



# fiction The Fall

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HE DIDN'T GET OUT OF BED, DIDN'T eat anything, didn't even touch a cigarette. He'd gotten a book of essays by Thomas Mann a few days back and had been reading it slowly, page by page, as a gourmet tastes some delicacy, but now he didn't look at it at all. Helplessly he saw himself forget a whole lecture, all beautifully prepared in his mind, because he'd no urge to go to the college, nor any effort, nor any energy left. The whole day he stayed in bed, slept like a child, intermittently, in fits and starts, occasionally woke up with bloodshot eyes, somewhere between worry and an utter blank state of mind, then floated back into slumber again, into dreams, into beasts and gems. Time and again he kept turning over the pillow, since its sides became hot and hard, as if exchanging a brick for a duck; the mattress soon became a long, stretched-out rock. The bedspread slid down the bed, to the floor. Around noon Mother came from the kitchen to look in — "what does she mean by always staying in the kitchen?" He'd always been angry about that, but this time he forgot all about it. He only said gravely when she felt his forehead and saw there was no fever as yet, "I don't feel good." She said she would have the food sent to his room, and went back to her chores. He was asleep again, dreaming, bits and pieces all broken and fragmented: There he was roaming around in the street, all naked, with a high turban on his head like that of a vizier, throngs of people lined up on both sides. They were all smiling, waving their hands and handkerchiefs in the direction of his royal entourage on the otherwise deserted street. He was sailing along like a lone boat on a river when suddenly his eyes fell on someone who made him ashamed of his nakedness. It was a girl who happened to be his class-mate at the university. He was madly in love with her though he never mentioned it to her. Now, the very same girl was there, standing among the cheering crowd, with a baby in her arms. "Good God! When did she get the baby? She wasn't married even! Who is the guy standing beside her?" Who else, but his own best friend Kaiser? Is it Kaiser himself, then, who she got married to? This was an awkward situation, so he abruptly left the street and hurried down into the roadside ditch. A rat was running along the glassy water of the ditch. It touched one of his big toes and instantly turned into a gold nugget. With that he was awake again, changed sides, and in a few moments found himself talking idly with Thomas Mann in a coffee-shop. Mann was very shy and uncertain in the beginning and was not doing much of the talking, but when he did begin, he went on talking without a let-up; however, soon he transformed himself into Firdausi Begam, a girl in the second year class of the college where he teaches, who was notorious for singing and dancing and her skill in casting coy glances. Now that girl with such manifold skills put one of her white, shiny, cutlass-bright legs on the table and then started spinning around a severed head on a little finger of one of her ten or twelve hands. He immediately realized that it was his own head. By that time there arose a great hullabaloo inside the auditorium (need one say that the coffee shop had meanwhile become an auditorium) and he arose to give an address. Noise subsided immediately and there was silence all around. He was delivering a very powerful lecture on Rabindranath Tagore, and for a second, overwhelmed with his own success, he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, a moment later, the auditorium was deserted. Not a soul in the whole blasted hall! Like an utter ass he'd been lecturing all alone. "But wait," he said to himself, "the place doesn't seem that deserted." There was somebody sitting on a bench at the far end of the room, whose vague features told him that it was none other than Rabindranath Tagore himself. He rushed to him, eyes agog with wonder, but he thought as he approached the man, "Good gracious, who is this Rabindranath? Quite like the poet but still he isn't the same person! I don't know this fellow! Oh my God!" He almost screamed and that made him wake up again. Then, he lay down for a long while with a nagging pain in his back and a headache. Then he saw: He was lying in a grave, and words began to wriggle out of the pages of a book and were merrily traveling in and around his body like hosts of inquisitive earthworms — out of books which had been his texts from his primary school days right through his post-graduate classes. Once again he saw: He was weeping, and soon there arose a river out of the tears shed. From the horizon there came a ship on the river, and he, along with many others, clamboured on board, and it started moving immediately with a terribly loud chugging noise. He now stood on the deck in the strong, bright wind, hugging onto a post; suddenly there was an uproar throughout the whole ship: a terrible criminal is hiding himself on the ship. Wasn't he the criminal, himself? He started running frantically even before this thought really got hold of him. Everyone was after him and he ran mile after mile, crossing both harm and hurdle, but, out of breath, he was thinking all the time, "I have never been on such a huge ship it's



