favourite fiction II

25 STORIES FROM SOUTH ASIA

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favourite fiction II

MORE STORIES FROM SOUTH ASIA

The Little Magazine, volume VI, issue 6

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COVER ART: Oil on canvas by Manjit Bawa
DESIGN: Antara Dev Sen
Printed at Param Offsetters, New Delhi
ISSN 0972-7108

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Cover Price: Rs 250

TLM subscribers receive this special number as a regular issue included in their subscription, at no extra charge

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25 stories from
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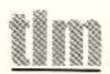
Bangladesh and
Sri Lanka



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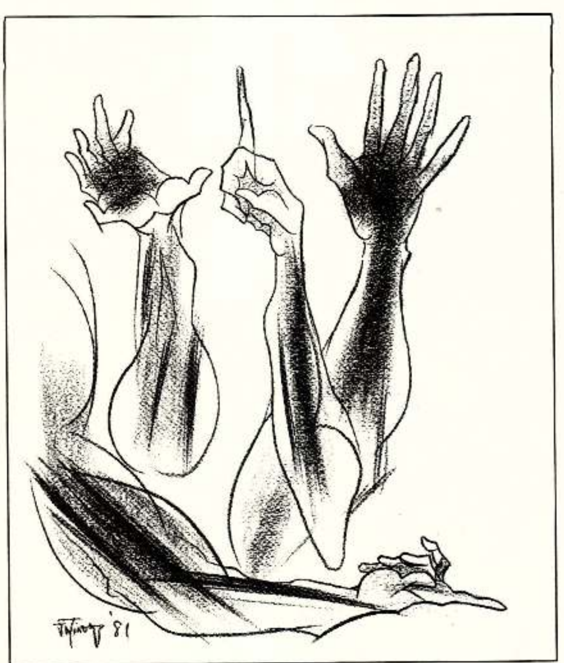

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Dear Reader,

So here it is as promised, the second volume of short fiction selected from the archives of *The Little Magazine.* This time we bring you 25 stories, again in nine languages, from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Of course, these are not the same nine languages that we covered in the first volume, and representation by country is still fairly proportionate, but not perfect.

As always, this collection would not have been possible without the unconditional support of our authors, translators, artists, illustrators, friends and advisors. We are particularly grateful to Zubair Razvi and A.J. Thomas in Delhi, A.S. Panneerselvan in Chennai and R.I.Pathmanaba Iyer in London for their sincerity and enthusiasm in sourcing appropriate stories and translators for *The Little Magazine* in record time.

Happy reading!

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SAMARESH BASU

Adaab!

Illustration by VINAYAK BHATTACHARYA

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THE ARMY PATROL JEEP did one round of Victoria Park, shattering the silence of the night. The city was under curfew, Section 144 had been imposed. Riots had broken out between Hindus and Muslims. They were at each other's throats with sticks and sickles and knives. Besides, there were the furtive killers, murderers who struck under cover of darkness. Then there was looting. The fear of death that darkened the night seemed to intensify the joy of the looters. Several slums were in flames. The terrified shrieks of dying women and children made parts of the city unbearable. Army vehicles drove into the thick of the terror, firing at random, desperate to keep up some semblance of law and order.

This is where two alleys meet. A battered garbage bin has rolled down to this point. Using the bin for cover, a man crawls up to it from an alley and hides behind it. He doesn't dare look up, just crouches there, absolutely still, his ear straining for the

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distant din. Can't quite make out whether the cries are "*Allah ho Akbar*" or "*Bande Mataram*".

All of a sudden, the garbage bin shakes a little. A shiver runs down every nerve of his body. His teeth clenched, his body turned to stone, he waits for the worst. Moments pass... nothing but a frozen silence.

Must be a dog. To shoo it away, the man gives the bin a nudge. A few moments of silence. Then the garbage bin shakes again. This time curiosity gets the better of his fear. He raises his head slowly to look over the bin... from the other side another head creeps up.

A man!

Two human beings on either side of the garbage bin, petrified, neither daring to breathe. Their hearts skip a beat.

Two pairs of eyes fix on each other, laden with terror, suspicion and anxiety. Neither trusts the other. Each takes the other to be a killer. They hold each other's gaze, waiting for the attack.

The moments tick by, the attack is not launched. Now both have the same question: Hindu or Muslim? The answer could lead to the horrific finale. So neither can bring himself to ask the question. Two creatures scared stiff, who can't even run from each other, in case the attacker pounces with a concealed knife.

This gnawing suspicion stretches on for some time and both grow impatient. Finally, one blurts out, "Hindu or Muslim?"

"You first," says the other.

Neither is ready to reveal his identity, their minds ensnared in suspicion. The earlier question is abandoned for new ones.

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One of them asks, "Where do you live?"
"On the other side of Buriganga — in Subaida. And you?"
"Chashara — near Naraingani. What do you do?"
"I have a boat. I am a boatman. You?"
"I work at the cotton mill in Naraingani."

Silence again. In the dark, each tries to size up the other from the corner of his eye. The face, the clothes… the darkness and the intervening garbage bin make it difficult.

Suddenly, there is a commotion. It's somewhere close by, they can hear the uproar of the combatants. Startled, the cotton-mill worker and the boatman shift uneasily.

"It seems to be nearby," the cotton-mill worker sounds alarmed.

"Yes, let's get away from here," says the boatman in an identical tone.

The cotton-mill worker stops him: "*Arre*, no, no — don't get up! Do you want to die?"

A wave of suspicion sweeps over the boatman. Is the man plotting something? He looks into the eyes of the cotton-mill worker. The cotton-mill worker is staring at him as well. The moment their eyes meet, he says, "Sit. Just sit still the way you are right now."

The boatman feels his heart sink. So the man won't let him go. His eyes cloud over with suspicion. "Why?" he asks.

"Why?" the cotton-mill worker lashes out in a harsh whisper. "What do you mean why? You want to die, do you?"

The boatman doesn't like his tone. All kinds of possibilities flit through his mind and he grows determined. "What do you expect — that I should just lie about in this filthy alley?"

The man's determination makes the cotton-mill worker

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suspicious. "I don't like your attitude," he says. "You didn't tell me which community you belong to — what if you go get your people to come and kill me?"

"How can you say that?" the boatman almost screams in injured anger.

"I haven't said anything wrong, *bhai*. Sit still, don't you understand human feelings?" There is something in the cotton-mill worker's voice, the boatman feels slightly assured.

"If you went away, how could I sit here alone?"

The commotion dies away in the distance. The stony silence descends again, where every moment seems to await death. In the dark alley, on either side of the garbage bin, two creatures think of their imminent danger, of their homes, of mothers, wives, children... will they ever return to them alive? Would their families be alive when they returned?

No rhyme or reason, no warning, nothing. The riots struck out of nowhere, like a thunderbolt. There was so much chit-chat before, so much laughter on these streets, these shops, in the marketplace — and within seconds they were cutting each other up, the street turning into a river of blood. How can human beings suddenly become so ruthless? What an accursed race! The cotton-mill worker sighs. The boatman sighs in turn.

"Want a *bidi*?" The cotton-mill worker pulls a *bidi* out of his pocket and offers it to the boatman. The boatman takes it, and out of sheer habit, pinches it once or twice, moves it around his ear a couple of times, then clamps it between his lips. Meanwhile, the cotton-mill worker is trying to light a match. He hadn't noticed till now that his shirt is soaked. The matchbox is really damp. The match sputters and manages just a couple of faint blue sparks. Irritated, he throws away the

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matchstick, its head scratched bare.

"The bloody matches have gone damp!" He takes out another matchstick.

Losing his patience, the boatman crosses over to the cotton-mill worker. "Of course it'll light, just give it to me..." He almost snatches the matchbox from the cotton-mill worker. After a couple of false starts, he manages to light one match. "*Sobhan Allah!* Here, light up quick..."

The cotton-mill worker almost jumps out of his skin — as if he's seen a ghost.

"You...?"

A light breeze brushes past and blows the matchstick out. Two pairs of eyes stare at each other through the darkness, wide with fear and disbelief. A few moments of silence.

Then the boatman springs to his feet. "Yes, I am a Muslim. So what?"

The terrified cotton-mill worker can barely speak: "Well, no... nothing, but..." He points to the bundle the boatman clutches. "What's in there?"

"Some clothes for the children and a sari. You know it's Eid tomorrow?"

"Nothing else, right?" the cotton-mill worker needs reassurance.

"You think I'm lying? Check it out yourself." He thrusts the bundle indignantly towards the cotton-mill worker.

"Oh, no, *bhai*, what's there to see? It's the times we are going through. Can't trust anyone, can you?"

"That's true. Well, *bhai* ... you aren't hiding anything, are you?"

"God's my witness, I don't even have a needle on me. All I can think of right now is just to get back home alive." The cotton-mill worker shakes out his clothes to make his point.

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The two sit down again, side by side. They light their *bidis* and smoke in silent concentration.

"Tell me," the boatman talks as if he's chatting with a friend or relative, "tell me, what's all this fighting and killing about?"

The cotton-mill worker reads the papers; he knows something of the news. He replies in a rather angry tone, "It's the fault of your League-*wallahs*! They're the ones who started this, in the name of some struggle or the other."

The boatman is irritated. "I don't know all that. What I am asking is, what's the point of all this fighting? Some of your people will die, some of ours will die. So how will that help the country?"

"*Arre*, that's exactly what I say! The country gets nothing!" he twiddles his thumb in negation. "You'll die, I'll die, and our children will go begging in the streets. In the riots last year, they chopped my brother-in-law into four. So my sister became a widow and I was saddled with her children. I speak with good reason, *bhai*. Those leaders up on the seventh floor happily issue orders and sit back, and we are the ones who get butchered!"

"We don't seem to be human anymore, it's like we have turned into dogs. How else could we be at each other's throats like this?" The boatman simmers in helpless anger, hugging his knees.

"Yes."

"Does anyone think of us? Now that there's this riot, how on earth am I to feed my family? Will I ever get my boat back? From the Badamtali Ghat, who knows which riverbed it's been sunk to now? *Nayebmoshai*, the manager of Zamindar Roop *babu*, used to take my boat to the courts near Naira once a

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month. He had such blessed hands, like the hands of Hazrat. He gave me five rupees as rent for the boat, and five rupees as a tip. Ten in all — that took care of us the whole month. Will the Hindu *babu* ever step into my boat again?"

The cotton-mill worker is about to reply, but checks himself. The stomp of heavy boots echoes through the alley, the noise seems to be coming towards them. The two exchange quick glances, their eyes questioning.

"What should we do?" The boatman swiftly tucks his bundle under his arm.

"Let's run. But which way? Don't really know the city streets."

The boatman says, "Let's just run, anywhere at all. No point getting beaten up by the police. Never can tell with those bastards."

"Absolutely. Now tell me which way, they're almost here."

"This way…"

The boatman points towards the southern exit down the alley.

"Let's go, if we can somehow get to Badamtali Ghat, we'll be safe."

Keeping their heads low, they creep round the corner, then make a wild dash down the alley, till they arrive at Patuatuli Road. The road glows silently under the electric lamp posts. They stop in their tracks — what if there's someone lurking in the shadows? But there is no time to lose. With a quick glance towards one end of the road, and then the other, they run towards the west.

Soon, they hear the sound of hooves. Glancing back, they see a man on a horse coming their way. There's no time to think. They slink into the narrow service alley on the left, and hide. Moments later, the British mounted policeman gallops past, revolver in hand, raising a clamour of hoofbeats in their

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hearts. When the sound vanishes into the distance, they emerge again, after peeping out hesitantly.

"Keep to one side," says the cotton-mill worker.

Apprehensively, they hurry down the edge of the road.

"Stop!" The boatman warns in a hushed tone. Startled, the cotton-mill worker stops.

"Now what?"

"Come here." The boatman takes the cotton-mill worker by the hand and pulls him behind a *paan*-shop. "Look at that."

The cotton-mill worker follows the boatman's eyes. There are lights in a room about a hundred yards away, and on its balcony are a dozen-odd armed policemen. The British officer is talking to them, gesticulating through the thick smoke of his pipe. Under the balcony, another policeman holds the reins of a restless horse that is pawing impatiently.

"That's the Islampur police station," the boatman says. "Just a little further down, there's a lane that turns left, right after the police station, which leads to Badamtali Ghat.

The cotton-mill worker is horrified. "Then?"

"So I say you stay here," says the boatman. "Getting to Badamtali Ghat won't do you any good. This is the den of Hindus and Islampur that of Muslims. You go home tomorrow morning."

"And you?"

"I must go." The boatman's voice is thick with fear and anxiety. "I can't stay on anymore, *bhai*. I have had no news of home for eight days. Allah knows what's happening there. If I can just get into that lane… even if I don't get a boat at the *ghat*, I'll swim across the Buriganga."

"*Arre, miya*, no, no, how can you do that?" The cotton-mill

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worker grabs the *kameez* of the boatman in panic. "How on earth will you get there, eh?"
"Don't hold me back, *bhai*, let me go!" Overcome by emotion, the boatman's voice quivers. "Don't you understand? It's Eid tomorrow. My children are looking at the moon tonight. They are dreaming of tomorrow, of dressing up in new clothes, of climbing onto their Baapjaan's lap. My wife is weeping her heart out. I can't, *bhai*, I can't stay. My heart won't allow it."
The boatman's voice chokes. The cotton-mill worker feels a tightness in his chest. His hand loosens on the boatman's *kameez*.
"What if they catch you?" There is real fear and sympathy in his voice.
"They won't, don't worry. Just don't get up from here, ok? So long, *bhai*... I won't ever forget this night. If it's in my destiny, we shall certainly meet again. *Adaab*."
"I won't forget either, *bhai*. *Adaab*."
The boatman creeps out and stealthily walks away.
The cotton-mill worker stands rooted to the spot, worried sick. The pounding in his heart refuses to calm down. He waits anxiously — dear God, may nothing happen to the boatman...

Moments pass in breathless silence.

It's been a while, the boatman must have gone by now. How the children must be pining for his return, longing for the new clothes, for the festivities. How can Baapjaan stay away! The cotton-mill worker sighs. How the wife will cling to his chest, dissolving in love and tears: "You've come back to me from the jaws of death!" A soft smile touches the corners of the cotton-mill worker's lips. And what will the boatman do then? He will...

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"Halt!"

The cotton-mill worker's heart sinks. There are people rushing around in boots. People shouting.

"The dacoit is running away!"

The cotton-mill worker cranes his neck to see the police officer leap into the road, brandishing his revolver. The silence of the night is shattered by two gunshots.

Bang. Bang.

Two flashes of blue flame. Horrified, the cotton-mill worker bites his finger. The officer jumps onto his horse and gallops into the lane. He has heard the death shriek of the dacoit.

The cotton-mill worker could see the boatman's blood staining his children's new clothes, his wife's sari, a deep red. The boatman was saying, "I couldn't make it, *bhai.* My children and my wife will weep their hearts out on this festive day. Our enemies didn't let me go back to them."

Translated from the Bengali story Adaab, *on the Bengal riots of 1946, by Antara Dev Sen*

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AKHTERUZZAMAN ELIAS

An accidental death

Illustration by VINAYAK BHATTACHARYA

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As each rising sob slams into Mobarak Ali, his eyeballs twitch behind closed but gradually slackening lids and he feels a prickling sensation in his left foot. His folded arms nestle between tightly drawn-up knees. He lies comfortably on his right side and doesn't feel the urge to sit up and scratch the eczema sore on his left foot. Meanwhile, the silence between the sobs fills up rapidly until the lament is a continuous wail that knocks around in the dome of his seasoned skull, disturbingly staccato. For a moment he imagines drumming rain; he reassures himself that it will muffle the sobbing before it can drift out of doors, but soon enough he realises that he is mistaken. The wailing yanks at the very roots of his wispy hair. It strips his eyes free of their lids but he can't see a thing in the pitch-dark room. He doesn't have the energy to look properly. His wife's incessant weeping has pushed him to the edge of exhaustion. But as his brain sends a message to his tired body, he gathers up enough strength to be annoyed: is this the time to cry? When will Bulu's mother understand? Will she *ever* understand?

The school which has been converted into a military camp is less than three hundred yards away. Countless sandbags stacked high on its wide balcony partly conceal the hands that hold an assortment of weapons. Mobarak doesn't know the names of those weapons; he wouldn't remember them even if he were told. A couple of weeks back the office of the Union Council, less than a hundred and fifty yards away, had also been taken over by the army. And Bulu's mother dares to grieve aloud? Such temerity in a woman can only spell disaster. If her cries are overheard and a couple of soldiers march down from the Union Council office, will Mobarak be able to

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handle the situation?

What if the soldiers — the soldier *sahibs* — ask about his children? Maybe Mobarak can get away initially by saying: *Ji*, two sons and two daughters. Which has to be immediately followed up with the information that both daughters are married and live with their husbands. But that the younger daughter had been staying with them for the last two months and that she went to her uncle's home three days ago. Her uncle is the erudite headmaster, head *modarres* of the Mostafabia Madrasa in Thanthania, well-known in the district for his social work through the winter.

At this point, the soldier might holler at him: how can this be a valid reason for your *bibi's* wailing? You'd better come up with some real answers. Then he'll be forced to admit that his eldest son's death is the real reason for his wife's grief. Eldest son? *Ji*, yes. I have two sons; the younger one is at home, he's in class four. The soldier will be furious: Cut the crap! "The older one is dead? What did he do?"

"*Ji*, he was in college."

"In college? Was he a *Mukti*[1] — a freedom fighter? How did he die?"

"*Huzur*, it was *apaghaat*."

"*Apaghaat*? What's that? *Apaghaat kya hai?*"[2]

"Well, uh… it means accident, that's all."

"What kind of accident? Out with the truth!"

At this point Mobarak Ali will never be able to say: "*Ji na huzur*, no sir, no sir Major *sahib*, no sir Captain *bahadur*, I don't know anything!"

"*Sala*, your son was a miscreant, wasn't he? You give shelter to miscreants?"

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"No sir, *na huzur*!"

He knows nothing about miscreants. Mobarak Ali, a clerk in the Union Council office, is a faithful employee of the Pakistan Government, sir, and his salary comes from the Bogura Treasury and he has no clue about miscreants. No, it won't be easy to talk his way out of it, especially in his parched, bone-dry voice. So the imaginary conversation with the soldiers doesn't add to Mobarak's mental strength in any way. His younger son Tulu, who lies beside him, mumbles in his sleep. Mobarak's drowsiness fades away entirely and he sits up. He scratches at the eczema on his left foot even though it doesn't itch any more. In the next room his year-and-a-half-old grandson suddenly starts bawling. Only then does his mind clear up a bit, and it registers that the sobbing is not inside his home. It is outside, to the south. The infant cries out again and in a flash Mobarak realises that the Chairman's son must have breathed his last.

He had visited the Chairman in the evening. After the army took over the Union Council, odds and ends of office work had to be finished at his home. The Chairman had looked less ruffled that evening — perhaps Shajahan was a little better. No… there was no remission of the fever, but he had managed to drink almost a glassful of lemon-barley water. The Chairman had chatted a bit. It was impossible to get him properly treated here. If the boy's condition improved even slightly, it was advisable to send him to Bogura. The only doctor available to the four villages in the area, a distant cousin of the Chairman, had gone to his in-laws' in Dinajpur early in March to attend to a dying brother-in-law and had disappeared across the border at the first sign of unrest. And the latest

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news of Biru Sanyal of Sherpur, a man with one of those ancient National Medical College degrees, who was consulted by the villagers even a decade ago, was that the old man had been cut down by a slashing bayonet while trying to slip across the border. So who could the Chairman consult? He could ride a bullock cart to Sherpur, which is deserted but for the military — the military in never-ending numbers. The Chairman had recently become acquainted with the Captain of the army camp at the High School, but with young women at home it is difficult to ask for favours. Nobody's very sure of what exactly they'll ask for in return! So let's see, he had some lemon-barley water today, things seemed to be improving a touch, and surely the situation will be normal in a few days?

But is the young man already dead, before the situation in the country is back to normal? Had his condition deteriorated since evening? In the absence of expert medical opinion, Mansoor Sarkar the homoeopath had been consulted and had diagnosed typhoid. Nonsense! Surely typhoid would have given two weeks' lead-time? This was over and done with in ten or twelve days!

The voice of the lad's mother is now clearly discernible, as well as the rising sobs of the Chairman's mother. How could Mobarak have mistaken their cries for Bulu's mother's moans? He feels sorry for Bulu's mother. Grief has turned her heart to stone. He is being unfairly harsh to his wife.

Mobarak Ali gets out of bed and shuffles across the room towards his wife's cot. His foot knocks over the unlit hurricane lamp. The pungent fumes of kerosene help to clear his head. He remembers that his wife is sleeping in the next room with

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their grandson. That used to be Bulu's room. The thought depresses Mobarak Ali, but he walks down the verandah to the next room in the darkness. "Careful," cautions Bulu's mother in the dark, "there's a bottle of milk and glasses on the table."

Mobarak knows this room like the back of his hand. For Bulu's mother this is only the second night, but ever since he found out about Bulu, Mobarak has sat here every night on his way back from a piss. He sits for a very short while, his buttocks just about making contact with the wooden chair, then he gets up and returns to his own room. But he knows exactly where Bulu's bed is, where his cheap kerosene-wood table is. His books with their jackets made from old calendar pages, his notebooks, inkpot, pen — Mobarak can pinpoint the position of every item. Instead of going to the bed, Mobarak starts groping around on the table. He feels the presence of Bulu's mother and mumbles, "Can't find the matchbox, dammit!"
"Don't light the lamp." He hears the careful warning in his wife's tear-drenched voice as he goes to the head of the bed. For the last month and a half, on the way back from his nightly piddle, he has entered this room, stood in the same spot and visualised the scene. Tonight, his senses are not adequately clouded by sleep, so he can't consign Bulu's tall, strapping body to the bed and have his fill of the imaginary picture. The bareness of the bed crystallises as salt in his empty eyes, so he tries to control himself and says in an excessively casual voice, "The Chairman's son is probably dead." Before the news of Shajahan's death is entirely revealed, Bulu's mother starts weeping, obviously picking up from a recent bout of tears. So Bulu's mother has been grieving for quite some time now. Afloat somewhere between sleep and consciousness, Mobarak

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had erroneously assumed that the wailing from the neighbourhood further south, from the Akhanda house, was his wife's. But it seems that she *had* been crying after all; the loud lament outside had drowned her out. Mubarak's discomfort at misjudging his wife disappears in an instant. He seizes the opportunity to be cross with her and barks, "Softly! Cry softly! Don't you understand the danger?"

She tries to stifle herself, but sobs even louder. She is overwhelmed by her anguish and it is too dark to see her husband properly. Panic and anger distort Mobarak's features beyond recognition: will she always be such a stupid woman? All it will take is the arrival of one soldier. Will it be possible to explain her distress for her dead son? Then? What then? Mobarak knows only too well. They will drag him to the school building, to the headmaster's room, now converted into a torture chamber. A shiver runs down his spine and he quickly tries to erase the image of the cell from his mind. They will set his house on fire. It will be an inferno — this old mud house with its corrugated tin roof and bamboo ceiling. He can already feel the heat. He can feel the heat below his stomach. He fears that he is wetting his *lungi*. Maybe he should step out for a moment? But he will manage at most eight drops by the count if he squats in the castor-oil bushes behind the house.

"Shut up, Bulu's mother, shut up," he almost shouts, "Couldn't find a worse time to express your feelings, eh?" It works. Bulu's mother shuts up. And at that moment the lament outside builds up again. As Mobarak Ali heaves a sigh and lets his out-of-control posterior drop suddenly on to one side of the bed, Bulu's mother snaps, "Softly!" The single word reveals her lack of confidence, perhaps temporary, in her hus-

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band. Almost two minutes pass before Mobarak Ali's spine stops trembling and, as if making a compromise, he blurts out, "The Chairman has only one son."

Mobarak Ali feels bad for Shajahan. He had been Bulu's classmate in school for seven years. Not that they had been buddies. Shajahan was an excellent student, preoccupied with his books. Bulu was just average, content with second division grades. Shajahan, on the other hand, wasn't satisfied with his first division; just a few more marks would have brought him a truly outstanding result. There was no end to his frustration. For at least one month every year, Shajahan suffered from some ailment or the other, otherwise there was no reason for the Chairman to keep him back in the village school, was there? They had enough relatives in town, and if Shajahan had gone to the district school, his roll number and name would have undoubtedly found their way into the newspapers. After his SSC exams, Shajahan was adamant — he got himself admitted to a college in Dhaka. Bulu went to Bogura College. But from then on, the two had been really close; they would hang around together for days when they came home for the vacations. Shajahan was a well-mannered lad — unlike his father and uncles who couldn't help but speak in words that pinched and hurt. In an attempt to forget Bulu, Mobarak tries to recall the sound of Shajahan's voice. Ah, the boy had been so amiable, always ready with a "*Salam aleikum*, Chacha. Is Bulu in?" And to think that this boy, after just a few days of fever…

Instead of appreciating Mobarak's suffering for the dead Shajahan, Bulu's mother turns her back on him and starts to weep softly again. She is trying to bear the burden of their son's death all by herself. But Mobarak knows how far that will

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go. Shortly, the woman will grab his arm and start howling hysterically. What's the use of this lament? You couldn't shield him from danger, so why weep now? Bulu had become too big for his boots.

What the hell can the Muktibahini do? The army was wiping out village after village and other than dying pointlessly, what jack-shit did they achieve? Anger drives Mobarak to curse impotently. And why not? The military lays waste like an epidemic, like cholera or malaria. Once they fall upon a village, they leave nothing behind. Last Thursday, a group of young Muktibahini fighters had taken shelter for the night at Maliyandanga, about six miles north of here. Two days later, on Saturday night, forces from the Singra Camp went down to the village and burned it to the ground. They didn't even spare the primary school. And what could the Muktibahini do? When the soldiers left, they took lame Jameer Ali Sarkar's daughter and niece with them. Why? Well, there had been complaints. Complaints? Against women? Oh yes, they are all informers for the Muktibahini. One of the girls came back after about ten days. And lame Jameer Ali's troubles have just begun with her return; who knows what else is in store for him. A curse! A curse! Damnation! That's what it is!

Even the Chairman — who can deal smoothly with every government, who, by the grace of Allah can please just about everyone — even the Chairman had told Mobarak Ali two days ago, "Mobarak *miyan*, don't keep your young daughter here!"

"Why not?"

Mobarak's idiocy exasperated the Chairman.

"Don't you understand? The army has set up camp in the

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Union Council, which is as good as setting it up in our homes, is it not? All military men are not the same. Are all the fingers of a hand identical? And let me add this too: you can't run an army without a few hotheads."

On the Chairman's advice, Mobarak Ali sent his younger daughter off with his brother-in-law. The Chairman sent his second daughter along. This girl was quite fair and attractive, and that was a dangerous thing. The Chairman had faith in Mobarak's brother-in-law simply because he was a distinguished *maulana*, a well-known priest and the head *modarres* of a prominent *madrasa* of the district. He stayed home these days because the *madrasa* was closed thanks to these turbulent times, prayed to Allah regularly and helped the common people. Kuddus Maulana was truly a fine human being. He had heard from Heaven knows where about his nephew and had hurried over to his sister and her husband. Poor boy, he was a deserving nephew, no doubt, but Khuda must have called him, God knows why, or why would he meet such a violent death? Mobarak Ali whispered that it was best not to discuss such matters. If the military came to know, they wouldn't leave a single member of the family alive. Before he left, the *maulana* promised to perform the *Koran khatm* in Bulu's name, along with the other necessary rites, when he reached home. Then he agreed to take his niece along with him, no questions asked; he was also willing to take Zohra's infant son. But Bulu's mother considered her daughter's condition and decided to keep the child with them. A pregnant woman with a child on her hip winding along the narrow paths through the paddies and bamboo groves would attract danger.

Their son-in-law, a clerk in a bank in Dhaka, had sent his

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wife and baby off to her parents at the first opportunity. In her condition, she was supposed to be with her mother in any case, and there is always some sort of disturbance in Dhaka. But she can't be with her mother after all, can she? Allah forbid that anything should happen to Zohra — the mere thought makes Mobarak almost lose control of his limbs. In an effort to pull himself together he says, "Let me go and see what's happening at the Chairman's house. His only son — oh, how he has suffered these last few days. The Chairman's wife hasn't stirred from his bedside even for a minute. And now she's crying for her boy like that."

Bulu's mother bursts into tears. At first she is incomprehensible but soon she controls herself and speaks clearly: "That's what I'm saying… that's what I'm saying too." To figure out what exactly she is saying, Mobarak has to wait a few moments. "See, the Chairman's son, he died with his mother, his father beside him! The mother could look at her son to her heart's content. But my Bulu… shot dead by an unknown assailant, in some godforsaken place… and I couldn't even see his face one last time. Why was the evil eye on my Bulu? Why did he have to die such an unnatural death?" Mobarak has no answers. To escape the edge of his wife's questions, he needs to get out of here quickly. But through the crack in the door he can see it isn't daylight yet. If he goes out in the dark, he'll be shot instantly.

About ten or twelve days ago, the peasant who worked at the Sarkars' farm was shot in the back. He had lived near the lake and cultivated Tahseen Sarkar's holdings on lease. He was taking a crap beside the lake at night; the bullet came from the camp at the High School. It hit him in the back and he died

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instantly. Then Najibullah, the bookkeeper of the High School, was shot in the back — again at night. He had gone to the Belukuchi market. After the army settled in these areas, the local markets had all but gone out of business and Najibullah had a couple of kilos of black pepper to sell. He was late returning home. Not as late as it was made out to be, though, about the time for the evening call for prayers. He was walking briskly past the High School when some soldiers yelled at him to halt. But Najibullah broke into a run. Almost instantly, a bullet smashed into his back. He probably continued running even after being hit, because his body was found in Aminuddin Sarkar's bamboo grove.

And Aminuddin Sarkar's nephew Tabarak, Ayanul of Lathidanga, Hashem Mondal from Podoomshahor and Noor Muhammad, the math teacher of the High School were lined up and shot, and their bodies buried in the open grounds behind the schoolyard where the little boys used to play hopscotch, ball and tag. A corpse by the lake, another in the bamboo thicket, killing fields behind the school building — every single death during that month had been by the bullet. All of them! That's right! All of them had died accidental deaths!

It was the same even further east. Mobarak's cousin Aminabubu had married into a family in Keshtia village, beside the Yamuna river — it was quite a distance away — where every monsoon brought the terror of washed-away riverbanks; this year, terror had arrived in the guise of the army, far worse than any river. Aminabubu's brother-in-law's son Ali Akbar, a student at Chandanbaisa College, was shot and thrown into the Yamuna. He had been arrested in front of the army camp at the Collectorate Office for possession of

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arms. He was the only man in the family, but the military subjected him as well as all the women of the household to inhuman torture before killing them. No, no… they couldn't do anything like that to Bulu. He was dead before they could even get near him.

As Mobarak imagines the unheard sound of gunfire in an unknown place, his head reels. In the last couple of months, all the deaths — even those as far away as Keshtia village — had been by the bullet. No one had died a natural death. It is definitely Allah's curse. His evil eye. How else can one explain the carnage? The Chairman is fortunate. His son had had a natural death. It is fate. The Chairman is known to have Lady Luck on his side; his land yields the best harvest, irrespective of the crop. Rice, black pepper, onions, potatoes — whatever he plants fetches the best prices of the year. Another example: he has been voted Chairman of the Union Council three years running; never lost an election. His only son, a brilliant student, passed with record marks from the village school. And when people were being butchered like animals, the lad died in his mother's lap, surrounded by love. What could this be but fate? Mobarak covers up a deep sigh with a cough.

Whereas Bulu… his handsome son, and so tall too, wasn't he? Already taller than Mobarak Ali, he would have been a strapping young man like Mobarak's elder brother. The boy had been perfectly fine when he left home and four months later, they heard that he had been shot dead. And where? Far, far away. The same district, yes, but those are the rich flood plains of the east. Yes, probably near Aminabubu's in-laws' home. He doesn't know the name of the village.

When Mobarak got news of his son's death a month and

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a half ago, he had tried to keep it from his wife. He had been silent for some hours, but that was largely at the request of the young lad who brought the information. It would be appropriate to describe it as an order rather than a request — people with guns don't usually make requests. What was the lad's name? Nah, it's best not to remember. If someone from the nearby army camp comes up to him now and yells, Mobarak will surely blurt it out. But though he has forgotten the name, the lad's face floats before his eyes twenty-four hours a day.

A tanned face framed by dense, dark clouds in the background. He had come in the evening. Mobarak was hurrying back from the market as daylight vanished behind the rainclouds. At the time, there weren't any military camps within five to seven miles of the village; the only reason for Mobarak's haste was the imminent rain. He first noticed the boy pushing his bicycle across the narrow ditch by Boromiyan's fields. Then the boy rode off towards the village and disappeared from sight as he took the sharp turn beyond the fig tree. Actually, Mobarak Ali hadn't paid him any attention.

At the marketplace, he had gathered that the military had taken Sherpur and ransacked the village. Then he heard about the huge army camp in Bogura. It was impossible to go into town because of the unbearable stench of rotting corpses. Meanwhile, a top military officer had been assassinated. There was heavy fighting along the border. The price of jute was expected to go up this year. These were some of the things that the people at the marketplace were discussing in whispers.

When Mobarak Ali reached the Union Council office, there was no bicycle in sight. He climbed up to the concrete

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veranda and checked the two locks on the front door. Yes, they were okay. There had never been a slip-up, but every time he passed by — on his way to the fields or the market or the lake for fishing — he just had to get up there and check both the locks. He looked up at the sky, tried to gauge the intensity of the clouds. No, it didn't look so good — he should rush home. He was about to come down when Shoklu Paramanik emerged from behind the office block. Mobarak glared at Shoklu: it was impossible to turn these rustic peasants into human beings. In spite of repeated warnings, these assholes insisted on using the backyard of the building for a toilet. The Chairman had so fondly planted flowering shrubs behind the office but the stink prevented anyone from going there. However, before he could scold the man, Shoklu said, "Chachamiyan, there's a lad asking for your address. He's on a bicycle."

"Who is he?"

"How should I know? I asked him and he said he was in college with Bulu. He's not from around here, Chachamiyan. One look at him and I knew he was from the town."

"Did you ask him his name?"

"How was I supposed to do that? Before I could, he was off on his bicycle."

Bulu's classmate? Mobarak ran home as fast as he could. It was four months since Bulu had vanished. He had come home around the middle of March. There was a lot happening this side of the country as well. There were processions everywhere — in the streets, in the markets, by the ponds. Never had the villagers seen anything like this before. The population seemed to have grown overnight. Maybe there were only twenty or thirty of these men but looking at their

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broad chests and the way they carried themselves, one couldn't but think that each had the strength of ten. Bulu had no time to eat or bathe. He travelled from village to village, organising the able-bodied young men of the area in a march-past, as if he would conquer the world with his army of dark-skinned peasants. The boy suddenly stood so tall! In town, he stayed with a distant uncle — maybe he didn't get regular meals and good clothes. Even so, he had turned into a strong young man in no time. By end-March, the army was slaughtering people in Dhaka and the exodus from Bogura began. The troops couldn't enter Bogura; the young men had taken up positions in the courtyard of the bank in the northern part of the town and put up fierce resistance.

One day the Chairman came to complain, "Mobarak *miyan*, Bulu is getting involved in this mess, why don't you say anything? And he's instigating Shajahan. Shajahan is a serious student — should he get mixed up in all this, do you think?" Then in an undertone, he added, "Tell me, isn't this sheer madness? These two-bit boys have bugs in their heads! They want to confront the army with shotguns, choppers, hatchets and spuds, eh?" Mobarak Ali was aware of the problem. But before he could talk to Bulu, he disappeared. Not a word from him for five days. Then they heard that the army had finally taken Bogura and were burning everything. An unending stream of people passed through the village, most of whom looked like sophisticated gentlefolk. The women were so beautiful in their sunglasses and heels. Clearly, they had never been to a village before. As they walked, they tottered and as they tottered, they fell. People ran away from Sherpur. Even the leaders of the resistance took off towards the border

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down the same road, with hard cash from the banks they had looted. They would use this money to free the nation. But there was no sign of Bulu.

His heart pounding, Mobarak made his way home. He was too old for all this running around. Maybe the boy with the cycle was Bulu himself, in disguise. Maybe Shoklu hadn't recognised him. It was possible, wasn't it? No, it wasn't. And Mobarak is still unforgiving because it hadn't turned out that way. And so he is determined to obliterate the picture of his possible meeting with Bulu in disguise. Can he then listen to Shoklu Paramanik saying the same things yet again? No, that is also not possible. Two weeks after the incident of the boy with the bicycle, the army entered the village. Shoklu was in Boromiyan's paddy field, bent over in the mud, tending to the rice seedlings. The sound of the army convoy startled him and he suddenly stood up straight, a bunch of seedlings in his grasp and a stupid, scared expression on his face. The soldiers shot him in the guts. Had the soldiers shot Bulu in the guts too?

In the dark room, Mobarak sits beside his wife and his sleeping grandson and rubs his hand slowly across his stomach. He used to have a faint, niggling pain on the left side of his stomach but hasn't felt it in the last three months. Had Bulu taken the bullets in his own belly and sucked out Mobarak's pain? Mobarak doesn't remember that the boy with the bicycle had said nothing about Bulu being shot in the guts. Perhaps he would have remembered in a little while but Bulu's mother starts to snivel again, "I couldn't even see him one last time. Who knows where he thrashed around before he died, all alone, without a drop of water! Why did the curse fall on my

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boy? Is this Allah's fair judgement? My boy doesn't even have a proper grave, he lies dead in the mud somewhere!"

"Shut up!" Mobarak is panic-stricken, thinking that Bulu's mother will now start screaming. "Shut up! Who told you he didn't get a decent burial?"

"Why didn't you go and see to it, then?" Bulu's mother snaps. "Why didn't you go and perform the *ziyarat* rites at his grave! So what if he died an unnatural death, was he not your son? Heartless monster of a father — didn't you sire him?" But she can't prolong her outburst. Her anger stumbles into anguish… anguish and apprehension. She puts a dark, scrawny arm on Mobarak's thigh and weeps, "What have we done to deserve such a calamity? Why did our son have to die like that?" Mobarak Ali is scared. A shaft of light enters the room through a hole in the bamboo ceiling. Mobarak opens the windows; in the pure, rosy light of dawn, the sky, the trees and the earth look like something out of a dream. The mosquito net sways in a faint breeze. Zohra's son lies spread-eagled on the bed, the cool breeze drawing him into deeper sleep.

Mobarak is anxious, he is late. By now, there must be many people gathered at the Chairman's residence. He sees Kabejuddin outside, sitting under the mango tree. He has served the family for years, but now he is old and has cataracts in both eyes. He can't recognise people till they are really close. Mobarak walks up to him and asks, "Kabej, where's the Chairman *sahib*?"

"He was looking for you."

Mobarak feels uneasy; he should have been here long ago. A little sheepishly, he asks, "What for?"

"The army came down here before dawn, when it was still

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dark, and took the Chairman to the camp. That's when he asked: Where's Mobarak *miyan*, we could have gone together."

But when Mobarak meets the Chairman a little later, he says nothing about the matter. Instead, he throws his arms around Mobarak and bursts into sobs. Mobarak leads the Chairman to the seat in the corner of the inner balcony and sits beside him. The Chairman dries his eyes and tries to compose himself. Very softly, he says, "Mobarak *miyan*, right through the night Saju called for Bulu. He was delirious from about eight-thirty but as long as he lived, he kept on talking about Bulu!" The sound of the Chairman's wife sobbing comes through the open door of the bedroom next to them. When she hears her husband, she repeats her son's dying words: "Bulu, Bulu… that's all he had to say. All night he called for Bulu, only Bulu — I'll go away with Bulu; tell Bulu not to leave without me; Ma, stop Bulu, please, oh look, he's going off without me!"

Mobarak feels dizzy. Slowly, there is a renewed surge of energy; he wants to know where exactly Shajahan had wanted to go with Bulu. The Chairman's wife and an old servant-woman haphazardly recount Shajahan's delirium. The boy had not asked to speak to his parents or siblings. He had neither looked around nor asked for water. He had not said, Ma, please massage my forehead. Usually, the dying stare in dread at the apparition of Azrail, the Messenger of Death, but Shajahan's eyes frantically searched for Bulu; he asked for only one thing: please call Bulu, I want to go with him. The Chairman's wife says that when she heard this, she was convinced deep down that her Shajahan would not live.

The Chairman fidgets uncomfortably. In spite of the

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heartache, his common sense tells him that if the story of Bulu's death and the blowing up of the military jeep on the Boudoba Canal Bridge leak out, not a single person in the village, including Mobarak, will be left alive. The Chairman has kept it secret from most, but how can a man not tell his wife? And how is he supposed to stop her now? The army camp is right next door and if they have the faintest suspicion, there will be hell to pay.

Yet within Mobarak Ali, within his flesh and blood, in every sinew and bone, there is a frenzied rush — Shajahan had really been desperate to leave with Bulu, then? What else had Shajahan said? But there is no way he can get more details because the Chairman's wife's voice is drowned out by Bulu's mother's heart-rending cries. Shajahan's corpse lies at the far end of the balcony. As the cerecloth is drawn from its face, Bulu's mother starts howling in anguish. Her cries overwhelm every other sound. The rest of the women, who were almost silent or weeping quietly, start anew. Mobarak Ali gets up and walks towards the corpse. No, he doesn't mean to stop his wife. Bulu's mother hasn't had an opportunity for release in a long time, and she is unlikely to get another chance in the near future. Let her cry as much as she wants. Mobarak won't stop her. His own eyes are dry and with those undimmed, dry eyes he wants to take a good, long look at Shajahan.

Even in death, there is a small frown on Shajahan's brow. His front teeth grip his thin lower lip. Are there traces of ignominy on his brow, lips, teeth and face because he wasn't there at the Boudoba Canal Bridge by Bulu's side to throw the grenades? In appearance, they had not been similar — Bulu was dark, Shajahan has a rosy complexion; Bulu had a craggy

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face, Shajahan's cheeks are chubby even in death. After blowing up an army jeep, Bulu's expression in death had surely not been one of discontent. Perhaps Shajahan has one or two bullet wounds to show on his chest. After all, it had been a bullet that shattered Bulu's chest. At least, that's what the boy with the bicycle had said.

It had started raining heavily after sunset. In the darkness, the rain came down like a wall. The boy couldn't leave. If he had managed to go, maybe he wouldn't have revealed so much. Of course, they were men on a mission, one could not expect them to sit around and have endless discussions with a dead comrade's father. The lad had gone to Bhabanihati, about two miles from here. He didn't say for what, he just said that they had allies there. On his way back from Bhabanihati, he had told himself that Sultan's village was in the vicinity, and maybe he could meet Sultan's father. Sultan was Bulu's proper name — that's what he was called in college. The boy with the bicycle was a year senior to him. When the army took control of Bogura, the two of them had fled eastwards.

Initially, the boy had spoken very cautiously, with long spells of silence in between. But soon, he opened up and told Mobarak everything. He and another friend were there when Bulu was killed. The name of the place? You have to go to Sherpur and cross the Kartowa River at the Sherpur market. Mobarak knew the area. Then? Then there is a wide dirt road leading right up to the west bank of the Yamuna. About a mile and a half from the river flows the Boudoba Canal. Then? There is a military camp in the marketplace at Dhunot. East of Dhunot is the village of Debdanga. Muktibahini soldiers had been assembling there in large numbers. But a sonofabitch

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stool pigeon in the village informed the army at Dhunot. But the Muktibahini forces also got to know of the army's plan to attack Debdanga. Just outside Debdanga, at right angles to the Dhunot-Debdanga road, is the Boudoba Canal, with a small bridge across it. The three of them had gone down to plant landmines under the bridge. As they were about to start work, they heard the roar of an army jeep. They hadn't anticipated the army closing in so quickly. The three friends swiftly climbed down from the road, slipped into the dense jute fields alongside, where the plants stood man-high, and held their breath as they waited for the jeep. The road leading to the bridge was in very bad repair, but if the jeep crossed the bridge it would reach Debdanga in a matter of minutes. The Muktibahini would get no time to prepare.

The jeep crawled towards the bridge on wobbly wheels as it tried to negotiate the bumpy road. All of a sudden, Bulu sprang out of the jute field and tossed a hand grenade into it. The officer beside the driver was flung right across the bridge. The Boudoba Canal had about fifteen to twenty feet of water, running deep. The driver lost control of the jeep and it careened down the slope towards the water till it jammed against the edge of the canal, just beyond the bridge. Bulu and the bicycle boy climbed up the bank and raced across the road towards the stranded jeep. They needed weapons. They hadn't even seen a Sten or a machine-gun till then, their armaments consisted of what they could sack from the police stations — basic .303 rifles, shotguns and grenades. But what they hadn't noticed was that a soldier had jumped off the jeep before it was hit. He was waiting on the slope and opened fire when he saw the two boys trying to cross the road. The bullets hit Bulu

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in the chest. The soldier turned around and started sprinting towards Dhunot, but he couldn't outrun the fire of Bulu's companions. He was hit in the leg, but by then he had covered quite a distance.

The boys were in two minds about whether to give chase when they heard the thunder of advancing army trucks. They had to retreat into the jute fields again. Most likely, a truck had already picked up the wounded soldier. But the convoy didn't slow down at all near the bridge. A little later they heard a heavy exchange of gunfire from the direction of Debdanga. It went on for about fifteen minutes. Then… absolute silence. A few moments later, they saw roaring flames, accompanied by much shouting and screaming. The villagers fled towards the Yamuna or scattered across the fields. The road was inaccessible, with the army patrols guarding the approach to the bridge. Bulu's companions waited in the jute fields through that night and into the next evening, while military jeeps rumbled up and down the Dhunot-Debdanga link several times.

"Bulu's body?"

The boy sat quietly, looking down. Oh no, no, Mobarak had no intention of embarrassing him, he was just asking. Did the bullets hit him in the chest? Yes, two bullets. Bulu hadn't made it to the road; he fell and slid down the near slope. On his back? Yes, on his back. He slid down headfirst. Did his head sink into the water of the canal? The tips of his hair barely touched the water. After this, the boy didn't say very much about the incident. Where exactly did the bullets pierce his chest? The boy got up without replying and went out. The rain had turned into a light drizzle; in the wet darkness, the boy put his foot on the pedal of his bicycle. Now, standing in front

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of Shajahan's corpse, Mobarak's eyes are dying to take a look, just one, at Shajahan's chest.

