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Father

In the middle of any winter's day, when the sun had risen directly overhead, Shobhana would be carefully arranging the couple of Bengali newspapers, the copies of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Chandi*, and the spectacle case beside the bed on the red carpet on the long first-floor balcony facing west. In the meantime, her father-in-law, Shekharnath, would have finished his midday meal. Having rinsed his mouth and wiped his face with a towel, he would drag his unsteady, eighty-year-old body onto the balcony.

Reading his religious books and newspapers in the middle of the day had been Shekharnath's cherished habit for a long time, but in recent years he had become severely racked by arthritis. From time to time he had excruciating pain in his shoulders and hips and felt as though someone had thrust a burning hot blade into them. Physiotherapy and strong doses of medicine had had little effect. Nowadays, once his lunch had settled in his stomach, his eyelids would get heavy and any more reading of his books or newspapers would send him off to sleep.

When he went out on the first-floor balcony, the rays of the midday sun shone steadily across his legs, but as the sun tended towards the west, its warmth gradually spread over his entire body, providing a tonic that he badly needed. Today, as on other days, Shekharnath fell asleep almost as soon as he had lain down, and when he woke up, it was well into the afternoon. The sun had gradually moved behind the tall buildings and trees to the west.

Awake, Shekharnath continued to lie there. He took his round bifocal glasses from their velvet case and put them on. His whole body was bathed in the balm of the dim golden sunshine of the late afternoon. He knew that Shobhana would soon come with a cup of saccharine-sweetened tea and that no sooner would he finish it than the last of the day's light would start to fade. The winter evening would fall softly, and the temperature would suddenly drop a few degrees. Then Shobhana would not let her father-in-law stay a moment longer on the open balcony but would hurriedly take him inside. Shekharnath was waiting for that.

It was Sunday.

At the other end of the balcony, a group of yellow-beaked blackbirds scampered about, now and then bursting into a joyous chirping, while from the ground floor came a tremendous racket, which meant that Sandip, Shobhana, Raja, and Ruku were engaged in a lively game of table tennis or carom.

Sandip, an executive of a leading multinational company, was Shekharnath's one and only son, and Raja and Ruku were his grandchildren. Raja was studying first-year English honours at St. Xavier's, and Ruku was in Class Eleven at Calcutta Girls'. Sandip and Shobhana were like friends to their children, spending their spare time with them in conversation, watching good videos, or playing such games as carom. No sound was coming from anywhere other than the frenzy of the blackbirds and the frivolity downstairs.

In front of the house was thirty-foot-wide Abhay Haldar Road, which ran straight to the tramline. On the other side of the road was a middling-size park. In Shekharnath's neighbourhood, most of the houses were of one or two storeys, though there were several of three storeys, while on the other side of the park there was a stretch of high-rise buildings.

There was hardly anyone on Abhay Haldar Road, and on the main road only one or two trams and a truck or a minibus were running, seemingly in no hurry and with no destination. Further on, in the park, countless children wearing various-coloured clothes ran all about, and groups of mothers or nurses watched over them. It was like a scene in a silent movie in Eastman colour.

Shekharnath was sitting up and looking out at the road. The blanket around him had come loose, and as he was slowly readjusting it, he noticed a taxi pull up opposite the tramline and a middle-aged lady get out. She asked something of someone in the street—apparently inquiring about an address—then started walking towards Shekharnath's house, but the taxi remained at the junction. Shekharnath's dull, eighty-year-old eyes could barely make out that there was someone as well as the driver in the taxi.

The lady was about fifty and had a handsome, dignified appearance. A little excess flesh had accumulated on her cheeks and around her neck and waist, but the last vestiges of beauty had not yet disappeared from her face. She was wearing an expensive sari, and her eyes were featured by a fashionable pair of glasses; on her right shoulder she carried a very fine lady's bag, and in her left hand was a large suitcase.

Shekharnath watched without curiosity, but was surprised when the lady, looking at the numbers of the houses, stopped in front of his house, Shanti Niwas. Although she had become a little portly, there were still remnants of one who, thirty years ago, might have been a slender and vivacious young woman: her innocent, oval mouth, her sparkling eyes with their thick lashes, the dimple in her chin, and her smooth, unlined cheeks. Shekharnath muttered to himself, "My God, let it not be her!"