bigger than most fields." His head by this time was weighing a ton, his pupils were whirling, his belly shrank, his left shoe was falling toward the bottom of the river. He stopped to catch his breath, but at once the screaming mob was upon him, he jumped to one side and tried to hide himself behind a few packing boxes, but could not quite make it. They nabbed him and surrounded him, shouting accusations. He was in the same cage with a pack of howling beasts. They were shouting at him, saying, "Why did you kill Dr Altaf?" Even Dr Altaf himself popped out his head from among the crowd, and joined them in the accusation, with his head bobbing and rubbing one shoe against the floor. "Yes, please tell me, why did you kill me?" etc.

By the time he could free himself from all the sleep and dreams, from the beasts and jewels, it was evening. He suddenly felt a desperate desire to get dressed, so he put on a shirt and a pair of trousers. Then he went upstairs to tell his mother that he'd be back late and would eat out, so she shouldn't wait for him. He didn't stop to hear what she said but ran down the stairs, and came face-to-face with the young housemaid who was standing at the foot of the staircase. He looked straight at her and winked, as he had seen the street-boys do. The maid blushed, lowered her eyes, and pulled down her veil, while at the same time turning away from him. Undaunted, he started making attempts at whistling, those were his very first attempts, but could not make them sound very convincing even to himself. However, with his first step onto the road he couldn't help but think: "What if the girl tells Mother?" The amid had been terribly surprised. She'd never experienced such behaviour from the young master, and it had been beyond her wildest dreams that this shy, serious, self-centered young college instructor would, all of a sudden, after all these years, make a "pass" at her. Then as he ambled through the narrow road, he thought, "What the heck, let her tell, Mother will never believe her," and then, "I could care less even if she does."

The small, narrow road ran into a larger thoroughfare a short distance further on. One, two and three-storied buildings with shops lined both sides of the street. Now, in the evening, there was a merciless flow of rickshaws, taxis

and people; the street was full of lights. Just as he entered the street he started glancing at the windows, doors, terraces and porches on both sides to see if there were any girls in view. He was walking very slowly since the street was very short — it takes only a couple of steps to walk through it. Well, there they are. Two or three girls were leaning on the rail of a portico, looking at the moving people and the undulating vehicles passing by. He kept looking at them intently, even had to crane his neck and twist his head to do so, while at the same time casting cautious glances at the hazards of the crowded street. "My God, that face looks quite familiar. She even visited us a few times. What would she think of me now?" He lowered his head and kept his eyes fixed on the paved road as a punishment to himself.

One day, it came back to him now, the mother of this very girl was telling his mother: "What a nice boy you have. Passes by our place all the time, but never raises his head to look this way or that — my daughters were telling me just the other day. Whereas, there are a number of rascals in the area who are creating quite a nuisance for my girls. We've a beautiful portico right overlooking the street, but my girls can never go there, can't even stand at the roadside window. I've hung a thick curtain on it, but even that isn't safe enough for the girls. I must say, your boy is one among a thousand, a gem of a boy!" Now if the same girl saw me ogling at her, he thought, wouldn't that be a shame! — all the compliments and pats on the back piled up for all these years, all that will turn into a big heap of dust. Damn it, man, what am I going to do with the compliments, breakfast on them? Compliments I've had enough, even strained myself to pick up so many proper manners. What good are they to me now? And as he mullied this over, he turned off that road, and, of course, couldn't even once raise his eyes to have a peek at any window or terrace, as if somebody had meanwhile placed a big rock upon his neck, so he kept his head bent down all the time as he went. He had so long been busy learning proper habits and accruing the right qualities to himself with a stony solemnity; now he mumbled: "Why am I walking this way, with my head down? What have I done? No, this just won't do, this being

proper all the time. It's a nasty habit I've developed, this being a gentleman all the time, playing the nice guy. I've become an absolute ass in the process; I've been starving myself, keeping myself miles away from the world, and my conscience was all the while trying to keep my desires chained up. Follow the crowd, don't try to stand out! There are only two kinds of men who try to do this — one's a madman, the other's a saint. I'm neither, and so by following the common rut trodden by millions I've now become a hollow person, a veritable biped donkey."

