



# BOTTLES OF WAVES

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Mr. Hakim was a very strange man for three things: he seldom spoke, he always smiled and he sold bottles of waves.

People trod uneasily upon the fine lines between liking and disliking him. They never cared for him but he had a way of making them curious about him. And in the village of Chunati, Mr. Hakim was somebody everybody came to know after he started his business.

Ayan Akhter was one of those people who came to Chittagong for its sheer, sprawling beauty. He didn't earn that much to be spending it on getaways like these. But he believed that to afford any luxury, you don't need money; you need to have the confidence to believe that this extravagance won't take your life.

And that is why Ayan chose to be traveling within the bowels of green Chittagong. And Cox's Bazar was his last stop. Ayan had opted to stay in the villages raking the borders of the sea beach so that he could witness the raw beauty of the sea, how its waves and the silt-splashed sand were enmeshed with the indigenous people there, rather than the blue lagoons flanking the ostentatious hotels.

When Ayan did arrive in Chunati, he didn't hear about Mr. Hakim right away. He had his own span of time diving in the green ponds and bathing with absolute strangers there, devouring a variety of smoked, blanched, fried fishes, snapping retrospective pictures of the native kids and riding in small, chestnut coloured boats that rocked like his consciousness when he would be back in the city. Rather, after two days while conversing with the villagers there, he came to know about the man who sold bottles of waves.

Ayan became curious about this trifling business and so on the next day, he decided

to pay a visit to that man. A rickety van trundled softly across the stone path as Ayan watched the leaves of trees overhead furtively dancing in the breeze. Soon, the van stopped in front of, literally speaking, nothing.

Ayan was taken aback as he had not anticipated that the drama would unfurl that early.

"Why'd you stop the van here?" he asked the van-puller.

"You get off here, sir. Walk a bit ahead and take a slight right turn, then you will reach your destination. It is what Mr. Hakim asks of anyone who comes here. I will wait for you here. Oh, and take your sandals off."

Ayan shrugged, took off his aquamarine sandals and headed off. He didn't mind the thistles meekly pricking his feet soles as he walked barefoot, but he couldn't deny that he felt a pang of fear like the sudden gusts of wind. His curiosity pulled him closer to that unknown man.

The path arched right like the backbone of an old woman as Ayan took a right turn ahead and stopped to take a good look.

Few meters ahead rested the brazen remnants of a wrecked boat that hovered over some spindle-shaped logs. The boat acted like the roof as under its huge shade sat a man.

Ayan had to squint to see the man for he seemed like a tiny part of the scratched skin of the boat. So he walked ahead and then sat directly in front of the man.

A gaunt face, bronze skin scarred with the salt of the sea and a grey bush of hair beaten by the fury of the wind – this was something Ayan had expected to see and that's what he saw. However, the man was also quite lanky but with an air of authority over himself. His face looked clean shaven, his clothes seemed fairly ironed. He looked almost literate.

"You sell bottles of waves," Ayan meant to ask him but somehow it came out rather like a statement.

"Why else would you be here?" the man smiled. "My name is Hakim."

Mr. Hakim sat on a faded purple *gamcha* beside a battered looking steel trunk. The lime paint of the trunk caught the sunlight and shimmered like silk. Mr. Hakim noticed Ayan speculating it but only smiled.

"So, *miya*, do you want to see one of the bottles of waves?"

"Yes," Ayan laughed, "I'm curious how you pull off the act."

Mr. Hakim opened the trunk and shaded it partly by his body from Ayan. He rummaged in it for quite a long time and finally closed it. He handed out something swathed in a green cloth to Ayan.

Inside was a slender, glistening glass bottle. It had just a small portion of water, and as the sunlight dappled it's glass skin when Ayan cradled it out of the green cloth, it looked like a miniature ocean, swelling and rising tenderly.

"Your bottle of wave, *miya*."

"It's beautiful," Ayan's first thought was like a small sprout of a plant that was abruptly crushed under a stomping foot of "I am such a stupid person". Ayan was furious, not with Mr. Hakim but with himself, that he didn't realise that of course, a bottle of waves meant this and nothing else. Why did he even bother to come here?

"This will cost you 50 taka," Mr Hakim smiled with an air of sharing some sort of secret.

"I don't want to buy it!" Ayan said incredulously, "Why in the world would I buy –"

"Once you touch a bottle of waves, it becomes yours."

"What! You didn't say that at first!"

"Why would you come here then? To see what you already know?"

Ayan was dumbstruck.

"Do you know where I got these bottles? I found them," Mr Hakim smiled at Ayan from underneath his straw hat, "I found them in the sea. These glass bottles weighed heavier than fishes. They were old, dirty but they had letters inside them. Letters written and sent or never sent. Letters that found no one to reach to, or no one to keep, when the blood of the war seeped into our seas and rivers. I scrubbed these bottles and replaced the letters with waves," Mr Hakim finished with a cackle.

"Why don't you just call it water instead of waves?"

"Water can stay still, waves never do. They ripple and break into arches, and topple over each other and drown and resurface. That is waves and that is life. Both go on and die the moment they stop."

Ten years later, Ayan quoted the same thing to his editor friend, Ishtiak. "And that sold you?" Ishtiak, laughed.

Sipping his tea, Ayan smiled at no one in particular, "I was sold the moment I decided to pay a visit to that old con artist. But what cemented my belief was what he said afterwards." Ayan opened his briefcase and brought out something draped inside a green cloth. He placed it on the table and inched it closer to Ishtiak.

Ishtiak looked bemused, "Is this the famous bottle?" He slid the cloth away and took the bottle in his hands.

"I might have replaced the letters with waves. But you can still hear those stories, those," Ayan looked at the riveted Ishtiak, "those voices," quoted Ayan, who ten years ago, suddenly left his business and became a mysterious writer of books, telling stories of the war whose blood seeped into our seas and rivers.

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