Mobarak Ali doesn't know why he moves towards the area walled in by bed-sheets hung from poles. Perhaps as a neighbour's friendly gesture, perhaps to keep his boss the Chairman happy or maybe just out of sheer affection for a son's classmate. Shajahan's body is being given the ritual wash in there. Very lovingly, Kabej soaps the body and mutters, "When he was a little boy, I often took him down to the lake for a bath. He used to prance about so much. And now, not a word."

Hell, no! There are no signs of a bullet wound on Shajahan's body. The whole thing hadn't struck Mobarak Ali so markedly before. But he is looking at it plainly with his own two eyes. He can see Bulu clearly. He can also see Shajahan. Bulu and Shajahan are two different entities. He starts disentangling the jumble inside his head but then finds himself entrusted with the full responsibility of Shajahan's last rites. The Chairman tells him that they'll have to speed up a little, which is what the army Captain had told him in the schoolyard before dawn. What is the ruckus about? Had the miscreants attacked his home? No, his son has just died. Okay, finish the last rites and everything else within two, maximum three, hours. If necessary, the troops will help.

The helping hand has been avoided with great difficulty for the time being, but the troops might still arrive if they take too long. There are women at home. The special prayers in the *jummaghar* — the prayer hall –– are completed by ten-thirty. Then they go to the family graveyard, about four to five hundred yards from the house. But soldiers stop them in front of the Union Council office. What are so many people doing

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together? The Chairman is standing beside Mobarak; Mobarak's right shoulder supports one side of the cot carrying the corpse. Mobarak clears his throat: "It's a corpse, Khansahib. The Chairman's son."

People are forbidden to gather in large groups in front of the army camp. The Imam and muezzin, the head priest who calls the faithful to prayer, whines, "*Mussalman ka laash*, Khansahib — the corpse of a Muslim. We're taking it for burial. Please..." Nope, the soldiers are not going to take a chance. If the person is dead, obviously he has to be buried. They can bury him wherever in hell they want to, but the funeral procession is not going past the camp. It is against the law. The Chairman comes forward in desperation. A combination of fear, uncertainty and inhibition has almost erased his grief. In a mix of Bengali, Urdu and English he informs the soldiers that his son had died at a quarter to four in the morning. The Captain had heard the sound of mourning and had summoned him to the camp. After he had heard the whole story, the Captain himself had ordered a swift burial. It is because of his orders that they have hurried so far. In fact, most of his relatives haven't arrived yet. "Even his daughter hasn't made it," Mobarak adds quickly. But the Chairman isn't particularly keen to discuss his daughter. His only humble request is that if they please... No, permission can't be granted. The soldiers inform them of their final decision and march off to the balcony of the Union Council building. The people in the funeral procession have no idea what they are supposed to do. Two soldiers have their guns trained on them; a step forward can prove fatal. After about ten or fifteen minutes, one of the soldiers comes forward and asks, "Son? Young son?

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How old?"

"*Ji haan huzur*, yes, sir!" replies the Imam and muezzin, "A lively young lad of barely eighteen!"

One of the soldiers laughs; the other very seriously wants to know the cause of death. Mobarak just about finishes describing Shajahan's illness when the soldier speaks again, "*Sala*... a *Mukti*, was he? Killed by a bullet?"

Who knows what Kabej concludes as he stands at the rear end of the procession. "But then the job is still incomplete," he says.

"Shut up!" says the Chairman's youngest brother softly, and the Imam and muezzin quickly tries to dispel the suspicion of the soldiers, "No sir! *Bahut achchha ladka tha* — he was a very good boy!" The two soldiers fling them bitter smiles. The Chairman steps forward again and says that since the Captain had given him permission earlier, it would be of great help if they please get him an audience with the Captain without delay. The soldiers are furious. One of them, since he is speaking for two, thunders at them with twice the usual menace. Do they think the Captain is a *jaanwar*, an animal like them who'll grant an audience whenever they want? Is the Captain their family servant that he'll have to come a-running at their beck and call?

Meanwhile, it is getting increasingly fatiguing to just stand there with the corpse. From time to time, the bearers change positions under the cot. The humidity makes everyone sweat; some would even prefer the sun to this nuisance. The water has receded from the lowlands by the road but the air is still heavy with the stench of rotting vegetation. In the meantime, one of the soldiers speaks softly to the Chairman. There's no

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point waiting. They should just bury the body somewhere. The Chairman doesn't agree. Irritated, the soldier says that it isn't possible for him to do any more. And by the way, since these people here have such an *entente* with the Hindus that they are practically Hindu themselves, the best option would be to cremate the body. The army could offer a matchbox.

The Chairman returns to the pallbearers almost in tears. What is to be done now? The roguish autumn clouds suddenly start pissing, spraying the earth with a light shower. The Chairman says, "Come on, let's go home." But once a corpse is brought out, it can't be taken back to the house. This is a problem. There are no big trees on the low-lying land to their right. The land on the left is also low, but there is a lone tree on the slope of the road. But it is a *sheora* tree which doesn't offer much shade, and besides ghosts and evil spirits reside in that tree, and they are all Hindu. There is no choice, so the cot is grounded under the *sheora* tree. The Chairman's cousin picks up a mat made of bamboo strips and spreads it over the corpse. Kabejuddin borrows someone's umbrella, opens it and sits at the head of the body, determined to shelter it from the elements. After a short while, the rain stops and the sun emerges with renewed fury. Kabejuddin leans towards Mobarak and whispers in his ear, "*Sala*, what's with this bloody heat! The sun and rain all over the boy's body! Tell me, what's this curse, just tell me that, man!"

The living also face the wrath of the sun and rain. The eczema sore on Mobarak Ali's foot starts to itch. The Imam and muezzin calls him aside and whispers a new strategy. If they go back down the same way, they can take the high road along the lake to the south of the Chairman's house and then

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walk along the edge of the paddy fields to the cemetery. Mobarak gives it some thought. It seems workable, but the water hasn't completely receded from the low ground. Would it be possible to carry the body across? It will be difficult, but may be possible to walk along the narrow ridges dividing the fields and avoid the low land altogether. But who would break the news to the Chairman about this new plan?

The sun climbs. Each ray is like a red-hot spike through the skull. The Imam and muezzin calls another member of the group and explains the plan to him. Mobarak Ali informs the Chairman's cousin, who doesn't comment. But his silence indicates endorsement.

It is time for the *jumma namaaz* — the Friday prayers — so the Imam and muezzin has to leave for the prayer hall. He takes the Chairman by the hand and asks him to follow. Normally, the Chairman doesn't give the Imam the time of day, but now he tags along without a word. In fact, he even forgets to give proper instructions to the pallbearers. Mobarak follows the Chairman out of a sense of duty.

The prayer hall is full up and the crowd has spilled over to the veranda. In these dreadful times, folks have become more inclined to pray. Mobarak Ali can't concentrate on the *namaaz*. Instead of Allah the Formless, Bulu's bullet-riddled corpse on its back fills his thoughts. Bulu's hair is soaked in the water of the canal. Bulu looks so tired, as if after a long, hard day he has fallen asleep without dinner. It is best not to disturb him. Let him sleep. Even after the prayers, the vision persists. So let him be; he isn't bothering Mobarak.

When they return to the *sheora* tree, they see the Chairman's brother Aleem Akhand in conversation with some

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army men. These are unfamiliar soldiers, who have come after the change of guard in the afternoon. There are fewer people in the funeral procession now. Some of them had gone for their *namaaz* and carried on home for lunch. Some left while the others were in the prayer hall. Perhaps they have been slipping away at regular intervals right from the beginning, only Mobarak hadn't quite noticed till now.

"Nope... not going to let us pass!" Kabej mutters incessantly as he sits beside the body, holding up the umbrella. Everyone looks at him. After the crowd thinned, he has suddenly become very noticeable. His mumbling hasn't stopped for a second. If people didn't know that he is a peasant, his constantly moving lips could well be reciting *kalema* — the Islamic scriptures. The volume rises a fraction, "They are saying that the military who can give the order has gone off to Koditala; that the young lads have created havoc at the Koditala police station."

"Quiet!" scolds the Chairman, "*Sala*, son of a stupid ox. Shut your trap!"

Aleem Akhand explains to them that the Captain isn't around. He rushed off to Koditala in the morning. Aleem Akhand isn't very sure of what has happened there, but the situation is exceptionally serious. After the Chairman's reproach, Kabej's mumbling becomes almost inaudible. But what exactly is Kabej saying? If the Chairman had consented to Shajahan leaving with Bulu, it wouldn't have come to this. Shajahan would have been part of the mission to take the Koditala police station. Bulu would never have returned without Shajahan if they had been together!

So Kabej doesn't know about Bulu. Mobarak is gripped by

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intense agitation. In his head are the animated images of Bulu sacrificing his life after destroying the military jeep, and with it two… four… ten soldiers. The images overflow his skull and drain through the roof of his mouth onto the dry bed of his tongue, a tongue that is so ready to wag that it tickles. Mobarak scratches his tongue with his teeth.

It is time to lift the cot again, turn around and carry on down the road behind the Akhand residence towards the cemetery. As they cross the bamboo thicket behind the Chairman's house, the women start wailing all over again. There is no time to stop and console them. They are behind time, way behind time; the burial must be finished without delay. Kabejuddin looks towards the women and continues muttering, "Ah, ladies, what's the use of crying now? Why didn't you let him go with Bulu? If the boy had left then, he wouldn't have suffered this much." Kabej quickens his pace to keep up with the funeral procession, walks past the bamboo thicket and climbs on to the high embankment of the twin lakes.

The embankment is actually an extension of a road, and it's an easy walk down this stretch. In fact, the descent down the incline of the narrow dirt road is also comfortable. Water has receded from these slopes, and beyond them the autumn harvest sways in the gentle breeze like waves in a green ocean. There is about an inch and a half of stagnant water in the fields; ten days ago, the water had been one-and-a-half feet deep but since the monsoons ended, the level has been falling rapidly. Even so, it will take a full week for the water to recede.

Two columns of people bear the cot on their shoulders. One column walks along the raised ridge between the fields;

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the other has to walk through the crop. The front right corner of the cot is on Mobarak Ali's shoulder. Before him walks the Imam and muezzin. The rear end of the cot is on Aleem Akhand's shoulder. Behind him is the Chairman, followed by his cousin. Then come the rest in single file. The column on the left, with Kabejuddin shouldering the front left corner of the cot, consists of Bitloo's father, the Chairman's most important *barga* farmer, then Bitloo with his naked infant in his arms; the rear left end is shouldered by Araz Ali Sakidar of Gunahar, who works at the Chairman's paddy-cutting machine, in front of him and under the cot walks Araz Ali's nephew, and finally Wabed, son of the late Shoklu Paramanik, completes the pallbearers' tally.

Walking through the paddy is exhausting. A foot set down between the rice plants is sucked deep into the soft, red mud. But the people in this file are farmers; they know the tricks of the trade and every inch of the fields. Their feet have a tacit understanding with the muddy earth; neither gets in the way of the other.

The people walking along the ridge have to be extra-cautious — at places, it's very narrow and eroded by the rains. Aleem Akhand cries out warnings at short intervals, "Careful, very careful! Watch where you're going. One false step and you'll land in the mud." He is so preoccupied with his self-imposed responsibility of keeping an eye on the others that he gets careless about his own footing. A few yards on, just as he completes his seventh or eighth call, he stumbles and his stocky right foot slips off the ridge. Shajahan's body rolls dangerously towards the right edge of the cot. Mobarak's heart misses a beat: the corpse will topple over into the mud! But

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like the other bearers, he too grabs the corner and legs of the cot the instant Aleem Akhand trips. For the time being, Shajahan is spared the humiliation of a fall. Fortunately, Aleem Akhand's foot lands on the base of a rice plant. Nonetheless, it is cut by a broken snail's shell and he starts to bleed. But it is not possible to relieve him of his position. Anyway, Aleem Akhand quickly regains his balance and proceeds watchfully; he doesn't shout warnings any more.

There is a shuffling sound that is sometimes punctuated by someone stepping in water or the paddy. On the firmer soil of the ridge, there is the monotonous sound of dragging feet. At the head of this column, the Imam continuously recites the *kalema*, so there is some sort of excitement along the ridge, too. Mobarak Ali is apprehensive about the Imam concentrating too much on his recital and losing his footing. Then the cot rocks and slips off Mobarak's shoulder; he shuts his eyes and stops abruptly. His closed eyelids flutter like a curtain in the breeze and he sees Shajahan's body lying face down in the mud. Almost instantly, he also sees Bulu's face. But Bulu's closed eyes were turned skywards. After destroying the military jeep and with it two... four... ten soldiers, the energy from Bulu's eyes had burned right through his eyelids and he could see everything. Mobarak Ali shuts his eyes in panic as he imagines Shajahan's falling corpse but even then, the image of Bulu lying on his back fills his vision.

Mobarak finds it difficult to extract his foot from the mud. Submerged in the dirty water, his eczema sore starts to itch. If only he could free his hand to scratch it. But the image of Bulu's burning eyes staring through dead eyelids has to be switched off as quickly as possible, or he will lose his balance again. Plus

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there is the painful itch in his foot; he needs to ignore that too. In his eagerness, Mobarak steps forward a little too hastily. "Easy! Easy!" shout Kabej and Aleem Akhand. Although Mobarak doesn't miss his step he barges into the Imam and muezzin. The Imam was getting ready to negotiate the tapering path further up front, Mobarak's shove cuts short his plans and he finds himself absolutely immobile with both his feet planted deep in the mud on either side of the narrow ridge. He looks as if he is perched on a couple of posts wrapped in white cloth. All that remains is to fit a crescent-and-star flag to his head so that he can wave and sing the national anthem. Instead, he says explosively: "*Sala!* Son of an imbecile."

Bitloo's father squats on the ridge and helps the Imam haul his feet out of the slush. Here, the mud is really heavy — as one foot is raised, the other has to bear the full weight of the body and sinks even deeper. Behind them, the long line of people with the dead body watch Bitloo's father in anticipation. The Imam and muezzin senses all eyes on him and is suitably embarrassed. Usually, he breezes through a much larger congregation at least five times a day, thanks to years of practice. As soon as the congregation settles down in rows, he rattles off a never-ending stream of *suras* (psalms) one after the other, like a train picking up speed. No such speed here, visible or invisible, and it is difficult to ignore the waiting crowd. He is the leading man and consequently responsible for holding up everyone else. Almost like calling the *ajaan*, the Imam and muezzin complains to Allah, "O Allah the Merciful, see how they mistreat the corpse of a Muslim, how they strive to prevent a proper burial, Allah, they are worse than *kafirs*, infidels all, beasts!" Although the words address Allah, the pall-

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bearers recognise and acknowledge the allusion, and its target.

But the Imam could have avoided this outburst. No one is irritated with him for getting stuck in the mud. Even Bitloo's father — who had two years ago taken a fifty-buck loan from the Imam, had promised to repay it in four months and hadn't done so even after seven and consequently had to pay double the interest, and to escape further punishment had to clean the well in the Imam's residence in exchange for a single meal a day — genuinely tries to help. "Why, Imam *sahib*, why are they doing this to my son?" the Chairman sobs as the others stare silently at the ground. Why, he wants to know, has Allah's curse descended on his gentle, innocent child? A boy who never ventured beyond his books and stayed as far as possible from trouble. Why does he have to suffer so? No one answers, but Araz Ali Sakidar from Gunahar supports his boss with conviction: "What's so special about the camp, that prevents us from walking in front of it? Is the corpse hiding a gun under the shroud? Or can a corpse carry some other weapon?
"That would have been the end of it," quips Kabej from the paddy field with the cot on his shoulder. His mumblings are now complete sentences. "You're talking guns, and all it takes is a spoon in someone's hand to make the buggers grab their pants and run for their lives; that's what happened at Koditala, where little boys wiped out those bastards..."
"Enough of your stupid whining, Kabej! *Sala*, the peasant doesn't know when to stop." Aleem Akhand's threat silences Kabej momentarily but his mumbling picks up once the Imam and muezzin's legs are free. The bearers recite the scriptures, the *kalema shahadat*, but Kabej, a commoner who doesn't know the sacred writings, keeps on mumbling — if Shajahan had left

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with Bulu, would he have faced all this?

Mobarak watches Kabej move his lips and he desperately wants to do the same. Kabej has to be told about Bulu right away. Bulu died with a bullet through his heart. Oh no, not gunned down just like that. Before he died, he threw the grenade that destroyed a jeep full of armed soldiers and then… then he was shot in the chest — or was it his stomach? — no, must have been his chest, and he tumbled into the Boudoba Canal. And where exactly is that? Er, eastwards, a little west of the Yamuna. But is he still there? Beside the Boudoba Canal? As if he would stay! The swelling waters of the monsoon must have carried him to the currents of the Yamuna. The Yamuna which, with a single surge, can wipe out buildings, farmlands, markets, settlements, even the schoolyard of the Pradyot Narayan High School in Gunahar, leaving no wrack behind.

So which way is Bulu headed, riding the rolling waters? Where is the confluence of the Yamuna? Does it join the Padma? Or is it the Meghna? Across the Atrai? Then the Dhaleswari flowing past the cloth merchant's house in Gunahar? Mobarak Ali knows of the river Surma of Karnaphuli, Kartowa is like his cousin sister; their history teacher in school came from a town beside the Teetash, and where exactly is Bhairav, or Sitalakhshi — Mobarak sinks deep into an eddy of names. These gigantic, roaring rivers and their tributaries crash into his ears with such intensity that even the cries of Bulu's mother are drowned. The bullet-riddled chest of his lean, tall, dark boy is covered end to end by the raging waters. In this muggy heat, Bulu need not be boxed underground; he can stretch out on the waters. Does he lie on his

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back? Or on his face? Does Bulu float along on the surface? Or does he swim underwater with all sorts of fish? Mobarak finds it difficult to find answers to all these questions. Neither does he have the time.

They reach the cemetery, put down the cot and as soon as he straightens up he notices, from inside a dilapidated grave under a date palm, a rather fat fox looking him straight in the eye. Mobarak picks up a pebble and hurls it at the fox.

On his way back, Mobarak and the others stop at the Chairman's home. About three miles away at Koditala, there has been some major action. A number of soldiers have been killed. The Chairman is so panic-stricken at the news that he forgets his distress; he had told the Captain of the nearby camp at least ten times that his union is clean, that he was absolutely sure that the Mukti trash wouldn't be able to cross the rail tracks. The Hindus of Mukundahaat had fled across the border at the first sign of trouble; those who remained were all loyal Muslims. Only Allah the Merciful and the army know what steps will now be taken, though the Chairman can venture a fair guess. The folks at home can't mourn aloud, except for Shajahan's mother who, in her weary, worn-out voice, is still wailing like the dog at midnight, the harbinger of misfortune. The people speculate in terror: as an act of revenge for the Koditala incident, the military will find novel and fiendish methods of torturing the villagers. Some people from the mosque in the west sit in Shajahan's room, the veranda and the courtyard where Shajahan's body had been kept. They read aloud from the Koran. Behind the thin pall of smoke from the incense, it is difficult to tell whether the faint, unclear voices are reading Allah's scriptures or finishing their own funeral prayers.

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Are funeral prayers allowed for someone killed by the army? Mobarak needs to know. How can he talk to them?

In the courtyard outside the Chairman's house there is only Kabejuddin. He is herding the Chairman's cattle towards the shed. Mobarak is determined to tell him Bulu's story and asks him to stop. But where does he begin, and how? Kabejuddin makes it easy for him. "Tell me, Chachamiyan, did I say anything inappropriate?" he asks, "If Shajahan had left with Bulu, would he have had to bear all this? Could they have messed around with him like that?" Suddenly he lowers his voice and asks, "Was Bulu at Koditala? Any news?" If Bulu were alive, perhaps he would have marshalled the Koditala operation. But what about the astonishing feat before he died? Mobarak ignores Kabej's low voice and replies in a normal tone, "Kabej, what do you know of Bulu? You think the Devil's spawn military will dare fool around with his body? Bulu's corpse has already floated down the Boudoba Canal into the..."

"Corpse? Bulu's corpse? What are you saying, Chachamiyan?"

Then Mobarak Ali elaborates on the story of Bulu and the jute fields and the grenade and the death of the soldiers. After destroying a jeep full of soldiers, Bulu took a bullet and rolled down into the canal. But before he can expand on Bulu's long journey down the river, the only brown calf in the herd takes off towards the haystacks; Kabej runs after it. Mobarak waits awhile and then starts down the road.

The road is deserted. Except for Bitloo's father who hurries home in quick, long strides. He is startled at Mobarak's appearance. "Going home already?" says Mobarak.

"Did you hear about the Koditala incident? I'd better be going. It'll be dark soon. If they suddenly catch us..."

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"Who'll catch us?"

"Won't they arrest us if it's dark?" Bitloo's father is reluctant to mention the ill-omened military at this hour. With the army camp at the Union Council in operation, these areas come under an unannounced curfew after dusk.

"*Arre*, forget it!" Mobarak almost shouts, "Have you heard the story of how my Bulu wiped out a jeep-load of soldiers with a single bullet?"

"What?" Bitloo's father had heard rumours of Bulu going off to India but then, it had come from Kabej… why would anyone take that fool seriously? "Now that you mention it… I haven't seen Bulu in a long time. I told myself he's in college, so he couldn't leave Bogura."

Bitloo's father stops to listen to Mobarak's story about Bulu. But as Mobarak tells it, his attention starts to waver. A faraway keening hithers and thithers in the emptiness of his soul. Ah, Bulu's mother is crying. With her eyes full of tears, her voice full of suffering, she is crying her heart out. He feels depressed about Shajahan and loses the opportunity to tell Bulu's story. The keening rides the wind and approaches them rapidly, floating over the trees, the settlements, the harvest and the sky. The two men look southwards in search of the source. In a moment, the area beyond the railway tracks a couple of miles south of Koditala erupts in flames, smoke, shouts and screams. "Looks like Ailgarh," whispers Bitloo's father, "They're finished!"

"Yeah, the military is upon them. They're not going to leave even a bug alive in Rainagar, Mokamtala, Ghoraghat, I tell you. The sons of bitches can't stand human beings." Mobarak's voice shakes.

"I'm off, *bhaijaan*. It's getting late, I'm going home." Bitloo's

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father takes a step and pauses, "*Bhaijaan*, when Bulu attacked with the bomb or gun or whatever, how many were there in the jeep? Did all of them cop it?"
"What did I just tell you?"

Bitloo's father scampers off home and all of a sudden it is night. The dark moon seeps light and darkness alike. Mad Bhikhu sits under the huge *simul* tree behind the decrepit *mazar* of Shahbaba beyond the west wall of Asmat Sarkar's mango orchard, and puffs on his *beedis* night and day. For at least seven years now, he has been taking special lessons on the occult from Shahbaba's pet djinn, who lives in the tree. But even Mad Bhikhu is not there tonight; perhaps even he knows of what has happened at Koditala-Rainagar. Mobarak is a little crestfallen; he was planning to tell Mad Bhikhu about Bulu and hoped that through him, the account would reach the spirits in the sky. But soon his disappointment vanishes. He sees the Imam and muezzin on the unlit veranda of the *jummaghar* busy with his daily ablutions. The sound of the Imam rinsing his mouth is so soft that he could almost be sipping a forbidden liquid in secret and spitting it out. Of course, Mobarak has no reason to think this is true.

He stands under the balcony and reports the facts of the Koditala incident. He does not miss out on even the smallest details. In the absence of a canal near Koditala, the mangled military jeep is thrown on to the playground beside the Primary School. There are no jute fields nearby, so the lean, tall, dark boys spring forth from the bamboo groves up north to throw grenades. Not a single soldier escapes alive. And among the boys, there is only one casualty, yes, the young lad who threw the first grenade. Then Mobarak slips into a flash-

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back and narrates Bulu's saga. He recounts everything, including the details of Bulu floating down to the Yamuna. He freely uses the adjectives sister-fucker, bastard, born-of-a-whore, sired-by-swine and pig-eaters to describe the military. And the Imam and muezzin, who knows perfectly well that listening to such foul language could well undo his ablutions, nonetheless gazes intently at the reddish-black paddy fields and pays attention to every word that Mobarak has to say.

All this while, Bulu's mother is waiting at the door. After the military had come into the village, Bulu's father makes it a point to return home before dusk. He even reads the *magreb ajaan* — the early evening prayers — at home. And today, it is way past that hour but there is no sign of him! She waits on the inner veranda beside the small stool that has a washcloth and a spouted pitcher of water on it. She is angry. "Why can't you send news if you're going to be late? There isn't a soul around whom I can ask about your whereabouts."

Mobarak is annoyed by his wife's concern. How can a mother whose son has died not even two months ago afford to be worried about someone else? If she can't howl uncontrollably for her boy and kick up a storm every evening, what was the use of Bulu dying such a glorious death? tlm

Translated and abridged from the Bengali story Apaghaat *(1971) by Abitagni Chakraborty and Antara Dev Sen*

NOTES

1. *Mukti*: Freedom. Here, freedom fighter, with reference to the Muktibahini, the freedom forces in the Bangladesh war of Independence from Pakistan.

2. The soldiers speak Urdu, the language of West Pakistan that the people of then East Pakistan had rejected in favour of their own tongue, Bengali or *Bangla*.

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JAYA MITRA

My Own, the Unknown

Illustration by SHYAMAL BANERJEE

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In the end, precisely what I had wanted to avoid happened. Perhaps it wasn't a particularly realistic desire anyway, given that a couple of people were being arrested every single day. It wasn't as though they were all Party workers, though — some were genuine supporters, others might have given someone shelter for a night, or given them a meal. They were being taken away and beaten up.

The police haven't ventured into the slums of the rickshaw-pullers and *beedi*-binders yet — maybe they haven't the stomach for it. They're huge, these slums, each harbouring about a thousand people. Each is a maze of narrow, winding alleys from which a stranger cannot possibly escape quickly. Besides, all the men of the GSS slum, who work at the GSS Beedi Factory, and those of the Chitadanga slum, who are either rickshaw-pullers or porters at the local market, are bound together by their sweat, their labour, their frustrations. These slums don't have room for that crucial person who can lead the police in and point out a particular door to them. There are no informers in here, so the police have been picking people up from right outside the slum. Though some of them managed to come out on bail in a few days, their condition did instil fear in others. Clearly, they have been let out precisely to inspire fear. Bidhu, Bijoyda, Kaluda, little Dilip — not even fifteen yet — so badly cut up.

All kinds of rumours keep pouring in. That two battalions of the Central Reserve Police Force have arrived. That an intelligence team from the Special Branch, specially trained for capturing political activists, has arrived and is looking for some of us. True, the locality is flooded with out-of-town policemen. Those captured by them and released on bail have been telling

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people that they had been interrogated in detail about me.

Those in the city can hardly move around. We are much freer in the village. There aren't any big *jotdars* around in the nearby villages. The smaller and middle-level *jotdars* are huddled together in the cities and bigger townships. Policemen guard their doors with guns chained to their waists. So the villages are quite empty.

Village after alert village rings us in a protective wall, but the police have made life impossible for people in the townships. Barging in everywhere, smashing hearths and homes, carrying away anyone they fancy. But not one of them has thought of betraying us, not even when they were offered lures by the police. Sure, some of them have let things slip under torture, but that is different.

The real trouble is elsewhere. With more and more comrades being apprehended in the cities and suburbs, the communication links have snapped. We can't get news from elsewhere, or pass on our own news. The awareness campaign is continuing in the rural areas, with the help of our peasant comrades, but we don't have any news of the District Committee's problems or decisions. No news at all, other than vague rumours of arrest and torture. A jailbreak had been planned, but there was no news about it even at the last minute. So I had to come to the city. I didn't know that the courier to the inner circle had been captured. In the hurry, there was no time to check the shelter either.

There was a padlock on the door. Chapala must have gone for lunch, I thought. She worked as a janitor in the municipality office. To the officers, she doesn't count as a person at all — that made us feel secure. In fact, that feeling of security had

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become the second exit — for hadn't I given up staying in a room with just one door ages ago? I had picked up the key from a trusted source and opened the door. But how on earth could I have fallen asleep waiting for her? And the sleep of the dead, with not a single sense in working order. I woke up to the sound of boots all around. So they must have locked up Chapala and set this room up as a trap — they had seen the door unlocked today and surrounded it.

I was bursting with rage at myself for falling asleep like a fool. I was alone — how could I have forgotten to keep vigil? By then, the banging on the door had intensified. I opened up before they broke the door down. As they rushed in, I glanced out the door. Three khakis aimed their bayonets at my throat and started screaming: "One move and we shoot! One move and we shoot!"

There was no room to move anyway. The alcove, the tiny space where Chapala cooked, was brimming with boots. I looked out the door. I could have made a dash through these alleys blindfolded, but a forest of bayonets glimmered in the dim streetlights.

They were going about their business. I had just one thought then — how to let the others know about my capture.

Maybe they had come for a routine check. Or maybe they had known, and did not want me to slip through their fingers once again. If not, why would they have brought so many CRPF men but no handcuffs? They didn't seem to be all there. First they tried to rip off Chapala's clothesline, then they fished out a bundle of thick white rope from somewhere and tied my hands to my waist. I didn't think of looking for my sandals.

Looking back, it would appear that I wasn't as calm as I

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believed myself to be yesterday. Maybe I was panicking somewhat — why else would it take me so long to chew up and swallow those little slips of paper? My mouth was completely dry. When you walk with your hands tied tightly behind you, you lose your balance. Their jeep was at the far end of the alley, near the tube-well on the main road. Then I noticed the two vans as well. They couldn't decide whether to put me in a van, or the jeep — they dragged me this way and that for a while, then they bundled me into the front seat of the jeep, between two police officers.

A couple of people were still hanging around Jiten's tea stall as we drove past. Others were walking up the road on the right. That meant the night show was just over. Before I could think, a slogan burst out of my throat. I had no idea that I could shout so loudly. Before I could shout for the third time, the officer on my left hit me on the mouth. My mouth filled with blood. I would have shut up anyway, because I had been able to make myself heard. Besides, the road ahead was empty. But what I had tried to do, the khakis did much better. The people lounging on the cot at the tea stall shot up, those walking up the road stopped dead in their tracks. Someone called out: "Who are they taking away?"

And some uniform from the back of the jeep shouted back in a voice thick with joy: "Oh, just taking your Meera away — come and collect her body tomorrow."

Finally, it fell into place. All these CRPF men weren't from around here, the police themselves didn't look like locals — their voices were unfamiliar. So who had identified me? Even if they had photographs, those would be from my college days. I look nothing like that anymore, and I know that my mother

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has cleaned out all my pictures from our home. Still, if they had managed to get hold of one... I was wearing Chapala's sari. My hair, almost as rough as hers, was tied in a careless knot, and I had even changed the parting. My sunburnt skin had weathered beyond recognition during my long stay in the village.

Then? It would be very difficult to pick me out from a picture or by a description, so it had to be someone who knew me. It was clear that they had recognised me. They had not asked my name even once. So I must have been pointed out by someone who hadn't come up front. One of those who spoke in Bengali from the back? Or could it be someone who is watching in silence, who is not a policeman? How did the police find out about Chapala? Very few know about her. Who was it, then? Anyway, at least they can't suppress this now. Word would get around by tomorrow morning.

They made themselves comfortable. The one on the left stuck his pistol into my ribs, the one on the right fished out a piece of cloth and bound my eyes tightly. The stinking, dank cloth was so tight that it hurt my sockets. From the horrible smell, I could make out that they had been drinking. They had tied the blindfold as tight as they could, but hadn't done it properly — I could see a little through the gap near the bridge of my nose. The distance seemed too long and the road too bumpy... this was not the way to the police station. I now realise that I wasn't scared then. Why not? Shouldn't I have been scared? At that moment yesterday, it hadn't sunk in that I had actually been captured by the khakis. And in my curiosity and confusion about what might happen next, fear had escaped my mind.

Finally, the jeep entered a gate and jerked to a halt. Because my hands were tied, I was flung onto the dashboard. The man

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next to me put a hand on my shoulder. Despite being blindfolded, I could sense the change in their attitude. Back at Chapala's place, when they were blundering about between the jeep and the van, some officer type had put a hand on my shoulder and said, "Come along this way." A loud outburst from me, and he had snatched his hand away. "OK, OK..." the others had mumbled hastily.

Maybe it was because they had entered their own territory, but I could feel their attitude change. The one on the left removed his pistol, grabbed me by the hand and yanked me out of the jeep, like he wanted to provoke me. Shrill cries of animal pleasure rung out in various voices. Some foul swearing too. How strange! I had no enmity with these people — didn't even know them! They weren't from another land, they were talking in my own language. I later found out that some of them were rather young as well, maybe they had been in college around the same time as us. Yet the prospect of torturing a woman of their own land had made them so delirious with joy. Why? Do people undergo a biological change when they join the police or the armed forces?

Of course, I hadn't thought it out so clearly then. There was no time. When the blindfold was taken off, I was blinded by the light. I was in a medium-sized, windowless room. The white walls just had a picture of that leader who preached non-violence, a bare table, two or three chairs. This was not the city's main police station.

I still couldn't see the khakis properly in the dazzling, bare-bulb light. One of them came up. I knew this man. A sub-inspector. Lived near the bazaar. A lecherous drunk. And a wife-beater, I had heard several times. He knew me from my

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childhood. Knew my parents too. It was clear that he was very drunk. His attempt at a rakish hairstyle reminded me of a hero in a village *jatra* play. He whipped out his revolver from its holster and wagged it about, saying: "So tell us what sort of treatment you expect from us!"

It was so absurd I wanted to laugh. Who did this man think he was? Even a week ago, if he had crossed my path, he would not have known which way to run, and today, with his own people around him, he was spouting dramatic dialogue! And very low drama at that. He brought his face closer to mine and tried to look me in the eye, but there was no vision in his eyes. He said again in the same style, "Come on, speak! What kind of treatment do you expect from us?"

It was impossible to be silent.

"Like animals," I said. This was perhaps not in his script.

"What do you mean? Why?"

"Because you *are* animals." All this was last night. Was it last night, or the night before? What time is it now? Morning or afternoon? This is probably a lock-up. That thing flowing in through the ventilator high up on the wall — is that daylight? A murky, ugly shadow, much worse than the darkness. I can vaguely make out my surroundings, but can't really see a thing. It should be called something other than light. Can't even see the ventilator from here. It's somewhere near the top of the very wall against which I am bundled up. If I manage to roll over to that side somehow, will I be able to see it, then? How would seeing it help? But it seems to be of vital importance right now — to see why the light is so murky. Is the pane of glass yellow or is it just dirty?

But I can't. This isn't my body. It is so heavy, just a bundle

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of pain. This doesn't feel like the main police station either. From the lock-up in the main police station, you can see a bit of the street outside, but here you can only see a portico, and a closed door to the right. I can't see what's on the left, but quite clearly, it isn't the street. I try to turn my head to check. My head seems to be made of cast iron; I can't lift it. They had been so delighted when they caught me. They had probably not expected any success. Like so many times before, they must have thought they would go, make a scene and finally return empty-handed. That's why they didn't even have handcuffs with them. And the ruckus they raised all the way back, like they had won a war or something. That too with two whole vanloads of CRPF men to protect them! But who had pointed out Chapala's room to them? What else does that person know? Who could it be? What has happened to Chapala? Where is she?

Yesterday, they hadn't asked a single question, hadn't tried to get any information out of me, had just searched me for bombs and guns. They clearly didn't believe me when I said I never carry them. "Maybe you haven't got any today," they sneered, "we know you carry two pistols."

What does one say to that? Their brains told them that we were fearless because we carried lethal weapons. But even when they had caught Subodh, they found only a measly little pipegun which didn't have any bullets. They had also seen the courage of that skinny boy, who had been starving for two days. They had had hardly anything to eat in the village — except boiled moringa leaves — and the fields were so muddy that his feet were getting stuck. All that must have contributed to his capture. At the GSS slum, Kaluda's wife had made *rotis*

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for him and waited till evening. Then she heard the news. How can they ever understand the real source of our courage and strength, they who torture boys and girls they don't even know for a profession?

So they had seemed to be quite disappointed when they found no weapons on me. They hadn't lost any time once they got me out of the jeep. My hands were still tied with that thick rope, and they were unbuckling their belts. A couple of them probably had batons too. I could see their teeth sticking out, eyes bulging monstrously, their hands swinging up and down, competing for room. In a little while I couldn't quite feel the belts lashing at me anymore. I had heard about this several times, but experienced it only yesterday — that there is a limit to the pain the body can feel. Once that is crossed, it feels nothing. Besides, when your hands are tied behind you, when you are completely off balance and there are crazed attackers raining blows on you from all directions, then somehow you get ready to take the blows. When I was on the floor, being kicked all over the room by heavy boots, when someone grabbed my hair and yanked me to my feet, I could vaguely make out a belt flung back against the wall, staining it red. A murky red screen crept before my eyes, inside my head.

Don't know when all that stopped, who brought me here or when. Can't recall a thing, yet I remember clearly that when they brought me to this room and stood me by the table, the newspaper lying on it was the *Dainik Basumati*. I was annoyed with myself for feeling this pain. Khakis always do this, who knows what they'll do next. But why must that paralyse my body? It's like losing to them, shameful. This is the body of a revolutionary. Is it on her side or theirs? Why can't you hold your head up

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and look them in the eye? They can make out that they've got to you, their torture has weakened you. Shame on you!

I am not alone in this lock-up. I realise this now — my senses are slowly getting used to my surroundings. It hadn't ever occurred to me that there might be someone else in this room, but now I seem to see a shadowy figure wrapped in a sheet at the other end, near my feet. Haven't heard a single sound from that person. Is she Chapala? Surely she is not dead? There is no movement. They haven't killed Chapala, have they? Could this be some other companion? If only I could get up a little…

Who's making that loud noise? What's he saying? Asking me to eat? But I won't eat. I'm not hungry. I want some water. I just said I want some water to drink, can't they hear me? Yes, they can. A tin tumbler is passed through the gap between the bars. Waiting to take the glass away. He flashes a toothy grin and says: "Eat up, there's a lot more waiting for you!" Everyone here shows big teeth when they smile.

The day stretches on, endless. Can neither sleep, nor think clearly. How will they redistribute the work when they hear about my capture? They must know by now that Chapala's room is a trap. Would they find out who did it? When the news reaches my village, my companions will be saddened, but surely the Village Committee will manage to keep the communication and information work going? Can't think clearly at all, my head is too heavy.

But I have sat up now, leaning against the wall. The toilet is inside the lock-up, on that side. I get the stink now. The one lying over there isn't Chapala. She had got up and walked slowly to the toilet, had looked at me, but hadn't spoken. Her

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whole face was badly swollen. She took every step with great difficulty. But she's not alone, there are two of them there, lying in each other's embrace under the sheet. The one I saw, when she got up, the other one just lay there. She looked like a village girl. But she didn't speak. I looked at her and tried to speak with my eyes.

I am sitting with my legs spread out in front and it looks so strange. Amidst the torn clothes, the squiggles of blood, there are henna patterns on my feet. A silver toe-ring. Mehzabin's mother had put them on me, before I left for the city. "Go during the daylight hours," she had said, "with the rickshaw's curtain down. If they see only the henna design on your feet, you won't draw any attention in the crowd."

She was right. Abhay dropped me off at the far end of the alley, and I came around it to enter from the other end at dusk. I had done this before. My only mistake this time was that nobody from the slum knew I had come. If they had known, they would have warned me somehow. How was I to know that Chapala wouldn't come? Actually, I had let my guard down because I was too confident. Of course that was wrong. But then, the news of my fate was broadcast by the khakis themselves. What was it they had said? "Come and collect her body tomorrow." I was still alive, though. Have they planned it out already? Tonight? Am I afraid? No, I am not. I have thought about it extensively since I woke up last night. There is nothing to be scared of in dying. In fact, if they kill me here today, the khakis will have trouble going out on the streets tomorrow. Others will draw courage from this.

Yes, they do torture you to death. They did it in Vietnam. In the Congo, they killed Lumumba by ripping him apart. And

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there were the Fascists before them. They are trained in the science of torture. And they are human beings. After all this, do they go home, take a shower, get into fresh clothes and sit around chatting and joking with the family? Play with their children? That officer who beat up Dilip so badly, had he gone home and laughed with his own son that day? How can anyone treat this as good or normal? My mother said, before Independence the police of the British Raj used to unleash unspeakable violence on freedom fighters. Are the police still following the old rules? Then what did we gain by fighting so hard against British rule? We want to change all that. Humans need to stay human, why would they become animals?

If they want to torture me to death, so be it. There's hardly anything I can do to protect myself. I come from a family of communist activists. Since my childhood, I've heard people talk of giving their lives for the country. I am not afraid to die. It's just that there's still so much I need to figure out. You can't ask outsiders, and insiders don't give you clear answers. I had thought I would slowly figure it out. If I couldn't do it by myself, I would discuss it with my contemporaries, my companions. Why don't the elders follow their own advice? And they get annoyed if you ask. My father dedicated his life to the Party, went to jail, never cast half a glance at his own household. Everyone respects my father, everyone listens to him. But then why are we six brothers and sisters? When I was old enough to understand this matter a bit, I had asked my mother. First her face turned red, then she slapped me hard. But that didn't answer my question. Yet I was always proud of the fact — I still am — that though many people had fathers in the Communist Party, I also had a mother who was a card-carrying

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member. I was the daughter of a political activist mother who had been in jail. Still, the questions remain.

My parents always said that in Russia or in China, boys and girls have the same rights, the same respect. They said it was irrelevant whether a Party worker was male or female. But when my father heard that I had slept in a slum shelter in the same room as boys, he had said such bad things that I couldn't believe I had known this parent all my life. I have countless questions regarding my elder sister. I love Didi very much. Most of my anger towards my elders is because of Didi. I can't understand these things and I feel the elders haven't practised what they preached.

When my mother was three months pregnant with Didi, she went to jail. Party activity was illegal then. My mother worked side by side with all the others, she stayed and worked in a village in Diamond Harbour. I cannot understand how — when my mother had already taken the gutsy decision to go underground for her work — she could get pregnant with Didi. Wasn't that dangerous for her? And when she did get pregnant, why didn't anyone think of treating her with some care? Why was she taken to rallies and marches where there was always the possibility of being hit by *lathis* and bullets, or where she could be arrested?

They talk about Ahalya of Kakdwip, but that was different. Ahalya was a farmer's wife, and they had an open battle going on right there. Besides, she hadn't had to drag her pregnant form away from her own village or fields. I have seen how people in the village, very poor people, take the greatest care of a woman who is carrying her first child. Because the one who will be born and the one who will give birth, both are of value

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to them. Why weren't my mother and my sister considered to be valuable? In that state, my mother went on a twelve-day hunger strike in jail, along with the others. So who should be blamed for the fact that my Didi was born with an undernourished, underdeveloped brain? Didi? Embracing hardship and pain as a choice is different. But what about one who has been made a victim of violence even before her birth by those closest to her? Those who speak of loving and caring for the downtrodden of the whole world, they didn't even spare a thought for — they didn't have a moment to love or care for — their own wife, their child, their Comrade's wife! And this act, this injustice, is held up as an example of the courage of the Party worker.

My parents are still involved in Party activities but except for their youngest son, my Chhorda, their sons hold down respectable jobs. My middle sister Mejdi's marriage was arranged, just like any other girl's. They found a man with a good job. Now, with her sari covering her from head to toe, vermilion marking her forehead, auspicious conchshell bangles on her wrists, Mejdi is the ideal married woman, busy with her household. She visits us once a year and stays for a couple of days. Only Didi — Didi's the one who sits around at home, can't speak properly, can't dress herself, can't read or write. She's mentally handicapped.

Apart from Chhorda and me, nobody loves Didi. Not even my father. He is irritated by her. Earlier, whenever we had visitors at home, we had to hide Didi away. She didn't want to go in, she would make droning, gurgling noises of protest. When we were young, out there in the drawing room, my father would ask me to recite poems for his visitors. Even back

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then I could recite long poems by Sukanta and Bimal Ghosh. When I recited, they locked Didi up. When I grew up some more, I stopped both — reciting poems and locking Didi up. My mother loves Didi, I have often seen her wipe her eyes while feeding Didi or doing her hair. But she never even gives Didi a pat on the head in front of my father or anyone else. Sometimes she says to herself, "When I am dead, what will happen to this enemy of mine?"

Yet, why didn't they get her treated when she was young? They sent us to good schools. Because Chhorda and I asked them this bluntly, my father couldn't stand the two of us anymore. There were terrible quarrels. My mother had to face the music when I left home. My father said loads of horrible things to her — I had turned out to be such an undisciplined creature all because of her, he said. Yet they say that my father's ideology doesn't distinguish between boys and girls. Besides, since childhood I had been spoiled most by my father.

I remember my mother now, again and again. In the villages or in the slums, when the housewives served balls of boiled flour in a thin, watery *dal* and got screamed at for it, sometimes beaten up as well, I don't know why thoughts of my mother flashed through my mind. And the mothers in those areas often said to us, "Why do you empty your mother's lap and come here? Your mothers' hearts must weep so much!"

Has anyone told my mother yet?

One of the two lying over there came up to me. She wasn't the one I had seen. She put her hand on my head. She spoke in a soft whisper. They were a mother and daughter, from a village near Kharagpur. Her name was Khandi. She didn't know anything. That very morning she had come with

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her two-year-old to visit her mother. Maybe her mother knew Mihir Rana's hideout. The khakis had thrust pins into the soles of her mother's feet. They have threatened to hack them both to death tonight if they don't speak up. The two were lying there, hugging each other so that they could both die together, in each other's arms, from a single chop of the axe. I was surprised that they believed they would both be killed, and were preparing themselves for it, but weren't thinking of giving away the hideout to save their lives.

"Comrets are God. How can you betray them?" she said. She was barely twenty. She was in a parrot-green sari. Deep, sunken eyes, dry lips. Maybe her husband would remarry. She had had many dreams, which would never be fulfilled. "Are you a Comret?" she asked me. "You will most certainly win. Mother Earth cannot bear so much sin. Everyone in our village is on your side. You will definitely win." She reminded me of the girl Sunil had told me about, the girl I hadn't seen. About fourteen or fifteen years old, the girl worked in the cowshed of the village *jotdar*. She was bonded labour. Her father couldn't pay back the *jotdar's* loan, and had had to leave her there in return. Their cowherd had asked Sunil to protect the girl from the terrible violence the *jotdar* inflicted on her. But before he could do anything — maybe they suspected something — they killed the girl and hanged her by the neck in the cowshed. We were all very depressed for some days. How much do we know about sin? Khandi knows much more.

