

move away from mundane issues such as buying rice, which seemed like one of the most ancient needs of mankind. When I began to think about things besides the daily worries of rent and groceries, I remembered a rather simple wish of my fourth daughter Dilruba, who was five years old.

The previous Friday Dilruba had wanted to go to the bazaar with me and I couldn't deter her from her decision. At the bazaar it had been quite a job to manage her, what with the crowd and all the groceries I had to carry. On top of that, Dilruba wanted to buy everything she saw, from fruits to different types of *mishti*. I didn't have much extra money so I avoided getting those for her, but when we came in front of a watermelon stall, she put her foot down. She wanted to have watermelon, no matter what. After the groceries I had had to buy, I couldn't afford an entire watermelon, so I bought her a slice.

The delight and satisfaction with which Dilruba ate the watermelon is something I'll never forget. She kept the black seeds of the watermelon in the pocket of her frock and when she got home, she showed them to her sisters. They were disappointed at not being able to have watermelon too, and I was saddened. That day I felt inadequate as a father. My daughters' wishes were not outrageous. They weren't asking for expensive, remote-controlled toys, but only for their share of seasonal fruits.

I carefully stroked my shirt pocket where I had kept the note. It was just a piece of paper, a little addition to my monthly income, but it seemed to have a lot of power. It could get me a good amount of rice or at least seven or eight watermelons. That day I had bought the slice of watermelon for Dilruba for only eight annas, but even then I had to think many times. But today how easily I could buy a whole watermelon!

Nuru was passing by with a file in one hand and an aluminum tea pot in the other, and he bent slightly towards me to whisper, "SDO saheb wants to see you. Also, I'll get you that file for only ten takas, sir..."

I felt a little uncomfortable at what Nuru had just said. But then I thought, what if ten takas goes from that hundred takas? I'll still have ninety takas left. And if I am to stay in this line of work, I'll need the help of these people. I touched my shirt pocket again and looked at my watch to see how much time was left till two o'clock, when I'd be able to leave for home. I had almost decided that I was going to buy a big watermelon and take a rickshaw home all by myself, instead of sharing the rickshaw.

While thinking all this, as I looked in the direction of head clerk Somiruddin's table, our eyes met. He was leisurely chewing *paan* and occasionally using into the spittoon. When he saw me, he pushed his glasses up on his nose, got up from his table and started walking towards me. I immediately averted my eyes and started moving files around, so as not to appear idle. By then he had reached my table. "Helal Miah you can leave, since there isn't much for you to do today," he said.

"Sir, there's still an hour to go before it's two..." I said.

"It's okay, as long as I know what's happening in this office. My words are the last words here. You can leave today, but when I'll need you to stay after normal office hours, you will have to do that. This is how it works in this office," he said and turned to leave.

After a few steps he came back. "And one more thing. That note in your pocket - you won't need to divide that with me this time. I don't want shares from the first take, but after this, it's always fifty-fifty."

As I was leaving the office I tried to control the agitation I felt. I was surprised, too...I couldn't figure out how Somiruddin had gotten to know about the

hundred-taka note. I thought back to the first days of my job here at the Dhaka branch of the Housing and Settlement Office. I think it was the fourth day that I caught Somiruddin looking at me intently from the middle of our long room. His nose is spread out, like the noses of professional boxers, so his glasses always rest on his nostrils. When Somiruddin looked at someone his eyes are outside of his glasses, just as now. He was looking at me with such intensity that I lowered my gaze and stared at the furniture in front of me. The table was made of a light-colored wood from jackfruit trees and the chair was of a darker shade, probably of *sheel-korny* wood.

"To you this table seems to be made of wood," Somiruddin said in a saccharine voice, a slight smile on his lips. "To me it's made of gold. One has to know how to care of precious things like these. And one more thing, Helal. I'm already calling you by your first name, because you are the age of my son. However, as you'll notice, I call many people in this office by their first names. I have been in this position for almost twenty-six years now, and no one has been able to transfer me. Some have tried, but instead they themselves have been transferred."

While I was thinking all this, the rickshaw had reached the lane of our house. Vehicles can't go all the way in, so I put the watermelon on my shoulder and began to walk carefully towards my house. The watermelon was yellow and green, and as big as an ostrich's egg. I felt as if I was at Zia International Airport, returning home from abroad, that after a long separation, I would be reunited with my family, who were waiting on the other side of the glass at customs.

My daughter Yasmin was playing with some neighborhood children in front of the house. When she noticed the watermelon she began to jump about, and entering the gate, she shouted to her sisters, "Afroza, Dilruba, come and see! Amma, look! Baba...a whole watermelon!"

