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## A Sentimental Pigeon Keeper

ADNAN ALAM

*San Jose State University*

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A SENTIMENTAL PIGEON KEEPER

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Adnan Alam

December 2015

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Adnan Alam

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

A SENTIMENTAL PIGEON KEEPER

by

Adnan Alam

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
AND  
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2015

Professor Cathleen Miller

Department of English and Comparative Literature

Professor Persis Karim

Department of English and Comparative Literature

Professor Nick Taylor

Department of English and Comparative Literature

## ABSTRACT

### A SENTIMENTAL PIGEON KEEPER

by Adnan Alam

This is a memoir – a narrative work of creative nonfiction. This story takes place over a single day, during the summer of 1992, when the life of a thirteen-year old boy falls apart. Years of misbehaving culminate into something so devastating that his world has no other options but to explode. The day starts with his mother selling off his beloved pigeons, followed by his father's stealing of a famous painter's painting, all the while the boy is terrified by the possibility of having impregnated one of his cousins, who is five years his senior. During this transformative day, he experiences, like never before, the distress of living and an intense passion for the life yet to come. In this memoir, *A Sentimental Pigeon Keeper*, the narrator not only captures the life of a thirteen-year old boy in Jessore, Bangladesh, in the early 1990, but also sketches the beliefs and lifestyle of a complex and liberal family within the conservative social and cultural norms of the time. It is a glimpse into a boyhood consumed by extraordinary circumstances. This is ultimately a memoir of a grand transformation.

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For not being perfect parents

Farida Khanam

Rabiul Alam

“Writers who are truly original do not set out to fabricate new forms of expression, or to invent themes merely for the sake of appearing new. They attain their originality through extraordinary sincerity, by daring to give everything of themselves, their most secret thoughts and idiosyncrasies.”

– From *Knut Hamsun, Artist of Skepticism* by Isaac Bashevis Singer

“The history of mankind is the history of our misunderstandings with god, for he doesn’t understand us, and we don’t understand him.”

– From *Cain* by Jose Saramago

“To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art.”

– From *What Is Art?* By Leo Tolstoy



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## Family Members

Sheikh Afsaruddin (Paternal Grandfather – Dada)

Aklima Khatun (Paternal Grandmother – Dadi)

Rabiul Alam (Dad – Abbu)

Farida Khanam (Mom – Mamoni)

Aunts: Khuku, Momo, Dipti, Lipi, Mukti, Shoshi

Sheikh Mohiuddin (Sheikh Afsaruddin's Brother)

Sofeda Khatun (Sheikh Afsaruddin's Sister In Law)

Sheikh Mohiuddin's Sons: Ayub, Musa, Mantu, Centu, Mintu, Babu

Sheikh Mohiuddin's Daughters: Ayesha, Sahana, Bijli, Shamoli

Sahana's Daughter: Dipu

Ayub's Son: Just

## PREFACE

Why write a memoir? Writing a memoir is ultimately an act of forgiveness. Clearly, anger is the birthplace of this particular memoir, but hope is what fuels this journey. It is, for me, a quest to find a set of points that can be connected to bring up the experiences of a life once lived. Memoir is the story of a past life that cannot be altered, but the experiences can be evoked at a later time, and that act of evocation has the power to see the life once lived through different eyes. In this memoir, I intended to look back at a very difficult and transitory period of my life, which ultimately defined me. I wanted to tell my story from within the stories of my family and the city in which I grew up. It is my family and the city that gives the form to the content of my life. The experiences of my life cannot be separated from the dynamics and complexities of my family and the city. My life is full of colorful people, events, and places. This book is not only the story of my life, but also the story of the people and places that surrounded me. The power of this creation has convinced me that I once lived an extraordinary life, and that life has the full right to take flight. Memories are like those other lives, some are lived and some are imagined. While we all get to live one life, no matter how small or large it is, some of us get to re live, over and over, the lives buried in our memories. This is not a quest to make sense of what happened, but to remember what happened and see it through the narrator's senses, feelings, and worldviews.

One day, in the summer of 1992, the life of a thirteen-year old boy falls apart. Years of misbehaving culminate into something so devastating that his world has no other options but to explode. The day starts with his mother selling off his beloved

pigeons, followed by his father's stealing of a famous painter's painting, all the while the boy is terrified by the possibility of having impregnated one of his cousins, who is five years his senior. During this transformative day, he experiences, like never before, the distress of living and an intense passion for the life yet to come. In this memoir, *A Sentimental Pigeon Keeper*, the narrator not only captures the life of a thirteen-year old boy in Jessore, Bangladesh, in the early 1990s, but also sketches the beliefs and lifestyle of a complex and liberal family within the conservative social and cultural norms of the time. It is a glimpse into a boyhood consumed by extraordinary circumstances. This is ultimately a memoir of a grand transformation. This is my story!

My parents ran away from their homes and got married when my Mamoni was only fourteen years old and Abbu seventeen. It was rumored that they had never really gotten married, but lived like a husband and wife for over a week before they were found in one of Abbu's friends' houses. My life until I was thirteen progressed along the same line as theirs, indicating an even worse outcome for my future. Mamoni was determined to change that direction, and the menacing consequences of her determination didn't matter at all to her, though they transformed me into another person and made me who I am today. Looking back, I do not blame; I merely see things as they once were.

At thirteen, my maturity matched that of an adult's. When I was growing up, there were no other children of my age in the house. The house was full of adults, and I witnessed a multitude of things that shouldn't have been witnessed by a thirteen-year old boy. One of my fundamental findings of the time was that age only made people older, and aging didn't make them any wiser or happier, and everyone constantly fought terrible

battles of their own that only they understood or cared for. Only the voices of the adults of the house mattered. They were important. I didn't count. I was too small and unimportant. This memoir is the voice that I didn't have at the time. I was not at the center of anything. I was at the periphery of all things. But I had my own world, and in that world I was at the center of everything. This memoir provided me with an opportunity to look at my life from that center.

I lived in a large house. Within the many secret locations of our house I was trained in the arts of lust and sex by one of my cousins. I was seven. She was twelve. It was not a sin. It was not a crime. It was not abnormal. At least not to me! It was something to keep secret and not talk about. Was it an abuse? Was I abused? I say, "No." I enjoyed it immensely. We were sex buddies! In this memoir, I have explored some of my innermost secrets, shames, and hypocrisies. It is not an attempt to present myself as a better man, but an attempt to evoke a few specific experiences that I once experienced.

While I worked on this memoir, I re read most of Leo Tolstoy's major works for artistic and spiritual support. I was inspired, in a completely new way, by Tolstoy's sense of spirituality, humanity, and artistic truth. I intended this memoir, *A Sentimental Pigeon Keeper*, to read like a novel, while remaining true to my memories. The present is a time of confusion and narrowness, but the grand past is what gives meaning to the present, and because of that a memoir is not only an act of remembrance, but a constant source of inspiration and dreams. A memoir, to me, is that essential and central object that defines one's place in space and time.

This book talks about the regional myths, tales, and beliefs popular in my homeland. Some aspects of it read like a fable. I learned this technique from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's memoir *Living to Tell the Tale*. Using the setting, regional beliefs, and carefully chosen words, he creates a world that feels and sounds like fiction. Just like his life story, my memoir is also about family members, friends, and neighbors from a specific region in the world. It is about a place and how it shapes its inhabitants' beliefs and eventually their lives. From this memoir, I learned the technique of creating the extraordinary from the ordinary. I learned from Marquez's memoir that myths can be found in one's own family if one is willing to accept the fact that one's memories are just one out of many possible faces of truth. People are constantly shaped by others and the places in which they coexist. I outlined the interconnections between the people and their places, one of the most fundamental layers that went into the creation of this book.

When I look back, I realize that I've always been deeply connected to the city where I was born. When I think of a city, I almost think of it like a person. A city is like a person who is always there whether one notices it or not. It is the guide. It is the compass. I cannot think of my life without talking about my city. My city is the pit that nurtured me and taught me how to survive in a cruel world and how to create my own thoughts. There was a brothel in my city that bought and sold young girls, a prison that subdued an uprising by killing a lot of prisoners in the middle of the night, and political violence often went rampant. I witnessed it all from up close. Jessore was the first city to be liberated from Pakistan during the 1971 War of Independence in Bangladesh. So, as a Jessorian we all keep a hidden pride in our hearts for our city. Orhan Pamuk's

memoir *Istanbul* tells the story of the city he grew up in. He almost wrote *Istanbul* into a fully fleshed being. I attempted to do the same for Jessore, but the task was a difficult one since no one outside of Bangladesh knows much about Jessore. It is from Pamuk's memoir that I learned how to talk about the history and the influences of one's city. Until I was about eighteen years old, I knew no other places in Bangladesh more intimately than Jessore. Because like me, Pamuk comes from an *Islamic* background, we share a lot of similar religious, cultural, and family oriented experiences. My emotions are eastern, but my beliefs about modernity are western. In my mind, I live in a world that exists in between the east and west. How does one connect the local experiences with the universal? It is through one's authentic love for the people and place. I have learned this technique from Pamuk's *Istanbul*.

Growing up, I had to lie a lot in order to live, to take on another identity or identities. I was a bit of a conman and a thief. I took everything lightly. I never thought about the consequences of my crimes. I just did it, for fun. I was like Toby from Tobias Wolff's memoir *This Boy's Life*, but I was a quiet one. Almost everything I did, I did very secretly, and at times not even my best friend, *Olide*, knew about it. I coned my way through my existence until *Mamoni* caught on to my trickery. If I hadn't been street smart and a conman of some sort, I wouldn't have survived my teen years. Because I was street smart, I was able to see and understand people's flaws and criminal activities better than my peers could. From Wolff's memoir, I learned the techniques of talking about past mischievous activities in a lighthearted and humorous way. Yes, bad things did happen to me. Yes, I did do the bad things. I prefer looking at my past from a

humorous angle, while maintaining the full weight of my experiences uncorrupted. It is the technique of telling the grave truth in a lighthearted way that makes great memoir. It is not an attempt to make light of serious situations, but it is a coping mechanism, trying to survive the lashes of truth.

My memoir would be incomplete without the secrets that my family members keep. There were thieves in the family, there was a murder accusation against one of the family members, there was an accusation of rape, there were hints of homosexuality, and there were countless abuses of all forms. I personally believe that it is by talking about our shames that we become free. I learned how to talk about family secrets from Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir, *The Woman Warrior*. The only way to talk about secrets is to simply lay them out. I believe one becomes free by revealing one's secrets or hidden shames. There is nothing better than this lifting of burden and the feeling of liberation.

Abbu was a drug addict and he suffered from Schizophrenia from the age of 21. When he was younger, he was abusive toward my mother and others in the family. Until I read Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes* I didn't know how to talk about this very dark and difficult chapter of my life. I enjoy McCourt's humor, and also the technique of telling a story in the only way possible, which is as simply and ecstatically as possible. He is a master of telling the truth as it is, and he taught me how to add enough humor so the reader doesn't fall into depression. Mamoni used to beat me all the time, and she always made me select the stick that would hurt the most. I can talk about Mamoni from a very depressing mood with a dark tone, but instead, I prefer to talk about it openly and



sympathetically. This is not a defense mechanism. This is liberation from depression and low self esteem. This is living life. This is telling the tale as it was.

In this memoir, I attempted to give expression to my experiences through an authentic voice, paint a picture of the space and time in which I grew up, and create a world that is no longer real but more real than the world of the present. This is my story. This is my life. This is my sense of the reality.

## Under the Guava Tree

During one June dawn in 1992, in *Jessore, Bangladesh*, I dreamt of catching pigeons, a lot of them, while the world outside of my sleep took a sinister turn. In my boyhood, I made a name for myself for not sleeping much, but that Friday dawn took me to a land of dreams, where every feeling was true and addictive. A sentence tried to reach me from somewhere far as if it travelled through layers of hazy memories and one that constantly needed to escape from obnoxious spider webs. “Your mother is about to sell off your pigeons – all of them.” A sinister sentence, which must have waited patiently since the beginning of time to finally unfold its true menace and transform the world of a naïve and sentimental boy. It knew how to get to me, cut through all my pride and stubbornness and hurt me, though I wouldn’t know it until I had woken up. The arrival of that sentence wasn’t sudden or entirely unexpected or untimely, but it still felt unreal, even when I escaped the world of that enchanting dream. My cousin *Dipu* uttered this unfortunate sentence in that dawn, which eventually left me shaken, naked to the core and altered. On the surface it was a simple sentence about a future transaction of some sort. Perhaps the others in the house wouldn’t have found anything wrong, bad or sinister about this sentence, but it had the potency to change my life’s direction forever. In my dream, I could hear her, but I was in no capacity to separate the real from unreal. I was in the grasp of an unreal world, and the real did not exist. For a long time, as she recalled later, she tried to wake me up, while I was in the clinched fist of a dream that told lies, made the real unreal and the unreal real.

The best part of the dream was that everything in it progressed toward a desired end. Right when the dark headed gray wild pigeons landed on our kitchen roof, at least a hundred of them, I began to wake up, must have been from the unexpected excitements. I knew I was waking up from a dream, but I didn't want that to happen. I wanted the dream to perpetuate and remain fascinating. They said the dawn dreams always came true, so I was naturally annoyed and began to pray, from within the dreamy state, to something unknown, for a much deeper sleep so the dream could reach its natural end. After the impromptu prayer, I almost immediately fell back in deep sleep. My prayers were answered though, at last, for once. As soon as I went back to dreaming again, I began to trap the wild pigeons, one after another. It was too easy. It felt to me that the pigeons let themselves to be trapped for my enjoyment and to satisfy my greed completely, which annoyed me and the trapping very quickly took a sharp turn to bore me even. I wanted to trap them all, but not so easily. All those pigeons looked exactly the same, and their fast moving red feet resembled the rhythm of some unknown music that had the power to capture me in its hallucinatory charm. I couldn't differentiate between the males and females, which bothered me since I was good at sorting out the male pigeons from the females. They behaved more like the obedient pigeons that ate from people's hands than the wild ones that no one could ever catch and domesticate. I wanted some resistance, some trickery from them and deep down I wanted at least one of them to escape or remain free and leave behind a lasting dissatisfaction in my heart.

In my dream, as I trapped those pigeons, I sat under the branches of the giant brown guava tree that had shaded our kitchen roof for ages. When I was much younger, I

spent hours of my life on the branches of that guava tree like a monkey, finding the ripe guavas hidden in the rough green leaves or picking one from the top branches of the tree where no adults could ever reach. That tree was like a guardian, and every year it renewed itself by shading its thin brown whitish bark, or skin as I used to think of it, in small circular blotches.

It had drizzled that morning, as I understood it in my dream, and tiny drops of water were trapped within the lively white guava flowers. The fragrance of the guava flowers soothed the air and made that place serene. In the afternoon, during the trapping, the sun finally decided to show its dim face and the trapped water droplets sparkled as if they were part of the flowers, primitive and cold. I have seen those sparkles before, but because I was excited, they looked magical as if those flowers were specks of light in the green river of leaves. In my dream, I fell in love with something I have known all my life in a completely new way. I have always loved the rain for as long as I could remember. I loved that guava tree in a muggy day when it blossomed. I loved the trapped water in those flowers. I loved the light that was trapped within the water droplets. I loved the rain water that fell on my skin from those branches and leaves. I loved the breeze that went through those branches. I fell in love with everything associated with that guava tree that afternoon, in my dream.

I sat under that guava tree, and trapped the pigeons using a handmade trap, which consisted of a long jute string, a large round basket made out of bamboo branches and a triangular wooden block. I scattered a fistful of fat wheat grains on the roof. The bottom edge of the basket touched the rooftop and the jute string was tied through a hole at the

top edge of the basket, which ran down in tangent behind the basket, went over the triangular wooden block and I held the string from a hidden position behind the wooden block, while the basket stood hanging directly over the wheat grains at a forty five degree angle. The pigeons fought over the wheat grains and as they neared the center of the basket, I let the string go, which trapped them. A simple method that rarely worked in real life, but worked perfectly well in my dream. They all came in as if they had no minds of their own, and my desire was their fate and they accepted it with ceremonial willingness. Every time I let the string go, I trapped at least half a dozen of them. In real life, when I was lucky to trap one, the others usually got scared and became cautious, but in my dream, I was in luck every time I let the string go.

As I caught them, I placed them in a large chicken cage, which had a soft netted circular opening that could be tightened by pulling a string. It was a large cage that could easily hold over five hundred pigeons. The chicken cage had hundreds of rhombus shaped holes around its circular belly so the birds could breathe, through which I looked at the captured pigeons and the sight transformed me into the happiest boy in the whole world. During those moments, nothing else but those extraordinary experiences existed. How the water drop shaped big bulky bamboo framed yellow chicken cage appeared on the kitchen roof I had no idea, but it was there for me to use. In the world of dreams everything is possible, and when that dream goes well, everything just appears. While those caught pigeons were in the cage they made no noise, which was not only unusual but unnatural. A thousand free pigeons on a roof could stay quiet for an entire afternoon, but once they are in a cage they try to explode the cage with their ritualistic continuous

calling of *bak ba kum bak ba kum bak ba kum*. There were so many of them, and they were now mine. From within my dream, I dreamt of surprising my friends since no one had a hundred wild pigeons in their possession in my city, maybe even in the entire country. I smiled, which came from a deep sense of mischievous pride. Then it occurred to me that *Mamoni*, my mother, would be angry again. Even in my dream I feared her. I already had too many pigeons, and now I had at least a hundred more. What would I do with them? Did they belong to somebody? Where did they come from? What if the true owner showed up and demanded their return? How would the true owner know about it anyway? What would *Mamoni* do when she found out? I thought there would be plenty of time to think of all that, for now I just needed to trap as many pigeons as I could. For a moment I thought those pigeons were stupid, a thought that scared me, then I was saddened and my smile disappeared. What would I do with these stupid pigeons that were easy to trap? Maybe I can train them to be smarter later? Can you train pigeons to be smarter? How would I go about doing that? I feared if those pigeons were truly stupid, then when I let them free and fly, others could also catch them as easy. That sadness fortunately disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared. I could not stay sad in front of a hundred pigeons that could well be potentially mine forever. So, for now I decided to trap them and cage them and worry about all my worries later. I was happy again, excited again, and the same proud smile reappeared. I had never trapped so many pigeons all in one afternoon before, let alone wild pigeons, the rarest of them all.

Then, while still in my dream, I felt something hit me on my left shoulder. I turned my head and looked at the shoulder first and then behind me to see whether there

was anyone there. I wanted to know what it was, but did not want to spend too much time trying to figure it out. There was no one else but me on that roof under those branches of the guava tree with wet green leaves and starry white flowers. I went back to trapping the pigeons again. It seemed to me that as I caught them their numbers on the roof continuously increased and I still had more to trap. Then I felt that hit on my shoulder again. This time I stood up in my dream, and said, “What is this? Who is this? Who is doing this? Who is trying to scare me?” I knew there was no one there, so I was a bit embarrassed by my own foolishness. I looked toward the rest of the windows and doors of the house that were to my left, right and in the front of me. I wanted to be sure that no one else witnessed that moment of my embarrassment.

Our house back then had six box shaped yellowish separate buildings built around a huge *uthon*, inner yard, and there was a building almost at the center of the *uthon* where my grandfather stored his collection of precious and rare furniture woods. The kitchen and the food storage rooms together formed one of those buildings. All of the roofs and windows of any one of those buildings that faced the *uthon* were visible from any of other roofs and windows. The main two story building where most of us slept was on my left. I had to be quick but complete in my scanning of the windows, roofs and doors to make sure that my embarrassment was mine alone and contained. When I was sure that no one else had witnessed it, only then could I concentrate on my trapping business again. All this still happened in my dream, but those memories remained fresh and never diminished, perhaps because it was the exact opposite to what was going on in the real

world of mine. Then I felt that hitting on the shoulder again, and this time the voice said, “*Adnan*, wake up! Wake up!”

I said, “For what? What time is it?”

The voice said, “I’ve been calling you for so long! I thought you rarely slept and slept very lightly! But you slept like you were dead.”

I said, “Did I? What are you talking about?”

“You are in a lot of trouble.”

I wiped my eyes with the sides of my curled index fingers and said, “What? What happened?”

The voice said, “Get off the bed! Your mother is about to sell off your pigeons - all of them.” It caught my attention as if a nail went through my spine, as if I drank something bitter, as if I fell from a tall tree and hit the ground hard. I couldn’t believe what I had just heard.

I grabbed the wrist of her right hand tightly, and asked, “What are you talking about?” It was my cousin *Dipu* who tried to wake me up to inform me about the worst disaster that was about to hit me like a *Kal boi shakhi Jhor*, a *Bengali* summer cyclone. She screamed softly and said, “Let go of my hand! You are hurting me!”

I realized I had not only grabbed her hand, but I grabbed her gold bangles as well, which pressed deeply against her soft white skin. When I let go of her hand she said, “Don’t hold my hands like that again.” In her blue *Kameez*, traditional clothes for *Bengali* unmarried girls, which had scattered tiny white flower prints, she looked younger in that dawn light, though she was four years older than me. She neatly made a *Khopa* of her



hair, which was held tightly in a wrapped circle behind her head by a long and red plastic hairpin. Her egg shaped face with a sharp nose and chin pretended to be calm, but her large frightened eyes gave it all away. I knew she was not joking, and I knew *Mamoni* was dead serious about it. I knew what *Mamoni* was capable of. In her fury she could even tackle a *Bengal* tiger, which was a popular belief in the neighborhood. I believed it, and I knew others truly believed it so too. She had the reason to be serious and deadly in her actions. Only *Mamoni* and I knew why she was doing it, and why I had to change myself drastically if I wanted all that to stop. But I also knew it was too late. *Mamoni* never took her words back once she uttered them and never admitted her faults either. Her power came from her creative and deliberate cruelties, which mostly and unfortunately centered on me. I knew I was trapped and done for. The reality hit me, and I wished for the world of the dreams to take over the world of the real again. I wanted the unreal to be real, and the real unreal.

Our house was about a mile away to the south from the center of the city, *Jessore*. In those days, *Jessore* was still a small city surrounded and filled by scattered trees, vegetation and villages. Our house was built on a two acre rectangular property with a family graveyard at the western end. The graveyard was set diagonally on the opposite end on the property from the main building of the house. The house was next to the main road, which connected the city center with the outskirts of the city to the south. The house was at the corner of the main road and a narrow road that went along the entire stretch of the property from east to west. The main road was called *Ghope Central Road*, which ran from north to south, and the narrow road on the north side of the property had

no name. Directly opposite to our house, on the other side of the main road, was *Rafik's* rice mill, and behind it was the community that ran one of the largest rice businesses in the city.

As I sat on my bed thinking, I could hear the labors talking outside, by the rice mill, which was no more than hundred yards away from my window. The mill operated for twenty four hours a day, which in those days was still a novel idea in my city. I could hear the rickshaws moving on the road - the noise of the paddling, occasional bell ringing and the familiar noise that was created by the uneven and broken surface of the road as the rickshaws moved along. I opened the window and looked at the rice mill, the community behind it and the city's one of the tallest white water tanks beyond it. Everything looked wet, but there was a hazy light among the clouds behind the water tank, which indicated that the sun might come out later on that day.

I looked at the roads. In any other day, there would be school kids walking toward their schools, but it was Friday, so there were no kids in their white shirts, navy blue or black pants and white shoes. A few elderly men were out on the road as always brushing their teeth - a filthy scene, which always disgusted me. They brushed and spat all over the road and by the sides of the houses and stores and into the drains. There was a stationary store on the left side of the rice mill, which was still closed. Vegetable sellers were going to the big and small bazars in the city from the nearby villages to sell their vegetables and fruits. A few beggars came out on the road as well, God knows from where, and were going toward the city center. Poor farmers who couldn't afford a bicycle carried vegetables on their shoulders, loads tied with long and hanging strings on

two ends of a carefully made flat bamboo stick that could take the right amount of load and pressure. As the men walked on their bare feet, the flat stick bounced on their shoulders lightly and they walked on in accordance to a primitive rhythm of tense muscle, hard work and hope. I could see the lights in our neighbor's windows, which was on the other side of the narrow road. *Shanta*, the girl with whom I used to go to the elementary school, lived on the second floor of that house. When we were in sixth grade we used to go to a private tutor's house to learn English. She used to sit opposite to me and every once in a while spread her legs wide as she paid attention to the tutor and his blackboard on the wall. She knew I liked to look. She made sure she had no panties under those wild and colorful skirts. I knew she liked to show it to me. I looked. I loved the view. I always waited for more. We never talked about it beyond that hour and a half study session, as if it never happened.

*Dipu* said, "She is on the roof! She is really going to sell all of your pigeons. Believe it or not!" I lifted the mosquito net high, pushed it away and sat on the side of the bed. The bed had a bright orange bed sheet, a couple of handmade *Kathas* (quilts), a brown body pillow and few blue head pillows. The walls were decorated with the posters of scientists and philosophers. I had two bookshelves with over a thousand books, a study table and two chairs. That was all I had in my room. That was all I needed to live a life of my own. The space under the bed was full of books and things that I rarely read or needed. I sat there in front of *Dipu* and felt cold. Though it had rained the night before and it was a cool drizzling dawn, I felt it would be a hot and humid day by ten in

the morning. Yet, I felt cold. I grabbed a *Katha* and wrapped it around my shoulders and sat there, thinking. The elders often said, “Dreams take place within the tiniest fraction of time, and within that dream exists the experience of a lifetime.” How different everything was then now that I existed outside of my dream! I compared a lifetime of realities with the tiniest of dreams, and I preferred the dreams.

*Dipu* asked, “Do you have a fever?”

I said, “No. I think I am nervous.”

“Nervous?”

“I’m cold because I’m nervous.”

“You better go, see if you can stop her. No one could stop her, but you could try.”

“She is going to do it. I know it. This is serious.”

“Why don’t you run up there and before she says anything open the cages and let the pigeons go?”

“That won’t stop her. She would do it anyway.”

“That’s the only thing I could think of. Yes, she would beat you, but you could save the pigeons.”

“She has waited for this moment for a long time. I know she did.”

“Would you stop hesitating and just go and see what you can do?” *Dipu* was visibly irritated. Her face turned red and her bottom lip began to tremble as it always did when she was angry or upset.

It was only then that I suddenly remembered *Dipu* and I were not seeing each other privately for days prior to that day and only talked through our various secret gestures, but now she stood in my room, so close to me, our bodies almost touching, just the two of us. It felt strange, awkward. I looked at her, she looked at me, we paused, and then I moved my eyes away. She moved closer to me, but then stopped a few inches away from my knees. She wanted to say something, but didn't. She was never supposed to be in my room ever again. That was the command, and we had to accept it. People in the house and the neighborhood had begun to talk about us. We had to be separated. I looked at her bare feet. Her yellow white feet against the black bluish floor looked like a flower in full bloom. *Mamoni* prohibited her from visiting my room for all the obvious reasons. I was only going on fourteen while she was going on eighteen. After what had happened, no mother in the world would allow it. I knew it. We knew it. Yet, we didn't like it.

I asked, "What are you doing in my room anyway? I thought you were trying to avoid me!"

She said, "There is always an exception, and this is one of those exceptions. I know you will die if your mother sells those pigeons of yours! I thought I should let you know even though you are a coward."

"But you still didn't tell me what I'd been asking you for some times now."

"You will know soon," she said, "and you may not like what you hear."

"Tell me now."

"I have nothing to tell you now."

“You know *Mamoni* will kill you if she finds you in my room, right?”

“I know she would. Thanks to you!”

“It was not my fault.”

“No man is ever at fault, yet all women are in trouble.”

Then my *Dadi*, paternal grandmother *Aklima Khatun*, called out from the *uthon*, “*Dipu*, did you wake him up? Tell him he is about to lose his life. Is he up yet?” Due to a severe back pain she never talked in a loud voice, but that day she had to catch our attention. Due to the same reason she couldn’t climb the stairs either. I thought maybe *Dadi* had sent *Dipu* to come and wake me up. But then again *Dipu*’s sincerity and facial expressions were real too. Maybe she wanted to come in my room and just needed the permission from someone! Maybe she was coming anyway and *Dadi* just happened to be there!

*Dipu* moved closer to the window that overlooked the *uthon*. She held onto the rod of the window, as she looked at *Dadi*. Her petite posture reminded me of *Dali*’s painting, *Person at the Window*. At that precise moment, *Dipu* was my *Gala*. I wanted to forget everything but that explosive posture and the pleasure of all the fantastical possibilities. I wanted her to just stand there forever, and not facing me. I wanted the time to stop and not flow like a raging river, and become sticky and flow slow like some of *Dali*’s paintings – drip one drop at a time.

She said to *Dadi*, “Yes he is up. He is going now.”

*Dadi* said, “Tell him his mother is killing his pigeons. If he is up, then what is he waiting for?”

“He is going now.” Then she turned toward me quickly and said, “Go! Go! Go!”

*Dadi* said, “You should leave before his mother finds you in there.”

“Why are you speaking so loud then? Can’t she hear us? She should be right above us!” Why would she ask a question like that knowing that *Mamoni* could have been hearing all that? Did *Dipu* go mad? Did she fear no one? It was beyond me!

“No, she went to get *Babu*. She wants *Babu* to take the pigeons to the market. That’s why I am telling you to hurry.”

When I heard it, I threw the *katha* away, put on my jeans and ran out of my room. On the way out I hit one of the bookshelves, which almost tipped over, but *Dipu* and the table next to it stopped it from falling on my bed. I could have climbed the black metal see through gate, which opened between our verandah and the stairs that went down to the *uthon*, to get to the roof faster, but I knew that would make *Mamoni* angrier. It was the fastest way to get to the roof, but it was also the riskiest. It was a challenging act. To get to the roof that way, I had to support my whole body on my elbow that I had to place on top of the metal gate while holding the top of the gate with both of my hands while I swung my right leg toward the edge of the roof to grab the corner of the roof with my foot. As soon as my right foot got a hold of the roof, I had to move my right hand from the top of the metal gate to the edge of the roof quickly while the left hand still held the metal gate. If the timing of any of those actions were off by a second or two, then I would for sure fall on the stairs below and break limbs, crack my head and even die. I was good at getting to the roof that way simply because I had four five years of practice

by then. Because I didn't want *Mamoni* to be angrier than she was, I ran down the wet and mossy stairs, where *Dadi* met me.

*Dadi* wore a brown *sari* with red edges, and the one end of it that went over her shoulders was also wrapped around her waist tightly, like the way young women did it. The mechanism of her wrapped *sari* told me how stressed out she was. It was no time to fool around. It was time for action. She had an accident a few years before during a winter *pitha* (cake) baking event and part of her back bone cracked. She was lucky to be able to walk again, even after years of therapy and multiple surgeries, but her movements became robotic. In order to see something on her sides she had to move the whole body, slowly and mindfully, toward the thing she needed to look at. She said, "Listen, be nice to your mother and tell her gently to forgive you one last time. You need to turn things around; otherwise, your mother will not forgive you." She looked smaller than usual at that moment, and there was a shadow of worry on her thin tall face and around her damp eyes. Then she smiled, just enough for me to perceive it before I moved on. Why did she smile? What was there to smile about? Then it occurred to me that no one really gave a damn about my pigeons except a couple of my uncles. She was probably being supportive of me on the surface, but wanted those pigeons to be gone too since they shat everywhere in the house and ate kilograms and kilograms of wheat grains every year without contributing to the family.

I ran across the *uthon*, passed the toilet septic tank, which was between the main building and the furniture wood room, looked up at the roof where the caged pigeon were, passed the chicken coop and got to the other end of the main building. The cool air



smelled of soggy mud and rotten clay mixed with chicken shit and cow dung. I ran up the spiral stairs, but fell exactly where the stairs bent toward the second floor of the building. I slipped on the pigeon shit. Only our dog *Kalu* realized that I fell since he barked a few times at that precise moment, but he didn't come to help me. My right elbow and the right shin grazed on the edges of a few stairs while I fell and scraped the skin, which began to bleed. I hurt my right hip and knee so much so that I couldn't stand up immediately. This time I wished someone was there to help me. It was still very early, and only a few people in the house had woken up. The house was still quiet except the chickens, sparrows and the crows. A few crows flew over the roof of the main building and made a lot of noise and my heart sank for usually the crows came when they hoped snatch a dead or a sick pigeon. Did *Mamoni* really kill my pigeons? I could hear my pigeons, but still I believed that *Mamoni* could have killed some of my pigeons. Why did *Dadi* say it? Did she just say it to make me overcome my fear of *Mamoni* and get me out of my room, or was there some truth to what she had said?

Lots of worrisome thoughts went through my mind as I recovered from that fall. Green and white slimy pigeon shit was all over the right side of my body. I wiped it off with my hands and then I wiped off the blood, spat on the cuts and crawled toward the second floor. There was a speck of bright green moss on the side of one of the stairs that was so bright that it hurt my eyes. I had never looked at mosses from that close of a distance before. It looked as if it grew out of the cement crack only a few minutes before my fall – it was so bright and youthful. It saddened me for we had to meet that way, but it made me happy too. My world fell apart, yet there was something so beautiful in that

world. The moss' tiniest leaves had the vibrant lively strength of a newly hatched pigeon. It gave me hope. It helped me to overcome my pain.

