

encircled a young woman's breasts, exuding desire - a desire that banished the hermit.

We take the first sips facing the river. A comfort spreads through us the moment the gentle warmth touches our lips.

By that time Chacha has returned to his rolling pan, and taking a soft ball of dough dips his finger into it to make a small depression, then dabs in a drop of oil taken from the bottle. Then he presses down with three fingers, and in a flourish of magic the dough disappears within the palms of both hands to be re-moulded into a new ball which is lowered onto the rolling pan. Now there is no delay, the magic is suspended, and in the blink of an eye the ball of dough is transformed into the circle of a new moon.

Then on the frying pan that moon slowly inflates as it receives the heat from the stove. Under the urging of the wooden spatula in Chacha's hand it will further inflate and begin to dance, as if somebody is tapping a young maiden on her arm and she is leaping backwards. The next moment she falls into one's lap, dangling on the end of Chacha's spatula. In one of Chacha's hand is the lentil *puri*, and in the other - nobody knows when he picked it up - is a scrap of newspaper, on which it is brought down, caught in front of us. This way the *puris* are placed in our hands, and from our hands to our mouths. Within our mouths spreads the taste of nectar!

While we are ecstatically silent, Kashem Chacha is not. He continues to talk. Every day he holds forth on one subject: "Razzak's name you folks have come to know recently. Everybody in Jaleshwari knows him now. The age has come whereby the father becomes known for his son. You all know the story of Razzak's father Abdur Rahman - he is now a big merchant in Jaleshwari bazaar. Has made a pile of money, rides about in a jeep, breaks bread with the judge. Ministers stay at his house when they visit Jaleshwari. Do you know, that Rahman Merchant is also my mother's son, my own brother?"

Then a small sigh would escape from his lips, followed by a long silence. The dough balls would keep transforming themselves into moons under his hands. Those moon-like maidens would suddenly giggle, inflating no sooner they hit the frying pan.

When the monologue first begins, then the hot rise of the lentil *puri* seems a boil on the skin of mankind. The water would gurgle noisily in the kettle. Then the kettle's lid would seem not to be a maiden's silver anklet, but the sudden thin cry of a starving child in a mother's lap during hard times.

We feel his pain, and are also duly distressed. How can we daily forget this talk, forget this sore or the child's cry? The next moment we again think of the maiden, see the full moon, hear the bell-like silver anklet. As if that boil or that child is no longer in this country or in our universe.

Every day when Kashem Chacha resumes talking after this preamble, there seems to be a disconnect. As if that was casual conversation. As if that was a silent prayer that suddenly erupted due to a continual urging from deep within him, and then the sudden desire to take the conversation elsewhere.

Kashem Chacha would say, rolling the dough, "But all of you should know something. This Aadhkosha River, let me tell you about it overflowing and breaking its banks. This was before you people were born. One time there was a terrible rainfall. That time the waters from the Himalayas came downstream in a huge rush. Cold ice water - when ice melts the waters come down like a wall. The rush of the waters smashed something that had been standing on the banks, standing from British times, the redbrick jailhouse. In a moment it sank into the

river. It fell with all its inmates inside, and all met with a watery grave."

He would then pause for a while, as if there was nothing else to add. But there would be. He would lift the lentil *puris* from the pan and place them in our hands, all the while smiling like a loving mother, giving us not just plain food but like a mother in a frugal household delightfully lifting into her children's hands choicest bits of food. We too would eat with equal delight. When we tore the *puris* the hot air inside would escape with loud sighs.

Steam too would escape from Kashem Chacha's chest, but we were not aware of it then. It was only gradually that we became aware of the story's conclusion.

Kashem Chacha kept on talking, "Now I have a question with regard to the jailhouse. You too think about it. It's in the Prophet's sayings, the mosque's imam too has said in his sermons, that those who die by accident they go to heaven. A thousand of his sins will be forgiven, for he has met his end in an accident. If that is so, then all those murderers and thieves in that jailhouse, the dacoit leader, are they also going to go to heaven? Are they forgiven time in hell? Like my brother Abdur Rahman has been forgiven his sin, the sin being that he has not taken care of his own brother? I am a brother of his, his one and only brother, both from the same mother - he makes a living selling tea, the thatch hut of his roof leaks water. And his brother? He sleeps in a golden palace, eats off a plate of gold!"

We remind him, "Ary, Chacha, first he has to die in an accident, and then the forgiveness! He's still alive. An accident is yet to befall him!"

Following this, we are startled by what Kashem Chacha says, "Which is why even though I've wished to kill him all this time, I haven't done so. What if then all his sins are forgiven because he met with an accident?"

It is now that we fully realize the heat within Kashem Chacha's breast. Even though he has said his words in a light-hearted way, nevertheless we hear beneath them the noise made by the flood-mad, onrushing waters of a river in spate.

We are locals. There are so many people in this area. Known faces, familiar names. We are conversant with them. We have knowledge of things and people, intimate knowledge. Knowledge that stacks itself in the bazaar like pomegranate stupas - information that is sold, that passes from hand to hand.

From one ear information travels to everybody else's ears. We know about Abdur Rahman. We also know about his brother Abdur Kashem. The two spines of wealth: one a mountain and the other a ditch. If Abdur Rahman was astride a mountain, then Abdur Kashem was lying in the ditch. People made stories about them. If life were like a story, then this too was life, and a story about life. So if a life which was like a story could be coloured brightly, then a story on the other hand could also be covered in darkness!

Our arguments about life being like a story buzz within our heads like so many bees. This afternoon we reach Kashem Chacha's teastall by the riverside only to discover that we are late.

Chacha says, "I was done with the kneading such a long time back and have been waiting all this while for you all, don't know whether you are going to come or not, seeing that it's getting late was making me fidgety. Come in, sit down. Let me fry them fresh, you eat your fill. Or do you want some tea first, say what?"

One of us said, "Tea first. But before that something we have to talk about."

"Say it."

"Do you really want to kill him?"

Kashem Chacha didn't understand the question. Startled, he asks, "Kill? Who?"

"Who else? Your brother?"

After a momentary silence Kashem Chacha bursts out laughing: Ho ho ho.

"Why are you laughing?"

Kashem Chacha begins to pour water into the kettle from the pitcher. A gurgling sound arises from the water falling from the mouth of the pitcher. He says, "If you say something funny how can I keep from not laughing? If I killed him that would make for a hell of a tale. Brother has killed brother. Why has he killed him? Because he did not look after his brother. He has grabbed his brother's property. Then his greed knows no bounds, so he sees his brother's wife's a beauty, he grabbed her too."

This we did not know. We are startled. Among the multitudes that populate this world, suddenly within the blink of an eye this man seems different, strikes the eye, leaps out at one. As far as we can remember we have always seen him as a solitary figure. So is this the reason that he was single, by himself? Every man then within himself carries the burden of such news about his own self.

Chacha keeps on saying, "There's more, this was before you all were born, during the war. This brother of mine joined hands with the enemy. So many young women he procured for the Pakistan army. And so many houses he looted. Yes, yes, brothers, to kill him was of no account. Everything would have finished just like in a story, heaven would have come down to earth and settled here."

In the play we saw today titled 'Life Like A Story' there were houses like palaces, women like princesses, intricately embroidered *shalwar-kameezes* on their bodies, motor cars like sailing swans -- saw the very picture of happiness. Lives in a story. Life like a story. We are confused, fried lentil cakes with boils on their skins by the river side, the mouth of a kettle filled with the thin cries of a spiritless starving child, all dreams of land wiped away like women of a household forced into dishonour, which story's life was this? Or was it an anti-story, its narration?