I put the watermelon down on the verandah and it seemed as if my family couldn't believe their eyes. Dilruba's mother, who came out from inside wiping her face with her saril, stopped short when she saw the watermelon. She hesitatingly said, "My...how much was it? It's almost the end of the month..."

I tried to lighten the mood. "It's just a seasonal fruit. We all want to have it from time to time, no?"

Dilruba's mother quickly went and got my *lungi* and towel, and scolded Yasmin, "Why are you just standing here. Go get the fan. Your father is sweating, can't you see? Such a heavy load...in the sun..."

Dilruba and Afroza couldn't wait. "Baba, when will we have this?"

I turned to their mother. "Why don't you cut it for them? It's so hot today, they'll enjoy it. It's quite sweet...I made the seller cut me a piece. And for that price, why won't it be good? It was fifteen takas..."

Dilruba's mother was startled. "How much? Fifteen takas?"

At that moment I felt as if, for the first time, I had been able to fulfill my duties as a father and husband. Everybody around me was content, and was trying to show their happiness by tending to me. When I was resting in the afternoon, Yasmin, who was supposed to be napping, came and sat down beside me. When Dilruba saw her mother fanning me, she said she wanted to massage my legs.

"Sure you can massage them...they have been hurting lately. But don't you have to go play outside?" I asked.

"I won't play today," she said. "I want to lie down with you."

The comfort around me put me into a reverie and I began to daydream. I saw the face of the gentleman in the off-white suit. He held out the hundred-taka note and I thought, I need that money, I am needy and my children are hungry. I grabbed the note from the man's hand and began to run. But I couldn't go

far because my leg was tied by an invisible rope to Somiruddin's table. He was indifferent to my concerns and was chewing *paan* and spitting into the spittoon. I was running about in all directions, trying to get back to my family. But I noticed that the gentleman in the safari suit was holding onto the key to happiness for me and my family. When I tried to take the silver key from him, I caught on the rope and fell flat on my face. Through the dust and grime, I saw Somiruddin's sly smile which seemed like a light in the darkness. He was saying, "I am giving you this table. It's not wooden, but made of gold. You can sit here and collect your fortune, but remember the fifty-fifty rule. Otherwise this table is only wooden."

Over the next few months I came to understand the underlying meaning of Somiruddin's gestures and suggestions. The exclusive clients, men in suits or expensive kurtas, began to visit me regularly at my table.

"Helal saheb, I just talked to the head clerk. File number..."

I had already learned how to manipulate these situations. "Yes, I know about this case. It's quite complicated."

"I am here because it's complicated. Keep this packet. I'll give you the rest after the job is done..."

"Only this much for such a complicated case? The file will have to go to higher officials. It is not only limited to me...and to satisfy the big bosses...this amount won't go far with them."

"Okay, here's some more. But the job needs to be completed quickly."

"Inshallah! Come back in two weeks."

I had a good partnership with the head clerk, and jointly we dealt with the controversial cases involving plots in the expensive neighborhoods of Dhaka city. Even though it was a lot of work since there were many laws that needed to be taken into consideration, the income from these cases made up for it. After sharing with everybody, I made more than a thousand per case. Sometimes I even managed five to seven thousand in special cases.

Within a year we shifted from our two-room, tin house to a brick house in Jhigatola with a three-thousand-taka rent. I also bought a piece of land measuring seven kathas in Senpara, for which I couldn't pay the whole amount at once, but borrowed a little from Somiruddin. Hopefully I'd be able to repay him soon.

My two elder daughters are growing up and day by day their demands are increasing. They study at a good school now, and travel by rickshaw often. They need many *shalwar-kameezes* with matching shoes and sandals. Our house now has a fridge, color television and sofa set. But with each passing day, I have less and less time to enjoy these luxuries. After office hours I work with Somiruddin saheb on the secret cases that involve huge amounts of money, cases that cannot be discussed when there are people around during the daytime.

Most days I return home after evening, some times even at night. In the beginning Dilruba's mother used to prepare a tiffin box for me that would have *paratha* and omelettes. But these days, she doesn't bother. "You can eat something from outside," she says. At home I don't get to see either my daughters or my wife. Yasmin, the eldest daughter, is fast friends with the neighbor's wife, who is close to her age, even though the husband, who is a contractor by profession, is much older. My daughters are always over at their house watching movies on their new VCR.

Dilruba's mother also spends most of her time gossiping in different houses in the neighborhood: some person's wife is having an affair with some bachelor, this teenager has gotten an abortion is some secret clinic, etc., etc. When I come home,