



all. The usual hubbub of the night-bazaar was missing, making it more deserted than it already was. He found a big and wide stationary shop and got in.

"That perfume called 'Evening in Paris,' do you have it?"

"Wait ... no. But we have many more just like that!"

"Never mind. I am only looking for that one."

In the meantime, it was a full blown high wind raging on outside. He kept walking in the open street, anyways. Passing over only three stores, he was almost knee-deep in heavy soil, dirt and mud. He felt the cold drops slowly trickling down his cheeks. From the way he looked, it seemed it was absolutely mandatory for him to get a hold of the bottle. Rain, no rain, it didn't matter.

Finally, the fifth store in the lane had such one. While fetching a piece of paper to put it in, the salesman commented, "Gosh, are you all soaked! Look for a rickshaw, will you?"

"How much?" as if he didn't hear him.

"26 taka and 50 paisa."

Beyond the patience of bargaining now, he delved deep into his pocket and was dumbstruck for the second time of the day. It was only two one taka notes and one paisa he had inside and that's it!

The salesman put the bottle back in the same place where it was before, as if accidents like this happen here on a daily basis. The customer comes in, picks a perfume, and finds his pocket emptied out of nowhere – a very casual crisis, indeed.

Azhar Kha stood there, expressionless, and suddenly took a turn to the right despite the heavy rain. The wind was rising dangerously causing an ominous noise everywhere, possibly indicating an approaching storm. His glasses were drenched in water and everything else was heavily coated in an icy fog. Azhar Kha kept wending his way like a silent ghost. One or two rickshaws almost drove him over but luckily managed to pull away the momentum. The wild fast taxis tried to render him blind with their stubborn headlights. But walking he kept on, almost like a drunkard. This rain, this freezing wind, the onrush of dirty muddy flood could do nothing to distract him, in any way.

"Aha, my poor daughter wished for a simple perfume! Perhaps, she is waiting for me at home. Oh, such hardworking a soul she is – suffering in the beggarly home of her father! Wait till she gets her own! I can swear there will be no such rainy days in hers!" such discordant impressions took him from Noyapara to the high school leading straight to Seijhkhali. Where he was going and why he was doing so didn't even cross his mind. At one point, he stumbled on a piece of brick and fell right into a puddle. The excruciating pain in the leg coupled with a throbbing headache on both sides of the forehead finally brought him back to the earth. "Why am I loitering around like a lunatic?" He took a turn in the opposite direction and the moment he crossed the post-office, a lightning bolt struck somewhere nearby followed by the loudest thunder. Who knows what time it was now?

Most of the shops had their lights out, people were getting ready for the bed.

Suddenly, a marvelous idea occurred to him, "What if Rafique has got some coins to spare? Twenty would do. But for how long will the stores remain open?" He hurried into the right side of the lane, his damp sandals constantly trying to slow him down.

Beyond the patience of bargaining now, he delved deep into his pocket and was dumbstruck for the second time of the day. It was only two one taka notes and one paisa he had inside and that's it!

The roads were buried in the shadowy veil of darkness, except for the lightning strikes that brightened up the area time to time, awakening the night-birds from their restful slumber.

It was when he knocked on Rafique's door that he understood he was shivering in high fever and had a dried out throat, all sore and scratchy. Rafique couldn't suppress his shock, "My goodness, Azhar bhai, what happened to you!"

"Nothing. I am fine. A glass of water would be nice."

"How is everyone at home? Does bhabi still have the flue?"

"Everyone's fine! Just bring me some water!"

Azhar Kha looked like a frantic rat stuck in a dead end. He tried to make sense of Rafique's place as if he had never been here before. Rafique held his hand and instantly said, "You don't have any idea how sky high your body temperature is right now, do you? What happened Azhar bhai, tell me!"

"You got some money?"

"How much?"

"Around 30."

"You will have it. Here, put this warm piece of cloth on. I will be back with a rickshaw."

"But first, water. Please!"

The salesmen were already asleep behind the shutters. Embarrassed, Azhar Kha didn't know what to do. The rickshaw-wala got annoyed and said, "Try a knock, sir! There are people inside."

He hit the door with all his might. "Who is it?" someone answered.

And he said what he could, trying to recover his voice, "It's me! Bhai, please open the door for a second! It won't take time."

"What is it?"

"I got the money. Can I have the bottle of scent now?"

The door opened. The salesman cast a suspicious eye on the late-night customer. Azhar Kha reached for the money in his pocket.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing! Why?"

"Why such an ungodly hour? You could have found us in the morning."

"What time is it now?"

"12:30."

The rickshaw was literally flying over the desolate street as he held onto the hood with a tight grip. He felt a weariness slowly taking him over, unwilling to let go. For a second he thought he would be thrown off from his seat.

The entire house and the lane adjacent were drowned in darkness. One tiny rain-drop on the ground or one blow of a strong wind and that would do it! All street lamps would stop working at once! The rickshaw took him a bit far from his house, near to the rear end of that of the neighbor. He saw Lily and her mother waiting in the yard with a dimly lit lantern before them, yet to see his arrival due to the dark.

Azhar Kha called out, "Lily! Ma Lily!" The mother and the daughter responded in unison, forcing their way out through the pitch-black murky water. He tried to get down in a hurry and almost immediately fell off of the footstool. The spot he fell on began to emanate a strange sweet smell. All he could utter was, "Lily Ma, I couldn't save your bottle! Forgive me!"

Sobbing helplessly, Lily answered, "I don't need it anymore! What happened to you, Baba?"

Azhar Kha couldn't reply. He was beyond any dimension that you and I know of.

Ranju was sleeping like a log, Lily and her mother wide awake, stricken with a fear unknown. A rainy night it was, drenched in darkness. The mysterious lantern was creating a soft silhouette of a surreal world. The crisp and cold rainy wind found its way through the moonless solitary window.

And with that wind slowly glided in a fragrance, sweet and strange.

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