I'M trying to have a meaningful dialogue with my *bua*'s elderly mother, who, having come to visit her daughter in Dhaka, has suddenly and bewilderingly -- for both of us -- been left in charge of the house. While her daughter, my *bua*, without whom we are both left quite helpless, has decided it's the perfect opportunity for her to take a few days R and R.

The question I am trying to address with the help of Raushan's mother is a quite serious one concerning a sudden and distinct sound of gas emanating from the cooker, but no smell of gas and no flame when I try to ignite any of the burners.

Our discussion, as always, is greatly hampered by the fact that I don't catch the words, let alone the meaning of a lot of her Noakhali Bangla, and she understands probably even less of my Banglish. I don't feel too bad about this, normally, because Raushan is usually here to translate -- and since she's been away I've basically been using the microwave a lot.

I've managed so far to establish that the how, when, and wherefore of the hissing gas noise, is as complete a mystery to Raushan's mother as it is to me. But in this crisis, I'm painfully aware of how enormous the communication gap is between us. And it's not just language. It's not simply the Noakhaliness of her speech or that my Bangla is just not rising to the occasion, habitually and lazily sprinkled as it is with so many English words.

As I try to switch the sound of gas off or light the damn stuff, or both, preferably at the same time, I ask if she knows anything about gas. She shakes her head in alarm. I mean does she know how "*denjaress*" (dangerous) it is? "Na, na! I don't know anything about it," she claims, rather defensively.

I try and explain: "If the gas is coming out like this ... without being lit ... it's very bad ... very, very bad! There could be a big ... a big ..." I trail off.

I don't know the word for "explosion" in Bangla, I realise, and as I'm trying to think of it, I have time to reflect that I've certainly heard more explosions of more kinds on the streets of Dhaka than anywhere in the world, and yet I don't know the word for one. This is really too ignorant of me.

Suddenly, with the last broken matches from the box, a tiny teeny flame -- out of all proportion to the amount of hissing that was heard -- appears above one of the burners. Raushan's mother looks from me to the burner as if this is not much of a result for all my effort. So, I attempt again to convey the still-present danger of the situation.

"We can't use the cooker now until the *mistri* comes and fixes the problem, OK?" She agrees, staring at the barely flickering flame, perhaps wondering what on earth she could possibly heat on it anyway.

"But," I add weightily, "You. Absolutely. Must. Not. Turn. This. Burner. Off! Not at any time, at all. Do you understand?"

"What's wrong with it?" she asks.

"I don't know. But. It. Has. To. Stay. Lit! If the gas comes out ... on its own ...without a flame ..." I'm getting stuck again. "There could be a huge ... a huge **fire**!" I try to make the word "fire" larger using my hands. "The whole building will go on **fire**!"

Raushan's mother is suppressing a smile. Then I'm smiling too. And then we're both laughing at my attempted dramatics. "Ok, well, just don't touch it," I say finally, as I leave the kitchen.

I feel the situation to be in hand as I return to my computer (though I have to sneak back just the once to make sure the flame is still flickering undisturbed). But then I realize how thoughtless I've been, how completely inattentive to the situation of someone who is living in the same house with me. An old woman, who has hardly left the village she was born in, ventures to visit her daughter in the big city and is suddenly told to "look after" a house of strangers with alien habits and mysterious lives. Or is that too condescending?

But no: since Raushan left, I've been in and out of the house without letting her mother know, left her to herself in the unfamiliar kitchen or in her room, thinking it would be better not to bother her. And not once have I thought to ask if she needs anything, whether she is managing all right, or needs any help. And she really is quite old.

Of course, I'll be having a bit of a go at Raushan when she gets back: *How could you leave your mother alone like that* ...etc. But it won't alleviate *my* conscience. How could I have been so mean? Then again was I really *so* mean? We had a bit of a giggle about the cooker.

What more could I have done, after all? And then it suddenly comes to me in a blinding flash. Why didn't I think of it before? How could I have been so stupid?

I run to the kitchen, peer behind the stove and spot it. And then I turn off the tap that supplies the gas to the cooker.

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