

# TO YOU, BHATU DADU

SAMIN SABAH ISLAM

Bhatu dadu died on a Friday morning, uneventfully and unobtrusively, surprising none in the village. Little to no tears was showered at his burial for he had little to no kin to carry out the honours. A distant nephew had arrived to only nod (approvingly or disapprovingly it cannot be said) but seemed scarcely moved. As for the rest of the villagers, some generously hit pause on their everyday toil to let out an ephemeral sigh and mutter, "At least he's freed from all his sufferings now."

Amin scorned at this. Simply put, sufferings were mere house pests that Bhatu dadu had squashed out of existence years ago. That was even prior to losing sensation on his left leg and having his clay money bank stolen. He was living his best life as an 89 years old childless widower, who, in the epilogue of his colourful life had discovered his fond and long shrouded love for fishing.

Let the records show that with his elderly trembles and cracked heavy rimmed glasses, Bhatu dadu was exceptionally unskilled at the avocation. That however, was a trifling shortcoming to him and didn't discourage his many endeavours. Those were the times when he was surrounded by his small army of admirers – six of the rowdiest and equally ardent village children. Bhatu dadu entertained the lot with highly exaggerated tales of his medieval life, accounts of the notorious boyhood of the now austere village-head and what not.

So on Saturday, the assembly of six, with ages ranging from 5 to 11, dangled their bare feet from the concrete barrier on the river side, hopelessly trying to hold back their whimpers. Nine years old Rimjhim, who was currently rebelling against hair braids, was the only one who had broken the sacred vow of a dry eyed goodbye. Now she not only lamented the death of the only 'dadubhai' she had left, but also feared the wrath of his ghost.

The agenda of the meeting was clear cut – dividing the crucial duties of Bhatu dadu now that his absence plagued the village. Among the members of this meeting it was well known, understood and agreed that no matter how much the adults scorned and sneered at the 'senile old man' (as they would call him), his contributions to this village were endless.

His entire life, Bhatu dadu had been the life of the party wherever he went, that is wherever he was invited, or at least tolerated. He filled the air with humour (and bodily gas). Even when neither was appreciated, it added colour to the greyness of the village. Bhatu dadu was content at being the joke as long as the audience found reason to laugh. He also took it upon himself to customarily embarrass the school headmaster, with animated retellings of the story where the latter had once urinated in front of the school building as a defiant teen. Someone needed to keep that pompous muppet in check from time to time! Bhatu dadu would also speak to the lonely old banyan tree behind the graveyard and throw baby fishes back in the pond after they were flung out by a storm.

Now in his absence, the six sets of



paint-stained, mud-stained hands were to be the keepers of prosperity in their village – an homage from loyal disciples to their revered leader.

"How come you guys get to do all the good things and I'm stuck dealing with the pesky old man (headmaster)," whined Rimjhim.

"That's because you don't go to school yet. If the rest of us get caught pulling pranks, we'll be walking home with ripe tomatoes for bottoms", Rownak explained to his sister, cringing at the mental image of his own description.

"Also, who will keep the old banyan tree company? Though I'm the oldest, I don't know how to have a heart-to-heart with an ancient tree!" he added.

"Leave that to me," 9-year-old Amin

chimed proudly, "My father is a farmer. I know a whole lot about plants. I can teach him a thing or two about living healthily and avoiding beetles".

"Who in their right mind goes to educate a tree?" giggled Durga, the baby of the group.

"That too one ten times his age!" Montu added, equally amused.

"I think someone who didn't fail the first grade should take on the role of the educator," Jimin chimed with an impish smile.

Amin creased his eyebrows in annoyance and decided to ignore Jimin's comment.

"Well, I once heard Bhatu dadu tell the tree that he should stop crouching because it's bad for its back!" he defended.

"I once heard Bhatu dadu apologise to the tree for passing gas in front him," Rimjhim piped in.

Again the group couldn't help but burst out in laughter, as if for the first time perceiving the extent of their leader's eccentricities.

As the reminiscence of Bhatu dadu's comical idiosyncrasies dragged on, not one of the six pairs of eyes were left dry. He had left them with memories of sheer joy.

"He really was a senile old man," Rownak sighed amidst the laughter, carefully wiping the tears that had amassed from all the giggles.

Amin gazed across the lake at a distant bird fleeing towards the blue abyss.

Tears of happiness don't count, right Bhatu dadu?