

A life where there was no sorrow, misery, wounds or insults. But did we know of such a life, could it possibly be true?

Arguing among ourselves, we set down the path.

We had among us one who was a very reflective sort. He said, "Listen, a life that will never come into being, a life that is spoken of only in dreams, that is what is called a life like a story."

After a pause somebody else said, "But why call it a life like a story?" "Why not call it instead a life like a dream? Stories and dreams are not similar things."

We nod our heads. Rightly spoken! How can a story and a dream be the same?

In a low voice the same reflective friend said, "But then why not? Stories are narrated by men, and so are dreams."

We head for the Aadhkosha River.

One has only to place one's feet on the road to get ahead. But conversation is not as easy. The contours of speech twist and bend; within talk are many hidden pathways. Just as we think, our talk is proceeding apace, we find out a little later much to our surprise, whither now? -- why, we have simply tracked back to where we were! And then there are mazes -- within the same conversation we keep circling back, and back again, to the same starting point, never able to get out.

And so our differences on issues never get resolved; arguments keep piling up. Our feet keep on walking, but our destination, we don't speak about it. Simply keep on walking ahead.

So, truly speaking, there is so much talk, but do we really desire to resolve anything? We arrive at Kashem Chacha's teastall by the riverside.

Our feet these past few days in the afternoons have been pulling us towards the riverside.

These last few days we have foregone Hanif Bhai's brightly-lit sweetmeat shop to spend our afternoons at Kashem Chacha's far more modest teashop by the riverside. One cannot even call it a proper shop. It is a thatch hut, a temporary structure by the river.

The riverbanks are under construction; flower beds are being laid on these reconstructed banks. It seems the government has nothing better to do. People can't put food in their bellies. A doctor has gone on leave from the public hospital, and there is no effort to bring him back. Nothing is done about the trains which now as a rule arrive late at the station. In the name of setting up a bus stand the Razakar's Abdur Rahman's eldest son Abdur Razzak illegally grabbed Ghosh Babu's mango garden, yet no justice has been dispensed there. In fact, the goon squad belonging to Abdur Razzak has laid claim to Baba Qutubuddin's shrine, set up shops there, set up a druggie haven right beneath the stairs, the billowing smoke clouding the shrine, yet no steps are taken against them. The government is blind to all these.

But the government has suddenly turned its gaze to the riverbank. Had it focused on the riverbank erosion it would have been something, but it has instead turned it towards the riverbank, towards its beautification, so that city folks could stroll here in their leisure time! As if people's souls were full, as if everywhere their backs were not being broken by want and deprivation, as if their happiness would not be complete if they could not walk by the riverside.

So fortify the riverbank. Lay down flowerbeds.

And not just flowerbeds. Colourful, showy beach huts with thatch roofs were also being put up. Contractors have put men to work, the riverbanks

are being re-constructed, and flowerbeds are being laid beside them. It was here to one side that Kashem Chacha had put up his shop, a tea stall.

We have known him here in Jaleshwari since we were born. There were days when he sold peanuts by the mosque. Whenever the village drama troupes came by he would light a fire in his stove by the platform stage and fry aubergines and *jalepis* in the hot oil of his frying pan. Then we didn't see him for a long time. People suddenly disappear from their surroundings, then just as suddenly re-appear. It is not a surprise when they leave -- or when they come back. It's simply one's of life's rules.

For a long time there was no news of him. Had he even gone to his grave, we would not have been surprised. And when one day we unearthed him sitting in his little tea stall by the riverside, we were not surprised.

Kashem Chacha's shop was a modest one. The fine sand by the riverside covered its earthen floor. A thatch roof overhead. On three sides were bamboo-latticed walls, with one side open facing the river. Inside were wooden benches. If one drank tea there one stood by the riverside, and if one's legs were tired then one sat down on a bench. The river's water was like glass. The light from the sky fell down on the river and was reflected twice over, just like in a mirror. Even in the afternoon's wan light Kashem Chacha's teashop by the riverside would be brightly lit up.

It was not in the morning, but in the evening when the stall would open. Even when the evening deepened into night the shop would remain open for some time. Then after putting everything away Kashem Chacha would head home. The tea glasses and kettle, the biscuits in their container, the tin of milk, rolling disk and pin and frying pan. The earthen stove would also be left behind in the shop. As would be the small water pitcher, along with the firewood for the stove. Who was going to steal those? Though the biscuits didn't sell much in Kashem Chacha's teastall. The magic of his hands lay in the lentil *puris*. After we discovered the lentil *puris* he made we went over there every afternoon.

