

leave everything and work in the cinema since you're such a good actor. Your father had two wives, and, you are, after all, his son. It was like the curse of God had come down. If you only saw the woman's wrathful appearance...."

After stopping a bit and jerking his arms and legs like a robot, Altaf continued, "I know what you'll say. You too have a wife at home. You'll say, Altaf, this wasn't right. Perhaps, but some of it was necessary. Day after day, that ape was getting too pretentious. You're neck deep in bribery, yet when the talk turns to corruption you bare your teeth and curse everyone and their families. Why? Why so high and mighty? You're wallowing in fraud and deceit, sleeping in a bed of money, none of us have ever stood in your way. Why this arrogance with us? So fine, the world works like this, go ahead, live that way, but why do you come to lord it over us? I'm a bloody merchant, I trade in love using my money, I ply a pleasure yacht, and he comes to teach me the heights of love? How much do you know of women? How many women have you seen? How many have you mixed with? As for your experience, there's only this married life of yours, and that, from top to bottom, is a house of cards. So I stuck a finger in his eye and showed him that much, that it's all a house of cards. If that's not true, think of this, the woman didn't even question once if what I said was true, she just heard something suspicious from one man and then jumped up and started flailing in every direction. Yes, what soul mates they are! Goddamn bastard!"

With weariness in his voice, Shobuj says, "Altaf, I'm not quite getting what you're saying. What exactly is it about him that offends you? So he takes bribes and denies it. That makes him a hypocrite. But that's typical. As for bringing up his wife in any conversation, that too is not a terrible sin. You might say he's a bit vulgar. Which of the two are you hostile to?"

Altaf replies, "Married life, the relations of man and wife, he's too arrogant about these things. Maybe you've noticed that because of this he is distracted all the time."

"I don't know...." Shobuj says in a pained tone. "Unlike you I haven't thought about this very much. I haven't wanted to, either."

"All right, let it go," Altaf says. "We seem to be dozing off. There's no sense in getting tied up in these useless matters. Let's go somewhere and do something fun. All my life, every day, I want to stay in an excited state. Who wants to live without thrill and adventure!"

"You need therapy."

"That's precisely why I want to be around women!"

"You always come back to the same old thing."

"There's only this one circuit. Life equals excitement, it means restlessness."

"That's a formula! A formula from pulp fiction."

"You still don't know me, buddy. Do you know what I do? You have no idea. Your head would spin! I deliberately monkey with women, and after satisfying myself I leave them with a dung beetle in their heads. Understand-o?"

"So give me an example."

"Just yesterday, I lucked out with a tasty dish in my hands. She spent the whole night with me! Great girl. Smart, even though she was a bit of a snob. So what. I did everything with her. Blah blah blah. Do you know what I did all through the night? I rattled off the assets of this other girl she knows. Praised her body, mind, and soul. Assets, only assets. Know what I'm saying? All night I waxed eloquent about this other girl. It was all a pack of lies. There can be no such girl. I've never seen a woman with that shapely a body. But she burned with envy, that's what happened. Up in flames! That's exactly what I want. I roasted myself in front of a fire like that. What did you understand, buddy?"

Without replying, Shobuj sits with his shoulders in a sulk. With the midday sun beating upon the still pasture, the breeze whirled around. The nest of the babui swings at the top of the palmyra palm. A flock of green pigeons darts out in a rush, scattering the green boughs of the bamboo, and they fly off in one direction. Mingled with the smell of crop fields in the air, a sense of desolation rises from the earth, stretching to the horizon. The cowherd's flute sounds out a mournful tune. Beyond nature's restlessness, everything else pales into insignificance.

Suddenly Altaf yells out, "I-I-I-I-I!"

Shobuj is startled out of his reverie.

Altaf jumps to his feet and shakes his body. "Enough. Everything feels like mud. Let's scam."

"How come you bolted upright like an explosion?"

"I exist, don't you understand?" He cracks up in wild laughter.

Shobuj also rises. Walking alongside, he asks, "Any news about the job prospect for me?"

"It'll happen, it'll happen."

"Has anything moved yet?"

"Why're you getting so worked up? When I've given my word, it will happen. F'sure, f'sure."

"Believe me," Shobuj says, his voice breaking, "I can't go on like this. Now Dhaka, now Ichapura, I can't stand it any more. What I'm earning there is pitiful in today's market. I can't make ends meet."

"I'm telling you! Why are you getting so worried? No matter how, I'm going to make sure you return to Dhaka. I'll get you a place in some government college. Now stop your whining."

"I know that if you want you can pull it off. Your network is huge, you have a zillion contacts. I've given my word to Rekha, no matter how I'm going to get a job in Dhaka. We'll be together all the time."

"Fearest not, son, there will be an arrangement."

Shobuj clutches Altaf's hands, looking helpless and troubled. "Then you're promising, right?"

"Why're you breaking down like this? You're a total idiot. I've told you before, I'm telling you now. It will happen."

Shobuj looks as though today the feeble response he's become used to is no longer reassuring. In his own eyes, he appears pathetic. Stabbed by doubt, Shobuj becomes absent-minded. As they walk, he stumbles repeatedly.

Starting up the car, Altaf zooms towards the city.

"You're of no use, Shobuj, none at all." Looking straight ahead, Altaf begins to say, "It wouldn't be bad if we dropped in on Rokhsana. You haven't yet figured out anything about women. You are another Jabbar. If you'd introduced her to me, you'd have seen how your sunken-checked beauty would dash into the love boat belonging to Altaf the hustler. You couldn't even imagine. Some swine say that it's an art to pull. Art, my foot. It's a mere trick. If you know the trick, you can pull off the scam. One thing leads to the other. You just have to know what button to push. If you push right, then ding! And who doesn't like ding dong!"

"You don't know what a good girl Rokhsana is."

"Stifle it, stifle it. Of all the words that begin with 'g,' such as goat, gobbet, gobbledygook, or golliwog, the cheapest and trashiest is 'good.' You *shala* are naïve to the core. You must believe that a woman emerges from the womb wearing a sari. *Arrey shala*, we -- meaning we the male species -- we are the ones who've wrapped them in saris for our own ends. Understand, boy?"

"Altaf, you babble endless nonsense."

"When all is said and done, you are after all the Teach-er."

"No matter how much you deny it, you're completely changing. You weren't like this before. For three years I've been watching how you're

becoming bull-headed and one-dimensional. God only knows where you'll land in the end. How much more? Now calm your...."

"Calm myself? That's not written in my destiny."

"Don't you feel worn out? You've made piles of money. What are you racing after?"

"A mirage, understand, dear boy, a mirage."

Suddenly he screeches to a stop. He parks the car on the side of the road.

"Now what?"

Lighting a cigarette, Altaf takes a deep drag. "In good time, you'll see." He's bubbling over in excitement.

A rickshaw is coming up from behind carrying a young woman of about twenty, twenty-two. Altaf swivels his neck to take a look, a smile on his lips, a blaze in his eyes. By accident he drops some ash from his cigarette on Shobuj. He says, "In a word, a knockout. What do you think?"

The girl is truly gorgeous. But she isn't paying attention to anything, and certainly not Altaf. She seems drowned in melancholy. Burdened. Shobuj thinks her mind is somewhere else, like the hospital or the prison.

Altaf opens the door and gets out. He beckons to the woman, and invites her to leave the rickshaw and accept a ride with him. Shobuj notices the woman has turned blue in fear. Leaning over she says something, and the rickshaw scoots off.

Altaf returns to the car.

"What's happening, Altaf? Have you gone crazy?"

"Now if someone makes me crazy, is that my fault?"

"It's not what you think."

"All girls are the same, understand kid, they're all the same."

"You've gone utterly mad!"

Whistling Under the bam, under the boo, under the bamboo tree, Altaf chases the rickshaw, his face flushed with anger and intransigence. "This girl's the playing type. She won't give in so easily, understand, kid? She'll play around for a bit, that's all!"

Shobuj pleads, "This is not right. Altaf, stop chasing the rickshaw. You're going too far."

Overtaking the rickshaw, Shobuj stops the car again. Once more, he beckons to the girl. When the rickshaw is about to rush past him, he orders, "Hey, rickshaw, stop. Stop right now!"

It doesn't work. The woman's face has now become even darker. She sits in the rickshaw like a block of wood, her eyes shut. Frowning his eyebrows, Altaf lights a cigarette. While trying to suppress something inside, his face is turning hard from the shame of defeat.

"Drop me off here, Altaf. I'm feeling awful. It makes no sense to chase a girl in the middle of the day without any sense of shame. You can see the girl isn't responding to you at all, but still you're hounding her. You're being repulsive."

"Perfessor, I'm definitely going to get her into my car."

"I'm telling you, you just can't."

"There's no choice. I have to."

"There's no sense creating a fuss, sticking to the girl like glue. Your assumption about her is baseless. Now stop chasing her. You've shown enough bravado for the day."

"Girlie, you may think you're a player, but I'm no less. I am the king of players. I'm getting you into this car. Under the bam, under the boo, under the bamboo tree."

Now in front of her, now at her back, Altaf keeps the game going, but he makes no progress. Shobuj realizes that Altaf is losing control. He's getting desperate. He is driving with his teeth clenched. At one point, he lets the rickshaw overtake him. His face has changed into a frightening coldness, his