There were no stairs that went up to the roof directly. It was the idea of my *Dada*, paternal grandfather, *Sheikh Afsaruddin*, who didn't want his children to climb to the roof and fall to their deaths. But we all had our own ways to get to the roof top by climbing different parts of the building. I sat on the top of the stairs, almost sobbing and tried to gather enough energy to climb to the roof by climbing the exposed half bricks that stick out on the side of the building. It was only then that I realized that it was still drizzling, the rain water fell on me and I was soaked.

How did *Mamoni* get to the roof? She had never climbed to the roof before. How did she manage? I thought about this possibility of her doing something odd or harmful to my pigeons, so I disassembled the bamboo ladder the year before, which was occasionally used by the workers to get to the roof and scrub the roof top so the green mosses couldn't grow freely. I didn't want her to go to the roof and interrupt me when I spent time with my pigeons. I had to be a step ahead of her in everything I did. From very early in life, I understood that she did everything with a plan even when it was a bad one, and there were many bad ones, like her marriage itself. So, I always assumed she had a plan, and I needed a plan too. I rarely climbed the ladder to get on the roof, simply because the ladder was too tall and old and I feared that one day it would snap when I was midway. A few of the rungs had cracks in them, where the spiders and other insects lived. So, I climbed to the roof by climbing the metal gate or the half bricks that were at the both ends of the building. I sat there and wondered which half brick *Mamoni* had

used to get to the roof. I looked at the building, which was directly on the other end of the *uthon*, where *Babu uncle* slept, and behind that building was our family fruit orchard that grew freely and wildly. The door to *Babu uncle*'s room was closed. I moved my hurt body close to the edge of the stairs that overlooked the *uthon*, and looked up at the roof. I could see *Mamoni*'s *sari*'s edge close to her feet. My heart sank. Did *Dadi* lie about *Mamoni* not being there? Did she want me to get in trouble? Or was it true that *Mamoni* did go down to see *Babu uncle*, but then climbed back on the roof again, and *Dadi* did not know about it? Did *Mamoni* hear the conversation between *Dipu* and *Dadi*? Did *Mamoni* figure out that *Dipu* was in my room?

As I sat there, *Dipu* came by, sat next to me, and said, "You need to put some *Dettol* (antiseptic fluid) on your cut. Save your pigeons, but don't kill yourself."

"Leave quickly."

"Why?"

"*Mamoni* is up there?"

"But I thought ..."

"*Dadi* lied."

*Dipu* stood up hurriedly and moved away from the stair's edge.

She said, "Do something about those cuts."

I said, "I don't have time for that. *Mamoni* is right above us, you don't want her to catch us together. You should leave."

*Dipu* did not leave, just moved farther away from the stairs and me. She had no desire to get into another quarrel with *Mamoni*. We both, *Dipu* and I, shared the bitter

memory of the day when we were found alone in the furniture wood room late one night, and what had *Mamoni* done after. We were both beaten for hours without mercy. No one saved us from her cruel blow of stick, but everyone was amused by it.

I jumped up to the top of the railing that was about three feet tall, which was between the stairs and the half bricks, and then climbed five or six half bricks. The topmost brick had been loose for years, and I never fixed it because I wanted others to find out the hard way. It was my way of deterring people from going to the roof. But on that day I'd forgotten about it and almost slipped and fell to my own demise. Then with my left hand I held the topmost brick on the side of the building very tightly and with my right hand I grabbed the brick on the edge of the roof and stretched the right leg and landed it on the narrow two feet wide railing that was on the side of the building, which went around the entire building, and then pulled in my left leg and left hand at the same time to stand up on that two feet wide railing. Because it drizzled, everything in this equation was wet and a bit slippery. I had to pay attention to where I stood and how I would take the next steps forward. I stood there for a while, got a good grip under my feet. Then I asked *Dipu*, "Do you know how she got to the roof?"

*Dipu* said, "She climbed the same way."

I asked, "She climbed these half bricks and not the others on the other end of the building?"

*Dipu* confirmed that what I just heard her say was correct, which of course astonished me. She added, "Aey be careful! It rained all night I think and the railing must be slippery. Keep your left hand on the roof's edge as you walk."

I said, "I will."

I began to walk on the railing in short steps, while my left hand touched the edge of the roof at all times, walked to the back of the building and climbed another small structure to finally get to the roof and confront *Mamoni*.

## A Sentimental Pigeon Keeper

The roof top had a four inch thick layer of some kind of water proof reddish composite material, which looked like a long and wide rain soaked soggy *sari*. Tiny specks of green moss grew out of its scattered cracks and it was never slippery even when it rained. When I first began to climb on the roof, I constantly feared of falling, and placed my every step very carefully. I never walked up to the edge of the roof to look down to our *uthon* or the roads; instead I lay on my stomach and crawled toward the edge, and then looked down. If anyone had noticed me, they would scream, “Get away from there. You could fall. Your *Mamoni* would kill you if she sees you like that.” I would stay there and smile. It was an achievement of some caliber to be able to climb to the roof, since it was a grownup thing to do. One such day, *Dadi* was asking me to come back down from the roof when she saw my head was sticking out beyond the edge of the roof. She said, “Move away very slowly, and do not stand up until you are at the center of the roof, and then come back down immediately. You will fall to your death one of these days! Your *Babu uncle* once fell, and he survived out of pure luck. Luck does not repeat twice.”

I said, “But we are two different people!”

*Abbu* overheard our conversation from his room, and he came out to tell me, “Come down immediately.” Then he said to *Dadi*, “A boy his size has a better chance of surviving. If he falls, then his momentum will be less than an adult or heavier person”. Then he went back to his room, as if *Dadi* had understood everything perfectly and I would listen to what he had just commanded me to do.

Our house was built in the early 1960's, and the foundation was built out of nothing but clay. Due to years of brutal tropical torture, the roof began to deteriorate and the rainwater seeped into the top floor of the house. The water marks looked like the veins that spread through the ceiling and the walls inside my parents' bedroom, and when it rained they looked shiny and alive. So, in the early 1980's a protective cover was needed to protect the rest of the structure along with the ceiling and walls. I was still a baby, barely a few years old, but I still have the vague memories of the piled up red materials on our *uthon* and the rose garden. *Mamoni* told me once that I used to play in those red composite materials and it would need at least four bathing per day to keep me clean. I was definitely beaten by *Mamoni* when I played in that red material, which of course she conveniently omits from her telling. No doubt. During those days, she took great pride in telling others, "I hit him for the very first time when he was only six months old."

They would ask, "Really?"

She would say, "He never slept. One day I decided to hit and see what happens. When I hit him he cried out loudly, then he was tired of crying soon and fell asleep." It was not only the beating, but she once even told me that she used to mix sleeping pills with my milk, so I would sleep longer than thirty minutes. Parenting! This was the parenting of the clueless and the stubborn one. I never asked, but I imagine I was beaten often after that first beating, and *Mamoni* had over a decade of practice in beating me by the time we faced each other on that fateful day when she had decided to sell off my pigeons.

On one edge of the roof, facing the main road, a banyan tree grew out of the composite. With its large green leaves it looked more lively than any other banyan tree I had seen. When it rained, its leaves and branches moved gracefully as if a young girl was dancing in the rain in her new green *sari*. It was barely about three feet in height, but it had all the grace and confidence of my *Dada*. It behaved as if nothing brutal had happened in its past, and it was only interested in the present and future happiness. Most probably the seed for that banyan tree came from the bat droppings since a lot of bats crowded the night sky above our house during the summer nights. The bats not only just crowded the sky above our house, but they were busy eating fruits from our wildly grown fruit orchard at the back of the house. Particularly they targeted the *litchi* tree that had thousands of red ripe *litchis* about to pop under the summer sun. *Dada* designed a device made out of a large oil tin can. He made two holes on two opposite sides closer to the bottom edge of the tin can, and then pushed a wooden log through it. He made another hole at the bottom of the can, through which he ran a rope. The rope was wrapped around the log and at the end of the rope he tied a piece of heavy metal. The top of the can was open. The *litchi* tree was at least five hundred yards away from my grandparents' bedroom window. The tin can was hung on a branch at the center of that massive tree and the rope ran through other trees and finally tied to my grandparents' window that faced the south orchard. During the night, when the bats attacked the *litchi* tree, my grandparents would wake up and pull that rope a few times and the metal in the



tin can would make enough noise to chase away the bats. They were not able to save all, but they saved enough for the entire household to eat and still sell thousands of *litchis*.

*Dada* cut that banyan tree down too many times over the years, but it always grew back. He declared a full scale and all out war against that little tree – cut it down, dig the roots out, even letting the hot tar seep into the roof to destroy the hidden roots. None of that worked. The banyan tree always grew back and let its green leaves dance in the air again. He finally gave up by saying, “This tree is more stubborn than I am.” That little banyan tree was an inspirational symbol for some of us in the house, but in the late 1980’s part of the roof had to be scraped in order to take out all the roots and kill the banyan tree since it was growing too fast and the roots spread too far into the roof. Roots hung from the ceiling in my parents’ room like the old dead people’s hair. And when it rained it dripped water inside the room. They had to be clipped often, a task *Mamoni* hated, but *Abbu* loved it. He would sometimes say, “The genetic code telling the tree that the root supposed to go deep into the ground, but this tree is losing its root often. I wonder what is going through this tree’s mind.” He was not asking the question just for the sake of asking. He seriously wanted to know. But instead of running any experiments he let his imagination to take flight. He declared, “Trees grow more roots than they need, and the genetic code always takes the loss of some roots into account. That is why the tree is not dead or weak.” When the tree was finally destroyed, even an emotionless person like *Dada* was sad, and he uttered what he had always uttered before

any risky investments, “Everything is just an illusion, just an illusion.” He finally missed the tree, his only equal.

*Mamoni* was talking to *Dadi*, so she had to look over the edge of the roof that faced the *uthon*. I was on the opposite side of the roof, directly behind *Mamoni*. She didn’t notice me. I believed that except my heart, nothing else moved as fast on that roof that morning. I stood on the roof still and bare feet, and the cold from the roof seeped into my leg. I was cold, but I had no time to worry about all that.

Everyone in the city knew *Dada*, so no one had hard time finding our house with the big green main gate. The city beyond that gate didn’t know how my life began to change that day. I couldn’t hear *Dadi* very clearly because of the breeze and light drizzle, but I understood what she was saying. It was surprisingly cold on the roof, hairs on my hands were straight and I was surprised to notice that my senses were still active and working. How could my mind still feel the cold when my pigeons were in danger? How could I let them down like that? How cold did I have to be to feel that cold? I was bothered by those thoughts. The only thing that I had to do was find a way to save my pigeons, and I was determined to do that. I said to myself, “Nothing else matters now, except my pigeons.”

My pigeons were caged in three large brown cages made out of bamboo branches, ready to be shipped to the chicken market to be sold. I could see them and they could see me, all of us were excited. They made a lot of noise as they were used to in the early

morning hours. In our house, not the roosters, but the pigeons made the first noise even when it was still dark outside. I fed them every day, so they were probably excited to see me, thinking I was there to feed them. Most of them were never caged even once in their lives, since they were born on our roof and grew up in total freedom. I wondered what they were thinking about at that moment. I knew they were scared, but I wanted them to perceive it as a game of some kind and enjoy the show until I had had the time to rescue them and set them free. Then a strange feeling came over me. Feelings changed so fast that I couldn't keep track of them, and I was certainly not in control of those sudden and rapid rushes of feelings. Those feelings rushed in like torrential rain, as if it was on a mission to destroy me. I was scared that they all knew that they would be sold in the market and served in the restaurants, and the noise they were making were pleas to be saved like I would soon plead *Mamoni* to be saved one last time. I wished we could hear them all in human voices so *Mamoni*'s heart would melt. But I was in the grip of the reality, and not dreaming anymore.

Fantasies remained fantasies and reality marched on with its old mean grumpy attitude. I felt listless, even thoughts were becoming numb, and a process of giving up probably had already begun somewhere deep down though I did not want to admit that yet.

*Mamoni* said to *Dadi*, "How many times am I going to have to forgive him? He should have listened to me already!"

"Do it one last time." She begged.

"The last time was the last time," *Mamoni* uttered in her confident authoritative voice.

“At least he doesn’t hang around with the bad boys in the neighborhood! You should really think about it and do something. You can’t be childish about this.” *Dadi* tried to reason with *Mamoni*. I knew that *Dadi* knew that it would not work. She only said it to make me happy, but there must have been still some sincerity, since she was out in the drizzle and cold trying to at least do something.

“I said I am going to get rid of these pigeons and I am going to do that.”

“This is not how to do it.”

“He is my son and I am going to do what I feel like. You ...” *Mamoni* didn’t complete her second sentence, but I knew she wanted to say, “You haven’t raised your own son right in the first place! So what qualifies you to tell me how to raise my son?” *Mamoni* had said that too many times to *Abbu* when no one else was around but just the three of us.

Between the house and the roads, main road and the side road, there were multiple flower gardens. My grandfather and his brother founded a combined family, and they had seventeen children all together. My grandfather had six daughters and one son, and his brother, *Sheikh Mohiuddin*, had six sons and four daughters. Each flower garden had a history of its own - usually they were created whenever one of my aunts prohibited one of their sisters to enter their flower garden. So, most of the sisters had their own flower garden, more like a patch, but as a whole the front yard of our house looked beautiful throughout the year. There were a few coconut trees that stood where the flower garden ended by the high brick boundary wall that went around the house. Those coconut trees

were much taller than our house. That morning a few crows sat on the green and dark coconuts and occasionally shook their wings to get rid of the accumulated rainwater from their feathers. They looked as miserable as I was - nowhere to go, but somehow still had to find ways to survive the day.

The TV antenna was stationed at the center of the roof on top of a tall bamboo pole for a better signal. We had to change that bamboo pole every year. One rainy season was enough to weaken it, moss grew on it and the wetness crumbled it from within. I walked a bit closer to *Mamoni* and stood by the bamboo pole. I suddenly did not know what to say. *Mamoni* turned around. She must have heard my heavy breathing. In her early thirties she looked more like an old lady than my mother. But then again, everyone always said, she was more mature than her age. She wore a yellow *sari* that had prints of blue peacocks and red butterflies in a lush green garden. Even the vibrant colors of her *sari* failed to make her look young and happy, and added nothing to improve the mood of that moment.

She was soaked in rain water and her *sari* wrapped tightly around her body, which made her look smaller. She looked devastated. Her tall face was narrower than usual like a sick narrow coconut. I had heard that when she first came to the house people in the neighborhood called her *the girl with the God's sharpest cuts*, chiseled to perfection. She was thin and tall, the color of her skin glowed like the warm honey, her chin and nose were pointy, and her anger was unparalleled as was her beauty. She always talked confidently and stood tall even when she was wrong. I expected to find her angrier than usual. She was angry and shaking a bit, but she looked sad, depressed. Her eyes wanted

to see or find out something that wasn't there. I did feel certain sympathy for her, but I knew she would not change her mind. Then I remembered I had forgotten to check to see whether *Abbu* was at home. There were nights he did not come home, and most of those nights *Mamoni* did not sleep. She stood on her bedroom balcony and watched the roads like the night owls. Because she did not sleep, I often did not sleep either but only pretended to sleep. Those were long nights for me, and I could imagine that they were even longer for *Mamoni*. I grew up seeing her on the balcony sobbing at times. I feared *Abbu* was not at home, and I knew immediately my punishment would have no limit and there would be no mercy. My pigeons would be sold for sure, I was convinced.

Then she simply said, "Oh you are here! Good. I am going to sell your pigeons. I will give you the money, whatever we get, and you can do whatever you want with it."

"I don't want the money. Forgive me one last time!" I cried.

"How many times did I warn you? Did I not warn you?"

"*Mamoni*, why are you doing this? What have I done? Maybe it is my fault, but those pigeons haven't done anything wrong. This is their house. They have nowhere else to go."

"I am tired of this. You are still not doing well in school. You spend far more times with your pigeons than with your books."

"I will only come on the roof once a week from now on. You can forgive me one last time. I will prove ..." I could not finish my sentence. My voice broke and I sobbed like a little boy.

“Because the last time wasn’t the very last time, I will make sure that this is the very last time you will be on this roof with your pigeons. You did it to yourself!”

I began to cry harder. One of my neighbors once told me, according to the *Hinduism*, there were nineteen ways to get anything one ever wanted, and crying was one of those techniques. I never checked for its accuracy, but I found it useful. For a second I remembered my mother didn’t even ask me how I cut myself. I was still bleeding a bit. I paid no attention to cleaning it up anymore – I let it run. It didn’t hurt at all anymore. But why didn’t she ask what had happened? I knew she knew, but I still hoped that she would ask. I wished *Abbu* was there to help me. The rice camp on the other side of the main road looked serene. I could see the movements of life there like any other day. Even during the rain they boiled the rice and dried it on heated tins. The rainy season was long and they had to have an alternative. Life never stopped for those hardworking people in the rice mill or the camp. The serenity of the surrounding didn’t match with my terribly disturbed internal world. Was *Abbu* at home? If he was he would have come to the roof or at least asked *Mamoni* to forgive me one last time. I was convinced he was not at home for we were standing on the roof and directly above my parents’ bedroom. He would have heard the noise and come already if he had been at home.

When I was much younger, the nights he hadn’t come home, *Mamoni* sent me out to find him in the morning. I would go to a list of his friends’ houses and inquire about his whereabouts. Sometimes I would find him on the floor of one of his friends’ houses, lying among the cards, money and empty bottles. I would call him, but he wouldn’t

answer back. In the very beginning, I thought he was dead a few times, but in time I learned what went on during those nights. But there were mornings when I couldn't find him at all. None of his friends could tell me where he was. But some of his friends would smile, barely visible, but I noticed. I knew they knew something but they didn't want to tell me. I wondered what those brief smiles meant. Those were the days my parents fought, verbally and physically, all day long, and they usually slept in different rooms during those days and nights. Life in the house went on just fine around their fight, as if it was part of air, part of the scenery and one of the most cherished necessities of daily living. Everyone paid attention to it, but no one was bothered by it, but me. Though I would not understand it for another few years, I was always deeply disturbed by it.

As I kneeled, I grabbed *Mamoni's* foot and begged for her forgiveness, and I again wished *Abbu* was there. At least he would take me away and maybe even find a way to stop *Mamoni*, but he wasn't there to help. I hoped he was at home, still sleeping right below us, and I hoped *Mamoni* didn't have to send anyone out to find him. Even if she had sent someone out, I hoped *Abbu* would be found in one of his friends' houses. There were talks of other women, and *Abbu* was always attracted to other married women, primarily his friends' wives.

*Mamoni* said, "Let go of my foot. You are hurting me." It seemed everyone I touched I hurt that day. Nothing happened as I wished them to be like.

"Then you will have to forgive me this one last time. I will study all day long from now on. I won't miss a day." I said everything that she usually liked to hear.



“What have you studied in the past week?”

“A lot of things.”

“What are those? I know what a lot of study is like.”

“You memorize big history books. I just do a lot of math and science, which is not about memorizing, but understanding.”

“That is what I fear. Everyone knows you don’t understand the math and the science well.”

“But I studied a lot. It is all true. Believe me.”

I must have looked like a tiny diseased dog soaked in the rainwater, hiding behind a door to get away from the rain. I must have had the face of the most obedient slave, ready to do anything, just to survive that moment. I must have acted as if I grabbed the legs of my soon would be murderer for mercy. I began to recite a few sentences that I had memorized months ago, but my voice had to pass through the true source of tears that coagulated my throat. I recited not knowing how accurate I was and how convincing I actually sounded, but I recited anyway, like the boys at the *mosques* who memorized the *Quran* without understanding the meaning of the *Arabic* words.

*Mamoni* said, “Why do you always recite these few same sentences whenever I hear you studying?”

I knew she had figured out my trick, and waited for this right moment to bring it up. It was a tradition to study every evening from six to at least nine. *Mamoni* would work in the house and shout, “*Adnan*, are you studying? Go to your books!” She barely came to see me what I was studying, she was always very busy in the house. In most

days, she had to cook for about a dozen people three times a day, which was her duty as the wife of the house. She didn't have time to help me with my studies. She expected the private tutor to take care of it all, and she was always tired anyway. *Dadi* did not understand what made *Mamoni* so tired. *Dadi* had seven children, two dozen cows and goats, and a very punctual husband to take care of, where my *Mamoni* only had me to take care of. So whenever I heard her voice commanding me to study, I recited and mumbled a few sentences in a loud voice for a few minutes just to assure her that I was in my room and studying. I memorized a few poems, a few essays and some math formulas for moments like that. As long as she heard me studying, I was fine and she was relieved.

I said, "I memorized these this week."

"What have you studied last month?"

"A lot of stuff! You can test me if we go back to my room." I wanted *Mamoni* to get off the roof, and wanted to believe that if she was away from the roof, then the day may end differently. She wanted to try me out. She had a master degree in history, and I knew she knew nothing about science. As we went down the roof, which she handled skillfully even though she was wearing a *sari*, I planned to explain to her how the solar system worked. But the problem was that it was not part of my school science books. I planned to say that our science teacher was preparing us for the high school. When we entered my room, I took my old slate and the chalk out from under the bed. I stood on the floor in between my bed and the table and sketched a sun at the center of the slate, as she stood on the side of the table, between the bookshelf and the entrance. I said, "This is

the sun. This is 92 million miles away from the Earth. The light that we see now is actually 8.2 minutes old since that is how long it takes for the light to travel from the sun to the earth. Stars are suns too, but I would just explain how the solar system works for now.”

“What is this? Is this part of your school works? I am going to ask your tutor tomorrow when he gets here. I am paying him a lot of money!”

I figured tomorrow would be another day, another story, and I had to survive the day I was living in then. I said, “Yes. He taught me all this, and our school science teacher who’s preparing us for the high school. You can ask *Olide* too.”

“*Olide* is your best friend. He will not tell me the truth. You guys can read each other’s minds. Both of you are liars and both of you would beg soon on the roads for the way you two are going.”

“I am telling you the truth. You can ask me anything about this. I know how our solar system works.”

She was about to say something, and then we heard *Abbu*’s voice. As he walked up the stairs, he was talking to one of his friends. I recognized the voice. It was *Jamal* uncle, *Abbu*’s boyhood friend. I looked at the stairs through the window. *Abbu* had a large something wrapped up in a *katha* which he held onto tightly with both of his hands. When he saw us from the verandah, he stopped for a few seconds and asked *Mamoni*, “Can you ask someone to fry a few eggs and a few *Paratha* for us? We are very tired and very hungry. And make some tea.” Directly in front of the stairs was the long and wide

verandah, my room on the left, bathroom on the right and my parent's bedroom directly on the opposite side of the verandah from the stairs.

*Mamoni* said nothing. She just looked like a drop of liquid fire.

I asked, in a tattered voice, "Where were you?"

He looked at me with squinted eyes, and asked, "Why do you look like that?"

What happened to you?"

*Mamoni* said, "What do you have in there?"

*Abbu* looked at *Jamal* uncle, then at the thing and said, "What? This? Come in the bedroom with us, and I will show you."

She asked again, "What is in there? You can just tell me now. I need to be here to make sure that your son does not become a beggar."

"I will look into it. Did he fail another exam?"

"This is not the exam time. You don't even know that. I have to do what you're supposed to be doing."

"I don't have anything important here. If you really want to know, then come in the bedroom and we will show you."

*Mamoni* said, "I am asking you. Is that thing yours? Why are you saying 'we'?"

*Mamoni* hated whenever *Abbu* brought a friend home, especially because he always brought his friends into the bedroom and the *Adda*, chit chatting, would always go on for hours, late into the evening. They played cards, listened to the music and talked about the world politics as if they were the foremost thinkers of their times. I could see

that that wrapped object caught *Mamoni*'s attention, and she went into the bedroom, but she didn't acknowledge *Jamal* uncle's presence as she walked past him.

The year before, *Abbu* stole five thousand flower pots with various flowers plants from a nursery, which needed three trucks to bring to our house. Those flower pots were in our front yard for months before he could find a buyer.

*Dada* asked, "Where did you steal it from? Tell me, and I will go myself and return it."

*Abbu* said, "Who told you that I stole them? This guy he owes me a lot of money. He can take all these back as soon as he pays me back."

*Dada* knew *Abbu* was lying. *Dada* said, "And where did you get a lot of money from?"

"That you don't need to know. I had it from another business deal."

"You are my only son. One of these days they will kill you on the roads and I will not be able to do a thing to save you."

"Don't worry. Nothing like that is going to happen."

The owner of those flower pots never came by. We all knew they were stolen from somewhere far in the district. When *Abbu* was just fifteen he ones asked *Dada*, "Can I have some money? I want to go to India to travel and see that country."

*Dada* said, "What is wrong with our country?"

"India is more beautiful."

"You can go when you make your own money." *Dada* brushed him off.

The next day fourteen of our trucks were missing two of their front wheels. *Abbu* found a way to take them off, sell them and leave for India, all in one night. He took one of his cousins, *Musa*, with him, and they did not return for the next four months. *Dadi* was almost dead from worrying about her only son. She had had two sons before *Abbu*, and both of them died from *Typhoid*, one was two and a half years old and the other about a year old. So, when the third son, my *Abbu* was born, *Dadi* and *Dada* promised to Allah never to hurt their son, which in turn spoiled their son to the point of no return. *Abbu* grew up to be a useless young man, who had big dreams, but no desire to work on his dreams. He was a good artist, but rarely painted. He was good at math, went to technical university too, but never finished his studies. He was a man who wanted to live a good life without the burdens of the living.

*Abbu* and *Mamoni* went into their bedroom and *Jamal* uncle came to my room. Compared to *Abbu*'s six foot height *Jamal* uncle was short and chubby. He had his fifteen year old glasses on, too small for his big head, and he was as smiley as always. I liked him as a person, but at that moment I hated him since he smiled through his fat cheeks as if it was the last time he would ever smile, as if the world was such a great place that we had no other options but to smile happily and as widely as he possibly could. He was a harmless man, and *Abbu* liked him because of his *yes man* characteristics.

*Jamal* uncle said, "*Ki re baba!* Did she give you one of those famous *Dholais* of hers today? Your mother is just like my mother. My mother used to beat me every day

when I was at your age. It's nothing. Take it like a man and soon you will forget all about it."

"No. She is going to sell off my pigeons because I am not doing well in school."

"She wouldn't do that! Some of those pigeons are older than some of the people in this house, right? Some are even older than you are, right?"

Then I heard something hit the wall in my parents' bedroom. From what I could gather from the sound that came from its breaking that it was the ashtray hitting the wall. *Jamal* uncle and I looked at each other. He still smiled and said, "That was expected. It will go on for a bit and then everything will be fine. You don't need to worry about any of this."

I could hear *Abbu* saying, "Calm down! Calm down! *Jamal* is here!"

*Jamal* uncle still smiled. I began to think that the smile could be a permanent thing, a disease. Otherwise, how could he keep on smiling through it all?

"I don't care. You cannot keep this in the house," said *Mamoni*.

"Just for a few days until I find a buyer."

"They will arrest you for this. He is a famous painter. This will not go unnoticed."

"Everything will be just fine. Just listen to me and do not tell anyone about it."

"I can't deal with this. Your son is failing and falling apart in his studies, and I don't think he will graduate to the high school level. And you are going around stealing things!"

"He will be fine. He will survive. He never failed to graduate to the next class."

“How do you know? Do you know that he hasn’t studied anything in months? He is in eighth grade!”

Then I asked *Jamal* uncle, “What’s going on? What are they talking about?”

“Well, just because like your *Abbu* you too like art and literature I am going to tell you the truth, but don’t tell anybody. I think you would understand it! Your *Abbu* and I stole a couple of paintings and we just need to keep them hidden in your house for a few days. No one would ever find it here in this big house even if they search this house with a comb.”

“Who’s painting?”

“That I cannot tell you now, but your *Abbu* may tell you later.”

*Mamoni* came out of the bedroom, red and wild with anger, entered my room, and acted as if *Jamal* uncle wasn’t even there, grabbed my left wrist and pulled me away.

“Let’s go,” she said.

“Where?” I asked.

I figured with a new reality in the house she might have changed her mind about my pigeons and not sell them after all. I took my chances and asked her again, “Can you please forgive me one last time? I would be the best student ever, study every evening in front of you in the kitchen as you cook.” I had to say it. I had to try. My pigeons, my brothers and sisters, definitely have expected me to save them.

As she pulled me away down the stairs her absolute voice uttered an absolute, “No.”



## A Sack of Crow's Meat

*Abbu* had already said to *Mamoni*, “He is going to be what he is going to be. If he wants to be a thief, then just tell him to be a damn good one, to be the best. That’s all you can tell him.” He had that conversation with *Mamoni* every few weeks, and each time *Mamoni* shut him down. She had no desire to listen to what he had to say about my future. He was a wise talker, but a horrible listener of even his own advices that were sound and good for himself. People said he was a dreamer, but he was an insult to the dreamers. Dreamers tried to make their dreams come true, but he desired that his dreams would come true all by themselves and without any effort. Worthless, as *Mamoni* began to describe him. I loved him as much as I hated him. I wanted him to take care of us, *Mamoni* and me, but he didn’t care for his family as the other men I knew.

When I was younger and went out with *Mamoni* to our relatives’ or friends’ houses, they would often ask, “What is *Rabiul* doing these days?”

“He is still trying to do well in the contract construction business.”

“Did he get new project?”

“Not yet. He is smart you know. Only if he applied himself. He studies a lot. He reads stuff all the time. He never finished college, but if he had he would have earned top grades. He has no degree, but he is smart.”

As she said all this, she would turn red. The people who asked, they asked to embarrass her in the first place, but as she dragged on and kept repeating herself and not able to finish her thoughts and move on, they changed the subject. They would say

something like, “Who would really like go to work with a beautiful wife like yourself at home!” It was even more insulting, and they knew it. The conversation came to an end when they brought something for us to eat as they always did for their guests.

*Abbu* somehow suspected that I wanted to be like *Sherlock Holmes*. He once said to me, “That you cannot be. It is much harder than you can imagine. Listen, your mother is an extremely stubborn person, so you better come up with something very soon.” I read the entire *Sherlock Holmes* collection cover to cover multiple times. I even had a phase when I kept notes on what had happened in the neighborhood and in the house whenever something was missing or stolen.

*Abbu* always understood me better though. When I was about eight years old, I watched a British movie that showed how pigeons were used during the WWI to carry messages. After watching that movie my fascination transformed into obsession. I spent hours every single day taking care of my pigeons. Then when I read about Charles Darwin’s pigeon breeding experiments, I began to realize that keeping pigeons was not only an art, but also a science. I had a pair of homosexual female pigeons. Together they laid three eggs every six to eight week, but the eggs never hatched. Then I paired them with the male pigeons and then their eggs hatched. Does homosexuality exist in other species other than human? Yes, I discovered it when I was about eleven years old. Did I do a bad thing by breaking those homosexual pigeons’ pairing? Yes, but then again after about a year those two female pigeons got back together again. *Abbu* was instrumental in

that journey of discovering homosexuality in the pigeon species. He was at the center of everything bad, they said. *Abbu* also bought me Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

Because *Mamoni* was tough and angry all the time, and because *Abbu*'s message was in the back of my mind, I evolved in the only way possible. When your mother is over controlling, you learn to live a second life, and if you are smart, you live multiple lives. This is your only weapon, and nothing else works. Deception = Best survival technique. The trick is you have to do a bit of what she expects from you, just enough to keep her from exploding. *Mamoni* was over controlling, and I lived multiple lives, all hidden from her. I was not a very good student. I was good in physics, but to everyone's surprise bad in mathematics. I was bad in English, but good in *Islamic Studies* even though I was not a believer. Because I read so much about Islamic history to fight its dogmatic beliefs I was good at it. Our religious studies teacher or *Maulana* at the school knew that I was an atheist, so when the score of the exams came out, he always said to others, "How come this infidel can do better than you guys? How come? In the next exam, one of you guys needs to score higher than him. If you fail, then you guys will be the infidels in my eyes. This is not acceptable." He would warn, "Allah allows you to chuckle all your life, but he himself chuckles only when it is needed, and usually after that you never chuckle again."

I loved our *Maulana* because everything he said he said it lightly and with a great sense of humor. He hoped that people would find their way in life on their own. I respected him immensely for this peaceful attitude and for giving chances to everyone.

Everyone taught that one must destroy their enemies, but he wanted to look at it from a humorous point of view. He particularly liked me. One of my friends was related to him. I went to his house one time, and there were a lot of jackfruits hanging from the tree that grew on a tree right outside of his window. I took some nails and stuck them into the jackfruits. It rained after that and all the nailed jackfruits rotted. When he found out that I did it, he took me to this office and asked me, “Why have you done that?”

I said, “To find out whether you get any help from *up there* or not.”

“You think *up there* is busy with saving people’s jackfruits? Is that what you really think?”

“But you are the *Maulana!*”

“That is what everyone calls me. Allah may not see me that way. Have you ever thought about that?”

“No, I have not.”

“Sometimes you must question yourself and try to understand the other sides of things.”