The front door was directly under the first-floor balcony, and when she came to it, she could no longer be seen from above. When she pressed the doorbell, its musical sound rang throughout the house, and a few moments later Shekharnath could hear the door being opened. He guessed that Sandip and the others would be eager to see who the caller was.

Shekharnath remained seated, his nerves on edge. Then he could just make out the lady saying, "Is this the home of Shekharnath Bandyopadhyay?"

He recognised the voice. Although it had become a little rough after all that time, it still sounded like the vibrant, resonating hum of the sitar.

Sandip said, "Yes. Who do you want?"

"I—I have come from Dhaka. Can we sit down and talk?"

"Yes, yes. Of course. Come in." Shekharnath heard the door being shut.

The visitor said she had come from Dhaka. Then it had to be her. Despite the abundance of fresh air on this winter afternoon, it seemed as though his breath had stopped and his lungs would crack.

The excited racket had stopped, and everything downstairs had become quite still. At first Shekharnath could not decide what he would do. But after looking for a few moments down at the street in the dying rays of the sun, he made up his mind. In a few minutes, Sandip or Shobhana, or both of them, would run up to the first floor, but he would not look at the face of the one who had come from Dhaka. After all this time, she had died in his mind. Shekharnath had tried to forget her, praying for her death year after year. Would her coming now to Calcutta after thirty years open up that old wound buried deep in his breast?

Shekharnath hoisted up his worn old body, and a current of pain shot from his waist down to the soles of his feet. On another occasion, he might have uttered a sound of grief, but he no longer had the feeling for it.

His own room was on the left of the balcony. There were two doors to it: one led into the house, the other out onto the balcony. His heart thumping, Shekharnath went into his room and shut both doors.

There was very little furniture in the room. A freshly laundered bed was made up on a thick mattress on an old-style bedstead against one wall. On the other side was a small stand with figures of gods and goddesses ranging from Kali to Ganesh. There was also a clothes rack, a wardrobe, and a couple of antiquated iron trunks. On one wall was a Bengali calendar with a picture of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, and above that was a framed photograph of a woman in her midforties. The smiling and beautiful lady was Hemlata, Shekharnath's wife. The photograph had been taken in 1963, the year in which she was burned to death in Mirpur. It was the last picture ever taken of Hemlata.

Shekharnath bolted both doors against whoever might come. Then he got up onto the bed. In a strange reverie, he sat and looked at his wife's photograph.

So many times Shekharnath had resolved not to look back, for in the passing of those thirty years he had been buffeted both inside and out. Who could say how much heartache he had suffered? Sandip had only been a fifteen-year-old boy then. As Shekharnath looked at Hemlata's face, he tried to forget the grief, the sorrow, the distress.

Time's magic hand had healed so much of the pain, and Shekharnath sometimes felt that it had all been forgotten, but the dark side of memory had preserved intact all that he thought had been dispelled—the terror, the panic, the nightmare. He remembered how Hemlata had been so terribly frightened when, in the time after Partition, waves of refugees were rolling out of East Pakistan into West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam. She had said to him, "Come. Let's go and find a place to live in Calcutta." At that time in East Pakistan, it was not such a problem to sell property.

Shekharnath, then thirty-five or thirty-six, was a junior administrative officer in MacKenzie Brothers' jute mill, which was situated beside the Dhaleshwari river at Mirpur, about forty miles from Dhaka. Shekharnath's family had lived in this town for a hundred and fifty years, and his was the seventh generation. In all that time, no one had ever thought of moving anywhere else. For generation after generation, the roots of the Bandyopadhyay family had been set deep in the soil of this old town. It would not have been at all easy to pull them up.

Shekharnath had retorted, "Why should we go to Calcutta? Have we done anything wrong? This is my home, and here I'll stay."

"But don't you see? Every day so many people are leaving—"

"Let them. We are not going."

Hemlata looked worried as she said, "I know in my heart that we won't be able to keep on staying here."

On the one hand, Shekharnath was staunchly orthodox, assiduously observing all the rituals and practices integral to the life of a brahman; on the other, he was infinitely trusting of his non-Hindu neighbours. He said emphatically, "We know everyone in this town. None of them would ever so much as scratch us."

Hemlata said nothing.

Shekharnath went on, "There have been not a few riots in Mirpur, but have we been hurt? Haven't people run to us in time of danger?"

