

TABISH KHAIR

TABISH KHAIR

*The Corridor*

I GREW UP in such safety that, inevitably, my first real memory is of fear. They go together, safety and fear; they hold hands surreptitiously, like all those newlyweds used to in my town, pretending to be oblivious of one another.

It was a corridor and a staircase in an old white-washed mansion, variously partitioned and rented out by a family that had graduated to running a cinema hall. The multi-hued theatre rose next to the house and in stark contrast to it. My teacher lived in one of the partitioned units of the peeling house. She was also my private tutor.

Every evening, when my father went for the second shift at his private clinic—dispensary is what it was called—I would be dropped there. His dispensary was just two buildings farther on, in a sprawling complex of rooms, most of them locked, some used by distant relatives, usually students from the ancestral village. This had once been a street on the outskirts of the town, which had swallowed it up in due course, and the old families had built their *hawelis* in it. Now my father drove to it from the new outskirts of the town, where we lived. Those were the years when you did not leave town; you just moved with it.

164

My father would be driving his slate-coloured Fiat; he used the driver only when he was not in the car himself. He was an impatient, irascible man, but he liked driving. He was not irritable when he drove. He drove carefully, his face peaceful. Years later when he taught me to drive, he told me: “The point isn’t that you should not make a mistake yourself; the point is that you should be able to avoid the consequences of other people’s mistakes.” Looking back, I am not sure he managed to do so anywhere in his life except in the driving, though he tried—and he tried to protect his family, desperately, from such consequences.

At six in the evening I would be dropped outside the side door, leading to a flight of stairs sandwiched between a cycle-repair shop and a clothes retailer, up through a dark corridor to the rooms rented by my teacher-tutor and her parents. The corridor was full of discarded and broken furniture, some covered with a tarpaulin. The tarpaulin moved sometimes, disturbed by a stray gust or the rats that nested in the furniture. I was frightened of climbing this stretch of stairs and walking down the corridor to my teacher’s flat. That is my first real memory; everything before that might just have been stories implanted in my mind by others, by adults. But this one I remember vividly, not just with my mind but also with my body.

My teacher’s name was Sushmita; she was a Bengali. We lived in Bihar, and in those days the best teachers in Bihar came from Bengal. Or, actually, their parents or grandparents came from Bengal. Now, unnoticed to us in the 1970s, they were moving away. It was a trickle; by the 1980s it would be a flood.

Bihar was no longer a safe place for them.

It was not unsafe in the ways in which developed Gujarat or Maharashtra became unsafe for Biharis from the 1980s onwards; Bengalais were not chased down streets and beaten up. No one was really chased down Bihari streets and beaten up for not being Bihari. Not as far back

165

as I can remember, not even now. If Biharis felt an urge to bash up other people, they found fellow Biharis—Bhumiyars against Yadavs, Hindus against Muslims...it was a long list.

Bengalis had started leaving for different reasons. But in 1970, we had not noticed that they were leaving. The Bengalis had not noticed it themselves.

Sushmita, Miss Sushmita, and her parents were not leaving. They had no plans to leave; they spoke disparagingly of the Bengalis who had left. Miss Sushmita must have been close to thirty by then, which was old for a single woman in Bihar, but not too old for the working middle classes in Bengal. I remember her as pretty; compact, rounded, nubile, those are words I would use now.

Then, I just saw her as a strict teacher, who, surprisingly, mothered me in weak moments. I was used to being mothered. I was an only child, and the only son in my generation on my father's side. My parents had had one other son who died in infancy. My father's only sister had three daughters. I took mothering for granted.

As I ascended the stairs to Miss Sushmita's flat, I heard sounds. That narrow dark space was full of startling sounds, largely due to the cinema hall next to it. Voices and music seeped through the walls, muffled, distorted, ghostly. There were sudden silences and explosions of noise. The tarpaulin shapes lay in ambush farther up. My father was always running late (he had a busy practice) and he only waited in the car, engine running, until I had entered the door and Miss Sushmita had appeared in the balcony above, with freshly washed hair—she had long, perfumed, jet black tresses, usually tied into a strict bun with a garland of white flowerbuds—and waved in response to his sharp honk. He never left before I had entered the door, though, and Miss Sushmita had appeared upstairs. He was frightened of something happening to me. His dead son haunted him. Lots of other things haunted him too, but I didn't know. He was not a man to betray his fears.