*Abbu*’s cousin, *Babu*, would be the one who would take the pigeons to the market to sell. *Babu* uncle understood what went through my mind. He himself used to keep pigeons in his younger days. He was a dark and short man with a huge cut on his face, which he got from chasing a pigeon on the roof and falling to the ground. It happened when I was very small, a year or two old. *Mamoni* had selected the right man for the job. *Babu* uncle was a heroin addict always in need of money. Why wouldn’t he agree to sell

the pigeons in exchange of some *takas*? He needs the money and *Mamoni* needed to get the pigeons sold. A perfect plan with a fatal flaw. *Babu* uncle's addiction did not numb his sense of love for the pigeons. He may have had learned to treat people bad, but he still had his love and respect intact for the pigeons. There were rumors that he was stabbing people while he mugged them. No one ever came to our house with the accusation, but we would hear it every once in a while. I believed it. There was no reason not to. A lot of addicted young men of his age did that when the night fell.

While I begged *Mamoni* on the roof, he climbed up. He looked normal, as if nothing was going on. He said to *Mamoni*, "Let us find a way to make him happy, so he does not waste too much time taking care of his pigeons. You know it's raining often these days, and you have to clean each pigeon's box one by one every day, otherwise they get diseases. At least you have to throw some dry wood dust to keep the boxes dry. It's a lot of work, hard work. I think now that the rain is about to go away in a month or two, he will focus more on his studies before the final exams. From now on he will just clean it weekly. How about that? Give him another chance."

"You are taking these to the market to sell. That's my decision."

"I would help him clean once a week. I know the work, and I think I can do a better job than him so he doesn't have to clean every day."

"*Babu*, take them and sell them off. It is better for your nephew's future."

"You are absolutely right. *Adnan* is wasting too much time taking care of these pigeons. I often see him on the roof at all times of the day, and not in his study room. I

completely agree with you.” He was a talkative person. He had begun his magic. I was hopeful.

Then he looked at me and said, “What is all this? Why don’t you study? I agree with your mother. I am going to tell you something, and you are just going to listen and do exactly what I say. Are you listening? You messed it up, and now you have to pay for it.”

Then he turned to *Mamoni*, and said, “There are a few pigeons here that are very expensive, and they are living with us for years now. For example, *Laltu* is twenty six years old, as you know. And there are others almost twenty years old. We cannot sell them. They are like family members. You cannot do that to them. To you they are nothing but a pigeon, but to *Adnan*, *Mintu* and me they are our brothers and sisters. Soon they will be too old or not able to fly anymore. And we can’t throw them out now. They will need a lot of care and looking after before they die.”

“Get them out of this house. They are destroying my son’s future. Nothing is as important to me as my son’s future.”

“I will make a cage and keep just the old ones, and I will take care of them myself. They used to be mine anyway. They are not *Adnan*’s!”

“You should find another place for them then.”

“Another place? What place? And what about the squabs, and the eggs that are waiting to be hatched? Have you thought about them?”

“Keep them somewhere else? We got to get them off this roof.”

“They got to stay here,” he said to *Mamoni*, and asked me, “How many pairs are with squabs and eggs.”

“Eleven pairs are with squabs and eight pairs are with eggs.”

*Babu* uncle said to *Mamoni*, “Those got to stay. We cannot kill the squabs and smash the eggs!”

It took some time, but when *Mamoni* agreed, he said to me, “Never again I want to see you around these pigeons. Those used to be mine, and I will take care of them again.” Then he released fifty seven of them. I was amazed to see that he picked the oldest fifty seven in just a few minutes, like the way experts separated breeds of pigeons in the market. He didn’t take care of them for years. How did he remember? He was not a man without his faults. He was a heroin addict after all, which was the most devastating faults of them all, and years of his life he spent sleeping and not helping with anything in the house. For months at a time I wouldn’t see him. He left home between nine and ten p.m. and came back by three or four a.m. according to many.

On one corner of the house, there was the main gate of our house, and on the opposite corner there was the gate to the large fruit orchard that was behind our house. Our house was surrounded by the guava, papaya, and coconut trees, with rose bushes all around the front of the house. *Babu* uncle had the room that was close to the gate that opened toward the fruit orchard. So he went in and out like the night animals. He was a man of the night, and I suspected that that morning was the first time he saw the daylight in years. One curious thing about the heroin addicts is this: They are the most eloquent speakers. When you talk to a heroin addict, you keep wondering why that person is not a

novelist. It helped me that morning, when off the bat he was able to save the oldest pigeons with his words. *Babu* uncle was right. Those pigeons were like our brothers and sisters, and some were our friends. When the pigeons were released they all flew away to the neighborhoods to take their ritualistic morning flights. But *Mamoni* still had one more thing up in her sleeve. She said, “*Adnan*, go with your uncle, and sell the rest of them.”

She knew how much it would hurt me. She knew it too well. She was gifted in finding those kinds of cruelties. I said nothing. I went over to where *Babu* uncle was, and said, “Let’s go!”

“This is the right decision you know. Your mother is right. You got to study.”

It took us some time to bring the cages from the roof top to our front yard. We used a long rope to lower down the cages to the ground. *Babu* uncle smiled secretly at me and whispered, “We will still find ways to save them, as many as we can. But you have to let a few go. Everything is plus minus!”

“How can we do that?”

“I will show you. Let’s go!”

I was born in my maternal grandmother’s house on a Thursday evening, May 17, 1979, at five thirty. *Mamoni* was in labor for forty nine hours before that. Whenever she is upset she still tells me, “There were blood webs in my eyes giving birth to you. You must listen to me exactly as I say. During the last two days I didn’t even know whether I was alive or dead.” She was seventeen years old, and *Abbu* twenty, when I was born.



They sent *Abbu* to the *Mosque* to get the molasses candies blessed by the *Mullah*. The expectation was that the blessed candy would lessen the pain, as it was popularly believed.

He went to get it blessed, but didn't return until after I was born. My mother's brother *Rana* went with *Abbu*. When they came back, uncle *Rana* said to everyone, "*Dulavai* (brother in law) ate all the candies. I told him to come home, but he asked me to eat the candies. I didn't eat any." My maternal grandfather, *Morshed Ali Khan*, got angry, and said to *Abbu*, "What is this? Your wife is dying in pain and you are the one who ate all the candies?"

*Abbu* said, "I don't believe in that kind of stuff. It doesn't work, believe me..."

My grandfather looked at him and said, "Of course you don't feel anything because you ate those candies, it numbed everything inside you..."

"I didn't even get those blessed!" said *Abbu*. My grandfather kicked him out of the house. *Abbu* mentions it still every once in a while, and we laugh together.

The next day, after I was born, *Abbu's* cousins, *Mintu* and *Babu*, went to see me along with others from my *Abbu's* side of the family. Each one of them took whatever they thought *Mamoni* and I would need. But *Mintu* and *Babu* had the brilliant idea to take their favorite pigeon *Laltu* with them. When they saw me, they took *Laltu* and touched my cheek with *Laltu's* breast. That was their way of showing their love and welcoming me in the family. They were about fifteen and twelve years old at that time, respectively.

When I grew up and took over the pigeon keeping tradition, *Laltu* was some pigeon to behold. He didn't have any special breeding. He was just a normal pigeon, the original *Bangladeshi* breed. But he was big, a *Sumo* for a pigeon among his kind. He was little over four and a half pounds in weight, which was unheard of, almost impossible, since an average large pigeon weighed only about two and a half pound at best. I have not seen another one of his size ever. It is possible that *Laltu* was the world's biggest pigeon of his kind! He was so big that he couldn't jump on top his mate's back, balance himself and mate. Instead the couple found another way, his mate used to jump on his back and then mate. *Laltu* was a giant in the world of pigeon and a wonder.

On that morning, *Babu* uncle released him first. With all that weight *Laltu* could still fly, and he was a smart one. If he started the flight from the edge of the roof, then he would not be able to fly high and would have to somehow manage to get to a tree branch or another lower roof. So he started the flight from the other end of the roof, which allowed him a distance of about hundred feet to take the flight in safety. When he was released he walked to the other edge of the roof and took his flight the usual way. This was a pigeon my uncles never bought. One day he just showed up in our house in late 1960's and never left. He found a mate from among our pigeons, and when they reproduced their squabs were the fattest squabs and none ever died. *Laltu* had the magic gene. Because he lived long his mates used to die every few years or were taken by the raptors or simply lost or caught or hunted by the people when they went out in our neighborhoods or rice fields to eat. But *Laltu* kept surviving, and always found a mate.

*Laltu* was so big that the raptors wouldn't get close to our house when he was around, and when the crows tried to steal the squabs they never showed the bravery either to land on the roof when *Laltu* was around. He was the protector of his tribe without knowing it. Because his mates died or were lost every few years, he would often pair and mate with one of his offspring, and the offspring would almost always mate with him even when they had a mate of their own. They would break their pair and pair with their father. This was a strange phenomenon. It is extremely hard to break the pairing of the pigeon, but *Laltu* could sing his songs for a few minutes and the offspring that he was after would mate with him and let her mate go, and then they would make a family and make fat squabs again. In secret among my friends we referred to him as the dirty old man! His feathers were mostly white with a few red ones here and there. His head was completely red from neck up. He had a large beak with high nose, and had large eyes. When he sang his mating songs, his feathers were puffed up to a size that made him look three times bigger. When he sang his tail feathers scraped the ground, which made a scratching noise, almost as if someone was scraping the roof top to clean it. *Laltu* was a majestic bird!

I had a cousin who lived in the next town about three miles away from our house. She began to keep pigeons. Because she was a beginner, she bought about thirty pigeons. I liked one of those pairs. I liked their pitch dark colors, size of their strong nose and glittering necks. The female was tiny and the male was huge. I knew they would lay eggs at least five times in a year, and their squabs will be healthy and will never die. I

told her, “Those two pigeons will take a long time to lay eggs. Why don’t you exchange with me for a pair that will lay eggs next month?” She agreed, and we exchanged. The day she released my pair, they flew back to my house on the same day. She never found out.

Pigeon keepers are extremely jealous and savage like people. There were a few serious pigeon keepers in my city, and often we would take our best pigeons in a field and show it. We would walk from cage to cage and provide compliments, but we all knew that we all had a strong desire to kill each other’s pigeons or at least we were thinking about stealing them. Five qualities defined a good pigeon keeper: You had to have at least fifty pigeons, must have more than five different types of pigeons, must never purchase a pigeon unless it is a new type, must never steal pigeons from another pigeon keeper and the keeper had to know everything there is to know about their pigeons. Whoever had the most number of pigeons held the honor and it was the most prestigious thing one could gain by pigeon keeping, besides personal satisfaction. I was always among the top three. One year I even had over two hundred pigeons at the same time. That year I had the honor to be the best pigeon keeper in town. No one ever followed the rules, but the rules were there to follow.

That day, when we left the house with three large cages on three different *Vans* (flat topped four wheeled man driven vehicles) I hated *Mamoni* more than anything else in the world. I began to think of her like a step mother. How could she do that? Didn’t she like any of the pigeons? They were always there, and every morning we woke up

with the music they made. Did she ever not pay any attention to them? I tried to understand what she meant when she said she was worried about my future. I never hung around with boys that took drugs. That was her only condition when I was younger. So, how did I make her so upset that she was selling my pigeons, even when I never failed to graduate to the next class? The truth was that she knew how to hurt me and get my attention. It worked. So that morning, after we left the house, we barely went about four hundred yards or so, then *Babu* uncle stopped the *Vans*. He got out and looked at our house from the side of the road to confirm whether *Mamoni* was still looking at us. The house was not visible, but the main gate was. He stood there for a few seconds and then said, “Your *Mamoni* is not there. Let’s go to your best friend *Olide*’s house first.”

“Why?”

“Well, we got to ask him to keep a few of these pigeons for you.”

“Why?”

“Let’s go! Let’s go!”

*Olide*’s house was another three hundred yards or so ahead of us. We went to his house, but he wasn’t at home. We waited for a few minutes, and then convinced his mother to keep a few pigeons for us.

*Babu* uncle said, “Well, *Adnan*’s mother wants to sell them all. But how can she do that? You know his mother! When she says something it must happen. Look, *Adnan* is crying all morning. His eyes are still swollen as you can see. Just keep them for a few days until we find a way to take them back.”

*Olide's* mother said, "Boys, these birds make a lot of noise, and they crap a lot. We can keep them, but they must remain in the cages. Take it on the roof of our toilet, and leave those cages on there. But no more than a week..."

Then came the tough part. *Babu* uncle said, "Now it is your turn to decide which ones to keep and which ones to sell. Pick the ones you like the most."

"I like them all."

"I say we sell about sixty. That way you will still have a hundred of them all together. Pick forty three that you want to keep."

"How can I do that?"

"Do what?"

"Pick the one's I like! I like them all."

"There is no time. Your mother is expecting us to return home quick. Just pick. You might want to close your eyes and pick them. That way it will be done randomly."

"I can't do this."

"You want me to do this then?"

At that moment I knew there were people in the world that I would have killed gladly, but I was in no condition to pick forty three pigeons that I liked the most, and let the others go to the market. I kept imagining how people would eat them. Roasted pigeon soaked in coconut milk curry is one of the most delicious foods one could ever have. In my mind's eyes I could see that the people were tearing off their legs and necks and eating them.

I told my uncle, “I will select them.” And I did. I selected the ones that were older, bigger in size, produced healthy offspring, had shiny feathers and I paid big money for. We left the selected ones there on the roof of the toilet in two cages and took the rest all in one cage and left for the market.

After we arrived in the market everyone wanted to buy our pigeons because they looked healthy, clean and big compared to what they had in their baskets. We fed them well. They ate rice with husks intact when they went out to eat to the rice fields and the camp on their own, but at home they always ate wheat grains. Taking care of one hundred and sixty pigeons was not easy or cheap. But I managed. All the money that I got from my uncles, aunts and grandparents went in taking care of them and buying books. The chicken market was nothing but hundreds of sellers sitting by a brick wall at the end of fish and vegetable market. Next to it was the meat and spice market. So the entire area was full of dogs and crows, waiting to eat the dead animals or a piece of meat or fish that were thrown out. Thousands of people crowded the market. The entire area smelled of raw fish, meat, animal blood, sweets and spice. Everyone was there to buy quickly and return home so they could still make the mid day Friday mass. Fridays were the most chaotic and crowded since it was the weekend.

We sold our pigeons very cheap, and we sold them to the buyer who we knew would sell only to the other pigeon keepers. But in the end, I knew that some would be eaten for sure, since a lot of people purchased their pigeons from those sellers since those pigeons were healthy and clean and while purchasing lying about what they would do with those pigeons. Pigeon meat was supposed to be good for your health and sexuality.

We made the buyers promise, and sold them very cheap under that one condition that they would be sold to the other known pigeon keepers. That way I still kept my hopes alive that some of them would return home one day.

I used to feed *opium paste* to my pigeons once a month. In those days, in my city most pigeon keepers had their pigeons in a large house like cage, and they never let them go out and fly. I didn't like the caged pigeon idea and ours were free to go anywhere they wanted to fly to. This way we lost a few, but then other peoples' pigeons used to come to our house and stay with our pigeons too. We all fed *opium* to our pigeons because our belief was that if anyone caught them, then whenever they get a chance they would fly back to our houses. Everyone practiced it, but no one ever admitted it. I made addicts out of my pigeons. No one else in the house knew. Standing in that market place, I hoped that those pigeons would be sold to other pigeon keepers in the city, and when they released them they would fly back to our house. At that moment, I was proud that I kept my pigeons drugged. I looked forward to the days and weeks ahead and felt good about it.

Pigeon keeping is not fun without its rivalry. I hated every other person whoever kept pigeons. Not only the number, but the type of pigeons one had added to their prestige. I had the following kinds: *Deshi* (*Laltu* was this type), *Loton*, *Lakha*, *Giribaj*, *Shiraji*, and *Buno*. Only six kinds! *Lotons* specialty is that if you shook their heads they could flip on their backs on the ground. *Giribajes* could flip in a circle during the flight in the high sky. *Shirajis* are large pigeons, about four six pounds in weight, and the legend says that they were perfected by one of the regional rulers hundreds of years ago.



*Lakhas* specialty is that they have a peacock like tail in full bloom, and they cannot fly very far, but hop. The *Bunos* are the wild pigeons, which I dreamt of trapping that dawn. I once caught four pairs of the *Bunos* from our ancient tamarind tree. I caged them for over a year, but when I released them only one pair stayed, and the others went back to the tamarind tree. It is extremely hard to domesticate them. It was said that only the very best and persistent pigeon keepers were able to tame them. My attempt to tame them taught me that if they never wanted to be tamed, no one ever succeeded. In reality it was the pure luck and had nothing to do with the keepers' experiences or tricks. There was another keeper who had seven different kinds of pigeons. He had a pair of Australian pigeons for which he paid a fortune. I envied that man very much, and I hoped that those Australian pigeons would die. If a rival's pigeons ever came over to my place, I always caught them, roasted them in mastered oil and hot chili and ate them fresh. Yes, I did that. It was great fun. I felt elated and absolutely no remorse. It made me happy, I admit. It was part of the game.

That day when we were in the market selling our brothers and sisters, there were a few dead crows around. The market authority often killed a few crows by shooting, the ones learned to be brave and steal meat or fish from the sellers' hands. Usually a young boy was in charge to kill them by a BB gun. If you have a dead crow around, then usually you get thousands of crows showing up and protesting. So, the market authority had the dead ones covered by a basket until they had enough of them to burry somewhere. Some were just killed and not covered yet. The people in the bazar often

said, “Even crows have stronger unity than us *Bengalis*.” But they had to kill a few to keep them from bothering the sellers and the buyers.

*Babu* uncle said to me, “Did I help you today or not?”

“Yes, you did. You saved my life. I am so happy that you were at home.”

“Now listen. I am going to do something and we will never talk about it again.”

“What?”

“I will clean a few of those dead crows and give them to your *Mamoni* to cook and eat.”

I agreed, and immediately supported the idea, and together we cleaned and chopped three crows. At that moment I thought *Babu* uncle was the best human being in the whole world. On the way back, *Babu* uncle said, “Tell your friend *Olide* to release a few of those pigeons every three to four days. And within a few weeks they will all be back at our house. We will tell your mother that they are just coming back from whoever purchased them, and we will have to manage to keep her calm. So make sure *Olide* doesn’t release them all at the same time. And if *Olide*’s mother objects too much, let me know about it. I will steal all of their chickens and we will have a picnic.”

When we returned home, *Babu* uncle said to *Mamoni*, “You have done a very bad thing today. But it is all for *Adnan*’s future. I understand. I will not disagree with you. Here is the money (*he added a lot from his own pocket*). We could not sell them at a higher price than this. I bought some meat of a foreign bird that they were selling in the market. Please cook it, and we will all eat it at night.”

*Mamoni* did not look at me. I barely looked at her. She came out of the kitchen and took the sack of meat from *Babu* uncle.

*Babu* uncle patted on my shoulder and went back to his cave.

## Living an Adult's Life

What a summer it was! I was in eighth grade. The most important year in the lives of any Bangladeshi student, since what one would become later in life depended on that year's total final score and mathematics score, because before entering the ninth grade, it was determined based on the score whether the student would study arts, commerce or science. It was mostly a done deal when the scores came out, but students still had some say: They could transfer in between arts and commerce easily, science students could transfer to any of the other departments, but students from the other departments could not transfer to the science department so easily. And of course the local powerful politicians could always write a letter to the headmaster, which almost always did the trick, the dumbest of the dumbest usually had the biggest connections and got a chance to study science. I needed one such connection, a small one, which put me in the borderline dumb category. I was bad at math – I only scored fifty out of a hundred in my eighth grade mathematics final exam.

I had no idea what I wanted to be later in life. To me, life was then, those moments – it was happening all around me. I never thought of life too far ahead. The thought never came to me. I didn't know how to bring about those thoughts either. I had no clear understanding of the future. I didn't know what "future" looked like or what it really meant! None of the elders I knew were happy with their lives. All my aunts had broken hearts from love. My parents were not happy. Grandparents were not happy. No one in the house was truly and completely happy. Why would I grow up and arrive at the future? What was wrong with the present? I was somewhat happy where I was, but even

my paradise was infected with unhappiness and particularly by one of the adults, *Mamoni*.

I had friends who sat in a circle and planned about what they should do in the weeks to come, so they could become what they wanted to become years down the road. I had a hard time understanding their logic, and had absolutely no idea what life would be like for me a month down the road, even a week down the road. Life until then was just fine. Why think about changing it, changing it at all, changing it ever? One of our mathematics teachers, *Mahitosh Kumar*, used to say, “Boys, these are the best years of your lives. Live it to its fullest for you will forever look back and regret if you have not.” I didn’t even fully understand what he meant at the time, but someday I hope to let him know how right he had been.

I sat on my chair around noon and thought about life and what would happen next. No good thoughts came to me. Instead everything very quickly and eventually turned into how to hurt *Mamoni*. I thought about all kinds of ways to hurt her and make her feel what I was feeling. *Mamoni* was busy in the kitchen like any other day. I could hear her voice, as normal as any other day, no change, no sorrow. I hated her, and with every passing minute that day the hate increased. *Dada* went to the vegetable and fish and meat market, and before he left he let *Mamoni* and *Dadi* know what he wanted them to cook for the day so they could get going with the preparation. He wanted to eat *Khichuri* – rice and lentils slow cooked together with ghee, chili and other spices. People usually ate it when it rained, but he ate it when it rained and even when it was really hot.

Whatever he wanted to eat was the menu for the day. He dictated it, and fortunately, he was almost never boring in making the list.

He was cheap with everything, but not with eating the expensive stuff. He had a hard life. His father, a row boat man, who barely made enough money to feed himself, yet somehow managed to have five wives. *Dada* was the son of the third wife. When my great grandfather, *Imanulla Chasha*, married for the fifth time, he had no focus on anything else. He was busy with his youngest wife, as the joke went. There were too many kids in the house, and nothing to eat. *Dada* ran away from home at seven with his older brother who was then ten. They moved to the city, about forty kilometers away, to their uncle's house. Their uncle did not take care of them much, but made them work on the roads – mostly selling things. Eventually *Dada* became rich beyond belief, but he knew something about being hungry. His uncle was a poor man himself when *Dada* moved to the city, so the uncle had no other way but to make them work. *Dada* took care of his uncle more than his uncle's children did, when the uncle was old and dying. It was not love; I never noticed it, but a kind of respect and a form of responsibility. As if this is what one did to repay, no matter what one felt about that person. So, when it came to eating, eating delicious things, *Dada* had no problem spending the money. Buying furniture woods and eating well were his passions though I didn't understand it at the time.

I could hear from my room, *Dadi* asked *Mamoni*, “Call *Adnan* so he can catch that rooster.”

“Why don’t you call him? I don’t think he would come if I call.”

*Dadi* called me, “*Adnan*, come help to catch the rooster. Your *Dada* is about to come home.”

I did not want to go, but *Dada* always screamed when he returned from the bazar. He would always complain about the prices of things going up and how the sellers cheated the buyers or how lazy they were and so on. He called everybody lazy. To his credit, there was nothing that he hadn’t done from begging for food to polishing people’s shoes. We were all used to his perpetual habit of complaining and pissed off attitude. When he went around the house working on his little projects and complaining about everything, everyone in the house knew that all they had to do was say nothing. He quieted down all by himself as he talked and talked and talked and the lunch time neared.

I went out in the *uthon* with just my pants on and bare feet. It was already very humid and hotter than the morning. The sun was barely out, but not enough to turn the day into a steaming pot. *Dadi* was standing by the stairs, next to the giant plum tree, which stood next to the furniture wood room’s only door.

I asked, “Which one?” pointing at the chickens and roosters that were running all around the *uthon*.

She said, “That one. This is his fourth year. Beyond this we will not be able to chew his tough meat.” She pointed to the biggest of the roosters that was under the guava tree showing off his might to the hens.

Usually we caught the chickens in the morning when we opened the door of the chicken coop. But that day due to the early morning drama, the servant girl might have forgotten it. I understood what the hurry was all about then. It was time for *Dada* to come back from the bazar, and he would expect the rooster already slaughtered and chopped into small pieces and already marinating in spices. If he saw that it was not slaughtered, then he would ask why not, and soon discover that it was not caught in the morning, and it would just fuel his anger and he would have one more thing to scream about. I took some wheat grains, and scattered it next to the chicken coop, which was behind the furniture wood room. A lot of chickens rushed in to eat. A few roosters also arrived, but an adult rooster always waited until the hens had a few grains first before they joined in. It was their custom, their way of taking care of their potential mates.

And the biggest of the roosters were too proud and they made sure that the hens were full first, before they ate. They even scratched the grains with their feet and pushed it closer to the hens so the hens can eat it easily. It was a gesture of power and self control. After the eating the chasing and mating began. Roosters chased the hens all over the house whenever they wanted to mate. Hens didn't want to give it in so quickly for the young roosters, but for the big roosters it was easy. They chased only a few steps before the hen sat down on the ground for the rooster to jump on the hens' backs and copulate. The rooster would hold onto the feathers at the back of the hens' heads with their beaks as they climbed on their backs. The copulation period lasted no more than five to ten seconds, and a big rooster was able to mate many times during the day, at least ten to twenty times. So, after the eating when the rooster that *Dadi* wanted me to catch



jumped on top of a hen, I grabbed it. It was a heavy rooster, at least ten pounds. It had black, red and yellowish feathers. The head was black, but the rest of the body was a mix of all three colors. The tail feathers arched majestically, and when it chased the hen, it looked like a general going to the war with all his might, beauty and colorful weapons.

After I caught it, I called my youngest aunt, *Shoshi*, to come out of the room, so she can hold the chicken while I slit its throat. Women were not allowed to participate in the ritual due to the religious guidance, but *Abbu* never performed such works of necessity. I was not a believer, everyone knew, so even I was not allowed. But it was always a nonbeliever and a woman who slaughtered the chicken in our house to make it *halal*. Auntie *Shoshi* came out of the room, which was at the first floor of the main building, right below my room and my parents' bedroom. That room had two beds, one dressing table, two almirahs, one *alna*, one shelf built into the wall, a storage area close to the ceiling and a tea table. All six of my aunts slept there since the beginning of their early childhoods. My eldest aunt married a man against her will because she was betrayed by her lover, but she could not adapt to her husband's house, so she divorced him and came back to the house. So, at that time four of my aunts lived in that single room, since two of my other aunts were married and left the house years earlier. *Mamoni* hated them all. They hated *Mamoni*. *Mamoni* was younger than my eldest aunt, *Khuku*, and expected *Dadi* to treat her as a daughter, but *Dadi* never did, and that was where the hatred came from. *Dadi* believed *Mamoni* performed some kind of black magic to marry *Abbu*, a rich man's son.

When *Shoshi* auntie came out, I handed her the rooster. She held its feet, upside down. The rooster twisted its body hard trying to get away, but every time she would shake it hard so the rooster was constantly imbalanced.

I said, "Hold tight. Don't let it go. *Dada* is almost home."

"Hurry then," she said.

I went to get the knife out of the storage room, next to the kitchen. Grazed the knife against the kitchen wall a few times to sharpen it a bit, and then moved to where my aunts' rose garden was. She wanted the blood to drop on her garden, so patch was fertile and roses were red. She said, "Let's drip the blood on this rose plant today." She held the rooster by squeezing its wings and legs together along with the tail with both of her hands. Rooster still jerked and moved in hope of getting away. I held the head and the beak with my left hand, stretched out the throat to find the best place to draw the knife. I could see the wind tunnel under the skin throbbed up and down fast. I placed the knife on the throat, and recited, "*Allah hu akbar, Allah hu akbar, Allah hu akbar,*" a few times and drew the knife precisely two and a half times to cut the throat so the neck was cut but not separated. If the neck was separated, then it would not be *halal*, and the whole rooster had to be thrown out. The warm spray of blood fell on our arms like blood rain. After we cut the throat, she threw the rooster in the open space away from the rose garden, where the rooster twisted and flipped rapidly among the grass and other plants before coming to a full stop by the boundary wall. It took a while. It was a big rooster. The wings were still moving, and I grabbed it by one of the wings and brought it to the kitchen. *Mamoni* took it from me and threw it in the boiled water so taking the feathers

off was easy later on. We did not look at each other. We did not talk. She went ahead with her work, and I left the kitchen.

*Dada* burst in with a howl, “You can’t touch anything in the bazar. No matter what you touch, it burns you.” Then he spotted the bloody knife on the kitchen verandah. He said, “How come the blood is still soft? When did you slaughter the chicken? How come you did not clean the knife?”

I said, “A while back. It is a hot day. The blood would take some time to thicken.” He knew I was trying to be smart. As I said it, I took the knife and went to the tube well to wash it off. *Mamoni* said to *Dada*, “What did you bring? Let me see.”

He emptied the bag on the verandah where the knife was. “These are too expensive.” I always thought that because he was cheap, it broke his heart whenever he bought anything. And in order to justify it, he had to complain about it. He always complained, and always bought the most expensive and the best foods he could find. That day he bought two large *hilsha* fish, two pounds of goat fat, few different types of vegetables, some spices, some *kochu* roots and about a kilogram of tiny shrimps. *Mamoni* called out to my aunts, “Hey somebody come here quickly. We have a lot of stuff today. I need help.” For a while no one came out. *Dada* screamed, “Where is everybody? Come out. I got all the lazy people in this house. All lazy.” *Lipi* auntie came out quickly. *Dada* said, “What do you guys do all day in the there? Don’t you guys like to see the outside world, the daylight? Go help her.” I went back to my room, and *Dada* kept on finding mistakes with everything and complained about it. Those sessions

usually lasted for about ninety minutes until he took the mid day shower and was ready to eat.

I was back in my room. *Abbu* came to see me. The first thing he asked was, “What did your *Dada* bring today?” I told him what it was, and he said, “It would be a good feast. Did you tell your *Mamoni* to fry some dry chilies along with the goat fat?”

“No, I did not.” I was upset. I expected him to talk about something else. I wanted to be quiet for the rest of the day, but life kept on happening to me. I was angry. I wanted to believe that what had happened did not happen. But it did happen, and I was not able to deal with it. Not only was I not able to stop time, I was participating in life like any other day, as if nothing had happened. I wanted to feel the sadness, but my mind was occupied with a lot of other things, maybe it was a coping mechanism working hard to save me.

Years earlier, when I was still a toddler, I remember *Abbu* once came home with a lot of money - about one hundred and fifty thousand *takas*. He had finished his first and only big contract job a few months before that, and he was finally paid. He came home with the money, left the money on the bed and went out to verandah drink a glass of water. When he came back, he found me sitting in the middle of the money and playing with it. I had scattered it all around me.

According to him, I asked, “What can you buy with this money?”

“All the toys in the whole world.”

“Then buy it.”

“But this is not my money. I borrowed from your *Dada* and I need to pay him back. I can only keep some of it. I will buy you something, a toy pistol. How about that?”

“Why do you have to pay him back? Don’t tell him that you have the money. Tell him you lost it.” It is one of *Abbu*’s cherished memories of me. I was still a toddler and already thinking about how to cheat, and had everything figured out.

As I thought about earlier memories, *Abbu* was about to go back to his room, then I asked to *Abbu*, “Whose painting is it? Can I see?”

“Come with me.”

We went into the bedroom, and *Abbu* took off the *Katha* and there it was – an ordinary daily life village scene where people sat around and having fun. All the men and women were big and healthy. Their muscles were built and tight and they looked like *beings* from another world.

“Why are they so big like *Rambo*?”

“That is how the artist sees his people.”

“What people?”

“Bengali people. Us of course!”

“But we are not like that! We are thin and don’t have any muscles like that.”

“This is a portrait of our inner strength.”

“But is it true? I don’t see that when I meet people on the roads.”

“Every human being is strong inside. No matter where they are from. He wants us to know it, feel it and act it. Bengalis don’t believe in themselves enough. It is the artist’s job to remind again and again.”

He seemed another person when he talked about art and literature. He sounded successful and philosophical, but in reality I knew who he was and what he was capable of. He loved life and had fun as he wished, but he was not a husband type or a father type. He was a rich man’s son who expected life to be an easy ride and live off of his father’s money.

I asked, “How did you steal it?”

“You really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“You should never do this though. I don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

“I promise.”

He sat on the bed, and asked me to sit next to him. The room was full of paintings of unknown painters, furniture, show pieces and the posters of the nude women filled the wall. *Dadi* never went to my parent’s bedroom. She referred to it as, “*The Hell*.” *Abbu* watched pornographic movies often. He would go to our drawing room, close all the windows and doors and would watch it. *Dipu* and I and others would see it too through the tiny cracks in the windows and doors. *Dadi* complained to *Mamoni*, “Why does he watch these things? What’s in seeing naked women on TV? Do you think you have anything to do with it?” *Mamoni* would stay quiet, and say or suggest nothing.

He began to tell his story. He said, “We went to the artist’s gallery yesterday, and there was a drinking and *ganja* smoking party. Everyone participated, but *Jamal* and I just pretended and when everyone fell asleep we removed the paintings from the wall and took it to another friend’s house nearby. Then we went back to the artist’s house and woke up with everybody in the morning, had breakfast and left along with everyone. ”

“And no one noticed that the paintings were missing from the wall?”