They came with dinner.

Even Hell has rules, and a clock.

I can hear the roar of an automobile engine. Are they coming here? Have they picked up someone else? Haven't seen

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anybody here all day except for a couple of sentries and that man who brings the meals. Where is this place? How will my companions know where I am?

A gong rung out somewhere. Couldn't make out the hour.

The door of the lock-up opened much later. They had come for me. Khandi Bauri and her mother lay in each other's arms. I would probably never see them again. Nobody would know my story — would not know that I was not afraid. Or they shall find out much later, when all this has been destroyed.

Today, they put me in handcuffs. The policeman walked ahead, leading me by the other end of the cuffs. Another khaki uniform passed by. His voice was barely audible: "Don't drink the water there, it's drugged."

What water? Why drugs? I am not thinking of all that.

They are here as well.

There are some people who are watching all of us. Keeping an eye on us. Our stories will reach the people.

Now, I am not scared at all.

I am walking through the final doors of Hell, but I don't walk alone. ꟾm

Translated from the Bengali story 'Swajan, Bijan' by Antara Dev Sen

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AKIMUN RAHMAN

Bangladesh

Illustration by VINAYAK BHATTACHARYA

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Something strange happened as I was getting into the bus today. Me, Riazul, I keep my eyes peeled out here. But it was all so sudden that I was stunned. Well, no big deal, really. But it was so unexpected, it left me shaken.

I've been here all of five years and I have got the hang of this place — the way things work here, the good and the bad, I've seen it all. Our native folks here, I know them well. We bump into one another once in a while but we keep our distance, we keep our noses out of each other's affairs. We've better things to do than to get under each other's skin. We do meet sometimes, but we aren't family. Of course, people who huddle together in one place can't help but become a group. Like, I stay at Suba's house. He has bought the apartment. I've rented one of his rooms. Iliyas lives in another while Suba himself lives in a third room. He has been here nine years, says he wants to spend all his life here. Guys like Suba can say that. They aren't like us. They don't have much feeling for their homeland. Our hearts ache to be back there… they aren't like that.

He says he plans to settle down here. That's exactly what he's doing. He owns the place and he shows it. The bastard can afford it. He doesn't seem to care a fig for his home, his family, his village. Sometimes, I can't prevent myself from asking him, Subrata, how *can* you? Well, he's like that. Good for him. I don't want to be like him. I am not here to plant my roots in this soil. I'm here to make money. I'm doing just that. I'm sending most of it home. My father's buying some land with it. He's building a house. He *needs* my money. Four years have gone by. I want to stay maybe another five years. After that, with some serious cash in hand, I want to go home and, Allah willing, start a business there.

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I am sending money home and keeping some here in the bank as well. Besides the rent and the little that I've to spend on my food, I don't waste a penny. Money is to be saved. Isn't that why I'm here? But is that the whole story? I just said that I've come here *only* to make money. Well, no, there's something else. There's something that I haven't said. But right now, that's not the point. The point is that I'm kind of smart, and yet I was taken by surprise! Didn't see it coming, really.

What happened is, there I am standing at the bus stop, waiting to go home after work. There's a bus every twenty minutes. No. 6 and No. 36 stop in my neighbourhood. I am standing there waiting for one of these buses to take me home. A No. 36 is coming. Good enough.

My God, I am barely in when someone barrels into me. I'm about to fall off the step, but he grabs hold of me. With his other hand, he holds on to a seat handle to save himself. A black devil straight from hell! And he says: "Oh, sorry! So sorry! Extremely sorry!" The devil take your apology! Why did he have to rush into the bus like that, just when the doors were closing? I am hurt, and he thinks he can win me over with a little 'sorry'? I'm not the sort who lets off steam by cursing under my breath. I need to scream at him. Who would understand Bengali in this damned place? I look the other way and give it my all. Dirty pig! Did you come all the way from Sri Lanka to die and rot out here? Dirty swine! Stupid moron!

"My dear friend, aren't you being a little too harsh on me? I didn't do it deliberately, you know. I just lost my balance."

What the…? The Sri Lankan speaks Bengali! A dear brother from my native land! Great Allah! I am so ashamed of myself. A dear old Bengali from my homeland! Seems new in

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these parts. Seasoned travellers like us mustn't lose our cool; we are examples for the young ones. I almost embrace him right there. How had he come here? Which route had he taken? How long had he been here? Where did he live? I bombard him with questions. He only stares at me with his big eyes, saying nothing. What's wrong? Why is the guy being so strange? Something shifty about him. What can I say? We all have dubious pasts, or we wouldn't be here. None of us is clean. Now, what is his number? He listens, and keeps mum. My bus stop isn't far away. I ask him again: "So? What's the story?" Finally he opens his mouth. "I'm a student," says he.

Allah! Have they now started sending folk abroad with student visas? A pretty clever ploy to make a few bucks! That must be it. What's the harm in spelling it out, son? We are all brothers in this alien place. We don't need to hide things from each other! I tell him, "My dear friend, tell me honestly, how much did it cost you? What was the route, and what are your plans now?" He just stares silently at me with vacant eyes. At last he says, "I've got a scholarship to study here."

"How much money did you have to bring from home?"

"Not much. Why do you ask?"

"I mean, how do you manage your expenses here?"

"I just told you — the university foots the bill. Why are you asking me all this?"

"How would I know if I didn't ask?" Irritated, I try to drive some sense into his head. This lad has come so far to study, with a scholarship and everything, but look at his attitude! I have to drag the words out of him. Is he bragging? Bragging about his station in life! He'll be nowhere in a few days! Trying to become one of these foreigners at the cost of his own

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brothers will land him in hell, I know it!

"Do you live nearby?" the boy asks. Aha, now he speaks. "Just two stops away, at Raiano," I tell him, "that's where I live." One would think that after this he would tell me where he lived. But he doesn't say a word. I have to ask, "Where do you live?"

"Not very far from here — in Barcola. My apartment is in Sanita Contovelli."

Ah. Not too far. Three stops from my own bus stop. I go into my shell — let's see if he wants to talk to me. The bus was just a few minutes from Raiano. But the kid just wouldn't talk! You'll get into a mess without contacts, kid! But he didn't seem to bother. Oh well, let me do my bit. He is a brother, after all, I should give him my address. I gave it to him as the bus slowed down near my stop. Cross the road, go right and then on your right, the third floor of a four-storey building. He had the sense to tell me his name and then ask mine. I am Riazul, of course. He says he is Rakib.

When I was looking at this bloke, Riazul ... Or was he Rizawul? Oh, I'm confused. As I got off the bus, I thought — maybe I could've talked with him a little more. But I hadn't thought about it when I was with him. Or rather, I hadn't allowed the thought to strike me. Have I come here to socialise with Bengalis? Then I would have stayed on in Bangladesh. Do I have a passion to hunt down my fellow countrymen, secure a corner of this country for us and create a mini-Bangladesh? No, I don't. I just didn't feel the need to prolong the conversation with Riazul. Trieste is hardly a big city. I'm sure I'll see him downtown on the weekends, or at Piazza Oberdan. In these last seven days, whenever I have gone downtown, I've

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seen a couple of familiar faces. And since we have to take the same route, we'll meet sometime. Oh, this is already getting on my nerves. I don't need a Bengali for company, not a single one. I want to find myself in a world where I don't need to utter a single Bengali word. I've had enough of it. I've seen millions of Bengali faces. I've been positively surrounded by them.

But look, Rakib, aren't you surprised that you can't forget anything? It's been seven days. You have travelled thousands of miles and plunged into your lessons. Seven days on, your mind is light years away from home and family. You were so adamant about breaking all the bonds — and yet you carry them all within you. They dog your footsteps. Very strange! I don't want to think about it. But I realise that my past has become the very blood in my veins. How long will I take to drain it off and replace it with new, fresh blood? How long? Hey, Adriatic, do you have any idea how long it will take? Does the Adriatic listen to me? Can she hear me? The Adriatic is on my left. That's where she will be till I reach Miramare, the last stop. And just beside her stands my university. It's quite a distance from downtown. It's also quite far from Raiano, where that guy Riazul got off. I didn't really have to go downtown today. But after classes, I felt I might want to go and get acquainted with the place — just to say hello to the streets, to get used to the smells of the city — and as I reached the stop, the bus was about to pull away. No. 36: if I missed it, I would have to wait for another twenty minutes, so I made a run for it. I lost my balance and got myself into this mess.

Despite my apologies, the man doesn't stop whining. And who does he blame? Sri Lankans. Funny. I know that my complexion strongly suggests that I am a Sri Lankan. I'm dark, very

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dark, in fact. Back home, I didn't have to worry about it. But ever since I left Dubai for Trieste, I have been asked a number of times — Sri Lankan? These days, I have started using 'literally translated' Bengali. We don't talk like that back home. But why not start now? When I call Amma, I shall speak to her that way. I'll tell her, I have crossed over, all hurdles have been overcome, Amma, don't worry. No, I'd better say, brush aside your concerns, Amma. Which version sounds more robust?

Anyway, this stupid brother in the bus was moaning away and calling me a Sri Lankan. Funny. Then I thought I'd shake him up a bit. That's why I spoke to him in Bengali — to see his expression. He was bewildered! Ha, ha! Now that I have crossed over, nothing could compel me to get back into the arms of a Bengali. I hate I hate I hate you Bangladesh my love… my love… my love…

Amma always told me, I'll see to it that somehow, by Allah's name, you cross over. Dear Allah, see to it that my child gets there, safe and sound. I felt like I was being torn apart by tidal waves. Where was I? Where? In my own country. In Bangladesh.

Even a second before I got off the bus, I hadn't thought that I might not want to go home. I had had to slog all day — the company had sent me downtown to work in a house at the far end of the city. I'm a welder. Just stood and welded and fixed all day. I'm fagged out, dog-tired. Normally, I'd just go home and jump into bed. But today, I want to go to a restaurant and have a coffee, or just walk or something. That guy in the bus has ruined my mood. Showing off, wasn't he? Snob! C'mon, we're all hardworking guys — do you have any idea how

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much each of us earns here, in Bangladeshi currency? And we would have been scholars too, if we had done the right things. I had had my chances in that wretched country, in my village.

I am standing under a rose-apple tree on a hot May afternoon. Oh, the sweet scent of its flowers. Bees buzz around them. I call out, Mother, come and see! This year, the tree will be full of flowers. On his way to work, Father calls out to me, Hey, Riazul, I want you to go to Nayapara at ten. There's nothing in Nayapara, only hosiery and dye shops. Why do I have to go there? Father tells me that I have to start work in Hosen Mia's dye factory. But I have school today! No school from today, and with that he leaves for work. What can I do? We're ten brothers. All little bits and pieces, like pennies and shillings, one on the back of the other. My father desperately wanted a girl but every time, it was a boy. No girl or ill-luck followed us. I'm number five.

My eldest brother has no mind to work. The second one only goes from door to door, looking for a job. The third and fourth work in a tailor's shop and the one after me, he only wanders about. I'm the only one my mother has sent to school. I haven't yet got to the fifth standard and my father tells me to go work in a dye factory. I did just that. Sweated it out in that factory twenty-four hours a day. How long ago was that? Hey, Allah! It's been ages! That fellow — what was his name now? Rakib. Must be my age. Are there others like him, who have come from my country for their education?

Coming to Trieste to study was complicated, tricky and almost impossible. I had wanted to go to the US. Johns Hopkins had offered a very attractive scholarship, and it was my

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first choice. Amma insisted, Europe should be your first stop, study at ICTP. Oh well, forget Johns Hopkins this year. As soon as I began preparations for ICTP, advice started flooding in from all parts. Remarks, opinions, suggestions from my class-mates, teachers, well-wishers from other departments, they never stopped. And what did they have to say? Ha, ha! I can recall every word they said.

Our Rakib is trying to hoodwink us, they said. Does anyone in his right mind decide *not* to go to the US and opt for Italy instead? C'mon Rakib, do you expect us to believe that Johns Hopkins has actually offered you a scholarship, and you've rejected it for Italy? Hey there, we're not morons! He's lying! He's bragging! Thinks he's very clever…

So you've decided to give up the world's best university for ICTP. Even a donkey knows what that means! Ha, ha, ha!

Amma, don't you see, I have to take this shit every time I step into the campus. All because of you. You told me, "Don't let them distract you. Get there first and then you can look back."

But I need recommendations from these people. I get hit around like a table tennis ball by my teachers' opinions. Our seniormost teacher is Dr Azhar Ali. Almost jumps out of his chair. No, no, Rakib, ICTP is no joke. You can't survive there.

Why not, sir?

Tremendous workload. You won't survive.

I go to Dr Shamsul Alam for a recommendation. Would he oblige, or would he make things difficult for me?

Well, Rakib, why do you want to go abroad now?

To complete my education, sir.

Let me tell you, it's a mistake. Big mistake. You've topped

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the class in your degree course. I suggest you complete your Masters here. Because when you come back, you won't have any influence in the department and won't be able to join it. It'll be very tough to get a job. You can go abroad later for research, after you join up. Getting a job is your first priority, research can wait. You have to secure a living first, right?

Oh yeah. I am of the starving classes. I don't have the right to dream. Amma, I want to tear myself apart! I keep forgetting that I am a man. Men shouldn't cry, right? But tears roll down my cheeks in a stream. I don't need knowledge, I need nothing, I only need to fill my belly… Now don't be upset, just wait, get out there and then we'll see — Amma weeps with me.

In the dye factory, I stamped prints on shirts and vests all day, packed them up, despatched them and received new stocks. The days crawled by. In the evenings, I relaxed with friends. I got home at about ten or eleven at night. My mother used to doze off as she waited for me with my dinner. "Why do you waste your time in the streets?" she chided me. Didn't I need to hang out with friends once in a while? I nosed around for new openings, but it was useless. Brother number three had finished his training and was now the master of a tailoring shop. Earned okay but splurged on food and clothes. If he had cash in his pocket, he blew it up on a dozen chickens and the best rice in the market. Took the whole family to the movies. A new shirt every day, counted his money all the time. How did he make so much from tailoring? The local guys barked at us in the streets: "Swelling up like a balloon, aren't you?" What balloon?

They talked crap, but the police came in a huff one day, abused everyone and packed us off in a van. Why were we

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arrested? Those locals at the teashop had told the police that we were involved in a robbery or something. We sat smelling the litter in the lockup and on the assigned date, we were taken to the courtroom with a rope tied round the waist. We stood with palms joined in entreaty in what looked like a cage made of heavy iron rods. The case didn't move an inch, only new dates were given at every hearing. A whole year went by. No sentence, nothing, only new hearing dates. A lawyer was arranged, said he would get us bail. We didn't see him doing anything and there was no news of bail. We lived on crumbs in the lockup and cried ourselves hoarse. I couldn't figure out why the hell I was in prison.

I had always dreamed of being a physicist. I would walk the path of pure knowledge, walk all the way up till I was among the clouds — that was what I had promised myself. But at the entrance interview, I discovered that I had sinned in preferring physics. Pure physics, at that. The interview board scorned this madness. Why would such a brilliant student want to study physics? There are so many tempting subjects on offer! He should go for computer science, or pharmacy or applied physics. Or even microbiology. Physics! Why pure physics? Hello! Have you gone crazy? You want physics? Look here, my boy, are you from a remote village? Isn't there anyone in Dhaka who could counsel you? What would you do with physics? There's no job guarantee. The kid wants to ruin his career.

Rakib is silent. Physics will ruin his future, but Rakib has no choice. Rakib wants physics; he wants to be ruined in this way. The board members sneer at his foolishness, one or two of them shake their heads in disbelief. They make a last-ditch effort

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to bring him back to his senses — by threatening him. We want you to understand that we won't allow you to change your subject later. We are making a note of your name and roll number.

You will never get a second chance. We give you the last chance, will you take computer science?

Rakib wants physics. Hey, Physics, hey! Have you heard what they say about you? Oh, purest knowledge, don't be angry — Rakib wants you. They close in on him from all sides. In class, everyone stares at him. The department clerks, the cashier in the canteen, the waiter, the sweeper — they all watch him goggle-eyed. Has he lost his mind, the kid? He throws aside all the best subjects to meddle with old-fashioned physics? Oh, I couldn't take it any more. I couldn't suffer those mocking eyes! Oh, Amma! Where am I? Where? In Bangladesh.

A bunch of students from the geography department come to look for this new freak, a horde of chemistry students cry out, "There goes the intellectual of the new era." Students of applied physics give him raspberries and the microbiology students yell out, "Pseudo-intellectual, pseudo-intellectual!"

Amma, why do they do this to me? How shall I study here? "Bear with it, thicken your skin, Kalo." Amma calls me Kalo, meaning black or dark, when she's sad. Amma is dark; she wants skin as thick as rhinoceros hide. "First you cross this dark tunnel, then you can be angry, Kalo." Ridicule rains down on me from all sides, non-stop. I must become as dead as a stone to survive this. Why me?

I gave up counting the days till the next hearing. I got used to the mosquito bites in the lockup. Learnt to live through those days that never seemed to end. And then, out of the blue,

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we heard that the case had been dismissed. What case? Why was it dismissed? It went over our heads. Returned home after one year and seven months, thin as a needle. Just like those hardened criminals who spend most of their hopeless years in prison cells.

After those long days of toil and tears, I found the household strangely prosperous. Lavish meals, expensive clothes. The third brother is running the show. He tells me that he has started a business. What business? What about the tailoring shop? "You don't need to know," he tells me. I don't bother to ask again. I work on enjoying the good life just like everyone else. Every day is a feast day. One day, Mother cooks *korma* with two dozen eggs and the next she makes a curry with ten kilos of beef. With a truckload of *parathas* to go with it. I eat, pack my tiffin and go to the town in search of a job. That dyeing factory says they won't take me, but I plead with them. I go there every day, I plead, browse the cinema posters, return home in the afternoon and eat the world's best food. Mother feeds me and says, "You'll find a job soon, don't fret." Then one day, after another round of pleading and cinema poster-watching, I come back to find the household topsy-turvy, everybody running around, tables, dishes, the stove lying all of a heap and a bunch of policemen in the porch.

I see Jalal, my brother's friend, with a rope around his waist, shrieking as the police shove a rod into his belly. What's up now? Why are the police here, in our house? Jalal points to me, "Sir, that guy there is my business partner." Allah! I have never had shady deals with Jalal. Why is he lying?

"Hey, Jalal, you skunk! What are you saying?"

No one cares to listen. They put the rope round my waist

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again, they kick and push me into the van. Pigs! Vipers! Beasts! So that's the story behind my brother's sudden prosperity! The police dredge up piles of Phensidyl bottles from our pond. They file a suit, but they don't have evidence against me and so, after six months, I am released on bail. And I have to attend court again. What a wretched, Godforsaken place this is!

More trouble awaited me when I returned home. The local kids had grown up into young scoundrels.

"Hand over some cash, man!"

"What cash?"

"You want to be the only one to get rich? You worm!"

Another day, a group of addicts hemmed me in.

"We need ten bottles."

"What bottles?"

"We don't have time! Give it to us now!"

"What are you talking about, you rogue?"

"This guy's family is rolling in money and he doesn't know what we're talking about? Just give it to us."

"Son of a bitch!" I couldn't take it any more, "Bastards! I won't give you anything! Let's see what you can do!" And they all grabbed me! They punched, kicked and thrashed me. I couldn't take them on. How could I, on my own? And everyone in the street just stood there and watched me get beaten. It's a motherfucking country, this.

Faizal says, "Hey, pal, please give me your first year notes."

"Why? What use would they be?"

"I have to take the first year Improvement Test. Look at my percentage! It's not even third class!"

Oh-oh! How did you do so badly? I felt so awful. In that

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depressive place, Faizal was the only one who talked to me. He sat beside me in class, had tea with me and we did our lab work together. I was grateful to him. How could he get such poor marks in his first year exams?
"Come on, Rakib! We're not like you! You always get ten more than the all-time-record!" he says angrily. Oh, all right — I don't need those notes anymore, I can give them to him. He takes them all. I tell him, "If you need help, let me know."

I don't find the time to ask him how he is getting on. He is busy with his Improvement Test, I with my second year finals. Phew! Why does a student have to take exams? I hate this system — it has to go. Anyway, I steel myself and finish the exam. Don't have the time to lose sleep over the results. Third year classes begin.

And in the meantime, there is this new distraction. I have seen the girl of my dreams; I see her face in the depths of physics. The ideal face, which Amma has always described as the shape of a betel leaf — that very face is right here. Her name is Labani. Little things like going to class, to the lab, working in the library, become more pleasant because Labani is there. But how do I confess my feelings to her? How does one say these things? Shit! I don't know how! I'm a worthless coward! How can I get closer to her?

Ah, Nature, I'm so grateful! You find ways to make things happen. Labani herself breaks the ice: "I've taken physics but I'm finding it very tough. I guess I won't make the grade if you don't help me." Oh, she is near me at last, but she has this strange accent! I don't like the sound of her dialect. My ears rebel. Okay, these things can be sorted out in time. But how can I give her time? My days are cramped with study schedules. The

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third year finals are not far off, but I'll have to manage. I forgo library work three days a week and coach Labani in the late afternoons. The campus buzzes with gossip. Rakib has a crush on Labani. Why doesn't Labani know? The campus knows so many other things about Rakib, but Rakib himself is in the dark! The campus knows that Rakib is selling his first year notes to the first year students at a very good price. Almost all the junior students are queuing up to buy them. But Rakib has his pride. So Faizal is selling the notes on his behalf. A friendly gesture. Though Rakib is a pseudo-intellectual, he has a nose for business. Faizal guffaws when he hears this charade about Rakib and counts the cash that he makes from selling the notes. The intellectual fool! You're trapped, man! Who would believe you if you said that I was behind it? Amma, where am I? Faizal had taken my notes for himself! What do I do now? What? Let me go to Labani. I feel sick and dizzy. Today, I want her to know my feelings. I want to make things clear between us. Let her hear me out today… all the words that were left unsaid, the words she must have read in my eyes, in my voice, in my attitude — now, the time has come for her to give a plain response. I tell her, "Labani, I love you."

"How can you say such things? I feel terrible!"

"Don't you understand that I love you?"

"Why? You are like an elder brother to me, why are we talking about love?"

Labani sees me as her elder brother. Oh my God! Fine! Two people don't necessarily have to fall in love at the same time. But why didn't she, anyway? Something wrong with me? I love you, Labani! Oh my beautiful beloved! Be my redeemer, give me your love. "An affair with that black spook? He stammers, too.

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Labani isn't so cheap that she'd fall for that bloke! We only milk the old dud to get through our exams — he should be grateful for that! I'd have to be crazy to fall for him." I hear her thoughts in the voices of others.

Amma says, Kalo, you have to walk this long, dark tunnel. Yes, Amma, yes, I have to. Don't lose your balance. Even if he is torn apart, Rakib will have to carry this burden himself. How much further?

Afia tells me to go to the big tree behind her house every afternoon. Her eyes don't go dead when she sees this jail-bird. She calls out and smiles. One afternoon, I go to meet her near the tree. She talks, laughs, teases and jokes with me. Not bad at all. She asks me to take her to Hiru Rubel's cinema. All right, no problem. She goes with me, we sit close together in the rickshaw. We munch peanuts and snacks. I get the feeling that things are happening here — love and all that. Good. Without a bit of romance, teenage life would be dull. For Eid, I buy her a three-piece georgette dress. On another Eid, I give her five rupees. Romance and stuff doesn't work out without these things. We kiss and embrace... the usual stuff. And then one day we hear that Afia has run away with someone else.

If she had to run away, she should have run away with me! I thought *I* was the lover! But who does she run away with? With Mohsin, the rich guy. Mohsin disappears for a few days and then surfaces again — very normal, as if nothing's wrong, as if he has no idea where Afia is. Mohsin is back, but where is Afia? No one knows. And it's funny, but her parents file a complaint that I had abducted their minor girl. It's crazy! Another farce of this motherfucking country. The police bring my house

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down hunting for me. Now, I know nothing about all this. How come I'm convicted? But I'm a bloody criminal. My name's marked permanently in their register. A hard-boiled criminal. But this time, they won't catch me. I'm not a sucker anymore, now I know the ways of the world. A wicked, corrupt country! A land of traitors! Needs a kick in the face. I'd get away from this nightmare.

I didn't have a passport. I left the country with only the shirt on my back. I travelled across India and near Punjab, I was caught. After six months in jail I reached Iran by way of Pakistan. From Iran to Turkey. From Turkey to Romania and on to Hungary. I ran like a storm wind with my life in my hands. The agents stole the jewellery I'd taken from my mother. I had a thick wad of my brother's Phensidyl banknotes; they took that too. For months, they made us toil in gardens, fields, wherever they could. We would move ahead a mile and then cool our heels for three months. I stayed the course. I worked hard. And I decided that there was no going back.

In Romania, our agent told us that we would have to be packed in a sealed van. There was no other way. It was a container of beef or something. It was locked and sealed on all sides; there was only this little hole in a corner which let in a bit of air. I had no choice. I had to go.

How dark it is in the van, pitch dark! Darker than the grave. There is hardly any air inside so we don't hear the sound of the motor. This grave on wheels speeds on and on and on. Who knows how many days and nights go by? The black grave doesn't stop. No food, no toilet. Sleep and wakefulness have become meaningless… everything clusters into a dead darkness. One moment I have sense, the next moment I've lost it. Oh, if I only

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had a drop of water. The grave doesn't stop anywhere. My chest bursts for a drop of water. I want water. Give me a drop, someone. Is there any water? Where can I get a little water? Finally, we work out a way. We piss in our palms. Who says you can't drink urine? Oh yes, you can. You sure can. Tastes like water. Doesn't smell like piss — its water. And then one day they open the door of the grave. Before us, we see vast, open fields.

Faizal was selling my notes year after year in my name. Why did it take me so long to figure out? I was being sold out in the open, and I was totally in the dark. I don't deserve to survive. I don't even deserve to be loved! What am I, then? Why am I alive? Where… where am I?

I heard some people were looking for me and for a few days, we narrowly missed meeting each other. They'd come to the lab looking for me just when I'd left. Or they'd be asking my classmates where I was. Who were they? They were from the party. One day, they caught up with me.

I am in a hurry, five minutes late for class. As I run up the stairs, they converge on me. And they all shake my hand.

"Let's have some tea together," the leader says.

"I'm sorry, I have a class."

"But it's important. You know us, don't you? We're party workers and leaders." One of them comes directly to the point: "You'll have to join our party now. If a brilliant student like you joins us, we'll gain some prestige."

"Let me tell you the benefits of joining up. You'll have a room all to yourself in the hall, from today. The party will take care of all your needs."

"This isn't for just a day or two, either. The party will make

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arrangements to get you through the Master's."
"The party will manage the finances; we only need your face value. A Honda will be parked outside your door twenty-four hours a day; the fuel is on us. If you turn us down and join the other party instead, things could get sticky. We've come to you first."
"Either you come with us or stay away from both."

So they have offered me a choice. By mistake? Or are they being kind to me? I... I want to complete my education. Right now, I have a class to attend. They take off after giving me a final lecture. And then the other group comes. They assure me of the same benefits and securities. My face has such value for them! How do I get out of this hole? "Kalo, don't talk back to them," Amma says, trembling with fear. "Tell them that you don't understand politics, that you want to complete your education and nothing more." I don't need anything else. What else can I ask for?

My seniors in the department were all three-year course graduates. The university had just introduced a four-year honours course. We were the first batch; at last we were catching up with the rest of the world.

Most of the professors called me to their rooms. Why? God knows. Zulfikar Haider talks straight: "Look here, Rakib, you will take up laser physics in the fourth year. My subject."
"I... I shall take modern field theory, sir."
"Look, this is a prestige issue. How dare they put up field theory as an alternative to my subject! There's a market for lasers. With field theory, you'd starve."
"But, sir..."
"You want a high first class, right? I'll see to that. Besides, you

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need to secure your future. My party will definitely come to power."

"Sir..."

"Modern field theory is not for us. It's for students in developed countries. A lot of research work has been done in my subject. It's just right for our students. This field theory has no future."

"Sir, I shall study theoretical high energy physics. For that, I need to study theory. That's why I took physics in the first place."

"How dare you shoot your mouth off in my face? What do you understand of physics? So you've decided to reject my subject! Go to hell! Let's see how you join the department."

I am desperately eager to work in this new field of physics. But how shall I manage here, surrounded by so much anger?

Dr Kabir Hussain tells me, "This is a brand new subject and it has been introduced for the first time for your fourth year. I suggest you start reading up on it. And Rakib, you'd better start preparing notes according to the syllabus. And submit them to me soon. I shall draw up my lecture schedules after that."

Let him worry about his lectures. I enjoy myself exploring this new area. While preparing notes, I develop a special liking for the subject. When I hand in the notes to Dr Hussain, he says decisively: "I shall keep them." He kept them for good. Oh, I wish I had made photocopies. Rakib weeps in his room alone. Where does he go from here?

The class lectures that follow are literal echoes of Rakib's notes. They come in handy for subsequent batches of students as well. How long will it take me to walk this tunnel? Can I hold my head up that long? Shall I ever see the other end? Rakib sees

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a pale horizon before his eyes as they fill with tears.

I get out of that grave on wheels to see a huge field crossed by wire fences. The agent tells us that we must cross over to the other side. We are standing in Slovenia and beyond the fences is Italy, my final destination. They are electric fences. No one would dream of cutting the wires. There is no way to climb over them either.

The wires from both sides converge in the mouth of a pipe. We couldn't even guess where the end of that huge pipe lay. Maybe it went all the way to the horizon. The agent says, the pipe is three kilometres long. I know miles, what are kilometres? It's pretty wide inside the pipe but he says five thousand volts run through the wires in there. Oh, my God! He says that we'll have to crawl three kilometres through that pipe to reach the other end, which is in Italy. We stagger in fear. We shake from head to foot. How shall we get through this pipe stacked with high-energy wires?

Like the others, I wrap myself in a plastic sheet. The agent swirls it round and shrouds me. The body has to be completely covered, not an inch of flesh must show. You can't lie on your back and crawl. You have to sit up and creep forward. No other movement allowed, and you mustn't let the shroud slip. Five thousand volts, careful!

Mother! Look at your Riazul! He sits on his ass and creeps along. Riazul, the plastic mustn't budge an inch! Dear Allah, how many millions of years will I take to get to the other side? Oh Allah! Has the plastic worked loose over my head? No, don't cry, Riazul! Oh my wretched, hopeless country! You threw me out of your land!

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Back in my country, I had pretended to be standing upright, though I had fallen flat on my face. I was crawling, creeping along. I had aspired to study theoretical high energy physics in a place where the only thing that mattered was to secure two square meals a day. Wasn't I crazy? A four-legged animal. As soon as the last bunch of papers arrived from ICTP, Amma put me on the aircraft. Amma, will you cry, Amma? You'll be so lonely! Utterly lonely!

Ah, now my child will live. Now he will hold his head high, he will be a scholar. I've managed to get him across. Finally, he has crossed the dark, dreadful tunnel. I've been able to set him free into the big, wide world out there. He will live, he will survive, I'm sure he will…

Oh, Bangladesh! Oh, my country! Is this how I *live*? No Rakib, no. Swallow those tears. This is alien soil, you mustn't shed tears here. Come on, Rakib! tlm

Translated from the Bengali story 'Bangladesh' *(2004) by Joydeep Bhattacharya and Antara Dev Sen*

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AMIT CHAUDHURI

The Second Time

Watercolour by JATIN DAS

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ALTHOUGH ONE OF THEM lived in Kensington and the other in Bayswater, they didn't know each other. It was that evening, when he'd come out of the Underground and walked down the road glittering with light and rain, and gone back home to speak to his parents on the telephone, that he'd first heard about her. A second marriage! What was marriage, after all? The back of his overcoat was velvety with moisture as it lay drying on the sofa, where it had been roughly put aside. Once, after a couple of meetings, it was agreed that the idea of a second marriage was congenial to both of them, they decided to put it to execution. They had no idea, really, what it was all about; members of both sides of the family became like co-conspirators and decided to keep the fact a secret till they had an inkling as to what the shape and features of a second marriage were. As far as they were concerned, it was still as formless as the rain on Kensington High Street. Last time, the rituals, like some vast fabric whose provenance they knew little about, had woven them into the marriage, without their having to enquire deeply into it; Arun remembered, from long ago, the car that had come to pick him up, his eyes smarting from the smoke from the fire, the web of flowers over everything, including the bed, the stage, even the car. The first marriage had been like a book into which everyone, including they, had been written, melding unconsciously

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and without resistance into the characters in it that everyone was always supposed to be.

They met at an old pub near Knightsbridge, and ordered two coffees. This time Prajapati, or Brahma, would not preside with wings unfurled from the sky or the dark over their marriage; nor would this wedding be in that ageless lineage that had begun when Shiva had importunately stormed in to marry Parvati. This time the gods would be no more than an invisible presence between their conversation. They sat there, two individuals, rather lonely, both carrying their broken marriages like the rumours of children.

"Sugar?" she said, with the air of one who was conversant with his habits. He was shyer than she was, as if he needed to prove something.

"Two," he said, managing to sound bold and nervous at once. They were like two film directors who had with them, in script, a plan, but nothing else. There was both exhaustion and hope in their eyes and gestures, which the waitress, saying "Thank you!" cheerfully, hadn't noticed.

"Two?" she said, noting that he was overweight. A gentle affection for him had preceded, in her, any permanent bond. It was as if it would almost not matter if they never saw each other again.

"Are you all right?" said the waitress, coming back after a while.

"Oh we're fine!" he said, his English accent impeccable. "Maybe you could bring me a few cookies."

The cookies were pale, star-shaped squiggles, or chocolate-dark circles. They had brought a list of invitees with them.

"This is Bodo Jethu," she said, pointing at the name, A. Sarkar, on the top of a piece of paper. "You'll see him during

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the *ashirbaad* at Calcutta." Withdrawing her finger and looking at a name, she said, "That's my only *mama*." He stared at the name she was looking at.

Six years ago, these very people, six years younger, had blessed her at the *ashirbaad* ceremony before her first marriage. Now they would have to be summoned again, like figures brought to life a second time from a wooden panel where they'd been frozen, resurrected from their armchairs, or old age homes, or holiday resorts, or wherever they happened to be. The embarrassment, the fatigue, of blessing a niece, or a grand-niece, or a daughter, a second time! Some of them had developed a few aches and pains, inexorable, since the first time; though all of them were still there. Now they'd be brought back like soldiers who had been disbanded and were caught loitering happily and absently.

But the list of invitees, this time round, was to be a more makeshift affair. It had the air of an impressionistic personal reminiscence; it had been composed, without much advice from elders, haltingly, from memory. "Might as well put him there," and "Don't you have anyone else on your father's side of the family?" were the expressions of collaboration and trade heard being made across the coffee cups, smudged with marks from their lips, on the table. Last time, the list of invitees in both cases had been all-encompassing, almost all the people who populated their lives on a long-term basis had come. This time, only a handful were to come; some people had been left out mysteriously, for no good reason; others were the most essential, the kind of people they'd have chosen to take with them to a nuclear-free zone, in case of a war, if offered the choice.

In everything they said, there was this air of acceptance,

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and tentatively, experimentation rather than celebration, of a resolve towards provisionality rather than finality. Since they themselves, rather than tradition, authority, or destiny, were having to author this event, they were experiencing the difficulty that authors have, bringing into existence what didn't exist before. In Arpita, especially, there was deep sadness, not so much because she was attached to her ex-husband, whom she hated, but because she realised the marriage ceremony has only one incarnation, it had no second birth or afterlife, that the fire could not be lit again, consumed and charred as it had been by ghee, nor the garlands re-exchanged, except in memory, where it could be played again and again, like a video tape. Whose wedding was that, then, six years before, and whose wedding was it to be now? There was subtle disjuncture between meaning and reality. In the meanwhile they, while considering the idea of the wedding and the marriage, were having to behave like visitors from a remote planet who were studying the civilisations of this one from a book, and finding their habits increasingly difficult to put to use.

Later, after he'd paid the three pounds and fifty, there was a brief discussion about who should have the right to pay, till it was decided that it was not so much a question of rights as of who had the change. They took a Tube — both of them had taken the day off from the office — to Highgate, and walked down from there to Hampstead Heath. There were two or three preponderant clouds in the sky, which were being gradually pushed beyond their field of vision by a breeze, but there didn't seem to be any immediate danger of rain. The Heath was largely tourist-less and deserted except for a few devout ramblers and the usual conference of ducks and a few expatiating,

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unidentifiable birds that, as they walked, had the strangely private and liberated air of tramps. They went to take a look, from the outside, at the old, stately home where they would have their reception in London — they could well afford it as they both earned more than 50,000 pounds a year — after the *ashirbaad* and reception in Calcutta. They were too well-dressed to be loiterers or intruders, Arun in his usual overcoat, Arpita in her slacks and her dark blue duffel coat. An onlooker, looking at them and looking at the stately home, might have concluded they'd come here to attend a function, only to discover they'd arrived on the wrong day.

"It is lovely, isn't it?" he said, dazzled by the sunlight mutely reflecting on the wooden door.

"It's very nice," she said, nodding.

The old two-storeyed house with long verandahs where she'd first been married, a family house converted and rented out for such occasions, had set like a sun, while this one had risen like a new sun which had no name, only an indefinable light, in its place. She couldn't look at it properly. This past month, she couldn't tell clearly if she was happy because she was at last getting married, or because she was getting married in the light of her imperfections, and others'; that imperfection, as much as accomplishment, would define them when bride and bridegroom would finally meet. This second time round, she'd discovered that to be happy was not so much a self-sufficient, spontaneous emotion, such as you might feel in relation to a dream or a secret, but a way of reacting to the rest of the world; that to be happy this time, she must curb the natural human instinct to look up the sky, with its all-encompassing definition, and gaze towards the immediate ground and horizon, with its

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lack of shape, or abode, or clear ending.

He was talking about food. He said maybe it would be better if they didn't have an elaborate dinner this time or guests at the reception in the five-star hotel in Calcutta; just some snacks and cocktails. "You know, things like chicken *tikka* and *kababs*," he said.

He meant that the meal should be composed of small, piecemeal, disposable items, which one could consume and move on, in favour of those large repasts which arrested the passage of time and movement. To be left slightly hungry seemed to be apt to the occasion; and when he saw, in his mind's eye, the singed wedges of the tikka, they seemed well suited for this purpose.

Two months later, she and he took separate intercontinental flights to Calcutta. They arrived at the small shed of an international airport with the air of those who'd arrived on a necessary business trip. She was carrying her laptop with her. Neither had anything to declare, as they walked, on different afternoons, nonchalantly past the incurious customs officials in the way one might walk down the marriage aisle if all the guests on either side were asleep. During the *ashirbaad* ceremony in her father's flat near Dum Dum, everyone was a degree less solemn than you might have expected them to be. They'd blessed her once before, but they had enough blessings in store to bless her again, with the same untidy shower of grain and grass. There was an element of play-acting, as they were not adhering to the plan of the ritual, but imitating what they'd done a few years before. But there were also unsettling moments of discovery; some of the faces — those of the bridegroom's family — were new, while theirs were the same. This collision, this bumping into each

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other, of strangeness and familiarity in the small flat, made the experience something like rereading a well-known story and finding that some of the characters in it had changed while others had remained who they were. Later, they all relaxed, like actors after the performance, unmindful of their attire and a slight air of dishevelment. There was a gap of silence, in which Arpita existed momentarily as if it were her new home. She remembered how everything had been precisely laid out and premeditated during the last wedding; how she'd hardly had to move of her own volition, but had been carried down, as the ceremony pre-ordains, from her small room in the rented house, down the steps, precariously, in the arms of her male cousins towards the fire, and from there to walk blindly behind her husband seven times. She now saw that house as one she'd never visit again, but which she'd sleepwalked through, without the aid of her hands and feet, half-afloat, as if she were handicapped but had been somehow given the power to move through its spaces in a supranormal way. She said: "Ranga *dadu*, it's good to see you looking so well! You're positively pink!"

"It's the rum that keeps him so healthy," someone else said.

After two weeks, she was looking at the photographs, and she said: "So many photos! I didn't realise someone was sneaking around taking so many photos! Who was the photographer?"

"I don't know," he said. Proudly he added, "I wasn't there." Naturally he couldn't be present at his wife-to-be's *ashirbaad*.

They sat looking at the set of photographs. Everyone in them looked as if they had no desire to go anywhere, and there was a strange unhurriedness about the faces and postures. It was almost as if someone had somehow managed to take the pictures after the event. tlm

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AMITAVA KUMAR

Girgit

Watercolour on paper by SUDIP ROY

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There's a crack about an inch and a half high between the bottom of the bathroom door and the cement floor. When Ma takes her bath, I slide my toes under the door and wait. I can hear the water running and the sound of the radio inside.

When Ma notices my feet, she switches off the radio. I hear the clink of her bangles as she comes to the door. I stand with my body pressed against the painted wood, and I can feel my warm breath on my face. A quiet moment passes. And then Ma sprinkles talcum powder on my toes.

No matter how many times this ritual is repeated, I am surprised and intensely happy. Years later, the gentle warmth of early spring and the smell of talcum powder will evoke in me the memory of my childhood.

The giant masts of All India Radio stand only two hundred yards from our home. Our house is at the end of a short alley. Outside the house, on the left, is a small *khataal* for cows and buffaloes, from where the neighbourhood gets its milk. Brij Bihari owns the *khataal*. He is a milkman, because that is his caste. His full name is Brij Bihari Yadav. Brij Bihari does not know how to write, but my mother says he is very smart. He is from Samastipur, where he goes by train for the Holi festival.

Ma bathes during that long hour of mid-day after she has

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finished cooking. She first washes a few clothes and then fills the buckets for her bath. After Ma emerges from the bathroom — the jingles on the radio announcing her return — we wait for Papa to come home for lunch.

Today, Ma opens the door hurriedly and asks, "Did Papa call?"

The phone is in the living room. I follow her there. Ma calls my father at his office. I know he is not there, because her conversation with Bose Babu, Papa's secretary, goes on longer than usual. She says, "You have to arrange for a car. I can't leave Sneha at school when there is trouble in town."

My father is an important man. He is the Additional Magistrate for Patna Sadar. Papa goes to work in a white Ambassador, with his peon sitting in the front seat beside the driver. The peon's name is Raghunath. He holds my father's briefcase in his lap in the car. The driver's name is Aziz. He is an old man. Between Aziz and Raghunath stands propped the Eagle thermos with my father's coffee.

I ask my mother, "How is it that Didi gets to come back early from school?"

My mother says, "Go out and see if Brij Bihari is around. Tell him to come here right now."

The two buffaloes are lying outside the *khataal*. I look in. It is dark and cool under the thatched roof. I can see the cows standing in front of their empty tubs, chewing the cud. But Brij Bihari isn't there. I am about to turn back for home when I see Brij Bihari outside the gates of the radio station, talking to two men. I run up and say to him breathlessly, "Ma is calling you."

Brij Bihari nods but does not move. The men continue to talk in low voices. One of the men has three metal keys and a

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penknife hanging from the yellow thread that drops in a diagonal across his torso. He is sitting in the saddle of his bicycle. Brij Bihari and the third man stand on either side of the bicycle. A few minutes pass. At last, Brij Bihari turns and, taking my hand, says, "Let's go, hero."

When we get home, Ma is standing at the bathroom door, listening to the radio. Brij Bihari says to Ma in Hindi, "A storm is breaking in the city." Ma says, "They are not telling us much. But they just announced that there is a curfew."

Brij Bihari says, "*Arrey,* the public can't be controlled by a curfew when it is angry."

I don't know who the public is. I think of the two men I had just seen talking to Brij Bihari. The one sitting on the cycle, perhaps, can't be controlled when he is upset. He uses the little knife hanging from his sacred thread to kill the curfew.

Ma is worried. She has not been able to contact my father. But she doesn't want to use the phone. "I'm afraid he might be trying to call us here," she says. Ma is worried about my sister, who is four years older than me. Ma tells Brij Bihari why she has called him: "Take your cycle and go to Sneha's school. Stay there until I am able to send the police. Please do this much for me."

Brij Bihari laughs at my mother's tone and tries to set her mind at ease: "There is nothing to worry about, Didi. The public is looking for Muslims."

Nevertheless, he is ready to go. My mother says that she will ask for the police jeep to be sent to the school soon. She says, "Just stay there till it comes."

I follow Brij Bihari out. "The Muslims have been running around a lot. Now the postman is going to come," he says. Then he puts on his cotton vest because he is going to the

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school. "A few of the bearded ones," he says mysteriously, "are going to be stamped and mailed today." He points up at the sky. He has a sly look, as if he were joking.

I go out into the small garden. The gate opens on to the street outside. I have to stand on my toes to lift the gate's half-moon metal latch. The gate is narrow. It hangs from white pillars on either side. An overgrown hedge stretches around the perimeter of the property. There are lizards all around. They creep out of the hedge and sun themselves on the metal gate.

I am scared of the *girgits*. These lizards have long tails, although their thin bodies are no longer than the span of my palm. Their colour ranges from pale yellow to dark, scaly brown. Many of them have bloated red sacs under the chin. Though I'm scared of these creatures, I also want to kill them. I often daydream about catching them unawares with a throw with a sharp stone, the blow flinging them off their perch. As they fall back in the air, I imagine seeing their pale, exposed bellies. Brij Bihari has told me that the lizards are Muslims.

I am suspicious of the lizards with sacs under their chin. These sacs used to be beards. During the Partition riots, the Muslims were running scared of the Hindus. If the Hindus found the Muslims, they would kill them. If the Hindus did not kill the Muslims first, the Muslims would, in fact, kill the Hindus. Or they would take the Hindus to the new country, Pakistan, where they would be converted and trapped forever.

Once, the Hindus saw a bearded Muslim running away. They caught him and were about to chop off his head. The man was a coward. To save his life, he pointed with his beard towards the well in which the other Muslims were hiding. Because of this act of treachery, that man was turned into a

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lizard with a sac under his chin. That is why, when we Hindus look at these lizards, they bob their heads. As if they are pointing the way to a well.

Brij Bihari is a tall, thin man. His moustache hangs over a part of his face. Brij Bihari's voice issues from deep within his stomach, which he holds tight as he walks. He is usually clad only in a blue *lungi*. Bare-chested, he roams the neighbourhood with his cows every morning, selling milk from door to door.