Their neighbours were magnanimous and compassionate and had always stood by them in any time of trouble. At the time of the 1946 riots, when blood flowed throughout undivided India, they allowed no one to lay a finger on Shekharnath. But be that as it might, Hemlata did not have the same faith in people that her husband had—he had maintained a foundation of trust even after Partition—though she did not, of course, openly express whatever suspicions she had about anyone in the town. She asked apprehensively, "But what about Khuku? What will be her future?" Khuku was the pet name of their only child at that time. To the world she was

known as Manika, and she would later earn her living in education. Khuku then was five.

Shekharnath had no trouble discerning the implication in Hemlata's question. She was the daughter of a traditional Barisal brahman family, like his, who had come to her father-in-law's house saturated with all the old values and conservatism of her father's house, so the orthodoxy of the Bandyopadhyays was a part of her too. Hemlata's thoughts and ideas, her worries and concerns, were all enclosed by a strong iron frame beyond which it was impossible for her ever to stray.

Secretly Shekharnath felt a little amused. He had said, "You must be mad to be worrying now about the future of a little five-year-old girl!"

"I wouldn't be worrying if the country had remained as it was. Anyway, Khuku won't be five forever."

"Do you think that everyone around here has become inhuman?"

"Perhaps not. But Khuku's—"

"You want to talk about her marriage?"

Hemlata had said nothing but had looked straight at her husband.

Shekharnath had responded, "The country may be divided, but not everyone is going to shut up their homes and go across the border. From among those who stay, you will certainly find the boy of your choice for Khuku..."

Suddenly, there was a gentle tapping on the closed inside door, and along with it, Shobhana's quiet voice could be heard. "Father...Father..."

Shekharnath was awakened from his memories, but he refrained from giving any answer. He knew why Shobhana had come.

After calling for a little longer, Shobhana went away. A little later there came the familiar sound of a pair of feet running impatiently up the stairs and stopping in front of the door. It was Sandip.

"Father, open the door!" he called urgently. He sounded agitated and excited.

Silent, Shekharnath sat there as though struck dumb.

Sandip went on, "Open the door, open the door! Didi has come from Dhaka."

Shekharnath's heart seemed to stop, then to beat with such force that he could almost hear it. It was as though a thousand drums were being beaten wildly inside his chest.

Sandip was calling anxiously, "Father, won't you come and see Didi?!"

Shekharnath remained seated. Crestfallen, confused, and embarrassed, Sandip stopped calling and went back downstairs.

Instantly Shekharnath was again lost in his memories of those days beside the Dhaleshwari...

Soon after the talk with Hemlata about Khuku, the atmosphere at Mirpur changed. Like the flood of refugees who had gone to India, countless people were now migrating to East Pakistan, having been uprooted from

their homes in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. After the big cities of Dhaka, Chittagong, and Khulna had been filled, many of them went to Mirpur. Like the East Pakistani refugees, these people from India felt angry and resentful for all they had lost and were singularly bent on revenge. The jaws of Mirpur's new arrivals took on a ruthless set, and their eyes blazed with fire.

The poison of the profound hatred and mistrust that were integral to the two-nation theory in no way abated after Partition; indeed, it gradually increased. Relations between India and Pakistan were so complex and sensitive that for the flimsiest of reasons a violent commotion might be ignited on either side of the border. Malice had set its gunpowder to the winds; all it wanted was a spark.

In the meantime, Mirpur too became heated, and from time to time petty riots broke out. However, as before, Shekharnath's neighbours kept him and his family safe.

A number of years passed in what seemed to be no time at all, during which the British directors of MacKenzie Brothers turned the jute mill over to a Dhaka industrialist and left the country. The environment at the mill was no longer the same, and Shekharnath could see that he had become unwanted. He talked about this a lot with Hemlata. By then Khuku had grown, and they also had another two children, the boys Sandip and Sanjay.

It was not only the atmosphere at the factory but also the looks and actions of the neighbours in whom they had placed their hope and trust that began to change. The boundless faith in people that Shekharnath had maintained even after Partition was starting to crack. One minute he would think of going to Calcutta; the next he would decide to hold out a little longer. In actuality, Calcutta was totally unknown to him; he could not imagine where they would live or how Hemlata and the children would survive should they go there.

Eventually, another riot broke out in Mirpur, but before their formerly well-disposed neighbours could run to their aid, their house was set alight, Hemlata was burnt to death, and Khuku was abducted. Shekharnath, who was at the mill, and the boys, who were in school, survived it all.

