

Mashiul ALAM
Two stories

Milk

Once there was a severe flood in the month of Magh.

– Local saying

1

Salimuddi's wife Julekha did deliver the baby, but barely two months had passed when her breastmilk dried up. What was the baby supposed to survive on? There was no answer to Julekha's brutal question. He who was Master of the land and the skies was also Master of Julekha's breastmilk; this Julekha believed. But now it seemed to her that the Divine Master had pursed His lips in a smirk when He saw the distressing situation Julekha and her baby were in. It made her very angry. God was exceedingly whimsical: these words continued to beat in her heart. Unable to bear it, one day she held her baby away from her breast, looked up to the sky and blurted out, "This wasn't a good thing you did, Allah."

Within this Julekha's heart lived another Julekha. That Julekha raised her forefinger and said, "Do not try to comprehend the mysteries of Allah." It was enough to terrify Julekha; she spat on her chest and said tauba in repentance. Nevertheless, she received no forgiveness and came down with a terrible bout of stomach flu. She flooded the house and the yard with her piss, shit and vomit.

But the people of Modhupur knew that the Master of the land and the skies was infinitely kind, exceedingly forgiving. He sent the non-profit worker Aminul Islam to Julekha's bedside bearing packets of oral saline, and thus, ordered the angel of death Azrael to go back this time around.

2

Julekha was no emperor's daughter. She was a farm labourer bound in year-round employment at the Talukdar farmstead of Modhupur village. Her husband Salimuddi was the same. (There is no difference between a bound farmhand and a bound cow.)

Julekha was twenty-four years old; her skin was the colour of an old, shabby black umbrella, her body suffered a scarcity of flesh. Joint-ridden, thin as a cane, her body jutted out every which way, angular and long. Her nose was bony and high, her jaw at the ready. Her eyes were narrow; below them lay shaded hollows. They were like a pair of rusted black sickles. Julekha's breasts were not as large as a woman's should be. Her waist was flat and narrow. Her ass, disappointing.

3

There was no milk in Julekha's breasts. But, through Allah's grace, her son didn't die due to lack of breastmilk. He was quite well, growing. After all, rice water was not a rare commodity in a farming household. Also, people had seen him eat clods of earth. Meaning that Julekha's son was growing up on a diet of rice water and dirt. This was not a problem. He had begun to crawl and could even stand up grabbing onto this and that. This crawling pup advanced along the yard, the verandas, the stove-side, and the barns of the Talukdar farmstead, with ease. He wedged his red tongue against the back of his two just-grown teeth and cooed, toh toh toh. There was no one in Modhupur to pick up the child gently, or rock him a little, or make him chuckle or cry. It made no difference to him. He kept to himself, crawled here and there, grabbed this and that, played with the lambs and the baby goats, and laughed aloud whenever he felt like it.

4

In the evenings during the month of Poush, winter winds blew across the northern lake of Modhupur, baring their teeth, laughing and gnawing on the entire village. Cold dew dripped from the black sky onto the tin roofs, the straw thatches, the leaves, the haystacks, the supine paddies, the dusty roads and the hardened fields. In the Talukdar barns, the cows shivered with cold, and mosquitoes and gadflies swelled from sucking their blood. At some point, an owl poked its grotesque face out from a hole in a tree and gazed at the misty dawn. The elderly muezzin chanted the azan from the village mosque in a trembling voice and, in one of the many barns owned by the Talukdar family, a black dog eased her distended belly by bringing five puppies into the world. Still, there was no sign of the sun in the eastern sky. Still, adjacent to the Talukdar household, inside the tin-roofed shed spread thickly with straw, a group of dark-skinned people breathed noisily in their sleep.

5

The black dog's pups couldn't open their eyes yet. They couldn't bear the light of the world. They squealed and constantly tripped all over each other. They couldn't even locate their mother's teats.

The mother's teats were bursting with milk. But her belly burned with hunger. She filled her babies' bellies and went out. She needed food for herself. She crossed the hay-filled barn into the yard, and along the bank of the pond, along the grove of bamboo where leaves fell, and, swaying her milk-filled teats, she went in search of food.