I was much less manly. I sometimes intuited that my timidity was a source of worry to my father, but he hid it well, being unbendingly loyal to blood. Even though I knew Miss Sushmita was waiting up a flight of stairs and a short dark corridor, cluttered with generations of broken furniture, haunted by the sounds of whatever film was running next door, I had to force myself up every step. I wished for a brother. I wanted to run down, but I could not. I was not a baby anymore. I was close to ten, as the heavy schoolbag on my back reminded me.

At the head of the stairs, there was a weak yellow bulb, dangling naked from a wire. It fused every few weeks and then would not be replaced for days until my father, on one of his visits upstairs, noticed it and got it replaced. The bulb was in no-man's land: both the landlord and the tenants refused to replace it, ascribing the duty to the other. But then, in any case, there would be power cuts lasting for hours. Private generators had not arrived in Phansa yet. Much of my tuition was conducted by the light of lanterns, flames flickering in the sweet stench of kerosene, soft shadows ebbing like waves on the walls. The lanterns—we called them *laaltens*—had a small knob that you could turn to reduce or increase the glass-encased flame, which was a source of fascination to me. I was not allowed to handle lanterns back home, so the moment Miss Sushmita left the room, on some quick errand for her parents, I would stop doing my homework and manipulate the flame, creating a theatre of shadows on the walls. I was not frightened of shadows in the room.

But each step up the stairs was an effort of will. It did not change for the six years that I continued going to Miss Sushmita's for tuition, from class four to class nine. By the time I was thirteen, I had stopped believing in God, and consequently also in ghosts. It did not make any difference, Phansa was chock-full of gods and ghosts; my lack of belief rarely survived insertion into other spaces in my hometown.

Upstairs, there was light, finally. And Miss Sushmita. Smelling of soap and some subtle fragrance, usually sandalwood. For the next three

hours, she helped me do my homework and crammed me with extra information; I was not the most receptive of students. As I grew older, I merely stood confirmed in my prejudices: maths bored me to death, unless it was geometry, and I liked only the theoretical parts of physics. Biology and chemistry always struck me as secular versions of the Quran and Arabic lessons that had been imparted to me for a year at home by a Maulvi who committed the mistake of twisting my ears once too often. My mother spotted him in the act and told my father, who promptly fired him. My father was not against a disciplinary twist of the child's ear, or even a slap or two, but he felt, very strongly, that such punishment was the parents' prerogative, and solely the parents'.

Like the Quran and Arabic, chemistry and biology seemed to consist of rote learning with very little practical significance and even less entertainment value. Compared to the threats and dire warnings of the Quran, which did serve to wake you up when the Maulvi also had a hand itching to twist your ears, chemistry and biology offered little in terms of human interest. In later years, chemistry picked up a bit, when we were allowed into laboratories, but even then the more interesting chemicals were behind lock and key. Civics and geography and history were similar, though they were sometimes relieved by stories and exotic photos. What I really loved was moral science—it was a Catholic school—and English literature. They were full of stories and human dilemmas; I revelled in both. The nuns thought I was a highly moral boy; they never realized that it was the potential immoralities and actual frailties suggested by the stories that interested me. I was not always convinced by the answers, but I was intrigued by the problems.

Miss Sushmita noticed my love for stories and tried to encourage it. She was herself an avid reader, but she was also an eminently practical young woman, able to do difficult sums in her head without blinking. The books she recommended to me were far too practical and sensible for me; they gave too many answers. Undaunted, she tried for three

hours every day of the week except Sundays, from six to nine in the evening, to make me overcome my weaknesses and learn my replies. I think she largely failed.

My father was supposed to collect me on his way back from work around nine. If I sat out on the veranda and leaned over just a bit, something I was fearful of doing, I could even see his car drive out of the gate to the dispensary and drive up to Miss Sushmita's building. He would occasionally come up the stairs to collect me.

We were supposed to eat at nine-thirty at home. But I seldom returned before ten, sometimes as late as eleven-thirty. My father tended to get delayed. By the time he arrived, I would have been—at least in the early years—fed by Miss Sushmita and sometimes put to sleep in an armchair on the veranda. My father would carry me down to the car. But, on such occasions, he would spend some time, up to half an hour if it was not past eleven, talking to Miss Sushmita. They spoke with an avidity that I would recognize only much later. They did not know that I was not fully asleep, just pretending to be so. I had long realized that the only way one discovered anything of interest from grown-ups was by pretending to be asleep or not there. Papa and Miss Sushmita never said or did anything that they would not have done if I had been awake, and yet I also felt that it would be wrong of me to wake up and deprive them of this short chat, in which both of them—serious people in different ways—laughed more than they usually did.

