

FICTION

Give back the forests, take away this city



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

“So many people from our village got jobs. The village children can now study at the mill school. People go to the mill’s hospital for treatment. There’s a daily market now.”

ABDULLAH ZAHID

Every night, a market forms near the mill gate. When it’s time for that market to close, Fulbanu stands on the high bank of the pond, waiting for her husband’s return. The raised bank has been especially useful for her; it’s like a watchtower. From there, she can see for a great distance.

In their village, there used to be a weekly market, the Kaliachapra market. After the sugar mill was established, however, a small town soon grew around it, and a new daily market formed near the mill gate. It was created for the convenience of the mill workers. At first, a few villagers would bring their homegrown vegetables, cow’s milk,

and fish caught from the river to sell in front of the mill gate. Later, the mill authorities provided space near the gate and built some small stalls. Then several grocery stores opened there. The market was called the Mill Bazaar.

Fulbanu’s husband, Syed Ali, goes to the market after finishing his work in the field. The extra milk, fruits, and vegetables from their farm are brought to the market by the farmhand, who sells them at a designated price. Meanwhile, Syed Ali spends his time chatting at Jagar’s tea stall near the mill gate. When everything is sold, the farmhand brings the money to him. With that money, Syed Ali sometimes buys fish brought from the city, or sometimes meat. He also buys goods

from the grocery stores. Previously, one had to wait for the weekly market day to buy such items.

While waiting with Fulbanu on the bank of the pond, Sajal says, “Grandma, isn’t it great that the mill was built?”

Without waiting for an answer, he continues, “So many people from our village got jobs. The village children can now study at the mill school. People go to the mill’s hospital for treatment. There’s a daily market now.”

Even though Fulbanu had never learned to read or write, life had taught her many lessons. From her experience, she understood that her grandson saw the mill only in a positive light.

With a deep sigh, she replied, “No, my dear.”

Fulbanu’s voice was soft, and she brushed her grandson’s hair with trembling fingers.

“Even though the mill has brought some good, it has also caused a lot of harm. Now, all night long, tractors roar past, raising clouds of dust, and their noise breaks my sleep. We never used to sleep under mosquito nets, but now, because of the mill’s waste, mosquitoes lay eggs there and invade our village. The smoke from the mill scatters ash onto our trees, and we don’t get as many mangoes as we used to. Many of our people are suffering from asthma. And it’s not just the air or the mosquitoes. The mill drains dirty water into the canal where children used to bathe and catch little fish. Now the water stinks, and no one dares to go near it. The once-clear night skies are often fogged with smoke, and stars that used to twinkle above our rooftops are hidden. The peace of the village and its gentle rhythms are gone.

“The mill has brought strangers, too—tricksters and fraudsters. Our own Moti Mia took money from people, promising them jobs, and then vanished. That never used to happen before. There’s more tension now. People argue over money, over land, even over market stalls. Who knows what more will happen in the days to come? Only Allah knows.”

After answering her grandson’s question, Fulbanu sat still for a long while, her eyes lost in the fields beyond the yard. Memories floated back like dust in the wind. In every household, there used to be cows, and any extra milk was used to make curd, payesh, or firni. If a baby was born, neighbors would bring milk in exchange for bottle gourds, pumpkins, or radishes—no money needed, just love and mutual care. The new market had brought opportunities, yes. People earned more, sold their vegetables, fruits, and even fish from their ponds.

But something had changed. The warmth of simple living had faded. Kindness was being replaced by monetary calculations. Where laughter

once rang during neighborly chats over a cup of tea, there were now hurried glances and guarded words.

Fulbanu felt a quiet ache in her chest. There was one more thing which she didn’t say to her grandson. In the past, when the sun dipped and the fields quieted, her husband, Syed Ali, would return home, wash up, and sit beside her under the dim light of a kerosene lamp. He would tell her stories—about his youth, the fields, the festivals, and the dreams he once had. She would chew betel leaves, and give some to him from her brass container, and they would talk for hours. These days he returned from the market drained, silent, and heavy-eyed. Dinner was followed immediately by sleep. The cherished conversations—the ones that kept their hearts close—had disappeared like dew in the morning sun.

