

clobbered by the flat edge of the cleaver. Damn bugger died on the spot. His brain oozed out."

Sonali grabbed Anzam's hand.

Anzam looked into Sonali's eye "...What? Now? Do you want to?"

Sonali let go of Anzam's hand. "That is all that you ever think of!" Getting off the bed, she said, "Get up now. Take a shower... Let's get ready."

"Ready for?"

"Aren't we going to Shantanoo's birthday?"

"Right away?"

"Listen, we want to be there before the others arrive. We'll say that we have come to lend them a hand. Tell us, what we can do."

"They have a lot of help. Catering people and all."

"Don't I know that? But is there any harm in showing some good spirit?"

"None whatsoever," Anzam nodded his head. He too would move and get down from the bed eventually. "Have you decided what you will wear?"

"The maroon one."

"You have a few of them in maroon."

"The maroon sari that has a hint of chocolate in it."

"That one is becoming on you. Good decision. Sonali, human blood is red, isn't it?"

Sonali pried open the wardrobe, "Yes, that is what is commonly believed."

"But left to pool for a while in a place, the blood looks maroon or chocolate."

"How do you know? Oh! yes. Well, Anzam," Sonali turned back, "You didn't say a thing about how that fight went, remember that?"

"Remember what?"

"If something happens here, I won't tell you a thing either."

Anzam laughed, heaving himself out of the bed. "When I was returning, the street was red in places with blood." He stretched his arms. "What am I to wear? Have you decided on anything? Faruqui is such an imp. Walking past all that gore he says in a poetic spasm, hundreds of blood camellias are abloom along the way."

"Get away!" Sonali shook her head vigorously. "No one can be that brutal... Anzam, do you want the bottle green shirt?"

"And what about the trousers? What if I were to go without them on? That would convince Shafqat Bhai and Zarina Bhabi we are really in a tight spot."

"Brilliant idea. Wear the buff-coloured trousers... Hang on, between Tiffin Babu and that White or Mite whatever his name is, who won?"

"How can we know that? Let's say it was a draw. Each side lost two. And it all depends whom the police sided with..."

"Hmmm... I sometimes wonder how is it people can be this cruel! Anzam, I need to buy a couple of lipsticks."

"Buy them."

"The other day, I saw such an outfit."

"Wait a bit, let's just get the business going."

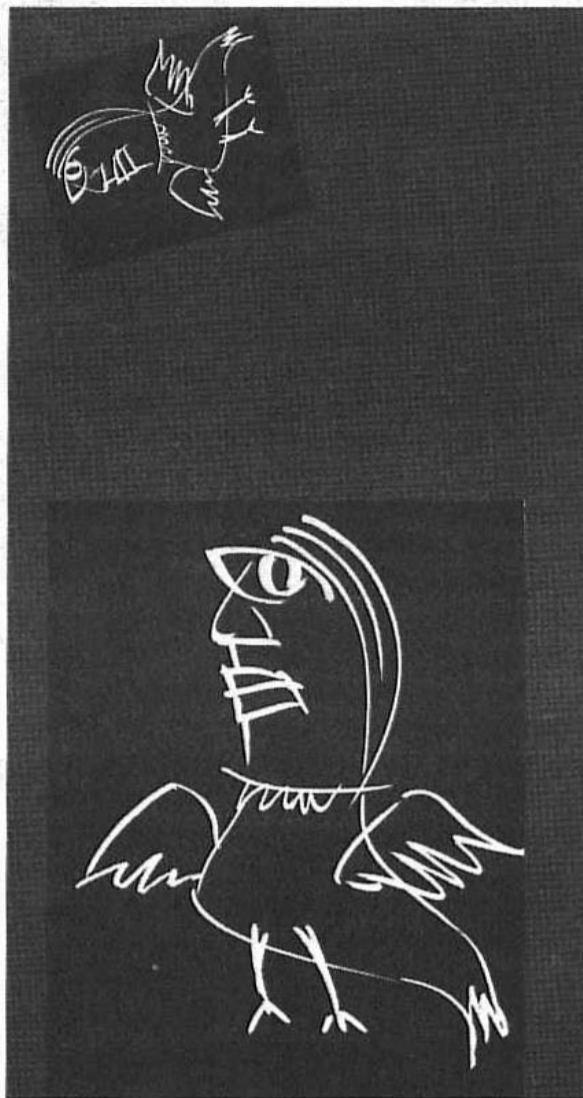
"Got it. You know why people can be so cruel?"