“Fortunately no one noticed. God knows how many paintings he is missing!”

“What if they find out?”

“They wouldn’t suspect us. There were too many people. We were too busy pretending to pay attention to the *ganja* than the paintings.”

“Can we keep it?”

“I intend to sell it. If we keep it, then in time, they will find out. I must sell.”

“But this is so beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like it by any Bengali painters.”

“Enjoy it while it is here. And then let it go. We must let all beauties go. What did I tell you – we are here to live and go away, not to waste time on anything – just live your life and go. If the beauty hangs around for too long, then they become ugly.” He talked to me, but looked elsewhere as if he was seeing something in his mind’s eye. I knew he was more interested in lofty thoughts than facing those same thoughts in real life. As a daydreamer he was a fantastic human being, but as a practical man of the world he was less capable than a blind cripple.

“When are you going to sell it?”

“Soon.”

“Who is the painter?”

“It is by S M Sultan?”

“Sultan?”

“Yes. Have you heard of him?”

“No.”

“He is the best painter of Bangladesh. He could have lived anywhere in the world, but he had decided to live in his country and be among his people. It’s important for an artist to be among his people and portray their lives and try to define a meaning of life, define the purpose of their existence.”

“Where is his house?”

“*Narail*. He has a zoo of his own. He has a few horses, monkeys, a few porcupines and a few other animals. I will take you there one day.”

“How come I never heard of him?”

“You like to read stories. You haven’t thought about painters yet. Keep reading and you will know about him soon. He is a giant and a master who towers over everyone else in this part of the world. A true artist, who is more interested in making art than making himself known.”

“How much would you sell it for?”

“Whoever pays the most will have it.”

“How much?”



“I don’t know. Listen, study hard for a few days until your *Mamoni* cools off a bit. If she stays like this, then it is bad for you and bad for me.” Then he left the room abruptly and went to the drawing room to watch a movie, maybe porn. I had heard him say to his friends, “The reason I only watch English movies is because the actresses are thin and not too meaty. I can’t stand fat people.”

I sat there in my parent’s bedroom thinking about *Abbu*. Did he not care about my *future* at all? How come he didn’t say that I should be studying hard from now on? How come he just said that I should study until *Mamoni* cooled off? He was more concerned about his heist going bad than my future. At that moment, I hated him like never before. I loved him for buying me books, but I began to hate him more and more. He was too wrapped up in himself. I went back to my room; I lay down on the bed and pulled a comic book from the bookshelf. It was a collection of *Nonte Fonte*. *Nonte* and *Fonte* lived in a boarding school. There was another older kid, *Keltu*, a few years their senior, who tried to mess with them, but *Keltu* always fell into the same hole he dug for *Nonte and Fonte* and then the giant superintendent ended up punishing *Keltu* even when the adventure was initiated by *Nonte and Fonte*. *Note Fonte* and *Keltu* never got old. They always remained stuck to the same age. Why couldn’t I do that? Why couldn’t I get stuck in one of those sweet lives and remain there forever? I envied *Nonte Fonte* and because of that I read the latest issues – whenever one of their new adventures was published. That day, I particularly envied them for being fictional characters and not being part of the world and facing the problem I had faced. After I read their adventure I

threw the book away, which fell on the floor somewhere beyond the foot board of the bed.

I tried to take a nap, but I was cursed by the *sleep god*. I could rarely fall asleep during the day. I lay on the bed for a few minutes, but I was restless – my pigeons screamed inside of me. I was composed somewhat because I had the tiniest of hopes alive in me that they would someday come back, and wake me up from my sleep again with their morning calls. Too many conflicting thoughts went through my mind. Just the way I slaughter the chicken, they would be slaughtering my pigeons, I thought. I was happy that I saved some of the most precious ones, but I wished that I had saved more. I needed to put my mind somewhere else. I picked up a novel by *Mikhail Lermontov*, *A Hero of Our Time*, translated from Russian to Bengali by *Arun Shome*. I read that book the year before for the very first time. The main character *Pechorin* caught my attention immediately. He is a bad person. As young officer in the military, he enjoys a carefree and adventurous life in the wild frontier. He plays with the girls to destroy them by making them falling in love with him and then by rejecting them. It is all a game for him, but everyone around him suffers. He has the extraordinary ability to attract people around him with his mystic quietness, and he walks among the elites of the high society with eloquence and ease. I did not like him as a person, but I liked his trickeries and the things that he could do, and I wished I could use his techniques as expertly as he did. I believed I could also be like him and use my power in the areas where I wanted to be successful. I had the secret desire to destroy the girls as he did, but I was not that brave. That dream of destruction remained in my mind, hidden since the moment I read about

*Pechorin* – he lived a life that seemed so unbelievable and impossible, hence a secret desire to live his life or something like it.

I once told *Abbu*, “I want to go to Russia and travel the path *Pechorin* traveled in the span of this novel. These areas are so beautiful and still a bit primitive.”

“Russia is a big country, much bigger than America. When we go to America you would know how big Russia is.”

“But mostly under ice right?”

“Yes, but still quite big. And those areas that he talks about in the book are some of the most dangerous places now.”

“Dangerous?”

“Yes. Isolated nature is beautiful, but isolated people are dangerous.”

“*Lermontov* describes those places so well, like it is another world far away from everything we know. I want to go there. One day I will.”

“If I had a lot of money I would travel too. But if you want to travel, then you should never get married. True travelers fall in love with the road, and they can never return home again. You should travel to *Rabindranath’s* and *Lalon’s* house first.”

*Rabindranath* is the only Bengali author to ever win Nobel Prize in literature. *Rabindranath* was perhaps inspired by the songs of the mystic Bengali singer *Lalon*. *Rabindranath’s Gitanjali* (song offering), the book that won him the Nobel Prize, is philosophically similar to *Lalon’s* numerous songs that the mystics all over the *Bengal*

sang. This was the popular belief that *Rabindranath* took ideas from *Lalon*, and there is some truth to it.

I asked, “Will you take me there?”

“I will take you there this coming winter. You will like it. I have seen *Rabindranath*’s house in Calcutta too, but I like the one in Bangladesh – it fits the *Bengal* nature that he describes so well in his poetry and songs. We will go in the morning and come back at night. We can see both, *Rabindranath*’s and *Lalon*’s places in the same day.”

“I read *Lalon*’s house is not too far from *Rabindranath*’s house. Do you think they have met?”

“Most likely. *Rabindranath*’s elder brother liked *Lalon* a lot, and often invited *Lalon* to their father’s villa. They must have met. *Rabindranath* collected a lot of *Lalon*’s songs in a book, and was definitely influenced by *Lalon*’s mystic philosophy. A lot of poems from *Rabindranath*’s Nobel Prize winning collection are influenced by *Lalon*’s thoughts.”

“*Rabindranath* lost his property right?”

“Yes. But the government recovered a small piece of what he had lost to protect his memory. It is the best place to be if one wanted to be a poet. He was able to listen to nature and compose its songs.”

He never took me there. No one else was interested. But my interest in traveling *Pechorin*’s path never diminished. I remembered it that day, because I wanted to get

away, leave everything I knew behind and never return. My fantasy was to go to India, Tibet, China, Mongolia and then Russia. It was a simple plan. I took notes, and I thought it would be as simple as placing a few words on the page. I read a few key sections that I liked from the book. I didn't enjoy it as much as before. I could not settle my mind on anything.

I hopped off the bed, and went down to the *uthon*. There was a giant spider on the plum tree's bark. I approached it, and it climbed up a bit and slowly moved to the top branches and I could not see it anymore. The bark had a lot of cracks, like veins flowing from the top of the tree to the bottom, close to the ground. It was like the moist riverbed after the rain. A few ants travelled through it. The ants carried their white eggs, which meant there would be more rain later in the day or night. There were red and black ants. When the red ones bit, it hurt. We called them *Hindus*. The black ones never bit, so never hurt, and they were the *Muslim* ants. That is what they told us, and we believed it. When I was very young, I would catch the red ones and kill them, but not the black ones. Then in time, it didn't matter, I killed them all. I would take small glass bottles that were used for the homeopathic medicines and put sugar in those bottles and lay it where the ants were. After about an hour or two, there would be hundreds of ants inside the bottle and I closed the opening with a cork stopper. Then I would leave the bottle out in the sun and the heat would fry the ants and mix the ants with the melted sugar. I liked that game. I killed them by dripping melted candles on them, and I called them the instant mummies. I not only killed the ants, but the flies and all sorts of other bugs that I didn't know the names of. The days were long and I was bored. I needed things to do. So when I saw

the ants travelling with their eggs, I wanted to kill them, take their eggs away and destroy, but then I decided not to, enough things had happened that day already. Instead I stood there and watched the crack that ran like the rivers on the plum tree's bark. Those cracks were just there. No one ever watched them so closely, I thought. I found it funny, exciting and new. I have never thought about things that way – the cracks on the tree, an art of another sort from another world. I could have spent hours watching those cracks and those ants. Oh how those cracks moved so deliberately and created paths for something so mysterious! Toward the bottom of the tree they were wide and as they went up they narrowed and then finally disappeared. Everything disappeared, I thought, except my inner turmoil.

I wanted to find *Dipu*, see her. She wasn't around. I went from room to room, but she was not there. She was not at home. I needed to talk to her. A couple of weeks prior to that she had said something that almost made me fall on the ground, and be buried in it. But then somehow I was able to tell her, "It is what it is. If that is what happens, then I would deal with it. It is bound to happen one day soon, and if it happens for me at thirteen, then that is fine." I talked like a grown up, like *Abbu*, but I knew *Mamoni* will kill me if it turned out to be true.

Almost everything that I knew about sex, I learned it from *Dipu*. She taught me. I have heard for days that *Dipu* will come to our house from the village. I was excited to hear that someone young will be in our house permanently. My aunt, *Shahana* (*Abbu*'s cousin), rarely visited us with her children, and when she did, I went crazy – I had

someone to play with. *Dipu* was about twelve years old at that time. Her father died unexpectedly at the age of thirty seven from a stroke. She was old enough to be not safe in the village anymore. They lived somewhere close to the *Sundarbans*, in a small village. I didn't know much about that place, except that sometimes *Royal Bengal Tigers* would come to their *uthon* and they would not be able to go outside for hours.

The day she came to our house, I was playing under our guava tree. My favorite flower is the guava flower. They look most beautiful when after a rain the water gets stuck in them. So white! So crystal like! So quiet! You would have to hold it up or get close to it to see its beauty. Once you do that, you will never forget how beautiful that flower really is. I was playing with my marbles – a simple game where I rolled one marble to hit another. She sneaked behind me. I didn't notice. She said, "Did you know that the flowers are the plants' sex organs. I was excited to see her." I was startled, but I didn't show it.

I said, "You are already here? I thought you will come at night."

"You are so small... I thought you were much bigger by now," she said.

"I am big, I am in third grade now."

"So, did you know that?"

"What?"

"That the flowers are the sex organs of the plants?"

"What is that...I don't know."

"Well, do you know what fucking is? Flowers fuck too!"

"What is that?"

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

“Fine, I will teach you, but you have to promise not to tell anyone, it will be our secret.”

Late that night, we were talking about so far what I had read and how good of a student she was. My mom thought it would be good for me to have a big sister, and since she was older than I was, she should be able to teach me stuff. Well, she did, except that it was all about sex. Everything that I had never known but I needed to know about sex she taught me. She used her left middle finger to bend the left index finger backward, which made a vagina like gap between the fingers, and then put the right hand’s middle finger in it, and asked me, “Do you know what this is?”

“No.”

“You are too small, tiny. You don’t know much. Listen, I will teach you this, but you can never tell anyone, if you do, they will kill us. You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Fine, what you see on my left hand is what I have, and what you see on my right hand is what you have. This is your *nunu*, and this is my *nunu*.”

I was shy. She was my big sister. I was scared and excited to talk about *nunu* with her. I said, “I don’t want to hear it. You don’t have a *nunu*.”

“Why are you so shy? Your *Abbu* put his *nunu* into your *Mamoni’s nunu* to make you.”

“What do you mean?”



“I will tell you, if you are not shy or scared.”

And that’s how *Dipu* became my master for the next few years. Later that night, she said, “Do you want to fuck, now that you know what it is?”

“What?”

“You can fuck me, if you want.”

“No.”

“You will. All men want it. You are not a man yet...but you will...”

Since then we did a lot of fucking in our large house, starting with kissing, fingering and then in time real fucking. In our family, there were suspicions about us, but no one could put their fingers on it. I guess we were too clever and the large house helped us to hide our carnal activities. Much later I found out, from her, that she had been abused by the caretaker of her country house since she was seven or eight years old. Not sure what it explained, but that’s that. It was all a circle of abuse. After she arrived in our house she wasted no time at all – she had turned me in her potential sex toy in matter of hours.

She was a sex machine. My schooling in sex started at seven, and she continued to train me as we got older in the large house. Whenever we had sex, she often took the condom from me and chewed it and ate it. That is how freaky she was. Three weeks prior to that day, we had sex four times in one night. She always wanted to have anal, and we did that often too. I slipped myself into her vagina and came hard. She put her hand into her vagina, took out the semen and ate it. She sucked my penis, chewed my

balls and licked my ass. That is how freaky she was. She had spoiled me, made me rotten to the core.

We had sex for the first time when she was fourteen and I was nine years old. It was also about the same time when I saw two people having sex live for the first time – one of my uncles had sex with one of our servant girls frequently. About a month before that day, as she ate my semen she said, “It is all protein. It is tasty and sweet,” and two weeks later she had said, “I missed my period.”

“What are you talking about? How could you miss it?”

“It means I didn’t bleed this month.”

“Is this the first time it has ever happened to you?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“I am pregnant.”

“What! No!”

“I missed my period.”

Before I could say anything, she had left me there, awed and numb. Since then I had tried to talk to her, have a conversation, but she had avoided me. I was thirteen, and she was eighteen.



## The Sense of a Judgement

Then it was the prayer time. *Olide* came by to take me to the mosque. It was an excuse. We sometimes went to the mosque during the *Jumma*, Friday mass. In terms of collecting good deeds from prayers, *Jumma* is unparalleled. If you wasted a grain of rice, you would burn in hell for ninety nine years! Or if you helped a blind person, you would gain ninety nine years! Most of the calculations went like this, and the name of the unit was *Neki*. The more good *Nekis* you collected during your lifetime, the better, and after the judgement day your entry to the heaven would be easier, faster. It is said that most people would go to heaven, after burning for enough time in the hell until they used up all their bad *Nekis*. And to convert the week's bad deeds into good *Nekis*, there was *Jumma*, at the end of the week. If you prayed, then you would collect a massive amount of *Nekis*, enough to make up for a lot of bad deeds. One hopes that *Jumma* is worth more than one week's bad deed just to be safe.

When *Olide* came in I was already eating. I sat on a mat on our kitchen's verandah, and ate the *Khichuri* with fried *Hilsha* fish, fried goat fat and chicken curry with fried dry red challis. He came closer to where I was, sat on the stairs of our kitchen and said, "Let's go to the mosque."

"Not today," I said.

"If we hurry, we could still catch the final *Monajat* session."

"Not today."

"Come on!"

“How are my pigeons?” I whispered.

“Good! Don’t worry. I would not let anything happen to them.”

Then he winked. I understood what he meant. He didn’t know whether *Mamoni* would let me go out or not, so he wanted to take me to the mosque, so we had some time to talk in terms of what had happened that day. I trusted no one more than *Olide*.

“Get me on the way back. Let me finish eating, and then we can go out.”

*Mamoni* came by, and said, “*Olide*, sit next to *Adnan*. I will get something for you to eat.”

“Oh no. Not today. I just ate. We cooked the same stuff, and I am full. I am just trying to take him to the mosque.”

“I thought you don’t pray!”

“I don’t pray every day, but I go to the *Jumma* sometimes.”

I said, “*Olide*, get me on the way back. We will go out for a bit.”

“Are you sure? I mean you don’t have to.” I knew he panicked since I had said it in front of *Mamoni* that I would go out. I wanted to try it to see what happens. *Mamoni* said nothing. I kind of expected that. She went away to do something else inside the storeroom.

“I will come back as soon as I am done,” said *Olide*.

“Fine.”

*Olide* came back after about half an hour. It was longer than usual. He was already late, and the mosque was three minutes away by bicycle. Why did it take half an hour? I knew *Olide* didn’t go the mosque. I was ready. I did not put on anything fancy.

I still had my *lungi* on, a shirt and a sandal. During the Friday lunch, I put on the *lungi*, traditional *Bengali* clothes for men and young boys. We rarely went out in our *lungis*, so *Olide* was a bit surprised to see me in *lungi* still.

“Are you going to change?”

“No. Let’s just go out. We won’t go too far.”

“Alright! Go get your bicycle.”

“Let’s go together. I don’t want to take mine out now. *Dada Dadi* is sleeping, and I don’t want to wake them up trying to take the bike out.”

“Hop on then.”

I hopped on the back seat of his bicycle, and he paddled hard. *Olide* was fat. That is how everyone described him, and that is how even he described himself. He had no problem with being fat.

“Where are we going?” *Olide* asked.

“Into the camp.”

“Why?”

“I want to go see *Salman*.”

“Why?”

“Just go. I want to tell him something.”

*Salman* was the boy who sold me the *Opium* and he had a lot of pigeons, more than I had. I wanted to let him know what had happened, and wanted him to return if any of my pigeons went to his house. Sometimes when pigeons were disturbed, they spent

the night away from their usual places, just to be sure, just to be safe. I expected some of my pigeons to stay away from their usual place that night.

*Salman*'s father was in the rice business and he was the only man in town who raised the black and white sheep. I once asked him, "Why do you keep sheep when no one else is doing it?"

The short and bald old man was standing at the corner of his *uthon* under the extended branches of the ancient tamarind tree, which provided cool shade during the hot sunny days. He cupped his balls over the clothes of his *lungi* by his right hand, held it tight, as a lot of older men of his age did when they felt they were being asked something unique about themselves, a gesture of pride and satisfaction. They felt enough pride to hold their prides tighter while they talked – it made them feel like the manly men.

"It is an old art. The prophets raised the sheep."

"Prophets raised sheep?"

"Yes. All of them."

"Why? They didn't have goats?"

"Sheep are Allah's favorite."

We took the side road next to our boundary wall, crossed the *Ghope Central Road*, and continued into the rice camp. On the side of our house it was a tar paved road, but when the same road went into the rice camp it was not paved. That road was always moist, even in the dry times, and in the rainy season the mud on it turned into clay, and the people, livestock and dogs walked on it and made it a mix of something that smelled

so foul that one had to run on it after a few days of rain to pass it as quickly as possible. *Olide* rode the bike as fast as he could. I said, "Take it easy. I am sitting here. Don't fart." He said, "You wouldn't be able to tell anyway." On the left side of that road was the *Rafik's* rice mill, and on the right a large jungle, which had all kinds of exotic trees. At the right corner of that road and *Ghope Central Road* there was a giant fig tree that was at least three story tall. We passed that road fast, the whole seven hundred yards of it. At the end of that road there was a large *uthon* of a family who rented the place and worked for others to take care of their rice, and got paid daily and got the place to rent at half the cost. There were many families like theirs in that camp of about half mile long and quarter mile wide. Most houses were tin shaded, and had an enormous *uthon* for the rice to be dried and go through different phases of the processes before it became rice that people can boil and eat. Most houses had a lot of children, a chicken coop and tens or even hundreds of pigeons. Most people took care of the wealthy people's rice, so they didn't really care if the pigeons ate the rice. Because of the rice a lot of sparrows showed up every day, and the people often trapped them and fried them mixed with mustard oil and dry chili paste. We never cooked that at home, but I have tasted it in *Salman's* house a few times. It was a miraculous food with an unbelievable primitive taste. It was so delicious that one could eat fifty of those tiny birds before they knew it, especially if it was sauced with garlic and plum sauce and right before eating it if a pinch of salt was scattered on it lightly.

We passed those houses, arrived at the house that specialized in *Lakha* pigeons, turned right to one of the roads that eventually hit the *Pilu Khan Road*, and at about at the



middle we made another turn to go to *Salman's* house. When we arrived at *Salman's* house, a lot of women were on the *uthon* separating stones from the rice. *Salman's* house always had a lot of people, close to a hundred of them, at all times of the day. Always busy, always noisy. I once said to *Salman*, "Your *Abba's* business must be good. You got a lot of people working for you." He said, "The rice business is always good. *Abba* is doing it since he was at my age. No one knows it better than him." It was a hard job. A lot of people mixed small pieces of stones in their rice before selling, but *Salman's* father did not approve of that method. He was an honest man. I had often heard him say to others, "If I die today, tomorrow would be day number two. I do not cheat and I do not allow anyone to cheat either." I liked the old man a lot. He was always smiling through long bearded face and jovial. I had never seen him not working. If he was at home, he was doing something, much like my *Dada*, but more so since *Salman's* father didn't take nap during the day.

*Olide* and I stood by the main gate and asked one of the women to let *Salman* know that we were there to see him. There were many tin shaded one story houses built around the large *uthon*, where most of the rice was processed at various phases. After a few minutes, *Salman* came out, and said, "I had heard. You got raped my friend. I saw your mother once and I knew she was no good. I knew something like this would happen." *Salman* was a tall boy, so tall that even his own parents called him *Logi*, a thin tall bamboo.

*Olide* said, "Then how come you didn't tell him that?"

I said, "Listen I need your help. Some of my pigeons could come to your place over the next few days. You need to return those to me."

"I would my friend. I told you before that I would never keep any of your pigeons if they came to my house. Your trouble is the other people, not me."

"I have not forgotten what you did when we first met."

*Salman* looked at *Olide* and said, "Can he really still blame me for that? That was a long time ago and we were not even friends back then. And he behaved like such a fool too. Even he would have done the same to me if I approached him with a business idea like that. What would you have done?"

*Olide* said, "I would have eaten the pigeons. I do not understand anything about pigeon keeping. This makes me laugh."

When I first met *Salman* during a pigeon showing event, he told me that he had a pair of pigeons that he would like to sell. He said it only because I asked a lot of people there whether they would sell their pigeons to me. At that time I had no purebred *Giribaj* pigeons. He saw an opportunity, and he proposed an idea. I agreed to go to his house and see the pair. He said we could go together on the way home. I never knew where his house was and hesitated, but went with him anyway.

"We are neighbors," He said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I live very close to your house. Almost behind your friend *Olide*'s house."

"You know *Olide*?"

“Yes. I see you all the time at the back of their house, but we never had an opportunity to talk.”

“In that case I can go. I am not doing anything in the afternoon anyway.”

When I arrived at his house, I was awed by seeing his special collection of the *Giribaj* pigeons, the ones that flipped in mid air as they flew. At least seventy of them were resting on their many roofs.

I said, “Yes I would like to buy some of them.”

“They are not for sale.”

“They are not? Then which pair are you going to sell me?”

“I am trying to get rid of my other pigeons. I only want to keep the *Giribajjes*.”

“Really? Why is that?”

“I like the *Giribajjes*.”

“Where are the other pigeons?”

He pointed to a pair that was sitting on another roof, which was under a tamarind tree. They were the regular *deshi* pigeons, but they were large, and among them the male was at least double in size compared to the female. I liked those types of pairs. They always made good squabs and took care of them well. I said, “How much?”

“One hundred.”

“That’s too much. I would pay forty.”

“Do they look like they are forty *taka* materials?”

“I am buying from you. Not from the bazar. In the bazar they would sell a pair like this for fifty five to sixty, but they would buy it for no more than thirty. I am giving you ten more, forty.”

“Hundred.”

“Can’t do it.”

We went back and forth for a few times, and then he said, “Sixty. How about that? Later I will sell you some *Giribajjes* too.”

I believed him. I was charmed by his *Giribaj* collection. All perfectly white, not a single black feather on them. I agreed.

He said, “I would keep them locked in the morning. Come by this time tomorrow, and you can have them.”

I bought that pair the next day, but I could never keep them in my house. They always flew back to *Salman’s* house. In the beginning I thought it was only because *Salman’s* house was too close. I broke the pair’s pairing – I paired the male with another female and the female with another male, and still it did not work. When I let them go, they bonded again and flew back to *Salman’s* house. Months went by, and *Salman* finally told me the truth.

He said, “Let it go. I will give you a pair of young *Giribajjes*. You can have a pair as soon as they learn to fly. This pair actually went wild. They used to be domesticated, but now they are just like the wild pigeons.”

“What do you mean?”

“They went wild.”

“What does that mean? They are *deshi* pigeons!”

“They used to be, but now I see they live on that tamarind tree. Not domesticated anymore. That’s wild! Isn’t it? They turned wild because they could not compete with the *Giribajjes* for the territory.”

*Salman*’s father was inside house, but he had heard our conversation. He came out of the house, and asked *Salman*, “Have you told him that before you sold?”

*Salman* went quiet.

“Why are you not answering my question? Have you told him that before you sold these pigeons to him?”

“No.”

“Did you know that the pigeons would come back?”

Silence.

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s a fraud!”

While they talked *Salman* did not raise his head. He looked at the ground and answered his father’s questions. I knew he cheated and fooled me. I didn’t say anything. I knew his father would take care of the only way *Salman* should have been taken care of, which would be an hour long beating. But something extraordinary had happened. His father said, “Give *Adnan* his money back.

“I don’t have it.”

“How much was it?”

“Sixty taka.”

“How did you spend all that money?”

“It was a long time ago. I ate *chotpotis* and biscuits.”

“You ate with that *haram* money? Now you have *haram* blood in your body. I cannot keep a son with *haram* blood in the house.”

I said, “*Salman* I believe you.”

His father said, “Give him a pair of the *Giribajjes*.”

“That is too much. I would return his money or give him a young pair as soon as they learn to fly.”

“You have to make the wrong right at this very moment.”

“They cost too much. They are all my favorites.”

“Give him the least favorite pair.”

“They are all my favorites.”

I liked the judgment. I did not expect it, but it was in my favor in a big way. I stayed quiet and I knew I was very close to owning a pair of superb *Giribaj* pigeons.

“If you do not, then I will have someone catch a pair and give it to him and of course I will kick you out of this house.”

“Give me some time. I need to think about it.”

“Don’t take too long.”

*Salman* showed a pair by pointing his fingers at them and said, “He can have those two in the morning.”

His father asked me, “Would you be satisfied?”

“Yes.”

A few months after that, I found out that all those people in *Salman*'s house were not workers, but family, a huge family, they were all related, very closely. *Salman*'s father had four wives, and each wife and her children occupied a separate house around the *uthon*. An honest religious man with four wives! Only my great grandfather had five wives, but I had never seen anyone to have that many wives all at the same time. *Salman*'s father was a small man. How did he manage? Then again they said, “Tiny chilies always sting the most.” I had lost respect for *Salman*'s father. I tried to talk to *Salman* about it, but he was not interested in shedding any light on what went on in their house. I decided not to push him too hard. He was clearly embarrassed. He was so embarrassed that he turned red, his ears turned to dark blood color and he almost cried. Usually, men who had multiple wives allocated their nights to their wives by a strict rule, the first wife usually had at least three nights of the week, more than any other wife, and the youngest of course had two since she was the most recent fascination, and the middle wives fought over the remaining two nights. When I talked to *Olide* about it, he said he knew about it, but never found it interesting enough to spend too much time thinking about it and talking to me about it.

He said, “That’s a lucky man. While the wives fight, he is always taken care of, every night.”

“I read some of these men visits more than one wife per night.”

“Wouldn’t you do the same? I would.”

“I wonder what kind of fight the wives have when they find out.”

“Maybe no fight at all. Imagine this. They all have limited nights, right?”

“Yes.”

“Now, if they fight, all the men need to do is pretend to be sick, and then that wife would lose her night and would need to wait one whole week. You see the trick!”

“You have thought about it then!”

“I am thinking now. In fact, I think these men are very happy. Think about this. All his wives would be involved in all kinds of fight over him and he would just sit there and do whatever he wants to do. These are king like characteristics. They are tiny kings!”

“But then again I am sure all those wives are always asking for things from him and so on.”

“You play the same tricks. Punish them by taking their nights away.”

“You would have more than one?”

“I cannot afford it. Look at our house. There are just too many people in there, and I would probably get just one room and that’s about it. I would not be able to keep more than one wife.”

“How about keeping four wives in the same room?”

“I would like that, but then again, I would die from satisfying four of them every night. That is a bad idea.”

“Of course there are complications. Each of these wives expects to have a son, for power and to have the larger share of the property and assets. That is the real politics!”



Once they have a son, they know the men wouldn't be able to get rid of them so easily. Most of these men change wives you know!"

"You can't believe how embarrassed *Salman* was. He turned red from shame and anger."

"One day he will do the same. My *Dadi* said that the sons of most these men also keep multiple wives, because they are so used to the idea."

So, whenever I went to *Salman's* house after that embarrassing incident, I always waited outside his house and called for him. I wanted to show him that I understood and I was ready to do the right thing. But he took me inside the house anyway. He also understood that I would never bring about the issue. It was no different that day, in my mind. But *Salman* was a bit different, often looked back in the *uthon* area while we talked. He did not invite us to go into the house. I thought it was probably because *Olide* was with me. I never visited *Salman's* house with *Olide* in the past. I assumed it, and stayed focused on what I had to say. Then *Salman* came close to me and said, "Come to the side a little bit. I need to tell you something."

I looked at *Olide* and said, "We have some business to talk about. We will be back soon." *Salman* and I walked a few yards closer to his *abba's* room, which had a window through which they could see who is heading toward their house from the main road. The room was dark, but there was no one in there.

He said, "*Abba* married again."

“Really? I thought he wouldn’t keep more than four wives since he followed the Islamic guidance by the book!”

“He divorced his first wife.”

“How?”

“I do not know.”

“So, your mother is the first wife now right? That’s mean you have a lot of power now?”

“Yes, but the woman he married is not very young, and that’s mean he would marry again and my mother would have to go and so is my power.”

“I thought he was such a good man.”

“It is all an act. Some of the things he does right so the people in the society find no fault in his business dealings while he turns this house into a whorehouse.”

I had never heard *Salman* talk like that about his *abba*. He said, “He is old, but still fucking like a diseased dog, all day and all night. The rice price is going up, but money is not as powerful as before, and when my eldest step brothers ask for their share, then he will know how it is. Until then he will remain a filthy old man.”

“Don’t feel so bad. You should begin to steal now, as much as you can, before your mother is let go.”

“I will not steal. I will do something worse one day.”

“I will not tell *Olide*.”

“*Abba* is evil you know. He has no shame that he lives with four wives and fucks his wives while all his children know about it. How could a father behave this way in front of his children?”

“That is why I do not like religion. They can justify almost anything, including, cheating, lying and even murder. All in the name of God and religion! They see no problem! Why do you think I don’t believe in any of these?”

“I don’t know. I am just too sad. The wife is here and tonight we will all stay wake and hear him fucking the new wife. We can hear everything you know. The walls are just too thin!”

We walked back to where *Olide* was. As soon as we got closer to *Olide*, *Olide* said, “Your *Abba* married again, didn’t he?”

*Salman* looked shocked. Looked at me curiously. I said, “I was with you.”

*Olide* said, “I saw someone in a red *sari*, looked like a new wife to me.”

*Salman* said, “Please don’t tell anyone.”

I said, “We will not utter a word to anyone.”

*Olide* said, “But the neighbors will know it tonight. She looks good. *Chacha* would go crazy tonight. In fact, I might come over and stay behind the room, just to experience it from up close.”

*Salman* said to me, “Ask him to stop. Otherwise I will hit him, hit him hard.” He sat down on the ground, and shaking, not sobbing, but angry.

I looked at *Olide*. *Olide* said, “Hey we are just friends, we are having fun. Your *Abba* is a monster. I know it. We all know it. I am sorry, but I was just joking my friend.”

“Don’t call me your friend. You are an ass fucking friend. You would talk nice and then would fuck me in the ass.”

*Olide* said, “I am telling you. I would not tell anyone. Why would I do that? I understand how you feel.”

I figured our conversation wouldn’t go anywhere, so I said, “*Salman*, you can always come to our house and spend some time with me. In the meantime, stay strong and remember what I have told you about my pigeons.”

*Olide* and I helped him to stand up, patted him on his shoulders and assured him that everything would be fine. I had a brief moment within that brief moment where I found myself thinking about how sad I was and here I was trying to make another sad person feel good. I was surprised by my own capacity of keeping calm.

When we got on the bike, *Olide* wanted to say something. I said, “Not until we turn the corner on the main road. Go toward *Pilu Khan’s* house.” *Pilu Khan* was the only man in our city who kept foreign birds. He converted the entire roof top of his three story house into a giant cage. He had many cages within that cage, where he kept different types of birds. I once asked him to take me to his roof and show me the birds. He was happy to do that. He was about forty years old at that time, and that was the first time I saw how childish a forty year old man can be. He was not like the other pigeons keepers, rough and tricky. He was genuinely in love with his birds, and he took care of them as if

they were his children. He talked to them like, “Hey how are you today?” “Do you like the new grains? Sorry, I forgot to change your water.” “See we have a new visitor today.” I felt like stealing some of those birds. I looked at the tall coconut trees right next to the building, and knew I could climb any one of those and get to the roof at night and steal them, but then I decided not to, since I had no interest in keeping the type of birds he had. They were colorful birds, beautiful, but not my type. I liked the pigeons because they were free to fly and still come back at night.

