



Centre for Writing
and Communication

10 STORIES

A CHAPBOOK



PREFACE

On 8th June, 2020, the Centre for Writing and Communication, Ashoka University began the Online Summer School by hosting a 5-day short story writing workshop, followed soon after by a Research Writing Workshop. This was the first edition of the CWC Summer School that featured sessions on creative writing, and after receiving close to a hundred applications, we selected 12 participants with 12 promising stories to attend the online workshop. In this chapbook, we feature some of these stories in an humble effort to showcase them to as wide a readership as possible.

Throughout the workshop, participants were exposed to interactive activities, writing in groups and individually, and intensive peer review sessions, with the aim of the workshop being to familiarize the candidates with multiple forms of storytelling and equip them with as many tools to tell these stories. Over four days, students were required to read not only these short stories, but also theoretical concepts associated with literary theory in general and the form of short stories in particular.

We are immensely grateful to the participants, not only for their participation in the workshop, but also for their contribution to this anthology. Their involvement enriched us as well by bringing in, through dialogue with each other, so many other dimensions of the short story previously unfamiliar to us. On behalf of the CWC, we would like to express our gratitude to all the participants

We are particularly thankful to Sumana Roy, Professor at Ashoka University and a novelist and short story writer herself, whose guest talk for the participants was the perfect note on which we concluded the workshop. We are also grateful to Kanika Singh, Director of CWC, for supporting this workshop and the summer school throughout its planning and execution.

Regards,
Apoorva, Sidharth, Uday, Souradeep

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Brigade Chalo! <i>by Tathagatha Mandal</i> | 1 |
| First Time Caller <i>by Eshna Sharma</i> | 7 |
| Pitter-Patter <i>by Mewan B War</i> | 19 |
| Scarlet Everywhere <i>by Shaivya Sahare</i> | 24 |
| The Endless Dream <i>by Akshada</i> | 27 |
| The Memoirs of an Unfair Choice <i>by Mrilina Senjam</i> | 33 |
| The Night of Broken Glass <i>by Arpita Roy</i> | 39 |
| <i>The Postcard</i> <i>by Kritika Kapoor</i> | 45 |
| The Politician <i>by Pallavi Krishnappa</i> | 51 |
| The Widening Gyre <i>by Muddasir Ramzan</i> | 57 |
| <i>About the Authors</i> | 66 |

BRIGADE CHALO!

BY TATHAGATA MANDAL

It was the day before Lakshmi Puja and I was at my dadu's house, where I used to spend my Durga Puja holidays every year. In the evening, when our house was being prepared for puja the next day, our neighbourly Dijen-mama came to me with an unusual request. He asked me to chaperone his brother Babul and his friend Dinesh to appear for an all-India competitive examination in Calcutta the next day. The proposal came as a surprise even as the prospect thrilled me to the core. I was only 16 and my 'charges' were two boys three years senior to me. Escorting them to a big city like Calcutta was kind of a big deal.

'Why are you putting me in charge?' I asked my mama.

'Because you are smart and you know Calcutta well. And my brother and his friend are not the brightest, as you know.'

I was pleased with this proposition, in any case. But there was something unusual I had done that helped me earn the 'smart' tag. In those days I had developed the habit of going to Calcutta frequently to shop branded clothes. There were some speculations involved as nobody quite knew the exact source of my riches. Everybody attributed it to my rich grandfather, which was not exactly what it was thought to be. And we are digressing here.

Calcutta was where all opportunities lay, for us who were from the districts of Bengal. Anybody who knew this city well, or were believed to know it well, acquired the social approval of being smart. For Dijen-mama, I was smart enough to shepherd two grown-up boys safely to Calcutta at the teeny age of sixteen, for I was thought to 'know' the city.

I agreed to go with them. He offered me some money for the trip, but I refused, saying that it was my duty to ensure the success of this trip. Since the next day would be the first day after the Durga puja holidays and the exam was scheduled to start at 9:30 in the morning, it was best to go by the earliest train, at 5 am, which connected north Bengal to Calcutta. But soon it struck us that there would be a huge political rally of the ruling Left Front the next day. Those days a 'Brigade Chalo' ('Let us all go to Brigade') call by the Left Front – the ruling conglomeration of left parties – meant all the traffic of the state would be directed towards this vast stretch of open space in Calcutta: the Maidan. We decided that we would take the earliest train available to us: Gaud Express, which ran from Malda Town to Sealdah in Calcutta. Its arrival time in Bolpur station was 1:22 am.

Babul and Dinesh were quite different from each other. While the former was docile and reticent, and slightly effete; the latter pugnacious and forthcoming. Babul had a diminutive stature; while Dinesh was strongly built and tall enough to be labelled tall by others. Babul was very sincere in whatever he did or said; Dinesh was fickle-minded, and possessed a very quick and dry sense of humour, which easily irked elders who expected deference from him. But despite their stark differences, Dinesh and Babul were best of friends. It was perhaps because Dinesh loved playing protector of Babul who always faced the brunt of the teasing from men who were uncomfortable with Babul's nature, which was considered unmanly by Bengali men. They went to the same school and now, the same college. I was drawn more towards Babul because of Dijen-mama who was close to my *mamas* and *mashis*. With Dinesh, I kept a safe distance because I always imagined him to be a closeted bully. But the trip would somewhat alter this view.

I was brimming with excitement while I had my dinner. My grandmother was obviously not happy with this plan. But I assuaged her and promised that I would bring her *shonpapdi*, which was sold by hawkers on the trains, and which she was crazy about. I was supposed to meet Babul and Dinesh at Bolpur station around midnight. When we got there, we found our tiny but important train station overrun by a crowd of at least ten thousand people. We were completely overwhelmed.

'Who are these people?' I asked Dinesh.

'They are all accompanying us to Calcutta,' Dinesh responded mischievously.

I was dumb-founded and tried to remain calm, as any leader should in such daunting circumstances. It was decided that we would bide our time at the station and board the Gaud Express when it'd come. Since we had valid tickets, which most people at the station did not, we thought we were assured to get a safe passage to Calcutta.

But we were ill-prepared for what was in store for us the rest of the night.

Instead of arriving on time, the Gaud Express was a half-hour late, which is not a big deal for the Indian Railways. As the train was stationary, there was a mad scramble to get in. We were there too. But all the doors were locked from inside and nobody was willing to open them. Since the train was supposed to stop for only two minutes, everybody went berserk. They started banging on the doors, imploring, screaming at the inmates to open them. Sensing that nobody moved even an inch in the darkened interiors of the compartments, tension rose further. Meanwhile, the three of us were running along the length of the train to find even a small crack to squeeze in. But there was no response from the passengers aboard the train. The more the mob swelled, the more deafening became the silence inside.

Suddenly, some passengers started to throw stones at the train, directed especially at the windows. The whole train was now besieged by an angry mob of ten thousand people who were desperate to get into the train. Quickly, all the other passengers start-

ed grabbing the crushed stones strewn along the railway tracks and pelting on the train. The heavy pattering sound of the stones raining on the train was now mixed with the screaming and howling of the stone-pelters. It was petrifying.

We had nowhere to go.

It seemed to us that the Gaud Express would not be able to finish the remainder of its journey to Sealdah Station. I was not hopeless though. I felt responsible to infect Babul and Dinesh – who by now appeared gloomy – with my optimism. We shared the view that the train would be able to leave Bolpur and take us safely to our destination. But we were not sure of getting us seats. So, we went to enquire about the logjam with the driver and his helper. They were perturbed as well.

Dinesh asked the driver's helper if we could sit at the small open space behind the engine, which was the only space on that train that was not occupied. That man answered, wryly, that we could definitely choose to sit there; the only problem was that earlier occupants of that space, two young boys like us, had fallen and had their bodies mangled near Ahmadpur Jn., just three stations behind Bolpur. This piece of information had its intended effect on us: we ran for life!

The high drama went on for about half-hour more before station authorities came over for a dialogue with the angry passengers. That 'discussion' got heated as well, as it was suggested to the aggrieved party that no train could accommodate so many passengers and some of the passengers would have to let go of this train and board the next ones—that there are plenty of trains to ferry them to Calcutta for the rally. After some time, the situation calmed down. There was a murmur that indicated the passengers inside would open the doors to let people in. The train would, finally, leave Bolpur station, where it had to overstay for more than two hours. I, as the leader of the pack, let out a sigh of relief at the prospect of resuming the duties that were given to me.

The compartment we got into was chock-a-block with people. There was not even an inch of space to wiggle one's feet or hands. The three of us stood there with all the sombreness we could muster. Because, somehow, we felt that we were intruding into somebody else's space, especially knowing what exactly transpired in the last two and a half hours: the iron-willed passengers of faraway North Bengal were brought to their knees by a swelling crowd of passengers. But we were young and free, being serious and keeping quiet was not our wont.

The train was unusually slow. It seemed it was heavy from all the injuries sustained from an hour of stone-pelting. However, after ambling along for two stations, it came to an unscheduled halt at the Gushkara station. Nobody got in. Nobody could get in. It was packed to the rafters. After some agonising moments, the train took off again. But this time it gathered some speed. Babul, Dinesh, and I were happy.

A short while later, we could sense a rumble in the compartment. I could also sense a

shift in the mood of our fellow passengers. It was getting hostile. A man, in his 40s, suddenly started to scream at us. He was pointing fingers towards Dinesh and saying: 'He is the one, he is the one!' Dinesh was unperturbed. He replied: 'Yes, I am the one, I am the one.' The mimicking tone in his voice was inescapable. The man was now supported by a few in accusing Dinesh of something. But he was characteristically unruffled. Soon, a young man grabbed Dinesh by the collar.

'So you did this?' he thundered.

'I did what?' Dinesh was perplexed and a little afraid now.

Babul and I were frightened as well, and surprised, at this sudden turn of events.

'You broke Sunil-da's wife's nose and one finger of her right hand. You have blinded her!' the young man retorted balefully.

'I did not break anything. Why do you think I broke it?'

'Because *boudi* saw you throwing stones at her.'

All of us shifted our gaze towards this unnamed *boudi* who was sitting at a window seat. Crouching near her was Sunil-da, trying to both console her and nurse her injuries. It was a bloody mess.

Dinesh was defiant now. He said he did not throw any stone at anybody. He was not one of 'those' who threw stones at moving trains; in this case a stationary one. And besides, he was going for an important exam the next day. So, all his energies were directed towards reaching Sealdah station on time and taking the examination. He included the two of us in this defense of his innocence. We nodded meekly in his support. What else could we do?

But the mood of that packed compartment refused to let up. Now, there emerged more witnesses to Dinesh's culpability. More men, middle-aged, started screaming that Dinesh was the person who was throwing stones at the train. A particularly angry man – whose disheveled hair suggested he had been jolted from a deep slumber, which made him groggy – suggested that since by then the train had crossed Gushkara, our 'local' area, a criminal like Dinesh should be beaten black and blue, and thrown out. Everybody else concurred with him.

The three of us shuddered at the thought. Dinesh, a nonchalant loafer with a dry sense of wit and an unusual spring in his gait, turned completely pale. His early defiance had understandably evaporated by now. He looked at me for an answer. But I too was completely terrified; so was Babul. It was now our bounden duty to protect Dinesh. Babul, the self-effacing guy, took the lead. He tried to say, in a semi-choked voice, that we were not among those who threw stones at the passengers. We were just innocent

students going to take a competitive examination the next day. He brought out his ticket to support his plea. We also took out our respective tickets to endorse him. It had some calming effect on that angry crowd. But soon after, their collective wrath turned against the three of us. Their anger was directed at the younger generation that produced reckless and vicious boys like us. Soon, other tales of broken fingers, gashed heads, battered cheeks, and of general helplessness when the train was under attack by the mob started unravelling.

These tales of collective woes made matters worse. The enraged mob in the compartment was determined to lynch Dinesh and make an example of it. The three of us burst into sobs. Somebody grabbed Dinesh by his hair and dragged him away. He was dragged for about 10 metres to where boudi and Sunil-da were. The guy deposited Dinesh at Sunil-da's feet and asked him to do to him whatever he pleased. Sunil-da was delirious with anger and pain. With the certainty that his wife's right eye had been permanently damaged, he asked Dinesh, 'Why did you do this to her?' He swiveled his wife's head towards Dinesh, crouched on the floor now, to let him see for himself the extent of the damage that the unforgiving pieces of basalt had inflicted on her. Dinesh was weeping profusely. He kept saying sorry and 'It was not me' in the same choked breath. All eyes were fixed on Sunil-da, except boudi's. Her wounds put her in a stupor that seemed to last forever.

Sunil-da kept quiet for the next few moments and uttered, 'Don't do anything like this from now on. One thoughtless and juvenile act has left my wife with a bloodied nose and blind in one eye. Please don't repeat this mistake. I beg of you.'

We were stunned. So was the rest of the crowd, who were hell-bent on punishing Dinesh. Dinesh had this shocked expression: he was understandably relieved that he was let go, but was also baffled that Sunil-da had not believed his entreaties of innocence. He gathered himself gradually and came to be with us. Nobody in the compartment uttered a word nor touched him. The crowding was the same. But, the three of us managed to somehow recede to a niche to be distant from the rest and by ourselves.

The train was now running smoothly towards Calcutta. We spoke very little for the rest of the journey. Dinesh was quiet the most. He was shaken to the core. He knew that he had been saved from a near-death situation by one act of kindness from an aggrieved man. That made him deeply thoughtful.

As soon as the train arrived at Sealdah at 7:45 am, we sprang into action. We had a hurried breakfast at a food stall beneath the Sealdah flyover and went off to the examination venues: Dinesh had to go to a college at Hazra Crossing; I had to take Babul to Maulana Azad College in Dharamtala, at the heart of the city, where his centre was. The plan was to meet at Howrah Station to catch the 4:40 pm train back to Bolpur. After escorting Babul safely to the college, I got time to spend an entire day at my favorite place in Calcutta: Esplanade, where I watched a movie and loafed around in general.

Babul and I waited for Dinesh at Howrah station to catch the Viswabharati Fast Passenger to go back home. He did not turn up. I was anxious thinking of what'd happened to him. But Babul said, 'He will be fine.' There was no other way for me but to accept Babul's verdict. We were happy that at last we were going back. The moment our train left Howrah Station, we heaved a huge sigh of relief.

There was no news of Dinesh for a long time; it seemed he had evaporated. His house was also far away from where we lived, so nobody gave me his whereabouts. Then one day I saw him in the evening. He was on his scooter; I was on my bicycle. I stopped him and asked him where he was all this while, how his examination went. He replied that our breakfast of untoasted bread slices and *ghugni* and omelette did not agree with his digestive system. He passed out at the table inside that college whose name he had forgotten and had to be taken to a medical centre. He was then dropped at Howrah Station, from where he took a local train to Burdwan Junction., and reached Bolpur somehow. I was also keen to know whether he was still upset from that night's incidents and the terrifying prospect of getting lynched by a mob. In response, he smiled and winked mischievously. I was taken aback by his frivolity. He said. 'I was lucky.'

I was left scratching my head at his reaction.

'What do you mean you were 'lucky'? You did not throw the stones at Sunil's wife that night, did you?

'Dinesh smiled at me again, and scooted off, saying nothing more.

FIRST TIME CALLER

BY ESHNA SHARMA

For a brief while there was only silence on the other end. Chhaya wondered if it was a prank call. She turned on the other side of her bed and called out, "Hello, sweetheart?"

Sensing hesitation on the line, she continued, "Are you a first time caller, love?" Her voice was syrup-sweet drawl. She had to exaggerate it a bit sometimes. The men seemed to like it more that way. Her days at the call centre had taught her as much.

On the other side of the line, a young boy sat on the edge of his bed, frozen in terror staring at his phone screen. He held his breath, as Chhaya continued cooing in an unconvincing voice, "Okay, let's talk, tell me what you would like to do?"

As if on cue, she heard a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line, and then the familiar call-end tone. Chhaya plopped back on the bed with resignation. Holding up her phone, she checked the time. 4.38 am. She was tired to the bone. Alright, I'm done tonight, she thought to herself as she switched off the phone and slipped almost immediately into a dreamless sleep, black and thick and all-consuming.

When Shashi woke, the first thing that hit him was how silence wrapped the house in a thick, impenetrable shroud. His father had also come to wear it like second skin. Shashi's stomach sank as the truth that he had forgotten momentarily came back to him.