"No. Professors of sociology and psychology would know that. Honestly, Sonali, if it was only annihilation of the enemy, then what's the point of such cruelty? A single bullet aimed right would be able to get the job done."

"You said that a little while ago but you're right."

"Say, for example, one on the left side or in the head or below the chin..."

"Anzam," Sonali chided, sounding decidedly cross. "Why aren't you off to have a shower? Forget the germs, shouldn't you want to wash up after all that you have seen today!"



As long as they were at Shantanoo's birthday, the time went by pleasantly enough for Anzam and Sonali. They had not anticipated the degree of cordiality that Shafqat and Zarina showed towards them. Nothing was left undone, not even a car to take Anzam and Sonali back home. It would be almost rude to overstay after that. So they stood in front of Zarina Bhabi and said, "If you permit us, we'd like to be on our way." Zarina said, "Now? Well, all right, you have worked so hard, need to rest."

"Not at all, what is it that we could do here! Everything was going so smoothly."

"Shafqat and I are aware of how much you have done... Just like our own would have done... Shafqat, Shafqat... they are about to leave. Listen, do drop by whenever you wish to. Give a ring, we'll send the car. Hold on, let me arrange a car to take you home."

They protested no, no. Zarina would not hear of it. Shafqat came to join them and he shook Anzam's hands warmly, "It was wonderful that you could come."

On their way back, Sonali asked, "What do you make of all this?"

"This is perhaps a 1800 cc. No bumping whatsoever."

"Tell me what have you made of it all?"

"If we aren't bitch-fortuned then we should be able to make it good this time."

"We will. I feel certain of that. See, what a good idea it was to go there early."

"My smart thinking wife!"

"Don't you forget it."

On returning home, they changed and washed their hands and faces. It was quite late and they should have gone to sleep. But before dozing off, they had a habit of lying in the bed surfing the channels and chatting.

"If the business does materialize and if there is a profit, do you know what I will buy first?" "You can't block money by first by wanting to buy a car."

"We will buy a car later. First, we will get an air-conditioner."

"Right. How hot it is! It is going to be sweltering like this for quite some time more."

"Not just that. Say, who doesn't want to be rich? I mean to be well-off. Nothing wrong in wanting that, is there? Not just for a car or AC. I want to put together a business so that I don't need to have a business."

"Was the meeting with the MD today successful?"

"Success didn't have a chance. Before the meeting made any headway Tiffin Babu and White Kalam met in combat. Success went to them, either to Tiffin Babu or White Kalam. And to the police."

"Honey, be a little careful in streets near the office for a few days."

"It is quite frightening. All on a sudden one could be caught in a skirmish."

"Don't talk like that you're scaring me."

"Did you have the ice-cream?"

Sonali asks, bewildered, "What did you say?"

"The ice-cream. The one that came after dinner. What was it called, 'ice-cream float'? Did you try it?"

"Why wouldn't I, it was delicious."

"I didn't have it."

"Why on earth not?"

"I have my reasons."

"Well, tell me then. Say, have your tonsils been playing up again? Are you hiding something from me?"

"No...no...it is something else."

"Tell me then! Do you know what will happen if you don't tell me..."

"It is about the fight. I came out after it was over...but wait, let me finish what I was saying about the ice-cream. It was about the same. Ice-cream float, it is called. ...a scoop floating in a thick syrup... So as I was saying to you, one of them had his head halved into two. The brain oozed out. There it was on the road, a pool of blood with bits of brain in it... didn't feel like having the ice-cream after all."

"Now my stomach is beginning to churn!" Sonali really looked like she was feeling queasy. "Get me a bit of *paan masala* quick, will you," she said to Anzam.

After a while, when the feeling had subsided a bit, she told Anzam, "No more tales about the fight."

"Done. What is it to us? God knows who they are and who got killed in whatever circumstances..."

"One thing saddens me, though. Those who died if they had lived they would have had normal lives... Would have had dreams like we do, life could have been charming for them. But what happens? They meet their ends in the streets."

"Right. They die in such a terrible way, but does any one get fazed by that? Does any one feel sorry? People gawked. Feeling a little thrill, something to gossip about for a while. That's all."

"True enough. Go and see - your colleagues are recounting the tale to their wives."

"And the wives too are listening with rapt attention. People have become so very cruel."

"Right. No one is sparing a thought about them dying in that insensible way. You are absolutely right. There is nothing more beastly than humans."

"Let it go... Remind Zarina Bhabi about the business soon."

"Will do."

"A cool breeze from the AC in this room. Feels good to just think about it, right?"