For as long as I can remember, Brij Bihari has been a part of our household. He uses the bathroom in the servant's quarters behind our house, and some of his belongings are stored in the garage. In return, my parents use Brij Bihari's services for a variety of tasks. When guests arrive and cold bottles of Coca Cola must be brought from the shops near Vijay Chowk, or when the doctor needs to be fetched, like the night my father started vomiting and the phone wasn't working, or when crackers and big chocolate bombs need to be set off during Diwali, Ma always summons Brij Bihari.

For a few months, we had a maidservant who had come from my mother's village. Her name was Lata. My sister let Lata oil her hair and weave it into plaits. There was some trouble one morning. Lata was upset. My mother had the red toothpowder in her hand — she was still brushing her teeth — and she was speaking angrily to Brij Bihari. Then my father appeared and told me to go up to the bedroom. Later, from the window, I saw Brij Bihari labouring silently in the sun. He was cutting the maize in the backyard.

Lata did not make the *rotis* for lunch that day. I went looking for her, and found her lying on her thin mattress in the small room at the back. The room was next to the bathroom

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that she shared with Brij Bihari. I asked Lata why she was not in the kitchen and she said, "I have a stomach-ache." I did not believe her, though I didn't know why. I said to her, "I want some water." She turned her face to the wall and began to sob. I saw how her back heaved as she wept, and I left the room quickly because I had made her cry. Next day, I did not notice that Lata had left our house. Many days later, I heard Ma telling someone that Lata had returned to her village.

Brij Bihari is very different from my father. Papa is a government officer, and people like Brij Bihari call him *Saheb*. Papa does not joke with anyone. He travels in the car with Aziz and Raghunath, and he finds out from the poor what they want and then he signs files and gives to the people what they need. Aziz, our driver, is a Muslim. I imagine Brij Bihari taking the small and dark-skinned Aziz and putting him in a brown-paper parcel. Stamped and mailed. For a moment, I think I do not have enough air and cannot breathe at all. Now I want Papa to come back home. Didi will be back too. We'll all be together unexpectedly, sitting down for a surprise lunch.

'Tifflin' is the term that Brij Bihari uses for lunch. He can't really speak English; I laugh when Brij Bihari uses foreign words. One evening, my parents are sitting in the living room with some guests. Brij Bihari is asked to bring the tea. In the kitchen, he holds the tray bearing the teacups in both hands and walks back and forth with the mincing gait of a woman.

Periodically, he stops before me. A cup appears, but before I can take it, Brij Bihari lifts the cup to his pursed lips. He simpers, and says over and over again, "T.P., T.P." I laugh at this strange exhortation to drink tea, but feel guilty about laughing at our guests and, perhaps, at my parents.

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Brij Bihari is amusing, though I don't always know what he means. What I do not understand about Brij Bihari's words is like a trapdoor in the floor. I am falling through the door. The dark tunnel opens into the future where, unknown to me, I shall struggle to become a writer.

In that distant future, I shall find words to describe my childhood. Words will liberate me. But I shall also discover a distrust of the promise of language. Words will fail me. I shall not be able to undo the confusion around me. One day, I will tell myself that I am a writer because the childhood fascination as well as unease with what I am being told has not yet left me. At the place where the trapdoor will finally lead me, people will find words to justify any injustice. People will kill and they will use words to whet their knives. Words will join battle. I shall forever be left bereft in language.

In the present, however — in the present of my childhood, which I shall later think of as being neither happy nor unhappy — I like talking to Brij Bihari because, unlike my parents, he speaks to me as if I am part of his world. For me, it's a very exciting world.

My mother knows this and does not like it at all. I have just started going to school. When I come home with my notebook empty, Ma says to me, "What will you do when you grow up? Milk cows like Brij Bihari?"

I want very badly to take care of Brij Bihari's cows. I want to feed them grass and hay mixed with a little water in the trough. I like the smell of the hay. I also want to milk the cows, binding their hind legs with rope so that they don't kick at me. I have watched Brij Bihari pulling at their teats, squirting milk into the bucket held between his knees. I want to make the milk

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foam like that. And I want to sleep in the open like Brij Bihari does, on a string cot, with the red lights atop the masts above the radio station glowing in the dark like stars.

Brij Bihari is off right away on his bicycle. The white football that Pappu Bhaiyya, my elder cousin, had given me for my last birthday, is still under the bushes, where I had kicked it. A single lizard is sitting on it, its tail drooping over the curve of the ball. The lizard swallows, and for a second I see into its pink mouth. I wonder whether it has eaten an ant.

I like killing ants. There's a spent matchstick fallen at the edge of the verandah floor near me. I squat and use the matchstick's blackened head to slice in half the bodies of the ants that are climbing the yellow wall.

I start with the ant at the bottom and quickly work my way up. But by then, a new column of ants has started climbing again, and I have to hurry back to the beginning of the line. It's hard work, but it commands my complete attention, and it gives me pleasure. The ants have no idea what I am doing to them. Now and then, however, they break the line and start scurrying in a curve, like trucks that turn off on a diversion when the roads are being repaired.

I look up and see that the lizard has not moved. I put three dead ants on a small leaf and begin to walk slowly toward the ball on which it sits. But it suddenly disappears on the other side of the football, and then I see it diving into the foliage. I place the leaf carefully on top of the ball and retreat to my place by the wall. I feel like a hunter, and I take up the matchstick again.

Once you kill an ant, another ant will eat it. If I keep at this task near the wall, I shall have killed enough ants to feed the rest of the ant colony. I have seen ants carrying other ants on

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their backs. They are not taking the dead ants to be cremated. Brij Bihari has told me that the ants will take the dead ones into their homes and eat them like toast in the evening.

Ants live in the earth. I would like to see their tiny rooms, one bedroom separate from another, and all linked by narrow tunnels that are actually hallways. Every house has a living room where ants sit around and drink tea and eat their dead neighbours, whom I have killed.

The police jeep comes to our door and my sister jumps out of it. Brij Bihari is at the back with his bicycle resting on the jeep's footrest. My mother is delighted. She wipes Didi's face with the end of her *sari.* Once we're inside, Ma kisses Didi. Then Didi begins to cry and stops only when my mother gives her a glass of water. As abruptly as she had started crying, my sister stops and says, "I'm hungry."

A constable brings my sister's schoolbag to the door. He is a young man with a steel bangle on his wrist. He seems weighed down by Didi's bag. He says, "Order *hai wapas jaane ka.*" The police jeep is going to leave. I want it to stay so that I can admire the red lights and the red-and-blue flag that droops on its hood.

When the jeep is gone, Brij Bihari begins to tell my mother a story. The public is likely to get interested in Sneha Didi's school very soon. The nuns there have begun taking in Muslim families from the surrounding areas. Brij Bihari saw this while he waited with his cycle leaning against the giant tamarind tree. Women in *burkhas* with children in tow, led by groups of intense young men. The main gates of the school are locked. But the side gate is open. The Muslims are using that. They are all gathering in the shelter of the school's walls.

I know those walls that Brij Bihari is talking about. They are

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tall and have shards of glass embedded at the top. They are painted white and have a red line running around them. The colours are the same as those of my sister's uniform.

My sister says, "Mother Superior has a very big heart."

Ma says, "They have dedicated their lives to the poor."

Both my mother and sister look a bit like the nuns when they say this. But Brij Bihari says, "The Muslims have been building such a big mosque. Why are they not hiding there under their loudspeaker?"

My mother is listening quizzically to Brij Bihari, as if he has presented her with a puzzle. But my sister, who knows a lot because she is in school, has a question for Brij Bihari: "Should the Muslims not have their mosque?"

Brij Bihari is tickled by Didi's question, or maybe by the fact that she knows so little. He begins to speak but my mother has had enough. She says to him, "What are you saying in front of the children? Have you fed your cows today? Go to them... At least they do not find differences between Hindus and Muslims."

This provides Brij Bihari the opening he needs. He says, "How can you say that, Ma? The cow is our mother. We care for her with our lives, but those Muslims eat cows."

My mother holds her head in her hands. She says, "Dear God, why do you say such things under my roof?"

Brij Bihari laughs. He says, "Ma, this is the plain truth. We wouldn't have these riots if the Muslims had any sense. How can you like them if they kill cows?"

After Brij Bihari leaves, there is a discussion about whether we should wait any longer for Papa. My mother feeds me while Didi eats by herself. Ma has cooked fish. She picks out the

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bones and I mix the fish with the rice. As I eat, I think of the Muslims, who eat cows instead of lamb or chicken.

The phone rings. But it is not my father. It is someone from his office who wants to know if Papa has come home. My mother says she has no news. Ma asks the caller what "the situation" is like in the town. She listens to the answer and sighs. Then she returns to the business of feeding me.

It is hours before my father comes home. My mother has not eaten. Raghunath comes in first with the briefcase and the Eagle thermos. Didi takes the flask from him but I run out to find my father. Papa is talking to Brij Bihari, who is telling him about Didi's school. My father takes my hand and leads me into the house.

My mother is angry. She will not speak to my father. She puts a plate in front of him when he sits at the table. Papa asks my sister, "The jeep came for you at school, little one?" My sister nods but doesn't say anything because she knows Ma is angry.

Ma serves Papa some fish. He begins to eat. Ma says, "Was there not a single phone anywhere, which you could use to tell us where you were and when you would come home?" My father looks at me and my sister. He does not look at my mother or bother to reply. His face becomes stern and he begins to eat quickly.

Ma goes to the door and asks Raghunath very loudly, "Do you want some *chai*? And where is Aziz?"

Now my father breaks his silence. He says, "You want to offer tea to a man whose house is burning?" His tone is not very kind. He is still not looking at my mother. He says, "It was dangerous even to keep Aziz in the car. I went and dropped

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him in his neighbourhood. There has been police firing. At least twenty-two men have been killed."

My mother is silent. I don't understand what my father is saying. I do not like the way my parents are behaving. To break the silence, I ask my father, "Papa, why does Aziz kill cows?"

A dark shadow passes over my father's face. I can see that I have made him angry. He turns in fury toward my mother and demands loudly, "What have you been telling the boy?" This confuses me. I can see it also confuses my mother. There is such immense sadness on her face as she looks for a moment at my father.

My mother holds the edge of the green curtain close to her. She has turned her face away, as if she has been slapped. I go to Ma and put my arms around her waist. My forehead touches her cool stomach. My mother is sobbing. I press my nose against my mother's *sari* and wait for her to gently put her hand on my head.

The jeep has returned to take my father back for patrolling. At the back of the jeep are the police constables in khaki shorts and red berets. They sit like roosters crammed in a bamboo basket. The men are silent. They have dark, sweaty faces and they look at me without much curiosity.

The driver, also in khaki, has a revolver at his belt. The driver is the only one who has stepped out of the jeep. My father is having lemon tea in the verandah of the house, and the driver is calmly watching us. I call the driver into the garden; my father turns his head, as if to ask why, but then turns away again. He is listening to the radio.

I ask the driver if I can hold his revolver. The man pats it and points wordlessly at my father. He shakes his head as if to

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say that Papa will be angry.

I say to him, "Are you a Hindu or a Muslim?" The driver reaches into his shirt and takes out a ragged sacred thread. He asks me, "Why do you call me a Muslim?"

"And they?" I point toward the soldiers in the jeep.

"Woh hamaare hi ladke hain," he says. They're our boys.

I understand that the police are there to protect my father. My father is invincible. I look at him as he sits in a cane chair, bare-chested, sipping tea and listening to the news on the radio. I ask the driver if my father also has a gun. The man says, "Why would he need a gun when we are there with him?" He uses the English word "command" to tell me that the men will use their guns when Papa orders them to.

I know now that no one can harm my father because he is an officer. But if anyone dares to try, I have decided that this is how the plan will work: if the attackers are Hindu, the policemen will simply tell them that Papa is also a Hindu; and if any of the Muslim rioters threatens my father, the policemen in the jeep will shoot him down like a lizard sitting on a fence.

My sister is doing her homework. Ma has asked me to sit down with my picture book on the sofa. In her hair, Didi is wearing the elastic band with shiny plastic stones that Rani Phua has given her. They're called 'Love-in-Tokyo bands'. I've asked my sister about the name, but she just shrugged her shoulders.

When I go down to the kitchen, I see that Brij Bihari is standing near the doorway talking to my mother. He is telling her that a few Muslim families have collected inside the walls of the radio station nearby.

I ask him, "Will they attack us?"

Brij Bihari says, "They have their tails between their legs."

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Maybe the Hindus will set fire to the whole radio station, I think.

Brij Bihari tells my mother that the Muslims have come to the radio station because there is a police party there.

Ma says, "I'm thinking of Aziz… I hope his family is safe."

And then it is morning. I find myself coming down the stairs. The sun is out. I remember the previous night and the troubles of the day only when I see Brij Bihari, once again standing outside the kitchen. Nothing appears to have changed. Ma is inside, making tea. Brij Bihari is holding one of his milk cans, which he bounces lightly against the back of his leg. I ask him, "Did they burn the radio station?"

"No, no," Brij Bihari laughs, and takes me by the hand out into the garden to show me the yellow building which is standing there with its tall masts, unharmed.

My father, I discover, has already left with the police party. I want to know when Papa is going to be back, and Ma says, "He'll come for lunch. Things are returning to normal." I look at my sister. She has planted a small *peepul* plant in a pot. It has a single leaf, fresh green. My sister is using a small comb to dig the soil in the pot. She then takes water from the sink in her hand and pours it on the dirt around the plant. When my father comes for lunch, there are no discussions about the riots. When Didi asks him when her school is going to reopen, my father says, "Monday." I ask them what day it is today, and my sister says, "He doesn't know anything at all." When Papa looks up at her from his plate, Didi says, "Friday."

Next week Didi will go back to school. My mother has told me that I shall begin school in July. I shall be five years old. I shall be in the kindergarten for two years. Didi says that

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Mrs Joseph will be my teacher.

I ask Papa, "When I start going to school, will a police jeep take me there?" My father smiles at me. His smile shows that he loves both my sister and me. He says, "Do you want to go with the police? Can't Aziz take you in our car?"

Is Aziz still alive? I ask my father, "Is Aziz going to come back?"

My father says, "He has to drive our car. Where will he go?"

My sister speaks up now. She asks, "Didn't you say to Ma yesterday that his house was burning?"

Papa says, "No… That's not what I said. It is Friday today. He gets the afternoon off for prayers."

My sister says, "Did you see him today?"

Papa says, "My dear, today people are still settling down after the troubles in the town last night. I know Aziz is fine. I know the area he lives in… Eat your food."

One morning, indeed, Aziz is there, running a cloth over the white Ambassador. Raghunath and Brij Bihari stand chatting with each other near the *khataal*. I go out to the gate of the house. A few feet to my left, almost within my reach, a lizard sits on the hedge. I don't go any further and call out to Aziz. I say, "Aziz, why did you not come all these days?"

Aziz says, "Son, there was a lot of trouble in town."

I watch Aziz working on the car. Then Ma calls for the thermos flask to be taken out and Raghunath hurries inside. When my father steps out with a few files in his hand, Aziz opens the car door for him and asks Raghunath to get in. The car leaves. It is then that Brij Bihari, leaning over the gate with a twig in his hand, tells me that Aziz has spent these last few days at his sister's house. The sister is an attendant in Kurji

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Holy Family Hospital. Her husband had been killed in a riot five or six years ago, and she lives with her daughter near Patthar Wali Masjid.

I ask Brij Bihari, "Will Aziz now return to his own house?"

He says, "How can he? The public threw kerosene on it and burned it to the ground."

Brij Bihari looks serious. But he must be joking! When I look at him, I know that what he is saying is true. He looks sad, too. What will my parents say when they hear this?

"What happened to his clothes? Were they burnt also?"

Brij Bihari says, *"Ek* photo *tak nahin bacha paaya."* He could not even save a photograph.

I want to go indoors now. It feels hot outside. I tell Brij Bihari that I shall talk to my parents about Aziz. Brij Bihari laughs. He says, "What can you tell them that they don't know? Ma has given him two of Saheb's shirts."

"Really?"

I cannot be angry with my parents for not having told me about Aziz. My father was not able to save the house of the man who works for him. I feel confused by this, and suddenly filled with disappointment. I am sad for Aziz, but I also realise that my father is not who I think he is. He is helpless, just like me. It is even possible that he is scared of the lizards that sit on our fence. I am a little ashamed, and I want to cry.

Brij Bihari looks at his *khataal.* He says, "Aziz has to travel a good distance to come here every morning. I am trying to sell him my bicycle. I will be like the bank. He will pay me a monthly rate." He laughs. And adds, "Aziz is a driver. I think he will keep the cycle in good condition."

More than thirty years have now passed. I went to the

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house about six months ago. It stands unchanged but everything else has altered beyond recognition. The yellow walls of the radio station are no longer visible behind the tall buildings that have come up all around it. In place of the *khataal* now stands a brown concrete structure from where you can buy milk by putting tokens in a machine. A part of the field where I later played cricket has been turned into a shopping complex with stores selling suitcases, television sets and ice-cream. There is a huge sign outside for Omega watches, the hands fixed at two o'clock. The other half of the field is taken by a new Hanuman temple. It is surrounded by fluorescent lights that are attached to banana leaves. The leaves are made of concrete, painted green. They sprout from black pillars. On the dome of the temple sits a large grey megaphone.

One day, I was in a pharmacy buying some Benadryl. A man standing next to me asked the shopkeeper for a tin of Cuticura talcum powder. I was suddenly reminded of my childhood. I was a little boy again. I saw the warm corners of my mother's smile and caught the scent of her smell as she passed from one room to another in that first house in Patna. In that stuffy shop, already filled with the darkness of the evening, I even imagined I could hear the radio. In March this year, when I read of the riots, I remembered that evening in the shop in Patna. I thought of my parents. But I have been away far too long, because along with those memories — of the violence that I barely understood, and of the ways in which we related to each other at the time — came the thought that the name 'Cuticura' sounds so oddly Indian, fitting in nicely with words like *raita* and *tanpura*. tlm

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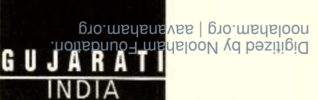

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ELA ARAB MEHTA

Bablu's Choice

Illustration by VINAYAK BHATTACHARYA

"**HEY, YOU! COWARD!** Why are you crying like a girl? Come on, come on. Get up!" Papaji's voice reached Milan's ears, rising up from the compound of the building and coming in the window of the second floor. He wanted to go hide in a corner. After some time, he slowly drifted over to the window and looked down.

Down in the compound, little Ankur and some girls had quarrelled. Ankur was crying. Papaji, Milan's father was angrily shouting at Ankur: "Are you a girl? Come on, get up, don't be a sissy."

Frightened and ashamed, Ankur picked himself up and ran away. Watching this little drama, Milan shivered. He knew what would happen when he handed over the circular into Papaji's hands. The circular which offered a choice of subjects for the students of the ninth standard at school.

He knew his father well — he had had fifteen years to get to know him. He was Papaji's youngest child, born several years after his older brother Vipul and sister Sujata. He was darling little Bablu. Papaji came into the house. Milan waited till he had had a bath and some tea before silently going up to him and handing him the circular. Without waiting for his reaction, he turned away and hurriedly flopped down on a sofa.

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Papaji stood reading the circular. He saw the subject which Bablu had ticked. He stared at it, refusing to believe his eyes. Then he bellowed: "Bablu!"

There was no answer. He shouted again.

Silence engulfed the house. Suddenly, everybody in the house seemed to get very busy with some chore or the other. Mummy went into the kitchen and silently busied herself with the cooking. Grandma sat down before her small temple and started singing bhajans. His older brother started reading his medical journal and Sujata-didi turned on her computer.

Nobody responded to Papaji's shouting. Nobody dared to face him when he was annoyed.

Papaji was also quiet for a while. Then he started pacing up and down the room, trying unsuccessfully to control his temper. Suddenly, he erupted: "Change it! Change it, I say!"

Milan did not answer. He sat on the very corner of the sofa, staring down at the floor. He would have liked to run into his room and close the door behind him, but lacked the nerve.

Of course, Papaji had never struck his darling boy. He had only raised his hand once or twice, as if to strike.

"Where has everyone gone? Am I supposed to handle this alone?" Papaji said loudly. Mummy could tell that he was exasperated, perhaps even angry.

Reluctantly, she emerged from the kitchen and stood in the corner. She looked at Milan, imploring him to accept whatever Papaji said.

Milan averted his face as if rejecting her plea and saying instead, "No, I won't. Please let me do what I want to do."

Papaji coughed briefly and tried to collect himself. "Look,

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son, you are a nice, intelligent boy. Give up this stupid idea. If you do such idiotic girlie things, people will laugh at you — and at me, too."

He paused and then continued.

"I work so hard for all of you. I make good money, and for whom? Isn't it all for you? So that when you — all three of you — grow up, you become somebody, somebody much better than me."

He put the circular in Mummy's hands.

"Read this."

Though she had read it before, she read it again, just to please Papaji. Nodding in agreement with her husband, she said. "Bablu, your father is right. Come tell us which subjects you have trouble with in school. Maths? Science? Don't worry? We'll engage a tutor for accountancy."

"I have already asked Ramnikbhai to send his tutor Deepak Sir to us. I'll remind him today." Papaji told Milan. His tone of voice implied that he was talking to a mentally challenged boy.

"Bablu, don't worry. You will score good marks in all subjects. Look at Unmesh. His mother was telling me how they all helped him with his SSC exams, how he got 80 per cent. So don't worry, Bablu." Mummy said soothingly, as if she were singing a lullaby.

"Why talk about Unmesh? Look at our own daughter Sujata!" said Papaji. "Your elder sister. Who would say that she is a girl? She is far ahead of all the boys and always gets a first class. She is no daughter — she is my son."

Sujata's eyes darted from the computer screen and rested on Milan for a while. Then she went back to her work.

"Speak up, you idiot, Bablu!" Papaji exploded.

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"Sujata-didi is clever and is comfortable with all subjects. She likes to study them," Milan answered in a low voice.

"Oh, God! That's what I have been trying to explain to you for the last hour. Don't you understand? You must study hard. Where is your attention? On the television? All the children in this country went crazy the day 24-hour television started!"

Papaji's anger had crossed the danger level and Mummy was now worried. She was thinking of his blood pressure. "Please calm down. Everything will be all right," she said.

All at once, everyone was relieved. Now, it was Mummy's responsibility to get Bablu to toe the line. Papaji, Vipul, Sujata-didi, Grandma and Mummy went out in quick succession. Milan was alone in the house.

He switched on the TV. Today there was a programme of Bharatnatyam dance by Karthikeyan, a young dancer from Chennai. Milan was keen to see his recital. Thank God, he was alone now. The small screen before him was no mere TV — it was transformed into a land of divine beauty and Karthikeyan was its undisputed king. The matchless grace of his movements, his *mudras*, his *bhavas* mesmerised him. Unawares, he started to sway to the rhythm of Karthikeyan's dance.

His eyes filled with tears. This is what he wanted to learn — to dance. His school had offered two optional subjects to all ninth standard students: accountancy and dance. Milan had chosen the latter and all hell had broken loose. Papaji's shouting, Mummy's tears, his older siblings smiling indulgently, when all along he knew they were really saying, "Bablu, you girlie baby!" Papaji went to his school to meet the principal. "We send our children to your school to get an education, not to learn dancing," he said sternly.

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"Mr Kapadia, please be patient, let me explain," the principal said. "Our time was different. It was the age of stereotypes. Girls had to learn to sew and cook, and boys had to study engineering and medicine. But today, our society no longer has any use for this stereotyping. If a girl can become an engineer, a boy can become a dancer."

"What rubbish!" Papaji got up and almost raised his hand before he could control himself. "Is this freedom or foolishness? My son wants to become a dancer — he wants to learn to dance."

"Mr Kapadia, please talk to your son," the principal said. "He can take another subject, you know."

However, the question of talking to his son did not arise. It was discovered that in a class of a hundred students, only two people had opted for dance. Milan was one; the other was a girl. Everyone else had opted for accountancy. The school had had to hire an extra teacher for accountancy.

Right from the ninth standard, the school was preparing students for the final examination the following year. When the school was driving the students so hard, could the parents lag behind? Tuition, coaching classes, special notes from a Deepak Sir and a Bhatt Sir — they arranged for everything. Papaji hired special teachers for his son for maths and science.

Once, in the midst of all this, Milan was caught watching a classical dance programme on Doordarshan. Right when he was imitating the *mudras* of the dancer on the TV screen, his brother Vipul had walked into the room. When everyone got to know, they laughed at Bablu's passion for *mudras*. "Oh, Bablu, you are still a girl-child!" they said.

And so Milan stopped dancing. He passed his final exam-

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inations with more than seventy five per cent. Sujata-didi stood first in the Intermediate Chartered Accountancy examination. There were phone calls and flowers from friends and relatives. Papaji's joy knew no bounds. "Yes, yes, she is my son, like Vipul." He repeated this several times.

A function was held at the City Hall to felicitate top students. Sujata and Papaji were invited up on the dais while other family members sat with the audience. The president of the community, a very old man, was speaking into the mike.
"Dear friends, this is a very proud day for an old man like me. There was a time, not long ago, when our daughters were married off at an early age. They were beaten and burned alive by cruel in-laws and we were silent onlookers. Not any more. Now they are like our sons. We have given them the freedom to be who they are."

The audience gave the old man a standing ovation. Bablu looked at Papaji, who was clapping the loudest, and thought, "Father, you have set your daughters free. Why do you keep your sons in chains?" tlm

Translated from the Gujarati story 'Bhaiylo' *(2001) by the author with Devina Dutt and Pratik Kanjilal*

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BHISHM SAHNI

Like Family

Making *saag*-meat is no big deal. Have dinner here, see how it is made… you can even note down the recipe. You'll stay to dinner, won't you? My husband is very fond of *saag*-meat. Whenever he has friends over he gets it made. *Uff,* you should have eaten Jagga's *saag*-meat. If he'd been here, you could've had it. He was a real cook. He used to put all sorts of things in it… curds, garlic and God knows what else. He liked making it. These days I have to buy three canisters of *ghee*. Though I give them Dalda for their own cooking, I think these rascals feast on the *ghee* and give us the Dalda. You can't trust people these days. But you can't keep everything locked up, can you? I just can't do it. I tell myself, let them eat. How much can they eat? I can barely carry my own burden, can't go around locking things up? This Mathra, he has seven *rotis* for breakfast and seven for dinner. In between he wants tea twice and whatever sweets there are in the house. But I tell myself, "Let it be. Where do you find honest servants these days? Who knows when they might come to you and say, 'I'm quitting!'"

My husband keeps telling me the same thing. He says, "As long as you keep the dog entertained with a bone he is not

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going to bark." We hired this boy for seventy rupees a month, now he takes a hundred. And just look at him! Jagga was an honest man. Very loyal. He was almost like family. He used to worship my husband. So devoted, he'd never refuse my husband anything. Extremely loyal! My husband also never considered him a servant. He was like family. My husband never hesitated when Jagga needed a hundred or fifty rupees. He gave it without keeping any record.

When Jagga got married, my husband got two suits and a warm coat made for him. I used to tell my husband, "Why do you spend so much on them? Servants can never be like your own. If someone gave them five rupees more they'd just forget you." But my husband always countered, "What do you know! A well never tires of supplying water. He makes *saag*-meat for us, let him ask whatever he wants. Where would you find a cook as good as him?"

I still remember the day he got Jagga. He called out from outside, "Here, Sumitra, I've got you a servant!" My instructions were to always give Jagga something with his tea. My husband used to tell me, "You won't lose anything by giving him an extra biscuit. If he gets attached to this house, he'll serve you for years. He'll do all your chores."

Jagga aroused feelings like that. He was like a deer from the wild. He had big eyes like a deer, he'd gape guilelessly at you. My husband was right. Jagga became attached to our house. This happens when they are young. These huge hulks you get these days, when do they get attached? They are very worldly-wise. The young ones are pliable; they'll do whatever you teach them. If you can teach animals… these boys are still human. My husband knows how to control them.

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Do you remember Jackie? Oh, you don't remember Jackie! Jackie was the dog my husband picked up from a friend's place. He used to bark at everyone. But my husband knew how to control him. Jackie used to follow him everywhere. He was also quite attached to my husband. It was incredible how Jackie used to prick up his ears whenever he heard my husband approaching. Out of the hundreds of cars that passed our house Jackie recognised my husband's. Whenever he heard his car he'd rush to the gate. One day he got crushed under our own car. Attachment is a curse.

Where did you get these earrings made? They're very beautiful. How much did you pay for the diamonds? They're real, aren't they? Everything is so expensive these days. When I got this tiny nose-stud made, I had to cough up seven hundred rupees. These days, I'm scared to even wear jewellery. When Jagga was here, I could be careless with my jewellery box. We never had a theft. Not even a few paise missing! Forgetful woman that I am, I'd sometimes leave my gold chain in the bathroom, sometimes on the cot; but Jagga would always return it to me. But these servants! I have put away all my jewellery in the bank.

Before Mathra we had another servant, Mansa. Very innocent-looking, you would think the boy was simple. Then one day, what do I see? Mansa is standing on the roof and passing off our clothes to a man downstairs. They both scooted off when they saw me. Mansa jumped into the lane and disappeared forever. It is not wise to keep servants these days. I always have this fear that the servants will 'clean up' my house if I step out. When Jagga was here, I never bothered about these things. He was very honest.

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Why don't you eat something? You never eat anything! Shall I get you some piping hot tea? Don't drink this tea, it has gone cold. Have a slice of cake. It's from the market but it's nice. Kamla's mother-in-law used to make delicious cakes. Sometimes she made them with chocolate, sometimes with something else. The stuff they sell for eighteen rupees at Wenger's, Kamla's mother-in-law used to make it for five. She used to put all sorts of things in it… eggs, *ghee*, sugar, dry fruits and what not. I can barely carry my own burden, what can I make? Jagga made excellent cakes too. But the boy was cursed, or I would've asked him to make some cake for you. Every third or fourth day he'd bake a cake, never ate it himself! I used to tell him, "Why don't you have a slice?" But no, his logic was, "Where would I get this cake when I am away? Why get hooked to it in the first place?"

Who knows why he left. I still say, he'd have been alive if he had opened his mouth. It's all destiny, what can man do? Jagga didn't open his mouth before my husband. He used to worship my husband. He kept quiet because he thought it would hurt my husband if he spoke. What other reason could he have had? Anyway, how was my husband supposed to know what was on his mind? He'd have known, only if Jagga said something. It was I who knew the truth. But Jagga never opened his mouth.

One should talk in whispers, you never know who might be listening in on conversations in the afternoon. A sleeping man may be as good as dead, but our house is like a burial ground in the afternoons. No one knows what's going on in the back-yard. I can barely carry my own burden… But God is my witness, one afternoon when I woke up, what did I see? I was

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going to the bathroom when I heard a noise. It seemed as if someone was going towards Jagga's room. I would be the last person to expect anyone at this hour... Still, I had this nagging feeling — who could it be at this hour? Jagga was supposed to be with my husband at his office. He worked as my husband's peon during the day. My husband used to say, "If I get another servant for the house, I'll keep Jagga with me full-time at the office." Still, my heart wouldn't let me rest. Who could it be — at this hour?

I looked out of the window. And what do I see? I see Bikki, my brother-in-law! Clad in a black suit, he seemed to be going towards Jagga's room. I was shocked. What was Bikki doing in Jagga's room? Then I thought, maybe he had some work in there. But what work could he possibly have in Jagga's room? And why was he tiptoeing? For a moment I thought I'd go and ask him, but you know me, I can barely carry my own burden. I went back to my bed but I kept thinking about my brother-in-law. People of good breeding don't do such things... it's better to get married if you can't control your desires. Why break someone else's home?

Do you remember Jagga's wife? A very simple girl, so fair that even your touch would stain her skin. My shameless brother-in-law would often leave the office on some pretext and come to Jagga's room. It was by chance that I saw him that day. She was such a simple village girl — a little timid too — what could she do against this smooth operator?

Debauchery seems to run in my husband's family. But he is an exception. His uncle had two mistresses. His aunt, old hag, she used to get her feet massaged by a servant. I saw it with my own eyes. Soon after dinner that hulk, Shankar, would follow

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her to her room.

Now, you can't keep such things hidden. One day Jagga saw it too. My husband had sent him home to fetch a Thermos flask. I gave him the flask and Jagga went to his room. I looked out of my window and suddenly, I saw Bikki coming out of Jagga's room in that same black suit. "Bikki-babu!" that's all Jagga managed to say. He kept staring at him with his huge eyes. Bikki just walked away as if nothing had happened. My heart began to beat faster. I said to myself, "Jagga's wife is going to get it today. He's going to thrash her black and blue. He might even kill her. You can never tell with these people." But the room was as silent as ever.

I don't know how long Jagga remained inside, or whether he said anything to her or not. I went back to bed but I had decided to talk to my husband about this incident. He'd have to either ask Jagga to leave or get him to send his wife back to the village. It wasn't right for her to stay here.

Much as I tried, I couldn't keep my ears off what was happening in Jagga's room. I was expecting to hear wailing and fighting. But there was absolute silence. I said to myself, "What's the point of being so civil and quietly tolerate your wife's infidelity?" Two slaps were all that you needed to control that woman. There are many ways of controlling a woman but this man just wouldn't utter a word!

Lying in bed, I was so restless that suddenly I felt the need to go to the bathroom. You know, I have chronic constipation. Every night I have to take laxatives with my milk. Only then can I have a proper motion the next morning. Sometimes, it really makes me very restless. Once, I didn't go to the toilet for five full days. My husband used to joke, saying, "Now when you

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go to the bathroom it will be difficult cleaning after you're through". Phew, I can't even laugh these days. Whenever I do, I feel out of breath. I also have these wretched piles. There is no shortage of problems here. Twenty different types of medicines, but no relief!

The doctor says I should walk. Now, who can go around walking with a body like mine? Even if I walk a little I get out of breath. The doctor says I should not eat sweets but I just can't keep off them. There are always one or two boxes of sweets in the house, and it only takes one piece to make me want more. That damned doctor wants me to give up sweets. If I give up sweets then I might as well go live in exile. What's the point of living without sweets? I tell the doctor, "Doctor*ji*, please cure me without all this trouble. Please don't ask me to give up sweets or to take regular walks. If I could get well just by walking, why would I need you? Anyway, you come you charge fifty rupees every time you visit. Why should we pay you so much if you can't cure me? I am not a bonded labourer that I'd go around walking!"

Only after I told him all this did the doctor come around. He said, "Don't worry, have two spoonfuls of this medicine every night after dinner." That's how I straightened him out. Now I have two spoons of medicine every night. The hiccups have stopped now, but whenever I am anxious I feel the urge to go to the bathroom.

That day at the club, Harcharan's wife was showing off before the women. She was saying, "I have seven tablets every day." I never said anything to that. Is this something to be proud of? May God save me from pride, I have had fifteen tablets in a day but not once have I gone out and proclaimed it

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to the world. We pay this doctor three hundred rupees a month. Whether anybody is sick or not, he gets his money. Even today, you'll find not less than ten bottles of medicines on the dining table — some are tonics, some for digestion, some for something else. Jagga knew exactly which medicine to give me at what time. I didn't even have to ask him. After him, my whole medicine routine was disrupted. Eat something, why aren't you eating?

That evening, as soon as my husband came home he called for Jagga, he said, "Ask him to cook dinner for five guests. Ask him to make *saag*-meat." But Jagga stood before him, at a loss for words. His face was deathly pale. My husband asked him rather affectionately, "Why, Jagge? Why are you so quiet? Bad news from home?" But Jagga did not utter a word. What could the poor boy possibly tell my husband? How could he tell him that his brother had been disgracing his wife? After all, there's such a thing as shame. He wouldn't even look up at my husband while talking to him.

But you know how my husband is, when he's angry he doesn't care about anything else. He doesn't even think twice before insulting me in front of the servants.

My husband was really angry when Jagga refused to talk. The boy just stood there like a statue. God knows what was in his heart. If he had opened his mouth his emotions would have got an outlet. But he never said a word.

My husband started shouting at him, I tried to stop him. I said, "*Ji*, the guests are about to come and nothing's been done yet. Go, Jagga, you go to the kitchen." Jagga went to the kitchen in silence. After a while I went to the kitchen to check only to find him standing there listlessly. Standing there, right

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in the middle of the kitchen like a statue. I said to myself, this fellow's lost his mind; he'll be no good in the kitchen tonight. I came back and said to my husband, "*Ji*, something's happened to this boy, he's not talking at all. Why don't you order dinner from a takeaway and give him the evening off?"

As soon as I told him this, he just got up and went straight to the kitchen and started scolding Jagga. I was trembling. Who knows whether Jagga had a knife concealed somewhere. You can never trust these people. "You scoundrel, why don't you speak?" my husband was screaming like never before. I was almost feeling ill with fear. I didn't know what to do. I ran up to my husband and tried to pull him away but he just pushed my hand off. "You ungrateful wretch, I'm asking you something and you don't even reply. Is it such a strain on your tongue to answer me? Get out of my house right now. I don't want to see your face." He hauled Jagga out of the kitchen by the ear. I started pleading with my husband, "*Ji*, please don't work yourself up, the guests will be here in a few hours and nothing's ready yet. If Jagga goes away, who'll make dinner? Go, Jagga, you go to the kitchen." Finally, I managed to pacify my husband.

At night, when all the guests had left... oh yes, Jagga made everything that night. Made it very well but he remained mum throughout, didn't say a word. As he ate, my husband felt sorry for him. In front of the guests, he called out to Jagga and said, "Jagge, I give you a ten-rupee raise. Rai Saheb says the *saag*-meat is excellent. Well done! Go, boy, I forgive you." My husband can be generous to a fault. His heart is like an ocean.

At night I just couldn't hold myself back. I said, "*Ji*, Bikki is now grown up, why don't you look for a match for him." He

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just snapped, "You are already worried about his marriage. He's hardly old enough to fend for himself."

"*Ji*, if we don't get him married, he might become wayward like a bull on the loose," I persisted, trying not to be specific. My husband is extremely fond of Bikki, he's brought him up like a son. He can't stand anyone pointing a finger at Bikki. When I tried talking about Bikki's marriage again, he said, "Let him have his fun. After all, this is the age when he can. Eventually, he will have to get married."

I said, "*Ji*, he's a young boy, he can easily fall into bad company. You should get him married as soon as possible." My husband replied, "He hasn't even completed his education. I have spent maybe thirty or forty thousand rupees on his studies so far, I should be able to recover that amount through his marriage. He has to complete his BA."

Men are very wise about these things. They can keep track of ten things at a time. What could I have said to my husband after this? I just asked him to keep Bikki in check. Youth, after all, is an intoxicating phase. At this, he really flared up, "Do you know anything that I don't? Why don't you spit it out?" He seemed rather incensed so I decided to keep shut... I thought I'd bring it up later when he was in a better mood. How was I to know what lay ahead?

The next day — it must have been eight, eight-thirty in the morning — I was drying my hair on the verandah, it's nice and sunny there. I thought, after drying it out, I'd dye my hair. Jagga's wife used to comb my hair very nicely. I thought, once it was dry, I'd call her. It must have been eight-thirty then. That's the time the Frontier Mail came. The railway line is behind this house, just a stone's throw away. If the signal is not

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green the trains often stop here and then move on slowly. But the Frontier Mail doesn't halt here. It's perhaps the only train that never halts here.

Jagga had it all planned beforehand. As soon as he heard the train approaching, he came out of his room. I asked him to send Surastan to me. I don't think he wanted to hear me that morning. He just rushed out, jumped over our boundary wall and headed straight towards the railway line. All this happened in a fraction of a second. He didn't even look back. I did not suspect anything. I thought he probably had some urgent work. If I had an inkling of what he was going to do I would have stopped him. After he climbed the embankment of the railway line I didn't bother to look where he was headed.

Now tell me, why should I make false claims, especially in the evening? I really didn't see him go. I didn't even think it strange when the speeding train suddenly screeched to a halt. You know how the wheels scream when someone pulls the chain. I didn't bother even then. After all, trains are stopping here all the time. I thought, someone must have pulled the chain. After some time the gardener went out, running. He said something had happened, and then he too jumped the boundary wall and rushed towards the railway line. I still did not suspect anything. After a while, I heard our neighbour's servant shout, "Jagga is dead! Jagga's been run over by a train!"

I could hear my heart jump. Jagga was like family. How could I not be affected? My husband used to treat him like a son. Jagga also worshipped him like a son would. I think this sense of belonging ate at me. I still feel, if Jagga had opened his mouth he wouldn't have died. My husband would have definitely found a way. He knows how to handle situations. He is very

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wise. But Jagga didn't say a word.

I can't tell you how bad that day was. The phone kept ringing throughout the day and the inspector came three times. Every time he came, he looked into Jagga's room. That husband-killer was inside! The inspector also had an eye for her, every time he'd find some excuse to peek into Jagga's room. Men are such hounds! She was lying there, unconscious. She seemed to be having fits of some kind. I was hardly of any help, I can barely carry my own burden. Once or twice, I thought I'd go and see Surastan but my husband asked me not to visit her since it was a police case. He forbade me from stepping into Jagga's room. Men are wise, they have seen the world! "He had seemed a little off-colour since yesterday. I don't know whether the husband and wife had a fight. Why should we concern ourselves with the private lives of the servants?" my husband told the police. When I finally got to speak to him, I asked him to send Bikki away for a few days. I thought, what if one of the neighbours had seen Bikki in Jagga's room? But my husband knew better. He didn't send Bikki away. Men are really wise. Had Bikki disappeared, the police would've definitely smelled a rat.

Have another biscuit, have it, please! You've hardly eaten anything. If you don't eat, how will you keep your strength up? Just take care not to don't bloat up like me — an overweight person is a liability. I'm glad you came, I feel much lighter after talking to you. You should come over more often. You don't live very far away, do you? I can send the car for you if you want. The house seems so desolate without company. After work, my husband heads straight for the club to play bridge. His day is not complete if he doesn't play bridge for two or

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three hours. Cards are like a mistress to him… has been ever since I came here as a young bride. His evenings belong to her. *Hai*, I can't even laugh now. I feel out of breath. My chest seems to contract whenever I try to laugh. Do you know what he says to me when I ask him to cut down on his card games and give some thought to his health? "These cards have been very good for me. Had the police officer not been my partner in bridge, we wouldn't have been let off so easily. Do you know how they make life difficult for people if there's a suicide in the house?" Why do you think I say men always know what to do?

We really suffered that day. My husband is used to sleeping in the afternoons, if he doesn't he feels a little heavy throughout the evening, but that day he didn't get any sleep. Whenever he tried to take a nap that day, either the telephone would start ringing or some government official would come knocking. But this was only for a day. Everything was fine the next day.

One day, long after the matter was hushed up, I told my husband about Bikki's escapades. "I knew it from the beginning," he said. I stared at him in horror. "Everyone gets carried away in his youth. So what if Bikki did something foolish?"

I said, "Still, you should have disciplined him if you knew."

"At least he didn't go to a whore and come back with some disease," he said. "This was destined to happen, so it happened! Bikki's learnt his lesson."

But I persisted, "If Bikki had not done this, Jagga would have been alive today. What happened was not good. Bikki shouldn't have done what he did."

"Did you rather that I gave my brother up to the police?"

"But *Ji*, his crime was not a minor one!"

At this he became very angry and said, "Was I to look at his

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crime or protect him? What would you have preferred, that I sent my brother to jail?"

Then, after some time, he started explaining patiently, "Look, we don't know whether Bikki went there on his own or whether Jagga's wife made advances towards him. It takes two hands to clap! The man makes advances only when the woman encourages him. It just takes a small gesture to entice a man. If the woman didn't want it, Bikki wouldn't have dared to go to Jagga's room. If she was such a paragon of virtue, why didn't she keep her door bolted from the inside? Isn't it proper for a woman to keep her doors shut when her man is out of the house, at work? What does a room with wide open doors indicate? She could have come and sat with you during the day. No one had forbidden her from doing that."

I just kept listening to him... wondering whether the girl was to blame or Bikki. God alone knows who!

In the end my husband settled everything, everyone was happy with him. His wisdom is a gift from God, no one ever disputes what he says. Everyone accepts his decisions. He doesn't get ruffled easily, I think that's his biggest quality. Anyone else in his shoes would have got nervous. Jagga's brother came from the village, made quite a scene here. My husband gave him two hundred rupees. Jagga's father-in-law also came. My husband gave him a few hundred rupees, too. I said to my husband, "*Ji*, the whole incident is forgotten, now why are you wasting money on these people." But no, he insisted, "Jagga served us for ten years, we shouldn't forget that. What's a few hundred rupees if it can silence these people?"

My husband is very kind-hear ed, he wishes everyone well. He knows how to help people. Just ring that bell for me. These

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wretched servants can see that it's getting dark but they never switch on the lights on their own. I have to ring the bell and ask them. Have their ears plugged with wax! Have dinner before you go. I don't know when my husband will be back. Sometimes he is home by ten. Sometimes he eats out and returns even later. I sit alone at home, counting the hours. Now, I won't let you go without having dinner. Your visit has really been good for me.

And we haven't even started talking about ourselves! Let's talk some more. You asked about *saag*-meat, so we started talking about that cursed Jagga.

I'm not letting you go without dinner...

Translated from the Hindi story 'Saag-meat'
by Dhiraj Singh and Antara Dev Sen

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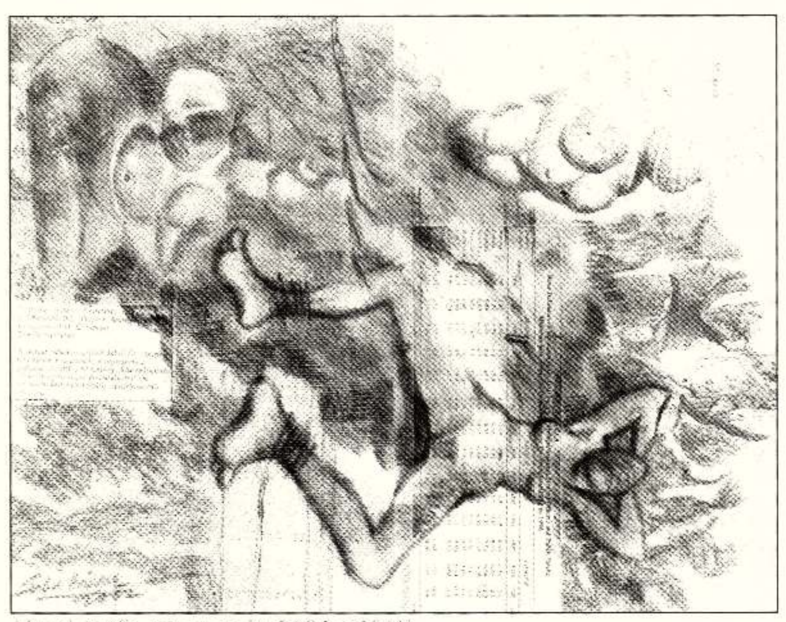
MRIDULA GARG

A Woman Is Born



Mixed media on paper by SABA HASAN

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Whenever Uma thought of that woman, she was gripped with fear. The woman who had lived in this house and died in this room and on this very bed giving birth to a child. It had, of course, occurred to her that she should simply move to the other room. Maybe sleep on the floor. But it was not so easy to admit her fears to others. Certainly not to Manish, her husband, or even to Maji, her mother-in-law, who never tired of relating the story of the woman who had died.