He walked outside into the living room. It looked the same as it always did. His father's armchair in the corner, brown and worn out. The smell of cigarettes had seeped into the very fabric of it, and nobody but him could bear to sit in it. Family pictures on the wall—some from his parents' marriage and the hillside honeymoon that followed, a couple of him as a baby. Morning light streamed in half-heartedly through a window behind the sofa and the sky outside was pale blue and unfriendly.

In the room beyond a pack of cigarettes lay half empty next to the bowl of fruits on the dining table.

Now this, this was something out of place.

His mother would have never allowed it. He imagined her lips curling in distaste, her hands firmly on her waist, as she called for his father. "RAVI!" she would shout, waving the packet in disgust, "is this what you want to teach your son?" she would ask of him, her voice crackling with annoyance. Shashi smiled wanly. Now there was no ma, maybe he could steal one or two? From some far off came the distant sound of his father's coughing, as if his lungs were revolting against him. Shashi grimaced, realised his folly and made his way to the kitchen.

As he cracked open an egg into the pan, hoping the smell of hot butter and the sound of the sizzling omelette would whet his dwindling appetite, Shashi slipped into thoughts of the night before. He felt a prickle of shame, hot and sharp, wincing as he remembered the woman's voice, seductive and husky. "mister," her voice echoed in his ears, "loosen up, na." He remembered the advertisement he had seen, scrolling through the web. FEELING LONELY? It screamed in lurid, blinking text. CALL NOW FOR A GOOD TIME!

Now, in retrospect, it seemed like a bad decision. Shashi felt ugly and exposed, like a pervert whose sick fantasies had been revealed to the world.

The house stood silently, oblivious, as father and son moved within, silent and hollow with grief, strangers to each other, and to this new, cruel life.

Chhaya swatted flies as she sat at her desk, filling out paperwork in a slanted, scratchy scrawl. All around her desk were scattered files and papers. The standing fan near her desk had coughed to an abrupt stop a half hour ago, and drops of perspiration dotted her forehead and ran down the length of her spine. A dirty water cooler, yellowed from year of use and ringed with lime, stood a few metres away, and two men she didn't recognize stood next to it sipping water from small plastic cups and passing indiscrete glances her way.

They know, Chhaya thought to herself as a slight chill went up her sweaty spine. Don't be stupid, she reasoned, nobody knows, and nobody could possibly know.

She remembered her days at the call centre. The hours were long and exhausting, the pay abysmal. The only silver lining was the experience: it taught her the gift of gab. It taught her to be creative, to do everything she could to keep a caller on the line, to satisfy, to assuage, to please. She remembered the manager, walking around shouting, 'Remember! Customer is King!' He was a dark, potbellied man with a face that seemed to be covered in an oily sheen and hair that seemed perpetually wet. He had a particular habit of standing too close to the female interns. She remembered his touch on the small of her back, "Nice work on reaching the targets, Chhaya," he smiled and came so close to her face she could feel his hot breath on her neck.

Chhaya suddenly felt grateful for her current night-time job. It was a secret, it had to be one. Her family back home still thought she was working at the call centre in the night.

Her job was simple: she was there to give the callers a good time. That is what the adverts said, too. She was an entertainer, a performer, even a sort of therapist, all rolled into a job with a hazy, vague description which she could definitely not put on a resume or a job application.

The hours were flexible, the pay considerable and the best part-she could work from home. The men troubled her at times, but these days that was an occupational hazard that came with almost every job.

On the metro ride back home, Chhaya was glad to find an empty seat. She sighed as she slipped into it, heavy-headed and tired from the day's work. Even in the haze of exhaustion, her mind ran round and round in circles as she thought of the men at the water cooler. The paranoia of being outed, of being found out wrecked her sometimes, but the income was too good to pass by. If she relied solely on her day job at the office, she could work like a horse but still be destined for the glue factory in the end.

In her loneliest hours, she often thought of home. She remembered her mother, how she had sobbed into the ends of her dupatta when Chhaya had said she wanted to study and find a job in the city. When she had expressed her wishes to her father, he had slapped her right across the face. Eventually though, he yielded. He was slipping into debt, and there wasn't nearly enough money for Chhaya's marriage. So while the other girls in the neighbourhood were decked in gold and red and whisked away to their in-laws, Chhaya stayed up late and buried herself in her books.

And now she was in the city, piecing a dream bit by bit. She shuddered to think what would happen if her family found out. She imagined her father, red with anger, dragging her by the hair across the marble of their crumbling house.

A familiar dread began percolating inside Chhaya, a snake that wound itself round and round her body, brilliant scales glimmering in the fluorescent light. She shook it away and closed her eyes.

That night, Shashi found himself on the roof staring at his mobile phone screen again. Downstairs, his father had shut himself up in the study all afternoon and evening, and Shashi had had dinner alone, fighting with the microwaved rice pulao on his plate. It had been heated unevenly, and he had one too many cold bites. It was bland, tasting like paper against his tongue.

Sometimes when he scraped his uneaten food guiltily into the dustbin, he would see his mother, arms folded across her chest, glaring disapprovingly from the dining table.

Up on the terrace, Shashi sat on a ledge. There were no stars in the sky. The wind was cooling, it was almost September, but his shirt was still soaked with sweat. He looked down at his feet and found himself choking with emotion. Then, taking a deep breath he

picked up the phone, he dialled the same number he'd called yesterday.

On the other end, Chhaya settling into work mode for the night, picked up immediately. Even as her stomach churned, she took a deep breath and chirped brightly, "Hello, and thank you for calling, I'm here to give you a good time."

On the other end, Shashi froze again; he opened and closed his mouth like a goldfish, unable to find words. Chhaya waited on the other end, trying to figure out the intentions of the caller.

What kind of drugs do men even take these days, she asked herself, shaking her head in distaste. Suddenly, faces from the water cooler flashed across her mind, men with perverted gazes and sniggers on their faces, and she felt a cold feeling along her spine.

"See," she barked, "if you do not speak up, I am going to cut the call, and even more, you must know that there is a block feature on phones, na? Well I will use it this time, so you can never call me again. Understood?"

Shashi mumbled nervously, wiping his right palm on his pants as he tried to find what to say. "I'm going now, I don't have all night. Goodbye."

"No! Wait." Shashi gulped, "I want to talk."

Chhaya felt relieved. It was time to get down to business. "Well, what would you like me to talk about?" she whispered.

Shashi balked. "I-I just want to talk."

"Bhaisahab, even talking has rates, na? You wait, I'm telling you. 180 for 15 minutes, 350 for 30 minutes, and for one hour I will charge----"

"No no, wait, I just want to talk, like normal talk. I do not want to hear any of that stuff."

Chhaya laughed. "Listen, men call me for all sorts of stuff. They call me because their wife left them, they call me when they want to cry, sometimes they call me because they never know what it is like to talk to a woman."

Shashi was silent.

"I have a family to feed, and I charge for everything. Now, if you don't want to pay, please stop wasting my time, mister."

He sighed heavily. "I'll pay."

"So, mister, what is your name?" Chhaya asked, settling back in her seat. This one sounded like it was going to be an easy job.

When Shashi told her, she giggled girlishly, "Shashi --- like the moon, ha!"

A nervous chuckle came from the other end. "My mother, her name was Roshni, she was quite fond of films. It was either this, or Rishi." "Well, let me introduce myself, I'm Shalini," Chhaya smiled.

"Do you want to know what I'm wearing?" she asked, forgetfully reverting to her standard programming. It always started with this one simple sentence."

I, uh, I do not."

Chhaya laughed. "Very well," she turned the question on him, "what are you wearing, mister?"

Shashi stammered feebly and continued. "A blue t-shirt, it was Baba's before he outgrew it, and uh, a pair of dark blue jeans." "I was wearing these," he added as an afterthought, "the day my mother died."

A hushed silence fell over the line. She tried to go for the initial perfunctory consolations, but they dissolved on her tongue like sugar before she could utter a word. "What about your father? Do you...have one?"

"I do, but more than often, it feels like I don't." Shashi felt uneasy, like he had vocalised thoughts that needed to be buried away, thoughts that needed to be locked in a box and thrown into the sea.

Sometimes, Shashi felt like his father existed on a different, separate plane. He would be there one moment, then like a ghostly apparition, moving through the floorboards, he would be gone the next. He would shut himself up in his room everyday for hours on end. Then, after maa's death, he stopped coming out of it. There would not be much sound from his father's room, even if there was, it would be absorbed by the thick curtains near the eastern window, and by wooden bookshelf across it. But, sometimes, the sounds of his coughing would escape. Incessant, droning, coughs. If Shashi had loved his father more, he may have felt sad for him. At worst, he felt indifference and at best, only pity, and it was between these two extremes that he oscillated.

When the call ended, Shashi felt the knot inside him loosen ever so little. When he went to bed, he did not stay up all night staring at the mosquito netting hanging around his bed. Instead, he fell into a sleep he had not experienced since his mother's passing.

Poor boy, Chhaya thought as she scrubbed her face in the dim light of a single 20 watt CFL bulb. Though she had never felt any sort of attachment to any caller, only revulsion, this time, she felt like if they had been born into different circumstances, maybe they could have been friends. The night had been busy, and Chhaya felt pleased with her earnings.

After work that evening, she did not get on the 5.45 local train to go back home. Instead, she got out of work and got into an auto headed in the opposite direction.

This was the richer part of the city. Suddenly, the streets were cleaner, there were fewer beggars to be found, upscale stores dotted both sides of the streets. In the mall, she sprayed sweet perfume on her wrist, tried so many lipstick swatches that it made her dizzy. One day, she mused, as she rubbed a thick blob of sweet smelling lotion, I will come back and buy all of this.

Finally, she looked for the cheapest item on the shelf, a small pink glass bottle of fragrance. It was overpriced for the quantity it contained, but it was beautiful, glamorous.

Shashi liked a girl. Her name was Sheuli. Once, they had sat on the steps of the school grounds, donned in starched white uniforms for sports day, and she had looked at him with her thoughtful, quiet eyes, and explained the meaning of her name to him. "It is the name of a flower," she had said, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips, "in Bengali."

And although she had a beautiful name, she was quite ordinary in looks. She wore her long hair in a thick braid, and she had eyes that conveyed more than she ever said in words. She was quiet, and gentle, as Shashi was. But where those qualities in Sheuli were admired, in Shashi they were considered weak and unbecoming of a boy who was coming of age. It made him easy picking for the classroom bullies, and although it never quite went beyond the usual horseplay, sometimes with words like faggot thrown around, Shashi realized that there was always a price to pay for gentleness.

When Shashi returned to school after everything was over, the funeral pyre lit, his hair shaven off from his head, the customary mourning period observed, family and friends fed on the thirteenth day, (rituals held no significance to Shashi, to him it seemed like a morbid dinner party) he felt a shift. It wasn't seismic, like death itself, but soft and subtle, like when skin tans in the sun, slowly but surely. When he walked through the crowd during morning assembly, no longer would they push against his gangly frame. Instead, they would part, ever so lightly, to let him pass. Sheuli, who used to sit at the desk in front of his, had shifted across the classroom. Her silence, which had seemed warm and beckoning, now offered no secret messages. The bullies had suddenly become uninterested; they had found easier, softer targets in boys who had locks that still were unshorn.

The train came to a grinding halt, jerking Chhaya away from her happy day-dream haze. She felt toasty, warm, like she had just gotten up from an afternoon nap in the wintertime. Chhaya rubbed her eyes and got up from her seat. A sea of humans rushed in, like water from a burst dam, roiling, forceful, moving of its own volition. It smelled of tobacco and sweat and lunch hour. Chhaya navigated the crowd with practiced grace and stepped off into her station, still softly smiling to herself like the universe had let her in on a secret. Only when she had walked a few paces did she freeze in sudden realization--- she had left her paper bag behind on the train. She ran back, but the train was slowly beginning to move, and even though she pushed and pushed, the wall of men stood impenetrable, impervious, and she was thrown back to the platform. For a minute, Chhaya stood defeated, staring at the train as it marched further and further away. Then, noiselessly, she blinked back her tears and started on the walk home.

Shashi was fast asleep when the phone rang. For a few minutes, he fumbled about in the darkness like a blind rat, trying to find it. Only when he turned his bedsheets upside down in frustration did it fall onto the floor with a dull thud. "Hello?" he murmured softly, a slat of pale moonlight falling in through the window illuminated his face. A weary female voice replied from the other end. Shashi's half closed eyes flew wide open, all remnants of sleep vanished. "Shalini didi, is that you?"

Chhaya laughed softly, her heart already feeling lighter upon hearing the word 'didi'. It'd been so long since she'd heard someone call her that.

'Yes, it's me. Tell me Shashi, have you ever seen snow?' She asked, as she wiped her cheeks.

"Yes, but only once. It was so long ago I barely remember it, but we went up north, to the hills, and we stayed in a hotel room and in the day-time we would travel by road and go even farther up in the mountains. It was off white, almost sort of brown in colour, and cold, oh so cold to touch."

"And did you like it?"

"No." Shashi winced, "I hated it. The snow numbed my fingers and wet my gloves."

Chhaya laughed. "Well, you should be grateful, you dumb boy. Not everyone has the money to go to the hills and stay in a hotel room and touch dirty brown snow. You see, I have a little sister, she's much smaller than you, Shashi, and I have promised her that one day we will go to the mountains, and we will also play in the snow, like all those movie stars do in the films."

"Do I have to pay you again this time?" Shashi asked. Modern technology was a marvel. Chhaya pursed her lips. "No, you don't have to pay anything."

"Oh, okay."
"Goodnight, Shashi."
"Goodnight, Shalini didi."
"Shashi, wait,"
"Yes?"
"My name isn't Shalini. It's Chhaya."

"Let's run away and get married," the man on the line declared, a twenty five year old from Jharkhand who had been calling Chhaya for the past three months.

"No, Rajesh. You prepare for your UPSC exam and get married to Jha sahab's daughter."

"You and I have a real connection, Shalu," said another, "why bring these petty things up?" when the issue of money and payments came up.

Chhaya had a few regular callers that she hated with a passion. They developed likes and dislikes, airs and affectations. They called her silly and vomit-inducing pet names like Shalu, and threw around terms of endearment like she was a wife, or worse, a girlfriend. They were pushy and sometimes pestered her for video calls and meetings and dates and addresses.

Only for one regular caller did she bear certain affection in her heart, and it was his call that she would await excitedly. Shashi would call her unfailingly, like clockwork, at 8 pm almost every day. And they would laugh, and talk about school, about the city where Chhaya lived, with its skyscrapers and its fancy shopping malls and its habit of selling dreams by the dozen. They talked about Sheuli, and about Shashi's father Ravi. From Chhaya, Shashi learnt the bad habit of referring to his own father by his first name rather than the correct, respectful term. To him this exercise seemed rather darkly amusing, he could now forgive his father's infractions simply because his father was not his father anymore, just some random man named Ravi. So his father's neglect became "Ravi didn't come to my annual function! Good thing because they didn't save a seat for a random Ravi anyway!" and "Ravi didn't come down for dinner for the fourth time this week, doesn't that man get hungry? Haha."

In sharp contrast to Chhaya's ruthless ambition and piercing clarity, Shashi lived in a state of entropy. He spent his time trying to unscramble the mess of his thoughts, to unspool all his memories and to box them neatly into a Before and an After. Before Ma and After Ma.

During lessons in school, he stared at the wooden Jesus on a cross statuette that hung from a single nail above the blackboard, noticing the minute details---the tiny nails in Jesus's wrists and at his ankles, the flaky 'blood' that was more orange than red, the expression on his face that seemed more bored than anguished.

Shashi had no real desire to learn or to interact with his classmates.

He did not want to think of anything at all.

Winter chill had begun to set in. Chhaya wrapped herself in warm sweaters and socks but she still described to callers bare skin, silver anklets and scant negligees. Shashi had just given his mid-term exams, and scored bottom of the barrel marks. His father had responded to his pockmarked report card by taking away Shashi's phone and shutting himself up in the study for three days. It was daytime, and Chhaya was slaving away at the office when Shashi suddenly called.

"Shashi!" she exclaimed, covering her mouth with her hand, "we can't talk right now, kid. I'm at work. If my supervisor sees me I'll be done for!"

Shashi did not respond.

Sensing something amiss, "Wait", Chhaya whispered. She moved outside to an empty corridor where some employees often came for cigarette breaks. "Where were you all this time, Shashi?!"

"Ravi took away my phone because I failed the mid-terms."