Going down that dark, frightening corridor and stairs, either in my father's strong arms or holding his fingers, was another matter. Ghosts do not bother you when you are with your father.

At a quarter past ten, the night is dark and deserted, apart from figures huddled at the road corners, warming themselves over a boarsi-fire, and the occasional rickshaw, empty, jolting past in a drizzle of metallic sounds. My father's Fiat is one of the few in town installed with

a cassette player, he still plays music on it. It is getting less and less frequent, though I am to realize that much later. A *qawwali* by Sabri Brothers is on. The headlights cut into the cool February night.

Papa honks once, before turning into the gate, and the gateman, ancient Boodhe Mian, who also doubles as the gardener, opens the gate even before the car reaches it. There is a short curved driveway of red bricks and a portico under which he parks. The driver, in a rush to go home, hovers around us, waiting to take over the car and drive it into the garage by the side of the large, solid house, built, I have been told, under the direct supervision of my father.

My mother is waiting up, the food ready. She has not eaten. She never does. She always cooks the dinner herself, despite the cook. The cook is only used to prepare the other meals, or dinners when we have guests.

I can see the happiness on her face when she perceives that I am not too sleepy. It means she will be able to eat with me. She sees me for less than three hours in the day, sometime between three-thirty, when I return from school, and six, when I drive off with my father for tuition at Miss Sushmita's. The only meal she is certain of having with me on weekdays is breakfast. Often I return fully fed from Miss Sushmita's, and if I am too sleepy, I am put to bed immediately by Zaibun or Sajjo Bha, while my parents eat.

We are used to elaborate meals. Any dinner with fewer than four dishes will be criticized by my father. He grew up in a household with cousins and village relatives eating together, all lavishly served by my grandfather's two cooks. He is sometimes unhappy about the fact that he employs only one cook and two maidservants, plus Boodhe Mian, the gardener. The driver comes only for the day. There is an army of other part-time "day servants," but they do not count for Papa, who is used to servants living in special quarters attached to the house. When he built this house, he got such quarters added at the back, though the Patna architect's plan had not provided for them. But my mother, who

usually accepts his wishes, refuses to hire more people. Not "full-timers," as she calls them. "We don't need more full-timers," she says, and rightly so. To which he shakes his head and says, "There were at least ten servants living in my father's house." "They had to feed at least twenty people at every meal too," my mother replies, sensibly. "We are only three." Even I can see that she regrets saying this, whenever it slips out. It reminds them of their lost child, my older brother who died a few days after birth, and the miscarriage that my mother had when I was less than two years old. They never speak of these matters, almost never. I learn only later that my mother cannot have another child because of the miscarriage, in which she had nearly died.

One night my father arrives early. Miss Sushmita is still trying to explain some algebra to me despite exaggerated symptoms of drowsiness on my part.

My father comes up. Miss Sushmita goes out to the veranda. I hear him say, "They have bombed our airfields." There is a moment of silence. Then Miss Sushmita says, "It really is war then." My father replies, "Officially." There is another moment of silence, and then he adds, "Well, it was coming. We'd better get it done with now."

I go out into the veranda. I still remember their faces. Their faces—Miss Sushmita's face is what our poets love to call "moon-shaped" and my father's is rugged, much darker, but more like that of a Hollywood star than a Bombay one; there is a strong resemblance to Cary Grant—are full of concern. But there is a difference too. On my father's there is an extra shade of worry. I notice it; I do not fully comprehend it.

The evening is unusually silent. Has the theatre been closed because of the news? That could hardly have happened. Maybe it was a break between shows. Maybe it is just the way I remember it. But what I recall is an intense silence, as still as a delicate plate of china on a mantelpiece.

Miss Sushmita's parents are in their room; they never come out during my tuition hours unless required to do so. But they must have overheard. The silence is broken. A radio is switched on in their room; I can hear it being fiddled to catch the news.

I go up to my father and, unusually, take his hand. I don't know why I do this. He looks startled.

Miss Sushmita offers to make tea. My father shakes his head. "There is tension in town," he says, "I think I should get back home to Zubeida." Zubeida is my mother's name.

