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Farewell

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Farewell

The hushed watches of the night were shattered by a military patrol vehicle tearing past Victoria Park.

Section 144 and a curfew were both in force. There were riots between Hindu and Mussulman. Each was at the other's throat with billhooks, pokers, knives, and sticks. Everywhere assassins were at work, striking clandestinely under cloak of darkness. Looters were on the rampage too, and the shades were haunted by their yells of deadly delight. The bustees were burning. Sporadic screams from dying women and children added to the monstrous atmosphere. On top of everything came the panicky soldiers on patrol: they fired blindly in any direction to maintain a semblance of law and order.

At a particular spot two lanes converged. A dilapidated rubbish bin lay overturned there. Behind it, using it as a shield and crouched on all fours, was a man. He dared not raise his head. For a while he lay as if lifeless, trying to distinguish the cries in an uproar some way off. "Allah Ho Akbar!" or "Bande Mataram!"? He could not be sure which they were.

All of a sudden the rubbish bin seemed to move slightly. Every nerve in the man's body tingled. His teeth were clenched, his limbs stiff with apprehension and dread. Several moments passed... The night remained still.

Maybe it was a dog. To drive it away, the man shifted the rubbish bin slightly. The silence deepened. Then the bin moved again, and this time the man's fear became mixed with curiosity. Extremely slowly, he raised his head—and opposite him there rose another head. A man! From each side of the bin the two creatures stared at each other, stunned. Their hearts had almost stopped; their eyes locked in a violent contagion of fear. Neither could afford to trust the other. Each thought the other was a murderer. Their eyes were narrowed, expecting an attack; but no attack came. In both their minds the same question reared its head: *Hindu or Mussulman?* Depending on the answer, the outcome might be fatal. Neither creature had the courage to voice the question; nor could he turn and run. The other man might jump him with a knife.

Minutes passed. Both men fidgeted with doubt and discomfort. Finally one of them shot the question, "Hindu or Mussulman?"

"You say first," came the reply from the other side.

Neither was willing to reveal his identity. Their minds were riddled with suspicion. They let the question lie, each having thought of a new one. "Where's your home?" called one.

"This side of the old Ganges. Shubaida. Where's yours?"

"Chashara, near Narayangunj. What d'you do?"

"I've got a boat. I'm a boatman. You?"

"I work in a cotton mill."

Once more, silence. Peering through the gloom, each tried to see the other, scrutinize the clothes he was wearing. The rubbish bin and the darkness obscured the view. Then the men heard the uproar again—this time much closer. The frenzied shouts were clearly audible. The mill worker and the boatman trembled in terror.

"They're not far now," cried the mill worker in a state of panic.

"Yes, let's go, let's get away from here," called the boatman in a voice that was equally strained.

But the mill worker objected, "No. Don't get up, whatever you do! Want to die?"

The boatman's suspicions were refreshed. What evil designs did this fellow have? The boatman stared hard into the eyes of the mill worker, who stared back and said, "Just stay where you are, just as you are."

The boatman felt pricked by these words. Why was this man trying to stop him? Grave doubts clouded his mind. "Why should I wait?" he called.

"Why? You need to ask?" replied the mill worker in a low, charged voice. "I've just told you. D'you want to die?"

The boatman did not care for the tone of the question. All kinds of unpleasant possibilities jostled in his mind and made him resolute. Why hang about in this dismal alley for a moment longer?

His obstinacy alarmed the mill worker. "I don't like your behaviour," he called. "You haven't yet told me what you're doing around here. Suppose you go off and bring your lot to finish me?"

"What the hell do you mean?!" the other man shouted, momentarily forgetting where they were.

"It's the truth. You don't seem to understand how people's minds work." Something in the mill worker's tone reassured the boatman slightly. He heard him add, "If you go, d'you think I want to stay here alone?"