On the corner there was a pan-stall in which all sorts of objects were glittering like sun-kissed diamonds, — the mirrors, the lights, the colorful wares. He stopped to buy a cigarette and saw his terrifying image reflected in the several mirrors of the stall: a frail body, an emaciated, sharp face, two eyes deep set, a rather large nose covering most of the face, flat cheeks, hollow and sunken-in, jaw-bone jutting out in an ill-mannered way, the receding hairline exposing a huge forehead. On other days his skinny arms were hidden inside his shirt sleeves, but today he had folded his sleeves above the elbow, so the protruding bones of his wrists and elbows were clearly visible. He could not stand it any longer, this sick, graceless reflection of his body, but still he watched it intently, painfully examining the details, deriving a special pleasure out of his pain. "I didn't notice it before: how skinny I've become. Well, that bastard, Dr Altaf, seems to be right after all." He threw a coin on the shiny brass plate, making a sharp chinking sound, then taking a drag on his cigarette he set out walking again on the numb sidewalk. "Every noon and every midnight this city seems to ebb, while, mornings and evenings, it swells up in full flow." He was almost smiling when he thought up these words, gazing at the moving people on both sides of the street and the bouncing, swaying, neighing, rushing vehicles. "I've rolled up my sleeves above my elbows today. This is the first time I've done that. If I were to run into one of my students now, who knows what he would think of me. They are such a nuisance, these students of mine. It's they who should be afraid of us, that's the way it should be, but we're afraid instead." He was annoyed with

himself but couldn't help smiling. Then he came to a halt at the nearest bus-stop. He, however, didn't stand in the queue this time as he always did before, but stood a couple of yards away, and, along with many others, started eyeing three innocent young girls, hazarding even one or two winks in their direction. He had to wait for a while before a bus came. Then ignoring those standing in line, he ran in front and pushed and elbowed his way in and scrambled on the bus, paying no attention to the shouts and insults thrown at him by the people in the queue; once inside he seized a seat towards the front so that he could watch the women sitting in front of him. Suddenly, for some reason, he turned around to see what was going on in the bus — but could scarcely see a thing since the bus was so crowded — except a few arms, knees and stomachs. Just as he turned his head around, somebody, from above his head, almost shouted as he said, "Why, if it isn't the 'Professor', Shahed Ali himself. And where could you be going?" He felt the inherent sarcasm of the enquiry, and the fact that many faces had now turned in his direction as a result of that rather loud question made him annoyed; he gave a brief reply: "Nowhere in particular, just a little matter to attend to."

Then he quickly looked away and began concentrating on the passing street scene out the window. He was, of course, mulling over the situation to himself: "I should've asked Rashid Sahed in turn where he was going. That would have been the proper and courteous thing to do. But I'm not now in a particularly communicative mood, and known faces now seem to be extra repulsive, be it a student, or a friend, or just an acquaintance. How would it be if nobody on earth recognized me, if no one in the world were familiar to me, if I were some unknown foreigner in this city — wouldn't that be marvelous. Of course, I told Rashid Sahed that there was a little matter to attend to, but what exactly is there to attend to? nothing. It's not even certain where I'm going, I don't even know. Why I don't know why I got on this bus even. Shall I go see Kaiser? Or some other friends? No, I don't feel like visiting friends now. Shall I go to see Dr Altaf once again then? Maybe he was mistaken yesterday. Shall I ask him to examine me again, more carefully this

