



artwork by saabyasachi hazra

# Every Day, One Handkerchief

MAHMUDUL HAQUE

(Translated by Mahmud Rahman)

“O h, how long have you been here?”  
“Maybe three minutes.” Altaf leans back and stretches his legs. “Look at you, all clean and fresh.”

“Fresh? Really?” Wiping his neck with a thin green towel, he replies, “This is how you look when you scrub your body with laundry soap. Soon the skin will get all ashy. Ah, the taste of independence! Tea? Should I ask for tea?”

“You never serve anything but lemon tea. People all over Bangladesh manage to get condensed milk, but with you there's a snag. No thanks, I drink my tea only with milk.”

“Should I then ask for some *muri* to be fried up for you?”

Altaf lights a cigarette, then says, “You don't have to bother. Just get ready. We should go right away since I parked the car at the end of the alley. Be quick, I don't want the car to get hijacked. It hasn't even been 15 days since I had to fix the windshield.”

Shobuj asks, “Get ready? Do we have an urgent errand? Why not leave after lunch?”

“No, we can't waste that much time. There are things we need to do. I don't understand why you drag. Whenever I bring up going out, you start to drag. What rubbish. Just put on your shirt and let's go.”

He doesn't have the courage to argue with Altaf. That would be a waste of time. What excuse should he then give Rekha? An uneasy fear creeps into his mind. After days of pleading from his wife, Shobuj went to the bazaar himself this morning and brought home an entire cornucopia of groceries - tiny *kachki* and plump *koi* fish, several kinds of vegetables, along with fresh cucumber, olives, and lemons. This fellow Altaf is inflexible, lacking any empathy. Shobuj fails to come up an excuse to

explain his departure to Rekha.

“What are you so worried about?”

“I do have to say something in there.”

“Stupid!”

“You don't have someone in your life. You wouldn't understand.”

“Spare me, I haven't the least desire to understand. All across Bangladesh, men refuse to put a single foot forward without their wives' permission. Every bastard here is henpecked. Be quick then, be quick!”

“But....”

Ripping the word out of his mouth, Altaf says, “Rekha? Every bloody Rekha is one living, breathing 'but.' Don't scratch your pumpkin head like those country bumpkins you teach in that so-called college in Ichapura. What bullshit! C'mon, daddy, don't get me worked up any more, you're trying my patience. You're like a living cadaver!”

Shobuj doesn't delay any longer. He yells into the interior of the house, “I'm going on an errand. Be back soon.” He quickly gets himself ready and skips out the door.

After starting the car and getting on the main road, Altaf relaxes and says, “Now tell me where you want to go. What kitchen shall I take you to?”

“Meaning what?”

“We have to do something about lunch.”

“I don't get you at all!”

“The two of us need to hang out, understand, kid?”

“Does this make any sense? Would ants have invaded our pants if we'd stayed longer at my house?”

“What pleasure you people get from staying in I have no idea. This is why I hate the idea of getting married. I can't see any difference between home and the rubbish bin. Brother, you've become spoiled. Utterly spoiled. Beyond redemption.”

In a lighter tone, Shobuj replies, “Perhaps that's true.” He lets out a long sigh that does not escape Altaf's notice.

“Perhaps? What's this perhaps?” Altaf snarls. “Visiting the in-laws with a rusted tin suitcase in one hand and a jackfruit in the other, raising a litter of children, fetching sour pickles for the wife, roaming the footpaths and bazaars for tiny shrimp and cut pieces of fabric -- that's become the grand total of your life's ideals! STU-PID! In school you were the one among us with the broadest interests. You played terrific cricket, in debates you demolished the seniors, you were an artist, and you wrote poetry. If you called a strike, it was on in an instant. And now? You're teaching, but that too in run-down Gobindopur, in some godforsaken Ichapura college where you get middle-aged fools who come after farming their fields, plodding in their bare feet and tying their lungis tight between their legs. Shit. Tie up some packs and bundles, get on a launch, and then take off! And at the end of each week, like taking a regular dose of medicine, honour a night with the queen of your life on some bedbug-infested, oil-stained bed, and then back again. STU-PID! Even death is more respectable than this! Such a huge movement shook the country -- you should have plunged into it. You should have let yourself be washed away like eggshells, banana skins, and biscuit wrappers adrift in the current. You should have allowed yourself to be obliterated!”

Abruptly, in the voice of a helpless child, Shobuj says, “I fear death, Altaf. I swear, I am terrified. If the army hadn't cracked down on the Twenty-fifth of March, I wouldn't even have known how much I love life, and how scared I am of death!”

“Worm! You're just an intestinal worm!”

“Whatever you say.”

“Fool, true happiness only comes from wrestling with death. If you'd been in the Chilmari operation then you'd know death is nothing. As desperadoes