When she came to this house she was pregnant like you. She had moved from the big city to this small town with her husband, who had been transferred to his company's new factory. The last month of pregnancy was particularly bad. She would lie down to sleep at night but get up every half-hour, grabbing her chest and saying she couldn't breathe. The air was thick with cement dust rising from the factory. People told her that she would get used to it like everybody else, but she never did. Unable to sleep at night, she would try not to stir too much so as not to wake up her husband. He was already so overburdened with work that he started snoring the moment his head touched the pillow.

But during the day she would complain to him. She couldn't breathe freely, she would say, she would not survive the childbirth. He would hear her out and curse the day he was transferred to this miserable place. There was neither a hospital here nor a doctor. What could he do? His mother was long dead and so was hers — there was no place he could have sent her. So he just tried to console her or laugh away her fears. After some time he simply stopped listening. How long can one listen to the same refrain?

But this is my story too, Uma would think to herself, except that Manish's mother was alive and so was her own. The rest of it seemed like her own life story.

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Then suddenly she became obsessed with cleaning. Unable to sleep at night, unable to breathe, she would spend hours scrubbing the floors, dusting and decorating the house. She started painting canvases and hung them on every wall. The furniture given by the company was locked away in the store. She got a carpenter to specially make this bed. The bed was long and wide, and of excellent wood, but only about six inches high, to create a sense of space. She would be able to breathe better, even get some sleep at night. But that never happened. The air was still thick with cement dust. She would rub her chest and toss all night. Sometimes she felt her unborn baby was stuck in her chest, at other times she would feel it had died and was rotting away inside her. But without a hospital or doctor or an X-ray machine, she would just have to wait for the pains to begin and hope the baby would push its way out. But she was unfortunate. The baby's head remained stuck inside the mother's body and they both died. Later, people in the big city said that if the head had been pulled out with forceps both mother and child would have lived. But they died here in this room, on the same bed on which you are lying. Poor unfortunate woman!

But wasn't this the story of every woman? Wasn't it the story of womanhood, of displacement by marriage? A woman is the only commodity that can be uprooted and flung away with the hope that she will take root again. And who is to be blamed for it? The woman herself, because she seeks a tree around which she can grow like a creeper. She never aspires to be the tree.

No, Uma could not say all this to Maji, for she knew what Maji would say: why did your parents not think of all this before marrying you off? And she couldn't tell Manish. He would write it off as pregnancy blues. What could she say, she was not even thinking coherently anymore.

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When she died, her husband was heart-broken. He moved in with a neighbour the very next day and applied for a new residence. When he left this house, he did not take the bed with him. He said he could not bear the sight of the bed that had been witness to her desperate screams before death claimed her and the baby. Poor, unfortunate woman — she had got the bed made with such care!

When the midwife announced that both mother and child were dead, he entered the room weeping and saw the bed soaked in blood and her lifeless body lying on it. He screamed and fainted, and everyone stood horror-stricken. Her eyes were still wide open, the pain and terror still frozen in them. Have you seen those beautiful babies she had painted? Her husband took them all with him. He only left this bed behind. Isn't the bed really nice?

Uma would turn pale on hearing the story, her breath coming in gasps. Her head would spin and a ball of fear would rise from her stomach. Exhausted, she would collapse on the very same bed. Neighbours and others who visited the house fed her fears with their own brand of wisdom. An officer's wife would say, "Don't have your confinement here. Seven of the ten women that the midwife in this godforsaken place attends to die. I had both my babies in the city at my mother's. Why don't you go to your mother in Delhi?" A clerk's wife would say: "Why did you take this house? It was lying vacant for six months. No one was willing to move in here. That woman's ghost… and you are pregnant as well. Why don't you go to your mother's for the delivery? Won't your mother-in-law agree?" A woman would tell Maji to send her to her parents and Maji would sigh, "Her parents are so busy."

This was not true. Her parents and younger sisters were caring, but city life had made them remote to the reality of this

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far-flung town in Bihar. They just could not imagine a place with no doctors or medical facilities — where the cure-all potion for any ailment was an Aspirin or water boiled with *tulsi* leaves. For them a woman dying in childbirth was a gimmick for a formula film or pulp novel. They just could not imagine childbirth with the help of a midwife and a pot of boiling water. The unbreakable nexus between class and place just would not let her sisters see the reality of this industrial town in Bihar.

When Manish was transferred here, he did suggest that Uma should go to her parents for the delivery. But her parents were taken aback at the suggestion. Her sisters reacted as though riots had broken out in the city! Their social life — revolving around parties, movies, plays or just sauntering about the college campus — slackened only during the riots. There was no place in it for running to the hospital or attending to a wailing baby. It would be strange to cart a big-bellied woman around in their sophisticated circles, and it wouldn't be right to leave her alone at home. Anyway, bringing a child into the world was the personal problem of a couple and not something that others had to bother with. Uma couldn't really blame them. Before marriage she too had been unaware of life beyond the city.

"What kind of a place is this?" she had asked the women on her arrival. "There is a factory, houses, furniture — but no hospital or doctor?"

"There is a dispensary and a private general physician. If it's a serious case, the company sends the patient to Patna. Of course, there is no lady doctor — midwives take care of childbirth. Yes, the maternal mortality rate is quite high but that's

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true for most villages in our country. But now they are planning to build a hospital here — maybe in two or three years…"

But Uma's baby was due next month and couldn't be asked to wait. Nothing was in her hands — she felt like going to Patna, checking into a hotel and finally moving to a hospital to deliver the baby. That woman would not follow her there. But how would she go? She had spent all her savings on her wedding, and on having a good time afterwards. Now she was completely dependent on Manish. Manish could not afford even the cheapest hotel in Patna. And there was no need either. What's so difficult about having a baby? If all women died giving birth to a child, the rural population would not have grown so much.

Anyway, just because one woman died during childbirth in this house, it doesn't mean the house is cursed. Women just like to gossip, that's all. I don't have time for such rubbish, said Uma to herself, I am new here and exhausted. I have no problems breathing and no woman's ghost haunts me. This big wide bed is so comfortable! If I don't sleep well at night, how shall I work the next day?

Then Uma developed a slight fever. Her body was wracked with aches. The day would pass somehow but when she lay down on the bed at night, she couldn't breathe. At times she would shake Manish awake and say, "I'm choking! I can't breathe…"

"Don't be foolish," he would say. "The polluted air makes it difficult, but no one has choked to death here! Try a different position — maybe sitting up will help. I *had* asked you to go to Delhi…."

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Uma would be silenced and Manish would go back to sleep. It was a big bed, as big as four coffins put together. The dead woman lay between her and Manish. In the stubborn hope of defying destiny and breathing freely, the dead woman would lie next to Uma, who would stare at her wide-open eyes. Death had taken the light out of them but not the longing.

What pain and terror she must have gone through, Uma thought, that even death could not shut her eyes? The woman would smile softly but the fear never left her eyes. Uma felt that the woman's unborn child had entered her own womb. In long conversations with the dead woman, Uma promised her that she would take care of the coming child as her gift to the woman. The woman would stop smiling and her eyes would fill with so much longing that it left Uma terrified.

She lost count of the nights she spent with that woman. When she could take it no longer, she would get up and roam around the house. Manish slept comfortably beside the woman, while Uma drifted from room to room. And for want of anything better to do, she started dusting the house.

Soon Uma developed a consuming interest in cleaning and doing up the house. A small town, no matter what else it may lack, is rich in nature's bounty. She spent most of her day in the fields and jungle, gathering attractive branches, roots, bamboo shoots, flowers and leaves to take home. She arranged some in vases and make a collage out of the rest. The vases were placed on low stools on the floor and the colourful collages on the walls. She would sweep the floor and the walls obsessively. She would cut out pictures of bonny babies from magazines and paint motifs of the rising sun and sunflowers around them. She wanted to fill the house with laughter and

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sunshine so that death would not dare enter.

Some nights her body collapsed from exhaustion. She would merely surrender her tired body to the fever that raged within and would lie on the bare floor. Lying on the sparkling clean floor gave her some relief. Maji would take her to her own mattress on the floor. When her husband's corpse was put on the floor, Maji too had stopped sleeping in the bed.

Massaging Uma's head with oil, she reassured her, saying, "Don't get so nervous, have faith in God. I gave birth to ten children, only four survived. Three daughters and one son, my Manish. It is God's will. Leave everything to God."

But Uma was exhausted. The dead woman would come and stand by her feet and stare at her with terrified eyes, making her shiver. Maji and Manish discussed whether she should be taken to the doctor. Would it be right to have her checked up during her pregnancy? The fever would subside before they came to a decision.

For a month, Uma kept cleaning and decorating the house. Then one night at the beginning of the monsoon, it finally happened. She suddenly felt something burst inside her. A stream of water ran down her legs and onto the floor. Someone shrieked. Perhaps it was that other woman.

Maji rushed in shouting for Manish to go at once through the rain and fetch the midwife. When Maji tried to take Uma to the bed, she screamed, "I will not lie in this bed. Bring me another bed. Not this bed." She could see the woman lying in the bed.

"Have you gone mad?" Manish cried out, "Where will I get another bed from at this hour?"

Maji had lost her nerve and she cursed her only son for the

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first time in her life, "You hopeless fellow, one must listen to a woman in labour! Get a cot from somewhere. Beg if you must — or steal — but get a cot."

Manish suddenly remembered the old cot lying by the mango grove. The *chowkidar* and his friends would sit on it, chewing tobacco and playing cards. It must be lying out there in the rain. He went out and brought it in.

The wooden planks of the cot were soaked through. Uma felt a little queasy lying on the dripping wet cot plastered with withered mango blossoms, but soon her sweat mingled with the rainwater and she was overcome by the waves of pain rising inside her. She felt something crawling all over her body. She knew the dead woman had crawled out of the bed in the other room and joined her in the wet cot. She could feel the woman's cold blue fingers leading trails across her body, but instead of soothing her, they stung. She screamed in terror. But pain seized her again, rising in waves every few minutes. "Something is crawling all over my body," she screamed. "It is stinging me!"

The midwife laughed, "Where did you get this rotten cot from? It's crawling with ants! Where is that fine bed on which I attended to that other woman?"

"No! Not that bed," shrieked Uma, "My child will die if I lie in that bed!" The midwife shrugged.

She held Uma's hands and urged her to push hard. The pain was excruciating. Uma begged the dead woman to leave the cot. "I will bring your child alive into this world, I promise you…" she mumbled. "Forget your terror and leave my narrow bed."

She shut her eyes, clenched her teeth and dug her nails into

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the midwife's hands, drawing on all her will-power for the final effort. The baby arrived in the world in a great spurt of blood. "It's a girl," the midwife said.

Uma's face glowed with pride. The pain forgotten, she whispered, "I have won. I have heard my daughter cry." She opened her eyes but instead of seeing the baby, she saw the dead woman, her eyes still terrified. Uma realised her mistake. "Not my daughter, your daughter," she said in the tone of a prayer, "Just look at her. How healthy she is. Stop worrying about her. Wipe the terror from your eyes. Bless the child and go."

The woman laughed in a manner that made Uma's blood freeze. A shiver shot through her and she broke into tremors.

The midwife turned to collect her fee and go, but warned: "Call a doctor. She is losing a lot of blood and the fever is rising."

Maji panicked again, "Never mind the lady doctor, Manish. Just go and get any doctor. We can't let her die!"

Once again Manish rushed out into the night, cursing the rain.

"Nothing has changed," the dead woman said. "My will power was no less than yours. But my baby died before me. This time you will die first and the baby afterwards."

"Don't say that," Uma made an effort to speak through her pain. "She is your baby, born through my womb. She will live. Just take one look at her."

Manish returned with a young doctor. He examined her and said, "It is too late. The kidneys have collapsed. This was a hospital case."

"The baby?" Uma asked anxiously.

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The dead woman bent over the baby. Her eyes lost their wide and vacant look, and they welled up with tears. When she looked at Uma, her eyes were brimming with the pain of love, not terror. Uma felt her fears ebbing. She opened her arms and the woman came into her embrace.

Putting her head on the woman's breast, Uma said, "I don't want to die, I want to live."

"I wanted to live too. I tried very hard."

"Yes, I know your story. I have heard it all too often."

"Forget that, now it is your story. This story ends only to begin all over again. Just look at her." She turned Uma's face towards the baby.

"Yes, the woman born right now lives," Uma said, sinking fast. She turned towards the baby for a last look. Her eyes remained wide open.

"Her life went out of her eyes too," Maji said, trembling.

The room fell silent. No one dared to move. Then the baby started crying. Maji moved forward towards the child and summoned up the courage to reach out and shut Uma's eyes.

Maji picked up the baby girl from amidst the ants and rushed to the other room to place her on the fine bed that had been made with such great care tlm

Translated from the Hindi story 'Woh Mein Hi Thi' *(1990)*
by Nirupama Dutt and Pratik Kanjilal

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ARUN PRAKASH

Bhaiya Express

Photograph by PRADEEP BHATIA

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THE TRAIN GATHERED SPEED, heading into a sharp wind laden with dust. Ramdev could barely keep his eyes open as he hung from the closed door to the compartment. How long could he hang on like this? He rapped hard on the door. The *jhola* hanging from his shoulder nearly slipped off.

After a while, someone opened the door. He steadied himself and climbed into the compartment. Standing in the passage, he dusted off bits of grass and cigarette butts from his *gamchha*. The soldier who had opened the door regarded him with loathing: "*Bhaincho*… they leave their homes to die. This is a reserved compartment. Do you have a reservation?"

Ramdev was silent. The dark, slim, eighteen-year-old was on his first long-distance journey. So far, he had travelled by train only to Barauni, the station after Tilrath. This was his first journey outside Bihar — in fact, his first journey outside his district. He had heard his brother Vishnudev relate the perils of the route to Punjab. It was easier to get to Punjab via Delhi, he had said. The Assam Mail went via Delhi. At Barauni, he was told that people were stuffed into the first compartment after the engine like red peppers in a sack. The train was about to leave. He had run and grabbed hold of the door of the nearest compartment.

"I have a ticket," Ramdev said, breaking his silence with an

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effort.

"So what if you have a ticket? This is a reserved carriage, do you understand?"

What was Ramdev to do now? He stared at the soldier with frightened eyes. In his own neighbourhood, he could pretend to be with it and adequate even in his old, ill-fitting trousers and faded shirt. But here, in this new and magical world, he was as rustic as they come.

A woman on the berth across, in a *salwar* and wrapped in a shawl, raised her eyes from her English novel and said to the soldier, "A civil compartment is so like a *dharamshala*... Is he a Bhaiya?"

"It seems so!" said the military man, and asked Ramdev in irritation: "Where do you want to go?"

"Punjab."

If he sat among them, Ramdev thought, he would irritate these big people. So he got up and went to the passage that led to the toilets. Spreading his *gamchha* out, he lay down with his *jhola* for a pillow. The scenes of the week before passed before his eyes.

His Mai had started arranging for money to pay his passage to Punjab when he was still taking his Class 10 examinations. Terrorism was at its peak in Punjab and no one in the village was willing to go there to look for his brother, Vishnudev. When everyone turned down her pleas, Mai thought of sending Ramdev, her younger son. But the money for his fare would have to be arranged. Their family had always roasted grain for a living, and the pickings were poor in that line of work now. People had stopped coming to the kiln to get their grain roasted. Gentlefolk no longer ate *rotis* made of coarse grain; they

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wanted fine stuff which you did not need to roast. Lentils were dear, too, but people would rather have them than roast gram to make *sattu,* as they had always done. And if they still wanted to do it the old-fashioned way, it was easier to gather dry leaves and sticks from the orchards and bamboo groves in the village and roast their own grain, rather than bring it down to the *kansar.* So the family was barely able to manage one meal a day. Mai started selling fuel — flattened cowdung cakes and coal dust rolled into little balls. That brought them two meals a day. But for special needs, they still had to take a loan.

This time, too, Panditji lent them the money. How they had suffered when they took a loan for Bhaiya Vishnudev's marriage. They found it difficult even to pay the ever-increasing interest. So Bhaiya had to take his *thali-lota*, his blanket and flute and travel to Punjab to make a better living. When Bhaiya sent money, Mai would go to pay it to Panditji. But when they had nearly paid off the loan, the money stopped coming in.

When news of killings came from Punjab, their hearts sank. If Mai wept, the neighbours mocked her. If she was so concerned, then why had she sent her son to Punjab, into the terror? But if Vishnudev had not gone to Punjab, they would have lost their home and hearth. Their neighbour Janardhan was waiting for an opportunity to buy their land. Panditji was pressing them for his money. So Vishnudev was forced to leave for Punjab. When his wife was brought home, where would she stay, what would she eat? How could Mai crush the saplings of new life? With a heavy heart, she sent Vishnudev to Punjab. And things were working out, but suddenly it all came to a halt.

Lying there on the floor of the train, Ramdev's hand crept to the secret pocket inside his shirt. He was comforted by the

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touch of his railway ticket, his money and the postcard bearing his brother's address. Folding the bag tightly, he put it under his neck, shut his eyes and tried to get some sleep. The train rattled on. The stink of the toilets was overpowering. And there was fear. So much of it boiling off the turmoil in Punjab that it troubled his sleep.

VASHANDEV! O VASHANDEV!

When Bhaiya came home from Punjab the last time, he had had so many stories to tell. Every night, Mai would ask him about Punjab. "You went all the way there to eat *roti*? Don't you get rice there?"

"Mai, they call all meals *roti*. What a nice, big glass of tea we get there! You can't get that sort of tea here."

"Curse you! Don't we have tea here."

"No, Mai, it is nothing like the tea we get there. They mix a little opium in the tea they give to the workers. You never feel tired, and the labourers really work."

"How long do you have to work?"

"From seven in the morning to six in the evening, with a one-hour break for *roti*."

"So the landlords there are worse than the ones here! ...And what do you do after sunset?"

"The others play cards, I play my flute. The landlady is kind. She calls out: 'Vashandev! O Vashandev!' She likes to hear me play the flute. Do you know, she is educated — a BA pass."

"The landlords must be well-off?"

"Oh, yes. They have a motorcycle, a tractor, a jeep and a house that looks like a palace. Two sons. Both live in Delhi. And they

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have a TV too?"
"What's that?"
"Like we hear songs on the radio, in a TV you can see the film as well."
"The landlord doesn't beat you, does he?"
"No, he does not. But he is cursing all the time — *Bhaincho… Bhaincho…*"
"Ah, well! It isn't easy to make a living. Do you like it there?"
"If it wasn't for the money, I'd never go back to Punjab…"

The ceremony to bring Vishnudev's wife home was just around the corner. Vishnudev had to go to Punjab yet again to make the money for it. There was no work in Bihar and if work was found, the wages were less than half of what he got in Punjab.

No night trains to Punjab

Getting off the train at the neon-lit railway station of New Delhi, Ramdev felt lost in the vast sea of people. Such a jostling crowd, such strange people, such bright lights. He clenched his arms tightly across his chest so that no one could rob him of his ticket, postcard and money. He stopped for a moment, wondering where the exit was. Then he just joined the crowd, crossed the over-bridge and found himself outside the station.

Rows of taxis, cars and auto-rickshaws. It was night, and everything was so dream-like. Just like it was in those Hindi films that he had seen. The Assam Mail was five hours late. He had been told to take either a train or a bus to Amritsar. He looked about for the waiting room. Some people with tired

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eyes and dirty clothes were sitting in a corner on discoloured tin trunks. He went to them.

"Go and ask at that window there."

There was quite a crowd at the window. He waited for them to move on, then went up to it. "Babu, has the train for Amritsar left?"

"Yes, it has!"

"When is the next train?"

"Bhaiya, it will leave tomorrow."

"But this is a big station!"

"There are no night trains to Punjab these days."

As he turned away, the Babu resumed his conversation with a friend. "All of Hindustan knows that there are no night trains to Punjab, but he has to ask."

"Oh! He's just a Bihari Bhaiya!" the friend said derisively.

"They're all heading for Jalandhar, Ludhiana. In fact, Punjab is full of them."

"You know, the trains from Bihar are known as Bhaiya Expresses in Punjab. Every train going that way is stuffed full of them."

"Don't they get work in Bihar?"

"If they did, would they risk death in Punjab? Hunger compels them to board the train... Bhaiya Express will always be on the move, making good use of the government's rail tracks."

PUNJAB ALL THE TIME

'These days' is a phrase that means a lot to Ramdev. It had been difficult to get through the past four months in the village. A single fear plagued them night and day. How was

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Vishnudev? Every drop of blood shed in Punjab seemed to be his. Every bullet fired seemed to strike him. Mai would go to Panditji's house to listen to the news on the radio. Ramdev would go to the tea-shop to scan the newspaper. When the letter they had sent by registered post was returned, Mai wept all night. He went to Begusarai and sent a telegram to the same address, but there was no response. Mai started asking for boons and she would ask Panditji to read out the prognostications of the *Panchang*. She wept on the way to the fertiliser township, where she went to get coal dust and to sell her fuel. When his aunt told Mai not to work so hard, she would reply: "I have sent one son to Punjab. Ramdev has finished school, and I will not send him to Punjab."

Messages came from the house of Vishnudev's betrothed, asking for news from Punjab. Mai feared that the marriage would be called off. How long could they keep the girl home? Mai was helpless, with no news of her son, feeling her daughter-in-law slipping out of her reach. She wanted to keep it all together somehow.

"I'll marry the girl to my younger son," Ramdev heard his mother say. He was stunned. His sister-in-law's — he called her Bhauji — innocent, dusky face and her dark eyes seemed to be demanding something of him. How could this be? Such things did not happen in gentle homes. What if Bhaiya came home after they were married? Mai seemed to have lost her mind!

But Mai had not learnt to lose. She wanted to hold close to her chest all that she had left. She went to the post office every day. "You sent your son to Punjab in greed, why do you now come every day looking for letters from him?"

Mai's failing health, Panditji's interest, Janardhan's wicked

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plans, Bhauji's sad eyes, fear for his brother's life, the daily squabbles, Mai's tears... Ramdev felt as though their home had turned into the very battlefield of Punjab. He could not sleep all night. He could hardly keep his mind on his lessons. Everything seemed to be converging on a single point — Punjab.

City frozen like blood

The stories that people in the bus were relating scared him so much that another bus journey was too frightful a proposition. He decided that he would spend the night at the Amritsar bus stand, but not take a bus to Attari. Panic seemed to have struck the bus stand as early as six in the evening. Everyone was in a tearing hurry. The shops were being shut down. The hawkers were moving on. The bus drivers and conductors were hurrying through their meals in the nearby *dhabas*. Everyone was trying to beat a retreat before the curfew started at seven.

Ramdev introduced himself to the peanut peddler. He mixed his *sattu* with some water and ate quickly. The peanut peddler was a Christian tribal from Ranchi. He had run away from home three years ago. With his bearded jaw and the *gamchha* tied over his head, he looked like a Sikh. He had large, honest eyes and an infectious laugh. James was happy to meet Ramdev, who had come all the way from their land. Both huddled themselves in a corner like bundles. There were other bundles too. All were silent.

The curfew had started.

Ramdev peeped out of the sheet covering him. Everything

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was still. The noisy bus stand was as silent as a corpse. There was no bird, no breeze, no leaf in motion. If someone let out a scream, it would have frozen in fear. If a bullet were fired, it would hang in the air. The world seemed to have stopped turning. People breathed, but soundlessly. Only the mosquitoes buzzed about, fearless.

A jeep full of soldiers drove through the silence. Ramdev felt as though a sharp knife had passed through his throat.

"It is like this here," the peanut peddler told him. "Just go to sleep. Don't get up. Not even to pee." Ramdev could not sleep, despite his long and tiring day.

At about eleven in the night, a platoon in uniform descended on the bus stop. They started kicking the bundles awake. A volley of questions followed. Where have you come from? What are you doing here? If someone stammered in fear, they used their gun-butts on him. Three Sikh youths were dragged away. Bihar, they heard him say, and they moved on. But Ramdev still trembled with fear.

James had fallen asleep again, as though nothing had happened. But Ramdev could still hear the screams of the three young men. In time, one gets used to everything. Slowly, the city too froze like blood.

Next stop is Pakistan

After he had bought his ticket and boarded the train, he felt somewhat relieved. He took the crumpled postcard out of his pocket and read the address — Vishnudev, Inder Singh's farm, Village Rani Ke Bhaya, Attari, District Amritsar (Punjab). He showed it to an old Sikh man, hoping that he could guide

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him to his destination.

The old man shook his head apologetically and said, "I can't read Hindi. I have read only Urdu all my life. But I understand Hindi. Tell me where you want to go."

"I have to go to Rani Ke Attari. I am a stranger to these parts. I have come from Bihar," Ramdev lost his hesitation to the old man's warmth and he read out the complete address.

"Oh! Santokh Singh's Rani Ke. The train will stop at Attari, and you must get off there. You can ask a *tongawallah* — they are outside the station. But you are a young man, you can easily run the two miles to the village. Or you can take a bus and get off at Rani Ke. You will see Santokh Singh's two-storeyed house outside the village. Ask there. Inder Singh's farm is close by."

Ramdev understood that the village of Rani Ke was two miles away. Santokh Singh's double-storeyed house was on its outskirts and Inder Singh's farm just across from it. "How have you come all alone from so far away? Your upper lip is still hairless. Are you from Bihar or UP?"

"Bihar. I have come to look for my brother in Rani Ke."

As the train stopped, the old man said "*Achha*" and got off. Ramdev looked out of the window and watched him walk away. The train started off again, and here was the ticket checker.

"Ticket?" he asked officiously.

"How many stations away is Attari?" Ramdev asked, showing him his ticket.

"Is this your first trip? We are almost at Attari. Get off there. The next stop after Attari will be in Pakistan."

The checker punched the ticket and moved on.

Ramdev was stunned! Where had he come to? Pakistan!

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Screech-creech. The train came to a halt. He got off and headed for the gate of the station. Outside, the *tongawallah* asked him, "Is it the train to Pakistan? Yes, it's the time of that train." In turn, Ramdev asked him. "Which road goes to Rani Ke?" "Take this road and go straight on… then ask someone the way."

The sun was high. He was perspiring, for he had walked fast. But his heart was light with the joy of arrival. On either side of the road lay bare, harvested wheat-fields. The sky was so like it was back home in his village — somewhat tilted, sprawling and clear. The sleepy wind stirred now and then and raised a cloud of dust and dry leaves. There was no one else on the long, silent road. The temperature was rising. Ramdev was thinking of his brother. How could his letters reach home when there was curfew every other day? Bhaiya, too, must be waiting for a letter from home. Wouldn't he be surprised? He would embrace Ramdev. And Ramdev wouldn't be able to hold back his tears. He would give Bhaiya Mai's sesame *laddus*. Bhaiya would be so happy just to see the *til laddus*. Then he would give him something to eat. Then, in a roundabout way, he would ask about Bhauji. How much would Ramdev tell him in one go? Bhaiya would also want to know about his examinations. He would ask Bhaiya to sort out Janardhan…

He saw the two-storeyed house on the side of the road. A Sardarji was walking ahead of him. Ramdev quickly caught up with him. "Bhai Sahib, where is Inder Singh's farm?" he asked. "Who do you want to meet? Where have you come from?" asked the Sardarji, but Ramdev could not follow his Punjabi

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very well.

"Vishnudev Bihari," he replied nervously.

"I can't make head or tail of what you're saying. Come, I will take you to Sarpanch Saroop. You can tell him what you want." The Sardarji gestured to him to follow.

Puzzled, Ramdev followed him. On the way, the Sardarji asked him his name and told him that he was Kirpal Singh. At the house, Kirpal Singh shouted out loud: "Sarpanchji, Sarpanchji, come down! Come and meet this stranger." A tall, fair, well-built man came down in *kurta-pyjamas*. The slim, pointed moustache suited his face. He smiled at Kirpal Singh and drew him close.

"Kirpalya, who is this boy? Where have you brought him from?"

"Sarpanchji, why would I bring him? This boy is looking for someone. He speaks only Hindi. You will be able to understand what he is saying."

Sarpanch Saroop turned toward Ramdev and looked at him closely. "What is it, my boy?"

"My brother Vishnudev works on Inder Singh's farm. I have come all the way from Bihar. This is his letter." Ramdev gave the postcard to the Sarpanch. He looked at it and handed it back, saying, "The address is correct."

"Kirpalya, just see, his love for his brother has brought him so far… yes, I remember. I had seen a Bihari boy at the farm… come, I will take you to Inder Singh." The Sarpanch led the way. Ramdev followed him and Kirpal went his own way. They walked under the blazing sun to Inder Singh's farm.

"Sat Sri Akal *ji*," a woman said politely.

The Sarpanch nodded.

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"Sa-Sri Akal! Where is Inder Singh?"

"He's gone to Amritsar. He'll be back tomorrow morning."

"This boy has come to meet his brother. His brother works on your farm… what did you say his name was?"

"Vishnudev," Ramdev said clearly, his anxiety turning to excitement.

"Vishnudev! Yes, there was a boy of this name, but he returned to Kapurthala three months ago. Last year, we had brought him from Mamaji's farm… This year, too, he came from Bihar, but he was restless. He returned to Kapurthala three months ago."

"Listen, Manjit Kaur," Sarpanch Saroop said kindly, "the boy has come all the way from Bihar. He is anxious and he only has your address."

"Talk to Sardarji when he returns, he will tell you more," Manjit Kaur said and turned away.

"All right, my boy! Come, you can stay at my place. Let's wait until morning."

What does the flute say?

At night, the Sarpanch and Kirpal Singh sat in the courtyard, talking. The conversation repeatedly returned to the crisis in Punjab. They were comparing notes about the news on the radio and television, and the rumours that were doing the rounds. Lying in a corner of the courtyard on a *takht*, covered by a sheet, Ramdev thought only of Vishnudev. He felt so like weeping. The Sardarni had been friendly at first. But when she heard Vishnudev's name, she had turned cold and said — talk to Sardarji. If Bhaiya had been in Kapurthala for the last three months, why had he not written to them? Even if he was in jail,

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he would have written. Where would he search for his brother with just 200 rupees in his pocket? Is Bhaiya no more… and he burst into tears. His sobs drew the attention of the other two. Kirpal Singh jumped up, shook him and said, "Boy, boy… just see, Sarpanchji."

The Sarpanch consoled Ramdev: "Listen, we will plainly ask Inder Singh for your brother's address. We will give you the money you need and you can go to Kapurthala and meet your brother."

"*Haanji*, the boy must be helped. They are poor people…"

Inder Singh shouted merrily when he saw Sarpanch Saroop, "*Ao* Maharaj! Manjit told me about that Bihari boy. I had gone off to Amritsar. We were worried about our two sons. I spoke to them on the telephone last night, so now my mind is at rest. I started from Amritsar this morning. I have just got home… Oh! I'm a fool. Come, let's sit inside. Send in some tea," he shouted and started off again, "*Haanji*, the boy was very fine. He was with me last year. But he was not his old self when he came back this year. He couldn't stay long. He kept saying that he didn't like it here. He moved on two months ago… If you want, I shall give some money to this boy."

Inder Singh's nervous patter made the Sarpanch suspicious. The day before, Manjit had said that he had left three months ago. And now her husband was saying that it had been two months ago. And why was he offering money?

"Inder Singh, tell us if the boy is alive or not," the Sarpanch said firmly.

Inder Singh's face grew dark and Ramdev's heart trembled. Inder Singh forced a smile and said, "Why should he be dead? …He must be alive. He may have gone to Kapurthala, or

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somewhere else. What can one say of the Bhaiya-*log*? They work here today, somewhere else tomorrow…"

Ramdev, who was standing behind Sarpanch Saroop, burst into loud sobs. Manjit Kaur came in with the tea tray. She flashed an intense look at her husband and pressed her lips tightly together. Mechanically, she put the tray on the centre-table and left the room quickly. The Sarpanch was now convinced that Inder Singh was lying. Manjit Kaur was hiding something too. Where was the need for all these lies? Vishnudev was not alive. The realisation hit him suddenly, and he was angry.

"Inder Singh, just tell me if the boy is alive or not. If he is alive, give me his address."

"I have told you that he has gone away. He must be alive."

"Take pity on this boy. He has come a long way. Where is the need to lie?"

"*Oye* Saroope, so you are calling me a liar. You have lost the Sarpanch elections but you have not lost your arrogance. Who are you to ask me all this? I will not tell you anything. Who are you to support this boy?"

Saroop was taken aback. Ramdev wailed and fell down at Inder Singh's feet.

"*Malik*!" Ramdev screeched as he wept, "Tell me, Master, where my brother is. Grant me this boon! Tell me, Master… Master…"

Sarpanch Saroop got up and lifted Ramdev to his feet.

"Bhai Sahib, just a minute!" Manjit Kaur called out from within. She came to the door and flung a *jhola* at the Sarpanch's feet. She was breathless, not quite herself.

"These are Vashandev's things! …He is no longer in this

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world!" she said, and burst into tears. Between her sobs she said, "He told me that he was going to Ambarsar to buy clothes for the family. He was going back to his *des*. If he had returned from Ambarsar, he would have taken his pay from us… he left at three in the afternoon. There was something wrong with the bus, and it left only in the evening. He was among those who were pulled out of the bus and butchered at Chhehratta…"

Tears flowed from the eyes of the dumbfounded Ramdev. The Sarpanch was shocked by what Manjit Kaur had said. Inder Singh stood staring guiltily at the floor, like a convict. "I wept for three days… I have sons too… he was afraid of getting into trouble. All of last night, I fought with him. Why hide it? He was also someone's son, someone's brother… yesterday, even I lied… forgive us, Sarpanchji!" The mother in Manjit Kaur got the better of her. She embraced Ramdev and held him to her bosom. She wiped his tears with her *odhni*.

The flute was peeping out of Vishnudev's *jhola*, lying in the middle of the room. They were all silent, but the flute seemed to be saying something. No one could quite make out what it was…

How long will you suffer here?

He sat by the canal for a long time, but the rippling waters and the fresh breeze could not soothe him. He got up to go to the Sarpanch's house. Tomorrow, he would get the money — two thousand. Sarpanch Sahib would take him to Amritsar and put him in a bus to Delhi. He should remind him today. He walked on, lost in thought. Three military jeeps drove past him. They were announcing something in Punjabi. He

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walked on and saw three more jeeps coming. Ramdev got scared. He walked briskly to the Sarpanch's house. He was out of breath when he got there.

"Sarpanch Sahib, has the Pakistan army moved in?"

"No, it is our own army," Saroop breathed heavily and said, "Our own army… this is bad."

"Why?" Ramdev asked him softly.

"How can you understand? We who live on the border know. The army comes and goes, but it leaves a trail of devastation… come, let's go to Inder Singh." Trapped there, Ramdev had no choice but to hear the news on Jalandhar and Lahore TV. He could not make out what was happening anywhere. All of Punjab seemed to have turned deaf. Wagah and Attari were like military camps. Screams crouched in the homes. Even the winds were being frisked. Silence was the language of the leaves in the season of hatred. Rumours flew like birds. Tidings of death were not permitted to rise into a scream. People grovelled like pigeons. The nights lay awake. Figures in olive drab stalked the silence.

The search had tired the landlady and Inder Singh sat glued to the television set. In between, they would listen to the news on the radio. Ramdev helped in the kitchen. The whole household was weeping. The Sarpanch came over to console them.

"Kirpal's brother is a *sevadar* in Amritsar… but he is calm. Everything is all right in Delhi. After all, it is the capital. Don't worry yourself, Manjit Kaur. Be brave!"

"How an I be calm? If a single flower dies, every leaf weeps… When the firing was from across the border, we would face it bravely. But now our own army is turned upon us. Those who gave us strength now frighten us. We have only the Guru to

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pray to!" In her tears, Manjit Kaur seemed so like Mai to Ramdev. What could have happened to her sons in Delhi?

Those days passed like a storm. When the curfew was lifted after twelve days, the time for reckoning began. Who had lost whom? Who was missing? At last Inder Singh said one day, "Go to Ambarsar. How long will you suffer here?"

Not the journey's end

Amritsar was a city in ruins, stalked by terror. Everyone was listless, without a sparkle in the eye. It was the silence of the graveyard. Ramdev looked out of the window of the bus. The Sarpanch and Inder Singh were standing down below. The bus moved with a jolt. Ramdev joined his palms.

He took a deep breath as the bus moved on. As he shut his eyes, there was Mai standing before him. He wanted to lie — I could not find Bhaiya. But how would he explain the 2,000 rupees. The *jhola* lying in his lap felt very heavy. His head reeled — the tear-streaked face of Manjit Kaur, Kirpal Singh, Inder Singh's face hanging like his very wrinkles... then he saw his mother wailing loudly... Bhauji sobbing softly...

He shivered. "No!" he whispered. He held firmly onto the back of the seat in front of him. He had to move on. The journey by Bhaiya Express had not yet come to an end...

Translated from the Hindi 'Bhaiya Express'
by Nirupama Dutt and Pratik Kanjilal

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GEETANJALI SHREE

These Days

Illustration by VISHWAJYOTI GHOSH

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These days, I sit out in the verandah every night — just sit there, absolutely still, as though it's a role assigned to me in a play. Sleep has deserted me and become part of the distant clamour. The noise keeps resounding in my ears and every now and then I feel the crowd is heading this way, coming closer.

But even if the mobs reach here, I know they will do me no harm. The very thought fills me with shame and I cannot articulate it even to myself.

I am often filled with shame these days. My eyes are moist most of the time. Perhaps I am growing old. They say one's defenses sag in old age, along with the body. The tear gland becomes a municipality water tap. Open the tap, and it is dry. Then suddenly it erupts like a spring or whimsically starts leaking — drip, drip, drip. I have reached a state where I am afraid to look at myself in the mirror, afraid that I might burst into tears at the memory of my forsaken moustache and beard. But even away from the mirror, the tear gland remains active. I have shaved off my moustache and beard. I look different, but in any case I am not afraid. Why should I be afraid when I am proclaiming to the whole world that I have come here, that I am staying here, when I deliberately keep the front door open and sit here like this so that the neighbours can see me clearly, especially when Kaluva comes at dawn with his *pooja thali* and I reverently cup my hands over the flaming lamp in the *thali* and then ask him, just the way I used to, to make me a good, strong cup of tea. I make it a point to come out on the verandah every now and then so that people can have a good look at me, recognise me, know that it's me and no one else, and thus remain at peace.

There is more than peace these days; there is silence, complete silence. If one sees anyone at all it is the occasional

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middle-aged housewife coming home with a bag full of groceries or some domestic help with a milk can hanging from his bicycle in the early morning, when the curfew is relaxed. The can still clangs against the bicycle but the cyclist is silent. He no longer sings *Keh do na keh do na you are my Sonia.* His silence is unnerving. There was a time when I was so fed up with this song that whenever I heard it, I would grind my teeth and rush to switch off the TV. But right away, every television set in town seemed to come alive, blaring the song from every direction. And now the song seems to have buried itself, gone underground.

Even young blood appears to have frozen over and if girls want they can walk the streets without fear of being jeered and whistled at by the neighbourhood boys, who no longer step out of their homes.

The youths who venture forth these days are others. In other places. They are not locals, people say. They gather every day at the clock tower, form groups, and head in one direction or another, tossing slogans on the tips of their swords and tridents. The rumour is that now they plan to come this way.

But I have to sit unafraid in the verandah. Everyone knows me here. Ask anyone and they will tell you my name, my religion. They see me, they know me. I have no fears.

But fear is not such a simple thing that exists only when you acknowledge it. It wafts in the air and anyone who inhales it is caught in its grip. It is like a wandering ghost that enters any body at will, making an old man speak in the voice of a child or a dead man from the mouth of a woman. Is it fear, too, that lurks in my assertion that I am in no danger? Fear, that sits huddled beneath my fearlessness suddenly rises, leaps,

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crosses the boundary. It disturbs my balance so completely that I, who just a moment ago was a hero ready to face the mobs and be killed, am now a frightened fox, tail between legs, desperately seeking a bush to hide in.

I get up and switch on all the lights of the verandah. The dim night-light may lead people to suspect that I have something to hide. I sit in the bright light, completely visible, illuminated, fearless, correct…

Tomorrow is Holi. It is the *chhoti* Holi. In the evening, the Holika will be set aflame. People will sit around the fire singing *Hori* and picking grain from long stalks of wheat.

In my childhood, the burning of the Holika was a much-anticipated event. We would start gathering firewood days ahead. Piles of wood were heaped up at crossroads and street corners. Ma would rub our bodies with powdered gram and turmeric and all the grime that came out with it would be collected in a bowl to be burnt with the Holika. It was a way of burning away all that was murky. It was the day of cleansing. It was also a day of fun and frolic. We are not Western folk, who must suffer the burden of original sin century after century! We are of the East — our impurities are burned away in one clean sweep, then it is the time for colours, the time to let go, to celebrate.

In our university too, boys and girls would have the time of their lives as the Holika burned. They would dance, flirt, romance. Each tongue of flame was lit by the mischievous expectations of the next day, by the colours of Holi they would lovingly drench each other with.

Has anything changed?

Yes, something has changed.

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These days, if one sees wood piled up at nooks and corners, one does not assume that it is meant only for the symbolic burning of Holika. Anything can be burned down. Fire, after all, is fire. It spreads in a flash. And its flames can engulf a Holika or a city, or even the whole world — who knows how far it can spread?

So everyone is alert and as the festival draws near the air is filled with foreboding. My heart is sinking. I have forgotten what sleep is. Kaluva told me today that people had been asking about me — when had I come, how long would I stay… telling him that it was not safe for me to stay…

I should be relieved by this news. I have been identified. Everyone knows that I am sleeping here and they are concerned about me. Or they know that I am not sleeping here and are concerned.

But my mind is restless. All eyes are on me. I am not used to being at centre-stage. I am just an ordinary citizen and I just want to stay in my corner. But I am caught in the floodlights. Its glare stuns me, unnerves me. I long to crawl like an insect into some dark crevice but I am afraid the lights may follow me and even if I cower, where would I hide? So, assuming the mien of a lion, I sit in the open, hiding my coward's heart.

Yes, there is fear in being safe, to be sitting in a verandah like a declaration: Look, it's me! Don't I belong to the creed entitled to safety?

I am sitting in the verandah and my every pore is aware of the scrutiny of the buildings around me, as if they were people, as if the open windows were their eyes, staring at me. I am pleading with them to note that I am not hiding. Why should I hide? Can't you identify me? I am a Hindu! The light has

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been switched on bright and I am scorching under it so that they may see me — it's me, brothers, spare me.

The other houses are drowned in darkness.

Oh, the number of houses my friend and I had checked out! It was a long search, and finally we settled on this one. All the pros and cons were discussed. Should one go for an apartment or a plot of land? Security and easy maintenance were important issues. But think of the joy of building one's own house! Then we started examining the colonies. Which housing colony would be the best? That one was too close to the market and divided according to religion. But in this colony, everyone was educated. A mixed bag of professionals — doctors and professors — of all communities, Christians, Parsis and others.

By every consideration, this colony was ideal and my friend took a housing loan.

I recall that old, rundown house. As every generation passes away, their profiteering sons pull down their houses and raise multi-storeyed buildings. This house, too, would have met the same fate. All these lovely old trees too would have been chopped away and rows of flats would be crowding right up to the road, designed to extract all possible profit.

I looked at the trees in the compound through my friend's eyes. He must have bought this house to save these trees. On one side was the *semul* tree, the branches of the *chameli* adorned the verandah, the *kachnar* and mango trees in front, an all-season lemon tree and of course, the *neem*. How could one think of uprooting these trees for profit? We were happy that unlike others who had to grow trees from scratch, we had found a house with full-grown shady trees. We thought we would adopt these trees but in truth, the trees adopted us. The trees

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exuded more compassion perhaps than us. I would walk here from my flat early in the morning and have a cup of tea in the open as the breeze rustled through the trees.

And he would walk barefoot in the lawn, admiring the buds and leaves. His heart would rest awhile on a branch and then swing onto a leaf. It would spread its wings with a bird sitting on this branch and join the song of another.

Will these trees be saved? I can hear the crowds. They are far away, but their uproar is loud. It is like wearing a hearing aid that turns even a whisper into a scream. A pin drops, and it seems like a bomb.

Just then, I see him. A mere shadow.

He probably thinks that no one has seen him. Leaving the buildings behind, he is walking up the road. He is walking in the shadows of the trees lining the verge.

Only a thief would walk like that, I think in panic. I feel a nameless dread. He will have to come out of the shadows to enter this house. I had switched off the globe lamps on either side of the gate after dinner, but he will have to pass under the streetlight in front of the gate. What will I do then, when I see him clearly?

But instead of coming up to the gate, he veers away along the boundary wall. A mere shadow. I can see his head bobbing over the wall. Where on earth is he going? I am puzzled. There is only an enclosure there, where the whole colony's garbage is dumped. A shadow among shadows, he seems to be heading there. It could be the shadow of a tree or a lurking thief.

What does he want? I sit rooted to the spot, wondering. My heart races but my body seems to be made of wood. May nothing happen, may nothing happen, says each heartbeat. My

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body has turned into a statue. Or do these strange times make me think it is best just to sit still?

A sidelong glance tells me that the shadow has stopped by the garbage dump. On the other side of the wall inside the compound is the big *semul* tree. Its branches are bent over the lane just where he is standing.

The *semul* tree. In the Holi season, in the month of Phagun, the *semul* blossoms. The old leaves have fallen away. The branches are now sprouting tiny fresh green leaves. The red *semul* flowers are gigantic in proportion and the leaves are hardly visible. Red petals surround the centre like a black beak, making it seem that flocks of black-beaked red birds are sitting on the branches. They seem to be fluttering their wings and might fly away any moment.

Yes, the birds seem to be ready for flight. And just then the shadow flies out and takes hold of a branch of the *semul* tree.

Just like a bird! The shadow jumps, crouches on the wall and then hangs onto a branch inside the compound.

Just like a monkey!

We certainly have a talent for moving one step forward and twenty steps back!