6

A muscular male dog showed up in front of the barn. His drooping ears pricked up. His nostrils began to expand and contract. Inside the barn, there was indistinct squealing. The dog, sinewy like a wolf, slipped into the barn. In a moment, he shot out again like an arrow. The bright white puppy dangling from his

mouth was clearly visible in the bright sunlight of midday. Bright red blood dripped onto the dry earth. The earth sucked in all the blood, but the stain remained.

The dog, with the puppy in its maw, disappeared. Then, for a while, there was absolute silence everywhere. All the men and women of Modhupur were frantically busy with cutting—Threshing—boiling—husking the rice harvest. In a little while, a pack of monstrous dogs showed up in front of the barn and within seconds the black dog's hideaway became empty. Only drops of blood remained, creating patterns on the white, hard soil of the month of Poush. The parched, thirsty soil absorbed all the blood, but still couldn't remove the signs.

The mother returned from the bamboo grove. She didn't waste time anywhere and quickly slipped into the barn. But her home inside the barn was empty. She writhed in distress. She clawed apart the piles of straw with her paws. Then she clawed at the earth, searched in the hay, and began running from one end of the barn to the other, distraught. She came out and raised her front paws to the sky, moaning. She clawed the earth again, rolled around on the ground, panted, and again raised her front paws to the sky, crying, and continuing to cry.

The people of Modhupur didn't see any of this. They had much more important things to do in this world.

7

Julekha's son crawled everywhere through the house, the yard, the outer yards. In Modhupur, the rice harvest continued: the fields grew empty and the farmers' households filled up with rice and hay.

During the day, Julekha dried out the unhusked rice in the red, cow-dung dabbled yard; she walked in circles within the spread-out unhusked rice, sifting it with her feet. In the afternoon, when the sunlight began to redden and die, she pulled the rice into piles with a paura. She covered the piles with polythene fertiliser bags and sacking so that the rice wasn't dampened by the night's dew. When night descended, she boiled the unhusked rice in large brass pots on a five-mouthed stove. She tossed some chaff into the fire; it crackled and burned.

Salimuddi reaped the paddy with the other labourers, carried back sheaves of paddy in baskets and arranged them in the outer yard. At night, he laid out empty barrels and wooden planks to flail the bundles of paddy or threshed them by walking a cow or water-buffalo in a circle.

Julekha's son was quite neglected in the middle of this massive toil; he wandered around on his own.

The dog with the lost puppies sat by herself in front of the barn. Her face was streaked with tears.

Julekha's son crawled over to the dog. The dog wagged her tail. She stretched out her neck and sniffed the human child.

8

One afternoon, Abdul, the servant of the Mondal household next door, was heard shouting. Then, he began to jump up and down, slapping both cheeks of his own ass, telling everyone, "What a strange thing, brother, what a strange thing! Julekha's son is feeding on dog's milk!"

Everyone was stunned. They dropped whatever they were doing and rushed over to the Talukdar's outer yard. There they found Julekha's son and the dog that had lost her puppies next to a pile of straw; the two were playing together in safety, in harmony. Nobody could see a hint of Abdul's aspersion in their simple play. Someone smacked Abdul on the back of his neck and said, "Shalla, you've become a detective now, have you?" Abdul touched soil to swear on his mother, to swear on Allah, and said, "But I saw it with my very own eyes!" When another smack seemed impending, he grew dejected and said, "One day you'll see with your own eyes that I'm not lying."

9

Abdul vowed to himself that, if he could show no one else, one day he would at least show Julekha and Salimuddi that astonishing scene. He remained vigilant from then onwards. After investigating for several days, he noticed that when the labourers left for the fields to reap the harvest after their morning's breakfast of watered-rice, when the women workers and the other women of the farmstead were engrossed in cooking and other chores, Julekha's son crawled while cooing toh toh toh, and crossed threshold after threshold, making for the outer yard. There, amid the countless piles of straw and the maze of haystacks, Julekha's son and the dog missing her pups found each other.