The racket of the crowd receded. The lethal hush returned. As time went by, the two men imagined they were awaiting death. Crouched on opposite sides of the rubbish bin in this dark alley, they brooded, thinking of their homes, their wives, their children; whether they would ever get back to them in one piece, and whether, if they did return, those faces would still be

there to greet them. These riots had come from nowhere, out of the blue, without the smallest warning. Overnight, the gossip and banter of the marketplace had turned into killing and bloodshed—enough blood to make Mother Ganges herself red. How could men turn so merciless so suddenly? The human race was truly cursed! The mill worker let out a deep sigh. The boatman followed suit.

“Have a smoke?” asked the mill worker, taking a biri from his pocket and holding it out. The boatman, out of sheer habit, pinched the rolled-up tobacco a few times, twirled it in his ear, and only then stuck it firmly between his lips. The mill worker tried to light a match. He had not realised that his clothes were soaked, and so were his matches. He threw away the dud stick in disgust.

“Damned matches are wet,” he said and pulled another one out of the box.

The boatman impatiently got up and crouched beside the mill worker. “I’ll light it. Give me the box,” he said. He virtually snatched it from the mill worker. After a couple of failures, he got a match to go.

“Allah be praised! Here you are—quickly, take it.”

But the mill worker sprang up as if he had seen a ghost. The biri between his lips drooped and fell. “You are a...”

The match flame died. Both pairs of eyes widened with mistrust and anxiety in the darkness. There was a profound pause.

The boatman abruptly stood. “Yes, I’m a Mussulman,” he said. “What of it?”

The mill worker replied in a frightened voice, “No—nothing, it doesn’t matter. I was only...” Glancing at the bundle beside the boatman, he asked, “What’s in there?”

“Some clothes for my children and a sari. Don’t you know that tomorrow is Id?”

Was that really all there was? The mill worker’s doubts persisted.

“You think I’m lying? You don’t have to believe me. See for yourself.” He held out the bundle.

“No need for that. Sorry, friend. It’s all right. But you never know these days, do you? You can’t trust anyone. Don’t you agree?”

“That’s true. I hope you’re not carrying anything?”

“I swear to God I haven’t even a needle on me. All I want is to reach home with my life.” The mill worker shook his clothes as if to prove his words.

Both men sat down again next to each other. For some while they inhaled their biris deeply, and did not speak. “Tell me,” the boatman said reflectively, as if chatting with one of his family or friends. “Tell me what all this killing’s about?”

The mill worker kept up with newspapers and had some notion of politics. With some warmth he replied, “The fault’s with those League types of yours. They’ve started all this in the name of freedom struggle.”

The boatman was stung. "I don't know anything about all that. I'm only asking, what's the point of all this killing? Some of your people die and so do some of ours. How can it benefit the country?"

"That's what I'm saying. The whole thing's not worth a damn." The mill worker made a gesture of hopelessness with his thumbs. "You may die, I may die, our families may become beggars. In last year's 'riot,' they hacked my brother-in-law into four, so my sister became a widow and landed on my shoulders with all her children. To me it looks as if the leaders give the orders from the comfort of the top floor, and leave us to do the fighting and the dying."

"It's as if we're not human beings at all, but stray dogs. Why do we snap at each other and bite like this?" The boatman wrapped his arms round his knees and sat hunched in impotent rage.

"You're right."

"Does anyone ever think of people like us? Are the fellows who started this riot going to provide my meals? Will I get my boat back? It's probably sunk at Badamtoli Ghat by now. That rich zamindar Rup Babu—his manager used to get into my boat every day to cross the river to the courthouse. That man was as generous as Hazrat: five rupees for the fare, and five for the tip—ten in all. He covered my entire monthly expenses. Will a Hindu babu like him ever step into my boat again?"

The mill worker was about to say something when they heard the march of heavy boots. There was no question: the boots were about to enter their alley from the road. The two men eyed each other with dread.

"What do we do?" The boatman had grabbed his bundle.

"We must escape. But where to? I don't know the city very well."

"Anywhere to get away," said the boatman. "We don't want to be beaten up by the police for nothing. I don't trust those bastards."

"I don't either. But which way? They're coming."

"This way." The boatman pointed towards the southern end of the lane. "Let's go. If we can get to Badamtoli Ghat, we don't need to worry anymore."