There he is, hanging from the branch as though he has come all the way just to swing from the *semul* tree. Amidst the great confusion in my mind, I can still bet that he is doing the monkey trick for the first time in his life.

But bet with whom and bet on what?

I am sitting like a block of wood. Breathing gently, I wonder whether I should move or not. These days, one does not know if one is more likely to invite trouble by sitting still or making a move.

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These days, the mind is numb. No one wants to make any move. It is best to be still, so that the raging fire does not come this way, at least. And when the fire stops raging, we will get up. Maybe we will.

I too am lying low — stunned and silent. Now that he has reached here, I leave it all to destiny, whatever will happen will happen, I have no energy left in me.

And out there, the shadow is swinging from its own fate.

Some day, I will look back on this game that we are playing. Each of us alone, separate, fully aware of each other, yet completely estranged. He in the dark of the *semul* tree and I in the light of the verandah. We are as alert as hunters who put on an act of elaborate indifference but are ready to leap and seize. Maybe!

He jumps down from the branch into the compound of the house, silently.

I switch off completely. Yes, completely. Otherwise, I could not sit still, pretending I can comprehend nothing. I am silent, as silent as someone listening to the footsteps of death. Ready to die without a tremor or a cry.

He remains rooted to the spot where he jumped.

For a long time, we stick to our respective positions. Fully engrossed in this strange game, we wait. A silent doubt travels between the two of us. We'll do what is to be done and end this game any old how.

I am not looking his way, but I see him rise from the ground. For a moment he comes under the rays of the light. My heart races, afraid that I may look that way, do something. He buries his face in his neck and my skin breaks into goose pimples. He crosses from the light to the dark. Then by the

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side of the house, he swishes like a snake and disappears.

Shadow, wood. Bird, monkey, snake. Who knows what other form we yet have to take?

If the door is not bolted from the inside it can be pushed open slightly with a hand and the latch can be opened. I hear the latch opening. If I continue with this newly acquired skill of holding my breath, I may yet survive.

I start thinking of the house. This is my way of forgetting the shadow. It is as though the shadow is an entity separate from this house. As though there is no shadow in this house at this moment.

This house too will be burned down! I will burn with it and so will he!

This house too will be burned down! I will burn with it and so will he!

Today? Now? Tomorrow? When the Holika goes up in flames? *Keh diya keh diya you are my Sonia.* Is it a rumour or is it for real? But these days, it does not take long for a rumour to turn into reality. A rumour began — and everyone thought it was just a rumour — that the tomb of a music maestro dead these five centuries would not be spared. And it was not. The rumour ceased to be a rumour. Guruji died after five hundred years. After all, real death is the death of the soul.

Who will die when this house is burned down? How long will a soulless body haunt it?

I was very stiff, like a corpse growing cold.

The shadow is in the study. It moves softly, very softly. But I am wearing a hearing aid and every sound is amplified. I hear the sound of a drawer opening and closing. I hear the rustle of paper. I hear him breathing.

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The shadow moves and its toes can be seen pushing the bedroom door just a little. And a line of light borders the study. It is my fault. I had switched on the bedside lamp. I switch it off only when I go to sleep.

Now I can see bits and pieces of him in the room — sometimes the hand moves to the almirah, sometimes his chin is turned toward the top shelf. It is as though human body parts are moving about in the house and everything else is in the dark.

Along with the bits and pieces of the body, things too are moving around in the darkness of the house. A green duffel bag slips out from under the bed. The bag moves to the study and, stumbling here and there, fills itself with odds and ends. Then fingers touch toilet articles lying in the bathroom and objects start moving out. The big cupboard pushes out hangers and the hangers hand over the clothes to darkness. The locker keys come out, jingling softly, from under the mattress and things kept in the hidden safe tumble out into a hand.

Later, I will think to myself that while I was sitting frozen outside, ordinary, everyday, household objects took on a life of their own — like in fairy tales — and moving out of their little corners, touched bits and pieces of a body, and slipped into a duffel bag where past met with future.

Even the vegetables that Kaluva had picked from the garden in the backyard and put on the kitchen table suddenly come alive. And as is the nature of vegetables, they start spreading the fragrance of the soil they were nurtured in. It is as though they are greeting the one whom they were waiting for. Sitting in the verandah, the separate smells of tomatoes, lemons and gourd reach me, and I know I will smell them again in my memory.

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I am sinking in the bright light. Helpless in the face of the fire that comes and burns down homes built over many years. Should I just sink in the light? Should I move? It is difficult to make a choice. How do I know when to be still and when to move? These questions will return when I describe my state of mind later.

The shadow is retreating. It is retracing the path it took to enter the house — from the branch inside to the branch outside, from the ground inside to the ground outside.

Oh! My chair moves of its own volition. Oh! He is going away. He will go away. The chair gives me a push. I wake up. I quickly climb down the verandah stairs and go and stand by the *semul* tree. As though he too is participating in the game, he starts walking with firm footsteps outside. And I keep step inside. Walking along the wall.

I will think about this too one day. He is outside. I am inside. On either side of the wall. On either side of the darkness.

Both of us reach the gate. But here the momentum of the game changes. I stop and he moves on.

He walks down the road and even the green duffel bag becomes part of the shadow. I watch him going and he knows that I am watching him. He walks on along the straight road that stretches ahead.

No, I don't go out on the road. If I hadn't come out for so long, there is little chance that I will venture out now. If I hadn't caught him all this while, I will not do it now, you could say. You could even say — just as well, for who knows who is carrying a weapon these days.

He is taking the turn at the bend of the road, and I turn for home. Suddenly, a door bangs open in one of the houses.

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We are startled. Stricken by fear, we turn around, he outside and I inside. The pupils in our eyes move like the hands of a clock from one moment to another.

In this single moment, we are piercing the darkness and looking upon each other, unblinking. The moment freezes itself for all time.

Such moments are never lost. Such moments are never spoken of. Such moments gather everything. Such moments erase everything. Such moments are dissected by social scientists, writers, theologians and psychologists. They dissect them for centuries but reach no conclusion.

Such moments strip us naked, so obscenely naked that we are left with nothing.

I lower my head and a repressed anger rises in me against this Muslim friend who has come as a shadow to his own house where I have been for a week, providing cover so that he can gather his lifetime's earnings in a duffel bag and get lost. For rumour has it that this house will be burned down along with him. To burn one of us amounts to burning the other too. Even the very rumour has scorched us. The road ahead is empty and behind it are the red *semul* flowers, perched in rows, their wings spread out, as though waiting to fly away before they are charred. Waiting, who knows, in despair or in hope. tlm

Translated from the Hindi 'Aajkal' *(2002)*
by Nirupama Dutt and Pratik Kanjilal

NOTE

On the eve of Holi, the Indian festival of colours celebrated in March, the evil mythical character Holika is burnt in a bonfire. Hori are festive songs.

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M.P. NARAYANA PILLAI

The Thief

Illustration by GAUTAM KAR

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I CRAWLED UP THE BRANCH of the mango tree that hung over the roof. Slowly, I removed two tiles. At first, it looked like the kitchen did not have a loft. But no, there was one, and that made the work all the more difficult. I managed to slip through the gap between the roof-tiles and landed in the loft.

There was only one way to get into the kitchen — remove at least two wooden slats of the loft. The gods are kind; the slats are loose. They aren't even nailed together! I carefully remove two from the southern corner of the loft. Now, there's just enough room for me to get through. Holding on to the edge of the loft, I can swing and jump down. But where shall I land?

I own a torch, but I had to pawn it. Somehow, I must make two rupees and get that torch back. It is a matter of my daily bread. But before I can make those two rupees, I must eat. It is two days since I had my last meal.

I strike a match and peer down into the kitchen. A bronze pot full of water. Clean dishes stacked upside down in a neat row. Three or four low wooden seats in a corner.

If only I could step onto the large rice box on the eastern corner, I could lower myself into the room instead of jumping in. Hanging on to the loft, if I swing a bit to the east, I'm sure I can land on the box.

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I lower myself into the corridor leading to the kitchen. There are only washed dishes here. The kitchen door is closed and latched. By God's grace, it isn't locked. Even the key is in the lock.

I open the kitchen door. The reek of woodsmoke. There are still a few embers under the ashes in the hearth. Should eat a handful of rice before lighting a *beedi*. What *beedi*? Perhaps I'll find one in the next room.

I strike another match and look around. There is an oil lamp on the hearthstone. I should light it, or I'll have to eat in the dark. In the dim light of the lamp, I see a pot full of water on the hearth. Lukewarm water. Good. I'll be able to wash before I eat.

I wipe my face on my thin towel that serves me for a turban. On my left, on top of the hearth, there's a pot covered by a lid. The rice must be in it. There's bound to be gravel at the bottom of the pot. It's difficult to eat the leftovers of rice if it hasn't been cleaned properly before being cooked.

But isn't this absurd? Have I gone through all this just to have some rice gruel? Before going to bed, someone has poured water into the rice pot. Someone wants to have leftover gruel for breakfast. Anyway, I don't want that.

No point pondering these matters. I must have some rice. Maybe they keep it somewhere else. What's in that pot hanging by a rope?

I lift the small plate that covers its mouth. The aroma of prawns in raw mango curry! So the problem of curry is solved. What's in the dish under the pot? Rice! Rice for guests who might arrive unexpectedly. A plateful of rice. And good *chembavari* rice, too. I can make out by the look of it.

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I lay a wooden seat near the oil lamp. And before the lamp, I put the plate of rice. There is, of course, the prawns in raw mango curry. If there were some buttermilk and pickles to go with it, this would be a complete meal. There's bound to be some in the cupboard.

Yes, indeed there is.

Just one element missing: a mug of water to drink. Can't get up for some water in the midst of the meal. If I start hiccupping, things will turn ugly. It is two days since I have had anything.

I sit down with a mug of water and part the mound of rice. Five or six grains fall to the floor. I look at them, saddened. It was for these grains that I had been on the prowl for two days. Just like today, I had set out last night. And the night before that, too. Every night, something had gone wrong.

I had opened the kitchen window of the Vattakkattu house. A cursed dog ran up, barking. I gave it a blow with a linseed stick, but all the sons of bitches woke up. I ran through the paddy fields. Ran and ran, and at last fell down on the bank of a canal. There was blood all over my body. The thorns must have torn me as I ran through the wild *kara* bushes. My *mundu*[1] was in rags. The only vest I had was gone.

I spent the day in the shade of the *marotti* tree at Idatitrikka. I drank water from the canal and tightened my *mundu* across my hunger. Lying there, I even considered suicide. I would at least be spared this misery. It is two days since I last ate.

No one will lend me even a quarter of an *anna*. If I take a tumbler to the pawnshops, they won't take it. It is stolen, they will say. He is a thief — even the schoolchildren would say

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that: "He is a thief." What have I stolen from them? I can't swallow this rice. My throat is parched. It is two days since I last saw food.

The cold rice is like rubber. Maybe I can get it down if I pour some water into it. Oh, what a craving!

"As you steal, you ruin yourself and as you are ruined you continue to steal," so goes the saying. True. Haven't I been completely ruined? Five *idangazhi*[2] of paddy fields and 50 cents of land, that's what I had. And just an old hag to care for. I could have grown anything on my land, anything I liked to eat. But I didn't do a thing. The old woman died, seeing her son filching other people's paddy and stealing bananas. God's benison, in a way. She didn't have to see her son being taken away by the police.

They drove pins under my fingernails and toenails. Slashed my thighs and rubbed black pepper into the wounds. Thrust matchsticks up my penis. That's when I owned up. And once I had started, I said yes to everything. Confessed to things that I hadn't done. Took the police to all my enemies' homes, saying that stolen goods were stashed there. They were all beaten up. Good, all these people who denied me two *annas* for a bronze pot, let them suffer.

I had earned twenty-seven rupees by the time I got out after eight months. I spent three rupees on a *mundu* and a towel. For ten *annas*, I had lunch at the Brahmin hotel. Bought a bundle of *beedis* and a matchbox. Knotted the rest of the money in the tip of my *mundu*, secured it across my waist and went to sleep on a cement bench at the railway station.

I didn't have even two *annas* for a cup of tea when I woke up in the morning. Brutes! They must have cut the tip of the

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mundu off with a razor blade.

I sat there till noon. Stark hungry. I went to the tap and drank some water when it became unbearable. Washed my face. Then back to the bench again. When it grew dark, I walked south down the rail track. Sat down for a while when my legs ached. Got up and walked again. At daybreak, I reached my village.

I went straight to Kunjan Nair's tea-stall. I had two *dosas,* gram curry and tea for one *anna*. I walked out, having pawned for four *annas* the towel that I had bought the day before for fourteen-and-a-half *annas*.

That day, I had wanted to take it right away. But I had to wait a full month before I got my chance. And at last I had it — Kunjan Nair's *idli* cooker.

I took the *idli* cooker to the market, sold it and bought the torch. It is very difficult without a torch. When you go out on a job, you need to be properly equipped. The man who sells his chisel and hammer for a meal is no carpenter.

This could prove to be my last supper. But what a craving!

I sold and ate up the five *idangazhi* of paddy fields. Sold and ate up the house and burnt and ate up the old woman. I am still hungry. Now, I have to satisfy my hunger with stolen food.

I had a strapping figure. They beat me out of shape.

My stomach full, I felt heavy, rather like a tug at the belly. I can't walk now. Can't swing up to the loft to get out of the house. The kitchen has only one door, which opens on the inner courtyard. That's dangerous.

My eyelids are getting heavier. I feel a bit faint. Sleep wells up in my eyes. When I lay in the shade of the *marotti* tree with

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my *mundu* drawn tight about my stomach, I couldn't sleep because of hunger. Now, I am sleepy.

Shouldn't open the door; the courtyard is moonlit.

Shouldn't have set out on a moonlit night.

But the cruel hunger, it was unbearable.

Brutes! Wouldn't even lend me money for a cup of tea.

I was made to walk in handcuffs for three miles. All for stealing a bunch of bananas. Fourteen *annas*, that's what I had got for the bananas. When I walked down the tarred road at noonday, the brutes, they sat in the wayside stalls and toddy shops and shouted: "Thief, thief!"

Yes, I had stolen.

You, who wouldn't lend me money even for a bundle of *beedis*, you call me a thief?

Had to walk in handcuffs! Had to carry the chamber pot!

When they removed the cuffs, my hands were swollen.

Are handcuffs meant to swell your hands up?

Outside, it's still bright with moonlight. It would be dangerous to start out now.

It was not for stealing that they had driven pins under my nails, but for not owning up.

All my fingers have swollen tips and sunken nails. Ugly fingers! My thighs bear the scars of rancid ulcers.

I am thirsty! Can't lift up my head. Can't keep my eyes open.

Why can't I sit here for a while?

I shall drop off if I sit down. You are not supposed to sleep on the job. Shouldn't sleep!

I am thirsty!

There is water in the bronze pot. I'll drink some, and wash

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my face. If only I could find an onion! That would wake me up.

Whose house is this? They are new here. They don't belong to this place.

This pain in my back? Oh, it's the wooden spoon. My back is all soiled with curry.

Shouldn't lie like this on the bare floor. Shouldn't lie down. If I lie down, I shall fall asleep.

I should get up.

I should get out through the gap where I had removed the tiles from the roof. There are no dogs, or they would have barked by now.

I should get out quickly. Where did I put that *beedi* stub? No, I had not lighted a *beedi*.

Handcuffs. The shade of the *marotti*. This isn't enough. The five-*idangazhi* paddy field. I must go.

Oh, how sleepy I am!

I was woken up by a kick in the back. Sat up, using the wall for support. Two women at the kitchen door, looking startled. And right before me, a man's hairy legs. I slowly lifted my eyes — an unshaven face, closely cropped hair, high cheekbones. He stepped forward cautiously.

"Who are you?"

"I … I ..." Couldn't say anything. I sat staring at the ground. What was there to say?

"Who are you?"

"A thief."

Surprise spread across the dark man's face. He threw away the stick he was holding, took the oil-lamp from the woman at the door and shoved it in my face. Sleep still lingered in my eyes.

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"Get up." I stood up."What did you want to take from here?" I told the truth without lifting my head.
"A few grains of rice to eat. I was starving... I was hungry."
"Then, did you eat?" The host was curious.
"Yes."
"Did you sleep well?"
"Umm..."
A moment's silence.
The women at the door looked at each other.
"Come."
I walked.

I crossed the steps of carved mud-bricks and the outer courtyard, laid with sand. I walked, hanging my head. I looked back from the gate. The women were at the door with the lamp. The man stood at the verandah, staring at the gate.

Walking down the lane, still blanketed in darkness, dry, fallen leaves under my heavy tread, a pain filled my heart. A pain that I had not felt when pins were pierced under my nails and pepper was rubbed into the wounds in my thighs.

Translated from the Malayalam story 'Kallan'
by Sanju Ramachandran with Antara Dev Sen

GLOSSARY

1. *Mundu*: the white dhoti of Kerala
2. *Idangazhi:* a measure for paddy fields

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M. MUKUNDAN

Delhi's Criminals Turn Sadists

Monoprint by GAUTAM KAR

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'Delhi's Criminals Turn Sadists' was the headline of a news item that appeared in a leading Delhi newspaper. Let the title of this story also be that. You may ask whether it is not improper to give a Malayalam story an English title. No, it is not, because Delhi's criminals live outside language and culture.

It was a report in *The Times of India* about crimes in Delhi. During the last six months, three hundred murders have been committed in the city. By the time the year is out, six or seven hundred Delhiites shall have been murdered. Many more than the soldiers martyred in Kargil.

As I sat with this newspaper in my lap, my thoughts went back to a time about eighteen years ago. You know that I had written a story titled 'Delhi 1981'. Some of you may not have read that. Many may not even know that such a story was ever written. But 'Delhi 1981' and 'Delhi's Criminals Turn Sadists' are stories to be read together.

Now, I don't want people who have started reading this story to run to libraries or bookshops in search of 'Delhi 1981'. The mere fact that they read my stories is a great honour for me. I shouldn't try to get them running to bookshops on account of that. Therefore, for the benefit of those who haven't read 'Delhi 1981', I will tell that story briefly....

'Rajinder Pandey opened the window and looked outside. Beyond the street, rows and rows of shops. Behind the shops, a *maidan*. His room is on the second floor, facing the road. Therefore, if he went to the window, he could clearly see the street below, the rows of shops and the *maidan* beyond...' This is how 'Delhi 1981' begins.

As Rajinder Pandey stood thus looking out...

He saw Raghuvir and Nanakchand approaching the street

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below. They were the bad guys of the area. Raghuvir had been in the police lock-up for two days recently. Nanakchand had been to jail five times.

Pandey stood watching Raghuvir and Nanakchand sneaking out to the *maidan*, from the back of Amir Singh's dry-cleaning shop... Pandey noticed a yellow shadow waxing at the other end of the *maidan*. And with it, a longer shadow too. In a few moments he realised that they were a woman in a yellow sari and a man. Soon, he could see an infant in the man's arms.

Rajinder Pandey called his room-mate Kishore Lal over to the window. The man and the woman had reached the middle of the *maidan*. They guessed that the woman was pretty. The young man with her was tall and slender. Wife, husband and child — a happy family...

Nanakchand pulled away the sari-end from the young woman's face. A strikingly beautiful face, with full cheeks and wide eyes. In the parting of her hair, she had worn *sindoor*.

The young man whacked Raghuvir across the face. The child in his hands began to scream... Nanakchand pulled out a knife from the waistband of his trousers. The young woman's mind began to flutter like the heart of a dove...

As the young man and Nanakchand grappled with each other, Raghuvir came with a big stone. Raising that stone, Raghuvir hit the young man on the crown of his head.

Before the eyes of the young man fallen on the ground and bleeding profusely, Raghuvir and Nanakchand dragged his wife away to a deserted mausoleum nearby....

This is 'Delhi 1981'.*

Many people asked me how I could write such a cruel story. Sometimes, I have asked myself the same question.

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Could it be that unknown to me, Delhi's cruelty had infected my pen? Some have said that this story was nothing but exaggeration — exhibitionism triggered by hyper-imagination.

Seventeen years have passed since I wrote this story. Now we are in 1999.

Now, let us examine this newspaper report. It first describes an incident that happened in West Delhi. Every Delhiite knows it by heart. All the newspapers reported it some time ago.

Imagine a boy who has not crossed twenty in the place of Nanakchand. There is a family he knows well. It is a happy family of a 30-year-old husband, 27-year-old wife and two little girls. One day, the 20-year-old Akshay Malhotra (name changed) was in urgent need of money. Intending to rob this family he knew so well, he went over with a kitchen knife. The couple received him warmly, for he visited them often. Akshay Malhotra slit the throats of that couple with the kitchen knife. And then he strangled the two children who were crying as they watched their parents die, writhing in their blood on the floor. From the almirah, he got Rs 15,000. He could have left the scene immediately with the money. But he didn't. He raped the dead woman. Still, he didn't leave. He dragged the bodies of the couple and their children into a heap, went into the kitchen, pulled out the cooking gas cylinder, and turned it on.

I'll narrate another little incident.

This happened in Sukhdev Vihar, near the Escorts Heart Institute. Anand, the famous writer and thinker, lives there. One day in broad daylight, another Akshay Malhotra went into a flat to burgle it. The father of the family had gone to work, only the mother and the baby were at home. He bound the

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mother hand and foot and gagged her with a piece of cloth. It was when he was rummaging through the almirah that the child bawled. Akshay Malhotra picked the child up and dumped it in a bucket full of water. As the mother lay unable to move or speak, the child drowned in the bucket.

Whenever I go to Sukhdev Vihar, I can't help remembering that child who drowned in the bucket...

I write this story, 'Delhi's Criminals Turn Sadists', in the first week of August, 1999. This city, changing fast every day, is becoming faceless. There are just eyes full of avarice and lust. Those eyes see only open beds in every path that women walk. Like some long-extinct monster of prehistoric times, they breathe fire.

As we come to 1999 from 1981, we see how Delhi's cruelty and violence have grown. In the life of a megalopolis, eighteen years is not a long span. It is as short as the wink of an eye. What will happen to Delhi another eighteen years on?

In the life of a city, eighteen years is nothing. However, in the life a story-writer, it is a long stretch. To write a third story about Delhi, one should not wait that long. Because this writer, who is past fifty-six, has no expectation that he will live for eighteen more years. So, from now on let me begin thinking about the writing of that third story.

That story will be titled 'Delhi 2000'. The title lacks novelty, but I believe it will be appropriate.

Some writers, when they sit down to write a story, first scribble the title. In my case, I arrive at an apt title long after I complete the story. There was this time when I could not find a suitable title. The publisher's deadline had already expired. Finally, I mailed the story to the editor without a title. And a

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note along with it: "Title follows."

But, when I sat at the table deciding to write the third story about Delhi, it was its title that I first wrote down. I can even send the title first to the editor. And a note along with it: "Story follows."

See? The possibilities before a writer! Story without a title. Title without a story. Will there come a world without either title or story, and with only the writer?

I haven't yet begun writing 'Delhi 2000'. Therefore, I am not able now to narrate the complete story to my readers. I can give you some hints about it, though.

In New Delhi, there is an old cemetery on Prithviraj Road. Walking along Shahjehan Road from India Gate, one can reach it in ten minutes. One can also reach it by walking along Amrita Sher-Gill Marg, turning left and proceeding towards Hotel Taj Mansingh. Aurangazeb Road, Mansingh Road and Shahjehan Road meet in front of this cemetery. The passerby will have noticed the flower-sellers at the gates of the cemetery. Summer or winter, all sorts of flowers, bouquets and wreaths are available there. These flowers are not only for those who lie buried in the cemetery. Those who go to parties or to meet their lovers also buy flowers from there.

Running around the cemetery is a compound wall painted saffron. People walking along the road cannot see beyond that wall. Nor can those who ride by in cars and autorickshaws. But if you are travelling in a bus, because of the higher elevation you might see the many crosses in the cemetery.

The gate-house of the cemetery has a tiled roof. During the July showers, pedestrians seek shelter beneath that roof. On several occasions, I too have stood there waiting for the rain to

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abate. And the pigeons cooing perched on the corner tiles would come fluttering down and shake their wet wings. It is always exhilarating to stand breathing in the heavy fragrance of soaked flowers and watching the rain. If there is a cigarette burning between your fingers, it is even more enjoyable.

An autorickshaw came to a halt in front of the cemetery in the drizzle. The flower-sellers looked into it expectantly. They had spread thin plastic sheets over the flower-baskets to keep off the rain, which would rot the merchandise. In the hand of Binsy Cherian, who got down from the autorickshaw, there was a white rose on a long stalk. She had plucked it from her own courtyard. With her was a boy of about five. Taking out some money from the bag slung over her shoulder, she paid the rickshaw driver and walked into the cemetery, holding her son's hand. The pigeons, seeing them, stopped cooing.

The rain at dawn had washed Captain James Cherian's tomb clean. Placing the flower at the foot of the wet cross, Binsy Cherian knelt on the wet earth, her eyes closed.

Nanakchand and Akshay Malhotra, who were sitting behind a broken cross at the southern wall of the cemetery, got up and walked slowly to her.

They stood behind the sobbing Binsy.

"Why are you weeping, sister?"

Nanakchand spoke softly. Binsy didn't seem to hear it.

"Who lies here?"

This time, his voice was somewhat louder.

It was the boy who answered his question: "My Papa. Papa died at Kargil."

"Kargil? Where's that?"

Nanakchand and Akshay Malhotra looked at each other.

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"Papa was brought from Tiger Hill. Mummy, auntie, Mummy's sisters — everybody cried a lot."
Binsy Cherian struggled to keep down her sobs, biting her lips.

Nanakchand and Akshay Malhotra moved away a little and stood discussing something.

Nanakchand came back and stood behind Binsy, grazing her. "Hey sister, you climb this Tiger Hill and lie down." Pointing to Captain James Cherian's tomb, he continued, "We have some tricks for you."

One can see the pigeons cooing on the compound wall of the cemetery. But this writer doesn't think a pigeon will fly in once again and peck at the crown of Nanakchand's head. ꙮ

Translated from the Malayalam story 'Delhi's criminals turn sadists' *(1999) by A.J. Thomas and Pratik Kanjilal*

NOTES

* 'Delhi 1981' ends like this:
"Who'll go first?" asked Kishore Lal.
"Who else but Nanakchand!" said Pandey.
Raghuvir held her up against the wall. Nanakchand unbuttoned his trousers. That moment Rajinder Pandey's room transforms into a metropolis. Skyscrapers shoot up in there. Rajinder Pandey and Kishore Lal turn into a populace of fifty-five lakh. From raised rostrums, leaders in khadi and Gandhi caps speak incessantly in Hindi. In coffee houses thick with cigarette smoke, sitting around tables, intellectuals with long hair and beards argue endlessly...
That moment, a tiny pigeon flies in from the darkness of the mausoleum and pecks once with its tender beak on the crown of Nanakchand's head.

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P. VATSALA

The girl who walked with the sun

Illustration by VINITA CHAND

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Many, many years ago, before the town devoured my village, on the top of a big hill was a big bungalow with a tiled roof. Full of rooms. And full of people. Men, women, the young and the old, and a very old Grandma. The sun, who came climbing up the other side of our hill, was a welcome visitor.

The eight-year-old grabbed Grandma's hand and said, "Please, Grandma, let's go bathe in the river." The pond, made to commemorate the sixtieth birthday of a departed grandfather, was at the edge of the paddy field on the southern slope of the hill. On its bank, just where the brick-paved steps began, was a twin bathroom with a mirror on the wall. A mirror that had lost its sight long ago. In the depths of the bluish water of the pond lived crocodiles and tortoises. The child was scared of the moss-grown steps of the pond. And the stillness of the blue water that stopped running to the paddy fields in summer. This is why she pulled at Grandma's clothes in the morning. Not to the pond… we'll go bathe in the river.

The river that flows leisurely on a bed of crystals. This is mine, my own, mused the girl. And not just the languid river, the sun that strains for a look from behind the cross on the church on the eastern hillock, that was hers too. Yes. She was sure of it. Only her Grandma, this river whose love never dries up, and the sun who walks with her to the bathing place were truly hers.

Dewdrops lingered on the tips of the narrow-leafed grass, quivering in the sunshine. The girl walked across the foothills, holding on to Grandma's robes. The older children, holding the soap dish and towels, followed them resentfully. Why bathe so early? It is so chilly. But cold mornings and the glowing red sun were dear to the girl. Dearer to her was the

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flowing water, which carried with it the warmth of the earth's heart. Here, her mind flowed with the river.

The sun followed them, keeping to the ridge of the next hill. On the way, they saw jackals that lay sleeping in their dens in the deep valleys. And in the thickets, the shrubs splattered with hen's blood shone like little red chrysanthemum blooms. The village resounded with the wails of housewives who had lost their hens.

The girl realised that she got to see the world only when she stepped out of her secure room in the western quarter of the house. As they walked along, on the rocks, Grandma showed her Lord Rama's footprints and Sita's tresses. Also left behind at the gap where Mother Earth had split open her chest to save Sita-*devi's* honour were the *athirani* flowers that had once adorned her hair. The sun, embarrassed when it reaches this spot, hides its face in the shade of the palm trees that stretch along the foothills. The girl reflected — could the sun be a man like Lord Rama? Who is the wife of the Sun?

The Earth, said Grandma. Human beings, animals, birds and plants take birth on Earth. She prepares everything for her progeny. Rice, pulses, tubers, fruits.

The bathing-place was deserted. It wasn't yet time for Raman, his wife, their donkey and a huge bundle of soiled clothes to arrive at the river. The river water is waiting for us, the girl imagined. She looked at the hilltop on her right. Where is the sun who was walking with us till now? Oh! The sun is hiding its face in the dense bamboo growth. Mustn't see. Shouldn't look. Shouldn't stand there, looking at this bathing girl. She felt a flush of respect for the sun.

Another day, the girl saw a person — a man — who had

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not a trace of the dignity of the sun, hiding in the bushes on the other bank and peeping out at the women's bathing-place. She was horrified. She did not take off her clothes or step into the water. She sat quietly on a rock at the bank, facing west.

Grandma finished her bath, offered a handful of water to the Sun-god and turned to the girl.

"Why aren't you coming down to bathe, darling?"

"Headache!"

Grandma wiped her wet hands and touched the girl's neck and forehead. "But you don't have a fever!"

"I *am* feverish, Grandma, I don't feel like bathing."

"All right." Grandma wiped her face and neck clean.

"Don't worry, dear. You'll be all right by tomorrow. You can come for a bath then."

Halfway up the hill, she turned and looked over the other bank. The demon was still there, hiding in the bushes. She saw his round, bulging eyes descending on the bathing-place like two eagles. She looked with fear at the half-naked village women gleefully swimming in the deep waters. She turned away and quickened her pace over the rocky steps. She waited for Grandma at the top of the hill. Just then, her sun came out of the bamboo forest and smiled brightly at her.

Never again did the girl go down to the river for a bath. Not ever. Grandma was surprised. But for the girl, her childhood sun was lost forever. From that day, she bathed only within the confines of the four walls of her bathroom.

Translated from the Malayalam 'Suryanoppam nadanne oru penkutty' *by T.N. Sushama and Antara Dev Sen*

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VILAS SARANG

A Rare Opportunity

Illustration by VISHWAJYOTI GHOSH

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People simply called him Buwa, the usual appellation for religious men who travel from town to town, narrating stories from the Puranas, their performances enlivened by singing. Buwa was famous in that part of Maharashtra for his enchanting performances of *kirtan,* a type of devotional songs. When Robert Merriman, the visiting American researcher, first met Buwa, like everyone else, he was most impressed by Buwa's imposing demeanour. Their friendship grew, and Bob declared that he would take Buwa to the US for a demonstration of his *kirtan* skills. Buwa, who had spent his life on the provincial circuit of upcountry Maharashtra, found the prospect of a visit to America electrifying. He began dreaming of this adventure beyond the seven seas. Buwa was well aware that this was a rare chance, which Providence had dropped in his lap out of the blue.

At his first meeting with Buwa, Bob had asked, "How come you're fairer than me? I am of the purest European stock and I live in the cold climate of Boston. But if you wore jeans and a T-shirt like me, and socks and shoes, you'd be judged whiter than me!" Buwa looked pleased. Addressing Bob with a suitable honorific, he said, "Bobrao, we have been living in this hot climate for centuries; yet we have preserved the purity of our Aryan race. That's why we are so fair."

Bob was equally impressed by the costume Buwa used for his *kirtan* performances. Buwa donned a white *barabandi* and *dhoti* and had a colourful turban on his head. He wore a string of sacred *tulsi* beads around his neck, four rings of solid gold on his fingers and a band of bells on his ankles. His demeanour seemed to reflect his profound knowledge and his passionate faith. Bob photographed him at his performances

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from so many angles that he exhausted all his film in the first couple of days. He had to pack up his camera because he could not get film in that remote village.

Standing in the doorway of his house, Buwa mused that if he travelled overseas, his established routine of village performances would be broken. At five in the evening Bob came down in his usual T-shirt, blue jeans and sports shoes. He was smoking a pipe. Buwa didn't like it, but would not complain and tolerated it as a minor addiction. "Come on Buwa, let us go for a walk," he said in a mix of Marathi and English. "I'm stiff all over from sitting and working all day." Buwa had a smattering of English, so they managed to communicate.

"If you say so, Bobrao. Let us go." Buwa tied up the laces of his *barabandi* and put on his sandals.

The villagers had stared curiously at Bob when he had first come to the village, as if he were an alien from another planet. But they had grown used to him in a few days.

"Well, then, how is the work proceeding?" Buwa asked.

"Pretty well," Bob said. "I have just about started grasping the essence of the form of *kirtan*. I was all at sea for the first couple of days. I could not understand the underlying principles, the basis of the whole process."

"Bobrao, you cannot grasp this subject by analysis. It's one's heartfelt devotion that is important. If you have that, there is no need for any analysis."

"You're right, Buwa. But I can't leave it at that. I have to analyse the form. I have to find the distinguishing features of the discourse. I have to study the structure, the conventions and the characteristics of the style."

"You Westerners are crazy about all your scientific methods.

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There is something more important than that, which you fail to understand. You have started coming round to our path, which is nice. Pandurang willing, He will draw you closer to Him."

"Buwa, your discourse is strewn with quotations from the Vedas, Puranas, the Gita and umpteen other sources. I can't trace them. Before I came down to India, I thought I had a pretty good knowledge of your classical literature, but it's not enough, as I've found out. When I return to Bombay, I must ask Prof Divakar to help me out."

"Bobrao, we have an ocean of literature. I use a few drops from that store." After a pause Buwa continued, "This is a speciality of our school of *kirtan*. There are many different schools and traditions of which, perhaps, you know very little. If you had studied another school, you would have encountered more of music. Our school insists on the study of classical discourses and traditional, orthodox Sanskrit scriptures. We don't believe in using song to disguise a lack of knowledge."

"I need time to grasp all this, obviously."

They had walked far, almost to the outskirts of the village, where the Mahars, who had earlier been untouchables, lived. Buwa wanted to avoid the area. "Let's turn back," he said. Bob said he would like to go up to the little hillock.

Buwa bypassed the Mahar settlement. They turned back at the foot of the hillock. The sun was about to set. As they walked back, circumventing the Mahar colony again, Bob and Buwa saw two men carrying a heavy load. The dark-skinned men were walking slowly, bent under the burden. Buwa and Bob were walking fast, and they were soon face to face with them.

They were two Mahar youths, carrying the carcass of an

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animal slung from a pole. It was a cow, with her legs tied up, her head hanging loose and the languid eyes turned up to the skies. The pole had been passed between her bound legs.

Buwa hurriedly got out of the way, but Bob stood his ground and curiously watched the two dark men carrying the carcass. The Mahar youths too stopped and glanced at Bob. "What's the matter? How did the cow die?"

One of the Mahar youths had spent his whole life in the village. He could not understand what Bob said. The other one, who had lived in Bombay for a while, could speak standard Marathi and understood a few word of English as well. He replied, "The cow slipped off a slope, broke her neck and died. It was just a while ago. We picked her up before the dogs could get at her."

"Where are you taking her?"

"To the Mahar colony."

"What are you going to do with her?"

"What do you think? Rip her to pieces!"

After getting their breath, the Mahars started walking again. Bob watched them go, craning his neck. Then he turned to Buwa, who was standing further away, having distanced himself from the scene. "Buwa, come on, let's go see what these people are up to."

"Oh no, Bobrao!" Buwa screeched. "Don't be silly. Let's go home. We're getting late."

"Come on Buwa, it'll just take a few minutes." Bob started following the Mahars. Bewildered, Buwa stood still for a moment and then followed Bob, dragging his feet uneasily. He kept his distance, too.

At the entrance to the Mahar colony, the youths dropped

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the carcass under a tree. All the Mahar children came running to the spot, shouting and screaming, followed by a few elderly women. They had troughs, pots and pans and knives. Most of the menfolk were away working in Bombay. The colony only had young boys and elderly women.

The two boys who had brought the carcass sat down and skinned it neatly, gutted it and carefully cut out the heart. Their clothes were soaked in blood. The women and the other boys squatted nearby, pushing and shoving each other, shouting and screaming.

"How excited these people are at the sight of meat!" Bob marvelled, but Buwa was too far behind to hear him, and was looking elsewhere anyway.

The youths chopped off large cuts from the rump, cleaned them, put them in the troughs and walked off. Now the others, who had been sitting in a circle and waiting, rushed at the carcass. They assaulted the remains in a great uproar.

In the old days, meat was distributed in an orderly manner, according to people's needs and social hierarchies. That sense of discipline had now vanished. Everyone was pushing and rushing about, trying to get as much as they could.

Suddenly, Bob got up and strode across to the carcass. Busy cutting off their portions, not many noticed him. A few did, and stared, wondering why the foreigner was interested in the proceedings.

Squatting on his haunches, Bob snatched a knife from a boy. He seemed to be about to scream, but the sight of the tall, hefty white man shut him up. He was wonderstruck. The others too looked at Bob in amazement, and the din died down.

From a distance, Buwa stole a glance at Bob. He saw the

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tall, strong white man sitting with the dark figures in the fading twilight, pressed his fingers to his forehead and closed his eyes tight.

Bob cut off a large, thin slice of the rump steak, gave the knife back to the boy, got up with the oblong slice in his hand and turned back. The others looked at him for a second and then attacked the carcass once again; the din rose once more.

Seeing Bob walking towards him with a piece of meat dripping with blood in his hand, Buwa shuddered, drew back and shouted, "What's going on, Bobrao? What's the matter with you?" Buwa, almost tumbled back in his haste. Bob was striding towards him. Buwa turned, as if to run.

"Come on, Buwa! Why are you running away from me? I'm not going to eat you up."

Buwa stopped. Bob drew up.

"Bobrao, drop that thing immediately! The thing you are holding. Have you gone crazy? Throw it away. You can't take it back into the village! Pandurang! Pandurang!" Buwa mopped his brow. "Buwa, why are you so upset?" Bob held up the piece of meat and looked appreciatively at it. "Look at this, this is first grade meat! This is a prime steak." Then addressing Buwa directly he said, "I am not taking this piece back to your house. We will cook it right here, have a nice little barbecue."

Buwa screamed at Bob again. "How silly! You're behaving like a fool, Bobrao. I'll go away. Don't take things too far!"

"Come on, now!" Bob tried to pacify him. "If you don't want to eat it, I won't force you. Why are you making such a fuss when nobody has hurt you in any manner? Just sitting with me for five more minutes is not going to hurt you. Tell me, am I not being perfectly reasonable?"

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"Pandurang! Pandurang!"

"Let us go over there. There are a few stones there, and some twigs."

Buwa followed him quietly, like a reluctant animal. Bob cleaned a stone, rested his cut of meat on it and began to collect twigs.

Buwa was standing at a distance. He wanted to run away. But then, how would Bob take it? Would it not endanger the chance of a trip to America, the land of everyone's dreams? What if Bob changed his mind? Maybe Pandurang was testing him.

Bob piled up a few twigs. He was enjoying the picnic. "Why are you standing, Buwa? Sit down."

Buwa brushed off a stone at a distance and sat down. "Don't you get upset, Buwa," Bob said, "the thing is that I have had no meat for such a long time, and when I saw it, I couldn't resist the temptation. There is this problem about meat in your county. I don't like mutton and chicken is just white meat. Not proper meat, really! The red meat you get in Bombay is buffalo — stringy, tough, chewy like rubber. When I suddenly saw this fresh piece of prime beef..." Bob was blabbering away while piling up the twigs. "Listen, Buwa, beef is so expensive in America, a prime steak like this would cost maybe ten dollars — and here I'm getting it for free!"

Bob bent down to see whether the twigs were neatly arranged. It was quite dark now. On the barren land at the outskirts of the village, they were the only sign of human life.

Buwa had relaxed a bit. Instead of looking into the middle distance, he watched Bob's efforts from the corner of his eye with a certain curiosity.

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"Bob, is it not dreadful to eat the meat of a dead beast?"
"What difference does it make whether the beast is dead or killed? Besides, this cow was not diseased. A healthy cow, just broke her neck and died, that's all."
"But it might be rotten!"
"How could it have rotted? The boys said the cow died just half an hour ago. It's quite fresh. Besides, how does it matter if it isn't that fresh? Let me tell you, my father has a large farm in America and we kill a pig for festive days. We skin the beast and leave it on the table for a day or so before we cook it. Nothing happens to it — on the contrary, it is quite juicy. In Europe, they kill rabbits and hang them up on a string, to be eaten after a few days."
"Pandurang! Pandurang!" Buwa preferred not to ask any more questions.

When Bob was sure that the pile was right, he took out a matchbox from his pocket and struck a light. The flames leapt up, the twigs spluttered and caught, lighting up the darkness.

Bob picked up a stick, skewered the piece of meat on it and held it over the fire. The meat burned, but Bob moved the stick about and let it cook for two minutes. Then he took the steak off and held it with his fingers. The hot piece scorched his fingers. He juggled it between his palms and examined it carefully. It was burnt on the outside but not quite softened inside. Dark blood dripped from it. "Oh, what a perfect steak!" Bob exulted.
"It's not cooked yet, Bobrao. It is still raw."
"No problem, Buwa. There are two types of steak. Well done and rare. This one is rare. Do you know what that means?"
"It's hard to get?"

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"No, no, in this context it means lightly cooked. Well done is thoroughly cooked. I prefer it rare."

"It is almost raw!"

"It doesn't matter. In America, some people eat raw meat in a hamburger. You know a hamburger? They use minced meat in the hamburger; some people eat it raw. I can't stomach it."

When the steak had cooled slightly, Bob opened his mouth wide and took a mouthful of meat. The blackish juice dripped from the edges of Bob's lips. Buwa felt nauseated as he watched in the red firelight. Bob looked like a brutal, predatory beast with the piece of bloody meat in its paws. Buwa got up and started pacing about in the light of the flames. To suppress the gorge rising in his throat, he started reciting verses from Sant Ramdas:

O Lord Rama! Come quickly, O Rama!
Come from the darkness of Kaliyuga!
Will you never have pity
On a tormented soul, My Lord?
Come, come, come, O Rama!
Rama! Rama! Rama! Rama!

Bob was chewing his steak happily, "Buwa, that's beautiful," he said. "You're singing so well today! I have heard you sing before but today, your voice has a rare passion."

Bob continued chewing. Buwa continued singing without a pause, his eyes staring into the gathering darkness. ▮

Translated from the Marathi story 'Kiti anta Pahsi'
by Asha Damle with Pratik Kanjilal and the author

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MOHINDER SINGH SARNA

Basant the madman

Illustration by RUPAK GOSWAMI

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As I sat down to eat at the *langar* at Gurudwara Bangla Sahib, a face in the next row caught my attention. A sad, tragic face, wrapped up in a soiled, threadbare *dupatta*. Pain had carved deep wrinkles into the forehead, the eyes were worn out from too much weeping and sorrow had settled like dandruff on the lips. It was a familiar, troubling face but I could not place it, though I felt that I had heard, or perhaps read, the tragic tale etched out in its desolate features.

But surely I was wrong. Where could I have seen this poor woman before? All sad faces, I told myself, look alike; all sorrows cast the same shadow. All tragic tales are told in the same voice, the same tone.

And then, swift as lightning, the face suddenly found itself in my memory. This was the face of Basant's mother, with its wave of white hair, the mole on the left cheek, the tarnished nose-ring. Instantly, my mind flashed back to that September afternoon of two months earlier, when I had stood in my aunt's courtyard in Mohalla Chan Charag in Rawalpindi, surrounded by a crowd. I was Deputy Director of Civil Aviation in Delhi. Pakistan had been created; August 15 had passed into history. Pakistani flags had been unfurled that side of Wagah and tricolours had celebrated freedom this side of Attari. But I had been unable to get news of the well-being of my aunt and her family. My letters to them were lost in the chaos of Partition and only an occasional one of theirs reached me. One such letter, written by my uncle on August 22, had come to my hand on September 11. It had spelt hopelessness.

"It is unlikely that we shall meet again," he wrote. "Rawalpindi has been cut off and there are stabbing incidents all over town. There's been butchery on the trains started for

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the refugees after August 15 in Gujarat and Wazirabad, and only a few have managed to reach Lahore. The Pakistani government has now stopped the 'refugee specials'. Even the road to Srinagar is blocked off by tribal bands. Those who left Pindi for Patiala after the March riots were wise. We fools did not have the sense to do that. Anyway, let's see what God has in store for us. I feel weak, but your aunt has not lost faith, her belief in the Guru."

The letter stung me like an accusation; it taunted my conscience. Why hadn't I done something? Each passing day had pushed my aunt's family closer to their deaths and I had just been reading the papers in Delhi and comforting myself with the thought that like hundred of thousands of others, they too would one day cross the border. I immediately resolved that I would get them out of Rawalpindi or die in the attempt. I owed them: I had been orphaned in childhood and they had looked after me and given me more love and affection than they had to their own children. They had educated me and made me what I was. Their own son, Parduman, was a laboratory assistant at the Forest Research Institute in Dehradun and did not have the means to help his parents in these difficult times. But I was Deputy Director of Civil Aviation. I could follow the example of many men of means who had chartered planes from our department and brought back their relatives from Pakistan. Life would not afford me a better chance to square my debts.

I didn't have much time. The government was due to hand over the planes to the Director General of Military Evacuation, who would launch a rescue of the army personnel and their families. The planes would no longer be available

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for private charters. In a couple of days, I had managed to charter a thirty-five seater Dakota and on September 15, just four days after receiving my uncle's letter, the plane stood at Rawalpindi's Chaklala airport and I was in my aunt's courtyard, surrounded by a crowd.