As Fulbanu blinked away her thoughts, she saw Syed Ali walking slowly along the narrow path between the fields, a three-battery torch in his hand, his posture slightly bent under the weight of his years. The fireflies danced gently around him, unaware of all that had changed. Her grandson watched too, sensing something in her silence.

“Dida,” he asked quietly, “are you sad?”

She smiled faintly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“No, shona. Just remembering.”

But in her heart, she knew—some things that are lost never come back. Not the stars, not the mangoes, and sometimes, not even the long, quiet talks under the moonlight.

This is the second part of a two-part story.

Abdullah Zahid is a Bangladeshi-American writer, librarian, and cultural commentator based in New York. He began his literary journey as a columnist for Jajaidin, where his widely-read column “Manhattan Diary” was later published as a book of the same name. The second edition of the book was released in 2024.

NONFICTION

Kumu: Nani’s salt

Chapter 1, section 2

LAZEENA MUNA

My nani’s nickname was Bokul—like the flower. In English, it’s called the Spanish Cherry or Mimusops elengi, though no translation quite captures its softness. The Bokul tree is tall and unassuming, often overlooked until it blooms. Its flowers are tiny, pale yellowish-white, with a scent so deep and lingering it seems to float long after the petals fall.

They bloom quietly at night. By morning, the ground beneath the tree is scattered with fallen blossoms, as if the tree had shed dreams in its sleep, quiet and deeply personal. At dawn, girls and sometimes boys gather beneath the Bokul tree, lifting each fallen flower with care, as if each one holds a blessing. The faint yellow-white blooms are collected in the ends of scarves or bamboo baskets, destined to be placed around khopas, slipped onto wrists, or simply inhaled. It’s not just about beauty, it’s about wearing a scent that stays with you, a small act of peace that softens the sharp edges of the day.

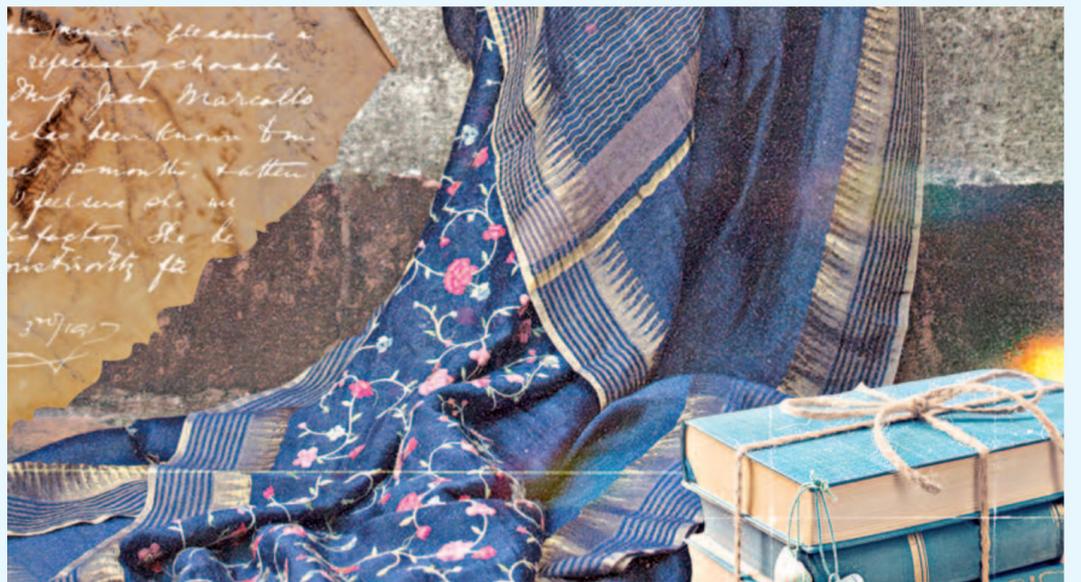
My nani was much the same. She moved through her day quietly, unassumingly, like the scent of the flower she was named after. She was taken for granted, as women often

tracks and destinies a railway man, moved with timetables and transfers, and for a brief, shining moment, the family lived near a school. And so she went, bangles jingling, slate in hand, Bangla blooming on her tongue.