When *Olide* turned the corner and *Slaman* could not see us anymore, *Olide* said, “*Dosto* (best friend), *Salman*’s father is the man. No matter what you tell me, that is how a man should live. I wouldn’t do it really, but I think people who could they are the lucky ones.”

“Let’s not talk about it.”

“Since when are you not talking about sex? I thought you were as talkative as your pigeons.”

“Not today. Not now. I feel what *Salman* is going through. It is kind of dangerous, now that his mother is the first wife. When the old man’s dick begins to feel not so good again and he would go out and get another wife.”

“He is a righteous Islamic man who keeps no more than four wives at the same time according to the scripture.”

“That is the trick right! Use the religion to keep everything under control.”

“Let’s go get some *gilabi*.” *Gilabi* was a fried sweet made out of fermented mix of flour, salt, sugar, some orange color and rose water.

“I didn’t bring any money.”

“I have it.”

*Olide* rode the bike slow through the neighborhood and we appeared on the *Jail Khana Road*. We passed the prison, got off the bicycle, walked the wobbly roads in front of the stores that sold terracotta cooking wares and toys, pushed the bike up the wooden stair to get on the wooden bridge to get to the *Boro Bazar’s* sweat making area. This was the back alley way to go to the *Boro Bazar*. Because it was after the *Jumma Namaj* and Friday, most of the sweat making stores were closed. But we found one where they made hot *gilabis*. To make the *gilabis* the material had to be fermented for days, it had to rot a bit to bring about the sweat and slight sour taste. *Olide* bought one kilogram for six *takas*. We took it, went back to the wooden bridge, stood by one of its rails and ate the *gilabis* as we looked at the *Vairab River* below to see whether we could spot any fish. Because it was rainy season, the river was wide, about half of a quarter mile. In the dry times the river turned into a drain, barely enough flow to take away people’s used condoms. There were no fish. Next to us was a blind beggar who begged there for as long as we could remember. He had a little boy with him who did the seeing, and the man sang religious story songs in a loud professional voice. We gave them two pieces of our *gilabis*, and the man recited a few *Koranic* verses to bless us.

*Olide* said, “Let’s go watch a blue film.”

“I am not feeling like watching porn today.”

“Nothing is better than porn to get rid of gloomy days.”

“Another day.”

“Let’s go see what they are playing then. Just to see what they are playing. I want to find out. Wouldn’t you go with me?”

“I would. But I would not go in to watch anything today.”

We went back to the *Boro Bazar* area, rode through it, and went to *Tasbir Cinema Hall* area, which was next to the elementary school that we went to. One of our classmate’s father was the manager of that theater, which played English movies, and in between played the pornographic movies. Everyone knew about it. No one talked about it. *Olide* and I used to go to that theater sometimes. *Olide* was definitely the pioneer among us. He started it, and then our other friends followed him. We always brought large amount of used newspapers with us to lay it on the seats, on the back, on sides of the seats and on the floor. A lot of people masturbated as they watched the porn. We sat at the very back, so no one’s semen hit us in the face in the dark. That day they were not playing any porn movies. The middle aged man at the ticket counter said, “Are you coming straight from the mosque?”

We didn’t say anything because anything would be useless and would continue unnecessary conversation. We left. Next to the *Tasbir Cinema Hall* were the back pack and bag selling market. And next to it were the doctors’ private chambers. I saw *Dipu* on the second floor in front of a gynecologist’s chamber. She saw me. I moved my eyes away. Those places were popular for getting a secret abortion done. I once had to go there to pick up a prescription for *Mamoni*. There was this couple who came in and the doctor greeted the man as if he knew him. The man handed the doctor a closed envelope, and then loudly said, “This is my wife. Take care of her until I come back. I need to run.

I will come back after this very important thing that I need to take care of.” The nurse moved the lady into the next room. Everyone in the room looked at each other, and I pretended not to understand anything. One lady said, “Wife? Must be the servant.” And a few of them burst out laughing. The doctor paid no attention to it. What was *Dipu* doing there? I thought about that miserable day as *Olide* rode the bike through the city. Is she there to get an abortion done? Is she really pregnant? This is something I did not share with *Olide*, so I couldn’t ask him to turn the bicycle. Maybe she is there just for a consultation! Didn’t I tell her that if she was pregnant then we would deal with that at that time? Did she hear me? Did I tell her that? Am I already a father? Is she killing my baby? As *Olide* rode the bike, I fell into an even more depressive mood, and wondered how a day could be any worse than it had already been until then.



## Fantasies of Children

After *Olide* dropped me off at home, I went to our fruit orchard at the back of the house. I walked around among the trees randomly. There was that *Sofeda* fruit tree about a hundred yards away from *Babu* uncle's window. *Dipu* once made me climb that huge tree along with her and fuck her in the ass on a high tree branch. The branches of that tree spread about hundred and fifty yards all around it and with dense leaves it was dark close to the center of that tree. No one could see us, even if they tried to. When I fucked her, something happened to me – I wanted her to have a tail. Because she didn't have a tail, my penis transformed into a soft lump of meat, and came out of her ass. She didn't like it. She snapped. She slapped me hard and said, "You need to make me come. What do you want me to do to make it alive again?"

"I want you to have a tail."

"I want you to have a bigger penis."

"I want you to have a tail."

"I want you do fuck me for three days straight."

"I want you to have a tail."

"Tail? For what?"

"If you had a tail and you screamed like a monkey, then I feel that I will be strong again."

"Oh! This is your fantasy? You want me to grow a tail?"

"Yes."

"Fuck me now. I will make a tail later."

We somehow finished on that tree branch. I didn't enjoy it at all. I needed her to have a tail. That was a moment of clear transformation of my sexuality – it was the birth of my sexual fantasy. She later did make a tail out of some old clothes and her hair, but it didn't do anything for me beyond the first couple of times. I wanted her to have a real tail. I wondered why all women didn't have a tail! As I walked among the trees I thought about how my life would have evolved if she never moved to our house. I was glad that she moved in our house, though she was the dominating one, I enjoyed how she satisfied her own and my sexual appetite. She was open to any idea. All I had to do was to tell her what I wanted and she made it possible. She often used to say, "The hardest thing is to find a sexual partner who is open to experience your sexual fantasies." I liked all that, but I didn't want her to get pregnant. What would I do if she is pregnant? Can I not blame it on someone else? Surely I am not her only sex machine! I thought about it, but I didn't like the idea. If it is my baby, then I must admit it. It was a depressing walk among the trees on soggy mud and clay. Nothing felt good. I found a small ripe jackfruit on a tree. I sat on a rain soaked branch leaned against the trunk of the tree and began to eat the jackfruit and throw the seeds to hit random targets away from that jackfruit trees. It was a lazy moment, which passed very slowly. My stomach was soon full and the humidity made me sleepy. I was tired. I decided to go to my room and rest, even take a nap.

*Olide* came to see me again, at our usual time, as he had often done. We went out often in the dusk and came back home late in the evening. That day *Olide* came to check

on me, just to be sure that I was alright. I knew him enough to understand it. He preferred to come to our house and then go out together, though his house was closer to the city center on the same main road, *Ghope Central Road*. Financially, *Olide*'s family was not very well to do. His parents didn't like me that much. They never said anything to my face, but they said all kinds of stuff to *Olide* about me when I wasn't there. *Olide*'s father was a banker, but an honest one – while all of his friends made millions he remained poor due to humanistic duty of never accepting bribes. He once took *Olide* to his office to show him how real life worked. His father showed him how many people tried to bribe him in a given day in exchange for a loan. *Olide*'s father did his job by the book, and the people pushed him to the wall and often threatened to kill him and his family. He referred those people to his colleagues who accepted bribes.

*Olide*'s father said, "It is not easy to survive a day at this office let alone a lifetime. But I am somehow managing it."

"Why?"

"Because we must. If we cannot stop the crime, we should at least say something and do something about it, no matter how small it is."

"But that is not changing anything!"

"But my conscience is clean. I do not feed you on illegal money. There is not a single drop of blood in your body, not a single cell in your body that came from the illegal money. I do not have enough money, and often I cannot do things for you, but it is because I am not like the others. I want you to understand that and remember that."

"I did not know it *Abba*. I am so sorry."

“I want you to study, study hard, and not waste too much time hanging around with *Adnan*.”

“But he is my best friend!”

“When you get to my age, you will realize that friendship doesn’t matter. You have to be in charge of your own life.”

“I do better than *Adnan* in school!”

“It is not that. I know you can do even better. You are smart.”

“I will try.”

“*Adnan*’s family is rich. And he will be going to America soon. When he is gone, what will you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“He will never come back to this country again. Who would like to live here anyway?”

“He will take me to America.”

“Do not talk like a fool. He will never take you. Rich people do not remember their past. They never have to.”

“He is not like that.”

“Not now, but you both will get old and will be taking on different responsibilities in life. And then you will remember these wasted times.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Do not hang around with him for more than once a week. Study. Study hard.”

Since that conversation, *Olide* and I tried not to be seen together often in our neighborhood, but as soon as we went to the city center and beyond, all our concerns fell apart, we were free and best friends again. We never doubted each other. We never thought about life going in different directions for us. We knew I would go to America one day, but somehow it didn't matter. We knew we would remain best friends.

When *Olide* came to see me that dusk, I didn't have to get off my bed, go over to the window that faced the *uthon* and look at the stairs to know who walked up those stairs. I recognized the noise that his sandals made, as it hit not the stairs but the bottom of his right feet. Visibly there was nothing wrong with his right foot though we all knew there were some hidden imperfections, since no matter what sandals he put on, it always made that unexpected strange *thock thock thock* noise. He had a chocolate colored *Bata brand* sandal, which he had on whenever he went out those days. Everyone had a *Bata brand* sandal, which lasted for a long time, sometimes for years, and wasn't very expensive. It was the brand to buy if one wanted a leather sandal. When he had gotten closer to the top most stair, he inquired, "*Adnan*, are you in there?" It was his way of finding out whether I was at home or not. I seldom went out on my own. *Olide* and I went to most places together since the year before, when we got our first Sony brand bicycles, which cost a lot, but lasted the longest. Separately, we did not know what to do, but together we had all kinds of devious ideas, together we were just brave enough to act on some of those ideas and together it was easier to face any troubles that were thrown at us. We protected each other, including our secrets.

“Yes. I’m here. Come in,” I said loudly enough for him to hear. I didn’t get off the bed. In fact I pulled the *Katha* over my body and tucked it in while I grabbed the body pillow and tightened it closer. I felt a bit better because he came to see me. I wanted to be comfortable while we talked for the next hour or two, so I rested the weight of my body on the body pillow. I didn’t feel like going out that day anymore, and wanted to talk away the evening.

As he turned toward my room, at the east end of the verandah, he said, “*Eey*, what are you doing? Studying?”

I said, “Nothing. Not feeling so good. Grab that chair,” as I pointed my finger to the chair that was closer to him, which he sat on whenever he came in to see me.

*Olide* had a yellow and blue checkered shirt and old faded blue jeans on. He pulled the chair that was next to my book shelf and sat on it facing me. The he quickly pulled the chair closer to my bed and then placed his legs on the bed close to the footboard. Now we were both comfortable for the conversations to flow smoothly. If living was important, then we knew how to live each moment through our conversations about nothing. We mostly talked shit, but occasionally, when the rare stars were aligned, we talked smart and about important matters. There was a book by *Humayun Azad* on my table. *Olide* grabbed it and said, “When did you buy it?”

“*Abbu* bought it!”

“And he gave you to read this? You will be in trouble with your *Mamoni* again if she sees it!”

“I am testing her out. To see how far I can go.”

“I heard they are going to ban this book.”

“Really? Already?”

“It is a tough book for the religious people to handle. Don’t you think?”

“But better for us communists! Anything that hurts religion’s menacing backbone is good.”

“This book has some juicy chapters on women’s sexual organs. Have you read it yet?”

“Listen, here is something interesting. This book is all about women and their struggle with rights and freedom. Right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Then why are we behaving as if it is written about another species? Don’t we know women?”

“No we don’t. *Tipu* read a few chapters of this book, and he told me we know nothing about women’s body parts and how they work. *Tipu* said even women themselves don’t know.”

“That occurred to me too. *Tipu* may be right. I would quiz *Dipu* later to see how much she knows about her own body.”

“*Dosto*, how many times you guys are doing it per day now?”

“We haven’t done it in a while. Let’s not talk about it here.”

Then *Olide* suddenly got closer to me, got very close to my ear and said, “Can you steal another porn magazine from your *Abbu*’s collection?”

“What happened to the last one?”

“I am done with that one. You can only bring about so many combinations of plays in your mind using those few images. I am tired of those pictures. I need something else, something new.”

“Bring that one back, and I will give you another one.”

“Will do! Tomorrow.”

“How many times are you masturbating per day these days?”

“You need to break my record of eight times first and then I will tell you!”

“I do not masturbate anymore. I play for real.”

We both began to laugh, laugh loud. But then *Olide* said, “Calm down. Calm down. Keep acting sad. That way you can get a few free days with your *Mamoni* so she does not bother you about studying.”

“I am not acting. I am sad. This is the worst day of my life!”

He said, “Now what?”

“What do you mean?”

“You are going to have to study hard you know!”

“I know. What choices do I have?”

“*Ahh*, let’s go out one last time before you disappear in your books.”

“Not feeling that elated. Not feeling good at all.”

“You can’t be depressed you know. You and I know it is not as bad as it could have been!”



Then his eyes suddenly got bigger and he became stiffened. Then he whispered, “Auntie is not in the bedroom right?” as he flicked his head to the right pointing to my parents’ bedroom.

“I don’t know where she is.”

“You mean she could be in the room?”

“She is not in the room. She is somewhere in the house, but not in the bedroom.”

“I got scared for a little bit.”

“Let’s not talk about any of that here, in this house.”

“That’s why I am saying let’s go out.”

“Not today.”

“You will like it. Don’t turn into a gloomy thing. We must go out.”

“Where are we going to go?”

“The usual places.”

“Later.”

“I think we should go out now and you should return home in the evening and get to your books. I think that will make your *Mamoni* very happy! What do you think?”

“How about I don’t study!”

“You can’t do that. You must put on a show for a while, and I mean not for a day or two, but for weeks to come, maybe even for months.”

“I don’t think I can do that.”

*Olide* suddenly stood up again, pushed the chair back to its original place, and grabbed one of my hands and pulled hard. He said, “Come on. You got to get out of this place. You will see, you will feel better as soon as we go out.”

I got off the bed, sat on the edge of the table and said, “Tomorrow. For sure.”

“Not tomorrow. Now.”

I realized that *Olide* wouldn't give up and he would continue to push me until I agreed.

I said reluctantly, “Let's go.”

“Really? Good. Where do you want to go?”

“The usual.”

“It is for the best. You will see.”

I knew it would help me. I knew I had to get out of the house to feel better. And I was glad that *Olide* came by to get me out. Before he came, I began to turn into a frog that never left the heating beaker as it sat in there and died. I needed help, and *Olide*, my best friend was there to provide that help. It still felt that I had betrayed my pigeons. Here my pigeons were all gone and sold in the market, and maybe some of them would be served that very night in the city's Chinese restaurants and *kebab* places, and I was still enjoying life. I have betrayed them. I have betrayed them. I have betrayed them. This sentence went through my mind over and over. A certain coldness grew within me, and I decided to stay strong, and not get destroyed. I was ashamed of my actions earlier in the day. Why did I hold *Mamoni*'s feet? Why did I behave like a beggar? Like a

slave? Like a defeated person? Why did I not take it like a man? Why did I cry like a child? I scolded myself. I wanted to spit on my own face. No matter wherever I looked, I began to blame myself. There was no one else to be blamed. It is I who brought the demise for my pigeons. I was the center of everything. I should have studied like the other good kids. I should have been good like the good kids. I should have been getting good scores on the exams like the other good kids. A tide and ebb of emotions and self doubts went through me and pierced me like the way a spear went through a fish.

We usually went out with our back packs with a few text books and notebooks in them. It made us look good, studious and familiar. Most importantly, it made us look like we were from good families and not a suspect of anything bad. Most boys our age went out with their back packs, definitely for the same reason. Our society gave great honor to the people from good families, where good meant power and riches, not morality or ethics. If one were from a good family, then one could almost get away from any trouble. Even when we didn't need it, we used our covers; it almost became our second nature, and we could not go out without our back packs. We pretended to be what we were not by acting older than our age. We thought of ourselves somebody smart, clever and untouchable. We were the heroes of our own creation and imagination. We created ourselves. We fooled ourselves of course. Very little of what had happened in the world or even in our city mattered to us, yet we liked to think of ourselves as communists. We existed detached from everything, as if we didn't need help from anyone or anything. Nothing had the power to influence us, if we didn't allow ourselves to be influenced by it. We were in charge. We believed we were not the slaves of our

habits, but our habits were our slaves. We wanted to do good, dreamed about it, but seldom did anything good. We expected the fruit, but wanted not to work for it. That is how we all felt, people of our age. I felt it. And what was worst for me was that I was becoming just like *Abbu*, and *Mamoni* wanted to stop that *becoming* at any cost. But that day all that began to fall apart and a different perspective began to grow inside of me. *Mamoni* proved that it was not I, but it was she who was in charge. I realized life could take major turns at any moment whether I liked it or not. Like her, everything else in the world probably had influence over me, I began to suspect. I began to think of all that and didn't like the feeling. I needed to be in charge of my life and all my tricks needed to work, exactly the way I had expected them to work. But that day it all failed in a big way, and I felt like a beggar who had lost everything, even the very little he had, including the last pot and the clothes, and kicked out from his last place of sleep.

*Olide* said, "*Dosto*, don't you have some of those biscuits?"

"The cream biscuits?"

"Yes."

"Look under the bed – take a few out for me too."

"I wouldn't take too many."

"Take as many as you like."

"Don't say it! I might take them all – the whole tin."

"Don't take them all. But take ten for each one of us."

"I will buy you some cakes when we are out."

*Abbu* bought those biscuits every winter, at least four tins at a time. He ate those late at night. He complained during the winter nights, when the night was persistently long and didn't end soon enough for him. He often got hungry, and needed something to eat. But who would go get something for him from the kitchen during the winter nights? He wouldn't go get it himself, and *Mamoni* could only do it if it was for a night or two. But he needed to eat something every night. Some days he went out of the house and to the neighborhood restaurants, which were midway between our house and the city center, at the head of the *Pilu Khan Road*, where they served early morning breakfast – bread, fried bread, poached eggs, tea, sweets and beef curry. But those places were never ready to serve until at least it was four in the morning. Therefore, he found the idea to have some cream biscuits at home that he could eat with the guava jelly that *Mamoni* made every year. *Mamoni* liked the guava jelly as much as I liked it. It was the one thing that connected us. The aroma of the guava jelly was so sweet, flowery and intense that *Dada* feared that it may bring about snakes in the house, even though we never saw a single snake in our neighborhood. Snakes were believed to be charmed by the aromas of the flowers. And because of that he never liked it when *Mamoni* made the jelly. He never ate the guava jelly, to make his point and to show his mental strength. Every year I would collect the ripest of all the guavas one day, a basket full of them, and she would spend the day making the jelly. First she would cut each guava into twelve half moon shaped pieces, take the seeds out and boil the pieces in water in a large aluminum pot for two hours. When the water thickened, she would filter out the pieces of the guava. And let the water sit for a few minutes, and then add a bit more water and a lot of sugar and

boil for another thirty minutes before letting it set over night. Everything in the house smelled of the guava jelly, and the aroma spread in the neighborhood. I always liked that day, since it allowed me to work with *Mamoni* and cook something together. In my culture not many men knew how to cook. Only my maternal grandfather, *Morshed Ali Khan*, and I knew how to cook things if we wanted to.

*Olide* said, “*Dosto*, let me take fifteen and you take five. You can eat more when you get back to the house. How about that?”

“Actually, you take all twenty, and I will just eat the cakes.”

“That works for me.”

*Olide* took out the yellow tin, placed it on the table and opened the lid with the bicycle key. He lowered his head closer to the opening of the tin and took a long sniff, and while he smelled he made the noise, “Ahh Ahh Ahh.”

He said, “Heaven should have these biscuits.”

“Heaven doesn’t have biscuits!”

“Here is something for you! In the past, people had all kinds of natural things to eat, like the grapes and they said let there be grapes in the heaven. In our time we eat these biscuits so we should get these when we go to heaven.”

“We are not going to heaven.”

“I am just saying! Actually, I never thought about it this way before. Think about the French people who like to eat bread and cheese. When they get to heaven they have

to adapt to eating grapes, milk and honey. Isn't that a torture? I think it is. Then how could the heaven be a heaven for the French people?"

"If you begin to question, then you will end up being so surprised and begin to utter such knowledge that people will be forced to call you a madman."

*Olide* filled his pockets with the biscuits and said, "Next year, I am going to steal one whole tin when your *Abbu* buys them."

"That would be fine by me."

I grabbed my navy blue shirt, put it on over my white t shirt and went out with *Olide*. I didn't come across *Mamoni* on the way out. I wondered where she was, but had no desire to find out either. In fact I didn't want to see her face that day anymore, which I knew would be impossible, but nonetheless I felt that way. Usually she slept after the mid day meal, but that day she didn't sleep. As I got down the stairs, I looked around, but there was no sign of her. She wasn't there. I was a bit puzzled, but then I was relieved. I didn't have to answer any of her questions as I left the house. It was a good thing, though puzzling. Where could she go in a day when she triumphed and had gotten what she had wanted? She had won. I lost.

My bicycle was at my grandparents' verandah. That verandah had a metal designed see through fence. Everything had to be locked at night. Thieves went from house to house looking for unsecured things. So, my bicycle had to be locked along with *Dada's* bicycle and along with other objects, such as the wood cutter, shovel, fruits waiting to be sold, spade and chairs. On one end of the verandah, there was a large table where my grandfather kept his things that he needed on any given day, and there was a

chair where he sat while he thought about who knew what. On the other end, there were the bicycles and a large pot in which we placed the bananas for ripening. We placed the bananas and closed the mouth of that large pot with clay, and in about three days all those hundreds of bananas were perfectly yellow and ready to be eaten and sold. During the rainy season the chickens went on that verandah to get away from the rain and shat all over it, end to end, which was a nightmare for *Dada*, since he had to clean it up. He complained about every little work that he had to do, but being a workaholic he needed something to do as long as he was awake. *Dadi* couldn't bend her body to clean up the shit. But there was nothing one could do about the chicken shit; we had to let out the chickens in the morning in order to survive their unbearable noise, conversation and complaints.

When I went in to take my bicycle, my grandfather was sitting on his bed, inside the room, doing some financial bookkeeping. The inside of that room always looked dark even when the windows were open, due to the dense fruit orchard behind that building. There was a large *almirah*, two beds, an *alna*, a table, two chairs, and a shelf that was built into the wall itself by placing three rungs of woods. The rungs were full of pickle jars and fruits. There was a ceiling fan, two lightbulbs and a rod light. That was all. My grandparents slept on separate beds. I've always wondered why, but I was told that it was because *Dadi* had a broken back and she needed to be alone so she is not able to damage her back even more by making un prescribed moves. An explanation that was never satisfying for me. *Olide* had a simpler explanation. He once explained it as, "Because your *Dadi* got pregnant at least eleven times, your grandparents decided to be



on separate beds so there were no accidental madness during the long nights.” I liked that explanation better than the popular one that was given to me.

*Dada* had his blue checkered lungi on, and no shirt. When he was in the house, he seldom had his shirt on, didn't matter which season it was. He grew up not having any shirts at all, so it was a habit as old as him. It was his time to think about money, after the nap in the afternoon. He was a small man. And he looked even smaller when he sat on his bed by folding his legs one around the other, in yoga like position. He had a strong and stern back, straight up. He never bent forward when he sat or rode his bicycle. He believed he could always tell about a person depending on how they walked. His posture was as strong as his character. He saw me taking the bicycle out and called out, “Where are you going?” He used hand gestures to ask me to come into the room.

I moved a bit closer to the room. “Just going out.”

“Where?”

“I don't know.”

“I hear things too you know. About you!”

“What?”

“I will talk to you about those later.”

I knew he wouldn't say any more than what he had already said. I took the bicycle off of the verandah, got on it, and was about to peddle away. Then he said, “My bicycle would last longer than yours.”

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how what he had just said related to what had happened in the house that day. I said nothing. I knew he never said things that were not connected somehow, but I could not figure out what he meant.

He said again, "My bicycle would last longer than ten of yours combined."

I began to paddle and said nothing. *Olide* looked at me puzzled. Neither of us understood what he had said. We rode the bike across the inner yard, and got out of the house through the gate that was part of the *Boro Dada's* (older brother of my *dada*) side of the house, and directly under the half bricks that I had climbed earlier that day to get to the roof. I saw *Dipu* on the second floor talking to *Shamoli* Auntie, and smiling. How could she do that? How? I wondered, but said nothing. Is it all a show? Her way of teaching me a lesson! But why? For what? I only did what she had wanted, and wanted me to do.

*Olide* said, "Your *Dada* never jokes around. He definitely has something on you."

"I know. But what could it be?"

"Nothing else could harm more you except the stolen books that we are selling to the used bookstores."

"You think he would know about it?"

"Why not? Everyone knows him."

"But he never reads anything. Books don't interest him. How would that come about in any of his conversations? He only understands money."

“It doesn’t have to come up. All one needs to do is simply tell him about us. That would do the trick.”

“The other day *Abbu* brought a book home and he said everyone should read that book and that book were banned in Saudi Arabia. *Dada* said, “But everything is banned in Saudi Arabia!” That is his connection with the books. We will see what he has for me later. I have a lot more to think about now.”

“You are right. Worry about it if anything comes out of it. Until then, we have a lot more to do and eat.”

We went to the city center, parked our bicycles next to *Siddik Bakery’s* entrance, which was exactly at the center of the city center right across from the *Traffic Police* post, where five roads merged. *Olide* wanted to buy a couple of pieces of the cakes that he had promised to buy. They made the fresh cakes about that time every day, getting ready for the evening rush. People who liked the cakes or biscuits hot, they gathered around the bakery to buy them fresh. It was a luxury that many could afford even with their small income. Fresh cakes and biscuits with tea was the thing of the evening. It was the time when most people got off from work, and they bought something on the way home for their loved ones, and on Friday’s it was extra special since it was the day off for everyone. It was a tradition, people with money followed, and people with no money just looked and dreamed about it. *Olide* and I bought those cakes often, just a couple of slices, which cost us about two takas per slice. We ate it as we rode our bikes through the city. It was our tradition. If one did any favor to the other, then the other had

to buy those cakes, and we did a lot of favors to each other, and ate a lot of cakes. In time, it turned into an at least twice a week thing.

He got the cakes, two large thick yellow cakes with dark edges. They were wrapped in paper packets made out of the examination papers that were sold by the local schools and colleges by the kilograms to the used paper buyers. Sometimes after we ate the cakes, we tried to read what was written on those papers. One time we read a boy's essay about the cow. He wrote, "I am looking at a cow now, and the cow has five legs. One is just hanging from the cow's butt." We read it as we ate the *chotpoti* in the park. What we ate came out of us, through our mouths, because we laughed so hard. Almost every evening we went to the *Jessore City Park* to eat the *chotpoti*. That road food needed no oil to prepare it, and was the healthiest thing to eat. First, let the that special type of large and round lentil to be soaked in the water over night, and then boil it in salted water for a few hours until the lentil was soft and the salted water thickened mixed with the lentils. Then serve it with minced cilantro, chili, onion and tamarind juice, breadcrumb, and minced boiled eggs, if one preferred. Each one of those miraculous plate cost us one *taka*, but we ate at least two plates each, one normal, and one with the eggs, which was two *takas*. It was the same man who sold *chotpotui* in the city park for over thirty years, according to him. His name was *Monsur Ali*. He had a long beard, a supremely shiny bald head, and his eyes turned inward, which made the eye sockets look like two holes looking out. He wore a lungi, cheap rubber sandals, wrapped a towel around his waist and a t shirt. The same dress every day for as long as we knew him. But he was clean. He prayed when the prayer times arrived. Even the boys who would

not mind stealing money from their mothers' purses did not steal from him. When he heard the prayer calls, he would ask one of the customers to look after his business, while he went away for a few minutes, a few yards away to pray. He took the towel off from his waist, placed it on the grass and prayed. That day we decided not to go and eat *chotpoti*, since we had too many cookies with us.

The cakes melted in the mouth almost as fast as hit the tongue. We liked that aspect of those cakes. Even if we had eaten three slices, we felt as if we ate nothing. They were soft and fluffy and while they were still hot they didn't taste so sweet. It was only after they cooled, the sweetness intensified. *Olide* liked them hot. I preferred to freeze them first, so they were sweeter. The entire area smelled of freshly baked biscuits and cakes. A lot of beggars gathered around the bakery. The owner used to feed them the scrap and broken pieces. He was a good man. A lot of other bakery owners sold their broken pieces to the poor people, and to the people who made less money. People who made less money bought them secretly so no one would know that they ate scraps. They had a social face that needed protection at any cost. Why throw out the broken pieces or sell them for a few *paysas* when there were people who were willing to eat things that were not perfectly symmetrical or well presented on a plate? It was the same food either way! He used to hand those out to the beggars and say, "When we shit we all shit the same thing, no matter in what form these cakes and biscuits go through our mouths." Everyone laughed, every time he said it. At least we liked it because we did not have to feel too bad about eating cakes, when the beggars watched us. Everyone needed a way not to feel too guilty about things. A beggar said to *Olide*, "Our duty is to watch and not

do anything, not eat anything, not feel anything. That is all we are able to do while you boys are able to eat just because you are born in a rich family.”

I was about to say, “We make money by stealing and that is how we can afford it. We are actually worse than the condition you are in,” but I didn’t say it, since it was no argument at all. In fact it was such a bad idea that I was shocked that it almost came out of my mouth.

*Olide* gave that man half of his cake. I gave half to his son, who was no more than five years old. We both knew the boy wasn’t his son, but was walking with the beggar for the day and the beggar would feed him scraps and hand over a few *takas* to the boy’s father at night when the boy was returned home. The beggar was about forty years old, but trying very hard to look like he was at least sixty. He had a traditional green *Punjabi* dress that had many holes and patches. The *Punjabi* was too new to have all those holes and patches. The boy just had a half pant on and no shirt. The more miserable the boy looked, the more success was expected. Life was like the water, it had to find a way to flow and get to the river. Life had to find a way and get going. Life went on.

I said, “We are sorry, but we can only help in a very small way.”

“That’s fine. When we die, *Allah* will ask what you have eaten on earth, and then what will happen? Aaa what will happen do you think?”

He took out a piece of paper from his bag, which also had a hundred holes, and began to unwrap the paper. The boy sat down on the road and said nothing. He looked at

the ground and ate the cake fast, so fast that one would be forced to think that he was commanded to do that. Eat fast, show how hungry you are.

I said, "I don't know. I think you have it written down on that piece of paper."

*Olide* and I looked at each other.

He smiled a bit, and then he said, "Yes, but I can't read. I will just tell you guys. The rich would begin to name the names of the foods and the list would be long, very long and they would often forget the names of the things and it would take a long time for them to complete the list."

"Ah!" said *Olide*.

"Then what do you think would happen?" the beggar asked.

"What?"

"Allah would ask the same question to the poor. And the poor, people like us, would have no problem answering it. We only eat a few things in the world. We would name it very fast and be done. The fastest would be Prophet *Mohammed*. He would say date, bread, milk, honey and water and be done with that question."

"*Mohammed* never had meat or fish or egg?"

"No."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Then being vegetarian should be an Islamic thing and all Muslims should be vegetarians. I wonder whether *Mohammed* ate meat on the *Eid* days!"

“Let us not ask that kind of questions or have that kind of wonderings. You didn’t ask me the right question yet.”

“What right question?”

“Why it matters who would answer the questions faster!”

“Why does it matter?”

He shook his head side to side in joy, and said, “Because when they answer it the person will be standing on a hot stone. And the people that would take the longest would find their brains boiling.”

“Boiling brain? Who thinks of things like these? Instead I think the poor need to start working hard and think differently. That might be better than imagining rich people’s boiling brain,” I said. I knew it was unsympathetic, but it just came out of my mouth. First of all, he was telling his own story that he made up or heard from someone like he was and telling to the boy who sat on the ground. A different Islamic tale I must say, re writing history as he uttered those sentences.

“It is up to you whether you believe it or not.”