One day Abdul begged and pleaded and brought Salimuddi, Julekha and three other labourers to the outer yard. They stood behind a high haystack and saw:

Julekha's son was crawling, the carpet-like straw crackling under him. Around him, heavy with milk, danced the dog. She was exulting, clawing at the straw, wagging her tail and emitting a strange squeal. Whenever the boy wanted to pet the dog, she pretended to move away, but the next moment she was back wagging her tail, calling to him and shaking her head. Julekha's son giggled and reached out to grab her, but again she moved away.

Thus, their play and pretending went on for a while. Then, gradually, the dog grew calm. The boy cooed toh toh toh and went up to her. The dog splayed out her legs and stood still. Julekha's son pulled his little legs together and then extended them sideways under the dog's belly, balancing himself on his hands. He crooked his neck raising his face upwards and attached his mouth to one of the milk-filled nipples.

Salimuddi slid out from behind the haystack. He gripped the hoe resting on his shoulder and raised it above his head, arching his spine like a bow, poised to strike. The dog ran in terror but, impeded by another haystack, it changed direction trying to run a different way, when Salimuddi opened his mouth expelling his breath, and at that moment the thick, heavy back of the hoe landed right in the middle of the dog's head. There was a noise like the thick shell of a ripe velvet apple cracking open and, trembling and biting down on its tongue, the dog fell.

Salimuddi saw millions of fireflies jumping and circling around him, sparking impossibly in the midday sun. While everyone stared wide-eyed at the dog thrashing on the ground in the last moments of its life, the hoe slipped from Salimuddi's slackened fist and dropped almost silently on to the hay; watching the shimmer of the hostile fireflies circling his head for just a few seconds made Salimuddi's eyelids droop, and when his body lurched slightly and fell, like a tree trunk, the other farmworkers turned to look at him. As Salimuddi's body tumbled like the trunk of a banana tree chopped at the base, they caught him. When Julekha witnessed the moment and began howling, three crows began screeching in chorus from the mango tree by the pond, and Julekha's son forgot his own tears and gazed in wonder at the crows.

10

Salimuddi regained consciousness after cold water from the wintry pond was poured over his head for a little while. At first, he glanced this way and that, looked at the branches and boughs of the trees in surprise. Once he was able to locate himself, he began to look more normal.

He lay there comfortably for about an hour and then, proclaiming, "Ah, nothing happened," he stood up. He glopped a fistful of mustard oil on his head and kneaded it onto his crown before smoothly walking to the pond with his lungi and towel slung across his shoulder, ducking himself into the water before coming back.

Then, with the sweet heat of the southbound winter sun warming his back, he sat in the yard with the other labourers and ate rice till his belly was stuffed; after the rice, like any other day, he chugged down gallons of water. As he stroked his belly, now round and tight like a watermelon, he lit up a bidi. He took a long drag and chatted with the others.

When their brief post-lunch resting period was over, Salimuddi went with the other labourers to cut the paddy just as he was supposed to.

11

Then, the winter sun grew tired quickly and sagged on the western horizon. The men's shadows grew longer and longer in the golden fields until finally they faded and disappeared. The dry straw grew damp from dew and, from the northern expanse, with its teeth bared in laughter, winter arrived to sink its fangs into the skin and bones of the people. The fields and the houses had all gone quiet from winter's terror. The echoes of the azan shivered their way from the minarets of the mosque into the winter sky. The labourers had returned with the rice. Neither the rice nor the house belonged to them. Every year, during the harvest, these dark-skinned people came from Rangpur, Roumari, Kurigram, Nilphamari, Gaibandha, Gobindaganj, looking for work. They reaped the rice crop in the fields belonging to the householders; they slept on straw spread out in the tin-roofed shacks erected in the outer yards of the farmsteads; they ate white rice with kheshari-kalai legumes and green chillies; they harvested the rice; they threshed it. In moonlight, as well as in the utter darkness of the new moon, they got wet with dew and they threshed the rice and sang.