Now Shekharnath was no longer resolved to stay. Sympathisers advised him, "Go to Calcutta. It's no longer good to stay here." And so the family arranged for the sale of the house, realising no more than an eighth of its true value.

After they got to Calcutta, relations who had gone there straight after Partition bought them the house on Abhay Haldar Road. Sandip and Sanjay were enrolled in a good school, and Shekharnath got a minor position in a mercantile firm. But Sanjay did not live very long, dying of a wrongly diagnosed disease a few years later.

After losing almost everything, Shekharnath hung on tightly to Sandip, in whom his life was now bound up. Sandip was a very peaceable and

amenable boy, and he was also an exceptionally talented student. He took a master's degree in commerce with first-class honours and, after graduating, was appointed to a company secretaryship in a multinational firm. Then Shekharnath arranged for his marriage.

Shekharnath had gone to Calcutta with two gaping wounds in his heart: Hemlata and Khuku. Hemlata had been murdered, but Khuku? Every day he prayed to God that Khuku too might be dead. But God had not heard his prayer.

Shekharnath was not aware that evening had fallen until he noticed the small circles of fog that had formed in the cold winter dark under the streetlights outside.

He did not want to get down from the bed and turn on the light in his room, and he was quite oblivious to the cold north wind coming in through the open window. He remained sitting there, unaware, unfeeling. For some time, he thought of nothing, then he noticed the sound of four pairs of feet on the stairs. This time Sandip and Shobhana had come together, and Raja and Ruku had come with them.

Again there was a knock at the door, and they all started calling together, "Father! Father! Grandfather! Grandfather!"

And as before, Shekharnath sat there inert and unresponsive through it all.

Then Sandip's voice rose over all the others'. He said, "Don't worry, Didi has gone. You won't have to see her. Now open the door." There was a mixture of pain and sorrow and worry in his voice.

How amazing! Once Shekharnath heard she had gone, he felt a strange sense of anxiety over the one he had not wanted to see, the one whom he had wanted to be dead for the last thirty years. He dragged himself down from the bed, switched on the light, and opened the door.

For a few moments, his family fixed their eyes on him, then they all came into the room together.

Shekharnath was wearing nothing other than a dhoti and a short-sleeved, homespun shirt. The cold wind continued to blow through the open window from the street, and he was shivering from the cold, though he did not realise it. Shobhana ran to a corner of the room and took a shawl from the clothes rack, wrapped it tight around her father-in-law, and helped him onto the bed.

Sandip, Raja, and Ruku walked up to Shekharnath, but they did not sit down. Sandip said, "What's the matter, Father? Didi has been trying to find us for so many years. At last she got this address from the Indian High Commission in Dhaka and rushed straight here, but you sat in your room with the door locked and didn't call for her at all! She left in tears. She won't come back again." He paused for a moment, then continued, "What do you imagine Harun-da thinks?"

"Who is Harun-da?" Shekharnath choked on the words.

“Didi’s husband.”

No sooner had Sandip uttered the word than the look on Shekharnath’s face changed altogether. He looked extremely distressed, as though he had stopped breathing. Immediately he heard the Muslim name Harun and was thrown completely off balance by all his old brahmanical prejudices. In a broken and indistinct voice, he mumbled, “Husband...Khuku’s husband...”

Sandip noted his father’s reaction. He had been all the while calm, unperturbed, and forbearing, but now he became a little agitated. “You know, Harun-da has done so much for Didi! If he had not reached out to her, who knows where she might be today!” He then went on to explain that at the time of the riot in Mirpur in 1963, when some of the rabble had abducted Khuku, Harun was a subdivisional officer in that region. Some months later, he rescued Khuku and took her into his own house. Then he tried to find Shekharnath and his family in order to return her to them, but by then they had gone to Calcutta. After a few years of trying and getting no news of Shekharnath, he married the rejected girl for the sake of her respectability. There was no objection of any kind from his parents; rather, they accepted Khuku with open hearts. Harun, the young officer of those days, was now a joint secretary in the Ministry of Education. They had one son, a doctor, and two daughters, who were studying in college.

“Perhaps you will say,” said Sandip, “that it would have been right for Didi to have committed suicide. But I say that it was right that she married Harun. There was nothing more honourable she could have done.”

Shekharnath was nonplussed. What was Sandip saying—the son of an orthodox, conservative brahman family? Shekharnath stared at him, utterly stunned.