"Oh. I kept telling you to study hard, na?" Chhaya started, launching into a litany of scolding like an elder sister.

But there were no protests or justifications this time, only a stubborn silence on the other end. Chhaya suddenly felt her stomach sink. She could feel that there was worse news to come, much like one can taste the electricity and the moisture in the sky before the storm even begins to gather pace.

"What is it?"

"I'm going away, didi. It's a school in the hills."

Chhaya sighed and took a step back. Her free hand accidentally brushed against a dirty ledge, and came away smeared in grey ash.

Late one afternoon, his father had called him up to study.

"What is it, baba?" asked Shashi. In the fading noon light, he noticed for the first time how painfully old his father looked. Ma's death had aged him overnight.

"Do you know about All Saints? That school near McLeodgunj?"

Shashi felt uneasy.

"Uh, yes, baba, do you mean that school where uncle Shibu went to study?"

"Yes." Here he paused and got up from his armchair. He walked up to his desk, opened a drawer, and having procured a cigarette, proceeded to light it.

Shashi shifted uncomfortably and took a few steps away. He made no efforts to hide his revulsion.

"Well, you and I both know I'm not a very good father," he stopped to take a drag. "I'm sorry I've been shutting myself away all these weeks, it's just that I can't bear to look at your face, you remind me too much of your mother."

Shashi gulped, shaken at this shameless admission of ineptitude. He wanted to grab Baba by the collars and scream *What kind of a man are you? Why did Ma marry you in the first place?* Instead he stood quietly, staring at his father straight in the eyes.

"It's only the right thing to send you away to a good school like All Saints. Shibu was a brat, and look at what a fine specimen of a man he is now. Those people know how to turn boys into men."

"I've already made all the arrangements for your transfer, thanks to some of my contacts there. You can complete the remainder of your term in your new school, and Shibu will come in two weeks to help you prepare for life at All Saints. Oh and no phones are allowed, so," he gestured towards Shashi's phone lying on the desk, "you should say goodbye to your friends, now."

He paused again and turned away to look outside the window. Shashi knew it was because his father couldn't meet his eyes. His stare was burning into his father's back.

"It is a very prestigious institution, son, I'm sure Roshni would have wanted this for you too." Shashi did not respond. The study became quiet. In the street below an incongruous, comedic tune played as someone reversed their car.

"What ma would have wanted, Baba, was for you to be a father for once."

The train rolled and rumbled, picking up pace after it had navigated a tricky curve. This was hilly terrain. Shashi looked at the scenery, wondering what the new school would be like. He thought about the last calls he had made.

First, he called his friends from class, boys that he would often share his tiffin with. Two picked up, one didn't. Then he called Sheuli. Her mother picked up and said she was busy. Last, he called Chhaya.

"Well, you do hate snow!" she had teased. They had a good laugh about it.

He thought of his life up till then, how it had been shaped and punctuated by two women, Roshni and Chhaya. Light and darkness. True to the clashing nature of their names, Shashi was sure that his mother, if she had been alive, would never have approved of this friendship. How would he explain how they came to know of each other?

Women like Chhaya only existed in the dark corners of the night, found on the interwebs. There were many takers for the services women like her provided, but would society accept them? A family a few berths away was playing antakshari, someone somewhere was watching Whatsapp videos on the loudest volume possible; the train was full of holiday makers--- children in monkey caps waddled about, women opened steel tiffin boxes containing parathas and achaar. The man sitting next to Shashi offered him a puri, shiny with oil, but Shashi declined politely. In the suitcase below his berth were kept two new, stiff sets of uniforms, a pair of polished black shoes, chocolate bars and chips packets, and a notebook containing important names and numbers that he could dial from the school office between the hours of 5 P.M. and 7 P.M. on Saturdays and Sundays--- Ravi Baba, a smattering of uncles and aunts and grandparents, Mahendra, Sukant and Sheuli from Class 11-c, Chhaya didi.

He wondered if he would ever meet Chhaya in real life, in all of her zestful, magnetic, big sisterly glory. How did she look? Was she fair? Dark? Did she have dimples? A double chin? How did her lips curl when she laughed? How did her eyes blink when she cried?

Was she even real at all or was she a mere figment, a construction of his lonely, grief-addled mind?

He wondered if maybe someday he would walk on the street and just pass her by, not knowing her face as intimately as he knew her voice.

At the same time that Shashi began making preparations to go to university, Chhaya headed home and was promptly informed that a match had been found for her. He had a good job, didn't ask for much in the name of dowry, and said he would even allow Chhaya to work after marriage. Chhaya immediately agreed. After the match had been fixed, she locked herself in her room for one night and destroyed any trace of Shalini to have ever existed. The internet was a sticky place.

A year or so later, Chhaya and her husband headed back to the big city again. They both found suitable jobs, and on Sundays and national holidays, they would head to the beach-side in the evenings.

Chhaya and her husband would sit beside the waves, eating bhelpuri in silence, while their daughter would blow bubbles with a plastic wand and soap water.

In the same city, Shashi studied at a university of middling repute. He made friends, and discovered that there were in fact, things that he found interesting.

After classes, Shashi would head to the beach side too. Sometimes he would bring a girlfriend along, but mostly he liked to be there alone.

PITTER PATTER

BY MEWAN BANSCHAN WAR

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter.

The rain drops on the ledge outside, above the large French window. Its wooden jambs moistened by droplets trickling down the window panes, one after the other, slowly wearing away thin flakes of white paint. The sills beneath, with mild outgrowth of green moss, splashed upon by the slanting monsoon showers – soon to be dampened and discoloured; not as soon as when the sunshine hits and the woodwork is clawed off and eaten away by white ants and powdery fungus. A soon-to-be ‘rotten mess’.

“Windows though, can’t be helped”, says Nangsan to himself as he pulls the strap of his black sling bag on top of his collar bone, close to his neck; his fingers curled around it.

It’s been three hours since he’d started his paper reading in an empty classroom at the Presidency University earlier today. A sophomore student of Philosophy at St. Anthony’s College, Shillong, Nangsan was given a paper reading assignment as part of a six-week funded summer internship at the university in Kolkata’s College Street which he had applied to. He had been anxiously waiting for this project, since a certificate of experience from here would be a significant addition to his resumé. His supervisor, Professor Sen, had assigned him a few papers on Karl Marx’s theory of ideology and its impact on Modern Philosophy. “A relatively good and relevant topic,” he convinced himself.

And now, it’s time to head back to his apartment at Prafulla’s Lodge, across the overbridge at Rabindra Sadan. He needs to cover a few kilometres on foot from the university gate to reach the subway at Central, and from there, an underground metro to Sadan. Barely a twenty to twenty-five minutes journey. However, instead of simply going back to his apartment, locking himself up in his room, lying on the bed, his head recumbent on a pillow with his fingers constantly scrolling across his cell phone, why not cruise the city for the afternoon? It’s been quite some time since he last visited Kolkata with his family in the winter of 2007. Also, his brother, an Electronics Engineering student, is studying here at Jadavpur University. They had plans to meet this week but neither of them has any idea when. Nangsan, a young city-dweller from Shillong, is accustomed to and yet perpetually fascinated with the tantalizing glimpses of city life and its melodrama. A daily humdrum of people, cars, food, fashion, constructions, megaphones, plastics, urinals reeking of ammonia, the list goes on. And what is the most striking part? The lights of a city, of course. Incandescence that pierces through polluted air; untethered, looming in front of the eyes of a layman, like fireflies glowing in the dark, luring eight-year-olds to catch them.

And Kolkata is even more alluring. From crowded malls, movie theatres, lavish cafés, restaurants and bars with special gigs on every Friday, to five-star hotels, expansive bookstores, spacious salons, this megacity has it all. And the one place in the city, where all this hustle and bustle agglomerate – Park Street. A name of its own. A space where business thrives, where luxurious commodities are stashed in stores, waiting to be bought; where money makes up a man's day, rupee notes shuffled between his fingers. And often teenage boys, young and fuelled with adrenaline, sons of business tycoons and Bengali aristocrats, roam around at night, in imported, flashy Lamborghinis and Audi cars, thundering across Park Street.

"But the rain, stupid. It wouldn't stop. *Thait leh*", Nangsan grumbles to himself. Walking through the cloisters and airy corridors, marble-laid floors and lime-white walls of the university building, he takes an exit from the gateway after exchanging courtesies with the guard. He then opens his umbrella, keeps it over his head and quickly strides along the flooded lanes of College Street. The street is heavily splashed upon by the downpour; the brown, muddy waters gushing out of broken drainage pipes that are held vertically against concrete walls. The pakora-sellers and chaiwallahs stand stubbornly behind wooden kiosks, under large sheets of transparent plastic and crumpled tarpaulin to keep their commodities from getting wet. Children run past the women in sarees, their pants folded upto a few inches just below the knee, their legs splattered with mud and filth. The sweltering heat that envelops the earth all day, now carried off by the rain and a sweep of petrichor that settles in the air.

And before he knows it, Nangsan reaches the metro station, *welcomed* upon his arrival by a horde of beggars and barefooted ragamuffins including a woman and her child in worn-out, tattered clothes, with their open palms hanging in the air, waiting for a miracle to alight.

Hurried down the stairs after buying a pass for the journey, he reaches the platform and closes his umbrella. After five minutes of waiting, the train arrives and he makes his way in amidst the pushing and shoving, jostled around by other passengers who are also trying to make their way inside. In the air, a thick smell of sweat and staleness lingers, as the compartment doors close and the train moves.

One station passes. Two stations passes. The train finally reaches Park Street, three stations away from Central. The doors open within a few seconds of arrival and Nangsan alights after struggling his way through the crowded train. In his usual quick and unconcerned gait, he paces up the stairs and takes the exit from the station, out into Park Street. And thankfully the downpour has now stopped. A drizzle here, a drizzle there, but it is fine. *As it should be.*

At first, he thinks of all the places he can go to and relax for the afternoon. A café is best for that, obviously. But which one? Which one should he try out first?

And after only a few minutes of thinking and arguing with himself, and realising he's been standing alone on the sidewalks, awkwardly holding onto railings with his head staring up at billboards on top of buildings and black wires slung across the sky, he reaches a conclusion. He knows where he wants to go- or at least, supposedly so. Flurys Café.

A fairly expensive tea and pastry shop, well-known across the city. Usually for rich people and large families, and less likely for loners and individuals who go there only for a taste of luxury. Perhaps much less likely for young interns like himself, all the way from Shillong, who had just chanced upon a place like this, after surviving a claustrophobic underground train journey and a heavy downpour, both of which had already agitated him. But again, it is fine. *As it should be.* He does have money with him. That's all they care about, anyway.

So, with his umbrella open, he skitters along the sidewalks, unbothered by all the traffic and people around, their feet squelching against the dirty lanes. A cold drop of rain falls upon the back of his neck and slithers down, across fleshy terrain; his shirt sticks to his skin. Nangsan shivers a little. Uninterrupted yet, he walks and walks until he reaches Flurys. Greeted by the guard at the door as it opens, he brings down his umbrella, water dripping onto the checker-tiled floor, and enters. Greeted by the waiter, he is offered a seat at a table meant for two people, beside a glassy wall. There he sits alone, folding his umbrella, his sling-bag hanging on one side of his chair. The menu is handed to him, and he glances at it. It's all food and it's all expensive. He wonders what he'll order, keeping in mind the prices. Finally, he decides to go with a plate of chocolate gateau and some fries, along with a cup of Darjeeling red tea, his personal favourite. He gestures to the waiter and gives his order accordingly. "An exquisite order, sir!" the waiter remarks.

Is it? He pours some water onto his glass, and Nangsan sits comfortably, his hands resting on the table. There are quite a few groups of people around him, at different tables. One is a family apparently, others are groups of three, and there are hardly any pairs. "Maybe it's the rain," Nangsan speculates, "that's why there aren't many people today."

As he gulps down some water, he feels somebody's eyes on him. In a place like this, one can always expect people to stare, especially at a young man like himself, alone and new to the lively, quotidian streets of Kolkata. Even so, Nangsan does feel someone is staring at him. He turns his head around uneasily and notices a middle-aged man, alone like him, seated at a table just behind his, constantly looking at and away from him. He is clearly done eating as there's a toothpick in his hand and some money on a plate on his table. It seems he somehow recognises Nangsan, but is having a hard time remembering him. Nangsan senses this as well. To simply break the ice, the man comes up to him and says, "Excuse me, aren't you supposed to be busy, today?"

"Umm, I'm sorry. Do I know you, sir?" asks Nangsan, confused. "Sure you do. I'm your professor," replies the man confidently.

"Umm, professor?" Nangsan asks, with even more perplexity, "from Presidency?"

"Aree, no, no. What Presidency? I'm Joydeep, your professor. Signal Processing classes? Don't you remember?"

"I'm sorry sir, I don't know what you are talking about" replies Nangsan, confounded. Slightly irritated, the man asks, "How can you not know what I'm talking about? I'm your professor from Jadavpur. You are Nangman, right? Don't you recognise me? Aren't you guys having some departmental talk or something this afternoon?"

"Oh! No, no. I'm sorry, sir," exclaims Nangsan, understanding the confusion, "I think you must have mistaken me for my twin brother, Nangman. He is Nangman, with an 'm'. I am Nangsan, with an 's'. I'm in Kolkata just for an internship at the Presidency University. Nangman's the one studying at Jadavpur. We're twins, sir. Awful lookalikes of each other".

"Oh, what?! Is it so? You guys are twins? Really? Nangman and Nangsan?! Even your names are lookalikes of each other!" the professor laughs in astonishment, looking slightly askance. "I didn't know that, sorry..."

"Ye-ye-yes, sir, rightly so," Nangsan assures him, "we're twins with almost same names—just the 'm' and the 's' are substitutes for each other, I'm afraid."

"Wow. Twins, huh? Yeah, you're right, substitutes for each other! Wow. I have never been in a situation like this!"

"Ye-ye-yes, sir," replies Nangsan nervously. "We were actually supposed to meet each other sometime this week."

"Right. I'll tell your brother I met you; my god, my god, you both look absolutely the same! But your voices are different. So there's the tell!" chuckles the professor.

"Ye-ye-yes, sir," says Nangsan, smiling in slight embarrassment, eagerly waiting for his gateau to save him from this awkwardness.

"I'll definitely tell your brother I met you. Nice meeting you."

"You too, sir."

"Good, good. Alright, I'm done now. I shall take my leave, okay. Bye, take care!" says the professor as he leaves, shaking his head in jovial disbelief.

"Phew, what was that?" Nangsan thinks to himself.

Of course, he and his brother are both frequently mistaken for each other; great lookalikes who can be told apart only by their parents. They both have almost the exact same name, same height, same skin, hair and eye colour, same fashion sense. However, they do differ in their music and sports tastes and academic proclivities, a fair number of traits to differentiate between them. But for quite a long while, the mistaking of one for the other had no longer been a problem, because they were both in different cities, studying different courses, living their own lives, being their different selves.

Yet with Nangsan being in Kolkata now and closer to his twin brother, Nangman, these mistakes seem to have been revived again. Regardless, neither boy has a problem with it. They've lived with it all their lives, together.

For when the summer rains come, falling and battering upon stiff, stubborn concrete, does anyone really know, let alone care, if their sounds make a pitter or a patter? Do these words render any value once said or written? Can only one letter, one vowel interchanged with another, completely alter then configuration of letters, of sound, of entities altogether?

No, but only that the ground cries upon being slapped by water. A tin roof is cleansed of its accumulated dust, a window washed of its thickened grime; water and earth, moaning together upon fusion. The rains do carry with them a simple truth. Twins, whether twin brothers or twin sisters or twin cities, or not twins at all, we are all part of the same "something", despite the different letters in our names, the nuances in our pronunciations, the diverse complexities we are taught to recognise and live with. A simple truth that merits thinking about. A truth that whispers in our ears, "*It is fine. As it should be.*"

Outside, the weather is still drizzly. The streets, wet and black, light reflective, bustling with noise and heavy traffic; the yellow Ambassador taxis, amongst others, jolting forward in staggering paces, with their wipers spanning the breadth of the windshield.

"It will rain again soon," sighs Nangsan as he gazes at the ruckus outside, through the glassy wall.

"Here's your gateau, sir," the waiter comes and clears the table.

"Thank you," says Nangsan as he wipes the cutlery with a white tissue paper and starts on his course.

There is no one looking at him now.