Kashem Chacha did not make more than fifteen-twenty lentil *puris*. Around these parts that amount sufficed. The contractor's labour of course did not eat them - if at all they would be consumed by the contractor and the court clerk.

Kashem Chacha would come in the afternoon and start to knead the flour. The boiled lentils he would bring from home. By the time we would come in Kashem Chacha's flour kneading would be finished. Seeing us coming in regularly and hearing praises for his lentil *puris* from our lips, it seems as if Kashem Chacha now waits for us to turn up. Only after we have come does he start to roll the lentil-dough on his pan.

We sit down to watch him rolling the dough. A little while later he would raise his hand to say, "Well, making the *puris* is going to take a little more time. What about a glass of tea?"

If we answered "Okay," then he would immediately lift his hands from the rolling pan. But, ah, would he then instantly put the kettle on boil? Kashem Chacha took his time. He would set about the tea taking his own good time.

This is something we have noticed about him - he went about his tasks in a leisurely manner. This slowness was not out of laziness - it was just the way he was. Just as folk singers very carefully extract the do-tara musical instrument from its case, slowly caress the instrument, as if it were a loving wife or an

old friend, then pluck a few exploratory notes on the strings, survey the surroundings from time to time by lifting dream-heavy eyes, speak a few words in low asides to the people sitting beside them, and only then lift their voices into song, Kashem Chacha's work mode seemed to be like that.

Kashem Chacha would lift his hands from the rolling pan. Then he would very slowly wash his hands with water from the pitcher. But would he start as soon as he finished washing? No. He would delicately shake the water from his fingers like a bird shaking rainwater off its feathers. Then would come the tea kettle.

Kashem Chacha would open the mouth of the kettle, which would make a little ringing sound. It was as if the sound came not from a kettle, but that of a gold ornament box being opened. Inside there were jewels! He would inspect the inside of the kettle once, as if every time he waited with bated breath for precious materials hoarded inside that was worth lakhs of takas.

Then there would be the gurgling sound as water was poured from the pitcher into the kettle. The river water did not make any sounds, the waves were silent, waves which would break out in an angry rhythm only during the rainy season when the upstream waters crashed down, but otherwise on silent, still afternoons by the riverside there was only the gurgling sound made by the water being poured from the pitcher. It would soon be joined by the flames of the stove.

The wood would catch fire with a crackling noise that would sometimes be loud, and at other times soft. And still later the water in the kettle would boil up noisily. The kettle's cover would teeter and ring as if it wanted to shed its husk and fly, as if it was a silver anklet on a maiden that had stepped spell-bound onto a field to dance. As if the vapour from that maiden's breast was steaming forth from the kettle's open mouth. And only then would the water be ready for making tea.

The water would be ready, yet the tea was still far away. Gently opening the bag Kashem Chacha would pick up tea leaves with his fingers, as if he was lifting a handful of flower petals. As if the petals were in the maiden's fist, as if the maiden would take those flower buds in her hands and close her fingers, press on them, wait, open her fist a little while later and one would see flowers in full bloom, spreading their fragrance.

Lifting the kettle cover Chacha would slowly release the tea leaves. He would put the lid back with what seemed to be the maiden's grace. When he later would lift the lid to peek inside the kettle, the fragrance of the tea would spread over the riverside.

Sugar crystals would drop inside the tea glasses like tiny diamonds, and on top of it would fall heavily a teaspoonful of condensed milk from the tin. Holding the kettle high over the tealeaf strainer, bringing it down and then lifting it up, Kashem Chacha would pour the tea, the kettle mouth a liquid red, and no sooner would it fall into the glass than it turned deep rose.

But is it still ready to be put into our hands? Let the river air play with us a while longer, the sounds of human activity die down in the distance, and only then. By now we long greatly for the tea, and all the world's noise has to be banished from our hearing. Chacha meanwhile arranges the tea glasses on a chipped enamel dish as if it was bound for a royal house, and only then will get the tea.

That tea we will take, the warmth of the glasses dancing on our palms, as if those palms had