time? No, no, it was not a mistake. Doctors cannot afford to make mistakes in such matters. Maybe I should've told my friends, or my parents? I don't know why, but I just don't feel like telling anyone. Now this Rashid Sahed, what business does he have hovering over me in this way, as if he were almighty God himself. I can't even look at a girl." The bus came to a stop and some of the people started shoving toward the door. He followed them, on a sudden impulse, paid the conductor, and jumped down. He remembered that there was a movie theatre around somewhere; he'd seen a movie there once, who knows when; and having asked a couple of pedestrians the direction, he headed that way. He bought a ticket; and when he finally reached his seat, the house was bristling full and the newsreel was already on. Then the movie began, a juicy Urdu movie: meaningless dances, many, many songs, almost aimless fighting and killing, the utmost of phoné excitement. But time and again, enthusiastic whistles, shouts, a comment here and there and cheers kept coming from all around. Then came a period when the heroine, with her back to the audience, went on mightily shaking her plump hips for a full three minutes and the hall was in an uproar, cries and whistles and animal screams arose in chorus; he even tried to join the fray by whistling. But he got a terrible headache even before the intermission, and lest anyone recognized him when the lights were on, he immediately came out of the theatre. When he looked at his watch, it was eight o'clock. The face of the town was now glittering in lights and laughter, somewhere, as if from far beneath the surface of the earth, sounds of beating drums could be heard, as if everybody's heart was gay, their faces shining, and somewhere out of sight there was the sound of a passing train, half-perceived and a little saddening. "To the park then, let me cool my aching head in the open breeze," — and so he flagged down an empty cycle-rickshaw and climbed on it. He'd never done that before, this jumping on a rickshaw or any other such vehicle without haggling, over the price; but now he took his seat in silence; and when the driver asked where he wanted to go, he just said, "Ramna Park," and then started looking at the brightly lit street, the people, the moving vehicles. He was now totally enjoying himself: these people full of light and laughter, well-decked-out women trotting tap-tap on the sidewalk, like a picture, like a moving picture, and the clanging of rickshaw-bells, there under the lamppost sits that madwoman on a spread-out newspaper of light; it's as if there's a huge, perpetual festival going on throughout the city. Picture after picture on every street, some painted with warm and live colors, some with cool, shadow-like, vague hues, resembling the bottom of a muddy pool: through all these the rickshaw was signing along, like a three-legged swan, toward its doom.

A taxi flashed past smoothly and he, on the rickshaw, was suddenly brought back to his senses: "Well, well, looks like that bastard Dr Altaf was in the taxi. Must be bound for, or back from plundering. What a royal son-of-a-bitch! Would you believe that he said: Look here, Shahed Sahed, had it been anyone but you, I'd have kept mum, but you are an educated, intelligent man, and you'll certainly understand. I hope you won't get too upset by what I'm going to say just now. I know you have that courage in you, so I'll tell you plainly and simply. From all I can gather from your present physical condition, a year is the most you've got to live. Of course I'll do my best, but, to be absolutely frank, I'm not sure whether that is going to change the situation. Please do what I tell you, and, what is more, keep faith in Allah. I am telling you these things because I know you've the strength to accept the plain truth." The doctor, of course, didn't say it so abruptly and in such a straight-forward manner; he did a lot of hemming and hawing, beat around the bush for quite a while, and, then finally, said what he really had to say. But, strangely enough, even though this truth was rather shattering, striking me like lightning and making me numb for the first few moments, for some reason I immediately thought: I was expecting this, this is right, I could, somewhere deep down, feel that this was going to happen. From the outside I look all right, there is nothing wrong on the surface. But didn't I know in my bones that something had begun to eat into my body? I had been feeling bad for quite a while, so I started seeing Dr Altaf. He probably discovered it on the very first day, since he became deadly solemn. But the first spoke about it only yesterday, last evening. I came back straight home from his chamber, didn't feel like touching any food and went straight to bed. The whole night was wasted on all sorts of worries, some real and some just hearsay; so I had to sleep through the whole day, with a nasty backache, and now, this evening I'm out again, like a new being; the news of an inevitable death has totally transformed me overnight: what was I yesterday; a tepid college teacher. Could I wink at the maid yesterday, whistle inside a movie theatre, do all this that I've been doing since early evening?"