SCARLET EVERYWHERE

BY SHAIVYA SAHARE

I am on the margins of my sleep, slipping into a deep slumber. I am trying to stay awake to meet Mana, but it feels like a heavy quilt is pulled over me. Rocks are weighing the quilt down on all corners, making it impossible for me to move. But there is peace in this paralysis, I can lay here forever, unmoving. As I am getting comfortable under the weight of this quilt, I feel a hand on my forehead, and it jolts me out of my sleep. Grey light fills the room and my eyes take a few seconds to adjust. I see Mana sitting at the corner of my bed. He has come into my room through the window like he does every night. "Are you alright? Did I scare you?" he asks while brushing my hair away from my face. I lean my face into his palm to calm myself, "No, sorry I fell asleep," I say. He asks me if I want to go back to sleep. I say no, like I do every night. I move aside, gesturing for him to sit beside me. He does, pulling the quilt over us. He tells me how he spent his day selling souvenirs outside the Agra Fort, and how he thought of me when he saw two girls eating ice cream. I read him a poem from my favorite book. I begin to fall asleep again before I can tell him more about my day. He quietly sings a song in my ear. Hesitating, I finally close my eyes, knowing I would wake up to find him gone by the morning.

*

"Ay Pupe! Pupe, wake up. And make me some tea," my father screams. I open my eyes to see my father drawing aside the window curtains to let sunlight into the room. I control the urge to scream back at him, to tell him I do not like the sunlight and I do not like him. The orange of the sunlight makes his face look like it's on fire. I imagine him screaming from the fire, the curtains burning slowly, pieces of fabric flying in the air. His screams fill the entire room. My quilt gathers into a ball, falls onto the floor, and rolls away to save its life, lest it should also burn like its dear friend, the curtain. I rise and dance in the autumn of flying fabric as my father's body turns to ashes.

I place a pot over the flame to boil water for the tea. My father does not like me drinking tea, so I add an unmeasured amount of tea leaves and sugar to the water. I quickly strain the tea into a tumbler and bring it to my father in his bedroom. I leave to get ready for school before he can start complaining about the tea.

In the evening, I come back home mentally exhausted from the trash that is taught to an 11th grader. I only get a half hour to myself, sometimes an hour if I am lucky before my father comes back and starts ordering me around the house. Pupe, make some tea. Pupe, fold the laundry, dust the shelves, water the plants, cut the vegetables. I usually do whatever I am told. An argument leads to a lot of screaming and things being thrown across the room.

On one such night, a steel plate had hit my face and I had gotten a bad bruise near my eye. I had to refrain from meeting Mana for two weeks because I did not want him to see me with a bruise. I always want to look good for him.

I cannot help but think about last night. Thoughts about last night have been threatening to force their way into my consciousness all day today. I cannot let myself think of Mana when he is not with me because it makes me restless. The only way for me to pass the day is to not think of the night. If I can just pretend the night does not exist and the day is all I have, I can live peacefully. And when the night finally comes, it's like a sweet surprise. If for some reason, it fails to come, I never had it to begin with.

"What do you think?" I ask Mana after I finish reading the passage to him. "You think too much for someone your age," he says. His reply offends me, but I try to keep a straight face. "I do have a sweet surprise for you," he says, handing me a small wrapped newspaper wound by a thread. I open it to find two pieces of pan petha inside. They are my favorite. We each eat them slowly, letting the flavor of pan linger in our mouths. The smell fills the small air around us. I imagine the petha inside his mouth, his tongue moving in circles, relishing the same taste as I am. The red of his tongue dancing with the green of my pan, mixing, spilling scarlet everywhere.

★

"Pupe, wake up! Go make tea," my father screams. I try to sit up and look for the newspaper wrapping from last night, but it is not here. Mana must have taken it with him when he left. I get off the bed and head straight to the kitchen without looking at my father. I want Mana's face to linger in my eyes a little longer. I pour water into a pot, but before I can put the pot on the flame, I notice the empty box of tea leaves on the counter. "How will you make the tea?" my father asks. I turn to see him standing at the kitchen door. I stand there with my head down, staring at my feet. I have found it best to not speak at such moments. When my neck starts to cramp and I finally look up, he is gone. I quickly get ready for school.

I come back home with a bag of groceries that my father had ordered me to bring. I do not know who runs this house, him, or me. I wash and chop the vegetables. The red of the tomato reminds me of the red of Mana's tongue. Tonight, I will wear something red for him. I will sing to him as he sings to me. I practice the song a couple of times, practice where to take the pauses, when to smile, when to stop and look at him, and when to pretend to not want to continue and have him urge me so.

"Go on, please," Mana whispers, his eyes closed. I let out a sigh before I continue to sing, resting my head on his shoulder. After I stop, he takes my hand in his and tells me I have a beautiful voice. I feel the ring on his finger with my thumb. He tells me the color red looks good on me. I tell him to take his ring off. He pulls the quilt over us and I sink under its weight.

★

The next morning, I feel the weight of the quilt being lifted off me. I slowly open my eyes to see my father standing beside my bed. Why can't he make his own tea for once? He continues to stand there, staring at something on the bed. I have the horrifying thought that Mana might have left something behind, my father could have found something – perhaps Mana's ring. I should not have made him take it off. I search the bed with my hands before sitting up. Then I see blood everywhere. I see what my father has been looking at. On the bed Mana lay still, a knife wedged through his heart. I scream but the sound does not reach my ears, or it does not escape my mouth. My father tells me to get off the bed but my hand inches closer to Mana, to touch him, to see if he is real. My father yanks my hand away. He drags Mana onto the floor, wrapping him in a carpet. I manage to get on my feet and try to stop him from taking Mana away. Words finally find me and I tell him I will make tea for him every day, begging him to not take Mana away from me. I watch as the carpet disappears around the door to my room. Not knowing what to do I go to the kitchen and pour some water into a pot. I place the pot on the flame to boil water for the tea. Mana must have fallen asleep beside me. I should have stayed awake until he left the room last night. But I cannot think about him when he is not with me. The only way for me to pass the day is to not think of the night.

THE ENDLESS DREAM

BY AKSHADA

Joseph K. woke up a day before his thirty-first birthday in a state of utter frenzy and inexplicable confusion. Drops of sweat had formed on his forehead and were frantically dabbed upon by the end of the sleeves of his nightshirt.

In the series of sleepless nights, the last one was particularly intriguing and filled with mystique. His usual dreams generally consisted of incidents from his childhood or lady loves from college. Sometimes he dreamt about Leni. But last night, K. had dreamt something exceptionally odd. And the moment he woke up, it was all gone. He had wanted to document it in that diary of his which sat on the nightstand above the copy of Fyodor Dostoevsky's 'Crime and Punishment'. (He was reading it these days. Perhaps it contributed to his recent obfuscated dream). But it all faded away as soon as he picked it up. All he could remember was in fragments. The only fact he was certain about was that it was about the case and that there was an intense sense of urgency, almost as if he compellingly had to make sense of the dream in order to understand the nuances of his case and win.

He got out of the bed hoping that once he sets himself in motion, it will come back to him. But he could still recall only some elements - some sort of a room with a high ceiling, without windows. The sheer thought of it was claustrophobic to him. He frantically walked up and down, up and down the room but to no avail. At one moment, he even thought that he was only overthinking and lending more attention to it than it demanded. Did he have too much to drink by any chance? Maybe that cruel manager added something to the glass of water he offered to him in the office the other day? Or was it the cook? Had he eaten something wrong? Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Breath was slowly running out of his lungs and in a mad state of hysteria, K. threw himself back on the bed.

That, however, didn't help the rising desperation K. felt in his body with every passing minute. The sheer possibility of getting rid of all the trouble of going to those dingy courts and meeting all those filthy people filled K. with extreme emotion. K. could do away with all those unnecessary and exhausting activities once and for all and focus on his work at the bank. He only had to decipher the meaning of the forgotten dream that would help him to decode the secret of his case.

Once he would crack it open, he could be a free man and do whatever and whenever he wanted. He may even think of getting married then. Perhaps to Fraulein Burstner? He won't press it but he would definitely give it a try. But what about Leni? What would happen to her? Oh well, she won't be disheartened. She herself her share of male suitors who'd queue up in line if she ever raised the question. Besides, she wouldn't want to marry, at least not now since she had to take care of the advocate. If she wouldn't have been there, the advocate would have been long gone. But, the dream. The case. K. was forgetting that these events of the future would be possible only if he would decipher the dream. He couldn't afford to waste his time in day-dreaming right now. Almost on the verge of crying, he sighed slowly like a hopeless creature, and told himself to instead remember what the dream had shown.

When K. went to the bathroom to brush his teeth and start his morning routine, he thought about the medicine he was supposed to take just before breakfast. It was recommended by a well-known doctor to prevent his depression and anxiety. There had been days when K. absolutely forgot to take them. These were days clouded aggressively by tension and stress regarding the case and its verdict, usually on weekends. And sometimes painted blue like the shade of the walls of the bank, when K. wanted to kill the manager and the entire bank and everyone in the world. As he looked at himself in the mirror, he thought about the consequences of not taking that wretched pill. Devilish, diabolical - the stark thought of it. And suddenly, an image of a prescription sitting under a book on a side stool came to his mind. The small piece of paper was seen flying as if there was wind blowing. K. held on to this image with closed eyes. This was one fragment of the dream, the dream that would lead to the path of his freedom. He must not let go of it. He must hold it fast. Copy the image in his mind and jot it down. Yes. He must write it down. The diary. Yes. The diary.

Without rinsing his mouth, K. went back to his room and wrote the image in its complete clarity. He could not risk forgetting this. Not now. Not ever. So it had to do something with a flying prescription. What could that have to do with the case though? K. wondered. Was he only conjuring up the heightened relevance of the dream? What if it was all a waste of time and there was no hidden meaning behind it? The pill. K. must have the pill and eat something and drink water and think. This anxiety won't do.

The case had taken a complete hold of him. And why wouldn't it? If an honest man who never had any enemy in his life is suddenly shaken from his sleep one morning to rise up from bed with three men standing over him and inspecting his small yet sophisticated dwelling, and asked to stand up with hands in the air because he was under arrest, what would he do? Would he react in any other way than K.? It had been exactly a year now since it all began. K. was now used to the weekly sessions of the court, his appointments with the advocate, his futile wanderings across unknown alleyways and crowded dwellings, etc. It had all become routine, just like his life at the bank. But he was still unable to wrap his head around the whys. The questions never ceased to lessen his confusion and curiosity. And even though a whole year had passed, the case hadn't made any progress and was almost strictly on that level from where it began. It gave K. all the more reason to hang onto the little hope the dream gave him.

During breakfast, K. found himself staring unblinkingly at the door of the small dining hall. The waves of memory swept him over and flung him on the shore of the day of his 13th birthday. A night before the event, K. had dreamt that he was in a room with dark wooden walls with no furniture and no windows. K.'s little self realised, within a few seconds into the dream, that he had been locked in there. There seemed to be no way out for him. And he struggled to find a crack or an opening of any kind because he was slowly running out of breath. When he looked up, the room seemed to be endless, owing to the tall ceiling. K. grew more scared. The door on which he was banging like a mad child did not seem to move even slightly. He was dying and just when he was taking his last few breaths, he woke up. The agitation and the pain was visible on little Joseph's face and his whole birthday that year was spent on thinking about that hell of a dream. This door in the hall reminded him of that and he sat frozen on the spot. He did not even realise when Frau Grubach, the owner of the tenements, came in to check on him and looked at him almost as an old woman looks at a child in pain.

"Joseph, Joseph!" Frau Grubach called K. and shook him violently.

"Frau Grubach! Oh, it's you. It's only you", K. replied in utter astonishment as he slowly seemed to regain consciousness.

"Were you expecting someone else? What's the matter with you? You have death on your face, boy."

"Nothing. Nothing, really. I was just reminded of something bad..."

"It's about the case, eh? Look what those monsters have turned you into. You can't eat, you can't sleep and now I feel you have trouble breathing too."

"Oh, no. I'm quite alright. I'm sorry I worried you. I'll just finish my meal."

"That you do."

As soon as she turned her back and exited through the door, K. heaved a sigh of relief. Embarrassed as he was at being caught in daylight like that, trembling at the thought of a dream of childhood, he was relieved that it was only Frau Grubach and thankfully, not Fraulein Burstner. No. That would've been a complete death of him.

After eating his breakfast, K. decided to walk to the Staatsbibliothek. The moment he opened the door, a cool breeze welcomed him and K. shivered slightly at its contact with his skin. But he was a determined man and one who didn't like to leave things incomplete. The dream, for example, had become for him an assignment that he was desperate to grasp the sense of. And it was for this that he had undertaken the task of going to the library. He intended to search books on dream interpretation.

K. melted into the silence of the library organically. He was one of those people who could go hours and days in complete silence and not once question it.

At the bank, for example, even the modest sound of a pen falling on the floor would cause him irritability. In this present atmosphere, if it were not for the misery that the broken dream had caused, K. would have been content and would have enjoyed the liberty and luxury of this silence. But now, his focus lay completely on the significance of the dream. And he went to look for a book with his quick, sad steps. It was when he was walking towards the psychology section and passing the section of books on music that a particular hardbound with '*Clarinet: Tips for an Amateur Musician*' written in a cursive font on the spine looked at him and urged him to stand petrified. Another fragment. Someone playing the clarinet in a dark wooden house and K. running around frantically in search of the person playing it. The melody appeared to echo from the house itself, but there was no one to be seen around the vicinity. Not even the clarinet. And the music got louder and thicker and quicker, as if asking K. to hurry, to make haste. But K. was running in circles. He was bound to that doomed cycle with no agency of his own.

And suddenly the sound of a clock ticking replaced that of the clarinet and fastened just as K.'s steps fastened.

K. ran to the nearest bench, sat down, and started jotting down the sequence of the events in it. It had something to do with the clarinet now too. And the clock? That must be symbolic of the fact that I'm running late and if I don't solve the riddle of this crooked dream soon, I shall be damned, K. thought. But how much time did he have? He had to know, so that he could work out accordingly, even if it seemed he was getting nowhere. But wasn't the speed of the ticking of the clock getting faster as he moved one step? What could it mean? That he had one hour? One minute? One second?

K.'s head exploded. Thoughtlessly, he screamed in the library and held his head in his hands, almost pulling his hair out. One of the staff members agitatedly walked towards K. and asked him to leave. With a fallen face and a dejected body, K. walked out of the library back onto the street.

On the verge of giving up now, K. thought about all the possible consequences that could be. A part of him wanted to die and a part of him wanted to retaliate against this absurd system where people were framed for crimes that they were completely unaware of. But what would the result be? There was no answer to it. He had not heard of one person who went against the status quo and made it out honest and alive. Not one. And K. valued his honesty and self-respect more than anything in the world. Perhaps it was better if he just lay down. Perhaps there was nothing he could do, nothing he could control. Things just were, he simply was, and it was not in his power to alter this equation in any manner.

Slowly, K. walked back towards his room.

When K. awoke the second time in the day, he seemed much relieved. The sun had gone down and K. had decided that he would not rack his brains to solve the stupid mystery of the dream. He would rest sufficiently, go to work, do his routine whole-heartedly, and remain calm. Yes. He'd do exactly that without unnecessarily being occupied with something as senseless as a dream. Ha! He almost laughed at his childishness.

Regarding the case, it appeared that K. tried to dodge the question of it altogether. He knew that there might dark consequences to his resort to inaction but he also knew that he had to maintain his cool in order to preserve the job he had at hand.

K. was warm and cosy on the bed. When he got out of it, he called out the maid and asked her to bring a cup of tea to his room. Then he went to the washroom to wash his face. For a few seconds, he looked at himself in the mirror – droplets travelling down his cheeks, forehead, and nose – and wondered just how uneventful his life was. Like these drops, he too had a beginning and an end, but could he lead his life thinking about something he had no control over, this abhorred case, for instance? Above all, what was he even working for or against? What about the journey from the origin to nothingness, the ultimate end? Did it account for something? Did all his efforts account for something? Anything?

A knock on the door.

"Sir, your tea!" the maid said from the other side.