We ate the other half of our cakes, took our bikes and walked toward the road that went into the depth of the bazar, which was only a few yards away from the *Sidfdiq Bakery* on the right, and it was one of the roads that started from the *Traffic Police Post*. The bakery was at the beginning of the *Boro Bazar Road*. There were all the stores that sold fruits. Not many, but about a dozen stores. Bananas hang from the strings along with the grapes, apples and oranges. Wonderful decoration of all kinds of fruits, placed in a way that they made a pyramid. Even after the rain, there were thousands of flies



gone mad with the smells of fruits. We stood by a fruit store and ate our cakes. We went there often, not for the fruits, but to see a girl. There was a girl who lived in one of the houses right above one of the fruit stores. Her father owned the fruit store downstairs and they lived in the upstairs. Her name was *Shova*. We both liked her. Not in the way that we would want to be with her forever, but we would like to have her for the night. *Olide* and I imagined a life with her where she was sandwiched in the middle and we were all naked and in the river doing all kinds of unimaginable athletic things that would even scare a seasoned Olympian. *Shova* was our girl, we both wanted her, and we both wanted her together in a game of pain and pleasure. We imagined she was freakish and she would know exactly what to do with us.

*Shova* was a girl of about sixteen years of age. I guessed. I heard she was in tenth grade, so we probably guessed right. *Olide* disagreed though. He believed *Shova* was our age, and not a day older. She was just being taken care of by some experienced hands, which catalyzed her girly parts to develop into a woman's parts faster. We never talked to her. We never said a thing. In fact, we never thought about finding out anything about her, which would have been easy in a small city like ours. We just watched her. We tried to capture her posture in our mental images, and we took it home with us. It was an art of seeing the girls and capture their images that got us going when we masturbated. We called those subjects, those images. We needed to recall those images whenever we felt like masturbating; it was like the movies, imagination put the reality and the fantasy together in such a wondrous mix that it never failed to make us come hard. There was an album in all our heads. Every boy kept an album of images in

their heads, ready to be called out and play. We recalled those images as we wished and in the small hours of the night or whenever. She was one of those girls who gave us countless images. She was priceless. I looked at her every day, and every day I had forgotten how she looked like. How she looked didn't matter.

*Shova* was no taller than five feet. We liked her because we felt we could move her as we wished while we did things to her and with her. That day her slim petite body looked great in the magenta colored *Kamise*. Sometimes if she wanted to play with us, she would come to the edge of the balcony and press her butt against the railing. She had a butt that could provide materials for days or even weeks. Just one sighting of it was enough. We went to get a glimpse of her butt, the shape of it, round and meaty. We joked, "God wanted to make her taller, but changed his mind in the very last minute and added the leftover material on her butt. God loved what he saw, and he left it that way." She enjoyed the attention. She would look at us and smile a little, and that would kill us. One of her smiles was enough to destroy us, change our mood and alter the thought process itself. Every once in a while she would press her boobs against the railing. Because it was a market place and a lot of people were looking, she did that for a second or two before changing her posture to the normal expected position again. Only God knew how many customers like us she had to entertain in any given day. We knew there were others, some we envied, some we hated and some we found to be very brave who uttered filthy things to her as they passed by. *Olide* had just one thing to say about *Shova*. He often said, "There is nothing normal about this girl. Her natural state is her abnormal state, and that is how she should remain." I never disagreed.

## God's Other Faces

After we captured *Shova's* thousand images in your heads, we rode through the *Boro Bazar* road, passed the fruit stalls, the stationary stores, stores of clothes and shoes, made a right turn, passed the city's largest warehouse and arrived at *Tipu's* house, which was next to the warehouse. I wanted to go to the chicken market and see my pigeons, if they were still alive, but *Olide* protested.

He said, "Live a one way life. Never look back."

I said, "*Olide*, that is deep. Where did you get that from?"

He laughed out loud and said, "From my grandfather. But I like it. It makes sense."

"Let's just go in to take a quick look."

"No," and then he quickly changed the subject and said, "You know *Abba* told me not to keep your pigeons, but you have nothing to worry about."

"Really? What if he tells *Mamoni*?"

"He wouldn't. He is not like that. Your *Mamoni* would never find out."

"Are you sure?"

"You are talking to me. You know what I can do for you."

"Tui ekta jinish *Dosto*! Tui ekta jinish! You saved a small piece of my life."

*Tipu* grew up next to a warehouse. What a place to grow up! Fridays were the busiest days. It was the day off for the most, but a busy day in the warehouse. *Tipu* expected us, since it was a Friday, our usual day to get together and see the whores. We

parked our bikes next to the main gate, outside of their house and went in. *Tipu's* massive mother saw us and yelled, "*Tipu*, your friends are here." She was so big that *Olide* and I often wondered how *Tipu's* father mated with her! How did *Tipu's* father have sex with her? From the front, it would be impossible, but from behind it is possible, but it meant *Tipu's* abba had a big penis. We did not want to give him the credit of being in charge. We settled on the idea that she was in charge and she did him by being on top of him. We liked that idea and solidified it in our minds.

On the way to the verandah, we greeted her by saying, "How are you Auntie?"

"Good. Good." Then she said to *Tipu*, who was still inside his room, "Don't go to the roof."

*Tipu* came out of his room and met us. "Ooi guys, you are early today."

"*Adnan* got raped at home today," *Olide* whispered to *Tipu's* ear.

"By your cousin?" *Tipu* looked at me and asked. "But that happens all the time right?"

*Olide* said, "His mother sold all of his pigeons."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?"

"Bad for you! Did you fail one of your tutor's exams?"

"She forced me to sell some, not all. Let's not talk about it. I might begin to cry."

*Tipu* said, "That's the right attitude. You can always buy some more later. Now let's get to the roof."

“Wait. Your mother is still around. Let her begin to pray first.”

“Ahh she beats me every time I am on the roof anyway. With you guys I can stay longer since she wouldn’t beat me in front of you two.”

“Clever! That’s clever *Tipu*. I am impressed,” said *Olide*.

“Beating is beating. It is always the same. Let’s go see.”

As we climbed the stairs, *Olide* said, “If these were not pigeons, and something else like the dogs, then people would think he was fucking them. I don’t understand why anyone would be so fascinated by the pigeons. They shit, and the only thing I like about them is their roasted taste.”

I said, “Stop it. Let’s not talk about it.”

“I am just saying.”

*Tipu* said, “You guys come in the right day.”

“Why is that?”

“There is a new girl.”

“Good looking?”

“Good butt?”

“Oh yes, she is good.”

“They will rip her apart today then. In the morning she will be an old lady.”

“When did she come in?”

“Maybe today. Oh man. She is small but everything is big about her. You can have her on your lap. She would fit right in. And she knows how to look at a man.”

“Let’s go behind the water tank, sit there and see her.”

“It would take some time. She just went in her room with a man.”

I liked our conversation. We were boys to our parents’ eyes, but we were no less dirty than the adults of our town who were able to make *names* for themselves. Men who went to other women and desired other women were called *lompots*, perverts of some sort. We were *lompots* too in our minds, except we were protected by our parents’ disbelief. We were still growing up, even babies at times. We still had the chance to be saved and not turn into our fathers! But we had already passed that phase, we were bad boys.

“*Tipu*, do you want to go to the rail station? We are going to the bookstore after.”

“No, *abba* will kill me if he sees me in there.”

“We know, but how is he going to see us? We will just go and come back. We don’t have much time either.”

“*Naa* that store sells Communist books and *abba* hates communists. I can’t go in there. If he catches me, he will lock me up, and I will not be able to see the girls for days. And you cannot masturbate in a locked room you know. I am telling from experience. I once did it, and by morning I began to vomit from the smell of my own stuff.”

“Is that true?”

“Absolutely!”

Then *Tipu* stood up, held the pipe on top of the water tank, leaned his body out beyond the edge of the roof, and said, “She is out. She is out. Guys look over there.”

We looked. On the south side of the whorehouse, beyond a short boundary wall, there was *Tipu*’s one story house. The whorehouse was one large u shaped two story

building. *Tipu*'s house was the perfect place to see what happened in there. If *Tipu*'s family sold tickets, they would have made a lot of money. *Tipu* also had the privilege of knowing a lot of the city's men who went there secretly. He used it to his advantage. When his mother sent him out to buy something, he found stores whose owners went to the whorehouse often. They knew that *Tipu* knew them, and they would give things to *Tipu* mostly for free or at a huge discount. *Tipu* was a generous boy. He fed us ice creams and *chotpoti* whenever he had the money during our lunch hours at school.

*Tipu* asked, "You see her. Doesn't she deserve at least that, a concentrated look from a young boy like me?"

We went quiet for a few seconds. I said, "Every second of it." She was a miraculous girl, more beautiful than *Shova*, and a bit shorter. Both *Olide* and I had a thing for the small girls, and fell in love immediately. She was like a doll. That was the first time I had found out how beautiful a dark skinned girl could be. She was dark, but her skin glazed even in the dark under the yellow lights that glowed on the whorehouse verandah. I felt sad for her. She wore a yellow *sari* at least that is how it appeared to us. She was small, but heavy at the bottom and breast. Why would she have a fate like that? Where did she come from in the first place? There was definitely something wrong with the world. A good looking girl like her should be a wife of somebody good, not die in a whorehouse. We didn't even know her name. We would never know her name. We knew she would only be in our memories, those who really felt her pain.

*Tipu* said, "If I did not fear the diseases, then I would have gone there and do her like a tiger."

*Olide* said, “*Tipu*, she is worth it. Do not fear the diseases. You should go in, all the way.”

“Fuck you. You want to kill me? I know what you are trying to do.”

A lot of young girls walked fast on the verandahs as they served their customers. Men, who had wives and daughters at home, were rushing in. Maybe they were the perfect husbands, perfect fathers, but they were the perfect abusers when they went to the whorehouse. Often times, there were *hush hush* incidents in the whorehouse where they took away a bleeding and screaming girl from one of those rooms. God knows where they took them. No one took her to the hospital or to the doctors. *Tipu* was sure of that. He said, “They have a doctor who treats them, and does it too for free.”

“Which doctor?”

“I don’t know where his office is. In fact he only comes in ones a week. He sees the patients and then gets in one of those rooms himself. No one wants to do anything for free.”

It was already evening. *Magrib’s Adjan*, evening prayer call, started, and *Tipu’s* mother screamed, “Boys come down from the roof. Go to the mosque. *Tipu* come pray with me or go to the mosque with your friends.” I was not a religious person, but I liked the times during the evening prayer. A lot of people rushed toward the mosque, store owners closed stores for a few minutes while they prayed, and everything took the aura of serenity. I liked that. I felt the world was still a good place to live. A hollow serenity whirled in my heart. I liked that hollowness. It assured me that I was good, life was good, and everything would be alright.



We left with a few guavas from *Tipu*'s tree that grew on their *uthon* by their tube well. The tree had more guavas than the leaves. We were shocked to see it. Even a week earlier they were not ripe, but now every single one of them was large and ready to be eaten. A few days of rain had done the magic. When we climbed the tree, *Tipu*'s mother said, "Boys, come down. Come down. The branches will break. They are just too heavy with the guavas, and wouldn't be able to take your weight."

We got off immediately. She was right. We knew exactly what would happen in a few minutes from then, if we didn't get off. We still managed to pick a few before we got off that tree.

She said, "I have a lot inside the house. Your uncle picked them for me. Come with me."

"We got what we needed. We are going somewhere so it is just for the road. We are good to go. We don't need any more than these few." And what guavas they were – crunchy and tight, like the girl we just saw. I flicked a finger and hit one by the belly and it made a *thuck* noise. Just the right type.

For some reason what *Tipu* had said a few months back, stayed with me, about another girl. "Let's go see her before she becomes like the others."

"How long does it take *Tipu*?"

"How long for what?"

"For them to become like the others. Dirty. Broken. Defeated."

"Weeks, maybe three weeks and they lose their lights."

“Their lights?”

“They lose hope. But it depends, some takes months. But mostly weeks and days. This one would be done in less than two weeks.”

“How do you know?”

“She is acting too happy, which means she is already trying very very hard to remain positive and hopeful. She is already at the end of her rope.”

“You sure? But she just got here!”

“I think she is from a good family. Somehow got sold! And she is pretty. She has no idea what this life is like. They probably told her as soon as she pays for what it took to buy her, she will be free to go! She would be used beyond her limit. I lived here all my life. I know more about these ladies than they themselves know about themselves.”

We said goodbyes and left *Tipu*'s house. As we left, *Tipu* said, “See you guys at the school tomorrow, and don't forget to bring the cricket bat.”

When we left, all the stores, those that were open, already lit their lights for the night. It was already time for us to return home, but we didn't care. We still wanted another hour and a half at least to stay out, and think of things and do all kinds of things that in the grand scheme of things didn't matter at all. I lost my pigeons. For me it was the end of my life, but life continued. To *Olide*, it was just another little inconvenience, and didn't matter at all. I think *Olide* and I became best friends only because we allowed each other to brutally question and doubt each other's actions and thoughts.

We got out of the *Boro Bazar* area via the road where they sold scrap metal and broken glass, and merged onto the road where the *Chitra Cinema Hall* was. We made the

right turn right in front of the cinema hall and went straight ahead, and made a left turn into the area where all the audio and video stores were in front of the *Jessore Institute School*, where *Olide* and I went to until the end of second grade. We rode through the *Mike Potti* neighborhood, passed the *Nirala Cinema Hall*, and arrived at the road where the *Ranar Newspaper Office* was, made another right turn toward the *Jessore Rail Station*. Instead of making the right, if we made a left turn then we would have arrived at the Islamic Foundation (Jessore Branch). Islamic Foundation had a lot of foreign and governmental aid and they published a lot of books that were good quality in terms of papers and print. That was our main source for stealing books. *Olide* and I started it only a few months back, but within a very short time, we were able to steal thousands of books.

We discovered it by accident. It started to rain hard, and we were going home from the *Rail Station Bookstore*, and needed a place to wait until the rain stopped. We saw the main gate open, and rode our bicycles through it, parked against the walls of the first floor, but found the doors to be closed. The main building was at the far end of the open space, and on our right there was the stair that went to the second floor. We were already soaked, and we could have gone home all the way, but we only stayed because we had already decided to stop by until the rain stopped. We took the stairs up, and there was the *Islamic Foundation* office. *Olide* looked at me and smiled. I knew what he meant. I made sure the strings of my backpack were tightly knotted. We couldn't afford it to be opened and the communist books inside visible. On the second floor, there was

the main door to the hallway of the office, which was nothing but a large verandah, on which a few clerks sat and did their work. Due to the rain, everyone went inside into their smaller office, and did their work there, which was at the mid point of the verandah, and behind it was the library, and behind the library was the storage room for the new books, which they sold. At the far end of the verandah, the director of operations held his office, in the large inner room, and the outer room belonged to his secretary. The inner office had a few locked *almirah* with some rare Islamic books. When we arrived at the verandah, the clerk rushed out to help us. He brought a towel and threw at us.

He said, "Come in here. Wipe quickly before the fever catches you."

"We went into the office."

*Olide* did not waste any time. He knew long before I did what kind of future that place held. He said, "I never knew that this office was here and I am born in this city."

One of the officials said, "Not many people know about us, or care to know about us. We are like Allah himself. We exist, but not many people care until they are in trouble."

"Yes, we are in trouble indeed."

The clerk already began to make tea for us. He asked how much sugar we wanted. I said, "No sugar for me." *Olide* said, "Two tablespoons please."

The same official, who had a large mustache, and a round dark face, said, "So, do you guys pray?"

*Olide* said, "We never miss the Morning Prayer and we go to the Friday mass."

"Good. Very good. Which school do you go to?"

“Zilla School.” Our school was less than a mile from the Islamic Foundation. On one end of the road was the Islamic Foundation and on the other end, Jessore Zilla School.

“Then you two are local. Come to see us sometimes. We have a great library.”

I said, “Really? Where is it?” I said it even when I could see the library in the dark through the two small windows between the small office and the library.

He looked at another official who sat next to him, and that man opened the door to the library. That room had several bookshelves with a lot of official documents and books and six sets of tables and chairs for the people who worked there. When he opened the door to the library, we were astounded. It was a large room with one long table at the center of the room, going from end to end. All around that library were shelves full of books. I felt like discovering something. Yes, our public library was much bigger, but everyone knew about it. We were bookish kids, and if we didn’t know about the existence of the Islamic Foundation, then we figured not many people didn’t know about it either. I knew immediately, we would be able to steal a lot of books from there, and we started on day one. When no one looked we shoved a few books down our waist into our pants as we walked around.

One of the other officials came in. He said, “Stay as long as you want. Take a look. We rarely get visitors.”

*Olide* said, “Books look so unorganized. We can come sometimes and fix this place if you agree. We love books, and can help you catalogue it.”

“We have been thinking about it for years, but there is hardly any time.”

“We can help!”

“I will find out. Bring your friends next time.”

“We will. This is a great library.”

“Let me show you something. We have a room for the new books,” the official man said. He went back to the office room, and came back almost immediately with a set of keys. He asked us to follow him by hand gestures. We walked behind him, and he opened a door at the far end of the library, which was on the side of the stairs outside that we had to take to get to the second floor. That was the main vault of the thing - thousands of books in pristine condition, mostly in their original packaging. They were printed in *Dhaka*, the capital city, and shipped to the *Jessore* branch of the Islamic Foundation.

“How many do you sell per year?”

“We will be selling all this in a month.”

“Really? That is a lot of books.”

“*Inshallah* our sales are good. That is what gets us going. We sell a lot to *Calcutta* also.”

“May we look through these books for a while?”

“Sure. Take your time. I will come back in a little bit.”

As soon as he left, we took out the old books from our waists and replaced them with the new ones from that room. We each had six books. We tucked in our stomach so hard that we could hardly breathe. We had to manage, and get out of there as fast as we could before the zippers or buttons of our pants exploded. Fortunately, we had our

backpacks to create some kind of illusion, so they did not see such imperfections of our mid section of the body. But before we left, we met the directors, who invited us to the 21<sup>st</sup> February essay writing contest. The date 21<sup>st</sup> February is the day when the Bangladeshi students in *Dhaka* protested against the then *Pakistani* government, in 1952, when the government demanded that the official language should be *Urdu*. Several students were shot dead, and since then the day was honored and celebrated. Every year at midnight and early in the morning people went to the designated *Shahid Minar's* to show respect and scatter flowers on symbolic *minars*.

We participated in the contest. We expected a big turnout, but when we arrived there was only one other student from an Islamic high school. We wrote the essay in the morning, and the winners were declared in the afternoon. The kid from the Islamic school was first, *Olide* second and I was third. There was a seminar where one of our *Bengali* teachers read a statement on *Bengali* history, 1971 war and what it meant to be *Bengali*. When he arrived he was shocked to see us. He knew how disobedient we were at school. And we were not of the good student lot either. He said nothing. We said nothing. He never brought it up. We never brought it up. Maybe he assumed we knew something about him and he didn't want his cover to be blown. We continued to steal from the *Islamic Foundation*. We gave the project a code name, IF 71. We viewed the people who worked there as *rajakars* (traitors), who helped the *Pakistani Army* during the 1971 war. We justified our actions in that way. We were not stealing. We were destroying the *rajakars*. On the way home, that day we sold the dozen used books at four taka each, and that was the first money we ever made from work. Yes, stealing was risky

work. We considered it work. The days we went to steal books, we would not eat since the night before so our stomachs were thin and we would always go in the evening, after school when the officials were also ready to go home and didn't pay much attention to us. They liked us. We helped them to organize that library and catalogued each book. We were proud of that, but we were thieves. *Olide* said, "These are *rajakars*. The old ones definitely raped someone during the war. We cannot kill them, but we can steal from them and destroy them." I agreed. We were in a war. Anything that had anything to do with the Islamic groups, we considered them *rajakars*, a backward thinking thing that had to be destroyed. It was our war, and we did our bit and profited from it as well. It was not an honest or selfless act, but reasonable enough for our thirteen years old brain.

We made the right turn for we wanted to go to the *Rail Station Bookstore*. It was a lazy evening. The sky was cloudy, but still humid enough to make us sweat badly. Everyone sweated. We smelled bad. But everyone smelled bad. No one paid attention to it. We didn't care. We didn't know that we should care. We passed the vegetable market outside of the main entrance of the station and that day entered through the main gate. Usually, we used one of the side entrances, which were less crowded. Friday evenings were never crowded though. There were a few light bulbs hanging from the high metal ceilings of the station. We passed the ticket counter and the waiting room section of the station, and arrived at the platform. The platform was empty and only a very few people walked around, mostly local people, not passengers. We made sure we had half of our mind where our pockets were. Even though it was an empty station, we needed to be



sure. When it was busy they pickpocketed you, and when it was empty, they snatched it. Either way, you were in the tiger's cage and exposed to the elements. And there were people who waited to mug you in broad daylight. We didn't have to worry about that too much since we were local people, and if anything did happen, we knew we would be alright. Our family would have taken care of all that for us.

Fridays were best to go to that tiny *Rail Station Bookstore*, since the owner wasn't busy. But the risk was that because Friday's were not busy, he didn't always open his store on Fridays. We had to take our chances. It was a nice about three miles ride to the station, back and forth. We had no problem. When he did open on Fridays we took our time to go through the books. We never stole from him. He was one of us, a vagabond type who preferred a life on the road than settling in anywhere for very long. That day our man was at the store. He was about sixty. He came from *Chittagong* district, according to him. We had no way to verify it except his accent. But anyone could copy it and pretend they were from *Chittagong*, if they wanted to. We believed in him anyway more or less. It actually served us well. We went with his stories, and he gave us good discounts whenever we bought books from him and we bought a lot of them. He had the best collection of the Russian books that were translated into *Bengali*. At one point in history Soviet Union translated their best works of novels and political books into *Bengali* and sent them to Bangladesh and Calcutta, in hope of converting us into Communism. It was their PR work. We read Tolstoy and *Dostoyevsky* from those books. It was the only place in the city where we found good Russian novels, and we collected and read them regularly. Our man was always wore clean lungi and full sleeve

shirts. And no matter what the season was, he always had a muffler on. We suspected that he drank a lot, since his eyes were always red, and he chewed beetle leaves and smoked cigarette all the time. He had a tall face, with red lips and thick eyebrows. He didn't look normal. If he wasn't a bookseller, and we met him on the roads we would fear him and avoid him at all cost. His large open eyes were the signs of bad people as we perceived it and learned to view people as.

The main reason he kept his store closed on Fridays were much more practical in nature. He claimed to have family in *Chittagong*, so he needed the touch of women as he described it at least once a week to get through the week. He would say, "All this headache of living comes out in liquid form on Fridays." The man had a filthy mouth, and he talked about what he did openly. That was part of his charm. People would just hang around to hear him talk. One time, a young man came by and said, "I came to *Jessore* to take my driving test and I failed," as he bought a pack of cigarette.

The bookseller said, "That is not surprising. What men of your age do is think about fucking a women with 15/16<sup>th</sup> of your time and only 1/16<sup>th</sup> of your time goes into thinking actual about stuff that you really need, and even then many doesn't manage to get that far."

"What are you talking about? Do you even know me?"

"You are the one who told me your story. I think before you take your next driving test, you should visit our whorehouse, fuck a few of them, and then take the test. You will pass."

We all laughed out loud. The young man didn't know what to say. He took his cigarette and left. He moved on the east side of the platform, smoked and kept checking the bookseller out. He was definitely surprised to hear such open talks on sexuality.

We knew our man went there in the early am hours on every Friday. He went to the mosque from the whorehouse and then came to the store and opened the shop for business, if he felt like. He was happy to see us approaching his store. He immediately told one of the boys on the platform to inform the tea stall outside for three cups of tea and gave the boy twenty five *paysas*. The boy ran out of the station to place the order.

He saw us and he smiled big. We can see his pun stained tooth even from twenty feet away. He wore his clean and rice *mared* lungi, in crisp shape, a white *Punjabi* on and a red, black and navy blue muffler. When he saw us, he swung the muffler from right side to over his left shoulder. When we arrived at his store he said, "How are you two doing today?"

"How are you?"

"Oh, they have a new girl. Boys, soon you will be old enough to go in there as free men and taste some of those wonderful creations of God. I believe in God only because of the existence of women. I need no other proof. The perfection of a women's body cannot be explained without a God."

"Aah, we wonder when that day will come," I said.

*Olide* said, "When that day comes, we will go with you. You can teach us how to bargain."

“As I said before, always keep the best relationship with the boss of that place. Girls will come and go, but the bosses rarely change. Before you lock the door, talk about everything you would want that girl to do to you and everything you want to do to her. These are the main things. And tip the girl. Always tip the girl secretly. She will begin to expect you and please you good. Oh if only they knew their true worth, then we men would never be able to fuck any one of them.”

“When did you fuck for the very first time uncle?”

“I fucked first when I was nineteen. It was a Belgian girl.”

“What?”

“Yes, those were the days. I come from a fishing community very close to the *Chittagong* port. I worked on ships and went everywhere until I was about thirty five.”

“You are married with children right?”

“Yes, I married after I settled back in Bangladesh. I was on the sea for years. The first girl displayed the secret that she hid between her thighs to me when I went to a whorehouse in *Antwerp* and I could not leave that room.”

“You lived life then. One day we want to travel the world too.”

“You boys need to remember another thing. A lot of people even if they want to live their lives to the fullest they cannot because they hesitate too much. You just have to decide to live your life and go with it.”

“You are right. I can see it.”

“I have drunk from a lot of women’s beaker, as you science boys might want to think of it – lots of women from every continent, but I like the Bengali girls the best.”

“Why?”

“Their smell. I never liked the smell of any other women. Only the Bengali girls still have their original primitive smell.”

“*Adnan* would know. I didn’t get lucky yet.”

“You boys can go in now, if you want. All you need is the gut and know how to please the ladies.”

“Please the ladies? I thought women don’t get any pleasure if you force them to do it.”

“They do. And you need to be in the whorehouse to find out. They expect to be raped.”

We found that to be puzzling. We looked at each other.

Then he said, “If you have not loved a whore, you have not lived. If you never wanted to marry a whore, you have never lived. If you never had the desire to destroy a whore, beat a whore, you have not lived. It is a wonderful world of existence!” He said, “There would be a time when you would like every single woman you meet. And that day you would become a being so intense and so connected with the universe that you would probably go mad. At least that is how you would appear to others. That day you would discover the true meaning of life. It is all about fucking as many women as you could.”

“We like to read too.”

“No matter how studious you are, if a naked girl comes in your room and lets you to sniff her butt and lick her cunt, then you will stop reading, you will fuck her. There is

nothing in the world more powerful than a woman in her full bloom boys. Never be under any illusion and think otherwise. Life is short. Start early. Live long. Be satisfied.”

*Olide* said, “*Chacha*, show us some new books.”

“Forget the books today. I will give you the books for free. How old are you boys again?”

“Going on fourteen.”

The old man smiled a bit, and let out a sniff of wind out of his nose, as if saying, “What dreamers!”

“You boys want to be the revolutionaries right?”

“Right,” I said.

“Then you need to build your guts first. Otherwise you would just read and never become a revolutionary.”

We listened to him quietly. We knew he was in a different kind of a mood. We knew he had the girl we just saw in the whorehouse. I envied him. I hated him. I liked him for being so free. *Olide* and I knew he never told us anything true about his past. Even that day it seemed too fictional, but then again he was from a port town. He had probably seen the world. What was he doing in *Jessore*? We suspected that he had committed a crime of some kind and was in hiding. Why would he hide in a rail station? Why not? He could get on a train any time he felt like and disappear. Maybe he was a murderer in hiding. We fantasized about his life. And we liked it.

That day we didn't purchase any books. We left after we had finished our tea. We rode our bikes through the town. When we arrived at the city center we found some of the bookstores to be open. I wanted to go in, but *Olide* said it was too late. He said, "Your mother will beat the shit out of you. We are already very late. And *abba* is probably waiting to beat me too."

As we rode our bikes the rest of the way, I kept thinking about what he had said. It went through my mind over and over, "If a naked girl comes in your room and lets you to sniff her butt and lick her cunt, then you will stop reading, you will fuck her," while I still wondered and worried about how *Mamoni* would react seeing me coming home so late.

## Birth of a Stranger

I returned home late. It was well past eight, not a time to return home for a boy of my age. By that time I should have been done with half of my studies for that night. Most people of my age hit their books at six in the evening, and I returned home at eight. I hesitated to go in the house. Who knew what *Mamoni* had in store for me! I had seen *Dipu* smiling before I left home. That still gave me some kind of hope and peace. At least the world would not break into two pieces, I thought, and I would survive the day. For as long as I could remember I have always played this mental game whenever I got into trouble, I imagined no matter what, with or without me, the day would pass and tomorrow would come, so the best thing that I can do is to survive the day to fight the battle. On that day, I remembered a great many things to keep me going, but I didn't remember this mantra until the night when I returned home. I rode through the hundred yards path that went from the side road to into the house, and as soon as I hit the *uthon*, I smelled a sweat something being cooked in the kitchen. It had a burnt sugar type of smell. As I crossed the *uthon* and moved toward *Dadi's* verandah, I could see *Mamoni* in the kitchen. Then I remembered the crow's meat that *Babu* uncle and I brought for her from the bazar.

*Mamoni* saw me. She said, "It's almost ready"

"What?"

"The bird meat. You can eat your portion during the dinner. I will send *Babu's* portion to his room."

"I ate at *Olide's* house today, and not feeling like eating anything."



“Eat what you can.”

“Let’s see. Maybe I will be hungry in a little bit.”

“It is just a little bit of meat. It shrank from the heat.”

“You can eat it if I don’t.”

“I will taste it a little bit.”

She behaved softer than I expected, after all, I guess, she knew what that day was like for me.

I said, “I am not feeling like studying today.”

She looked at me for a while, while still stirring the bird meat with the red chilies, garlic and onion in mastered oil. An intense look, not worried, but concerned. She said, “Start tomorrow. Sleep well, and start tomorrow. Wash your hands and feet quick, the drama on TV is about to start. What time is it?”

I loved her in that moment. I didn’t want anything bad to happen to her. She understood what I was going through, yet she had to do what a mother must and be tough and ruthless. A few pigeons in exchange for her only child’s future? An easy barter indeed! I wanted to believe my own thoughts. I couldn’t believe that I felt that sympathy for her. What for? Just because she was my mother?

She asked again in a hurry, “What time is it?”

“About eight thirty.”

“Already?”

“Yes.”

She began to wrap things up quickly. The weekly TV drama was about to begin. Friday nights played the most interesting and the best dramas, and everyone waited for it all week. Friday afternoon also played the English movie of the week. One of the movies that I had watched on TV was *The Guns of Navaron*, which stayed with me, and I had *Abbu* rent it from the video store many times. I just loved that movie, so much courage, betrayal and sacrifice. I remembered that movie that night and felt like watching it again, but everyone would be watching the TV, and I wouldn't be able to play the video, and besides all the video stores were closed.

I said, "I will skip it and read something."

"I will bring the meat by your table before I go to the TV room."

I was surprised to find out that she didn't tell me to read a textbook. She gave me a free day, which of course meant that the next day would be the first day in my new life, and I would have to perform and act as per her expectations. The questioning would begin tomorrow and the constant request of the progress report, I imagined. I walked toward the stairs. *Kalu*, the dog, sat on the ground by the stairs. When I was close to him and took my first step, he made a *kui kui* noise. *Kalu* reminded me of *Anton Chekhov's* story *Kashtanka*, a story I fell in love with, and began to see people like *Kashtanka* all around me. Most people had no dreams. They wanted to be like their ancestors and do all the things that were normal. I found no satisfaction in doing what everyone else did or the ordinary things that people talked about so much. That was part of my confusion about life in general. I knew more is possible, but didn't know how to get there.

I had no guidance until I began to listen more closely to one of my teachers at the school. His name was *Julfiqar Ali*. He was a man with a different type of a mind. He didn't get along with the other teachers. He had all kinds of ideas about life and death. He would say, "Death is a confirmation that we had been alive. Don't worry about how you have died or when, but worry about what you have done and achieved while you lived." What he said was different, though still didn't make much sense to me, but I knew it was different. He once made me piss on top of a small sand dune that was on the schoolyard for construction work and observe how the urine travelled down the dune and reached the ground. That was my lesson on how rivers are created and evolved over time. He also took us to his house and showed us the pornographic movies. We were all scared first, but then we understood that he wanted to be our friend. He was about twenty six, and we were half his age. I knew *Abbu* would love to meet him, since they were both older but had a mind like ours. I kept him a secret from *Abbu*. I didn't want *Abbu* to hang around with him and really find out how bad I was at school. I never mentioned about *Julfiqar* sir at home, but still feared that *Abbu* would find out about him, since they would have no other options but find each other in a city where no one had other dreams. *Julfiqar* sir was close to one of our friends, *Hasan*. *Hasan* was tall, well built and not afraid to try out new things. He was not good at school, but good looking. It seemed people that were good at school, were like everyone else in the city, and people that were not good at school had other ideas and wanted to be something else. Most of these boys were bad boys and did bad things, but we needed guidance, which we never had. So when we found *Julfikar* sir we were attracted to him like he was a magnet. Soon the

other teachers complained about him to the headmaster. They said, “Instead of spending time with our good students, he is spending too much time with the bad ones.”

He objected, “My goal is not only to help them to do well at the school, but also to help them in life as well.”

“Your job is to make them understand what you teach. Leave the bad ones and run with the good ones who would bring us the best results during the board exams.”

“The good are already good. It is the bad ones who need help.”

“Do your duty. And don’t be too friendly with them. Teachers need to keep their distance from their students.”

He told us about this conversation, and he told us not to discuss anything that we discussed in class.