It seemed that something had come over Sandip. Speaking his mind he said, “Could you have found such a boy for Didi in our community? Never.” To underscore his feeling, he said in English, “They are happy. Extremely happy.”

Shekharnath wanted to say something, but he could not articulate the words.

Sandip went on, “It is terribly wrong, Father, that Didi will never come back here to us.”

Shekharnath said nothing.

“Harun-da had come too. He wanted to see how the daughter was received in her father’s house, then he would come in himself. But that was the end of it.”

There was an element of irony in what his son had said, but Shekharnath was not aware of it. Breathing heavily, he said, “He came too?”

“Yes. He waited in the taxi opposite the tramline.”

Shekharnath remembered that he had seen someone sitting in the taxi when Khuku had gotten out. That must have been Harun!

A few moments later, Shekharnath's family left. Shobhana brought dinner for him at half past eight: two whole-meal chapatis, some potato-and-cauliflower curry, a bowl of milk, and a sweet. Having served her father-in-law his meal, she made up his bed, helped him into it, tucked the mosquito net in all around him, and left the room.

On any other night, Shekharnath's eyes would have shut as soon as he had lain down, but he could not get to sleep. Time and again, Khuku's face appeared before his eyes. After lying there for a long time, he drew aside the mosquito net, got down from the bed, and walked somewhat unsteadily around the room. He felt that his heart was continually cracking, quite beyond his control.

Towards daybreak, having not slept all night, Shekharnath had made up his mind. He went into the bathroom attached to his room, washed his face, and then went to the other end of the first floor and stood outside Raja's room. He called a few times, and Raja woke up. He was surprised when he opened the door. "Grandfather," he said, "it's you! What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Shekharnath. "Where is your aunt putting up in Calcutta?"

"At some hotel in Park Street."

"Can you take me there right now?"

Raja could hardly believe his ears. Astonished, he said, "You want to go there?"

Shekharnath nodded his head slowly. "Yes," he said.

"But you won't see her if you do."

"Why not?"

"They're going to Dhaka today on the early-morning flight. They'll have left the hotel by the time we get there."

Shekharnath thought for a moment, then said, "In that case, have a quick wash and get ready. We'll go to the airport. There's no need to say anything about this to anyone now."

He returned to his own room and quickly changed his clothes. Beside him was a small iron trunk; he opened it and took out a small leather bag, then closed the trunk.

When he left the house silently with Raja a few minutes later, none of the others had woken up.

The houses all around, the tramline, and the distant park were clouded in fog that winter morning. No one had turned off the streetlights yet, which were as lustreless as the eyes of dead fish. The sun was still very late in rising.

When Shekharnath and Raja reached the airport by taxi, they saw that Khuku and Harun had got there before them. Khuku—or Manika—caught sight of Shekharnath from a distance. She and Harun stopped in their tracks, as did Raja and Shekharnath. Shekharnath's heart started to

thump, and he noticed that Khuku's lips were trembling. On her face were sorrow and joy and pride and accusation—so much was reflected there!

Without realising it, the father had, step by step, gone up to his daughter. Suddenly the fifty-year-old Khuku began to sob like a child. Then, with an extraordinary passion, she threw herself at her father's feet, but did not touch him. With both his hands, he raised his daughter up and held her to his chest for a long time. He felt his chest being bathed in tears.

Harun was standing a little away from them. He had an exceptionally handsome, intelligent, and vivacious face. Shekharnath called to him. He came and touched Shekharnath's feet, and Shekharnath held him too, to his chest.

The announcement came over the public-address system that passengers for Dhaka should board the aircraft, as it was ready for takeoff.

Very slowly Shekharnath released Khuku and Harun and took from the leather bag a gold necklace, a pair of gold bangles, and a diamond ring. Giving his daughter the necklace and the bangles, he said, "I've not given you anything. Your mother had these made for your wedding." Giving the diamond ring to Harun, he said, "Put this on. I don't know if it will fit you. If not, take it to a goldsmith and have it altered."

Nothing was said for a while.

After another announcement from the public-address system, Harun said, "We have to go now."

Shekharnath slowly nodded his head.

Harun said, "Do come to Dhaka sometime. I will arrange it all for you."

"But before that, bring the children," said Shekharnath.

"We will."

Harun and his wife walked towards the security enclosure. As he watched them, Shekharnath thought to himself, "What a fine boy!" And at that moment he was not at all aware of the age-old tradition running in his blood.

Translation from Bengali by John W. Hood