K. could do more than just sitting in his room on the old wooden chairs, sipping his tea and watching the world from his balcony go by. But he sat there in silence and flipped through the pages of his diary. Without any determined motive of reaching somewhere he once again tried to sum up the images into one. Nothing. He was taking his last sips and his sight involuntarily lingered on the gardener who was working his evening shift in the small garden of the apartment building where K. stayed as a tenant. The scythe in the gardener's hands reminded him of something he had seen and he tried to remember where he recently saw it. And his mind zeroed down to the advocate's house. Last week, when K. was there, he had discussed with the advocate that horrific dream he had seen when he was 13. As he opened the main gate of the big house to leave, he saw a scythe in the gardener's hands and thought just how absurd it was that such a big tool as a scythe was being used for such a small garden. But he didn't want to waste his time and energy inquiring over it, so he ignored it and went back home. Today again, he was overcome by that same absurd thought. And he realised that the answer to his misery lay with the advocate. The advocate knew something that he wasn't telling him, some fact that he was keeping from K., and something that would turn the case effectively in K.'s favour.

In a matter of moments, K. changed from his pyjamas to a suit. On his way out, he grabbed his overcoat and started walking towards the advocate's house. This was it. It would lead to something. K. was, at the moment, a ludicrous mix of excitement and fear.

When he reached the house, he found it starkly silent. But when he reached the kitchen, calling out Leni's name, she leapt onto him and started smothering him with kisses. It made K. very uncomfortable, but in his own way, he was slightly gratified too. Outside the window, a walking band passed by – all of its musicians playing different instruments. Leni commented on their lovely synchronisation as she held K.'s face in her hands but K.'s eyes were glued to those of the musician playing the clarinet who was walking in a robotic fashion. He too, was looking back at K. The wind started to blow and as the man went by, he even passed a smile to K., who was only too shocked to move. It meant he had to hurry to see the advocate.

Pushing Leni to the side, K. ran towards the advocate's room. And it made all the sense in the world to him at that moment. The fragments lined up like the perfect order of books that sit in the shelves of a library. The prescription. The room. The door. The scythe. The clarinet. They were all leading up to the advocate. He had to look at the prescription and follow it. He had to be kept alive. That was the only way for K. To survive, to win the case, and to get over this perpetual death. Breathless, he reached the door and pushed it open.

(NOTE: This story is the author's imagination of an alternate ending or rather, an interpretation of a particular figment of Franz Kafka's novel, 'The Trial', which was brought out posthumously by his friend, Max Brod in 1925. The characters therefore, are his creations. For Kafka, the novel was unfinished, just as perhaps this story is :)

THE MEMOIRS OF AN UNFAIR CHOICE

BY MRILINA SENJAM

Alone was never real unless felt.

The scent of his body, the warmth of those cuddles, the laughs on that face long-known. "It was his jacket. It was the one he had always looked handsome in," a smile portrayed upon the lined face. The jacket could be seen hanging inside the half-closed closet, in the dim faded light of the long night. She tried hard with those pillows in her arms, left and right, struggling not to lose the sight of that jacket hanging inside the closet. She felt awed by flashes of memories each time she saw the jacket, hard yet soothing. She turned off the lamp to let the night sleep peacefully, something she could not afford since that very night. The Quran could be seen shining through the slack red silk covering it,. It was hard to call it a day, but she guessed, it would forever be just this hard.

The night was a war, it was never a good night. It had never been, since that night.

It was a stressful day with files piling up on the table one after the other.

"Avni? Wanna go grab some coffee?"

"Sorry, I have to finish these up," sighed Avni.

The seconds felt longer than hours she had had with the one person she was immensely missing every passing moment. She saw more files adding up with huge letters that read 'URGENT'. Previously, work wasn't this bad, she thought.

"Seems like everything changes when the only hope dies," murmured Avni while skimming through the files.

How she wished she could get a text that instant from that one contact that had been continuously going to voice calls since that night. A mysterious fear of being alone announced itself each time she heard the beeps after the line ended.

Oh he's gone, the beeps reminded her.

It was a bad day as usual, she thought, while climbing up the stairs to the station. Another thought came, do I even have something good in myself to call it a fine day? Her hair swished along with that thought, playing in the gust of the wind from the train that just passed by.

Out of the blue Avni saw a group of men with dark long beards and eyes lined with deep smudged kajal. She could feel her stomach turn. It was a nightmare, a lost hope. She could feel a tide of memories rising inside her. As everything has its own story to tell, those dark lined eyes had their own too. She tried hard to swallow the lump in her throat and moved her gaze from those men to a kid licking an orange flavoured popsicle.

"Oh the orange flavoured popsicle. Not now!" she murmured to herself. As much as those dark lined eyes has shaken her, the orange popsicle could give her butterflies throughout her body. She entered the train, trying to find a seat amidst the swarm of people looking for the same, but in vain. She found herself staring at that kid who had been licking the flavoured ice. Life was still. The noise of over thirty people stopped for the moment. The constant pushing of elbows behind her seemed to caress her peached coloured soft skin. She felt love, she felt missed.

"Avni, come on. You can do this. Come on. Avni yayy!"

"No wait Asim! Don't leave this thing with me, Asim wait. Just grab me from behind. I can't ride this thing by myself."

"Alright alright. I'm right behind you, and I will always be holding you tight so do not worry. Just start the engine, my lady. Drive till that store and let's get our favorite orange flavoured popsicle."

She felt the kiss embedded on her cheek, she felt those laughs, she felt those arms right around her waist. She could hear her name being cheered with that voice long unheard. How she missed that voice. How badly she wished for those words to be alive. *Avni, my poor soul.*

It was at that moment the elbow behind hit her hard enough to jerk her back to reality. Suddenly those beautiful memories dissolved with the noises of the world. Her only happy dream ended. The only place she could rest, gone. *Gone for better, or worse?*

She took the bag of groceries from the man who owns the only big shop in her locality. The man was her friend since she had moved to that place. Uncle Faisal, who had always looked cheerful, his face wrinkled with lines of smiles. Who knows if those lines could also contain moments of sorrow - hidden, unseen and unheard of. She gave him the money and waved him goodnight with a smile. Her only smile in those three months since that night. She opened the doors to her apartment and took inside the milk can she had forgotten to take in that morning. It must be spoilt by now, she thought.

She took the bag of groceries from the man who owns the only big shop in her locality. The man was her friend since she had moved to that place. Uncle Faisal, who had always looked cheerful, his face wrinkled with lines of smiles. Who knows if those lines could also contain moments of sorrow - hidden, unseen and unheard of. She gave him the money and waved him goodnight with a smile. Her only smile in those three months since that night. She opened the doors to her apartment and took inside the milk can she had forgotten to take in that morning. It must be spoilt by now, she thought.

The table was set, with only a bowl of egg fried rice with a spoon neatly placed beside it. She sat down to start her dinner until she could not help but notice the empty seat beside her. It was egg fried rice for dinner that night. Streams and streams of tears flowed down her cheeks as if they had been blocked for years. Her eyes, flooded with tears, could see no more, but the empty seat beside her could still be felt. Failing to lift up the spoon, she left the kitchen. She went to the bedroom, opened the closet just in front of the bed, and took out a jacket that felt familiar. Yes, it was the jacket on which lingered the only perfume he wore, it was the jacket he had always looked handsome in. She wrapped herself in the jacket like a baby longing to be caressed. Her night was silent, still and nourished with the scent of the perfume, a night where she didn't feel alone, a night where she was not left alone.

The day started with the Fajr, the dawn prayer of Islam, heard through the echoes of her own self, opening up a large reserve of memories for her. Fajr, Asim's favourite prayer of all, for which he would always wake up earlier than her to get ready. "I feel myself at ease and peace after this prayer. And you know what's my other favourite thing to do after I'm done with the prayer? Watching you sleep, that's one of my favourites. God you are so beautiful Avni. I could stare at you forever. Your eyes, they give me hope every day. Your breath, they make me love you more and more." With kisses as soft as petals, Asim kissed every inch of her face. These words silenced the calls of the prayer heard through the loudspeaker. Is that what you are doing now, staring at me from heaven?

Will you do that forever?

Work at her office had always been boring and tiring since his death. She was planning to shift her job to another office, which was closer to her home. As usual, her day started off with huge files waiting for her arrival. Bhavna, a colleague and the only person who had always lent her a listening ear with unconditional support, came with two mugs of coffee. "So good morning to the beautiful lady. Here, have the best coffee to start the boring work," Bhavna said, placing the coffee mug on Avni's table. "Good morning to you and the boring day as well, and thanks for this," Avni said, touching her mug to Bhavna's. "So, how's it going? Everything." "It's fine. Just fine, I guess." "Hmmm what about the dinner we've been planning for? CP? Hauz Khas?"

"Oh right! I totally forgot about it. Yeah, sure but why outside? Let's have it at my place?"

"No, I don't trust your cooking baby. I'd rather have bread than your burnt chapatis," giggled Bhavna. "Oh so you still have not forgotten that! Bhavna, you have been holding on to that memory for quite a long time, now be a good girl and let go of it," winked Avni. So it was there, both left the air silent. They knew what the other person was feeling that instant. It was the story of memories at a cliff. A barren mixture of dread and reminiscence. But it was also the story Avni longed for, the one she had protected for months, the only one she wished had never happened. It's strange, how two people met to be this much into each other, Bhavna smiled.

The day ended with a flick of leaked news from the head office. One of their project members had given the news to them that the HOD had decided to promote Avni to the project manager's post. Everyone was happy for her except her own self. She couldn't be truly happy for any reason so far. Not that she didn't try, but the failed attempts piled up her way, more like blocking her way to happiness.

She made dal and chapatis for dinner that night. She struggled not to burn the chapatis when suddenly she was struck by a familiar voice.

"Avni come I'll teach you how to not burn these."

"You should try harder then. You cannot beat my talent in burning them Asim.", she laughed.

"You can see how much I love you, I'll still be with you even if I have to eat burnt chapatis everyday. See, you're burning them again! Oh rest in peace my chapatis, I'm sorry on behalf of my beloved. I truly am."

"Seriously Asim! I burnt them again. I'm so perfect at this. Burning your chapatis." Both of them laughed.

How loud these words were, she thought. As she came back, she found fumes and the smell of burnt chapatis again. Some things never change, a curve tangling upon her lips.

She knew it was Isha'a prayer time. She could still see the Quran wrapped in silk linen from her bed. She had never been a religious person, she hardly had memories of visiting temples and doing rituals. Though her mother was a true devotee of Lord Krishna, and her brother of Lord Rama, she was never a devotee to any deity. She always felt that religions are humans' creations and that God is only one. Indeed, that was how she met Asim. She wanted to see how rituals were done in mosques, so she went with one of her Muslim friends to the holy place few years ago. Though they were not allowed to go inside, they prayed outside. She met Asim there, a volunteer on the day's ritual work. The first time she saw him, she knew they were connected through something unseen yet strong. Nevertheless, it was love that connected them. How the two of them bonded, knowing they were from different religions was truly magical and beautiful. People do create magic, even if they do not realise it immediately.

They speak no religions but of hearts that sang through the chorus of their love.

The morning was a hue against the shades of sunrise. It was a beautiful day to skip work and spend time lying in bed with coffee and cookies. The air smelt of cooked biryani with aromas of mint and bay leaves. It was a perfect day to cook a heavy lunch since it had been quite long since she had had lunch that was not sandwiches and coffee from the office canteen. She could feel herself getting thin; her wrist could now be covered entirely in one wrap of her hand, which was not the case before. Her wrists, which he had always loved to hold. Just as she woke up to go shopping for biryani, she got a call from Bhavna telling her to rush to work immediately.

She went straight to her cabin, found her entire department's colleagues waiting for her with a bouquet and a souvenir. They clapped and cheered as soon as she entered the cabin, Bhavna rushed from the side with champagne on her hand, her body dancing flawlessly in the air filled with perfume. She hugged her and congratulated her. Everything was a prize for Avni's hard work and dedication to her job. They celebrated her promotion as the project manager. Avni should have been happy, she smiled throughout but only Bhavna knew that those smiles were not real. Though work had been rough for her the past three months, she could still break the ice with a new beginning as the project manager.

"Congratulations Avni!" stilled the air from so many familiar and unfamiliar voices. She could see that they were all happy for her, and thought how blessed she was to have all of them cheering for her. If only, that one person could be there too!

Oh how much she wished he was there too. How much she wished she could tell him the news first. How much she wished for him to be alive! God's gracious.

She went to the HOD's cabin, carried out the required paperwork. She was all set to be the new project manager. She decided to shift to her new cabin the day after. Suddenly, she felt something irregular in her stomach, and she rushed to the washroom. It wasn't the weather or anything she had eaten but she threw up. She felt tired, dizzy and her head was spinning a bit. She felt so unwell suddenly that she decided to go back home. Taking an early leave, she rushed back to her place.

No, it's not the weather nor do I have any problems with my stomach, what is it then? Avni thought.

Dear Asim, oh dear. I was promoted today, the dream we've been dreaming since the day I joined. And the happiest of all, Asim dear, I'm pregnant too. We're pregnant Asim. We are going to have a baby. Aren't you happy? Why are you silent Asim, say something!

She opened the red silk. An aroma of beautiful memories sealed the room. She kissed the Quran, like Asim did every night. Her fingers ran through the letters of holy words. The tiny letters gave sparkled her as much as Asim's fingers did when he first explored her body. People create magic, she realised.

Is it not unfair that you have to take back the life you loved, the life born out of your blessings? Is it not just that your own creation took the life of one of your other creations? Is it not unforgiving to take away the husband of your child, the father of her child? Am I not one of your children? I was only taught Hindu prayers in my childhood but it was through this creation of yours that I learnt Islamic prayers. I was never asked to wear a burkha but only sarees, it was your creation who taught me so. Is this not enough that you have to take him away from me so fast, so early? Couldn't you have waited until his child could call him 'Abu'?

This child of ours is growing inside me. This child, whom I'd love more than my own self, whom I'd love with all my life, whom I'd never give up upon. This child, who would forever be your son, needs the caress of the father you have taken away. It's not fair that this child would never have a father to call out to, the whole wide world, but not a single creation of yours to call Abu. Is this your reward to Asim for never skipping a prayer to you? Or is heaven too lonely without Asim?

These questions reckoning the memoirs of an unfair choice of yours, would forever remain unanswered.

THE NIGHT OF BROKEN GLASS

BY ARPITA ROY

It is one of the most clichéd sights: Five college students drinking together on a weekend. Five minutes later, stories cannot walk straight anymore. They laugh like the war is finally over.

- *We are in Germany.*

- *The last time you were drunk, we were in Chennai. How is it Germany now?*

- *First of all, fuck you, I am not drunk, I defend myself. Second of all, it's a story. And first of all, it's the 1900s.*

- *Oh good that narrows it down,* Coral remarks.

- *You're so bad at this.* Lena reminds me, *The last time, you said we were in Chennai and remember when it began to rain, you said we were all swimming to the Andamans? Do you intend to ever complete your stories?*

- *Will you guys just let her tell the story?*

- Alright.

They all look at me expectantly.

- What?

- The story?

- Right. So, where was I? Wait, yes, we are hunter gatherers. No wait, that's the Andaman story. Lena, you confused me.

- *Sure,* they sigh.

A few more minutes later, as their windows begin to seep in love and loss, stories begin to seem more like them than like stories. I get up and walk carefully like there are landmines all over. As if, if I could avoid the wrong move, nobody would notice me. The ocean eyed man notices me. He says nothing. He knows I carry arrows on my back and sometimes they take me to lands I do not intend to visit.

I am from the land of hunter gatherers, which is to say, I am from different lands or from none at all. My home is this abyss. Yet removed by an ocean, like my sisters, I forgot the most important skill – when do we stop? What did our ancestors owe to the abyss? Nothing. Yet the ocean seems gentle only when you're not the one drowning. Now with the blood of hunter gatherers in our veins and armed with arrows, we know survival is hereditary. Some of us have simply inherited more survival than others. So, I sit near a tree and begin to hum a song and listen to them talk.

There is something primitive about storytelling. Like their ancestors who hunted, they bare their scars and talk about the time the claws and teeth had almost snuck behind their back and breathed on their necks.

- *You know, Lena says to Coral, Andaman always reminds me of the Cellular Jail. My grandfather was younger than us when he was sent to the jail, She casually lights a cigarette, inhales, breathes out the smoke across the night and continues, Whenever I am sad, my father asks me to think of that and be grateful.*

- *It's the most peculiar thing, Coral replies.*

- What is?