He said, “One of the greatest things we have to do in life is keep things secret until we are ready to share it. I will be the best teacher that you will ever have, but you need to keep this a secret, our conversation.”

We agreed. Then he said, “Now that you have seen porn, you know what it is like. You probably want to act it out on someone, but you can’t. It is a difficult thing to experience.”

We listened.

“But you have no one to act on. I go to a lady in town, but you are all too young for that. A few more years to go boys, a few more years.”

We listened.

“Don’t watch it too much until a few years from now. Every time you ejaculate the number of sperm that comes out can impregnate every woman in the world. Think about that. It includes all the women you know. Maybe this though will keep your desire in check for a while.”

We listened.

“I have full trust in you, no matter what they tell me about you all. You will all do very well in life.”

He was a bit feminine, and some suspected that he had some kind of sexual relationship with *Hasan*. But I knew it was all about connecting one younger soul with another. He was my guide outside of the house. I understood *Mamoni*’s pain, I knew what she wanted me to do, but I had my own desires as well. Yes, I wanted to be like *Sherlock Holmes*. It was an unexpected dream, but I had almost no one to encourage me, guide me. Only *Julfiqar* sir encouraged me and said that it was possible.

There was a beggar couple in our city, who raised a son to be a pilot, and the son died during the final solo flying test. During the flying test, he flew low and hit a date tree, crushed and died in a rice field. Thousands of people went to see the crush site before the military had the time to locate and remove the wreckage. The body was taken to a local doctor by the villagers, but he was already dead. We heard the news, and every time we heard it was different, and as the time passed, it took on a mythical characteristic. They said that he flew low longer than anyone else ever, and navigated among the trees for hours and then he disappeared from the views of his unit. He flew

like the bird, low, and even the cows started to moo and the chickens were horrified and began to seek shelter from that enormous bird. It cast a shadow, which was of course not possible on a rainy day, but it stopped no one from believing it, so big that people thought a tree was falling on them. He hit the tree only because he failed to go back to the airport on time and he ran out of fuel. Villagers, who have witnessed it, said that he flew like the kites in the sky, gracefully and smoothly. No one wanted to believe that he was a bad pilot or had made any mistakes. He was a hero, not a bad pilot, and there was no mistake from his part.

Even before he died *Mamoni* would every once in a while tell me about him.

“If a beggar’s son could do it, then why not you?”

I didn’t see the connection.

“You should eat his shit and urine. Only then maybe you will be as good as him.”

Still found no connection.

“You have a roof over your head and no problem eating. Why can’t you be better than him?”

He was a legend in our part of the city. Not many knew about it, though it was a well deserved story to be known by everyone in the country and in the world. I have never seen the young man, but he was so smart that he could do any math in his head and give an answer; apparently that was all what I needed to know about him. Even *Abbu* didn’t know that a smart boy like that who existed in the city. *Abbu* could also do math

in his head, and when he found out about the boy's death he said, "He was no good. He calculated everything wrong and crashed his plane." An untimely jealousy indeed. But there it was. Another glimpse into the mind of a man who was smart but lazy. After that boy died, everyone in the neighborhood called the beggar couple and fed them and asked them to come over whenever they needed anything. A different level of sympathy they had never fully shown in the past.

What was that death all about? Among others, *Dada* also wondered about it. He was not a religious man. He followed the rules, such as sacrificing animals during the *Eid Ul Adja*, feeding the poor during the Ramadan but not fasting himself, donating to the mosque but not praying himself, donating 2.5% of his income annually, believing in the almighty but not in the rules that made no sense to him. Once during the *Eid Ul Adja*, a new mullah suggested that even the rope that was used to tie the cow needed to be cut into three pieces, and just like the meat one piece you can keep, one goes to the neighbors and the last piece goes to the poor. *Dada* was furious and he made the main mullah fire the young mullah on the same day and send him home, even though it was an *Eid* day. *Dada* said, "He is a poison. If he begins to talk about all this, then soon others will mimic him, and then we have to let even our family members leave this place." The main mullah was not happy about it, but he had no choice, *Dada* was his biggest donor to him mosque. So when the boy died, *Dada* a hard man to please said, "If God is not cruel, then it must be his sense of humor. No matter what, I would stay away from anyone with that sense of humor." That was a rare glimpse of his sympathy about humanity. He did

think about people, but only if they achieved such things as the beggars' son, *Munir*. What he had said I had never read in any books, but I found it so profoundly true, that I believed it was the ultimate nail into God's coffin. There was no one in the neighborhood that did not find it cruel. We talked about it for days and months and years and then it faded like all things. There was still a lesson to be learned for me, even when the boy was dead.

I have never seen his father closely before, but I had seen his mother who came to our house frequently. She usually came after lunchtime, sat on our kitchen verandah, and *Dadi* would give her something to eat and a bowl of rice. The 2.5% that *Dada* donated, she was one of the recipients among many. *Dada* knew about it, and was happy to give it to her, because it made a difference. Some of my aunts went to school with the boy; they used to say that the boy was really ashamed that his parents were beggars. He never made eye contacts with anyone. He rarely talked. Teachers new about it, and because he was so smart, they did everything they could to help him out. The headmaster of the school was a Hindu, who grew up next to the *Mahamudur Rahman School*. He himself had very poor parents and every year when he came to the class to recognize the best students, he would make the boy stand up.

He would say something like, "I was poor like you. My parents had no money like yours. We had no light or lamp in our house. I used to go to the main road, sit under the light pole and study, the light from the top of the pole made the words barely visible. I am proud of being poor. You should be proud of it also. Do not hide from it. This is your light that will always burn inside of you wherever you go. This is your strength."



Other teachers would say, “You are an example for us. Do not feel any shame. We have seen what is possible. Our children have seen what is possible. You must never feel sad. Take your parents off the road as soon as you can. You are a very good boy and the best to come out of this school’s history.”

That night when everyone was busy watching TV I sat in my room and thought about life a little, for the first time, in a way I had never done before. I needed a plan. I needed to make things right. I needed to find a way where both *Mamoni* and I would be happy together. She would find a boy who studied hard and did well in school, and I would become a boy in total control of things and become whatever I wanted to become. I knew it would not be easy. I knew it will probably never happen the way I wanted it to happen. That night I thought about the tiny beggar mother who had a son who became a pilot. How proud she must have been! How she must have hated God! The boy’s parents will die one day. People in our neighborhood will not remember their story anymore, but life will go on, and even such a story will be forgotten. Evil things do happen, and we are not able to do a thing about it. That is our fate. That is what it means to be human. Be an observer and believe that you have the power, but in reality you have none. I felt it that way that night. That night made me a thousand year old man - I grew up faster than the sun could keep up with it. I was the center of everything in my world, but I was at the center of the Universe, and it seemed everything that had happened that day had something to tell me, to show me something different and stop me one last time before I moved on with my own cosmic journey from there on.

In a night like that, I would often lie next to my *Dadi* and have her tell me stories, stories about kings and queens and prophets and mystics and magicians. She was not a very good storyteller, but she tried, as best as she could. She soon ran out of the stories she knew and began to tell me stories from her own life. Her grandfather went to *Mecca* for the pilgrimage. He walked, mostly. It took him more than two years. When he returned, people from a hundred villages came to see him. From a normal human being he turned into someone people looked at as sacred. Because he went to the *Allah's* house they believed he was much closer to *Allah*. It was unimaginable to walk for anyone through more than a few villages, and he walked to *Mecca*. A man who could walk to *Mecca*, perform the pilgrimage and return home was not an ordinary man. He must have been blessed by *Allah*. That was the belief.

I asked, "What if he was lying?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if he stayed at a friend's place and then returned home?"

"Why do you have a mind like that? Why do you always doubt everything?"

"Isn't that good? All scientists doubt?"

"I don't understand science. My grandfather was no liar. He did go to *Mecca*. People came to him from all over the place to have him bless the water for their sick family members. People came to him to discuss religious issues and the problems they faced in their lives. He always helped. He was a good man. He helped everyone."

There was somebody in the past in my family who walked to *Mecca*. That thought was powerful. A few lizards were waiting in the shade by the light that was close to the ceiling. A lot of bugs came by attracted by the light, and the lizards ate them. There were familiar faces among the lizard family. I knew some for years. They were yellowish in color and if I was ever to scare them, they would lose their tail, which moved like the slaughtered chicken on the ground, while they ran away. Sometimes I could see the eggs inside the belly of one, and every year there were new squabs. How tiny they were! How agile! How full of wonder! There were tiny bugs as well for the mouth of the tiny lizards on the wall.

I went to talk to *Dipu*, but she avoided me. She sat in the middle of everyone watching TV. The TV room was next to my aunts' room, which was our drawing room. I stood by the door, everyone saw me, I made eye contact with *Dipu*, signaled her to come out of the room at one point and see me quickly in my room. She understood, but showed no interest. She could have easily gone out of that room as if she was going to the bathroom, and ran up to my room for two minutes. All I needed to know was what she was doing at her doctors' that day. Was she pregnant? I needed to know. And this time I needed to know before *Mamoni* did so I could work on a plan that would minimize the trouble for me. I left after I signaled. I waited and watched the lizards chasing the insects on the wall in my room. She did not come. She was older than I was. She knew the game she was playing well. I just knew the rules of the game, but she was a pro.

During the drama night when everyone was busy watching TV and it was a perfect time for the thieves to go through every house in the neighborhood and take

whatever small items they could find lying around. I have always wanted to see a thief in action at night, but had never seen one. It was one of my fantasies in those days, coming across a thief at our house. I could hear the pigeons on the roof. I tried not to pay attention. I didn't even go up to see how many had returned home. In the past, before I was born there was an incident where a wild cat climbed to the roof and ate one of the pigeons but killed tens of them by breaking and severing their necks. I had seen that happen to chickens, but never to the pigeons. As I thought about my pigeons and the cages, I felt like being in a graveyard, where there was nothing to be afraid of since everyone was dead, but one feared the dead anyway. I feared more horrible things would happen to my pigeons, and it was just the beginning. What if they protested and left our house? What if that really happened? One day they take flight and never return again.

That night *Babu* uncle was out on his usual heroin trip, so he was not at home to eat the bird meat. He never ate with others. I had rarely seen him eating anything. He ate from the kitchen whatever there was to eat. It was never easy to feed a house full of people and please everyone with the menu, but *Babu* uncle never complained. He was never there to complaint. He was busy with the life he was living. By that time he was treated several times at the clinics to deal with his addiction, but he always went back to the heroin. Peer pressure was stronger than the bonds of blood. His parents and siblings cried and begged him to give it up. He even once agreed to be locked up in a room for as long as it took for him to get out of his addiction. We locked him up. A doctor would come every day to talk to him, and sometimes give him a small dose of heroin, and let him smoke furiously. I stood by the window and watched him like he was in the zoo. He

survived three months. Looked great. We let him go, he tried very hard to stay clean, but within the first three months he fell for it again. All his friends were addicts. We worked with the police to create a false case so we could lock him up for a while. We did. But that was the worst treatment since he could always get something in with the help of the other police and hospital nurses. That plan failed horribly.

I looked at the meat *Mamoni* left for me on my table. It still had the same aroma that permeated the room. *Mamoni* ran in and said, “Here is your portion of the meat, I am going to the TV room. Come by if you like.” I said, “I am not feeling up to it and I will probably not eat anything either.” She cooked it with a lot of love. It was a victory day for her. *Abbu* was not with anyone the night before. She just sold her son’s pigeons that took him away from his studies. She had no reason not to cook it well. She had a habit of tasting things as she cooked. As she cooked, she ate, so she rarely had any reason to have a full lunch or dinner. I imagined that she ate a few small pieces of the meat. It made me sad. It made me angry. It made me happy. After the drama she came by to see me.

She said, “One day you will thank me.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Are you not going to eat that?”

“No. It would remind me of my pigeons.”

“Then I will eat it. Are you sure?”

“You can have it. It smells so good.”

She took the bowl and went away into the bedroom. As she walked away, while nibbling the cooked meat, she said again, “One day you will thank me.”

I didn't say anything.

It made me very happy to see her eating crow. She deserved it. I was sad and depressed sitting in my study room, but that sight of her eating crow meat made me happy. I won in a small way. I thanked *Babu* uncle for it. Others at home ate the meat too as it turned out, since *Mamoni* kept at least one small piece for everyone. But that was not the point; the point was that we made her eat crow. At that moment, I didn't think I could thank her for what she had done, but I can forgive her. She was my mother. I was her son. She was desperate to give her son a better life.

During the drama, a distant relative had shown up with a few pictures of a few young men. He was a matchmaker. He often came to our house, since I still had a few aunts to be married off. No one went to anyone's house announced. It was always unannounced. Every family had to be ready to treat their guests with food. *Dada* had a budget for it, and there were always homemade cookies and fruits. When I was smaller I once went to a relative's house and told them, “Give me something to eat now. You will feed us anyway. I want mine now.” That was an embarrassing moment for *Mamoni*. They all laughed about it, but *Mamoni* was so ashamed that she never went back to their house ever again. One should never show any desire to eat, but when served one should never leave without eating. My mind never worked well in solving that type of challenging and complex social puzzles. Sometimes my aunts would visit a friend's or

relative's house with the hope that they would serve something good to eat. One such night one of my aunt's friend came to our house who was also a distant uncle to my aunts. He came, got in our house, went through my aunts clothes, took a few, walked to the verandah that was attached to the drawing room and opened to the flower garden, threw the clothes on the floor, and lit them up. We were all watching TV. *Dada* was fortunately not at home and away on a fishing trip. Why did he burn those clothes? A forbidden relationship went bad or was he protecting anyone? Was there an aunt who was fucking her distant uncle? Were those clothes a gift from him? I never knew. I was much younger, but still suspected that much. There was definitely something wrong and suspicious. He burnt those clothes, smoked a cigarette and left. No one ever talked about him or that incident ever again in the house. I was fond of that young man. He always brought something to eat for me. I missed him. *Mamoni* and *Firoza* auntie talked about it for days. *Just*, *Firoza* aunit's son, was my cousin, who was bad at school, but like my *Abbu* good at math, but not as good as *Abbu*. My cousin *Just* taught me algebra. I called him *Dadavai*, bog brother. *Dadavai* came to see me that night after the drama, when almost everyone went to sleep. He tried to make me feel better. He was five years older than I was. We lived in the same house, but we rarely interacted.

My cousin, *Just*, was older and had friends in the neighborhood. We almost never played together when we were younger. He played with kids his age in the neighborhood, and I was not allowed to go beyond the boundary walls of our house. He taught me algebra though, but he couldn't graduate from college. Everyone wondered about it! He didn't care. When we were younger he would hit me hard to my stomach

and say, “Strong boys don’t cry! Let’s see how strong you are!” I wanted to be the strongest of boys, and I never cried, even when I believed that I might actually die later from an internal injury. *Dadavai* never went to the mosque, but I sometimes did. I was always an early riser, and I had to find something to do at four in the morning. A few friends went to the mosque at four thirty, and I began to go with them just so I could get out of the house. In the mosque we would pray for about twenty minutes, and then sit around until about seven on most days before going back to home and getting ready for the school. I loved it.

We talked about all kinds of things as we sat on the mosque floor. We talked about how to steal an exam paper from an old teacher’s desk, or how to cheat on the exam, or which area of the city had the most beautiful girls and how we can find a way to go there and see them, or which new English movie had the most sex scenes, or which actress had the biggest boobs and so on. We discussed things that shouldn’t have been discussed in the mosque, but somehow we always managed to do just that. No one cared really. We also talked about why the *Mullah* had at least a dozen kids and how he managed to satisfy four of his wives and so on. We liked to joke saying, “He definitely gets some help from someone in the neighborhood whether he knows it or not.” We laughed. No one cared. No one really bothered to listen to what we talked about.

According to Islam when one dies, his or her family organizes a special prayer event on the third day, where light food is also served. And on the fortieth day, another much larger prayer event is organized where hundreds or thousands of people are fed



over an entire day. When I was under twelve, I didn't really care who died, but I went to those prayer events for the food. *Dadavai* kept a notebook on who died within a three miles circle, and always took me with him. When we went to those events there were usually a lot of other old folks who joined the event. *Dadavai* would look at them, and his fat cheeks would light up. He would say, "I give that guy two more years, or that lady got at best three weeks and so on." He would write it down in his notebook and every once in a while he would tell me something like, "Listen, the next few months are not looking very good." He would speculate that there will be at least three more deaths over the next three weeks and so on. We went there not only to eat, but to steal food packets as well. Stealing was fun. We enjoyed it, and the more daring it was, the greater the enjoyment was. We usually fed most of the stolen foods to the dogs on the road. One could only eat so much! And we had already had our fun.

Then one day *Dadavai's* own paternal grandfather suddenly died. When someone I knew died, I never cried. So, naturally I didn't cry even when I was close to the man. *Dadavai* calculated there will be at least three thousand people and if we were careful, then we could steal at least two dozen packets of food. I said, "But this is almost our own house?" He said, "So what?" I said, "How can you steal from your own house? How could it be fun?" He said, "I will show you how." I said, "But he is your own grandfather, our grandfather!" He said, "He wouldn't mind it. He knows how we are." As usual, we did steal the food and fed the road dogs. It was fun, somewhat.

Right before he left my room that night he said, “Oh there is something the *huri* (*Dada*’s step mother) told me to tell you. She said that success could only be measured if one sets some milestones, if not, then there is no success. Where is the universe going? It must be going somewhere. If there is no set direction, then everything that happens in it is meaningless. The universe is behaving like the universe, like the *Allah* intended it to behave as. There are so many meanings, so many pleasures, but the final picture is a meaningless dot, and who knows what that meaningless dot looks like. But if one believes in *Allah*, then everything is meaningful, and she said that you should believe in *Allah* and it will change your life.”

“What does it all mean?”

“Ask her. I don’t know. She said something like this, I don’t remember it exactly.”

*Buri* had knee problem so she couldn’t climb the stairs to come to my room.

“I think she wants me to pray. She is always asking me to pray,” I said.

I thought about the God. Every God is right, they have to be. If they are not, then they are imposters. If one is true, then everyone else is false. Even then it does not disqualify the existence of a God. I knew that much. But I knew I could not live a life depending on a God that know no one knows how he helps, but everyone understands him and sees his signs in symbols. In my life, during that day, no God came to my aid. In fact I hated God, even when I knew he didn’t exist. I had a theory, there was a sector in our brain that accumulated everything that we could not understand, and we called that sector God. God was the necessary evil, to make sense of it all.

I needed to survive the day. I needed to know whether *Dipu* was pregnant. I needed to know how I would live my life the next day and thereafter. I didn't need a God. I had no energy to pray.

That night I felt detached from everything.

I believed the rain would fall on my skin, but I wouldn't feel it. I wanted to launch my hand into a fire pit just to see whether I felt anything or not.

I felt detached from the night itself. The electricity went out briefly. I didn't mind it. I had this urge to be hidden from everything anyway.

It rained lightly outside, for a minute or two, as I sat on my bed with my back to the wall against a soft pillow. I wanted to go out in the world and walk naked, believing that no one would see me and I wouldn't feel anything.

I felt all my senses were gone or at least I wanted them to disappear.

I didn't feel any need to smell anything.

No urge to touch anyone.

No desire to taste anything ever again.

No curiosity about any sounds, not even the sweetest frog calls that went rampant outside my window.

No urgency to see anything, not even words on a page.

I wanted the darkness to melt into me and I melted into it.

I wanted the darkness to spread all over the world and make everything disappear once and for all. No need to ever be in light again. No need to see my face again.

No need at all. No need.

I didn't even desire *Dipu* that night. I hated her. All I wanted is to know what she had found out.

I felt detached as if the sunlight would fail to touch me.

As if, if I touched a green wet leaf at that moment I would have become a part of that leaf, but not feel it. All the distinction between my existence and the rest of the world were fused into a grand moment of confusion.

At that moment the world could have gone mad and I wouldn't have felt anything.

There could have been dead people on the roads and I wouldn't have even paid attention to see whose bodies were those.

Nothing mattered.

Everything felt like everything else or nothing else.

I felt detached.

That night defined itself anew. I had a different definition to live by.

I was part of nothing. Part of everything.

There were days when I felt I had so little, and I felt poor.

And there were days when I felt I had everything, and I felt rich.

But that night, nothing mattered, not even being alive, for it had no meaning.

I stopped breathing but then again I had to breathe again. Life demanded it, though it made everything so impossible to perceive and accept.

Not sure how long. But it must have been minutes before I began to breathe again. Or maybe it was seconds. The sense of time began to deteriorate. I liked that. I wanted to exist, but not in my time, not in any time.

What will that existence be like if one lost all senses? I wondered. I wanted it.

I couldn't recognize who I was during that time. I was a stranger in my own self.

That night I felt detached from everything.

Everything.

## Interconnection of Things

Most of my aunts and the rest of the house usually fell asleep if there was nothing good playing on TV. In those days, the TV started at 5:00 pm and closed at midnight, and there was nothing good playing after ten. Fridays were the days when at the end of the week drama played on TV at 8:30 pm and TV started at 3:00 pm. I enjoyed seeing the dramas that had the sad ending, similar to my taste in reading. *Dadi* joined my aunts to see the drama, but *Dada* rarely went to watch it. He was one of the first to buy a TV in our neighborhood. It was purchased back in 1984, a 24 inch black&white TV set, which stood on four legs about two and a half feet high above the floor. My favorite was the *Tom&Jerry Kids Show*. I grew up watching it, and loved both *Tom* and *Jerry*. They had their own qualities. There was a lesson of constant torture and fun, and surviving both.

By midnight everyone went to sleep, and the house went quiet. *Abbu* was at home, so the door to my parents' bedroom was closed. I expected *Abbu* to come by at night to say a few comforting things, but he didn't. In the whole house, only he understood me, as I believed it until that day. That night I realized he didn't understand me, and he never grew up beyond my own age. He was six feet tall, big, knew many things, but he never grew up beyond his adolescent years. He talked to me nice because we connected intellectually, and he had no others to go to and share his ideas. Whenever my parents had sex, I knew about it. *Mamoni* didn't want another child, so she would make sure he was not wild when they had sex. She would not allow the condom to pop and was willing to do anything to ensure that. Between my corner of the verandah, and their bedroom, there was a brick wall, but I could still hear some of the things they talked

about. *Mamoni* made him wear two condoms, which he hated, but he had no choice if he was to have sex at home. *Abbu* wanted to do certain things, but she didn't allow it.

He would often say, "Do you even know how dangerous it is?"

"What?"

"This! Wearing two condoms and all that. There is friction between the condoms and it makes it pop. This is pure physics."

"It pops because you want to fuck me like the way you fuck one of your whores."

"You say some of the most disgusting things."

"You can fuck your whores any way you like to, but if you are fucking me, you need to put on two condoms."

Part of their relationship trouble had to come from their sexual frustrations.

*Abbu* said, "It is dangerous and I don't enjoy it either."

"That's the real reason. Isn't it? As I said, you can go to one of your whores."

"I do not go to whores. My taste is not that low. I could never sleep with anyone that dirty."

"I know what you do out there."

"What are you referring to?"

"I've seen her."

"Who?"

"She could have been your daughter."

"Whom are you talking about?"

"Everyone in town knows about you two now. How does it make me feel?"

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“I am talking about the girl who lives on the *Ghope Nawapara Road*. You two are walking around the city a lot.”

“She is just a friend.”

“She is sixteen! Your son is thirteen! Don’t you still see the problem?”

“That is a very smart girl, very sharp. I like talking to her, and show her a few things about mathematics.”

“When did you last sit with your son to help him with his math homework? Don’t say foolish things. It makes no sense.”

“I am not lying to you.”

“My skin is not smooth anymore? You need something *Kochi*, tight and smooth?”

“It makes no sense to talk about the things you are talking about.”

“I went to see you two too. I hid in a hooded rickshaw and saw you waiting by the gate of her house for her to come out. You are obsessed with her. I was with *Lipi*. We could not look at each other’s eyes. I should spit on you.”

“You have been spitting on me for years”

“What?”

“Nothing. This talk is meaningless. I am going to sleep.”

*Abbu* must have turned his back, and went to sleep, because *Mamoni* had pandered him about many things, but he did not say another word that night. He was not a saint. He married due to the body’s needs, had to be. In fact there was rumor that they had never really married. They went away, lived together in a friends’ house without



being married. When they were found by their parents, they were taken to get married again, so everyone can witness the ceremony and there was an official document behind the story. How could a fourteen and seventeen years old make a family with zero income? How would they even pay for their own condoms? How would they even go out and do something for fun? They had no money, so everything they needed had to initially come from *Dada*, and he was upset about it every time. It was during those years, *Dada* began to say, "I have a son like a tiger, but a fake one." *Abbu* could only pay for things if he had stolen something, more or less, which *Mamoni* hated, but she wanted her husband to pay for her things. *Abbu* bought a *sari* or two every once in a while, and he never missed to buy the most basic and essential cosmetics, which included the *Nivea Cream* and *Olive Oil* for her skin. *Mamoni* could not live without the *Nivea Cream* and the *Olive Oil*, a habit I have formed very quickly as well. *Abbu* wanted all the pleasures of life, but not work for it. He was never challenged due to my grandparents' promise to *Allah* about never hitting him.

Soon after their marriage, he went back to being just a teenager, smoking *Ganja* and playing cards with his friends, while his wife stayed at home alone on frequent nights. He had no ambitious friends, all gone bad due to their father's money or peer pressure. I was born when *Mamoni* was seventeen and *Abbu* was twenty, and the pressure was on. He did his best, trying to be good at managing small construction contract works, but he was no good at it, as they said. He spent almost all the money that was sanctioned for the construction works due to his acute artistic sense, and not

worrying about profit. *Dada* gave him a job from his portfolio just to see how *Abbu* handled it. *Abbu* made the road to Calcutta so good, that he went over budget and lost money where he worked for over a year. *Dada* was furious. *Dada* said, “This country doesn’t need any artists now. What it needs are people that are not imbecile! You should have brought home at least 25% of the money, but instead you lost money. This government would love to be in business with you!” That was the end of it, and *Dada* never gave him another job. *Abbu* found a few jobs on his own, but never made much money.

When *Abbu* was twenty two, one night he was coming home with a few of his friends, and another group of people of their age attacked them due to some gang rivalry, and *Abbu*’s head was cracked. Something must have happened to him, because after that he couldn’t sleep anymore as he used to sleep before and turned into a quiet person. He could not handle stress well, and he began to see people in his mind. He had the fantasy that he was a general and sometimes he was honored at the city hall or at the military camp for his excellence in developing war tactics. One night, after not sleeping for days, he said to *Mamoni* and I, “Last night I was taken to India on a secret meeting and I was honored.” *Mamoni* was scared to death, before she at least had a husband, but now she had a mentally ill husband. How would she survive in this family if the husband went mad? How would she live the rest of her life? What would happen to her son? *Abbu* did get better, but occasionally the hallucinations did come back, and he was honored with title after title. *Mamoni* had lost all hope, and she turned her attention to me. That is how

it all started. She was caring, but because I began to turn into another *Abbu* like person, which she was determined to change.

I felt restless all of a sudden. I picked up book after book from the bookshelf, tried to pay attention to its words and really wanted those words to affect me, take me away to another world. They all failed, one after another. In that precise moment, any book would have failed. There was nothing wrong with any one of those books. The inside of me burned, burned for something else that wasn't there. I desired another world, another existence. When I first learned to swim, I would swim far into the pond or the river as far as I could go, and be tired and only then begin to think how I would get back to the shore, which would be tougher and brutal. It was a dangerous game, even when I swam in the river where the bull sharks were rumored to visit every once in a while. I never feared, none of us, kids of my age, ever did, the fear itself turned into a mystery for us, and we were in love with that mystery. That night I wanted to do something like that. Get out in the world and get lost and not knowing how I would return home again. I tried to meditate like the people in the legends, where people meditated for years before they reached a place in their minds where everything was calm and they were in control. I wondered whether it was ever possible or was it just a myth. I could not concentrate. I tried to think of the moving clouds against the blue sky, and pretended that troubles of life didn't matter. I tried to think of the green algae that grew on the ponds during the rainy season, and pretended that it did not matter. I tried to think of the green rice fields moving in accordance to some cosmic rhythm in the cool breeze,

and pretended that it didn't matter. But everything mattered to me that night. Why would anything as beautiful as those images or experiences not matter to me? If I failed to experience the beauty of any of those, then what's the point of living? A restless river raged inside of me, and I was helpless.

I picked up *A Hero of Our Time* by *Mikhail Lermontov* again, began to read from the beginning. I decided to read it again cover to cover that night. *Lermontov* was only twenty six when he published that book. He had a gift for describing the location, as if he painted it, not with words but with the limitless supplies of color, color that only he knew how to use, when to use what color and exactly the perfect amount. The central Asia in his novel transformed into a place that existed in between everything, in the most beautiful way possible. It was not only another world, but more mysterious than the people and places of the fairytales. Everyone in the novel had a reason to behave the way they behaved. There were bad people and there were good people in the novel, but they were all human and all had a point of view that came not from them, but in the condition that they were in. If the universe was an experiment of God, then God must have been shocked to find out the outcome of that experiment. Living in that world is beyond anyone's grasp, yet life went on, the good people turned into bad ones, and the bad into good ones, and they often went back and forth in between the two, just like in real life. No one is to be blamed for their fate. They did not bring their fate to themselves, but the fate had arrived as an absolute inevitability.

*Pechorin*, the hero in *Lermontov's* novel, liked people, loved people, but he always wanted to play with them, not because those people were vulnerable, but it was

possible to make them vulnerable, and no one could escape his charm or the ancient rage that glowed deep inside him. If everything's inclination is to be destroyed, then why not destroy it? What's the worst that could happen if one destroyed another? People wanted to be destroyed, *Pechorin* just provided the avenue. People didn't know that they wanted to be destroyed, *Pechorin* made it known to them. He presented it not as an option, but as a challenge where no one could escape from the destruction. How did *Lermontov* write it? He was only twenty six when it was published! When did he begin to write it? At twenty four? Twenty? Before he was even born?

*Kalu* howled on the *uthon*. He was suspicious about almost everything, but only until everyone went to sleep. He never made a fuss even if the thieves went through the *uthon* when everyone fell asleep. There were nights when thieves did go through the house, and took things that were left outside by mistake, and no one heard *Kalu*. *Dada* hated him. He didn't want to feed *Kalu* because he was lazy and shrewd. I went by the windows and looked outside. I couldn't see anyone. I expected to see someone. I wanted to see someone. There were some moles that moved around. Far beyond the fig tree frogs sang their mating songs from within the puddles that came to life every rainy season. I didn't hang the mosquito net that night. I didn't feel like it. Sleep didn't land on my eyelid, I felt no heaviness on them. I wanted to go to *Pechorin's* Russia. I wanted to follow his footsteps and see the places where he had been in his brief life. Why did I like that novel so much? *Abbu* said I am too young to read adult's novels. Truth is I only liked the novels the adults read. Why did I like only the ones that ended on a sad note? I didn't know, but I suspected something. I was different from everyone else. I didn't

know what it meant, but I had unique tastes in things, and I didn't find pleasure in organized sports or anything that was part of a system. I knew I enjoyed things that were not approved or things that were different somehow. *Pechorin* was surrounded by many, but was a loner like I was. Was that the connection between *Pechorin* and me? How did *Lermontov* know about this connection? That was the most surprising discovery for me. A book that was written so long ago, matched with my heart's desire. How did the novelist do that? Was *Lermontov* a future seer? Or was it that the desires to be like *Pechorin* was a universal one or at least more common than I had believed? The novelists were like the magicians to me, more powerful than the others. In the novel, we knew a lot about *Pechorin* from others and very little from himself, but we knew there were lots more to be known about this man, but we would never know. I was fascinated by that novel so much so that *Abbu* wanted to find out what it was all about. He read it one night, which he often did, and it was a pain to *Mamoni*, since he preferred to read lying down on his bed with the lights on. The next morning before I went to school he said to me, "Do you really understand this novel?"

"I think so." I laughed a little, since the novel had some suggestive adult materials that I was not supposed to read, not at least at thirteen.

"What do you think about the confessions that he made to that girl?"

"Where he told her how he turned into a monster?"

"Yes. That's the one."

"It was all lies, presented as truths."

"Why tell it to her, such intimate truths?"

“Because he knew she would believe lies presented as truth, but not the truth itself. Simple lies were not powerful enough. *Pechorin* had to present it as truth and make it more real and powerful. He played with their minds!”

“Hmm... There is something in there. I think you are right, but I need to think about it more. But good reading. At your age I wouldn't have understood any of this.”