She was quick with language, quicker with wit, curiosity, and intelligence. But in homes where duty pressed against every wall, intelligence in a girl was an indulgence, a temporary distraction. Not something to be nurtured. Not something to last.

When her mother fell ill, nani stepped into the silence of unpaid labour. No farewell. No choice. Just the quiet shifting of roles, keeper of the house—laundry, rice and lentils, and firewood. She didn’t ask why. Women like her rarely did. Not aloud. Her dream for education crashed. Her father instead turned to the boy, the one who would marry her someday, and poured the family’s future into him: books, encouragement, ambition. He was the chosen path. She was the hands that cleared it. A life of her own was not a conversation anyone had. Not for her. Not then.

My grandfather, Mosharraf Hossain, was “Gobore poddo phool”—a lotus growing out of the filth. His merit shone bright enough to blind my great-grandfather. He



DESIGN: AMREETA LETHE

Books brought home by the children, borrowed from neighbours, forgotten in school bags or rescued from the damp corners of someone’s almirah. Dog-eared magazines tucked under piles of folded sarais in drawers that smelled of mothballs and camphor. They waited for her faithfully. They knew she would return.

are, but like the fragrance of Bokul, her presence was felt, steadying, grounding. She brought a stillness that held the household together—necessary and full of grace.

She grew up in Assam, in the railway quarters, walls the colour of old tea, mornings blurred with coal smoke, the whistle of trains slicing through the stillness like unfinished sentences. Her father, who was a railroad official under the British Raj, a man who believed in building

handpicked my nana for his daughter, not for his family, not for his charm, but for his intelligence. My nana was able to earn his degrees from a prestigious university in Kolkata, funded by my nani’s father. It was part of the agreement, a promise of marriage to his daughter. A merit match, designed to secure an educated husband for her, with a faint promise of love lingering beneath the arrangement.

Nani’s rebellion didn’t arrive like

thunder. It didn’t raise its voice or slam doors. It came instead in the rush of afternoons, in slivers of time stolen from the tyranny of chores. Her protest was made of smaller things—quiet, stubborn, fiercely her own. Moments carved out like prayer beads from the long rosary of the day. When the rice had boiled, when the knives were rinsed, when the sweat on her back had dried into salt, she would lie down. On the floor. The cool cement kissing her cheek, as if the earth itself had been waiting for her to pause.

The ceiling fan hummed above, its blades lazy with heat, whispering lullabies to no one in particular. The house, finally done needing her, exhaled. And in that breathless space, she read.

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magazines tucked under piles of folded sarais in drawers that smelled of mothballs and camphor. They waited for her faithfully. They knew she would return.

She read with the urgency of someone who had once been denied. As if every sentence restored a breath she didn’t know she was holding. There were no exams, no applause, no audience. Just pages and silence. And a woman reclaiming a piece of herself that no one else could touch.

The books didn’t demand. They didn’t ask for salt or stillness, didn’t tug at her saree or cry from a distant room. They waited, quiet and sure, asking only to be opened. And in that waiting, they became hers. The only thing in the house, besides her breath, that belonged to her without question, without noise.

In time, all four daughters, and the three sons too, walked barefoot and brave through

the unbeaten paths, winding shortcuts, and narrow backyards of the Bogura police line, that led to the tin-shed classrooms of Latifpur Primary School. And my grandmother, who fought battles too heavy for her small frame, battles that never quite surrendered, found in her daughters’ lives a kind of rebellion, a quiet, unspoken triumph. Not her freedom, perhaps. But theirs.

“Kumu” is a living memoir of Selina Hossain’s early life, told through carefully chosen themes and reimagined by her daughter, Lazeena Muna. Section 1 of Chapter 1 was published on Selina Hossain’s birthday, 14 June.

Lazeena Muna writes occasionally, weaving together gender and politics, and often exploring memory, movement, and meaning.