- *The fact that a few minutes ago she confused the Andaman story with the Germany one. And now this. When I was in the hospital, wondering if I would ever be able to walk again, sometimes I thought about all the Jewish children in the camps who suffered so much more. But, Coral snaps out of her reverie, tell me, does it help you? Do you feel happier?*

- *I don't know. I know this is ungrateful but I don't think so.*

- *You cannot guilt out of sadness, Lena. How about I tell you what happened yesterday.*

It was ten at night when the poetry slam ended. I told myself all the versions of okay to take the last metro home. As I was about to cross the road, somebody I knew saw me waiting and asked me if I was sure I could go back alone. I smiled and assured him. You see I am not scared of ten pm's or empty roads – I don't think anybody is – I am scared more about the empty machines waiting to run me over.

And that was the first time I met Elle. She offered to drop me home. I almost asked, "You are not an organ harvester, are you?" Five minutes into the cab, I analyzed the cab driver and his hand gestures each time they left the wheel and I could tell so did Elle. Now I

wondered if Elle was reckless. But something a friend had said back in high school had stuck with me, I was not worth raping. But then who is? The cab driver asked which route. Explanations failed. He took the route he preferred.

She talked to me about other things instead: School. College. We discovered how we both liked travelling and how much we've been misled. Even by the police. Meanwhile I remembered how the police had asked a harassment survivor if she had been intoxicated. Do you think poetry is a high that qualifies for rape?

Elle and I talked about an instinct that we must consult before asking for routes. Now that I think of it, perhaps it is a survival instinct that is triggered each time I see an unknown man smile at me. Then, a few minutes into the conversation, Elle told me she is a trauma survivor. And as if the cab had hit the brakes all of a sudden, I felt an air-punch on my gut and tasted bile in my mouth. White hospital sheets shrieked and I looked at Elle and said I understand. Elle had been telling me about the doors she couldn't open for days but when I said I understand, Elle didn't doubt.

Believing that a stranger understood her version of hell, she surprisingly gifted me something as beautiful as a lonely girl walking on the road at 10pm, unafraid and reckless.

You cannot weigh trauma against each other, Lena. How can we compare losses if they are already lost?

Loss seems to walk a little and then sit beside the girl with the red dress. She has an autumn smile. You can sense winter is always about to arrive but never quite here. She has fall leaves for her heart. They are soft golden but crumble when held. When someone leaves, she memorises every footstep.

She gets up, runs her hand across the dress to straighten the creases and then picks up an empty glass. She pretends to drink it and says,

Here the glass is half empty. I have drunk the moonlight out of this. Now this is yours, she says to the ocean eyed man.

He laughs. Four years ago, he had fallen in love with an ocean eyed girl. Her hands were as gentle as water but they were always slipping away. She could whisper all the love stories that had drowned in the seas. She was like a seashell. When he slept next to her and listened to the silence, he could hear the entire ocean. When she kissed him goodbye, she smeared the blue of her lips on his lips. And ever since, each time he speaks, the waves part and all the seasick lovers are reminded of the terrible blue.

Look the sky has poured out moonlight to its brim again. Now this is yours, she says, *yours.* Before he can decide whether he is willing to return to her half glass worth of emptiness, she asks,

Do you like me?

As he tries to take the glass from her hand, a slight tremble catches her unaware and the glass slips. A silver sound breaks and melts in the air. Nobody could have sworn if they had indeed heard the glass break. But the moonlight is spilt all over the ground.

Don't touch it, she screams, I can clean up my own mess. Don't.

Lena holds her hand and asks her whether she wants to hear a story. It is Lena's turn. Lena is going to tell them a story.

- *There was a little girl with spider web hands.* She fell in love with almost everything her spider web hands held. She didn't know smiles could ever be replaced by anything less which is not to say she had never cried or complained about rain on the days she was meant to play, but she learnt to play the harmonium on the rainy days instead.

Let's say her name is Lena. Not me; just my name. So Lena was seven when this happened. She was in the school bus and a boy of seventeen sat next to the window. She had seen blue marks across his hands and wondered how nobody was curious enough to know what crayons are so permanent on the skin. But on that day, Lena noticed, the boy, with the blue black painted crisscross sketched arm, was crying. Lena sat beside him and asked him what was wrong. He mumbled under his breath. Lena persisted on having a one-sided conversation and eventually asked him about the crayon arms. Suddenly, he turned around and hit her. Lena was taken aback. She moved across a few seats, held her breath and never cried.

By the next eight years, Lena had mastered the art of holding her breath and not crying. Whenever she felt that she might crumble into dust, she would cross her arms, hold herself and repeat it's okay again and again but never cry.

That day her friend of five years had declared that he was no longer in love with her and she knew how the bus she was in was merely taking her back to a home that was so foreign that she hated the way the very air tasted of antidepressants and cigarette smoke. There was always the sense of a quarrel half emptied from a container. She felt like she was a pill from the container and any day now all her uncried tears would dissolve her among the array of angry words that she had gulped.

That day, sitting in the school bus, a little boy of eight kept laughing about things she didn't care. Her anger threatened to spill over but she asked him to stay away from her. He didn't. And it was so sudden that nobody could have sworn they had witnessed it, but Lena hit him. *He sat down and didn't cry.*

The red dressed girl gently squishes Lena's hand as if saying it's okay it's okay. Lena turns to look at the broken pieces of moonlight across the ground.

Turns out, Lena says sipping each word slowly, spider webbed hands were always meant to hurt.

Slowly, the ocean eyed man gets up and begins to pick up the broken glass pieces from the ground. Castaways are scared of the ocean, not ocean of castaways. But hunter gatherers have always been too wary of castaways to be indifferent. Some of the most isolated people are so powerful in their resistance against outsiders that they shoot arrows at helicopters flying above their forests.

But what we lost, we traded for what we gained. Language creates empathy and for each story, I have found a broken arrow. Moreover, if you live beside an ocean long enough, you begin to understand its language. So I stand next to him and hold a piece of transparent plastic-skin perfectly stretched to fit my palm.

Gently, the ocean eyed man picks up the broken glass pieces and hands them over to me.

1938, Germany. Sarah and her parents are busy in prayer though Sarah keeps getting distracted to the moonlight seeping in through the window. She decides to write a story on the moonlight as soon as she can get out of the prayer. It is almost the very end when they hear the deafening sound and then the crumbling of walls. The silver of the moonlight suddenly turns orange. Her mother holds her in her arms and says all the versions of okay. Sarah is scared. Sarah promises God that she'll say her prayers properly every day. But her prayers melt against the air before they can make their way across the street to the broken synagogue. Tonight Jewish shops are burnt, homes destroyed, synagogues sledgehammered. Tonight someone will look at the road wrapped with broken pieces of glass windows and call it Kristallnacht. Holding his breath, God looks at the slivers of silver moonlight scattered all about him. How does the homeless god face the children of war?

- *What happened next?* Coral whispers to Lena, *Did you ever meet him again?*

- *Me?* Lena smiles uncomfortably. *The story was never about me. I understand why you misunderstood but*

- Lena looks at Coral and realises that no judgement lingers across her breath. *He didn't cry. But I kept thinking about everything and as the scent of pills and "home" inched closer, I decided I was not the boy from the old school bus sitting across me. I apologised. And at that moment, the most strange thing happened. At that moment, the boy began to cry. I held him and apologized again and again and was overwhelmed but I couldn't cry. I watched him cry and mumble under his breath that he forgave me.*

- *So where were we?* The ocean eyed man holds the hands of the red dressed girl, *you were saying something; asking something.* He walks closer. She smiles, runs her hand across his palm. He considers the sky and says,

You do realise we are drunk tonight. That tomorrow -

- *You have beautiful hands.* He wonders whether she has been listening to him at all. *But you know your problem? You have savior hands. And I don't trust them. We always think we own what we save. But that isn't true.*

Once my friend had argued 'but if he talks about killing himself for your love, doesn't he deserve love? How is that abuse?' We always think we own what we save but we don't. I am old enough to know what savior hands look like. But God, she slips her fingers in between his fingers, *you have beautiful hands.*

It's 1944, Germany. There's a girl lying cold on a stone floor. The air rings. She looks up and prays it is a bomb. She remembers the last broadcast and prays that the allies are here. A few miles north, they cut through the border-vein. The villagers are spilled out of their homes like alcohol. The war is finally over, the soldiers declare. And now they must have their share. The snow is cold and weary but the snow must have its share of red. Alcohol, blood and ice mix effortlessly. They find a girl lying cold on a stone floor. The territories of her body are violated before she and her husband are shot dead. The air rings. The ghosts of her untold stories escape her eyes and melt into the thin air. 'The war is over', the soldiers declare, 'we are the saviors of humanity.' Victorious, a soldier thrusts a flagpole among the conquered crumbled buildings.

The war has ended. His ocean blue lips inch closer to her autumn lips and their hands seem to translate to each other what spring had meant to them before the war began.

The war has ended. But after the war ends, are war stories not war stories anymore? Are they just stories stuck in a time wheel they long to escape? But if we escape to stories, where do stories escape to? Among the hunter gatherers, are the storytellers the most skilled of hunters? Do their arrows, thirsty for stories, take them to unknown lands? Are they the merciless killers who can reduce everything into edible stories cooked on fire? And for those who eat, do they seem to have savior hands?

Once they remember the enchanting spring song, the girl with the autumn smile and the ocean eyed boy kiss and a cloud splits the moon in half.

Few minutes later they realise that the song has stopped and suddenly a laugh rings the air and dissolves.

Guys, I swear this just happened. I was talking to this tree and I asked it if it thought everything would be alright. And I swear guys, I say, I swear the tree said that it "wood".

As moonlight glistens against them, the half broken glass pieces break into laughter.

THE POSTCARD

BY KRITIKA KAPOOR

I sat alongside the large clear window beside the mantelpiece to gain the absolute clear view of the meadow, which comprised of the long and lonely path. Unfolding a crumpled yellow paper in my hands, I read the prose, written in the most familiar handwriting.

*"The sun shines slightly brighter,
morning winds blow across the dawning sky,
the nurturing beauty of a new life holds the eye,
but nothing of all; pray,
fascinates me more than your wondrous sight."*

Memories take me back to an autumn afternoon, where Victor stood firm at the doorstep, with his little brown leather suitcase, eager to follow the footsteps of other military personnel. His expressionless face caught my gaze as he silently passed this paper in my hands and slightly kissed my forehead, his embrace signalling an incomplete farewell. These words were retained in my memory like a customary hymn. I often recited them in twilights when the sky turned orange- pink, simultaneously while sewing a woollen sweater that I wish to gift him on his return.

I await religiously to find his sign on the sand stretched across a mile in my view, but it seems that two hundred and forty-five days of devotion has not yet yielded fruitfully. This comfort of staying at home is nothing worse than a battlefield, where one endures an uncertain existence superseded by fear and anxiety. At least at the battle ground, one gets to fight with an ambition, but here women merely become the spectators of silent submission, lacking both voice and power, being left with no choice but to submit against their will when their husbands are away.

Minutes turn into hours just as in time dusk becomes dawn, the days transform into months just as the clock chimes in its own regular pace but my lingering eyes resolutely await his heavenly sight. The sight that has always adorned an unwavering smile in unforeseen circumstances and been my strength. He is no more there to brush away the gloominess.

The nature and criteria of practicing injustice and violence has not so far destined to capture our street, but the military has begun its hunt to diminish the individuality of each person residing in our state. It is so hard to endure the unpredictability of events and a constant panic captures the mothers - what if their babies are taken away from them? To be here, safely with Eliza any longer is out of my control. Will there will be

enough room in this brutal world for our yet to be welcomed child? Surrounded helplessly in a pool of dilemma, still the inner voice guides me to be reluctant to leave the place where we began our journey together; our home. Our home has been our paradise, a holy ground with wooden floor that has blissfully stored our memories intact within its walls, embroidered curtains, brass door handles and in the engraved collection of Blake's poems. Victor used to recite to me these poems on solitary days like these. How I immensely cherish each and every thing that we built in order to call this house our home, our family's secured space.

Maybe the horrific day is not quite far, when the officers will somehow forcibly take us all to their camps beyond the hills. Our 'paradise' will then be vacant and unwillingly abandoned by us. It will be turned into a mere architecture of brick and walls. Who knows what the new land of torturous possibilities may hold?

II

"Ouch, my leg hurts! I-I can't move my leg", I blurted sheepishly to myself while stretching straight on a white sheet spread carelessly on the floor. There were a dozen bodies of other unconscious men beside me, lined up as if will be taken for a funeral soon. I stare blankly at the tent's ceiling, fairly a couple of foot above my face, with a fading faith and tearing trust. It might be a few hours past noon, for I can still hear far away catastrophic noises produced by rifles and machine guns.

In a moment, a tensed nurse enters the tent holding natural herbs and ointment in her hands. She appears to be engrossed in a thought and continuously mumbles something under her breath. I attempt to gather her attention by trying to sit without a support on my back, and ask her,

"Sister, you've been looking after all of us. I'm really grateful to you. Can you kindly tell what's wrong with my right leg?"

"Oh comrade, I'm sorry you've been shot there, just diagonally above your knee, twice. Good heavens, the second bullet just missed the mark. Your treatment is indeed progressing but I'm afraid you wont be able to join the- ", the nurse said it in a breath before I interrupted.

"Don't worry about me. A bullet cannot defeat the one whose mind refuses to give up. What is the status outside, sister?", I inquired. "Too bad Comrade, Its devastating on our side. We're only left with- ", she broke up without completing her sentence and left the tent in haste without re-dressing my wound.

Swinging from the conscious world to diving into my unconscious state, five days passed swiftly in an expanse of darkness, a darkness as profound as my inability to express the grief overfilled in my heart, brain and senses. Martha awaits me at home. I know she .

does. Has my chubby little princess, my Eliza grown big enough to walk on her feet or does she still play on the carpet with those small purple tea cups? I wonder in what state they both are. Are they safe? What if the military determines to occupy the Lestlurn street, in that case, where will they probably accommodate hundreds of inhabitants, along with the two souls belonging solely to me.

I have to hasten my recovery. The little sunlight peeping from the isolated staircase at the doorway imparts me the hope to not consider my present situation as my final destination. We can't lose, we surely can't let our people suffer the hardships anymore, we can't stop fighting.

We can't close our eyes for hundreds of people who depend upon our capability are at stake, they pray for our return and drink the syrup of bondage to witness the light of 'life' once again. The war has to be won. We can't avoid the blood and sweat nor can we stop the crises at this stage. What lies in our bare hands is to face the battlefield and bear the circumstances, whatever they might be.

The introspection, I know won't cease for now, so I turn to my other side and strangely find a cigarette case and some postcards scattered in the corner of the tent, just beside my head. The pale thick postcards are printed with certain instructions, but they rather seem to be the discarded ones. Most of them are either filled with details or are torn and smeared with dirt, further becoming incapable to be written on. Luckily, one of them was in a fairly manageable condition.

It took me three days to fill in the preferred message for my loved one, crossing and cutting down a bunch of unsuitable words to be read by her. I couldn't think of a prose to write for Martha. At the end, the postcard looked no better than a notebook scribbled with lots of mistakes, nevertheless, I asked the nurse to send it.

III

"He wrote that he is well. Oh, but where did he mention of his homecoming? My goodness, will he not be returning soon?", the words abruptly came out of my mouth, when Anna, my friend, asked me about what he wrote. She empathized with me, telling me I have at least been fortunate enough to receive a postcard. She is right, because now I'm aware that my husband is alive whereas wives like her do not even have the privilege to know it so far. Our conversation was interrupted by a sudden hubbub outside my house. We went outside on the patio to observe them, and within a few minutes span, our entire universe altered.

The day when I received Victor's postcard, all the women and children of our neighbourhood were dragged to a faraway land in Norwich, that none of us had known before. Most of us were reluctant in their bait of offering us reputed jobs and a chance to earn and feed our kids, but none of us had neither an option nor courage to do

otherwise. The officers and strict commanders bought us to a barren land on which stood a huge cemented munitions factory. The fumes of heavy smoke arose from the chimneys and its interiors were almost black filled with huge quantities of steel, explosives, cartridges and screening smokes, that were to be prepared by our assistance. Without a doubt, the aura served an unhealthy and dangerous atmosphere for our children. It's first impression contributed in filling their innocent hearts with terror that made them freeze with fright and sob in surrender. As soon as their baby hands started searching to grasp their parent's secure arms, they were snatched away from their mothers and taken to clean the chimneys. Our parting was witnessed with lots of wailing and crying, numerous futile attempts to take back our young ones from the officers' grip and the first experience of men being violent on women. They hit us in odd numbers with steel rods, one by one, until each woman, young or old, fell straight to kiss their feet in reverence. Soon it became their custom to cane us almost every fortnight without a valid reason, other than their newfound desire to dehumanise us.

