

nudged at him. It came to him that he could have done this in the office of the bald head, but at that time he had felt downcast at not being able to sell the policy. He had been a strange person indeed, that bald head! That bald head did not even let him talk! You smartass! You will understand the importance of insurance one day, perhaps when you grow more bald, and two or three blocks have been found in your arteries...then going back and forth from hospital to hospital in Bangkok and Singapore, you will lament not having an insurance policy. One day, like a dried *korai*, you will lie flat in one of those mortuaries waiting for your sons and daughter to come from abroad to see your dead, blackened face. You will understand everything then. Making him wait an hour and a half and then... Tut-tut.

He thought of sitting somewhere to read the letter his father had written to him after hearing about his job. The two-page thing very subtly but unmistakably hinted at the need for money to buy medicines for his mother, for Minu's marriage, which had been delayed for so long - now that he had a job, they could start looking for a husband for his sister all over again. He only skimmed through the rest of the letter. An unknown anger clutched at his heart: Why do they expect so much from me? What do they think I am? An incarnation of *Kamdhenu*? Do they think I am that mythical cow *Kamdhenu*, who,

like magic, will flood the world with an ocean of milk? Father, don't you know your son is useless? This is not a job that I have. I am holding a glassful of hemlock, let your son drink from it, he wants to die peacefully.

He toyed with the idea of peeing at the foot of the bridge, but gave up the idea after seeing lovers sitting in twos, who, it seemed, would leave the place only after dusk. On the other side of the road, another set of people sat with packets of peanuts in their hands; some were sitting on a makeshift scaffold, fishing. In another corner, under the comforting shadow of a tree, young boys were playing soccer. No place was left for him to open his pants zipper and pee. He felt like a pot-bellied frog, he would burst on this open street.

Hunger gnawed at him again, and along with it came an overpowering urge to empty his bowel. The sight of a mall gave him relief. It was newly built; its façade was masked with expensive, imported glass. Inside, there were rows of stylish shops. At each door a keeper was standing, eager to usher him in. He, however, did not notice anything; he scampered to and fro from one corner to the other, and, while going up the stairs, he almost knocked a Barbie-like manikin down. It smiled mechanically and waved at him, as though it, too, had been praying for a safe defecation. He then entered a barbershop, but seeing

a woman-barber and the strange looks of her clients, he left it in a hurry and came across a shop that dealt in computer accessories. The man at the counter took him for a client and said, "We have a 25% discount on every product, sir."

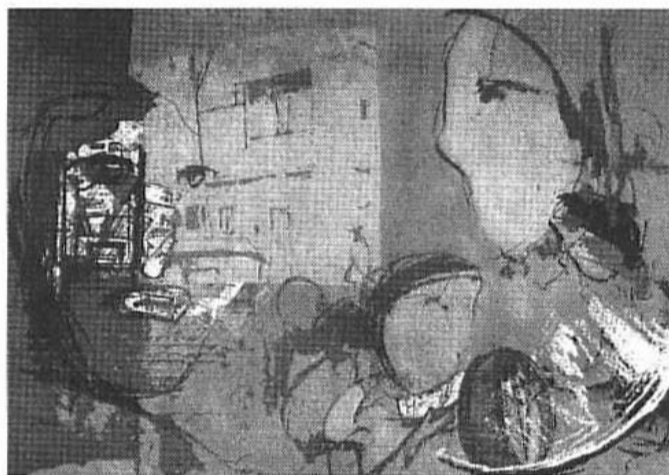
"Excuse me, is there any toilet nearby?"

The computer-seller turned gloomy. He answered, "It is on the fourth floor, on your right."

He thought he had been given back his life. He jumped the staircase, and once on the fourth floor, it did not take him long to find it. Like Archimedes, he cried out, I got it, I got it... Eureka! Eureka!

At the end of this long wait a tear of relief came down his eyes. But: the secret chamber was nailed from inside, it was too difficult for him to open up. The more he tried the harder it became. Everything created a perfect setting for blood and gore; like droplets of blood, the tears were now running down his cheeks. He did not have the will or the energy left to move, as though, the city, like the toilet-bowl, was stuck to his arse, from which came down a clump of twining tendrils which would rope him to this world of brick and concrete. He could not free himself; he would have to remain stuck to the toilet till the last drop of blood left his body.

By evening, the city would be stained with blood.



artwork by sanjiv das

The Journey

REZAUR RAHMAN

(Translated by Munjulika Rahman)

The movement of a shadow on top of the files on my table had made me look up. I was annoyed. I had just started at this job and I hadn't yet figured out the ins and outs of it from the previous official. Since I was new at this, it took time and concentration to understand a case and give proper instructions on how to proceed. Dealing clerks like me have quite a lot of responsibility because the progress of a file depends on how clerks present them. So I think my irritation in this situation was justified since I was not able to concentrate at all. Every minute or two, somebody came to me, sometimes in relation to work, and sometimes with irrelevant issues - you know, just to chat about an imaginary problem that might arise in the future. On top of that, I can't even express my irritation. After all, I was here to deal with the public.

I was a little startled when I looked up. As I was telling the gentleman to sit down, I saw that someone had moved the chair that was supposed to be in front of my table. I called out to our office peon, "Nuru Miah, bring a chair!"

The gentleman told me not to bother with it, and handed me a piece of paper that had a file number written on it. "I can't stay for long. Will you please look into my property transfer files?" he said.

"But that will take some time. The petition was filed three years ago... I have to search for this..."

The gentleman was wearing a crisp, off-white safari suit, a pair of maroon Albert shoes with heels, and roll-gold sunglasses. He was holding a 555-cigarette packet and a golden metallic lighter, and surrounding him was the aroma of an expensive French cologne.

This man was probably the most glamorous person I've ever seen. My instant reaction was to stand up like an automaton. "Where is that Nuru? He didn't even say where he was going..."

I dragged the chair with the single armrest from the table next to mine and gestured for him to sit.

"Kindly do this favor for me," he said. "Please find my file by tomorrow. I have to leave now since I have a meeting at ten fifteen at Chamber Mansion. I'll come tomorrow, okay?"

Before turning around, the gentleman forced a hundred-taka note into my hand and left without looking back. The whole thing was quite unexpected. I could feel my heartbeat increasing. I quickly hid the hand clutching the money under the table and looked around like a thief to see if anyone was aware of what had passed between me and the gentleman. There were clusters of people around

the other tables in the room, searching for and discussing files. The peons Nuru and Abdul were busy keeping up with orders for tea and paan. I was relieved that nobody seemed to be aware of what had happened.

I felt the crisp hundred-taka note with both hands now. I folded it a few times and put it into the side pocket of my pants. Then it occurred to me that the side pocket was not that safe, so I put it into the pocket on the front of my shirt.

The important file that I was working on was left unattended. I began to look for the gentleman's file among the dusty piles that were stacked on the tables in the room, but I couldn't find it. Sensing my situation Nuru came and said, "Sir, you won't find this file. I will come and help you after I get head sir's tea."

I was a little relieved. I went back to my table and tried to concentrate on the file in front of me, but in vain. I was acutely aware of the presence of the hundred-taka note in my shirt pocket, and I kept imagining it flying out into the air. I began to calculate in my head. With this money I could buy ten kilograms of rice, maybe not of the best quality, but of moderate quality, and that could last at least eight, nine days. The next moment, I consciously made an effort to