

with our private army, we played a kids' game with death. What is there to fear in death? Do you think the world is a huge roshogolla, soft and squishy? It's a hard place, understand, kid. A tough place. If you want to stay alive and carry on, you have to fight! Throughout one's life, there are only battles, battles and more battles."

Shobuj says, "To tell you the truth, I'm a coward! I don't have the stamina like you guys. Can't you see how I still walk hunched over? My spine's so weak I can't even stand straight!"

"Don't keel over then! Look at you, so easily you start to snivel."

"It's true, I've come to loathe myself!"

"Quit whining! Tell me where you want me to go. Quick, quick!"

"Wherever you please. What can I suggest?"

"Wherever I want? You won't object?"

"That doesn't mean going to a gambling den. I'd find that unbearable."

"How about a drink?"

"You do that every day anyway, why not take a day off?"

"Not this, not that, then what? Shala, why don't you speak your mind and say what you want without acting so innocent. I want to stay excited all day. Let's go visit some girl. Can you think of anyone?"

"You're asking me?"

"True. Who would you know besides your wife? Hey, what happened to that girl? The one you used to be in love with. Where is she? Do you see her at all? Rokhsana, that's it. Rokhsana."

"She's here in Dhaka. She has a difficult life. These days she works at a bank."

"What's her problem?"

"She has to support her family."

"Are you in touch?"

"No! I've only seen her once or twice."

"Why don't we go visit her then?"

"What would be the point?"

"Come up with an excuse to get her out of the house, then let's go have some fun. Blah blah blah. A saucy girl like her, still unmarried, what's the harm in taking a chance, brother? Blah blah blah."

"Not me. No thanks."

"Fine, if you can't, then hook her up with me. I'm feeling very empty inside for the last few days. I need some love."

"She's not an easy one to pull."

"Yeah right, you goddamn bastard! You're just envious. Fine, let her go. Now tell me where to go to find some girls."

"What am I, some sort of pimp? How come you suddenly got so worked up?"

"It's an addiction. A fever. Every minute of the day I want to stay excited. I need to live on the edge."

"You're otherwise doing quite well except for this fever that grips you now and then. Can't you control yourself?"

"Now you're talking like Jabbar the engineer. I've never seen such a henpecked man. He quakes in front of his wife."

Shobuj thinks of Rekha, and a fear crawls across his skin. There's no doubt she will be upset that he wasn't having lunch at home. She'd been delighted to see him bring home so much food from the market. Altaf is like a hurricane. The inconvenience of others simply doesn't penetrate his brain. Rekha shouldn't have to bear this injustice.

He leaves her all alone in Dhaka to take care of the children. All responsibilities rest on her shoulders. Two or four times a month Shobuj drops in, handing over some cash at the beginning of each month. It's not that he enjoys being stuck in Ichapura either. But he has no choice. He's tired. Until now he'd somehow managed, but he can't take it any more. If there was some other way to support the family he'd quit the college in an instant. He can't do this any more.

"There's a pack in the glove compartment, why don't you light me a cigarette?" Altaf says, "Which way to go, which way?" Then he whistles, Under the bam, under the boo, under the bamboo tree....

The car hurtles forward, keeping pace with a stubborn wind. Shobuj realizes that Altaf has no destination in mind. His emotions running wild, he's just trying to float like a scrap of paper tossed in the breeze.

Shobuj returns to Rekha. The injustice being done to her is exceeding any reasonable limits. Day after day she remains neglected, bereft of affection. Apathy is a deadly disease, and it has Shobuj in its grip. Whenever he comes home for a day or two, Altaf ensnares him. He sticks to him like glue, refusing to let go. Shobuj has deprived Rekha of his company for months. Slipping some money into her hands to pay their credit -- that's their entire relationship. What if Rekha wasn't such a patient woman? Shobuj thinks of his friend Jabbar's wife. Now there's a demanding woman, a frightful, dominating shrew. Jabbar is no longer the old Jabbar. The woman has tied a rope to his nose and makes him jump up and down at her bidding. From the outside it looks as if the relationship is defined simply by power, without an iota of love. Shobuj cannot imagine a life without love.

Under the bam, under the boo, under the bamboo tree. Altaf whistles like a gust of wind. Narrowing his eyes, he asks, "You're not taking us to Rokhsana's then?"

In a situation like this, silence is the only refuge. Shobuj remains absorbed with Rekha. In the last few months, he hasn't taken her out even once. Offhand, she'd suggested a few times that he take her to Gopibagh where her younger sister Jhimki lives. Shobuj was willing, but each time Altaf turned up like the demon Rahu and spirited Shobuj away. One of Rekha's special qualities is that she accepts everything with grace. She isn't one to disturb her peace of mind over the inevitable or trivial. They've been married for six years and Shobuj has seen, right from the start of their married life, that Rekha sidesteps conflict. In family life, she loathes disorder.