Miss Sushmita looks surprised. It takes her a second to understand the statement; it is as if she has to translate it from a less familiar language into her mother tongue. Then she says, "You don't think there will be riots?"

My father shrugs his broad shoulders.

"But we are safe here," says Miss Sushmita.

"Yes, you are," replies my father. Does he actually stress the "you"? No, I am almost certain he would not. It is my memory that stresses it today, as I write this down. It is what has happened since then that puts the accent on that word.

My mother has already heard the news. She often has the radio on when she cooks or relaxes, though never if my father is around. TV has not come to Phansa yet, and my father does not like the radio. Too much noise from the world, he growls, though Ammi once divulged to me that they used to listen together to the radio, especially the songs on Amin Sayani's *Binaca Geetmala*, in their early years together. Papa can still whistle entire film songs, a surprisingly artistic talent in a man of his type, though he never does so without much urging.

I know Ammi has heard the news because, unusually, she is waiting on the veranda. She runs down the five marble steps and hugs me as I get out of the car.

Boodhe Mian shuffles up after locking the gate, and carries my father's medical case out of the car. He puts it in the drawing room and leaves. Boodhe Mian is an aborigine from Chota Nagpur and, by tacit and mutual understanding, seldom enters the house. He has a shed next to the cowshed at the back of the fields; he will not live in the servant quarters in our backyard. He has a fascinating weapon, shaped like a bow, but used to shoot stones, or hardened baked-clay pellets. Once or twice, he has demonstrated it to me by shooting down a bird or a squirrel—something my father forbids—with incredible accuracy. He eats them. He also eats crows. As I am allowed to shoot crows (and lizards) with my airgun, I often gift him with dead crows, which he accepts with glee and then grills over an open fire, between two sets of bricks. He is an old man but walks erect and fast; he seldom says more than a word or two.

My mother asks Papa only after Boodhe Mian has left, "Is it true?" It is typical that she wants Papa to confirm news that she has heard on radio.

"Yes," says my father, "there is war." Then he adds, again, "It had been coming in any case."

I have known that too. Ever since March, when the Pakistani army went in to prevent a democratic upheaval in East Pakistan and the Mukti Bahani opposed them, war has been in the air. The more warlike of my classmates have been going about chanting nationalist slogans in the schoolyard until stopped by the nuns. Miss Sushmita and her parents—Mr. and Mrs. Basu, as I called them, both retired and surviving on savings and various government pensions—had been glued to the radio at times, following the development across the border, rooting for their fellow Bengalis, even though the Mukti Bahani was mostly Muslim, as were the opposing Pakistani forces. Almost everyone I knew was in favor of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his Mukti Bahani, though in my

family this support was tempered by a degree of unease. I knew why it was so: my father had cousins, some of whom had grown up with him, in both East and West Pakistan; three of my mother's many sisters and brothers were in West Pakistan too, as was my grandmother's twin-sister, who haunted family talk like a ghost, occasionally made real by a "long-distance trunk call" from Karachi.

But I still did not know fully what difference all that made.

The dinner was laid out as usual, though it was early. My father must have called. Everything was as it would have been, but only Zaibun was there to serve dinner, which basically meant refilling my father's water glass at regular intervals and clearing up afterwards. Sajjo Bua, who was actually one of my grandmother's servants, had gone back to Maalkini, as she and all the old servants called my grandmother. I called her Dadijaan.

My mother had made a special effort. Apart from the two vegetable curries and daal, there were shaami kabab and murg musallam, teh-daar-roti and muttar-pulao to go with them, and, finally, firni for dessert.

Dinner was the heavy meal in those days, and not just in my family. It was heavy in all families where people had the leisure to pity those who went without food on the streets.

But despite the lavish spread, we ate in silence at the old mahogany-topped table my father had inherited from his grandfather. There were twelve chairs, five on each side. My father sat at the head, my mother and I on each side of him. Zaibun hovered around us. The cook, Wazir Mian, came in only once or twice to ascertain that all was well.

I think my father said only one sentence during that meal. "It is good that you sent Sajjo Bua back to Ammijaan. I will call her." He called my grandmother Ammijaan.

To which my mother replied, "Do you really think there will be trouble?"

My father did not say anything. He helped himself to another piece of chicken.