A deathly fear had drained the colour from the faces in that crowd, as if they could see vultures circling over their heads. They were desperate for seats on that plane and were willing to pay anything for them. I did not want to show any favours in handing out the seats. So after my aunt's family and her in-laws had been accommodated, the nine seats that were left were given out on a first-come-first-served basis. From the rest of the crowd, I begged forgiveness with folded hands.

But I was embarrassed by the repeated appeals of Pandit Kirpa Ram and his wife, whom I had known since I was a child. Their young daughter, Kanta, stood behind them, her gaze fixed intently on the floor. Her fiancé and his parents had left Pindi in April and were now settled in Delhi. The Pandit and his wife were tormented by the thought that she now belonged to another family, and wished that she could somehow reach Delhi. If that could come to pass, then they could die in peace, even in Pakistan.

"It's only one seat," her mother begged. "She doesn't even have to sit. She can go standing."

I again pleaded my helplessness. The British pilot of the plane had made it quite clear that if we exceeded its capacity by even one person, he would not take off.

"There is one possibility," I said.

A faint hope rose in their eyes.

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"If someone were to return their ticket, then I could give it to Kanta."

The hope vanished as soon as it was born. There was no such possibility. The plane ticket meant life. To return it was to step back into the grasp of death. It was true that these people had lived together in that *mohalla* for generations, sharing in each other's joys and sorrows, not like mere neighbours but like relations bound by ties of blood. But now, things were different. The choice now was between life and death. No one was prepared to die in another's place, to step into another's pyre.

Kanta's parents cast a hurried, hopeless look over the faces of the crowd in the courtyard and then lowered their darkening gaze to the ground. Placing their hands on their daughter's shoulders, they began to wend their way slowly homewards.

Suddenly, someone shouted: "I will give my ticket. Kanta will go on my ticket."

I turned to where the voice had come from. It was Basant. Basant, who had always been known as the fool of the community. Basant the madman, they used to call him. Young boys would torment him, throw stones at him. Paralysis had deformed his face in childhood. His lower lip hung low and saliva dripped constantly down his face and neck, to the handkerchief pinned to his collar by his mother. All day, he would limp around the *mohalla*, talking nonsense, a clown.

I looked towards his widowed mother, who had washed the dirty dishes of the community to purchase life for her half-crazy son.

"Yes, yes," Basant struck his chest, damp with his drool, "take my ticket and give it to Kanta."

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His mother did not say anything. She did not object or try to stop Basant. Her eyes showed neither joy nor grief, only a mute acquiescence. I returned the fare for the ticket to Basant's mother and took the money for Kanta's ticket from a bewildered Pandit Kirpa Ram's hands. The crowd was staring at the angel who had silenced them forever by his act, reminded them that they had never prevented their children from throwing stones at him.

Lost in thought, I looked at her as I ate. She had taken two *chapatis* and some potatoes and cauliflower. She had eaten one *chapati* slowly and tied up the other one along with the remaining vegetables in her *dupatta*, perhaps for her evening meal. Then she got up and, dragging her feet in a pair of worn-out rubber sandals, went to the tap and washed her hands. When she had finished, I walked up to her, my palms joined in greeting.

"You have come from Pindi?"

She nodded slightly in agreement.

"From *mohalla* Chan Charag?" She looked at me a bit more intently, then nodded again.

"You are Basant's mother?"

Pain opened up a crack in her eyes. She seemed to moan in agreement.

"You didn't recognise me?"

"No."

"I am Narang Sahib's nephew. Sardar Nanak Singh Narang, who lived in Shah Chan Charag *mohalla* in Rawalpindi. It was I who had taken the plane to Pindi two months ago, when Basant gave his seat to Kanta. Where is he now?"

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She choked. She bunched up her *dupatta* at her mouth and tried to control herself, but could not. The tears began to roll down her pain-seared cheeks.

"Basant is no more," she sobbed. "He was killed in Pindi."

I wanted to say something to comfort her, to express my condolences, but could not speak.

She wiped away her tears, biting her lower lip. Then she continued: "One day our neighbour, Mehta Karam Chand, had a pain in the kidney. He had run out of his medicine. Someone had to go to Hakim Abdul Aziz at the Imambara to get some more. He begged all the neighbours desperately. But who would go? The knives were out in the streets. Only Basant agreed to go. When he was returning from the Imambara, he was stabbed at the Shah Nazar checkpost." Her tears welled up again.

"Don't cry," I said. "Not for Basant. We should not cry for people like Basant. People like Basant do not die, they live on forever."

Again she wiped her tears and folded her hands in farewell.

"Where will you go now?" I asked. "Do you have any relatives in Delhi?"

"No one," she sighed. "No one from my side or from my husband's side of the family. His people died in the March riots in Takht Parhi and mine in Narhali. I am alone today, in free India."

"You are not alone," I said. "I am alone. My aunt and uncle have gone to Dehradun to live with their son, Parduman. If you come to my house, I won't be alone any more."

"No, my son, I don't want to be a burden on anyone. I washed dishes in Pindi to get here. I shall get some houses to do here,

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too. I shall manage."

"May your enemies wash dishes," I responded. "Ramu cleans our dirty dishes and will continue to do so. You have called me your son. Now come to my house like my mother. Find a match for me. Find a sweet, pretty daughter-in-law for yourself. I cannot take Basant's place, but I will certainly try."

Translated from the Punjabi story 'Basanta Challa' *by Navtej Sarna*

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AJEET COUR

The Sun On The Terrace

Ink drawing by PREM SINGH

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My grandfather was an early riser. In fact, he used to wake up while it was still dark, when the hidden sun had just begun to awaken the sleeping night.

He always had a cold bath — winter or summer didn't matter to him. The morning bath used to do things to him. He'd laugh to himself, sometimes hum, sometimes he'd even recite a few lines from the Gurubani.

He used to bathe three times a day — once early in the morning, once before lunch, and then again in the evening before going to the Gurudwara.

He'd laugh aloud whenever he was happy. To others, he may have seemed slightly nutty. Because he'd laugh while bathing and then while he recited from the scriptures, he'd look up at the sky and burst into unprovoked guffaws.

Soon after his bath, he'd go to the room where the Gurugranth Sahib was kept. He'd perform his rituals and then start reciting. While reciting he'd shut his eyes and a silent laughter would seize him. He'd make little gestures with his hands, as if engaged in a dance.

Eyes shut, a smile playing on his lips and fingers dancing, he'd read the Gurugranth Sahib.

This was the most extraordinary vision of my childhood, the like of which I have yet to see again.

This childhood vision still fascinates me.

What kind of enchanted world did my grandfather inhabit? It was as if he had within him a whole cosmos. A cosmos that he had created for himself. He'd survey his cosmos like a king — he'd pan it from end to end. And after making sure everything was fine, he'd let out a satisfied laugh.

It was a strange world that he inhabited. Magical and

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enchanted!

Sometimes he'd stop halfway through his recitation and look at the sun. It shone directly into the room where the Gurugranth Sahib was kept. Shining like an incandescent island in the sky. Radiating brightness.

He'd look at the sun and start laughing. Sometimes he'd talk to the sun. Softly, like someone whispering into the ear of a lover.

He'd also talk to his God in those whispers. Slowly and softly, like he was chatting with an old friend.

Watching him sitting alone in his room, softly whispering and laughing to an invisible friend was a delightful experience. It was an experience from another world; a world about which I didn't know much then. Now, I know even less.

Growing up takes us away from the world of feeling.

But at that time, in the untouched innocence of childhood, I was vaguely familiar with this world. Although I didn't quite fathom much of it, there were certain things that revealed themselves to me — flimsily. It is difficult to describe such childhood revelations now. Adulthood does that to you.

My grandfather was an extraordinary man. He fascinated me. I liked watching him secretly.

No one else at home was interested in him. Least of all, my grandmother. My father had given them a part of the house to live in. The room where the Gurugranth Sahib was kept was built on the top of the house because that's how my grandfather, whom we all called Bhaiyya*ji*, had wanted it to be. Bhaiyya*ji*'s room was also at the top, next to the room for the Gurugranth Sahib. Although my grandparents' room was on the other side, my grandfather spent most of his time in the

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room where the Gurugranth Sahib was kept. If he was at home, you could be sure that he would be in this room.

My father had given him a place to live, food to eat, clothes to wear and two rooms on top — one for recitation and the other to relax in after he'd finished. My father also gave him pocket money. That was enough, my father probably thought, to complete his duty towards his father: "What else do old people need?"

My mother used to cook both lunch and dinner for my grandparents. She gave them tea, snacks, butter and *lassi* in the morning and also in the evening. She'd give them medicines if they were unwell, she'd apply oil on Grandmother's head. She probably thought she was serving them well: "What else do old people need?"

I never saw my grandfather talk to anyone. Nor my grandmother for that matter. In fact, besides questions like "What do you want to eat?", "Have some *rotis*.", "*Lassi*?", "Milk?", "Give your measurements to the tailor..." and "Do you want some more *subzi*?" — no one said anything else to them. Only my mother had these one-sentence conversations with them.

My grandmother, I suspected, had already retreated into the dark cave of senility, but my grandfather had his various channels of social contact — with his God in the room that housed the Gurugranth Sahib, with the sun in the open sky and with the birds on his terrace.

They used to live in Bhera, a small town in Sargodha, which is now in Pakistan. There, they had a family business. It was a flourishing enterprise that had seen many generations.

My great-grandfather had only one son, my grandfather. Each generation of this family produced only one child,

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almost always a boy. This boy would inherit the firmly-rooted family business and after him, pass it on to his son.

But my grandfather was an exception. He had two sons. My father was the elder one. I don't know what my father's younger brother was called because no one at home ever referred to him by name.

My father decided not to take up the family business because he wanted to be a doctor. That's why he came to Amritsar with his younger brother. "You also study and become a doctor. What use is a family business? It is not challenging and it does not give you an opportunity to use your mind," my father had said to his brother.

Both brothers studied in Amritsar, and later joined the medical college there. That's where my father's younger brother died.

My father was practising in Lahore when one fine day my grandfather decided to give us a surprise visit. Grandmother followed shortly.

She came with that green and flowery iron trunk. As soon as she met my father, my grandmother trapped him in a hug and wailed, "He has destroyed everything. Squandered all our possessions. He's even sold our shop. Our house is locked."
"Why?" was all my shocked father could say. "How?"
My grandfather just laughed. He said to my father, "Whom should I keep the business going for? You are clearly not interested. So why keep the headache!"

My grandparents were given a big room, but my grandmother kept bickering with my grandfather. It was hard for her to forget Bhera, their hometown. She still ached for her home, which my grandfather had summarily uprooted from Bhera

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and replanted in Lahore.

Soon after, my grandfather shifted his bed to the room at the top. This room had an open terrace and faced the side where the sun rose.

Before that, he used to do his recitations in the room below. But after shifting, he persuaded my father to build another room next to his. This is where he kept the Gurugranth Sahib. He said, "This room has such a wide terrace, such bright sunlight, such a lovely breeze... Baba*ji* will also stay here with me in a room next to mine."

Whenever my grandmother brought up the subject of their younger son, my grandfather would chide her and say, "He was not our own. He had just lost his way and come to us. He was a traveller, that's why he went on. Don't you get it? When has anyone in our family produced more than one son? Why do you mourn for the lost traveller? You have a son, haven't you?"

After saying this, he'd climb the stairs and go to the room where the Gurugranth Sahib was kept.

He'd recite for a while and shut his eyes. Then he'd laugh and whisper softly as if into the ear of a lover.

Sometimes he'd shut his eyes and talk to himself. Sometimes he'd look up at the sun and talk to it. As a child, I used to think his beard had turned white because of his deep friendship with the sun. I used to fantasise about the sun entering my grandfather's beard and bleaching it white with its brightness.

I remember asking him, "Bhaiyya*ji*, who do you keep talking to?" And he'd reply, "Who do you think?" and his face would turn serious.

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He must have taken me to be a part of that house — the one that belonged to my father, his son — where no one understood him. Everyone said, 'Bhaiyya*ji* doesn't have a care in this world — neither work nor worries. He just has a good time!' What's more, my grandmother also felt the same way, she often fought with him, cursed him, taunted him over the past. She would often harangue him when he sat down to eat. He would hear her out in silence, head bowed. To me, it seemed that my grandmother didn't like him eating in peace. He'd just pretend to listen while he swallowed his food in big gulps.

After eating, he'd collect the dirty dishes and put them aside for washing, take the *rotis* he'd saved for the birds in a tight fist and quickly climb the stairs. The terrace upstairs, the two rooms on the terrace, the sun and the birds — this was his world, his family and refuge.

The *rotis* he'd saved for the birds, he'd crush them into tiny bits and scatter them on the terrace. The birds came up to him and pecked at the bits. They flew off and returned again. They hopped around him. The fluttering of their tiny tails and straggling feathers send out ripples like balmy waves. My grandfather laughed. Softly, as if he was locked in communion with the birds. Exchanging secrets.

He and the birds were great friends. With advancing age, he even started resembling them. Small and fleet-footed, he seemed to glide up the stairs. He'd reach the Gurudwara in no time, taking small but driven, marching-army steps. You had to run to keep pace with him.

His room hadn't been cleaned for a century. That's what my father told us kids. But it really hadn't been long since my

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grandfather came to Lahore. The annual whitewashing never failed to make my father lose his temper with my grandfather. He never let him paint his room. The walls in his room were never painted after the first time. The doors were never repainted either. He didn't even let them sweep the floor.

Whenever my father lost his temper, my grandfather would hear him out in complete silence. Then he'd lock up his room and promptly disappear. He probably went to the Gurudwara or to Lawrence Garden or to the canal, no one really knew where. He'd only come back home at night. And the brightness of an entire day's sunlight would radiate through his white beard.

Only I could see this. It was our secret pact. After his disappearing act, he'd go straight to the room where the Gurugranth Sahib was kept and start reciting. He'd laugh while reciting, as if narrating the day's happenings to an invisible companion. Where he went, what he saw, what he ate, where he remained hidden throughout the day; he told his God everything. He was friends with his God. He was also friends with the sun and the birds.

I often asked him, "Bhaiyya*ji*, why don't you let them whitewash your room? It really makes Pita*ji* angry." He wouldn't say a word.

Then once — and it happened only once — perhaps he felt the pangs of some dormant filial affection, he called me and said, "Come, I'll show you something."

That day, I found out why he never got his room whitewashed. Because that one small room housed his whole cosmos — from gaping rat holes to the suspended latticework of tiny spiders; a ventilator that had become a pigeon cote, and a

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ceiling fan that played host to a family of sparrows. "Where will these go if I let them whitewash the room?" he said like a householder defending his family.

He lived to be a hundred and three, without ever letting up on quirks. Without, also, ever requiring false teeth or glasses to read his Punjabi and Urdu newspapers and the Gurugranth Sahib. He fell ill just two or three days before he died. He didn't take any medicines. He said, "It's time to get off the train, the station is almost here. I just have to collect my belongings. That's all."

The day he died, the sun was brighter than usual. He sat up on his bed to welcome it. He looked at it and said, "Forgive me, friend, I haven't had a bath today." And he gave a loud laugh before flopping back on his bed.

I shouted for my father, "Pita*ji*, look what's happened to Bhaiyya*ji*... Bhaiyya*ji*..."

My father came running. He checked my grandfather's pulse. Then he laid him out straight on the bed. My grandfather seemed to be laughing and looking at the sun.

My father closed my grandfather's lips, as if to wipe away his last laugh. But to me, my grandfather's laughter had simply relocated to his beard. I looked at the sun soon after. My grandfather was embracing him. And the sun, my grandfather's friend, was embracing him back. The sun had a white, flowing beard and arms that gave off light. tlm

Translated from the Hindi version 'Suraj, Chidiyan aur Rabb' *by Dhiraj Singh and Antara Dev Sen*

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KAASYAPAN

Night Show

Mixed media by SABA HASAN

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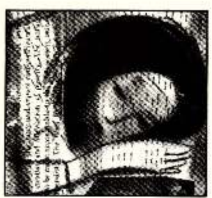

Stop right there! I'll break your leg if you cross the threshold!" Lakshmi's shrill voice jolted Raghavan out of his sleep. It was quite cold in the early winter morning, what with the rain and the gusting wind. The thought of lingering in bed, warm under the blanket, was tempting. But that was not to be. Now, sleep was out of the question.

Raghavan got up reluctantly. He washed at the basin and peeped out.

"What is there for you to do now? It is seven already. I have swept the front yard and drawn the *kolam*[1]. I've washed up. You have come at your leisure, when it is time for coffee! You don't need to work here anymore. Get lost!"

Jagada was standing silently outside. A slip of a girl, about ten years old, Lakshmi's domestic help.

"Why are you shouting?" Raghavan scolded Lakshmi. He would have said more, but Lakshmi cut him short with an outburst, "For God's sake, don't interfere. Your indulgence has spoiled this girl. She has become a shirker. Four days a week, she saunters in after I have finished the morning chores. What do you care? Your coffee is ready and waiting for you!"

Raghavan sat down at the table to drink his coffee.

"After coffee, you start reading the newspaper. Then you listen

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to the news on this damned TV. I can only blame my fate! After all the drudgery at home, I have to slog it out with the little devils at school…"

Lakshmi was too overcome with self-pity to speak further. It seemed that she would burst into tears. She checked herself with some effort.

You couldn't blame her, the poor woman! Her life was hard. She had to be out of the house by half past seven in the morning, or she would miss the bus that got her to school on time.

Jagada always took Lakshmi's tirades in her stride. When Lakshmi stopped from sheer exhaustion, Jagada would quietly pick up the broom and start sweeping the house.

After some time, a somewhat calmer Lakshmi would bring coffee for Jagada. The little girl, her pride wounded, would not take the tumbler. Lakshmi would scold her: "Oh, your pride is hurt, you little devil? Enough of your tantrums! Take the coffee." Jagada would meekly comply.

Some days, Lakshmi would put the tumbler of coffee out on the swing. When Jagada took it, Lakshmi would say sarcastically, "You're late for work but very prompt when it comes to drinking your coffee, you shameless creature!"

Jagada would be nonplussed at this rebuke; she would drink the coffee nevertheless.

Jagada is two years younger than Sundari, Raghavan's daughter, who was still sleeping comfortably under the mosquito net. That day, however, Lakshmi was really very angry. When Jagada picked up the broom, she shouted, "No, you don't have to work. Go away!"

Jagada's tender face was a picture of misery and exhaustion.

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Her eyes were sunk deep under her drooping lids — she obviously didn't get enough sleep. She looked up pitifully at Raghavan.

"Lakshmi…" Raghavan tried to remonstrate.

"Please don't take her side! I'm not going to keep her. She has to go!" There was finality in her voice.

"Pity the poor girl…"

"No, no, I don't want to have anything to do with her…"

"Why are you late, Jagada?" asked Raghavan.

Jagada did not reply.

Lakshmi said, "She had gone to the late film show last night. That's why!"

Jagada stood in silence, her head bowed.

"Did you go to the night show?" asked Raghavan.

Jagada nodded.

"Just this week, she has been to the night show three times," Lakshmi said.

Raghavan was surprised. He asked Jagada, "Who gave you money for the ticket?"

"My grandmother."

"Bring your grandmother. I shall settle your account with her," said Lakshmi.

Jagada turned to Raghavan again. Droplets of water sparkled in her hair. The poor girl had come running in the rain.

She was intelligent, energetic and adept at household work. She was punctual for the weekly TV film show. Ditto for the song-and-dance programme. She knew the names of all the film heroes and heroines and all the minor characters as well. If you had trouble identifying one of them, she would

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promptly help out.

Raghavan now understood how Jagada had acquired all this knowledge. He was shocked that she was being allowed to go to the movies so often, but he also had to admire her capacity for retention. If only she could go to school... Raghavan thought. But then he told himself, how can she afford to attend school?

Her parents had died when Jagada was a child. Her elder brother and she had been brought up by their maternal grandmother. The old woman had been eking out a precarious living, delivering lunch to office workers. Of late, her sight had failed and she could no longer work. She lived in the slum on the bank of the lake.

Jagada's brother was now a rickshaw-*wallah*. The old woman had brought Jagada to Lakshmi and got her this job.

Lakshmi and Jagada had got along well until two months ago. That was when Jagada began to come to work late, often to Lakshmi's annoyance. Lakshmi had scolded her and threatened her with dismissal many times, but Jagada's attendance record did not improve.

How could the little girl get up early in the morning after seeing the late night show?

Her brother had given her the money for the ticket on Monday. On Wednesday, she had got it from her sister-in-law. Her grandmother had paid on Friday.

These frequent late night shows explained the fatigue in her eyes. They had also made her precocious. Whenever there were intimate scenes on TV, she would glance meaningfully at Sundari...

Jagada brought her grandmother in the evening. Lakshmi

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told the old woman, "See here, Pechi Amma, I want the front yard swept and the *kolam* drawn before sunrise. It is mainly for this work that I have engaged your grand-daughter. If she can't do this, why should I pay her salary?"

"Where will the poor child go if you throw her out, Amma? She is very young, like your daughter..."

"Why should I bother about where she goes and what she does?"

"The little child can't get up early in the morning sometimes..."

"How can she get up early when she goes to the late night show every other day?" countered Lakshmi.

Raghavan said to the old woman, "Amma, is it proper to send the child to the night show so often?"

The old woman bowed her head but did not reply.

"Of course children like the movies," Raghavan conceded. "But as responsible elders, we should control them. If we give them money and encourage them, they are sure to go astray."

The old woman looked up. Her lips parted as if she wanted to say something, but she remained silent.

Raghavan said severely, "One day your grandson sends her to the movies, another day his wife gives her money for the ticket, and yet another day you yourself send her to the show... Do you want to ruin the child?"

The old woman began to cry.

"Pechi Amma, no use crying. My decision is final. I won't employ Jagada any more. Take her dues and clear out!" Lakshmi said firmly.

"What can I do, Amma?" the old woman said, weeping. "I got my grandson married two months ago. Our hut has only one

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room, where we cook, eat and sleep. Since my grandson's marriage, my granddaughter and I have been sleeping out in the open. When it rains at night, there is no place for us to sleep. I spend the night leaning against the wall, but what do I do with her?... So I send her to the late night show with the neighbours' girls..."

Lakshmi and Raghavan were stunned.

That night, Lakshmi buried her face in Raghavan's chest and wept. Raghavan could hear her murmur, "Jagada... Jagada..." between bouts of tears.

He tried to console her. "Why do you cry? Jagada is still working for you. What more can we do?"

In time, Jagada will marry a rickshaw-*wallah*. She will give money to her younger sister-in-law to go to the late night show...

Translated from the Tamil story 'Jagada' *(2002)*
by S. Krishnamoorthy with Pratik Kanjilal

NOTE

1. *Kolam*: auspicious designs drawn on the front yard every morning, usually with rice powder or flower petals.

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LAKSHMI KANNAN

Nagapushpam

Illustration by SHYAMAL BANERJEE

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Ratna selected a nice, wide branch of the *champaka* tree and leaned back on it comfortably. Hmm… it was cool in here, for the tree was thickly covered over with leaves. They almost hid her inside. She raised her face and smiled at the birds chirping on the branches above. Then she rose, adjusted her skirt and climbed over branches that were higher, with leaves that were very dense. She selected a broad branch once again and lay back on it. Now it wouldn't be easy for anyone to find out where she was. Wouldn't be easy at all.

Reclining on the branch, Ratna tried to close her eyes, but they remained half open. From her lowered eyelids, she could see them. Rows and rows of them. A whole army of big, black ants. They filed past her arm in an orderly file, carrying something to eat in their 'hands'. Only recently had Ratna got over her fear of being bitten by the big ants, and the pain it could cause. She could now handle the ants easily enough. She would just play possum. If the ants happened to move past at a close range, she simply remained motionless, as if dead. That helped. The ants did not get startled on their way. They just filed past, minding their own business.

Aha… if one takes refuge in this *champaka* tree, one can be transported into another world altogether. Even so, Ratna could not fight down the annoyance in her mind. She struggled to get rid of the irritation that fumed within her. *Che!* Look at these people at home who consider themselves to be the 'elders'. What sort of people are they, actually? They don't speak about anything clearly or in a straightforward manner. They seem to be confused and finally end up confusing us too. They tell me all the time: Don't interrupt us while we talk, don't talk out of turn, don't bother us by asking so many questions,

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don't argue endlessly, don't do this, don't do that and so on. If I ask a question, they want to avoid the point, so they just wriggle out evasively and escape. They can't even explain why they wouldn't give me a straight answer. Hell!

All that I said — rather, pleaded for — was Nagapushpam, the flower of the screwpine. 'Please don't do my *jadai alankaram* with jasmine this time, I said. Decorate my braided hair with Nagapushpam instead,' I had begged. But no way! Ratna closed her eyes and thought about the festivals and the *jadai alankaram* done during those days. Special days such as Sankranti, Deepavali, Dussehra and Navaratri. The little girls of the household would be dressed in sparkling silk long skirts with matching blouses. The elderly women of the household, that is the mothers, grandmothers or the aunts, would then adorn the girls with ancestral pieces of family jewellery and stand back to fondly admire the loveliness of their efforts. In addition, they would also do a *jadai alankaram*. They brushed the hair of the girls till it shone, braided it, then decorated it in myriad ways with a variety of flowers — different kinds of jasmine, roses, *kanakambaram* and of course, the odorous green southern wood, the *marukkozhundu*. Occasionally, they would also include Nagapushpam, work lovely patterns on it with other flowers. Using a needle and thread, they stitched the flowers over the sword-shaped petals of Nagapushpam. Then, the strong odour of Nagapushpam would easily dominate the rest of the flowers, penetrating the nostrils. It never failed to attract attention. Ratna remembered the last time her hair was decorated with Nagapushpam. How proudly she had strutted around that day, the cynosure of all eyes. Wherever she went, people turned to look at her and her braided hair. She had felt

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very important indeed on that day, but…

All that is over. The family does not allow Nagapushpam to even enter the house anymore. Not since two years ago. And if Ratna asks 'Why?' nobody answers her. Eventually, when she eavesdropped on the elders as they were whispering amongst themselves, she got to know the reason for it. It seems a friend of the family had bought a lot of Nagapushpam, strips and strips of them, because it was the favourite flower of that family. Then, sure enough, a snake had got into their house. It bit the little girl who had a *jadai alankaram* with Nagapushpam in her hair. The little girl died instantly. After that sad incident, the family wouldn't so much as touch a Nagapushpam if they chanced upon it at a florist's. They wouldn't even talk about it. They only exchanged frightened looks with one another.

Ratna loved the fragrance of Nagapushpam very much. Now, for this year's Navaratri, she had begged and pleaded with the elders in her family for a *jadai alankaram* with Nagapushpam. But everybody, just about everybody including her gentle mother Ahalya, refused to comply with her request. Let them suffer now. I'll make it real hard for them to find me. Let them run around all over the place in search for me. I must torment them. Then they will come begging. I'm not going to get down from this tree. I'm not going to eat. And I'm not going to talk to anyone. Yes!

Ratna reclined on the branch and closed her eyes. She felt something crawling on her ankle. It was a big, black ant. Hey you! Just go your way, will you? Get on with your work and don't you bite me, OK?… she sent the thought out to the ant. The black ant went past her ankle and moved over to the trunk

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of the tree. The garden below was soaking in the evening hour, the hour of dusk, a time when some of the buds slowly folded up their petals. It was laden with the pleasant fragrance of the many odorous flowers — *parijata*, jasmine, roses, tube-roses, mistress of the night and *marukkozhundu.* A collective redolence rose from the flower-beds and bushes.

"Ratna, hey Ratna! Don't keep Nagapushpam in your hair, because if you do, it'll approach you. Then bite you."

"But what will bite me, Amma?"

"I told you the other day, don't you remember? Come now, you remember only too well, so don't pretend. Just understand one thing, my child. You shouldn't even utter its name in the evenings."

The more they warned her about it, the more curious she grew. If the dreaded thing is a snake, then which of the snakes will approach her? The rattlesnake which is called *changili karuppan* in Tamil? Or the viper with black linear markings? Will it be the green whip-snake by any chance, or the king cobra himself? Ratna had learnt the names in her zoology class. Once, when she was taken to the Snake Park in Chennai by her Mama, her mother's brother, along with the rest of the children in the family, she had seen a wide variety of snakes. It was very interesting. That sluggish boa constrictor, for instance. It looked so hopelessly harmless, the way it was lying around sleepily. The children got totally engrossed in the sight of the snakes that crawled and curved around sinuously, wig-gling and meandering under their eyes. Some of the snakes slithered along gracefully, catching the rays of the sun on jew-elled bodies that shone dazzlingly, their eyes glinting like bright gems. Ratna remembered how the cobra had put out its

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tongue delicately between its poison fangs every other minute, hissing away. How quietly, how very nonchalantly, the snakes slithered along, not caring the least for the awestruck, admiring crowd milling around them…

And yet, it was a somewhat pathetic sight, thought Ratna, to see the snakes clustered around like that in a pit that was shaped like a well, or to see them coiled around the stumps of dead branches that were painted in bright, artificial colours. Why don't they release the snakes to roam free in the open?

Ratna would often study anthills to find out what was happening in there. 'Shh! Ratna, don't get too close. Anthills are the homes of snakes!" her mother would warn. But Ratna would stand near the anthills for hours on end till her legs ached. Once, she went to the extent of breaking up the sandy towers of an anthill in the hope that snakes would tumble out of their collapsed homes. It fell back in a sandy heap out of which a few red ants came scurrying. That was about all. It had been a very hot day. People say snakes come out if they find the heat unbearable, but not a single snake had come out.

"Ratna, Ratna!"

Ah… that's mother, looking for me. Even if I hide myself in one of the highest branches of the *champaka* tree, mother can find me out. Ratna's mother Ahalya stood below the tree, peering up into the branches.

"There you are. Caught you! I know you'll be here. Come, my child, come down. It's getting late."

"No, I won't."

"Why ever not?"

"I just won't."

"What?!"

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"I like it here. I want to stay here."

"The sun will set anytime now. Then all kinds of insects and worms will creep out. It's very dangerous. Come down, there's a darling."

"There's no danger whatever over here. There are just a few black ants and squirrels, that's about all."

"That's what you think. But once it gets dark, all kinds of insects and sna..." Ahalya bit her lip and stopped midway in her sentence. Her face was suffused with fear as she looked up at Ratna.

"What did you say, Amma?" asked Ratna, from the top branch.

"Nothing, nothing at all. You come down quickly. Aren't you my very own little Ratna, my little gem, my golden girl?"

"Amma, did you say snake just now?"

"Shh! I said nothing of the sort! I was about to say insects. All right now, come down quickly. How long am I to stand here? I've work to do."

"I'll come down on one condition."

"What condition?"

"I want a jadai *alankaram* with Nagapushpam."

"O god! With Nagapushpam? We've been telling you for your own good. That flower has a strong, intoxicating smell. It'll give a headache to a little girl like you. Do you know, sometimes the smell is so strong that it can even make you bleed through the nose. Besides, you know very well, don't you, that the smell of Nagapushpam attracts sn..." Ahalya stopped dead again, mid-sentence.

"Were you about to say snakes?"

"Ratna! How many times have I asked you not to utter that

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word after dark? This has become a big joke, or what? Now come down soon like a good girl, come."

"What about Nagapushpam then?"

"We'll talk about it later. You come along now."

Ahalya looked very tired. Ratna was sorry that she was harassing her dear mother. With an agile leap, she alighted from the tree and wrapped her arms around her mother's waist the minute she touched the ground.

"My darling girl, my very own little gem, my frisky baby gazelle. You're the *Nagaratna* of the house." Ahalya whispered the last line as she stroked her daughter's cheeks and hair.

Occasionally, only very occasionally, would Ahalya call her girl by her formal name, 'Nagaratna'. And that, only if no one happened to be around. 'Nagaratna, Nagaratna' she would call out softly, whispering into Ratna's ears as though it was a secret. In the beginning, Ratna had kicked in protest against the name. It sounded so very old-fashioned. There were plenty of Nagaratnas in Mysore. Teachers, family cooks, grandmotherly types. Some of them added on an 'Amma' to their names in deference to their age and carried their names heavily, as 'Nagaratnamma'. "I don't want a name like *that*," she said resentfully. "All the boys and girls in my school tease me. Laugh at me." She had her way. Her parents and other elders of the family agreed to shorten her name to just 'Ratna' in the school records.

Ratna. Literally, a gem. "A gem of a girl," they said fondly, pampering her on festival days. They would dress her in fine silk skirt and blouse, her hair smoothly brushed, braided and adorned with fresh flowers. Sometimes a length of *kanakambaram* would be coiled around her hair. They would fix that

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beautiful *Jadabillai* on her hair at the back of her head. It was a jewel that was the pride of the family. Exquisitely crafted in the shape of a large cobra, it had a broad hood spread out, with two large rubies on either side for eyes that glowed lustrously, like coals. The superior rubies dripped blood in their rich colour. A rare piece of jewellery that was stunningly regal. Whenever they took it out of the velvet box in which it nestled and fixed it on Ratna's hair, her whole body tingled and flushed with pride. She felt greatly honoured.

Ratna had been surprised to learn that the name 'Naga' (for cobra) was entwined with her formal name. She wondered about it. The elders in the family, who objected to her uttering the very word 'snake', and who hushed her up instantly, the same elders who exchanged frightened whispers about snakes, they had merged the name of the fearful cobra with hers. But why? Why did they name me 'Nagaratna'? She found the answer one day.

That was the day of Nagapanchami. For the puja that was a part of the ritual, Ratna had accompanied her mother and her Athai, her father's sister, to the temple. Inside the temple, her mother Ahalya joined the other women who had gathered there. All of them worshipped the large, sculpted stone snakes of the temple. Ratna looked around. Good lord. Such very large stone Nagas (cobras). Some of them had a wide hood spread out, while some others had several heads. All of them were frozen in stone. The women garlanded them with soft, fragrant flowers. Many of them adored the stone snakes with Nagapushpam. One of the women placed two large strips of Nagapushpam on either side of the Naga, prayed and did her *pranam*. Some other women fed the Nagas by placing sweets in

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their mouths. They also poured milk in the mouths. Then they went around in circumambulation. Ratna's eyes were riveted on her mother as she came round along with the other women, her head bent over her two hands that were pressed together in prayer. Ahalya whispered her prayers as she went around, a simple, soft, much-washed cotton saree clinging to her slim figure.

She often fasted on Shashti, Ekadasi and other special days. It showed on her worn-out, wasted body, which was now silhouetted by the simple handloom saree. She had given up eating snake-gourd, something she loved very much.

But this is strange! When they are so frightened of the very sight of a snake, why do they worship the same snake so fervently when it stands sculpted in stone? How many times would these women go round and round in circumambulation? My poor mother. Her legs will ache. One of the women in a purple saree was talking to Ahalya: "Why do you whisper your prayers like that, Ahalya?" she mocked. "Say them loudly so that this time the god Nagaraja can hear them right and grant you a male child!"

"Oh, be quiet," the woman in green chipped in with a laugh. "Poor Ahalya, she hesitates to raise her voice in prayer because Nagaraja, king of the cobras, disappointed her last time. Instead of giving her a Naganna, he gave her a Nagaratna, a girl child, *tch*, *tch*!"

"Yes," said the purple saree, "There she stands, the little girl." She pointed at Ratna, as the green saree laughed.

Is that how I got my name? Was it the snake that gave me to Amma? Do snakes make babies? If by mistake the baby is born female, do they still have to fuse the name of 'Naga'

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along with the girl's name? And is that done out of fear? Do we worship that which we fear? Or do we fear whatever we worship? Perhaps women are afraid of living without a male child. Because a woman's mother-in-law, father-in-law, husband and relations jeer at her. Is that what women are really scared of?

Ratna had often heard her grandmother, her father's mother, tell Ahalya in her presence: "Now look here, if you don't have a male child, then your life will be unfulfilled, empty of meaning. A womb that doesn't swell with a male child is but a vacuum. After all, if we don't give a male child to our family, there's really no point in our living, is there?" Whenever grandmother talked like that, Ahalya would go red in the face, shrink back and tremble all over. Was it out of a sense of shame, sadness or bitterness or was it because she was very angry? Ratna could never say for sure. Ahalya would instantly rush to her own room. And if Ratna happened to follow her, she would pull the child towards herself, bury the little girl's face in her bosom and plant frenzied kisses on her brow, on her cheeks, crying out, "My very own little Ratna, Nagaratna, my little gem, my golden girl..." She would then burst into tears.

Ratna's search for deadly snakes in gardens and anthills ended many, many years later, after she got married and moved into a house on Rash Behari Avenue in Calcutta with her husband and her little daughter. Because there were plenty of snakes in the nearby districts, plenty that roamed freely in the open, just as they did in parts of the southern district of Salem and up north in Rajasthan. These were not snakes that stood at a distance, sculpted and frozen in stone. They would

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not accept offerings of flowers, sweets and milk from desperate women who worshipped them. They were venomous snakes in green and brown that crawled craftily about, taking on the colours of their world, blending into situations without ever giving away their own true colours. In the neighbouring state of Bihar, in places like Katihar, Fasia Tola, Teja Tola and Budhuchak, and in some districts of Rajasthan, these poisonous snakes got into bushes and grass and houses — even large, wealthy houses. They got in without the help of Nagapushpam. The snakes entered the *saurighar*, the room reserved exclusively for childbirth in a house, and hid themselves inside. In the various *saurighars* all over the districts of Bihar, Rajasthan and Salem, in fact wherever mothers gave birth to the tiny little Nagaratnas of the world, one could find these snakes promptly swinging into brisk action.

The snakes functioned by taking on different forms and shapes. They got into the delicate spinal cord of the newborn Nagaratnas, bent it backward and snapped it, helping the midwife kill the female baby. The snakes transformed themselves into ropes, twined around the neck of the tender, young female infant and strangled her. Or they turned into a large, black rock salt, blocked the mouth of a baby till she struggled for breath and choked to death. They even metamorphosed into fertiliser and finished their mission by poisoning the baby. They changed into various forms. They became ropy dough that was coiled around the lid of the large earthen pitcher to seal off all air. The female infant stuffed inside struggled for breath. Slowly, very slowly indeed, they granted freedom to the female soul that was trapped inside the pitcher and helped the midwife again in snuffing out the young life.

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The snakes also entered the bodies of husbands whose wives protested against the killing of their baby daughters and who sobbed and screamed. The snakes made the husbands hiss in fury and spread out their hood. They slithered into the strong, muscular arms of these fathers of tiny daughters, helped them fling their own infants against the walls of the *saurighar* till the tender young brains spilled out. Snakes and more snakes. Venomous snakes, wherever you looked.

But what happened to the Ahalyas? Where have the Ahalyas of the world disappeared? Ahalyas, whose bodies were wasted by fasting and praying for a male child, Ahalyas who were all gentleness? Ahalyas who wrap a simple cotton saree around their thin figures and exude the smell of mother in their skin and their hair? The mother's smell. A pleasant blend of the scent of flowers, camphor, turmeric, of affection, milk, talcum powder, the scent of love, *kumkum,* kindness…can't really describe it. Where are the Ahalyas for all those babies in the country who are born by mistake as little Nagaratnas?

It has been a long time since Ahalya passed away. Nagaratna was told by her family that it was not right to keep on mourning and brooding for her mother, for after all Ahalya had died well, hadn't she? She had died a *sumangali*. That was auspicious. Ahalya was therefore allowed to vanish from their lives without a murmur. She faded like a lovely, remembered perfume.

But Ratna tried to recapture the redolence of Ahalya to an extent, with an old yellow trunk that had belonged to her mother. It was Ratna's treasure-trove now. She would not let anyone touch it. It was packed with her mother's things. The beautiful, classy silk sarees which she never wore, the exquisite

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jewellery that she never wore, not even once, the familiar soft, much-washed simple cotton sarees which she always wore, the sandalwood figurines wrapped in silk to preserve the aroma, the table linen and the cover for the radio which she had hand-embroidered in floral patterns, her old diary, old sepia photographs in black and brown tints, and many other personal belongings. Occasionally, whenever Ratna opened it, it would hit her strongly, the smell that rose from the trunk. It would wrap around her overpoweringly, till she was lost in it.

Mother's smell. One can always recognise it. Unfailingly. A mix that touches the aroma of other things even as it fades. Dried petals, clove, camphor, sandalwood, frankincense and all other loved scents. All except Nagapushpam.

Translated from the Tamil story 'Poonagam' *(1996) by the author*

GLOSSARY

1. *Jadai alankaram:* Floral decorations in the braided hair of girls and women on festive days.
2. *Kanakambaram:* Small, sunset-hued flowers with light petals.
3. *Jadabilli:* A round ornament encrusted with gems and with a screw-shaped coil on the back to fix in the hair.
4. *Nagapanchami:* A celebration of fertility on the fifth day of the lunar month in *shravan*, the monsoon season.
5. *Naganna:* A male child.
6. *Sumangali:* A married woman whose husband is alive.

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SIDDHARTHA CHE GUEVARA

Kamikaze

Etching by ATIN BASAK

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As M.S. Subbulakshmi's *Venkatesa Suprabhatham* filled the room, the missiles of Doom-II were blasting the army personnel (who resembled none I've seen in the real world) as well as the monsters (who resembled some I've seen) on my computer monitor. With fingers jabbing at the keyboard, eyes hovering on the video and ears relishing the melody (not necessarily that of MS), the pleasure was all mine — a student in his mid-thirties.

You should not, however, conclude that I am one of those crazy guys you've come across, who soak slices of bread in soda for their dinner. The situation is such, my friend — what else can I say! If only you knew that I am from a civilisation where men are forced to take up arms to wage war and where girls have either to carry rifles because their fathers and brothers have failed to protect them, or to wait for the faceless grooms or heartless agents who help them escape to Canada — no matter if it means weeks of confinement in the cargo hold of an oil tanker, in choking proximity to sweaty strangers; no matter if the ship zigzags its way through Moscow and Lesotho; no matter if such escapades are at the risk of an explosive end — you would not laugh at me. Actually, you could not.

As I was saying, I, Sugunan Chellathurai (watched *Die Another Day* yesterday evening), after graduating from the Hindu College in Trincomalee (it took eight years, with alternating university closures, openings and jobs), taking a master's in Singapore (listened for two years, and researched for another: *"Showing people around Little India and booking return tickets to Colombo for those transit passengers abandoned by their agents on their way to Germany from Sri Lanka"*), had ended up about twelve

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months ago in St Louis, Missouri, doing similar, if not more, claptrap!

Staying in my room is kind of difficult. Mainly because of the untimely phone calls I receive — twice a week on an average — from acquaintances and from family back home. Those calls would usually prompt me to respond thus: "How can you expect me to go to Seattle all the way from St Louis carrying a pair of scissors!" (The question, of course, for the uninitiated, would have been, "The wife of the cousin of my nephew's brother-in-law is about to shred her passport and raise her hands at the Vancouver-Seattle border; could you please help her?"). Considering such disturbances could also raise doubts in the mind of my Sinhalese roommate, I would rather end up, like now, spending my nights in the university lab. An added advantage is that here, I can actually listen to the Canadian Tamil broadcast over the Net, without any trace of guilt.

I don't even know if I have faith. Such 'faith' shows up if and when necessary. That's not important, however, since I listen to *Suprabhatham*, essentially because MS transports me to those mornings back home ten years ago. And games like Doom-II, I have to admit, please me when I see that I, who couldn't possibly distinguish between a revolver and a pistol, can kill dozens of soldiers at will. Especially when Doom's camouflaged monsters remind me of those Sri Lankan and Indian forces who had beaten me up. Beaten me up for being in possession a "dangerous weapon" — a razor which I had just bought for my morning shave. Otherwise, it has been over ten years since I pondered the merits and demerits of armed revolt versus non-violent struggle. Not only that, for a person who had chosen to come here in the interest of his own life

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and career, it would be nothing short of hypocrisy if I were to talk of things like freedom, revolution and humankind.

You need no further introduction about me, right? But I love to talk about myself. So let me round it off, please! While people are dying *en masse* back home, I have been busy here with one or more of the following: Crossing the Canadian border on the pretext of seeing Niagara, yet returning without destroying my Sri Lankan passport (for the amateur reader again: declaring yourself a refugee requires no passport on person); arguing that all pieces of the so-called literature of the Tamil diaspora are nothing but loads of gripes, yet considering a jump into the fray myself so that others can have a chance to grind my head; and adoring Gautam Buddha and Ernesto 'Che' Guevara as the only human beings to have ever graced this earth. Coming to my more tangible aspects, I'm lean and tall. I like dark colours for trousers and pale ones for shirts; never drank nor smoked. And I am not married (isn't it enough that I ain't dead yet?) and I frequently sport a stubbly cheek.

Just a minute, I'll be right back. The teakettle could be boiling by now in the next room. Talking about tea, I invariably think of the airlines I had chosen to fly here: Singapore Airlines and United Airlines. That is to say, I deliberately avoided Sri Lankan Airlines, and it was so easy to deny any flow of revenue from me to the Sri Lankan government. When it came to tea, however, it was easier said than done. With the chilly weather of the Midwest, tea has become an essential part of my life here. And in view of my financial condition, Sri Lankan Lipton is the only choice I have. Come now, a pauper has no right to choose, does he?

So, let me take a break here. Why, you could take a break

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too, and also register a complaint with your spouse, who might be busy cooking, that the smoke from the kitchen is interrupting your literary sojourn. That way, you might annul any guilt that you might otherwise be harbouring.

Oh, there you are. Thanks for coming back. I was here already, and I thought I would resume my narration when you arrived. I haven't been waiting long, though. Besides, I was listening, with the usual blank expression and predictable nods, to Abdul's commentary on the LA Lakers game of yesterday evening. Oops, I haven't introduced Abdul to you, have I? Sorry about that. Iftu Abdul Christy Woodfire, 42, per his claim, has been cleaning our laboratory for the last fifteen years. A proud follower of Farrakhan (since 2000). While Abdul knew about the meeting Farrakhan had had with General Gaddafi recently, he isn't aware, somehow, of the attempts of the daughter of Malcolm X to get Farrakhan killed. Never mind her motives.

Why him, we aren't exceptions either; are we? We know the politicians who had argued so vociferously against each other on the rights of Sinhalese and Tamil people during the Seventies in the Sri Lankan parliament. But how many of us know that, immediately after the heated debates, the same politicians met in the parliament cafeteria, savoured salmon sandwiches and asked one another, grinning, "How was my speech against you this morning?" Likewise, Abdul too is an ordinary, pet-loving soul embarrassed by his wife's faith in the imminent resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even now, he is saying something about whites not wanting to be friends with blacks like us.

