

becomes still. He realizes that he is not drowning in a stinking pond - he is hanging upside down. He cannot help smiling. 'What a hoax! Shaju Mia, you've dreamt an amazing dream while swinging in the air.' Shaju says to himself. He has been hanging upside down in a tree; his hands and legs have turned numb.

He comes to his senses. An excruciating pain is spreading all over his abdomen. Something puckers up inside. The smell hits his nose as he clenches his teeth in pain. A pungent odor of urine - the place where his two thighs have joined is wet. Yellow liquid flows over his chest and drenches his hair.

'They have greeted me cordially, really it's very comforting...' he thinks.

Shaju sighs. Nilu or Tilu is bogus. He had smelled his own urine while he was unconscious. How can he ever blame Nilu after this? Suddenly, all the scenes appear in front of his eyes like a spinning celluloid film: the sound of stamping feet, Jaliluddin's umbrella with its patches, panic-stricken faces, the whistle of the Razakar Nurul, Sharafat's master running away with his lungis that had slid off his loin and... terror! He sees himself running across the paddy field and courtyard, the toilet and drain, the marsh and meadow. Wild hounds like Nurul were chasing him.

Again, suddenly he sees the man in khaki smoking beside him. The monstrous face frightens him. His open mouth inhaling cigarettes looks like the wide, horrific jaws of the horse in Picasso's *Guernica*. The man wearing khaki smiles at Shaju with his big teeth.

The celluloid reel of his memory resumes once more. People were walking to their houses. It seemed as if they were fleeing away. Suddenly Nurul the commander of the Razakars whistled to remind everyone of the curfew. All of a sudden Shaju said to him, "You won't survive anymore, you son of a bitch Razakar! The Muktis are on their way."

Nurul got very angry and aimed the rifle at him. Dumbfounded, Shaju ran as fast as he could. Through the paddy field and the courtyard, past the toilet and drain, through the marshy field, he entered the outhouse of Torab's house. The running feet of Nurul and his gang shook the whole earth while passing by the outhouse. Shaju listened to whispers, low voices and footsteps of people walking by as he was panting for his breath. He stood leaning against the wall of the latrine when the voice of Nurul could be heard again, "Son of a bitch!" Shaju broke into a cold sweat as his heart started pounding. This Nurul when he first came to the village used to be a quiet and well-mannered man. He had a small pharmacy. With some herbal, some allopathic drugs - the mix of the two earned him a comfortable life at the end of the day. Then God knows what happened to the fellow, he flung himself into working for the defence of the Pakistanis! Some guts he had! Suspecting even ten of the faithful coming out of a mosque to be guerrilla freedom fighters he had opened fire and killed them on spot. It had earned him instant fame!

*Thaash!* The instant he slapped at the mosquito he realized his mistake. Stepping out of the outhouse in a daze he started to run for his life. There was no escaping now. Nurul and his gang were coming after him. B-a-n-g! The bullet whizzed past his ear. He jumped into the shallow ditch beside the road and closed his eyes. The intolerable, nauseating smell of the filthy drain made him want to vomit. But he managed to swallow it down. The light of a torch! Now there was no escape, he thought. Nurul was sweeping his torch in all directions, searching for him. "Son of a bitch! You pig!" he was swearing and grinding his teeth. In the light of the torch the bayonet at the end of his rifle gleamed. Lying in the drain, Shaju thought of his uncle Ghaus. He used to

love hunting. Whenever he got a chance, he would start telling the story, "You see, Shaju, once in the jungle of Assam, I was running after a deer. I ran and ran..." Shaju felt like that deer that his uncle had chased. The deer had run for its life with Uncle Gaus giving chase. There was no difference between that terrified deer and him now. Strange! Human beings and animals were the same! "Ah! You're lying in filth philosophizing," he rebuked himself.

Then silence...

*Jhi jhi, jhi jhi* went the crickets in the dark.

*Ghangor ghangor ghang* croaked the frogs.

He gradually, carefully raised his head from the scummy, stinking water. It seemed that Nurul was gone. At least that's what it seemed. This was great that he had pulled off. He had succeeded in rubbing



their noses in the dirt. A warm feeling of satisfaction stole over him. 'Son of a bitch Razakar, a good run you had wanting to catch me,' Shaju thought. He started for his home, his body covered with sticky, filthy liquid that reeked to the heavens. The streets were wet. He had not even noticed that it had rained.

*Tup tap, tup tap* on the leaves of the trees. Raindrops!

Moving away from the main road, he started to walk along the mud tracks between the paddy fields. Passing the graveyard on the right side he turned to the left. The light from four or five torches dazzled his eyes. There was no escape now. His heart beat faster as someone hit him on the nape of the neck. They beat him all the way to the camp. Whenever he fell down, the butt of the rifle would strike him hard

on the back. As they reached the camp, he fainted and fell on the grass.

Suddenly the scenes disappear from the celluloid. He cannot say for how long he has been hanging like a bat. They have beaten him all over his body. His mouth is dry from thirst.

"Water" he says faintly.

"Drink this, you son of a bitch," the man growls as he unbuttons his pants and pisses on Shaju's face. Shaju does not say anything. He can feel the devouring pangs of death. But when will it really come? It is better to give in to death rather than being tortured in this way.

A Punjabi soldier unties the straps on his legs. He drops like a stone on the hard floor with his head hanging down. It feels like his neck got twisted, but no sooner the pain began to shoot through him than someone is dragging him by the legs. Suddenly he remembers that cow. The one that had died and his father had hired labourers to haul it far away. They had dragged the dead cow by its legs. He is truly a cow, not a human being! He is dragged into a cold, damp room where many young men and women lie huddled in a corner. Their eyes are sunken, with unkempt hair and faces are pale with terror.

Slowly it gets dark. Unfathomably black and singular, it is fearful with its chill. Darkness supposedly had its own kind of beauty, a writer had once claimed whose name he can't recall right now. He can't discern any beauty in the darkness, he sees darkness as plain darkness.

But he does hear the different sounds of human beings - that there could be so many different sounds made by human beings he hadn't known before. Crying, cursing, grieving over being parted from family-friends, loved ones, et cetera. Suddenly the door opens.

A torch blazes like the eyes of a hyena; the sound of a pair of thumping boots coming forward. There is a pin drop silence in the room, the moaning has stopped. Everyone keeps lying like the dead. The boots stop at the far end of the room. A woman's shuddering scream rends the air. Slowly the scream transforms itself into groaning sounds. And even eventually comes to a stop. The sounds of whistles outside. The incessant chirping of crickets break the silence of the dark. The woman is no longer moaning.

Between his fits of sleep and wakefulness the morning finally comes. The morning light comes in through the cracks in the window and hits his eyes. His body is painful. A throbbing fever. Weariness and dejection overshadow him as he lies there in silence. Suddenly Mukul Bhai's voice breaks into his ear, "Bastard Nurul! One day, you too will be a corpse floating in the river water."

He thinks about Chairman Mufassil Ali. A fuzzy beard, a neatly trimmed moustache, two sets of crooked teeth rust-red from incessantly chewing betel leaf and his very public, loud appreciation of the Pakistan regime. Shaju's thoughts are interrupted by the sound of door opening.

They drag him to the top of the small hillock with the soft rays of the sun touching his skin, the breeze playing with his hair, and flocks of birds all around. Small bushes sway in the wind. In some places, the red soil has been piled up. Hidden beneath this earth are the bullet-riddled bodies of many young men. One crow! Crooking its neck it quickly flies away. He is given a shovel. Knowing what lay in his future he in a carefree manner starts digging the ground.