When I wake up next morning, the sun is stronger than it should be. Usually I am woken up around seven, so that I have forty-five minutes to get ready and eat my breakfast, before being dropped by car at my school. My school bell rings at eight. If we are more than five minutes late, the gate closes, and we have to wait until the morning-prayer and assembly are over at 8:15. Then the principal, a much-dreaded sixty-plus-year-old American nun (one of two left over from colonial times) with a stout wooden paddle that she does not hesitate to employ on our bottoms, turns up and gives us, and our parents in absentia, a thorough dressing down, in which our chronic unpunctuality is exposed as an offence against God, humanity, and the nation, in that order.

But this morning it is not the seven o'clock sun that greets me. And I have not been woken up; I wake up on my own. I look at the bedside clock; it shows 7:55.

I sit up, frightened. I will be very late this morning. I shout for Zaibun, for my parents do not seem to be around. "Why didn't you wake me up?" I cry out in Urdu. It is her job to wake me, alarm clocks not being considered reliable enough. "Now Sister Lisa will *paddle* me." I use the word *paddle* in English, because there is no Urdu equivalent for it. It is when Sister Lisa makes you stand stiffly and hits your bottom, or, if you are older or a girl, your outstretched palm, with her softball bat.

"Sister Lisa-visa *baddle* your enemies," replies Zaibun from the lobby, where she is dusting something. "There is no school today, babu."

If this is what war entails, I remember thinking, then it is a pity we do not go to war more often.

After breakfast, my father says to me, "Let's go visit your grandmother."

It is only now that it strikes me: my father is also home. "Aren't you going to the dispensary?" I ask him.

"Not this morning," he replies. "Maybe in the evening. We will see."

My grandmother dresses in white saris with coloured borders. Her house is white but bordered too.

She does not let anyone talk until she has fed them. She still has more "full-time" servants than my parents. All of them bustle around me; all of them seem just a bit terrified of my father, perhaps theatrically so. They have been with her for years. She pays them from money that she has saved up, which is not much—a matter of much consternation to my father, I discover later—and a monthly sum that my father sends her. When she runs short, she sells off a bit of the land that she has inherited from her husband. The land has been divided up between her, her daughter, and her son, that is, my father, in keeping with Islamic laws. This means that it has been divided into four equal parts, with the women getting one part each and the son inheriting two parts. The house she lives in should have been divided up as well, but her two children will not think of it; it was built by their father.

Dadijaan is a small, compact, imperious woman. She sits in her armchair, and expects me to come and kiss her on the cheek, after which she kisses me on my forehead and mutters a blessing. She continues sitting in her armchair as Sajjo Bua, in her fifties the youngest of her old retainers, and a couple of decrepit crones lay out a second breakfast for us. We protest that we have already eaten, but she ignores our protests. "Children can always eat again," she says to me.

It is only as we eat our second breakfast—Dadijaan joins us at the table but hardly eats anything—that my father gets to bring up the matter which has brought him here.

He talks between incursions by Sajjo Bua and the decrepit crones to serve us, mostly me.

"You should move in with us, Ammijaan," he says, with the directness that he is infamous for.

She ignores the remark and urges me to have another jalebi. This brings one of the crones bustling in to plop two steaming kachoris on my plate. After she returns to the kitchen, where they are probably eavesdropping on everything in any case, my father repeats what he has said.

This time Dadijaan answers. "What will I do at your place, son?"

"What you do here, Ammijaan."

But she just smiles in answer to that and shouts an order to the decrepit crones.

"At least move in with us until this war is over," Papa presses the issue.

"Nothing will happen in these parts. It is the Civil Lines."

"Who knows? If something happens, it will be too late to act. Mobs materialize without prior notice."

"Nothing will happen." She closes the discussion and switches it with another remark. "Aapa called last night."

My father looks even more worried. Aapa is what she calls her sister in Karachi.

"She and her family are fine," Dadijaan adds.

"She should not have called," my father says, petulantly. "Not now."

"Of course, she had to call. She had heard the news too, and she is my own sister."

"Don't shout it from the rooftops, will you?" says my father, irritably.

"It is not as if other Muslim families do not have relatives in Pakistan."

"Other Muslim families live in *mohallas* that cows fear to enter!" my father retorts, "Anyway, they are not as visible as we are. You should move in with us, Ammijaan."

"You have not taken a single jalebi, Hussain," says my grandmother in reply. "Here, have one."

I know that whenever she addresses my father by his first name, she is either happy or angry.