"I get it. You're thinking of the wife. Will you also end up a bonehead like Jabbar the engineer? Where will I go then?"

Shobuj suppresses a sigh, then says, "First get married, then we'll see what comes later."

"To hell with getting married! You still don't know this gentleman. Getting married and slipping into the mosquito net with the wife and eating panta bhat with potatoes, they're about the same to me. For a stray cow the whole country is a bloody green pasture, no?"

"It doesn't seem so," Shobuj says with some disinterest.

"And how do you say that?"

"Just a few minutes ago you were all worked up about Rokhsana! Why, isn't there any other single woman in this country? Talking big has become an ugly habit of yours. From now on, try to straighten up and fly right. Otherwise it'll cost you in the long run."

"Now I understand everything. Bastard, you're still obsessed with your old love. I'll have to report this to your wife."

"You could do that."

"Did I frighten you?"

"Rekha knows me well enough."

"Stop, enough!" Altaf says, "I know very well how much one knows another person. You can brag somewhere else, not to this gentleman here. All your boasting will come to nothing. I can make sure of that. If you don't believe me, go ask Jabbar how I cooked his goose." Altaf cackles like a lunatic.

"Cooked his goose?"

"That's right. The poor fellow's thrashing around in the depths of the ocean. The ass's face is swollen

from his wife's punches. The wretched guy is so pissed he doesn't even speak to me when he sees me. He turns his face away. He's really upset."

When a 1962 Volkswagen overtakes him, Altaf gets all worked up. He shrieks, "I'll show the bastard who rules this road." He catches up, then starts to push the other car to the side.

"Hey Altaf, what are you doing?" Shobuj sits up, alarmed.

Squeezing the Volkswagen until it swerves onto the shoulder, Altaf says, "What did you learn?" Under the bam, under the boo, under the bamboo tree....

"You're such a hoodlum. A teenager."

"Take a look behind and see how the pig's scared shitless. Look at how his face is all screwed up. Now he'll meekly keep to his place. When I chew sugarcane and spit out the fibre, he'll pick that up and stuff it in his mouth!"

The car has now left the city behind. On both sides of the road are wetlands and green mustard fields. The scattered greenery and gusts of wind work as a powerful sedative.

The sunlight is dazzling. The air dons a green colour from the strong odour of water hyacinth. Shobuj recalls the old days when he, Jabbar, and Altaf would take off whenever they had a chance, sometimes for a day, sometimes for two. They had named those trips 'flash tours.' How good it felt! Would such days ever return? Life changes so much.

"Altaf, shall we stop somewhere and sit?"

"Sit? Of course, a hundred times, yes, we shall sit."

"You didn't have this theatrical habit before."

"Good God! Are you still feeling bad about your wife? I can't stand your company any more. You shala have become another Jabbar!"

Spotting a dark and thick bamboo grove, Altaf stops the car. Leaving the vehicle parked on the shoulder, Altaf lifts his pants up and says, "I'm getting fat around the belly. Need to start watching my diet."

He moves towards the grove and whistles again, Under the bam, under the boo....

Whipped up by the wind, the water slaps against the bamboo trees. The reflection of the bamboo breaks apart on the unruly surface of the water. The two sit on handkerchiefs they place on the ground. Shobuj sniffs his fingers. They smell of burnt tobacco. Rekha loves these fingers, they are precious to her. In the air thick with the smell of rotting grass and hyacinth, the fingers evoke a strange languor. These two fingers, kissed by Rekha's lips day after day, drip with enchantment. These two fingers, night after deep night, transform into a huge swarm of bees and take flight. On a bed of soft breaths, when a pair of wet lips loses these two fingers and then seeks them out again, then life pools into a fleeting moment. It seems then, this is good, this is everything, there is no joy beyond a life this poor, and the vastness is overwhelming.

"Let me tell you about this business with Jabbar." He lights a cigarette, stretches his legs, and starts, "All the time he's been whining in my ear that no one can have a wife like his. There's no end to his pride about her. His wife supposedly thinks he's Judhithir of the Mahabharata. He doesn't understand anything about the world aside from his wife, and he never looks back. So I fucked him up. I slipped a dose to the wife that since he's an engineer she should keep an eye on him. After all, everyone knows contractors are a hell of a catch. That's all it took. The medicine worked so well the bastard's life is now on the wire, he has to account for himself every minute. Straight off, the wife believed that her husband the emperor is going around doing all sorts of vile things, that behind his quiet demeanour he's a jackal, a total devil, a rongbaj. Right in front of me, she went after Jabbar. She told him, why don't you