12

The labourers sat in a row in the yard eating rice. They devoured tub after tub. As if there was no end to their feeding. As if they would be happy if they could eat into eternity. They didn't want to stop, they just wanted to eat, eat and eat.

Dew dripped onto their heads from the black sky. They thought about the sky sometimes; they called it 'asmaan' instead of 'akash.' They usually only looked at the sky to check for rain or storms. Very rarely did they think of the sky with any other significance: where it was the throne of He who possessed both worlds; where the Master, although He was infinitely kind, nevertheless visited terrible disasters and calamities, and it was beyond humans to pierce His mysteries.

The labourers ate rice and drank water and inhaled tobacco smoke and transformed their bellies into watermelons; they groaned 'Ahh' to indicate their satiation and sat together chatting. Then, they tied their cotton towels around their ears and heads and laid out empty barrels and wooden planks and thipish thipish thopash thopash they beat sheaves of rice against the planks.

Thus, the night deepened even further. The dew thickened and accrued on the tin roof, the haystacks, the bamboo grove and the leaves of trees. Owls hooted, from afar floated the baying of foxes, dogs howled at the mouth of the pathway.

Finally, it was time for Julekha to leave the side of the stove. The rice chaff still sat inside the stove's belly, smouldering to the colour of egg yolk. Salimuddi left his companions and returned to his own home. As the farmhand employed year-round by this household, he and his family had a separate room allotted to them. Although there was no cot in the room, there was bedding made out of woven fronds of date-palm, and now, since that bedding had been spread out over a layer of thick straw, it felt as if they had an actual warm and springy mattress.

Their son lay asleep on that mattress. Salimuddi and Julekha finished their work, returned to their room, latched the door and fell asleep. The moon rose in the sky. The land and the sky grew enigmatic in moonlight. A mysterious, ruthless creature spread frost everywhere. There was no sound anywhere in Modhupur. No hooting owls, no baying foxes, no howling dogs.

Except, trapped in an endless silence within a profound chill, Modhupur shivered.

13

At night's end, the people of Modhupur awoke shouting. The moonlit land and sky shifted, rocked with the solemn sound coming from afar. People stood in their homes, at their doors, verandas and yards, and saw an all-encompassing deluge approach. The flood inundated the surrounding plains and surged and grew. As they watched, the flood swelled and submerged the bamboo grove, the dock by the pond,

the alleyways. It overwhelmed the yards and entered houses. People began to climb up the haystacks, the mounds of rice, and to the rooftops.

They saw that the world was flooded with milk. The land and the sky were inundated with white moonlight and milk. They looked at each other in surprise, they understood nothing, they felt a helpless and wretched desire to understand the profound machinations of the Master of the land and the sky. Their hearts trembled, they felt apprehensive. They stood up atop the mounds of rice, the rooftops, the highest points of the haystacks and the treetops, and they looked around. In their minds they searched for Salimuddi, they remembered his son and felt a keen curiosity to see him.

Suddenly, the sound of laughter, like never before, reached their ears. In the silent milk-flooded plains, they heard a child's numinous laughter echoing and re-echoing in a way that reached beyond all their experiences. Then they saw that the village paths and walkways, the yards, the banks of the pond, and the bamboo grove were inundated by milk; the fog-ridden moonlight and the steam from the milk curled their way up toward the sky.

Against this never-before-seen white backdrop, the people of Modhupur saw this—Salimuddi's son was swimming in the moonlit milk-sea in infinite joy; beside him, like a queen, swam the dog, her swollen teats swaying in the rippling waves of milk.

The Meat Market

1

A week before Eid, my wife elbowed me awake at the crack of dawn and said, "Go quickly."

For a man who never managed to leave his bed before nine o'clock, this was sheer torture. But I couldn't protest. Like you, I too was afraid of my wife. No, I'm not afraid of being hit. Whatever else my wife did, she never hit me. I'm afraid of conflict. Protesting my wife's actions always led to conflict. I, brother, do not want conflict. I'm a very easygoing man.

Her repeated jabbing ruined my indolence. But I had no idea what was happening, where I was supposed to be this early in the morning. I rubbed my eyes and asked, "Where am I going?"

