



Beast

SUMANTA ASLAM

(Translated By Mohammad Shafiqul Islam)

artwork by ansurzaman sohal

The girl has one bad habit. Many people talk about, and it's something she also knows very well. Yet somehow she can't let go of it. One can't say that she hasn't tried - but somehow the habit is like an addiction. She has tried to drop it, yet hasn't been able to. Shoma got furious the other day and said, "You really have to try get rid of it, Leena." Leena didn't say anything, merely laughed in response.

Leena thinks every person has a habit. Many people simply call it a hobby. Some people love collecting stamps; some love exploring new places; some make a collection of classic songs - and there's so many more! So she has one, too. Except it is not similar to the ones given above; it is distinct. Leena doesn't know whether anyone else on earth has this habit - she only knows this one is different, quite unlike anything else. Once Jafor saheb at her office had remarked, "Madam, everything about you is lovely except for that habit."

Leena had looked at Jafor saheb with her grave eyes. The man to some extent was of the too-eager-to-give-advice type. He always kept a smile on his face as if the whole world perpetually amused him. The man, however, had a single fine virtue. He deemed all to be equal, and really tried to help other people.

"Do you have a problem with it?" Leena had asked in an angry tone of voice.

Had it been any one else, he, even if briefly, would have been taken aback. But Jafor saheb only laughed easily, an unembarrassed laugh. Leena again became angry. She readied herself to say something but before that Jafor saheb said, "Many people have commented on it, which is why I mentioned it. Perhaps you don't know about it. A lot of people talk about it and I thought to let you know."

Leena was a bit startled. There seemed to be a certain tone in Jafor saheb's voice! She recalled this tone after a long time. She had forgotten about it. Deliberately! Because one has the right to deceive oneself, but no one had the right to hoodwink

others. No one, not any one!

Leena felt very depressed. She often thought of a fulfilling life. When a girl starts growing up she starts to dream about a fulfilled life; so too had Leena. When she was in class nine, Chopol, her classmate, a mischievous but brainy boy, had told her for the first time in her life that he loved her the best. That day her heart had throbbed. She had been inattentive in class, unmindful at home, she hadn't been able to sleep at night. But no sooner were love's seeds barely sown that she came to know that Chopol had committed suicide for reasons unknown. Along with everybody else at the school Leena too had turned speechless. She felt as if she had no feelings left anymore. The only thing that buzzed inside her head was the thought of how much pain would compel a man to commit suicide.

"Aren't you going to the office?"

Leena is startled. She sees that her mother is standing with a plate of food beside her. Smiling, Leena catches hold of the loose end of her mother's sari. Her mother sits down quietly beside her. Touching her hair with affection she says, "Come back home early from the office today, my dear."

Listening to her mother's soft voice, she feels close to tears. This was the one person who constantly had her best interests at heart. She was always busy thinking about how to do good things for her daughter, how her daughter could be happy.

"Ma, I don't feel good about all these things."

"You have to try and feel good about it. Diabetes patients shouldn't subject themselves to worries. Your father is always concerned about you. Deena is also growing up rapidly."

Bowing her head, Leena says, "Why can't you leave the elder sister alone and marry off the younger one?"

"Why can't we do it? We can, but parents of all middle-class families worry about one thing, and that is to give off our daughters in marriage when they are of a suitable age, and to the right groom."

Leena reflects on something for a while. Then, standing in front of the mirror she arranges her sari, its folds and its fall. She puts a little make-up on her

face, and takes her handbag from on top of the bed. When she is near the door, her mother said, "Why didn't you eat anything?"

"I don't feel hungry."

"They will come to see you in the evening. Come home a bit earlier, darling."

Leena remains silent, and leaves the room with her head bowed down. She is already late; she should rush for the office.

As soon as she sits down in her office chair, Jafor saheb advances towards her smiling. Standing in front of the table, he says, "Why were you so late today, madam?"

"No reason. It just happened."

"I was wondering if you were unwell."

"Sorry, nothing like that."

"Why are you talking this way, madam?"

"What do you mean?"

"Now I am sorry - I'm disturbing you."

As Jafor saheb heads back towards his chair, Leena calls out in a very sweet tone, "Jafor saheb, listen."

Jafor saheb turns back and again slowly comes towards Leena. She stretches a smile on her face and says, "Are you angry?"

"I felt a little slighted."

"Sorry, Jafor saheb. I am not feeling well at all."

"Any problem?"

"No, there is no problem. No specific reason." Keeping silent for a while, she again says, "Oh yes, I discovered another one today, Jafor saheb."

"What?"

"You know, that thing you call a 'bad habit'?"

"A dead animal?"

"Yes."

"What was it today?"

"A dog. It was lying in the middle of the road. The dog's flesh had turned quite black."

"How many have you seen including today?"

Leena takes out her diary from the bag. Opening it slowly, she smiles and says, "79 in total."

"Excellent! Another one will make it letter marks!"

"Yes. If I see another one, it will be quite a fair