Life would have been easier for me during that tumultuous day, if I had listened to *Mamoni* a few weeks prior to that. Everything would have happened in my absence and I would only have to suffer the aftershock and not the actual happening. *Mamoni* wanted me to go to our country house for a week and come back energetic and relaxed, so I could invest myself into my studies. She gave me all kinds of hints. I understood, but took no action. I could have hidden my pigeons in the secret bunker in our fruit orchard. I used to catch other people's pigeons and hide them in our fruit orchard in a bunker that I had made next to a large banana grove. It was large enough to hold about two dozen pigeons, but I could have made more bunkers to hide my pigeons. The challenge would have been to make it waterproof, but I had enough time to make it happen. But I did nothing, absolutely nothing. She knew I wouldn't do anything. I was stubborn and arrogant. I wanted to go to our country house, but I had decided not to at the last minute. It had occurred to me that she was being too nice, and I suspected something was up. It was the most natural conclusion that I could have made. A week away from everything in the country would have been great. I liked our country house, which was only about twenty kilometers away, yet it offered a different experience of life, so simple, so primitive and

so honest. Open fields of crops, ponds and rivers full of fish, and sleeping in the dangerous house were exciting. Our country house was dangerous for it had snakes inside the house. They hid in the storage room among the baskets of grains, bottles, tubs and coconuts and pumpkins that filled the room. They hid among the wooden beams that held the roof. And there were the *Tokko Snakes*, looked like some kind of gray white spotted lizards, but people called them snakes, since they were rumored to kill people by a single strike to the head. That house in my mind was similar to the life *Pechorin* lived in the frontier, far from everything, different from everything, yet exhilarating. Living among the snakes was scary, everyone had to be careful, but we all lived with the snakes anyway. It was an old house, and the snakes lived there all along with its inhabitants.

The time was well beyond the midnight. I still didn't feel like sleeping. I felt like going somewhere. I heard my pigeons making noises on the roof, a subtle sad noise that I had never heard before. Were they crying? Were they talking about the lost friends? Were they happy? Were they celebrating now that they had more rooms and more to eat? Why do we have to sleep at night? Why can't we do things at night and sleep during the day? Why not do the opposite of everything that we normally did? *Abbu* liked to sleep when he was in good health and mind, doesn't matter which part of the day or night. Sleep is sleep, as he described it. He once told me, while he was playing cards with three of his friends, "If you become an engineer, then invent a light like thing that emits darkness, and you can control the intensity of the darkness with a tunable switch."

I said, "Is that even possible?"



“Of course it is possible. Anything that you can think of is possible.”

*Jamal* uncle said, “Why don’t you make a room with such conditions where no light enters the room when the doors and windows are closed?”

“If no light enters, then when the door is closed the lights inside would stay trapped. How would you get right of it?”

“They would probably be absorbed by the walls.”

“I think the room would still not be sufficiently dark.”

“Now what kind of darkness are we talking about?”

“So dark that it would make you believe that there was no light in the world or every bit of light is sucked out of the world.”

“And what would you do with it?” Asked *Shodu* uncle.

“No matter where I am I would like to turn that on and go to sleep. Sleep is what makes this living so wonderful.”

*Shodu* uncle said, “If you are sleeping all the time, then why not die? What’s the point of living?”

“Sleeping is still not like being dead. When you sleep you still every once in a while know that you are sleeping and that is what makes it so good.”

*Jamal* uncle said, “Why don’t you do this? Pray to the sleep God.”

There was one of their *Hindu* friends, *Gopal*. *Jamal* uncle turned toward him and asked, “Ay do you guys have a sleep god?”

*Gopal* uncle said, “I do not know. There are so many gods. There must be one. Why not?”

“Can you find out for sure?”

“Why bother? Just pray to the sleep god and it would be accepted. If not, then you would know. Pray for twelve hours of sleep per day and see if you get it.”

They often drank, but *Dada* did not know about it. They drank just a bit, and acted as if they were drunk and didn't know what's going on around them. It was all an act, an act of being drunk. Drinking was all about getting drunk and saying filthy things. They would play cards with naked women's pictures at the back of the cards. Sometimes they licked those cards and wiggled their tongues on special locations. An image remained vivid in my mind even though I witnessed it only a few times and didn't even know what it was when I first witnessed it. *Abbu* loved the enjoyments of life. He knew how to enjoy life by being in his room, at least that it is how it felt to me. He had another world in his head, which was sufficient, as it seemed. And above all he liked being around young people. He often wrote columns in the city's newspapers about politics and science, and they were well received. Sometimes people on the road would tell me, “Your *Abbu* wrote a great piece. Have you read it?” I never read anything that *Abbu* had written. It was exciting to know that he published something, but I was afraid to read it. I didn't know how I would receive it or what would the experience be like. *Abbu* never asked me to read anything that he had written. His writing habit was an expensive one. While he wrote, if he misspelled a single word or needed to cross out a sentence or part of one, then he started all over again on a fresh piece of paper. It took him a long time to finish anything that he wanted to write.

Both *Abbu* and *Mamoni* were sleeping. I thought about them. They were married when they were almost at my age. They had me when they were only a few years older than I was. What an extraordinary experience it must have been for them. They were children themselves burdened to take care of another child, when they knew nothing about taking care of a child. I felt sad for them suddenly. I felt no hatred for them at that exact moment. *Dada's* step mother once told me, “*Allah* trusts you a lot. You are your parents’ only child. You just don’t know yet what an extraordinary gift it is to take on the responsibility of taking care of your parents all on your own. *Allah* believes in your abilities.” She just said it, a few simple words. It stayed with me though I never knew why she had said it or what prompted it. I was trained to perceive things as cause and effect, and I didn’t know what had caused her to say it. But it was motivating, strong and moving.

I felt like growing up fast and to be *Abbu's* friend. I liked discussing things with him, but he never spent too much time with me. There was this young man who came to our town and I was fascinated by him in the beginning. Everyone was. He spoke seventeen languages fluently. I had my doubts. I said, “How can you be sure? That is too many languages!”

*Abbu* asked, “What do you mean?”

“Maybe what he is saying is not even a language. No one in this town knows how *Norwegian* sounds. How could we be sure?”

“But he speaks English and French so well.”

“I am not convinced. Maybe he has just memorized a few sentences somehow and that’s what he tells us.”

*Abbu* was so close to him that *Mamoni* was upset. She would ask, “How could you be with him all the time? He is so young and people soon may have other ideas about you two.” When *Mamoni* and I went to my maternal grandparents’ house, *Abbu* and that young man played cards all night in my parents’ bedroom, drank and slept together on the same bed, which definitely began to look odd. One time we came back and found a dozen bottles in the bedroom, and *Mamoni* was furious. She questioned *Abbu*, and wanted an answer. The young man wasn’t there at the time, and that perhaps made *Mamoni* a bit less furious than what I had expected.

“He is harmless. I just connect with him intellectually. He knows so much about life and the world. I love talking to him. I wonder how he knows so much at his age.”

“But no one knows who he is. He could be a murder for all we know.”

“He is hiding here in our city. He murdered the lover of his girlfriend.”

“What? He actually killed somebody? Isn’t that what I have been telling you all along?”

“He went to *Austria* for three years to study medicine. Came back and found his girlfriend in a relationship with another man. And he killed him. That is the truth.”

“You hang around with a murderer? Are you not afraid?”

“I told you he is harmless. It was a madness of the moment. Madness of being in love. He wouldn’t do anything bad to us.”

“Do not bring him home anymore. I do not want him around *Adnan*. It is unbelievable. You should have told me before.”

Then one day he disappeared just the way he appeared one evening. *Abbu* said, “He told me he would disappear like this. He will come back one day. He will.”

“Do you even know where he came from?”

“No.”

“He will never come back. He probably conned a lot of people in this city and gone.”

“He conned no one. I know it for a fact. I asked around. He was a good boy. A good friend. He will come back.”

I knew the young man will never come back. Everyone knew. *Abbu* never believed it though. He had his hopes high.

That young man once brought me a bird, a small green bird that I could hold in my fist and it had black whiskers. I had never seen a bird like that before. He claimed it to be a foreign bird. I believed it. I had the bird for a few days, and I took it to show it to *Pilu Khan*, and he said, “It is a *Deshi* bird, not a foreign one.” I did not go back and say it to the young man, but it grew a sense of doubt about him in me. I observed him carefully since then. He seemed too nice to be true. I let that bird fly away knowing that it was a *Bangladeshi* bird and it ate insects and rice. I knew it would survive all on its own. It was a strong nice little green bird with whiskers.

The young man came in our city one evening. He went into the restaurant that was half way between our house and the *General Hospital*. He stayed by that restaurant that day and the day after. Then people began to ask him who he was. He said he was a traveler. He had travelled the world and now travelling the country. A few young people were attracted by his ability to speak many languages and the depth of his knowledge about the *European* countries. They all wanted to be his friend and take him home and feed him, which was exactly what he had wanted.

The first time I saw him he was in a *Homeopathic* doctor's chamber, reading newspapers, where I went with *Mamoni*. She went to take something for an abortion for an accidental pregnancy. The doctor was *Abbu's* friend, but promised not to say anything to *Abbu*. *Mamoni* believed I didn't know what she talked about with the doctor. The doctor kept looking at me, and said, "Go outside. We need to talk about something." I knew *Mamoni* never wanted another baby, since she believed the next baby could be mentally ill, which was simply a reaction from fear, but it was her life, her decision. I went outside on the verandah, and stood there and looked at the passing rickshaws on the road. The young man came by. He was a short, about five feet three. He had a face that looked like a mango – the head was big, kind of winded in the middle of the face and ended in the chin like the way a mango's bottom ended. He had a red shirt and jeans on. His black leather sandal was so shiny, even under the light bulb, that I was forced to ask, "Why is your sandal so shiny?"

"Dress makes the man."

"What does it mean?"

“If you dress well, then people will respect you. By the way, I know your *Abbu*.”

“I know.”

“He is a very well dressed man and a learned man too.”

“I know.”

*Abbu* had hundreds of sets of shirts and pants and *Punjabis*. *Abbu* liked to dress modern and up to date, though he rarely bought anything modern and up to date for *Mamoni* or me. He was all wrapped up in himself. He wanted a good life to happen, and none of its brutalities ever bothering him. That was our introduction like. The young man was friendly. He was smooth and soft spoken. He was calm as if nothing inside of him were ever excited about anything. He was like *Pechorin*. *Abbu* was in love with him as I was in love with *Pechorin*. We were in love with an idea that we wanted to be realized in our own lives, but we also knew that the moment we began to become like that idea, we would begin to hate it and would want out. While all these thoughts went through my mind, the night aged, I aged. Still no sleep had visited me. I could not read beyond the first page of that novel. Even the novel that had fascinated me so much had failed to alter the state of my mind.

I was so alone.

## The Small Hours

I stayed in our furniture wood room that night, my hiding place from the rest of the world, until almost about the *Morning Prayer* call. I needed to be quiet. When I was younger and *Mamoni* had a hard time controlling me, she would lock me up in her bedroom for hours. I would cry, cry hard, and when tired I would sob and then finally fall asleep by the door. She would not open the door. The day outside would go on like nothing had happened in the universe. A boy of three or four or five or six or seven didn't matter. I cried and cried, day after day, and nothing had happened. *Mamoni* locked me up anyway. It was during those hours I had discovered time, that it passes, and it would pass with or without me. All I had to do was survive. One good thing it had done that it made me quiet over time, calmness came over me like I had never experienced from doing anything else. Sometimes I would sit in that room, pick up a piece of paper and look at it from all directions and until I was tired and calm. I discovered a piece of paper had no specific center and the center could be anywhere, it could even be on the side, on the side. It made me happy. So, whenever I faced trouble, I found a place to be hidden, not to hide, but to be hidden and think and be calm. The furniture wood room was a single room building with about forty by twenty five feet dimension, and about fifteen feet high. My *Dada* kept his most cherished furniture woods in that room that he had collected over the years. People collected books. People collected stamps. People collected other things. My *Dada* collected furniture woods. He collected three types of woods, *Mahogany*, *Shegun* and *Kathal*, the most expensive and the best of quality. There were no signs in the room, no signs on the woods, but he knew



by heart the dimensions of each piece of those furniture woods, the amount he paid for it and the year of purchase and the location and even the names of the sellers. He was like that with the numbers, if it reached him, it was never forgotten. He was also good with keeping track of all kinds of things and above all good with making money. If he was up to any good mood, then sometimes he would say things like, I bought this bed from that maker in that year for this amount. Or in that city, there was a man by this name who tricked me with bad products in that year for this amount. He always shared information with the names, numbers, location and time, and one more crucial information, where he was in life during that time, like, I was short on money that year and still got tricked and learned a very hard lesson. He was a successful business man with almost no academic education, an amazing feat really, which in time helped me like him more than I hated him for being a stickler. He was rarely satisfied with anything. It was obvious that it is not easy to be like him.

The building stood next to the plum tree, both the interior and the exterior of the building were painted in a yellowish color like the rest of the house. All around the room the furniture woods were placed like the books – they came from different parts of the country, different trees and different sellers, but they were collected by a man who loved furniture woods very much. Who liked the smell, the look, the strength, and everything else about it! He worshipped the woods in a way, even during the busy years he would spend a significant amount of time with the wood, taking care of them, making sure the termites were not in the woods already in full attack mode.

The woods that he collected were the very best of their kind, in terms of their size and internal naturalistic design which shined as a map of something when polished smooth. The room had a tin roof. Some days when it rained I would go into that room and sit there and listen to the orchestra that threw an impromptu concert on the roof. There was nothing more beautiful than the enchanted rain falling on the tin roof. The room had no lights, so when the door was shut, the inside of the room turned dark, only a very small amount of light came in through the sides of the room where the tin touched the bricks of the building. I liked it in there. No one went in there. They had no reason to. It was *Dada's* territory. No one in the house understood him or what he did or why was he so cheap. If my aunts needed to buy anything, they never asked their father for it, but *Dadi* had to present the case to him, and even then it took days for him to release the fund, and he never paid them what they had asked for, it was always about one third or even less. Most people in the neighborhood hated him, but he was always cut throat and direct for their own good. He would often say, "I am telling you that you will fail in order to challenge you or to wake you up from your belief of false reality. Your business is failing, and I can help you to find a way to save it." Or he would say, "You will not make it. People that have your spending behavior would never make it. I cannot help you. No one can. Even you cannot help yourself." He gained a name for himself, "*Tanga*" which meant the "caustic one." Yes, that is how he was, for good or bad, but he had taken care of a large family, and he was good at it. He went into the business with his brother with only 750 *takas*, and he often said as he made risky business deals, "I will only worry about life when I see myself going below 750 *takas*." That is how strong

mindful he was and still is. He was a loner as well with a mind that refused to be affected by almost anything but his own logical and practical thoughts. He listened, but took action all on his own with full load of the responsibility. Not the hesitating type at all.

When I was a bit younger, I collected and hid my stuff in the corner of that furniture room, under some woods. All kinds of things, mostly electric wires and metal objects. I used to build things out of those scrap materials and pretend that those were the UFOs. It was a play room for me, my room to build things, not real, but imaginary. That night I sat there and thought about the day and I regretted many things. I wanted to rewrite everything and alter the history of that day. I wanted all my pigeons to be still on our roof, I wanted my mother not to be angry at me and I wanted to know what *Dipu* had found out and why she looked so relieved yet kept on scaring me throughout the day and night. I wanted everything to be as it used to be, no change, stuck in space and time, forever. I knew it was asking for too much from an unfair life, from a terrible day. Nothing stopped me from dreaming though, as they said, “We are all kings and queens in our imagination.” So I kept on dreaming to be enchanted by my own thoughts and dreams. There was nothing like believing in one’s own created fairytale. It helped in that moment, but did nothing for the future, but even then I knew I needed to imagine, imagine something that wasn’t there just so I could survive that moment, that space.

Then there was a slight knocking on the door, barely audible. It startled me. I thought it was the cat, *Mini*, trying to come in. No cat in the world would pass on a chance to play and kill a few mice, if it could. I sat on the cold floor and waited for the

next knock. The woods were placed a bit higher on other boards, so they didn't touch the ground, which kept them dry and easy to clean. I tried to hide behind the wood and see what the cat did. But it was not the cat who came in, it was *Dipu*. Somewhere inside of me I knew she would come to comfort me. That's how she was. She enjoyed sex and I was her toy. I saw her happy earlier in the day, which perhaps subconsciously told me we were out of trouble, and she would want it again, to quench her thirst that was always extreme again as soon as she had just finished. I could smell her, a combination of her skin, makeup, sweat and wood and the ambient smell that was mixed with flowers and leaves that grew around the house. I liked it. I thought the smell was the number one thing that made a woman a woman. They were like the flowers, each different, some smelled bad, but mostly wonderful, enough to be in love with their fragrance. To me, they were another species, better and beautiful.

She entered half way and whispered, "Are you in here?"

I said nothing. For a moment, I thought she could be hoping for someone else. I found that thought startling. First, I decided to say nothing and see, but then I said, "Yes." Perhaps, subconsciously I wished for her to be there, and didn't want her to expect someone else. I needed someone there, and I was glad that it was her. She came in and found me in the dark. Then a brief thought went through my mind – would it matter to her who was in the room, as long as it was a man? A dangerous thought! I decided to come back to that thought later. I had always suspected she had an incestuous relationship with her maternal uncle, *Mintu*. When we were younger, during the first years when I learned what we have done was called sex, she would tell me, "Men get

tired soon. They cannot go on and on and on for all night long. But women never get tired, they could go on and on and on and on and on for weeks and months.” She would have sex with the boys in the neighborhood and tell me all about it, and then she would teach me what good sex was and what was bad. She had an inclination toward the bad and the foul when it came to sex and nothing was off limits. She once told me, “The number one thing in life is to have a person who you can fuck exactly the way you would like to be fucked.”

She sat next to me, not on the floor, but on a piece of wood, so her butt didn't cold. “How are you feeling now?”

I said, “Obviously not good,” as I climbed on a stack of wood. She followed me. Then suddenly as she climbed down again almost as quickly as she got on that stack of woods, she said, “I need to close the door from inside. And if anyone knocks, then say nothing, make no noise.”

I knew it was the best, and the only thing to do. Then again I wondered whether she had expected someone else in that room. I wanted to ask her, but then again, I didn't. I needed to get to the bottom of what mattered the most then. I needed to find out from her what had the doctor told her. At that moment, I knew I would never marry her, because she was cunning and she would never be mine and I would never hers. *Dadi* liked *Dipu* a lot because she *Dipu* was beautiful and with a lot of property, which in future could be combined with mine. But it didn't matter to me. I wanted out. I needed to be free, free from her.

She came back and we lay down on our backs on the furniture, and then she spread a *Katha* on me. I said, “That’s good. It’s not cold, but I wanted something on my body.” I didn’t realize she had brought it in, but she came prepared, to stay, to stay a long time, to pass the night, and to pass the night well in comfort.

“Now we need a pillow,” I said.

“Let’s not go and get one. Stay here. Let’s fold the corners of the *Katha* and use it as a pillow.”

“That wouldn’t work.”

“It’s a big *Katha*! It’s the blue one I have, big enough.”

I knew she would not allow me to go out of that room. I knew I would not go anywhere if I discussed it any farther. We made it work somehow, as best as we could.

“I have something to tell you,” she said, as she hugged me, and brought herself close to me.

“I do not want to know another bad news today. If it is bad, then tell me a lie.”

“What do you think I am going to tell you?”

“That you are pregnant! What else could it be?”

“What if I am pregnant?”

“Then I will have to marry you of course, tomorrow. *Mamoni* surely would kill me when she finds out. She will finally be able to tell everyone in the house that she had suspected us correctly all along and it is everyone’s fault for not listening to her and not allowing her to send you home.”

“You are not a man.”

“I am not. I’m only thirteen years old!” It was a magical year for me. The year before I had read there was an *Egyptian* king who was only thirteen years old, but had three hundred wives and eighty nine children. I didn’t want to be like that boy, but I wanted something on a smaller scale. I wanted a life in a house like ours, full of trees and animals and to be living with my wives and children. I feared that I had willed my desire into reality. When the reality was closer to me, then I preferred the world of imagination, lies and dreams.

“You will never be a man.” I knew she would say that, she often did during those days.

“Maybe I do not want to be a man. It is just too complicated. I can’t take care of a wife and babies. Are you pregnant?”

“If I am, then what would happen to me? You would be the father for my baby?”

“I do not know. I may even kill myself and you would have to handle it all on your own. Are you pregnant?”

“You are pathetic! It’s not just you. All men are. They melt when they see a woman, and when the woman is pregnant, they try to kill either the baby or the woman. At least you said you would kill yourself. It is not only the men. There is something wrong with the entire male species.”

“What do you mean? Are you pregnant?”

“Even the *hulos*, male cats, kill the kittens so they can mate again. And the roosters peck the incubating chickens until they are not incubating eggs and ready to have sex again. Men understand nothing but sex.”

“Oh!”

“Oh?”

“Who are you talking about? It is you, you are like that. Are you a man?”

“I have a man’s mind, and that’s why I am the way I am. That’s why I understand men. I want to dominate like the men.”

“Are you pregnant?”

“Are you scared?”

“I am just too young to be a father.”

“But you are not too young to fuck? Are you really young? Then how could it be too young?”

“I do not want to solve any puzzle. Just tell me.” I said.

“What puzzle?”

“Why I have the desire to have sex, but no desire to get married or be a father? I don’t know. You and I did what our bodies wanted to do. That is all I know.”

Someone walked by the door of the furniture wood room. I could hear the noise of the sandal, but I could not recognize it. We were startled. With her warm soft hand she covered my mouth tightly and whispered, “Say nothing.”

“It could be *Kalu*,” I whispered.

“It is not. It is *Shamoli* auntie.”

“How can you tell? What is she doing out so late now?”

“I recognized the sound of her steps. She is looking for me.”

“Are you pregnant?”



“Do you want to have sex?”

“If you want it, then we can. Like always. You decide. I just want to know whether you are pregnant or not.”

“I want it.”

“But I cannot go out and steal the condom from *Abbu*’s drawer now. It is impossible and besides I am almost a dead person now. Everything is going wrong for me.”

“That is when you should do it the most. You will feel better.”

“I am too tired and worried and ...”

“We can have other types of sex.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Spit in my mouth first, and then I will tell you. Make me horny.”

“I am not into it now.”

“We can do it until the morning. This could be the last time we will be doing it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you had enough troubles with it already? We should be separated, as your mother puts it.”

I wanted to have sex, but I thought why bother making the day even more complicated than what I had went through already. There was always another day to have sex. I just wanted to survive that day. I needed the new day to show up and everything to be fine. I feared *Mamoni* even more then. She had run away from home at fourteen to marry *Abbu*, but she wouldn’t forgive me. She would say, “I wanted to

protect you from the mistakes I had made. How can you make the same mistake? You deserve all the punishment that I am about to throw at you.”

I said to *Dipu*, “I think we should just talk today. We can always have sex later.”

“Why talk when you can finger me! I will let you finger my anus too.”

“I do not want to finger you.”

“Do you want me to finger you?”

“I do not want you to do that either. I just want you to tell me whether you are pregnant or not.”

“Come, just do it. Do you want me to stroke you a bit first? You must be very scared and in need of some help.” I knew she would try to grab my penis, and I held it between the legs, stopping it from exploding.

“No,” I said.

“No?”

“No. Nothing sexual.”

“Then what are we doing here?”

“You came in. I was just here.”

“You could be the father of my child.”

“Are you pregnant? I saw you going into the doctor’s office today.”

“I saw you too and I said to myself if he is the father of my child, then I should be dead and so is the baby.”

“Why?”

“I need a man to raise a child, not a child.”

“I am not a child.”

“You are.”

“I am not.”

“I should be married to someone older.”

“I would be old enough soon.”

“I like having sex with you, but I cannot marry you.”

“I do not want to marry you unless I have to. But if I am going to be a father, then I would need to marry you. You need to marry me. That’s how it is. No one would accept any other solutions, in this case.” I lied. I knew she knew it. I wanted out and could have said almost anything.

“If I am pregnant, then I will not have the baby.”

“You would kill the baby?”

“It is not killing. It is about not being foolish.”

“Is that what the doctor told you?”

“Yes.”

“What else did the doctor say?”

“I am pregnant.”

“You are not! Tell me you are not.”

“I am.”

“No. I can’t take it. I think I will die. I told you to lie to me and not tell any truth today.” I couldn’t believe what she had just said. I didn’t even understand what I was saying. It was all a moment of confusion and fear and hopelessness.

“I am pregnant and everything will be fine. No one needs to know.”

“If you are pregnant, then why did you lie to me all this time? You should have just come in and told me the truth. Why play with me on a day like this?”

“I needed you to know what I am going to do and what I am going through.”

“I do not want you to kill the baby.” I believed her. I meant it. I wanted the baby to live and not die.

“It is not killing. No one would ever marry me with a baby.”

“I would marry you, even though you are not the marrying type!”

“I do not want to marry you. You need to marry someone your age. I am too old for you.”

“So, I am just to have sex?”

“Yes.”

“A toy?”

“Yes. Kind of.”

“I am?”

“We can still have sex when you are married!”

“That is not right! There is something wrong with you.”

“I know, and I am not going to get any better. You do not want to be stuck with me.”

We stayed quiet for a long time, which felt like a thousand years. We said nothing. We hugged each other. I thought about nothing. She said nothing. An anger presented itself mixed with immense sadness. I felt like sinking in the river and being

caught by the plants that grew from the bottom of the river. I thought about how I would say it to *Mamoni*. It scared me to death. I was thirsty, but there was no water and I was in no condition to go out and get the water and get back in there. Suddenly, it dawned on me that my pigeon problem was only a small problem, a tiny problem, compared to what was about to hit everyone in the house. It saddened me. But there it was. The truth. Now, it was a true life and death situation. I imagined *Dipu* killing the baby. I pictured a baby who looked like a day old fragile squab. I did not want the baby to be dead. Why would she kill my baby? Why would I allow her to do that? Why would anyone in the house allow it when I tell them everything? Then she climbed on top of me and began to kiss me. I grabbed her, and slipped my body away from underneath her and she fell on the wood on my right side. It was all dark, but the room was full of her smell. I had always liked her smell and I was sinking into it again, even then when my world around me had begun to collapse. I was the male species that she had often blamed for everything. I was the weak one.

She said, "Spit in my mouth. You are horny. You smell like it."

"Not today. Not now. What don't you understand? You mad *magi*, whore. What don't you understand?"

"Why then not have sex with a whore? I heard it is better. Now it wouldn't change anything. I am already pregnant."

"I can't have sex like this."

"Are you scared?"

"I am horrified. I am dead already."

“What do you want me to do?”

“Keep the baby.”

“And waste my life? Waste your life?”

“I don’t know what else to say.”

“One day we will forget about all this.”

“I will not. You will not. No one ever could.”

“Everyone forgets. It is the fear that we fear. And in time we forget this fear.”

“We fear the fear? What does it even mean?”

“Otherwise people would kill themselves.”

“I can’t think of this anymore. It is the worst day of my life, and about to get even uglier.” I feared and wondered, if they force us to get married, then how I would ever show my face to my friends. I will not be a boy of thirteen anymore.

“One day you will remember this day.”

“I know I will but I don’t want to remember it. That’s why I am begging you not to kill the baby.”

“I am not pregnant”

“You are not? What?” I was shocked again. But I believed it. I would have believed anything she could have said that night.

“I am not.”

“What is the truth? Tell me the truth. I can take it. I can take it. I know you are playing with me. I don’t know why, but tell me only the truth.”

“I am not. That’s that.”

“How can I believe you?”

“The doctor examined me.”

“How?”

“I don’t have the mindset to describe it, but be happy that you are not a woman who is examined by *lompot* doctors, and be happy that you are not going to be a father.”

“Then what is all this with not getting your period?”

“Doctor said I will get it back when I stop worrying about it.”

*Abbu*’s stolen paintings were hidden in that room, under the furniture wood. I wanted to tell *Dipu* and even show it to her. But a sense of calmness spread over me. I was still in shock, but my thoughts collapsed onto themselves and each thought was buried under another thought until I could think no more. Thoughts went through my mind as the night breeze grazed through three trees. She left. I wanted her to leave. I needed to be alone again. I was relieved. I believed she was not pregnant and at the same time I did not believe it. What if the doctor was wrong? Doctors are wrong all the time. I remembered the time when *Mamoni* once took me to get one of my jaw tooth pulled. The doctor injected the anesthesia next to the tooth, but the end of the needle went through the skin and went out the other end. The anesthesia did not enter my system. It all spilled in my mouth next to my tooth. *Mamoni* asked me not to make any noise. If I did, she would kill me when we went back to the house. I stayed quiet. The doctor took the forceps and pulled the tooth. I screamed so loud that *Mamoni* was forced to slap the doctor. After the scream and the slap, the doctor was so confused that he picked up the tooth from the bowl and tried to push it back in its original position. What

if *Dipu* was pregnant and the doctor did not know? What if *Dipu* was lying to me? She lied all the time. Maybe she didn't want me to feel bad? Maybe she will kill the baby and didn't want me to know! Anything was possible. I was scared. I was confused. I was powerless. I didn't know what to think of next, what to do next, what not to do next.

I went back to my room. I dropped on my bed like a thousand kilogram rice sack. I opened the windows. The sky was partially clear, not cloudy as I expected it to be because of the light shower. I could see things far and beyond the fig tree. The fig tree's barks were nodular and rough. I thought I could even see it from my window. But I knew I was seeing it in my memory. My imagination was coming back to me. I liked it. I was tired of the reality. In the world of reality I was weak, not functional, but in the world of imagination, I was a great many things and I could even surprise myself by creating a new reality that only belonged to me. Even the tree probably had forgotten how old it was. I was happy. I was tired. I wanted to go and ask the tree how old it was.

“How old are you tree?”

“I do not know.”

“Why not?”

“Age doesn't matter to me.”

“Why not?”

“Because time does not exist for me.”

I was happy and also numb, in mind, soul and body. *Dipu* was not pregnant. I wanted to believe it with undeniable certainty. I remembered my pigeons. I missed them even more so. I wanted to go on the roof and talk to them, the way *Pilu Khan* talked to



his birds. Just the thought that I only had a few of them on the roof made me feel broken, shattered, defeated. I didn't feel like climbing to the roof. I thought about the ones in *Olide's* house. I knew they were scared, but I was happy knowing that they will return to our roof soon again. I decided to take a few kilograms of wheat grain to *Olide's* house in the morning. I kept looking at that fig tree. The road was empty, the main door to the mill was closed to muffle the noise, but there was work going on inside still. Two bicycles passed each other on the road, one going to the south, one to the north, one going home, one going to work, or they were both going to work, or going home. I found that thought puzzling. I liked it. Years ago, the owner of the rice mill was caught with three naked women in his office room, which was on the right side of the mill. Young men of the neighborhood suspected it for some times, and they caught him *lungi* down. The version of the story got to me, via my cousin *Just*, was that all three girls were on the floor bent over and he was doing the one in the middle in the butt and fingered the buttoles of the two others. The owner stopped coming to the office for a few days, and then life in the neighborhood went on again as if nothing had happened. They said the young men were paid off well.

The electric cables that went along the road in front of our house looked like the guitar strings. There were four strings, vertically placed, one on top of another. I looked at them. Then something got stuck on the second to the bottom cable. All the cables vibrated and I tried to see what it was. It twisted a bit, trying to get away. Then I knew what it was. It was a bat, trying to get to the fig tree to eat the figs. Every year there would be a bat or two getting stuck on the cables and we would see it hanging upside

down for days, dead, drying, rotting and eventually disappearing. That was the first time I witnessed a bat getting stuck on the cable as it happened. A living thing getting stuck and dying in front of me! I thought about my imagined child, who existed in my mind. How could anyone kill a baby? *Dipu* said all men wanted to do that when they had a baby with a woman they were not married to. Is it because I didn't want the baby to be killed, she called me a baby and not a man, I thought? Perhaps. Or is it simply because I was not able to satisfy her sexual hunger? No one would ever understand her mind, I reasoned.

Just a few more twists and then the bat died. Dead forever. There should have been more bats getting stuck to the cable compared to the number of bats got to the fig tree to eat the figs every night. Only the very unlucky ones got stuck to the cable, it seemed to me, due to their low rate of death by getting stuck to the electric cables. Was I unlucky? Was *Dipu* unlucky? Was my imagined baby unlucky? Or was the baby real and about to become unreal when *Dipu* had an abortion done? A major part of life was about luck, I figured. If the baby wasn't there, was it a lucky baby? I was worried and horrified, but still fascinated by what had happened that day. Life, without notice, could take turn toward the good or bad just like that, which was at once a curse and a pleasure. Life could go both ways, all about a chance that was hurled at us, humans, by god knows why or as per whose command!

I stood there in my room by the window and thought that I can always come back here. Here. To this place. Not in this exact time, but to this moment. Not to this exact house, but to this place. Not to this night, but to this experience. Not to this life, but to a

life of the memory. Memories are like the other lives, some are lived and some are imagined. Some of the familiar stars were out as the light cloud cleared slowly. I looked at them. They looked at me. I felt safe. I found my place. There were dark places in between the shiny stars, space. My life at that moment was like those dark places, vast and mysterious. The stars gave me hope. No matter what, if I kept going I would always hit one of those bright spots, I imagined. I knew that tomorrow would be or should be better, bright like the stars. As I thought about life I fell asleep in peace, knowing in space and time there could only be so many days like that one in one's life – a day to be remembered and a day to be forgotten. I knew there would always be a clear path ahead through the life of imagination, the only reality that truly mattered.

## A Glossary of Bengali Words

Abbu: Dad

Babu: Baby

Dada: Paternal Grandfather

Dadi: Paternal Grandmother

Mamoni: Mom

Uthon: Inner Yard

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