We all worked hard with each passing day and often got evenings to relax. It was then in those serene hours before sleep that we dive into the pool of memories. It's my ninth month of pregnancy and I feel pangs of doubt arising in my throat of what may comprise of the future of this unborn child. With all this, I surely cannot be a good mother to this baby just like I have terribly failed to be one for Eliza. Sadly, I don't even know where is she right now. What are they making her do at this hour of the day along with the others? We only get to see our kids weekly, sometimes twice a week in the faint moonlight through a translucent partition of fence and their sobs don't reach us anymore. Where has destiny taken us? What will be the outcome of such widespread destruction? How can wars ever be capable of restoring peace and order in the world?

Victor is there to rescue his people, day and night absorbed in the task assigned to him with a belief to bring honour to his nation. No matter what, he is already my Hero; a saviour and a warrior, a father and a husband but above all, a saint committed to his duty. I have faith in him, my warrior, my only epitome of bliss, contentment and hope. Therefore, I await him with resolution yet again, my love stronger than it was and my patience firmer than it has ever been. Sitting on a rock outside the hall, thoughts like these were revolving in my head, when Anna gently touched my shoulder and presented the postcard to me.

"Anna, you saved it? Aw, I thought we dropped it at my home.", a sudden sadness engulfed me as I said the word 'home'.

"Why not, Martha? Afterall, how could I have afforded to lose your token of yearning?" Anna whispered and asked me to retire to bed, considering my health, but I persuaded her to leave me alone for a while.

This enclosed factory space has accommodated humans as herds of cattle under one roof. Apart from our regular contribution in tasks of pushing the huge wheels of complex war weapons, we are often made to work in fields and cut the rocks. They attempt to make us abandon what little humane is left within our spirits and brutally excuse our individuality by serving us the raw loathes of half-baked bread once a day. We are hardly served to eat meat or grain. During these hot summer days, we even struggle to drink drops of water, that has been recently made inaccessible to us.

When we meet our young little babies, we pretend to be normal in front of them, but we fail. We strive to stay stable but we can't stop missing our home and pretend to not crave for our family's presence. During this war time, the unjust enemies are skilfully attempting all the harsh measures to brutalise us, yet we fail to submit. Here, we witness the dusk of our coming days but we fail not to feel the emotional being alive within our souls. Though our bodies are traded, but our spirits await the person who resides within our heart.

The hope to see my husband is still intact. I wonder if he knows that the military has ruptured our dreams and demolished our house. I wonder if he gets to know that our daughter was taken away from my longing, bruised hands. I wonder if he knows that women's bodies here are traded more than being worshipped. I wonder if my husband is alright. Staring at the postcard, under the sky adorned like a bride with twinkling stars, I wonder if just like me, Victor too is hiding something in his postcard. I wonder if this state of war, the limitless infliction of pain will ever come to end, if I'll ever get to see his heavenly sight again, if I can free my daughter from all the evil forces of the nature and run away to a peaceful place where flowers blossom and birds chirp in their melodious harmony. I wonder if the days of unmeasurable bliss will ever knock at my homeless doorstep, if I'll ever get another postcard from him or will see my soldier again...

And thus, I wonder until oblivion clouds before my eyes. I feel as if I heard a deafening shrill, but the world around me is already revolving in reflection. I rise to walk towards the camp but in another instant my water breaks. Unable to hold myself, I fell down on the barren land and shout for help. I cry aloud, "Anna, Annaaa, someone help! Help me!" But maybe it's already too late in the night.

Slowly and gradually, a white light invades in my drowning vision. My eyes are almost closed. Maybe someone is speaking to me, calling out to me, they want to wake me up, but I'm too tired. A hand is putting immense pressure below my breasts, just where my bump begins. A voice, another voice squealing louder, heavier but all I feel is the blinding white light. I want to touch the space from where the light is being emitted and behind it, much beyond where the road ends, there I meet Victor.

The light has dissolved into a familiar place, my home. I'm back in my home, healed by Victor's unexpected touch as his arms encircle my body into his, it feels like completeness. Victor, Eliza, me and our new born baby, all of us are sitting on the couch

in our home. The baby is sleeping in my lap and the gusty afternoon wind is making Eliza dizzy. Victor and I are sipping chamomile tea from those purple tea cups. My head is resting against his chest as his soft voice recites Blake's "The Tyger".

THE POLITICIAN

BY PALLAVI KRISHNAPPA

On a late Sunday afternoon, I find myself sitting at Unnati Bar & Restaurant, tucked in a lane off Gandhi Nagar. It is an old establishment which pays its bills through its patrons, most of who don't care if the interiors or the sign outside haven't been painted in years. There are seven of us, a faction of the original group of strangers who had decided to undertake a walk across the city's remaining heritage landmarks based on a Facebook group in the early hours of the day. There wasn't much to see, really, in this place also known as Asia's Silicon Valley. We toured the palace, the park, the garden and military area. On the tour guide's suggestion, the seven of us decided to grab a drink and some lunch.

As we wait on the drinks to arrive, I look around at the faded, dust-layered maroon interiors with framed portraits of military ships, garlanded frames of the owner behind the billing counter and the pleather couches with tears in them, the yellow foam spilling out. Last week, in the office during lunch hour, a colleague insisted that I sign up for one of these city tours as a way of getting to know the city better. Like all her suggestions, I had merely nodded my head and said I would think about it with no intention of following through. It's not like I was new to the city but for the past six months beyond work and the rented room I called home, I had felt no desire to explore the city or meet new people until I found myself awake before dawn on a Sunday and walking the city.

I nervously dig an index finger through a tear in the couch, slowly elongating it until the beer reaches the table and my nervous hands shift to clasp the cold bottle. A lanky fellow dressed in a red plaid shirt, unevenly faded blue jeans and brown loafers which age him more than the few revealing grey hairs on his head slouched at the end of the sofa, turns to ask what I think of the current political climate. For a month now, there have been countrywide protests against a new discriminatory law the government had introduced.

"We have been living in a pressure cooker situation since Independence, now all our collective violence and shame is out, slowly seeping into the public conscience. It's good in a terrible way, isn't it?"

He's got narrow eyes, a hawk shaped nose and they're looking at me from across the two others sitting between us. Six months. And no, I haven't been here before. He tells me they serve the best crab salad. I can still feel the foam under my finger, my eyes gaze on the other group in the bar. It's a Sunday afternoon and aside from the seven of us, there

is a group of three men with a bottle of Khoday's rum between them. They seem to be patrons, judging by the servile look of the waiter who's hovering around them waiting to fill their glass as soon as it empties. One of them is dressed in the white cotton kurta and dhoti, the crisp uniform of power. He's the burliest of them and wearing a thick gold chain and heavy boxer rings and I overhear him discussing a business transaction he made last week as his companions, who seem to be his lackeys, hang on to his every word.

I feel awkward, out of place. It's been long since I've had company, let alone being surrounded by a group. and social cues seemed to have evolved into a different shape, a language I'm unable to grasp. I pretend to be comfortable playing the role of the observer, I have nothing interesting to say and am afraid of saying it wrong, of being asked to follow through on a single vague statement. I'm nearly done with my first mug of beer and have forgotten everyone's names.

I head to the washroom which turns out to be a single Indian style stall with a flimsy curtain in place of a door. It smells of sickly-sweet phenyl which assures me enough to proceed with the mission of emptying my beer bloated bladder. The walls are plastered with drunk lovers' confessions, stickers advertising massages (of the happy kind?), a caricature of breasts defined by two equal circles and dots placed in the centre for nipples. As I wash my hands with the diluted hand wash, clearly not Dettol as the bottle says but some local hand wash bought in bulk, there is a question floating in black ink above the oval mirror, the popular Pixies song title Where is my mind? Indeed, I ask myself, where is it?

On my way back, I cross the table with the Khoday men, one of the lackeys gazes at me as the burlier leader continues speaking. I notice they all have fresh tikaas on their foreheads and a sacred thread around their wrists. I catch a bit of the conversation, the white kurta man is complaining about someone, he thumps the table and I hear him curse – 'bevarsī' – within my earshot as I rejoin the others at my table.

The lanky, plaid-wearing fellow is now sitting at my corner of the sofa. He shifts inside and now we're sitting next to each other. I catch a whiff of the phenyl smell I've seemingly carried with me from the bathroom mixed with the smell of the rose-scented watery handwash. My hands are shot with nerves, I glance nervously at the only other woman at the table who's flailing her hands about, engaged in a spirited discussion with our guide from earlier in the day. I reach for my phone as a crutch but I'm interrupted by plaid shirt.

'Do you smoke?'

'Yes.'

He indicates towards the entry, I stand up, grab my bag – just in case I feel the urge to make a run for it–and we walk out of the bar, down the narrow staircase, crossing the

electronics shop, the bicycle and tyrewallah dukaan, the fruit seller with his pomegranates and bananas until we reach by some unsaid agreement a quiet patch against a compound wall, the peepal tree above providing us shade. He takes out a pack of Gold Flake Lights and a matchbox, with a single match lights both cigarettes and we inhale both the slightly cool Bangalore December air and the musty taste of nicotine.

He begins to talk, he's a content writer, he writes copies for brands, in his own words—this is the less glamorous, lesser paying alternative to completely selling out by writing advertisements. He wasn't cut out for the cut-throat world of journalism, the petty politics, the inflated egos out of a misplaced sense of doing something important and the very little space to understand the 'why' of events. By some romantic notion of wanting to be closer to words in the most practical sense, he stumbled across this new avenue of content writing a few years ago and settled into it.

I can sense that he's well-liked, popular even. His self-assurance reveals itself in his posture, leaning against the wall, smoke curling up his face, talking to a stranger he just met a few hours ago. He doesn't stumble on his words, the sentences flow without the usual breaks of 'um' and 'like', clear, concise like this rant about his job is a script he's used before, perfected with each trial.

"What did you mean earlier by 'collective violence'?"

Something in me loosens, the self-consciousness has been overtaken by this urge to hear my own voice, to tell this stranger my thoughts. It assures me that I might never have to see him again.

"That we hold on to our identities as a fixed entity and in doing so we inflict violence on others. By holding onto this notion of sticking to cultural authenticity we make sure the idea of 'other' never goes out of play. There is this false notion of individual or collective good when we as a society believe in punishment and each one likes to believe one form of punishment is more justified than the other."

."Ah", he says, "so we're doomed to human tragedy. Is that it?"

"No, just that our vocabulary refuses to include the messiness of the ideas of sameness or difference. When in practice, our lives are messy, intimacies are complex and no-one wants to acknowledge it because that would require pointing the finger at ourselves sometimes."

He pauses to stub the cigarette on the ground, then picks it up and puts it in his pocket presumably to dispose of later. 'If we agree to what you say...how do we empathise with fascists who operate on the violence of divisiveness?

""We are too quick to equate understanding to showing empathy. An impatience to

attribute blame in the face of violence is not wrong given that our justice systems fail us, public shaming feels like the only recourse. The issue is the problem still remains, taking on monstrous forms."

'I think you're leaning towards a more Dostoevskian understanding of the spiritual inner life of individuals which does not necessarily match their objective reality.'

At a distance, the sound of the azan can be heard. Something about it feels poetic, its defiance in its visibility, a permeating sound to serve as a reminder of its existence, not to be easily erased.

"Something like that...", I respond, "What does it say about our lives which are more fictional than fiction and what does it say about a world which imposes authenticity on the basis of a rigid notion of identity as being key to a compassionate narration of a tale? We allow violence by giving this much space to what our identities mean by the accident of birth. Our supreme leader was brought to power, not on an ideological, economic basis but an emotional one which ties in with the other two arguments."

There's a commotion nearby, we hear loud angry noises coming from the bar lane. The two of us walk towards the bend and like every Indian street fight, a crowd of onlookers have already gathered so it's not hard to spot the fight's location. As we inch closer, I recognise the Khoday men and their white kurta leader at the centre of the crowd gathered outside the cycle and tyrewallah shop, the burly man is holding a skinny bald man by his collar and yelling indecipherably in angry, fast-paced Kannada. Too local for my average understanding of it. I spot my other companions from earlier in the day in the fast-gathering crowd. I vaguely recognise the skinny man as the fruit seller, and as the burly man continues to yell, my stranger friend and I ask around in the crowd the reason behind this scuffle. We piece together this; the white kurta man was a local politician; he belongs to the saffron party and was a patron of Unnati much before he exercised the power he did now. Earlier he used to be a regular drunk nuisance, the older shop owners on this lane were used to his alcohol-fuelled braggadocio which until last year had remained mostly harmless.

This lane's occupants had become used to drunks on the street at odd hours of the day, the occupational hazard of having a shop near a bar of modest ill-repute. Except for the occasional minor damage to property, the defacing of walls by the younger drunks and the causal chain of drunk events leading to the frequent ugly drunk brawl which they needed to break up, the occupants of the First cross, Gandhi Nagar had remained largely unperturbed.

The skinny fruit seller was new to the lane, a migrant from Salem he turned up a month ago on this lane hawking his mangoes, but with the mango season over he was now selling pomegranates and bananas and making meagre earnings. The burly man had stumbled upon his cart drunk and grabbed a hand of bananas. When the fruit seller asked for payment, the inebriated man shook his fist in anger and began to walk away.

The seller left his cart and began to chase after him, holding him by the ends of the kurta pleaded for payment. The man kicked him and kept walking on while his lackeys looked back and jeered at the fruit seller from Salem. He nonetheless persisted and followed him to the end of the lane where the tyre shop is, shouting at the white kurta man for payment. The local politician, drunk with alcohol and power, couldn't take this affront, turned around and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and this is where we found them.

Many have taken their cellphones out to record this spectacle. The politician is still holding the man by the neck who's now folded his hands but continues to ask for his money. In Kannada, he shouts, intimidates the fruit seller letting him know this defiance will hold repercussions for him.

Suddenly, I find myself in the centre of the circle facing the two men. My mouth opens. "Pay him. Why are you troubling a poor fellow for some bananas? If you want them for free, climb a tree."

'Madam, you stay out of it', he snarls back but I see him loosening his hold on the fruit seller's collar.

I repeat, 'Pay him'.

He disrespected me, I'm the local MLA and all his fortune comes from my benevolence. He should be grateful to me. What are a few bananas in exchange? Does he not go to the temple and offer bananas to his god?

He continues, getting more agitated as he speaks, "Who are you to speak anyway? You with your broken Kannada...you outsiders come and think you own this place...I saw you at the bar drinking like a prostitute with men.'

A man shouts from the crowd, 'How dare you speak to a woman like that!'

My stranger friend comes up behind and requests the man to pay. The crowd meanwhile begins to murmur until they begin to chant in unison, 'Shame! Shame! Shame!'

The politician seems to be coming down from his inebriated state, he releases the fruit seller from his hold and in an attempt to regain lost ground takes out a two thousand rupee note and throws it to his feet. As the fruit seller bends to pick it up, his hand hovers over his head like a mock blessing.

"See madam, I care about my people. It is people like you who create a commotion out of nothing. Now look, I've given him more money than he earns in a month. He should have shown me respect; in our culture, it is more important than money."

He makes his way through the crowd, his lackeys, one of who is still carrying the bananas follow close behind and the crowd slowly disperses, having witnessed what they had come to revel in.

I look wordlessly to my stranger friend and we begin walking back in silence to our spot under the peepal. The evening sky has set in, the streetlamps are on, the sound of traffic is getting increasingly louder, all signs of Sunday night revelry have commenced. I'm tired and I want to go home. He asks me for my number, I hand him my phone to save his number. He dials his number, we smoke a cigarette each and as we part he turns around to ask my name. I watch as his receding figure is swallowed into the purple evening sky and the yellow glow of the streetlamp.

THE WIDENING GYRE

BY MUDDASIR RAMZAN

'I believed, like everyone else, that the stories about wild creatures, particularly about Rantas (Witch) and Wan-Mohneu (Wildman), were only myths, created only to scare children. Until I was dragged here.'

"But how did you reach here?" asked Hamid. '

'Yes, why are you here? I am not sure if any other human has dared to visit this part of the forest. The dense trees, those bushes grown over the fallen pines, and the dim light makes it look haunted' said Talib. 'I accompanied Hamid because he insisted on looking for some special herb in this unknown side of the forest. That herb, he said, has medicinal effects that could cure his wife. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here' Talib added.