Their heads bent, they ran without stopping to catch their breath, crossing numerous lanes until they reached Patuatuli Road. Deserted, the road stretched beneath bright electric lights. They peered out anxiously from the side street: could someone be lying in wait for them? Too bad; even if someone was, they could not delay. Scanning both ends of the road, they ran straight on in a westerly direction. They had not gone far when they caught the *clip-clop* sound of a horse's hooves behind them. Glancing back, they saw a mounted policeman some way off, riding towards them. They darted into a narrow lane used by sweepers.

The horse swept by at a fast trot, its rider's revolver at the ready, each hoofbeat jerking at their hearts. Only when the sound had become faint did they dare to peer out.

“Stick to the edge of the road,” said the mill worker.

And so, clinging to the walls of houses and buildings, they advanced in spurts as fast as they could.

“Stop!” whispered the boatman. The mill worker pulled up, taken aback.

“What is it?”

“Over here.” The boatman took the mill worker behind a pan shop.

“Look over there.”

The mill worker followed the boatman’s finger and saw a shed about a hundred yards off with a single light burning in it. Adjacent to it, on a high verandah, ten or twelve policemen with rifles stood at attention. A British officer was addressing them, gesticulating through a haze of pipe smoke. Below the verandah, a policeman held the reins of a horse, which tattooed the ground restlessly.

“That’s the Islampur outpost,” said the boatman. “If I go a bit further down the lane to the left of it, I reach Badamtoli.”

The mill worker’s face was grey with fear. “What then?” he mumbled.

“You stay here. There’s no point in your going to the ghat. This is a Hindu area; the ghat’s in Islampur—Mussulman territory. Spend the night here, then go home in the morning.”

“And you?”

“I have to go,” said the boatman in a voice choked with worry and fright. “I can’t stand it any longer, friend. It’s eight days since I heard from my family. Only Allah knows how they are. Somehow, I have to get into that lane. If I can’t find my boat, I can still swim across.”

“Are you mad?!” cried the mill worker. He gripped the boatman’s shirt. “How will you ever make it?” His voice was passionate.

“Don’t try to stop me. Don’t. You must understand: tomorrow is Id. By now my children and their mother will have seen the new moon. They’ll be looking forward so much to new clothes and hugs from their father. My wife will be pining for me. I have to go, brother. I can’t wait.” His voice faltered.

The mill worker felt agonised. His grip on the boatman’s shirt slackened. “What if they catch you?” His voice was hoarse with fear and pity.

“They won’t, they won’t get me. Stay here, don’t get up. I’m going. I won’t forget tonight. If Fate wills, we two will meet again. Farewell.”

“I also will never forget it. Farewell.”

With a few stealthy steps, the boatman was gone.

The mill worker stood up and waited, stock-still with suspense. The thumping of his heart refused to slow. He was all ears, praying that God would keep the boatman from peril.

Minutes passed in strained silence. The boatman had been gone some while. How his children would be delighted by their new clothes, and how that would please the poor fellow! The mill worker sighed. The boatman’s wife would probably fall upon his chest and weep tears of loving relief. “You have escaped the jaws of death,” she would say. A small smile played

upon the mill worker's lips as he thought about the reunion. And what would the boatman do then? Then he would—

“Halt!”

The mill worker's heart missed a beat. Men in heavy boots were running nearby. They were shouting something.

“The bastard's trying to get away!”

The mill worker edged out far enough to glimpse a police officer with a revolver leaping down and running into the lane: he fired twice, splitting the night. The mill worker heard both reports, saw the blue sparks of both bullets. He was so tense he bit his finger. Then he saw the officer jump on his horse and race down the lane. And he heard the death cry of the fugitive.

In his dazed imagination, a picture of the boatman floated up. To his chest he was clutching the new clothes and sari for his children and wife. Gradually they turned crimson with blood. He heard the boatman's voice speak to him: “I couldn't reach them, brother. My darlings will drown in tears on their festival day. The enemy reached me first.”

Translation from Bengali by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson