

blazing eyes bulging out. Shobuj sits petrified. Suddenly Altaf speeds up the car, and then like a storm he swerves, smashing into the rickshaw. In thirty seconds it is over, the rickshaw a wreck. He reverses and drives off."

"Altaf, Altaf, what have you done? What have you done?"

Altaf does not speak. He's now retreated inside himself, inside barbarism, inside darkness. Whether there is darkness there, or barbarism, or sheer sport, only he knows.

Snaking through the roads of the city, he arrives at the mouth of Shobuj's alley. Between the two of

them, a cold silence hangs like a sword.

Shobuj opens the door and gets out.

Altaf offers him the pack of cigarettes. "You're sweating. Make sure to wipe your face. Keep the pack, there's still four left in there."

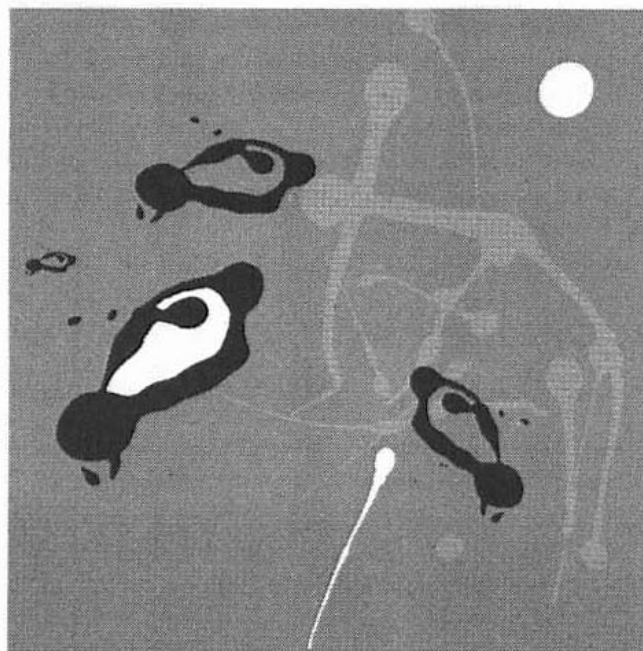
Shobuj fishes in his pockets but can't find his handkerchief. He remembers that he'd sat on the handkerchief near the bamboo grove. He left it there. He loses his handkerchief so often that Rekha gripes, how do you lose so many?

"You didn't ask me anything," Altaf says.

"What am I supposed to ask?"

"About what I just did."

Starting the engine, Altaf says from inside the car, "No matter what you say about my faults, this is how I am now. I don't sit around looking at someone's face with longing and awe. Whatever I need I grab by force. Where that's not possible, I use force to destroy it. I have to be this way for my existence. I understand you're feeling awful. I'm sorry. Try to wipe it out of your mind, forget about all this. You'll see, everything will look clean again. The world works like this, friend. One's ability to forget must be as tall as a mountain."



## Blood At Sundown

JAFAR TALUKDAR

(Translation by Ahmede Hussain)

As had been happening to him a lot lately, especially during a long wait, he dozed off. It occurred to him that he could not keep his eyes open even while talking to people; this had become a habit, like the sudden, menacing hunger that frequently stung him somewhere in his stomach, which would churn till he shoved something down his throat. My body, he thought, has become a gangling, all-bone truck stuck in the middle of a mud road.

Though he felt his heart get stuck somewhere in his throat when he sent his business card inside the Boss saheb's chamber, in the air-conditioned comfort of the waiting room he felt a little dreamy. It had taken a great deal of effort to get a referral from Mr Afzal, whose nincompoop son he was tutoring for a despicable fee. Besides this, he had a job, a strange job, for which he had to run to the office every morning clean-shaven, clothes creased, shoes shining. On days he was late for meetings he would scamper to the last row, head down, waiting for the manager's rebuke. Maruf Khalil, the manager, had quickly gone up the ladder through discipline and hard work. He would look at him through the corners of narrowed eyes and say, "So, what made you late today?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I said why are you late again."

"Got up late, sir."

"What do you do at night? Burgle? How long have you been working here?"

"For two months, sir."

"And how many assignments have you completed?"

"None, sir."

"In two months you could not get a single client,

and Kabir saheb has been working here for only a month and he has finished three assignments. Listen, I'm giving you one more week, okay? If things do not get better, you will have to quit. Have I made myself clear?"

He had once so desperately looked forward to this, to having a proper job. Things that he had done when he finally got one were no less than astonishing - plodding over footpaths of the city to get a decent set of clothes, and, he remembered, how the money he spent on them cost him days' worth of meals.

Maruf saheb himself was quite a dandy, all crisp and starched. The slightly accented Bangla that he had, he made up with his clothes, the shine in his shoes and the cut of his shirt. He remembered Maruf saheb advising him, "Those who are beginning a career in insurance must remember that you need to be smart. This is a cut-throat world where you produce or perish. Do or die. If it is too much for you, you should not think of a future in insurance."

The do-or-die thing he understood well, but only if that meant getting a client. That Kabir had created quite a stir in the office, getting one client after another, as though he had secretly found Aladdin's lamp. He, on the other hand, went door to door, begging... "Sir, dear sir, imagine once, imagine only once things that will happen to your family when you die. How will your young wife feed herself and the kids? Whom will she turn to for help? Make a policy, sir, when the time is yet ripe." No-one had listened to him, the people whom he went to to sell a policy. Their attitude surprised him; as if through their refusal they were surrendering themselves to their fate, as though they were subtly telling him who the hell was he to take their responsibility. God would take care of everything when they left the world. Let

it be, he would tell himself, may you live happily a hundred years, and here I am getting screwed. This boss saheb, whose office he was in now, was his last resort. The man was rich; he would be able to fill an island with all his wealth.

And it took him a while to gather himself when the call came from the boss saheb's room. A soft sheet of icy-cold air enveloped him as he looked at the flabby bald man inside, who, sunk deep in his chair, was intently scrutinizing sheaves of paper on his table. Without looking up he said, "What do you want?"

"Mr. Afzal of Shetu Limited has sent me..."

"All right. But what do you want?"

"Sir, the thing is, you are a business tycoon. I do not have the boldness to take the liberty and give suggestions to you on matters of money." (Here his heart sank.) "But, the thing is, money-matters are entwined with the question of future security. For this reason, sir, we need to be careful about it. No-one can rule out the possibility of a sudden death. Our company has a fantastic policy; I can elaborate on it to you if you allow me, sir."

"Oh, you are talking about life insurance! I do not need this, I am doing something important now. You can leave."

"Sir, the policy... sir," he cried out. The bald head did not reply.

It was late afternoon when he went out. The heat was soft, but the air was a little humid. It had rained in the morning; now a slice of cloud hovered in the western sky, telling him that it might rain again in the evening. Roads in this part of the city were always a little empty. The guards who stood at the entrances to different houses wore faces of indifference. In a few minutes an irresistible urge to empty his bladder