

THE WHISPERING MOSQUE OF BADEHARIPUR

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When the old caretaker of the mosque retired to stay with his daughter's family six villages away from where he lived, Hussain was appointed by the local elders to look after the mosque, the state of which could be best described as "almost-broken-down".

For a salary of eight thousand taka a month, he would do all the cleaning and gardening around the small mosque and the graveyard of Badeharipur. He would live in the mosque and have groceries provided for him. Hussain was in his late teens. He didn't study or work, and the *Murubbis* – after consulting with his mother – decided that it would be best to appoint him as the caretaker of the mosque. They thought that he shouldn't waste away his life gnawing at his old mother's very limited and materialistic mental faculties. He had no aspirations for an education, as the closest school was forty kilometres away.

A small village in Sunamganj with a few residents, Badeharipur mostly housed farmers and fishermen who were used to working till midday. In the afternoon, they would gather at Jamal bhai's quaint tea stall by the small, almost still, river that flowed by the village and play carrom. They went to sleep early at night, but Hossein slept all day. He was sceptical of the new job at first.

The mosque, right next to the Badeharipur cemetery, didn't inspire anyone to go near it at night. Badeharipur was one of the many villages that were nearly wiped out by the Cholera epidemic, leaving behind the memories of people who lived and dispersing the graveyard with reminders of what the village endured. As a child, he grew up hearing stories of this graveyard being visited by people, who were perhaps not really people, late at night to pay their respects

to the deceased. He was warned not to get in the way of those visiting at night. That was when you were meant to pray, sleep, and wait for the *Mu'adhin* – Bashir Mia – to recite the call for prayer.

The first few days slipped by. He would sweep the prayer hall in the morning and trim the bushes when his mind didn't drift away with the saccharine setting sun of Badeharipur, but things started to change slowly. Often at night, he started hearing scratching sounds on the tin walls of the latrine, almost as if someone was repeatedly scratching it with a sharp knife.

When he'd go to check who or what was causing it, there would be nothing, except the flickering old light. The thin tin latrine door would open and clasp itself shut on nights with no wind. One night, when he had been sleeping in the prayer hall, he woke up to the sound of whispers, something resembling a quiet muttering. It stopped as soon as he rushed himself up, sweating.

The power had gone out. Yet, it wasn't the sound of the Chairman's house generator, still rumbling its low mechanical noises a few blocks away. And then there it was, a loud crash, the sound of a jar shattering in the tiny makeshift kitchen behind.

Hussain started reciting the *Ayatul Qursi*, which his mother had taught him. He had to inspect what was happening.

He ran to the backyard, chanting the words loudly, sighting movement in the bushes. It was almost time for *Fajr*, and a cold wind blew across his face. And he heard it again, movement in the long bushes stretching far beyond into the graveyard. He started following the direction of the footstep with loud thuds of his own, almost manic now.

He needed to know what was going on; he kept running, didn't know what for, and didn't have a name for this feeling either. Was this fear? Delirium? Acceptance?

His body was sweating on a cold winter morning, and he kept chasing after this seemingly nameless, faceless entity. Sweat poured down his face. And then there it was, a loud hissing noise left him half-paralysed. Whatever it was, it most certainly wasn't a person. And then it came again. He pushed the bushes aside to look down in front of him, and there he found the source of his grievances.

A feral mother cat with her babies. She had found a dry corner in the graveyard and built a small nest with them. The mother cat continued hissing at Hussain, who, now finally relieved, sat down in his tracks. Bashir Mia's melodic *Adhan* poured out all around the mosque. Hussain finally started breathing again. Having come back to his senses, he realised that he had to do something about the situation.

He returned to the mosque to find some leftover fish and rice he had kept under a lid and set it down a few feet away from the mother cat, who had been nursing her kittens. Hussain's days in his new job also started lighting up after that night. The mother cat developed a bond of trust with the teenager. He was allowed to move the kittens inside, who were now louder than the Chairman's generator in their purring. He named the mom cat Bulbuli, who would now join him in his afternoon naps after he was done with his sweeping duties for the day, and they would watch Badeharipur's sunset together during *Maghrib*, waiting for Bashir Mia to come and recite the *Adhan* with his magical voice.

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