They lowered their gazes, stealing the odd glance at the Wildman who was sitting on a big dry log. Hamid and Talib were lounging around a big rock, placed near the Wildman.

"I don't know how to proceed."

"Well, you can start from the beginning,' Hamid suggested.

'Okay. It was sometime in the winter of 1998 or 1997, no, 1999. No! I don't remember the exact date. I awoke in the middle of the night. My wife Laalie and my little son Aalim were fast asleep. I didn't bother to wake them. I forgot to tell you my real name, I am Bashir."

"I went outside to check the cow and saw snow falling heavily, making the trees arch. There was a thick white blanket of snow on my lawn. I took my umbrella in one hand and lantern in another and went straight to the cowshed to check if the cow was fine – she was to give birth to her calf soon, which is the only reason why I was concerned about her enough to check on her in the middle of the night. She seemed fine, so I locked the cowshed and began walking back to my house. It was a fantastic sight to watch the whirling snow."

"As I tried to shake off the snow from some trees, I heard a woman's voice calling out my name. I thought it was Laalie and responded, but I recalled immediately that I had locked the main door of the house from outside. 'This isn't Laalie, can't be,' I thought. I waited. The voice called out again. Scared, I tried to locate the voice and walked towards the pomegranate tree. There was so much snow on the tree's branches and leaves that the

main branch had snapped and fallen on the snow-covered ground. As I went closer, I saw what I thought was a woman dressed in white, looking straight at me. "It's a mere illusion created by the snow", I told myself. But the lantern slipped from my trembling hands, and the light went out. It's an evil spirit or an apparition, I thought. I was horrified. Then, just as I began to run towards my house, which was only a few steps away, she called out- 'Stop.'

"My trembling heart, shaky legs, and the deep snow made those few steps appear like a thousand miles. With great effort, I managed to reach the steps of the verandah and breathed deeply in relief. I have escaped her, I thought."

"But as soon as I tried to push open the main door, a massive hand grabbed my left shoulder. As I cried out, a hand clasped my head, and another capped my mouth. I struggled to free myself and managed to kick the door, but the powerful hands dragged me back. Her stench filled my nostrils. I could see her closely now. She had a hairy face, a vast, dirty, and hairy body with huge breasts and long nails. Her untidy hair fell over her shoulders. I noticed her feet last: they were twisted backwards. I was terrified."

"She was exactly like the creature whose stories my grandmother had told me in my childhood, to distract me whenever I cried or wanted something that was not available. For some time, I thought she would eat me alive. Having lost all my strength, I began to believe she had cast a magical spell on me. Helplessly, I let her tie me to her back with her long hair. I cried for help, but I don't think anyone could hear me. My struggle to escape was of no use. I..."

Yes, carry on, what happened then?' asked Talib, listening keenly to him. When the Wildman didn't reply, the young man looked towards Hamid.

'It is clear she brought him to this cave then, isn't it?' Hamid remarked loudly, hoping to shake the Wildman out of his thoughts.

"No, not to this cave. I was half-asleep on her back all the way. She walked fast, and I couldn't recognize that pathway. Later, when I opened my eyes, I wondered where I was. The place I found myself in was dimly lit. I could see stones and some dry logs, lots of straw, and some sand too. I walked a few steps, exploring the place. There was a rotten smell nearby; I had to cover my nose and mouth. I found myself standing upon a large carcass, surrounded by bones. I was frightened, much more than you two were when you first laid eyes on me. So this is it, I thought, I am her food. I could see my death now."

'Wasn't she there?' asked Talib.

'No, I didn't see her there at that time. I kept searching for a way to escape. But all I could see were little holes in the cave's walls. It was the only source of light in that dark cave. I whispered some verses of the Quran, and tears rolled down from my eyes. I begged God to save me. I remember the words I expressed when I was broken, and I thought of God. *What wrong have I done, Allah? How can You end my existence here? Is a grave, and a proper funeral not in my fate? I prayed regularly to You, always tried to do good, never committed any grave sin, and this is what You have in store for me? Do I really deserve this? What will happen to my family, my old father, my wife, and son, my little sister, and my brother? You're well aware of my condition. Please save me!*

Then I saw a big rock turning, and there she was. I kept reciting the Kalima – La Ilaha Illallah Mohammad–ur-Rasullullah. She entered and turned the rock again to close the cave. I said to myself, look at her, see her power, she can move mountains, and she may have eaten half the world already. You are just a tiny morsel for her. As she began to walk towards me, I could hear my pounding heart. I was watching my end; it was the first time I had felt so helpless. I begged her. With tears in my eyes, I requested her to leave me and not eat me. To my utter surprise, she laughed. It was a burst of strange laughter. I can't describe its musicality. She said, "I won't eat my husband," and dropped some roots and herbs for me to eat. I froze. How could I be her husband? Had I heard it right? Did she really say I was her husband? I felt utterly broken. As I looked at her, all I could do was think about my future. But when I realised there was no escape, I switched to imagining things that had always given me pleasure and filled me with joy – my family, Laalie and Aalim, their love for me. Later, when I came out of my trance, to my utter surprise, I saw Laalie in the cave, sitting close to me!

The Wildman started sobbing. Hamid and Talib looked at each other, wondering how to respond to the Wildman. 'Everything will be alright now. It is God's will that we came to this side of the forest today,' Hamid said trying to console the Wildman sitting before him, crying like a child yet terrifying in his appearance.

'We were cutting some pines with others in the group on the other side of the forest, and he,' the young lad looked towards Hamid, 'he suggested we should check this side. God has sent us here to save you.'

Bashir sighed, 'I, and the world, count myself among the dead. Is God still there? I don't believe in Him anymore!'

'Tell us what happened then. How did your wife arrive there?' asked Hamid.

'I was puzzled to see her there, but when I spoke to her, she turned out to be the Rantas disguised as my wife. She confessed her love for me and wanted me as her husband. It was strange when she told me about her desire to have a family like humans with me. I was terrorized on hearing this. But slowly, my fears started to fade away. Eventually, I

learned to talk to her, and it was easier to love her when she disguised herself as Laalie. But when I woke up in the morning and found myself on top of her real self, it was maddening. Once I realised that I couldn't escape the situation, I stopped thinking about it. Mystifying as it was, it was my reality. I understood that I had become a Wan-Mohneu, a Wildman.'

He appeared strangely calm. His eyes bore into Talib's.

'Tell me, what's the date today? I remember the name of the days. In the early days of my captivity, I would regularly count the weeks, but then I lost track of time. I can only guess the passing of many ages by now.'

Talib looked away from the wild man and on his mobile phone, noticed there was no network coverage. 'It's Wednesday, 20th July, 3:55 p.m.'

'Year?'

'2020.'

'What! Are you serious? No, it can't be 2020! I have spent so much time here! I don't accept it. No, it is not true. God, what have you done to me?'

'Yes, don't you see yourself? You hardly look human. When we first saw you, we thought you're some creature of the jungle, not human. If you haven't called us, we would never have come to you. Come with us. Let's go. Now. You'll be a great surprise to your family and others.'

After a pause, Talib again asked the Wildman to go away with them, but the Wildman remained silent. When the young man pressed him for an answer, he replied in a harsh tone: 'No, I can't leave. I have three daughters here.'

'What?' Talib and Hamid exclaimed together. 'How's it possible? Where are they?' Hamid asked.

'It's a long story. They have gone to get food. They only spend their nights in this cave. I'm usually alone here. You should leave me here. You don't know what they would do to you if they saw you here.'

The young man suddenly got up and shouted, 'How can you still want to live with them when you could easily escape with us?'

'They will find us easily if I go away with you. I won't endanger your lives. I always look out from these holes in the cave,' he said, pointing to the cave, 'to see if I can see any human being. When I saw you two coming, I was confused about whether or not I should call you. I was really happy to see you. I had thought I would never see a human again. So, I shouted to get your attention.' Tears coursed down his cheeks again. 'But I have to

remain calm and stay inside this cave. I must say, you are very courageous for coming to help me and listening to me, but please be careful. A long time ago, when my daughters were little, and we were living in another cave, I watched three men with their long axes, just like yours, approach the cave. When I called out to them, they came to help me. When they peeped through the stones and saw me, they ran away, screaming. My looks probably frightened them; they didn't even look back. I know I give the impression of being more like a monster with my long dirty hair, my beard, nails, and evil smell. I could only bathe whenever water was available, which happened only a few times, mostly after Sari delivered her five babies.'

'Her name's Sari? Do witches have names?' Talib shouted.

'Three daughters. What happened to the other two?' Hamid asked.

'Yes, we also had two sons, but they didn't survive. She can't have sons because her clan is cursed. She is the last fully-grown Rantas left in this forest.'

Hamid scratched his head and looked towards Talib, who seemed lost in the tale as if he had discovered the fountain of some secrets, or maybe the Wildman had cast a magic charm on him. Hamid moved closer to Talib and pointed to his watch, but Talib was still in a daze. When he didn't respond, Hamid spoke agitatedly, 'So are we going to stay here, in this cave?'

'Forgive me. It is because I have so much to tell. Yes, you should leave now. I am thankful to you for giving me the feeling of being a human again,' the Wildman interrupted.

'We will come again soon with more men, don't lose hope,' Hamid said. 'Where are you from? We'll inform your family about you.'

'I don't remember. Even if I do, I cannot tell you much about me. And please don't tell anyone else about me either. Go straight to your homes. Be careful.'

Before going away, Hamid gave the Wildman his long axe and asked him not to live in fear.

As soon as they had moved away from the cave, Hamid turned towards Talib. 'Why was he looking only at you, at your eyes? He was staring at you even as we left. I feel afraid. He seems dangerous. I think he is looking for someone who can replace him. He must be worried about his daughters. And why wouldn't he tell us about his home?'

'Uncle, don't worry. The poor man lives in another world. He looks frightening, but his story touched my heart. I think we should come back with more men and save him like we promised.'

The two carefully walked into the forest, searching for a path to take them back to their friends.

The group of woodcutters had been looking for them for many hours. Unable to find them, they gathered around a clump of trees and discussed their friends' disappearance. They were nervous. Frightened, they tried, again and again, to contact them, but there was no network coverage, they couldn't reach them. Then suddenly, one among them shouted: 'There they are, badass Baba Hamid and his little dog Talib. Come, we'll screw you here'. The men jumped with joy.

'What should we tell them when they ask us where we were?' Talib whispered to Hamid as they walked towards their group.

'They are our own men. We aren't supposed to hide anything from them. See how happy they are as they see us. They must have been searching for us. There's love in their anger,' Hamid said.

The group began to walk together through the forest towards their residence. Habib-ul-Lah, their group leader, asked Hamid about their disappearance, but before Hamid could answer, another man in their group yelled, 'Why don't you tell them what they've missed? Tell them what we did in their absence?'

You may have done something exciting, but we too have something special to tell you,' Talib said, gathering his pleasing tone and soft voice.

'After lunch, when you disappeared, Ustaad Habib-ul-Lah asked us to look for you,' Aejaaz, Hamid's friend, narrated. 'We searched in the places you would usually go to but we couldn't find you. Anxiously, we came back to our group leader, and he gave us his gun. Akram, Sultan, Yousuf, and I took our axes, a few other essential things, and went to the unexplored side of the forest. We climbed up the hill to see if we could catch a glimpse of you two from the top.

Instead, we saw a giant creature. "Rantas, Rantas" Yousuf began to shout. We were frightened. We thought both of you might be dead. You know how daring Akram and Sultan are. We went to check if you were hiding somewhere nearby, or if she had eaten both of you. We moved slowly until we reached the place where she lay among the fallen trees. She had made a sort of bed for herself by joining the fallen branches and trunks and binding them with dry logs to make the bed-frame. She'd layered the bed with dry leaves.

We looked around for you, carefully. We could hear her snore. As we were about to leave, Akram whispered something to Sultan and raised the gun he was carrying. The two of them walked silently towards her. The Rantas slept peacefully in the hot sun. We hid behind the pines. Akram carefully lit some small dry boughs on fire and arranged them around the dry logs - her makeshift bed. Soon the leaves and logs caught fire. The witch was still fast asleep, but as the dry logs and leaves underneath and around her also caught fire, we heard her cries, loud and long.'

'Oh, God! You killed Sari.' Talib yelled.

'What? Who's she?'

Then Hamid told them about their encounter with the Wildman.

After listening to Hamid's story, Habib-ul-Lah, who had chopped off the little finger of his left hand after a snake bite and was known for his valour, – told them about the legend of Wan-Mohneu and his power to enchant women.

'One evening, a young man came to me and asked for help. His wife was in danger. My friend and I accompanied the young man. We saw his wife walking ahead of us, but when he called out to her, she didn't respond. We thought they'd been in a fight and that she was angry and had left her home. So, we rushed towards her. That's when we saw the Wildman, he walked a few feet ahead of her. We were only a few steps away from the young woman. It was clear that he had tempted her, for when we called out to her, asking her to come back, she didn't answer. Instead, she continued to follow the Wildman. When her husband urged her to stop, she replied, 'Leave me. You are no one to me. I am going to live with my real husband, or else I will die.'

The young man requested the Wildman to let her go, but he wouldn't listen, and he continued to walk away with the woman. When, after all our entreaties, we realized she wouldn't come back, the young man shot her. We ran away when we saw that Wildman coming after us. The young man shot him too. After we'd escaped from there, the young man told us how his newly-wed wife had been behaving strangely of late and had gone missing several times.'

Hamid mentioned that they didn't fear the Wildman they met. He did not seem dangerous.

'I am sure he is the same Wildman who recently abducted a tourist girl from France,' Sultan said. 'Haven't you heard about that? It was the biggest news of last winter. She was skiing in the hills, and there he was. He cast his spell on her, and she willingly followed him into the dense forests. When some people saw her following the Wildman, they tried to save her, but she vanished from their sight into the snow.'

Hamid looked at Talib. Talib, too, was in shock. 'He cannot be that,' Talib said, 'or else he would not have spared us. He was kind to us.' Habib-ul-Lah patted Talib's shoulder, 'You have a lot to learn, son. Just forget about that Wildman. He may be expecting you again, and maybe he has cast some magic on you. Tell your family about him. Be careful and strong, and never ever visit that cave again.'

Habib-ul-Lah tied an amulet on Talib's arm. 'Keep this with you. Always,' he said.

In the cave, the Wildman sits lost in reverie. He thinks about his journey from being a God-fearing man to turning into a brutal Wildman. These are his sins, he thinks, and they have affected his family. In the past, he used to think about them all the time.

He thought of every possible scenario that could have happened to them. At the beginning of his captivity, he was almost obsessed with his family. Later, his dreams about them filled him with pain and anxiety, but they gave him some comfort too. In one dream, he saw his father marry Laalie to his younger brother Sajad, but Aalim didn't like his uncle as his new father. In another dream, he saw them living happily with Sajad. In the beginning, he often had hallucinations about his family crying – the nightmare about how, after his father's death, Sajad became the sole owner of their property and banished Laalie. When Laalie, along with Aalim, decided to stay with her brothers, her brothers too mistreated them. In his rage, Aalim killed Sajad in a scuffle and was put into jail. After a few days, Sajad's wife killed Laalie. These thoughts depressed him.

Some thoughts recur. No one knows what really happened to his family after Bashir became a Wildman. Perhaps they believed he was dead. Probably, Laalie married someone else and is happy. He often thinks about Aalim – his smiling face, his dream to be a rich man, his calling him 'Dad'. He wonders if Aalim misses his father.

He snaps out of his reverie when his daughters enter the cave. Late at night, when Sari is still away, he tries to inquire about her, but his daughters aren't bothered. They think of him as their man, their husband, of their mother as their competitor. Sari's dream – to have a family like everyone else – has only remained a dream.

'Perhaps Sari has left him for their daughters', he thinks. He feels as if he has lost his world again. It embarrasses him to think about sleeping with his own daughters. He remembers how Sari slaughtered the woman whom he, by his magic, had made his sex-slave. He couldn't forget the foreigner and how she was brutally killed and devoured by his daughters when they caught him making love to her. He remembers well his promise to Sari that he wouldn't lure any woman again when she tried to snatch away the magical powers she'd given him. He feels broken again.

If I am a Wildman now, why do I think and feel like a human being as I was? God, why have you turned me into this? Wait, do you really exist? You gave me two families, and both of them are fragmented. Don't you see I am an old man? That young man can rejuvenate and bind together my new family, he is my last hope. His youth is ideal for my daughters. Send him here, if You really exist. If You could do it, I'll die as a believer.

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