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You know him now. But he doesn't know you. I haven't told him anything about you yet. Maybe it's the smoke from your kitchen (or is it from your cigarette?), he hasn't asked me yet (this is a smoke-free zone, you know that, right?). Besides, he can't even tell you from me, and only knows that you and I speak the same language. Again, aren't we in the same boat — we couldn't differentiate between the Prime Minister of China and the chef of the Chinese Café in Colombo? Just like Hitler had named us sharp-nosed Aryans, don't we call the Chinese snub-nosed?

The day Abdul first met me, he asked me how many black brothers lived in our country. I wasn't aware back then exactly what he meant by 'black brothers'. "As far as I know, Abdul," I ventured anyway, "there are a few diplomatic staff in the African embassies." Because, by that time, I had no detail, much less any opinion, on Mangala Samaraveera the Sri Lankan minister, or on Susantika the sprinter. My response had disappointed Abdul. Naturally. I had to show him a group photograph of our family and friends for evidence. But then, Abdul had Sukumar and Sivam positively identified as members of his own black brotherhood clan. When I told Abdul that Sivam was my own brother, he promoted me too from being a Red Indian to a black brother. And he didn't stop there. He tried to teach me the blacks' traditional way of greeting one another, an expressive use of the forearm. Hey, I can see you smiling — much like Gary Oldman smiled in Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula*, or is it a Mona Lisa smile? Maybe a bit of both, eh? Save the sarcasm, will you? I do hear your question too: "Is Abdul such an idiot, to call you a black brother?"

But, well, that's the truth. He was not an idiot, however. But

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then he didn't have anything to gain from knowing about our country or about the difficulties we face there, did he? Why, unlike his government, stationing their naval forces in the Sri Lankan port of Trincomalee was not his concern; nor was the arms sales. He wasn't even aware of the two faces the terrorism in the island wore, Buddhist and Hinduist — and he did not have to support or oppose one of them. He wasn't under any compulsion, you see, to colour the terrorism in Sri Lanka as Hindu terrorism or 'ordinary' terrorism, depending on whether the BJP had won the elections to the Indian parliament. Now, let's talk about us. Were you ever interested in knowing that all American blacks are just not legendary singers, nor millionaire basketball players, nor a bunch of people round the street corners selling stuff for ten bucks a milligramme?

When you don't even know that, how could you possibly know that there are hierarchies and tensions within their community, too? Anyway, it isn't your fault. In spite of everything, you did learn about the gypsies. Since I didn't have any such opportunity, when Ki. Pi. Aravindan narrated a story last year, I was totally lost. Fearing that I might write senseless stories about them with my half-baked knowledge unless he did it first, the Holy Pope had written a story glorifying a gypsy who had, full fifty years ago, lost his life in World War II. *Such fear may be justified; Haven't I written that he (the Holy Pope, that is), in collaboration with Reagan and Walesa, caused the split between the Warsaw Pact countries?* So, you shall know of these people only if I tell you. Don't go only by the media of this country — isn't this the very country which justified their refusal to sign the Landmine Ban Treaty on the grounds that Cuba was a terrorist state? Hope my reasoning here, or my holier-than-thou lecture, hasn't put you

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off. Yet.

Describe Blacks' Salute Here

Abdul didn't know what this tradition meant. Nor did he express any desire to learn about it. Yet he was proud because it was something that belonged to him, to his race. If an act of tradition pleases someone with no side effects to any third party, I don't see any fault in doing it. Whenever we meet, therefore, it has become my normal mode of greeting too. Sometimes, friends (from Haryana, Poland, or China) watching us would smirk, letting their amusement show. They wouldn't say anything out loud, though. Don't want to be politically incorrect, what else? Otherwise, no one entertains any doubt that this country suppresses the right to speech. Neither they nor I — especially when they expect to be 'naturalised' in this country very soon.

Abdul says that he has to go. He, along with his Walkman (listening to Puff Daddy's call, in the name of rap, to have sex with virtually everyone in town), has to sweep, vacuum, dust and mop this building of sixty-three rooms, ten toilets, four corridors, eight and a hundred stairs, four floors and other numerous gullies where no one would otherwise venture. (It is, however, a different matter altogether if he actually makes a clean job of it!)

He would come at ten — look at him, don't you see? I'm sorry that you can't see. I should actually tell this story with pictures, but it would make my narration even longer. Even if I did, would it not offend you, who have long ago stopped reading Muthu comics or Tintin? So imagine for yourself many cartons that once contained computers, together now, holding Abdul as he takes a nap (unbeknownst to his African-American

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supervisor, of course!). He would come and, in one swift stroke, clean my table (just the way I would have cleaned it earlier) and the adjacent one (which Wang Lee would never have cleaned), flash a smile at me and disappear as quickly, with his usual parting words, "Have a good one, chief!"

Usually, I knock off at about seven in the morning and am back at two or thereabouts in the afternoon. Such meetings with Abdul are, therefore, very rare indeed. If at all I happen to be here, and if I see that his supervisor is around when Abdul is asleep, I run to him, tap him, wait until he casually takes off his Walkman earphones and alert him about his foreman's presence. Don't think for a moment that this is my only job! In addition to refining SimuLink (we also call it debugging — much like what the Water and Sewerage Board of St Louis does to our water here) I respond to Lee's telephone calls in his absence by replying, "*Tha Boo Sai*," in his native Schezuan.

Since this foreman of his has the habit of presenting himself in unexpected moments (just as God would, to an unsuspecting devotee — Have you read Puthumaip Piththan lately, eh?), Abdul calls him an inverse Dalmatian (a black dog with white spots!). He doesn't stop at that. He goes one step higher and calls the boss of his boss — a white woman in her early fifties — a former member of the Ku Klux Klan. Proof? She used to live in Montana. (I must admit here — lest I am branded a liar — that at times I fail to see any connection between the incidents that Abdul narrates and the conclusions that he effortlessly draws from them.) Once, having been caught sleeping on duty, Abdul was fired. Somehow, he proved that his dismissal was a direct result of racial discrimination and managed to get reinstated within weeks.

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I am always reminded, in such circumstances, about Raghunathan Master during the late seventies (maybe you know him by some other name… think about it), who would never be seen in the school where he professed to teach. Rather, he was seen in the market streets, trading the tobacco and onions that he cultivated in his vast fields. He was once caught, too, and suspended. But a 'Northerner' happened to be principal of the school. Not only that, the Chief Education Officer was Sinhalese. Does one need any further proof that Raghunathan Master was a victim of racism? Convincing the local people that he was indeed a victim, Raghunathan Master eventually became secretary of the local branch of a Tamil political party. (Once reinstated in his job, he went back to the school to serve the backwards by asking their children to take care of the potatoes in his fields, but I don't want to stretch this further. Hope you don't want to hear about it either, do you?)

Abdul is gone. He was looking forward to watching his younger son's school basketball game. Abdul's eldest son, by the way, is a third year medical student at a neighbouring state university. According to Abdul, those who had come here as slaves about four hundred years ago could not forever go on playing ball, singing songs and begging brothers for dollars to dope themselves. His eldest son does not live with him, though. I could still see Abdul as he was, running a wet towel over the glass windows covered with condensation (or automobile exhaust?) that had my name and 'Eelam' written all over (with my fingertip, of course), when he said this: His son, living with his girlfriend ("You know what," Abdul grinned, "she's white!") would visit them every weekend. But with his cleaner's job, and his wife's as the Pick 'n' Save counter clerk, Abdul couldn't

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expect much from his son. If he ever failed to show up on a Saturday morning, the next visit would only be on the following Saturday morning. Because, Abdul says, for everyone — irrespective of caste, creed or race — a Saturday evening is meant for forgetting everything (including kith and kin), and enjoying his or her individual time off. Nightclubs, dating, a walk in the park, anything will do. As long as you are amidst unknown faces.

On Sunday mornings, on the other hand, Abdul's wife is busy with her secretarial duties at the Church of the Saviour for the Blacks on 25th North. Abdul makes good use of the time by taking his two dogs with him in his pickup (while they lick his neck), listening to (and occasionally singing with) Notorious Big and Tupak Shakur on FM 104 MHz, driving for half an hour on I-64 West, taking numerous twists and turns afterwards for another fifteen minutes, going in and coming out of gullies like the monkey in a street corner circus jumping through the ring, and finally parking before a building that has surely seen better days. The six-storey building, the Arthur Munro Home for the Aged, is where Abdul's mother lives — a woman who had marched with Martin Luther King Jr in the Sixties, during the struggle against racial discrimination in the streets of Cairo, Illinois. Though he has to knock heavily before she lets him in (his mother has turned deaf. "Ma… ma, it's me, Ponchaa!"), and keep shouting in the name of conversation, Abdul enjoys the couple of hours he spends with his mother. It takes him back to his childhood.

I asked him once — it was around five or five-thirty in the morning, humidity 100%, the mercury at 17 degrees Centigrade; a light wind from east of north-east, the air pressure standing at

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30.05 psi (sorry, I still can't forget British measurement standards); and while I was reading the Sri Lankan Tamil News on the Net; it indeed was a dull winter day — what he had thought about his son living with a white woman. Turning off the vacuum cleaner he had been tinkering with, Abdul looked at me and said casually, "It's mutual aid. If indeed he marries her, my son will have children who are *less* black. For her, the advantage from the relationship is..." Abdul paused here, flashing a mischievous smile at me, before continuing, "that she... Chief, don't you know why white women like black brothers? Hmm?"

Ignoring the hint, I, a bachelor in every sense of the term, asked him, "So even *you* feel that your skin colour is something cheap, something to get rid of; don't you? Then why do you need this struggle against discrimination?" Any sign that Abdul had been smiling a while ago was gone now. In a deep voice, he said, "Chief, I'm a man walking on the earth, not a bird scaling the skies. Maybe I like to dream, but my feet are firmly on the ground. I hope our next generation goes that way too. Anything — any damn thing — is fair, isn't it, as long as it's not upsetting anyone else's apple-cart?" Without expecting a response from me, Abdul disappeared into the next room with his vacuum cleaner. Too dumbfounded to respond, I stared at the vacuum he had left behind.

Yet, I couldn't fail to notice the contradiction in his position. I recalled a leading figure among our backwards during the Sixties who declared from the podium, "I'm proud that my father was a hardworking peasant!" And in the same breath, he struck a marriage alliance for his son with a so-called forward caste family. I notice the same smile on your face again. I hear you too: "Brother, why this twisted look? It was just a marriage,

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and don't you interpolate any of this crooked reasoning." Hold on, just because you're in a hurry for your next cigarette, or because you're looking for your next opportunity to prove your supremacy over your wife and thus satisfy your ego (that takes a special form in this alien land, doesn't it?), don't draw any hasty conclusions and, worse, don't expect me to toe your line. You know what, it's only five-thirty now. I'll be here for another hour or so, minimum. You could therefore excuse yourself from listening to my Hamlet-like monologue for a while, do anything that I have just mentioned, or even read any other interesting story or poem in this collection. I certainly wouldn't mind. In fact, the forth level of my Doom-II is still on pause. *I have some more scores to settle with these Kamikazes too — in response to the whole ordeal I was put through when I visited home last in '89, by the Sri Lankan military forces that controlled our area then, just for keeping two AA batteries in my transistor radio.*

Oh, it's you? Been waiting for long? Must be more than three months since we last met! How are you doing? Is your daughter still struggling to pick up the new language? How about your son… why, he must be into something similar to what I'm doing here — killing computer-generated Kamikazes in revenge for all that he and other Eelam teenagers had received at the hands of the Sri Lankan army. The other day, after you had left, I was here till seven, killing the Kamikazes and waiting for you in vain. It's my turn to be late today; sorry about that. By the time I went to bed last night it was way past 11 o'clock. I had gone to see Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, and after the movie, I also had to cook and eat my dinner of boiled potatoes with salt, pepper and

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lemon, along with a slice of bread. The movie? It was okay. You can watch it once. But then, some young blacks in the rows behind me (must be students from the university!), in between their discussion about the betrayal of one of their girlfriends, asked why it was always necessary for a white to come to the rescue of their folk. "Even *Mississippi Burning* had a white," quipped one. Quite unconnectedly, I should say, I saw flashes before my eyes in which Eddie Murphy rescued a Tibetan boy in a movie, and Denzel Washington miraculously saved an auburn-haired Meg Ryan just before the end of another. I didn't ask them about those scenes, of course. But I was a bit confused. *Small or big, every issue has at least two sides. When you consider the eyes that scrutinise them, and if you also consider the spectacles such eyes wear, the dimensions can only multiply.*

You are asking who this is, behind me, with a Bob Marley Rastafarian beard, cleaning Wang Lee's table, aren't you? He is James Leopard Onununga, Abdul's young friend and his substitute for the past two months. A black Latino. I hear that Abdul has taken up his new position as Joint Secretary of the St Louis Association of Black Muslims. I also hear that Abdul, on a cue from the association's high command in New York, had asked his son to get rid of his white girlfriend but, much to his dismay, his son didn't. As a result — again, according to James — father and son are not on talking terms now. James adds that further information is only sketchy, for Abdul no longer lives in the neighbourhood. Since Abdul has moved up the ladder, he has shifted home to a neighbourhood where black writers and insurance agents live. You're asking me something else, aren't you now? Oh, my reasons for the allegation I had levelled the other day against our backward caste

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hometown leader? Not a significant one; anyway, here it is: If at all the marriage alliance with the upper caste family had happened in the normal course of things, I'd have had no objection (Aren't you asking me, "Who's bothered about your objections?" I hear you loud and clear!) But we, the engineering college students, had known all along that the son, three years our senior, was in serious love with another girl, and that girl happened to be from a lower caste. Even lower than that of our 'leader'! That's why… why, it seems you no longer want to listen to my explanation. What? You want to know more about James? There you go. I was just wondering why you lack the native inquisitiveness — the inborn quality that the Tamils have possessed right from the Stone Age, from before the inception of the race — to learn about others' affairs. Even James is quite different, probably because he's still in his twenties. Like when I was checking out this Tamil cinema Web page yesterday evening; when I was immersed in the ups and downs of Ramba's struggle to save the country by holding up a tricolour flag, James came up silently from behind me. With his eyes fixed on where I was looking, he whistled softly: "Man, your Indian chicks are too hot!" For him, every place in South Asia belongs to India. When I told him I was from Sri Lanka, he said it sounded like the name of a beer from some east European country whose name was another tongue-twister (no less!). I figured out that I would be better off if I was indeed an Indian, as far as James was concerned. He continued his commentary on Indian girls. "Stunning, man! The size of those…" I would rather not continue this. Not because of any aversion (or why would I be looking at Ramba?). And you wouldn't object either, would you? It's just that the editors of

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the magazines that publish works from the Tamil diaspora should not, on my account, suffer at the hands of press censorship. So you may fill in the blanks of James' commentary by letting your imagination go wild. This way, I'm letting my reader participate in the narration of a story, and I have a chance to prove that 'good' stories are always the result of successful collaboration between the reader and the writer. Hope you will, therefore, hail this story as a milestone in such an effort (and help it get trashed in the process).

James's parting words were, "Wait and see. When I have enough money, I'll go to Trinidad or Tobago, get married to a girl of Indian descent (Another chance for creating an off-beat diaspora literature, you see), and live there the rest of my life!" Don't, for even a second, take James seriously. If it was Wang Lee instead of me that was sitting here, and if Wang Lee was ogling some of those Chinese damsels, James would have undoubtedly substituted China for India, and British Colombia for Trinidad. For he would also like to live the rest of his life with a Chinese girl. And like me, Lee would have managed to smile, but unlike me, would have kept his distance from James, and would have gone back to checking his stock on the Shanghai Stock Exchange. (Money comes first; then comes education. Next is the love for Christ, discovered suddenly on landing in the US. If we have time, we could discuss the topic further — generally avoided while in China, but proclaimed at the top of the voice while in the US — on how the US government supports the struggle for human rights in China. Of course we shall do this when Wang Lee or any of his fellow countrymen are not around.)

Okay, ignore *all* that I've said here. I'm not an experienced

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storyteller, you know. I just blabbered on, only trying to meet the deadline that my editor had set. *Maybe Abdul and James never got dirty while cleaning these rooms, but in this story, I have made sure they did. In your opinion, at least.* Also, I was following your expressions when I touched upon the Tamils' *modus operandi* for getting refugee status at the US-Canadian border. I sensed that you didn't like my tone when I talked about Raghunathan Master either. The episode about our backwards' leader must have put you off, too. So before you call me a Tamil traitor or an upper caste hater, I had better stop here. Isn't it often the case, when a peaceful rally of Muslims passes by a lane where Lord Ganesha is resting, the whole thing ends in chaos? I wanted to say something, but you may have understood something altogether different. So, I should explain my… Oops, are you asleep already? Sorry. Okay, I don't want to wake you up. Still, it's not customary to walk out without taking one's leave. Hence this written note, just for you:

Dear unknown friend,

I thank you for having read my story so far. Next time, if at all there is a next time, let's meet elsewhere, in other pages. I would then try to tell you an interesting story about the travails of the diaspora, and I'll try to see that you don't drop off. Till then, maybe I'll just work on my craft.

Sincerely,
Sugunan.

Translated from the Tamil story 'Kamikaze'
by Govardhanan Ramachandran

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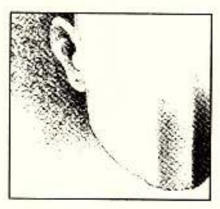
PARTHIPAN

The Island

Ink drawing by PREM SINGH



THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION may perhaps be helpful to you.

▪ Antony and Vathsala get frightened when they see Sri and Manjula, who live across the street.

▪ Because Shanthi wished it, Thayaparan took Thilaksan with him to Canada.

▪ Because Sabaratnam and Kangeswari are not on talking terms, Bharathan and Padmini don't venture out.

I have again been sent back to my island. Four walls surround my island. The only things in my island are an almirah of books, a cassette player, a settee and a window.

I am looking out of the window.

High above the houses and the trees is the sky. I like the sky's blue colour. That is why the walls of my island are blue. The floor, too, is blue. Besides, I have four blue shirts.

I like the sky. I like its blueness. I like the drifting cottony clouds. There is a vast distance between them and me: there is no intimacy or relationship of any kind. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, I like them.

A line from Mahakavi's song, 'A little crab is drawing a picture in the sand,' wafts softly from the cassette player.

The sky is blue. I gaze at it. I cry.

I cry only on my island. When I am on this island, I cry

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frequently. I pluck off and throw away the smile which I wear when I go out, and I let myself go, crying. The window knows this very well.

Even now, I am crying.

I am over thirty-five. Up to now, my island has only changed location, but nothing has changed on the island. I feel unable to leave this island forever. However much and however hard I try, they keep sending me back here, again and again.

I have strengthened myself in many ways. I have taken precautions. What's the use, though? The reality is that I keep losing. No, no, it's more accurate to say that it's reality that defeats me.

I am not unaware that nothing is achieved by crying. Besides, I don't like crying. But do tears wait upon my wishes? They come of their own accord, like now. My throat feels congested and heavy.

I cry, looking up at the sky through the window.

The cock and the hen in our house are always fighting. I can't remember when it started. But as far as I can remember, they have always kept their faces averted from each other. The chicks are on their own. All this, despite them being in the same coop.

Whenever I see them, I wonder if the situation will not affect the chicks.

It did affect them.

I can still remember the time when I first fashioned an island for myself.

I was then a child.

I used to go out and play cops and robbers with other children. I played marbles, built a temple and drew its chariot. I

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gathered jujubes. I shied a ball at tins stacked on top of each other and toppled them.

My playmates' parents loved me. They always gave me something when I went to their homes.

Till I grew worldly-wise, I believed everything I heard was true.

It did not take me long to realise that grown-ups were amused by my credulousness. They said we had the only garden where goats grazed. They laughed, saying that we had the only garden without a fence.

I felt small and ashamed. They liked to see me in this state.

Those social animals hunting for prey embraced me and, dragging me into their cage, extracted stories from me and howled out loud. I was shattered. Tears welled up in my eyes. But I would not cry in the presence of these animals, would not look them in the face. This world is evil. I must create a world for myself: no one else will have a place in my world.

I took my bed to the small lumber room. I shut the door. I kept one window closed, one open.

My island had come into being.

The house was an old limestone building. The walls were broad. You could climb up and sit on the windowsill. Beyond the fence, boys like me were playing tipcat (*kitti*).

Should I join them? They would laugh at me: therefore I shouldn't go. I won't. Why should I look at them?

Look instead at the sky overhead. It was blue and beautiful. Cottony clouds drifted across the sky, at times assuming familiar shapes.

Were they playing marbles now? Or could they have gone to the teacher's house to throw stones up into the mango tree?

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Why should I think about these things? How beautiful the clouds are. Where are they drifting so fast?

Now, they would be smashing open the raw mangoes on stones and strewing salt on the pieces.

Why do I feel like crying?

Though tears veil my eyes, I grip the bars of the window and look up at the sky. I like the sky; I like its blueness very much. I look at it appreciatively. After school, I look at the sky from my island. I don't go out anywhere, nor do I meet anyone. I don't need to, as I have my own island.

The teacher at school had taught us: "Man is a social animal. These social animals live together in groups. These animals need one another. They fight among themselves occasionally, but they have to adjust and accommodate one another... that is the law of nature."

I didn't entirely understand. Why did these social animals refuse to associate with me? Did they think they had no need for me?

When I was on my island, I used to think about this. Did my teacher really believe that one could live only by joining these social animals?

Whatever, let my wounds heal. I shall try once again. Till then, this island is my refuge. How much freedom I have here! Those who wound me with their words and their laughter are not admitted here.

Have I nothing for myself?

How vast the sky! Its blueness and the white clouds that crawl under it — how beautiful!

Even in my wildest dreams, I had never thought I'd be deported, crossing several seas. A new place. New people. A

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new society. New animals.

Here, I could try to live with other people. Perhaps I might succeed. How nice that would be! Then I wouldn't have to create an island for myself; I wouldn't have to gaze at the sky in solitude. I became absorbed in remaking myself. It was no easy task to fight with myself. Wounds don't heel quickly. To conceal them, I began to wear a smile.

A new beginning.

I ran into him by accident, and he recited the poems that ran through his mind. I took a liking not only to him, but also to his poetry. We became quite close; this was an unexpected surprise. My longing for company, my wounds and his decency made it possible.

We joined forces. Through our writing, we created the world and the people we liked. Only people we liked could enter this world.

We asked ourselves whether our world was sustainable, whether it would come out all right. Finally, we resolved that we, at least, would live in this world, our creation.

I was overjoyed. I did not need an island for myself any more. Out there, there are men whom I could join. They, too, would let me join them.

Though my wounds did not heal, they were forgotten.

We dreamt and wrote as one.

Later, he found a partner. My world expanded. Another dimension of support. I became a child again. What bliss!

A child was born to them. Now, there was a third dimension.

I love children very much. I love living in their world.

I hoisted the child onto my back and became an elephant.

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To make the child laugh, I became a monkey. I bore its blows and let it wet me. But I forgot it all when it came running and got on my back. What a sweet, delightful world! How many wonders were strewn around! I don't know the name for the relationship between me and these people. It was something nameless.

But are all things permanent? One day he wrote a new verse titled: 'We are going to another world.'

I was shocked. I asked: "What about the world we had created for ourselves?"

He said, "The world we are living in now is real. The world we are going to is also real. Understand the truth and learn to live with reality."

I couldn't understand. I couldn't comprehend the definitions of worlds each person had. But I understood this much: they were going to send me back once again to my island. I couldn't bear the thought. I pleaded with him. I knew no one but them, I said.

He replied: "Whose fault is that? The world is vast."

Do these people know about my island, its solitude and loneliness, its harsh rigours? I had fought so hard, against such odds, to escape from my island! Now, they are going to send me back there. Why does everyone ignore my feelings? Is it because they are beyond language? Can't they even hear what I say?

"We'll see you again," they said and left. Even the child, who was everything to me, was gone. The only things left were the elephant and the monkey.

I tried to understand them. They had the right to decide how they would live. They had the right to keep their child.

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After they had flown up into the sky, I disintegrated. I returned to my island in this fragmented state. Four walls surround my island. A settee, a cassette player, an almirah full of books and a window are now my only belongings.

Ameer's imagination soared from the cassette player. I stared blankly through the only window. The sky which I had known for so long, but which I hadn't gazed at for some time now. It was the same sky, the same shade of blue.

I sobbed aloud, continuously. Why did this happen to me? Why did I have to be the only one marooned on an island? Life is long. I must prepare myself once again. I must again define my relationship with my kin.

Outside, above, the same blue sky.

On whose back will the child climb now? Won't it look for me? I wept and wept. Why should I keep on thinking about that? Look above. What a vast expanse of sky! The beauty of the clouds drifting through it!

With whom will they drink porridge in the world they have gone to? Whose wounds will they try to heal?

I wept and wept. I fell on my settee and drenched it with my tears.

I found a new way of banishing my loneliness. Work, work, work.

When you carry tin sheets and iron beams for more than ten hours every day, how can other burdens come to mind? I made work my addiction. The work site was a different world. There were more objects and commodities than people. There was no room for conflict. My burdens were light.

The hours of solitude shrank; when I worked, there was victory of a certain kind.

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Besides, there is always my island.

I must be careful now. Whenever I have to leave my island and go outside, I must be cautious. I must not allow anyone to enter into a relationship with me, only to sever it when they think it expedient. I mustn't join up with anyone. There are plenty of people waiting to deceive me. They will say that they have taken me into their world, and then they will send me back to my island once again at the earliest opportunity. As far as they are concerned, it's reality. For me, it's like dying over and over again.

Whenever I go out I wear my smile; that's my only armour.

She told me that she had taken a liking for me. This was the first time someone had told me this. I was taken aback, upset. They're going for my weak spots. But I was experienced now. Thinking of my old wounds and my island, I was on my guard this time. How could I bear to be torn apart, again and again?

She wanted a sign. I must drag my feet. I have to give the devil his due: the world outside had made me sharp in certain matters. I decided to be dilatory.

Then she told me that she had taken a liking to him too. However cautious I had been, I couldn't help feeling anxious. I bore up; after all, this was nothing new to me.

She said she was unable to make up her mind — she felt confused. She had a problem of choice, and I escaped unscathed this time. No one can send me back to my island, for the simple reason that I am still living there.

After some time, she came to see me with her partner. "How long do you intend to be alone like this?" she asked.

I did not reply; there was no point in a reply which no one

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would understand. I came to my island, gazed at the sky through the window and cried my fill. I would never set eyes on her again.

And then we we were in touch again, quite by accident, despite my caution. I have said before that this is my weakness. Man is a social animal, our teacher had taught us.

I do not know what to term our relationship, but I became so attached to them. I now discovered the reason for my weakness: my mind yearned for what I had been deprived of as a child. If I found it anywhere, my caution dissolved.

Again, I forgot my island. That window, the blue sky, the clouds — I had no need for them now. With people around me, I was overjoyed.

A child was born in their house too. My world expanded some more. After a long time I was again an elephant, a monkey. Bliss once more.

When someone asked me whether I didn't feel the need for kith and kin of my own, I felt like laughing. "Fools, am I living on an island, surrounded by four walls? Look closely. I am surrounded by people who are my support, children who know me well."

Such is the link between happiness and me, that it happened again.

"You're no problem for us. But your comings and goings are watched by eyes in the street. They may make up all kinds of stories… Therefore…" When he said this, I felt shattered once again.

Again, a relationship was severed. Again, a rejection. Preparations had begun to send me back to my island. I was unable to say anything: the words died within me before I

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could even utter them. With great difficulty, I put on my smile: that was the only bandage I had to bind my wounds.

Where had the eyes and mouths of the street been all these days? I wanted to ask them what these eyes and mouths had done to them, but I couldn't.

They are a family. They have the right to decide for themselves how they should live.

They explained some more: the reality was that on this street, they had to talk with those mouths and look at those eyes.

I felt utterly defenceless in the face of this reality, which was new to me. The people who had surrounded me disappeared. The lisping child was so far, far away, too far for me to hear.

I was sent back once again to my island.

This is my island, surrounded by four walls. A settee, an almirah for books, a cassette player and a window. I stood beside the window and stared out bleakly. The same blue sky, partly obscured by clouds.

I tried to suppress my sorrow but it would not be contained. Though tears wet my cheeks, they felt hot. This is my island. I can weep copiously here. I can even cry out loud. No false sympathy or pity can touch me here.

They said I was one of theirs.

Forget, forget.

Look at the blue sky. How beautiful it is!

They had said nothing would stand between them and me.

Forget it, please. Words are not necessarily alive. Memories can only tear me to shreds. There won't be any other outcome. It's best to forget everything. Isn't that the reality? I don't know

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why, but suddenly I wanted to look at my photo album. I got it out.

All those who had sent me back to my island, all those who had explained reality to me, they were all there. My children were also in the album; they stepped out of it and played with me. They caught hold of my hair and pulled it. They climbed on my shoulders. They stretched out their hands, inviting me to pick them up. They searched for me.

My mind feels heavy. Tears still stream from my eyes. It has been proved over and over to me that this island is the only refuge for me. Why, then, do I cry?

I must once again reorganise myself. I must once again wear my smile. In future, I must be very wary and not let my guard down. I must not get close to anyone.

However…

I know my weakness. If I now get whatever I had longed for as a child, I'd be bowled over. My resolve, my caution, all my defences would vanish into thin air.

What shall I do?

Till I meet another reality, this island will be my own. I shut the album, went back to the window and looked out.

There's a vast distance between the sky and me. It has no relationship with me whatsoever. Perhaps that is why I am able to appreciate the beauty of the sky and continue to gaze at it…

Till the tears begin to flow. tlm

Translated from the Tamil story 'Theevu Manithan'
by A.J. Canagaratana

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INTEZAR HUSSAIN

Clouds

Illustration by VINITA CHAND

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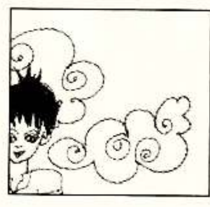

He wandered far in search of the clouds, down winding paths and alleys, till he reached the old mud hut. There, he turned on to the dirt track skirting the fields. He saw a grass-cutter coming from the other direction, a bundle of freshly cut grass balanced on his head. He stopped the man and asked, "Have you seen the clouds there?"

"Clouds?"

The grass-cutter was amazed, as though he had been asked the most outlandish question.

"Yes, clouds."

He was disappointed to see that the grass-cutter was still mystified.

He walked on until he came upon a farmer ploughing his field. He asked him the same question: "Did the clouds come here?"

The farmer, too, couldn't make sense of the question. "Clouds?" he spluttered.

"Yes, clouds."

He was asking after the clouds like a man who has lost a child and asks wayfarers if they have seen a child wandering. Perhaps the clouds, too, were lost children and he was going around asking people about them. But no one could give him

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a satisfactory answer.

His mother was the first person he had asked in the morning. "Ammaji, where have the clouds gone?"

"Who's gone where?" Ammaji shot back, as if he had asked an exceptionally stupid question.

"Clouds."

"Clouds! Have you lost your mind, boy? Hurry up, now. Wash quickly, eat your breakfast and go to school."

Ammaji's brusqueness depressed him. Dejectedly, he washed his hands and face, ate his breakfast, slung his satchel over his shoulder and left home. But the question still haunted him: Where did the clouds go?

He remembered what he had seen the night before — clouds billowing and surging in the dark sky. But when he went to sleep, the sky was clear and spangled with stars. Not a trace of a breeze; the oppressive heat kept him awake for a long time. When he awoke again, he had no idea of the time. All he knew was that it was the middle of the night. Up there in the sky, the clouds were rumbling and rolling, gathering head. In the occasional flashes of lightning, they were dense and black. It looked like rain. Rain that would ruin his sleep. With that thought, he closed his eyes again, pretending to be oblivious to the thunder. Soon, he fell asleep.

When he got up in the morning, he was amazed. The sky… the sky was clear and empty! Not a trace of rain in the courtyard. He was surprised and saddened — the clouds had surged and scudded across the skies without shedding a drop.

And it saddened him to think that he had fallen asleep. Had he stayed awake, perhaps, the clouds would not have disappeared like that. Perhaps they would have shed some of

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their rain… if only he hadn't fallen asleep. It would have been the season's first rainfall. But the clouds had come — massed, billowing, rumbling clouds — and gone while he slept. Not a drop of rain had fallen.

The month of the rains was slipping away. He looked up once again at the skies. Not a single patch of cloud. The sun beat down on his head from a clear, molten sky. He left the road that went to his school and turned towards the fields.

In the fierce heat, he walked far along the narrow ridges of earth between the fields. His body was on fire, his throat parched. After crossing several fields, he saw a large tree in whose ample shade a Persian wheel turned gently. It was like he had reached an oasis in the middle of a desert. He reached the shelter of the tree, threw down his satchel, splashed the cool water churning off the Persian wheel on his dusty feet. Then he washed his hands and face and drank his fill.

Refreshed, he looked around. An old man sat on a crumbling wall by the Persian wheel, puffing away at a hookah. He looked at the old man, wanting to say something but hesitated. Finally, he plucked up the courage to ask, "Did the clouds come here?"

The old man puffed at his hookah, looked closely at him and said, "Son, the clouds don't come in disguise. When they come in all their massed splendour, the earth and sky know of their coming."

"But the clouds were here last night, and no one got to know."

"The clouds came last night?" The old man thought for a moment, then called out, "Allah Din, did the clouds come last night?"

Allah Din was ploughing the field with his bullock. He

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stopped and said, "I don't know. I fell asleep the moment I hit the bed."

The old man said, "It is not enough for the clouds to come. I once lived in a place where it hadn't rained for ten years."

"Ten years?" He was open-mouthed.

"Yes, ten years. The clouds would come. They gathered and rumbled with such force once, but not a drop of rain fell."

"That's strange."

"No, there's nothing strange about it. It rains at His command. When He commands it, the clouds drop their rain; when He does not give the command, clouds do not rain."

The old man's words conjured up images from many past rains. He remembered dense, black clouds that had emerged fiercely from black nights as though they would unleash torrential rain, but scudded away without shedding so much as a drop. And there were those other rains that had come in the guise of a few meaningless, seedless cotton-wool tufts, yet let loose such a downpour that the ponds and lakes brimmed over!

The old man looked at the smouldering sky and muttered, "The season is slipping past. When will He give the command?"

He, too, muttered, as though in answer, "God knows where the clouds went..."

"Son, either it doesn't rain, and when it does, there are floods. The sky has become a miser. The strength of the earth is sapped. It's either a dry spell, or floods."

He could barely understand what the old man was saying, but he sat there listening to him. Suddenly, he realised how late

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it was. He picked up his satchel, slung it over his shoulder and got to his feet.

He walked for miles in the sun and dust. He went back by the same dirt track he had taken to come there. The sun was still fiercely hot but when he reached the mud hut, he felt a nip in the air and the earth was damp underfoot.

As he neared the village, he saw the roads were wet. Trees that had been standing draped in layers of dust when he had left in the morning now looked freshly bathed and the little gutter that had been dry since the last monsoon gurgled like a mountain stream. A wave of happiness coursed through his body. He hurried home. He wanted to see how fresh and clean the *jamun* tree in his courtyard looked.

When he got home, he saw that the rain had changed everything. A lot of leaves had fallen from the *jamun* and now lay soiled and bruised in the wet earth. The tree stood clean and scrubbed, freshly showered, and Ammaji was saying in a rare moment of contentment, "That was a good shower, thank God! The heat was killing me."

Raindrops were still rolling off the leaves of the *jamun*. He stood beneath the tree and let them fall on his head and face. He raised his eyes to the sky and saw it clear and scrubbed, without even a wisp of cloud. He had walked so far in the dust and the sun in search of the clouds, and in his absence they had come, shed their rain and gone away. The thought saddened him. Suddenly, the rain-drenched world was meaningless. tlm

Translated from the Urdu story 'Badal' *by Rakshanda Jalil*

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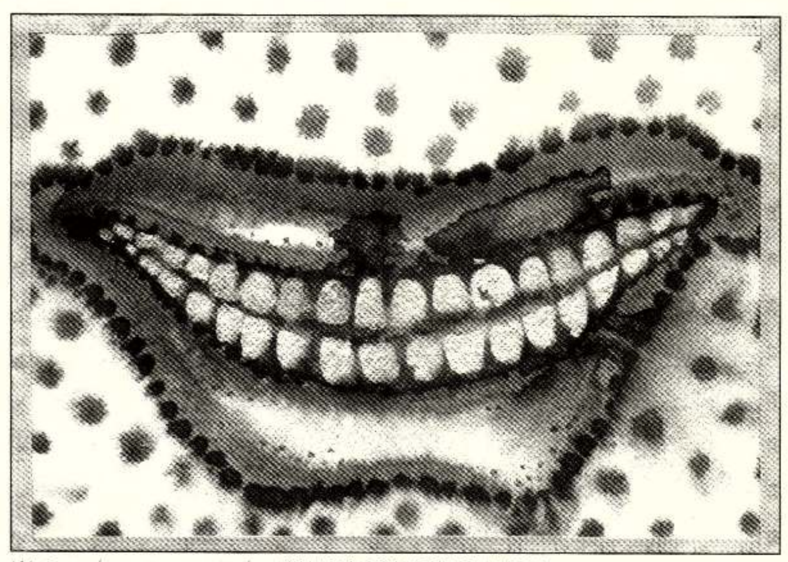
ASGHAR WAJAHAT

The Padmashree and I



Watercolour on paper by VINAYAK BHATTACHARYA

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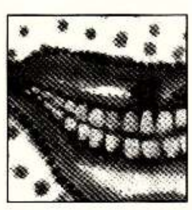

I WAS AMAZED TO SEE him there. Narrow black pyjamas, a black *kurta*, black shoes, a black jacket, a white cashmere shawl flung over his shoulders, and the shining bald dome of his head, with a mere fringe of hair. An expression that said — look, like all great men, I stand apart from all this. Look, I'm so great now that I have risen above all this. There is an air of satisfaction about him that suggests callous heedlessness. Perhaps he has read somewhere that the mark of greatness is humility, and so he has rendered humble his expression and his carriage. It is a formal rendering, like a classical dance *mudra.*

The brightly-lit banquet hall of a five-star hotel in the capital is jam-packed with the luminaries of the world of art and culture. Mitra walks into the hall, looking at all the people as if they are his children and as if he is accustomed to looking even upon children with humility. He stands before them with his palms joined. He is not greeting mere individuals. He is greeting everyone, all of them, the multitude, the nation, all the world. A few people about him underscore his greatness by their slovenly, uncouth and aggressive manner.

Mitra has brought them here with him to exhibit precisely these qualities, so that by force of contrast, they call attention to his carefully cultivated humility and thereby to his greatness. A strange smile plays upon his lips, a bit of the saint, something

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of the Mona Lisa and a dash of the politician's rictus. He raises his joined hands with the grace of a ballet dancer. With a couple of calculated steps, he is at the centre of attention. The photographers and television news cameramen don't know him, but they sense his importance and train their cameras on him. His gaze detached, he regards the company distantly.

A couple of personalities go up to him. He speaks with them in the measured, precise articulation of a television newsreader. In this orchestra of senior officials, ministers and the culture mafia, Mitra's preeminence is patently clear. He even suffers the few callow newcomers who come up to him, goes through the motions of blessing them, then turns quickly away to someone else, as quickly as a parrot averts its gaze. Everyone at the party seems to be drinking, but he doesn't have a glass in his hand. Several people have offered him a drink, but he declines with simple dignity, saying that he has a sore throat — he has to take his medicines. And he doesn't drink anyway, thanks just the same, he explains by implication and innuendo. Sometimes, he grimaces in distaste at a proffered glass, sometimes pushes it away. I know, of course, that the bastard can inhale a whole hogshead without even burping.

I walk towards him. Our eyes meet. My gaze holds memories of our old acquaintance. His holds a clear message: forget about it. I do know you, he is saying, but forget about the taint I see in your eyes, of our partnership in ancient sin. I understand the message and ignore it. I proffer my hand. Mitra is taken aback. He takes his dead white rat of a hand out of his cashmere shawl and advances it precisely two inches. I understand the dog completely. I take his hand and shake it firmly, looking him in the eye. I can see that he is completely at a loss.

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Let sleeping dogs lie, for God's sake, his look tells me.
"How are you, my friend? Seeing you after a long time," I say with relish.
Mitra smiles formally, as if I was making polite conversation. "How have you been? To meet you after so long makes me very happy," he says, his voice exquisitely modulated.
"Why aren't you drinking?" I hold up my glass. "Did you take your regular dose at home?"

Mitra's eyes flash: You bastard, why do you want to demolish my carefully cultivated personality? I read him clearly, but nevertheless want to ask — why all this play-acting?
"What's up?" I ask in a low voice.
"Up?" he whispers.
"Yeah, all this... What's it all about?"
"Don't you read the papers?"
"Yeah, pal, I do, but..."
He cuts me short: "I was awarded the Padmashree last week."
"Oho! So that's it... Pulled a few strings, eh? That business about your spiriting away a girl is still in the courts, and the Montreal case... that's been in the papers too."

There was a time, when Mitra was still learning the ropes of his craft, when he came to regard faith and culture as synonyms for each other. Following this philosophy, he found employment as a priest at a temple in Montreal. The temple was modern, the city exciting, offering an abundance of food and drink. Not just the milk and butter appropriate to the priesthood but also meats of every descriptions, both raw and cooked. Mitra began to fill out, and his reason became clouded over by a very basic need. He indicated to a beautiful woman who visited the temple every day that she could come

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to him if she were so inclined. He would be happy to receive her. The message was presented well, by a man who was yet to learn to speak like a television newsreader. The woman did come to him and in the presence of all the gods, Mitra did with her what Heer had wished to do with Ranjha and Farhad with Shirin. But our Mitra had no idea that for the safety of the gods, the temple management had installed closed-circuit cameras. Not only did they film the idols continuously, but also the congregation before them. Anyway, when the management saw this blue film made for free, they were initially inclined to sell it and use the money for good works. But then, who knows why, they filed a police case against Mitra. The matter stood thus: if the woman said that she had consented to Mitra's advances, he could be saved; if not, he faced prison. She was divorced, but had a work permit through her husband. Mitra made an honest woman of her.

But after they were married, she discovered that Mitra's sport before the gods was not a new passion. He was not a straight man; he was more comfortable on the thorny path. Pursuant to this discovery, Mitra found himself a free man, returned to his homeland and took a teaching position at the national arts centre. Alongside his teaching, he worked wonders at the institution. With his two hands, he did the work of twenty. With his two eyes, he saw what Shiva's third eye was blind to. He used his two feet like the four wheels of a car.

Every member of the national arts centre thirsted after the blood of every other member, but each considered Mitra to be his or her greatest well-wisher. Mitra got people to fight each other, to destroy each other, and so continued to chart a very erect career graph. He made friends with the very atoms that

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lined the road from the ministry to the secretariat. At any price, in any event and at any time there was only one thought in his mind — to clear the way.

Right now, however, a storm seems to course across Mitra's face, turning it red, yellow, black, rose, green, blue in quick succession. Baffled, he ignores me and moves on. And as he passes me, he regains his expression of benign dignity.

Every now and then, the entrance of a minister illuminates the room; people strategically change positions to accommodate the new luminary in their midst. I look for an opportunity to get to Mitra again and ask him the prescription for bagging a Padmashree. It takes a while, but finally I find myself facing him again. He tries to avoid me, but I stand my ground brazenly.

"Why don't you come home one of these days? We'll talk there," I say as he side-steps and I whirl around to face him.

"Look, I told you..." He glares at me. I laugh. The bastard is showing his true colours now.

"Tell me right now."

"What?"

"How did you rig the selection board?"

"What nonsense!"

"No, please, do tell!"

"What would you do with this information?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you asking at all? It's vulgar."

"What's vulgar about it?"

He looks irritated and helpless. Then he quickly walks away, faster than his usual dignified pace, to a celebrity and begins talking to him.

I drift like a kite with its string cut, but then I run into

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another old sinner. The bastard used to be a cameraman before he drank himself out of business. Now, he is being treated for cirrhosis, but he's still drinking on the side.

"Hey, Shantu, what are you doing here?"

"I... I'm with Baldy Padmashree."

"Yeah? Now that he has a Padmashree, the bastard isn't giving me the time of day."

"He won't talk to us here. He's brought me here on that condition. When he leaves for home, he'll pick me up outside the hotel."

"Shantu, tell me, how did Baldy bag a Padmashree?"

"Let go, man, let me drink in peace."

"Come on, tell us."

"Is it a secret? Everyone knows."

"Everyone except me."

Baldy Padmashree sees me with Shantu and his expression changes. He cocks his eye at Shantu, who shrinks away from me as people do when they learn that you have AIDS.

In the distance, I see Gita Sharma, the actress with the national arts centre. God, I just had to run into all these people from the past today! I turn towards her, unsteady on my feet. Once upon a time, she had had an interesting relationship with Baldy Padmashree, and it eventually became as public as it was interesting.

She had been beautiful, and Padmashree was her teacher. Padmashree used on her the therapies and nostrums he had developed in experiments with other women, and got satisfactory results. One day — or one night — they were alone together during a rehearsal. Padmashree told her the tear-jerking story of his life, and at the end he wept. The nostrum

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worked beautifully. But soon Gita learned that Padmashree knew less of theatre than of the uses of theatricals in ensnaring young women. I walked over to Gita.

"How do you like it?"

"Like what?"

"Baldy getting the Padmashree."

"It's very good. I've congratulated him."

"Now, you mean?"

"Now, I'm travelling to London to start a branch of the national arts centre. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly." Baldy Padmashree is chairman of the institution.

Outside the five-star hotel, Shantu and I stand in the darkness. When Baldy Padmashree's car draws up for Shantu, I step forward as well. Baldy smiles and pats the seat beside him. In a dignified voice, he says: "You don't get it, do you? Ever since I got the Padmashree, I have been feeling light as a flower. When I walk, it's like I'm walking on water. When I eat, it's like I'm only inhaling the aroma of food. I look at other people, and they are mere shadows. I touch one hand with the other and I'm overwhelmed. Like I'm radiating a flood of joy. What can I say... I'm not myself any more — I'm Padmashree."

He rambles on. The superabundance of free booze has plugged my brain and my ears. All I know at this moment is that I... I am me. **tlm**

Translated from the Urdu story 'Mae aur Padmashree' *(2003) by Pratik Kanjilal*

NOTE

Mitra: The ancient Indo-Aryan god of friendship and contracts. In modern usage, the word simply means 'friend'

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