"You've already forgotten? Didn't I tell you last night? Go buy some meat. Eid's almost here. Meat's going to double in price any day now. Go on, get up!"

My bovine brother-in-law was fast asleep in the next room. She could have just sent him. But the loving sister couldn't bear to send her brother, the virtuoso, outside on this bone-chilling winter morning. So I

was the one who had to get up. As I slid my arms into my jacket sleeves, I asked, "How much?"

"Ten kilograms."

Who was going to eat ten kilos of meat? No, my brother, I did not actually say this aloud. The question merely popped into my mind. Let it; how many men have the guts to spill all their questions to their wives?

As I counted my cash, my wife's advice streamed out in a torrent: "Check the meat carefully before you buy it. Make sure they don't tamper with it. That's why you're being sent out this early. If they slaughter a sheep or a she-goat and try to doctor the *khashi* meat with that, you'll be right there to catch them in the act. Go on, hurry up."

2

Even through the morning's haze, I could read it clearly: *East Rajabazar Popular Meat Emporium. Excellent quality, pure khashi meat available here.* Three other customers waited in front of the shop. The black tar of the road was soaked dark red with blood. A *khashi* lay on the street with its throat slit open. Beside it, an employee of the store was skinning a sheep with skilled hands. Beside him, two other butchers were slaughtering a bony, bearded she-goat, its dried-up udder like a raisin.

The three customers watched impassively. Their expressions were blank; there was no sense of urgency in them. They waited like obedient gentlemen. It didn't seem like the meat sellers were paying us any attention. They were absorbed in skinning the sheep and the she-goat. However, it was pertinent to wonder why the *khashi* splayed on the street hadn't already been skinned, its meat readied into cuts for sale. My common sense gave me the answer. They were going to separate the heads of the sheep and the she-goat, skin them, and then take them out of sight. Then they would spike the *khashi* meat with sheep meat and she-goat meat and sell it.

It was to make sure we didn't fall victim to such a swindle that my wife had sent me here this early in the morning. In my head, I praised my wife for being so smart. Now they wouldn't be able to palm off their doctored meat on me.

The she-goat and the sheep were skinned in a flash. Then, just as quickly, they stripped the *khashi* of its skin. The other customers showed some signs of life. I shoved one of them aside and stepped ahead. I said, "Ten kilograms of *khashi* for me."

As he detached the *khashi*'s front legs from its carcass, the shopkeeper said, "You'll have to wait."

The same technique was being applied to dismember the she-goat and the sheep. I waited. The other customers had arrived before me, so their orders were weighed first. Meat, bones, and layers of fat were cut from the carcasses of the *khashi*, the sheep, and the she-goat, mixed together, and piled onto

the scales. The customers said nothing; they didn't protest. Their eyes and faces were expressionless, as if this were the rule.

I asked one of the other customers, "What is this, brother? What's happening here?"

The man looked at me and laughed in a way that made me feel as if I were a fool, as if I had no experience at all in buying meat. The two other customers also glanced at me and laughed in the same way. The employees of the butcher shop continued their work of slicing and weighing the meat in a grave, busy manner.

I said to one of the staff, "Give me ten kilos of khashi."

"Getting it, sir, just wait a little." He turned to his coworker and said, "Hey, Soleiman, ten kilos for sir."

Tall, gangly, angular-jawed, with bloodshot eyes, a cigarette dangling from his lips, Soleiman reached for the sheep. I shook my head in protest. "Not sheep, not sheep. I wanted the khashi."

"There's no sheep meat sold here, sir," replied the first man as he served another customer. I pointed at the carcass of the sheep and said, "What's this then?"

"Khashi, it's all khashi." Gangly Soleiman employed the knife on the limbs of the sheep as he spoke.

"I'm not taking this khashi of yours." I pointed to the remnants of the actual khashi and said, "Give me whatever's left from that one."

"Not happening."

When the other customers heard the shopkeeper's dismissive response, they roared with laughter.

"Why? Why not?" I spoke quite harshly.

The shopkeeper repeated in a somber tone, "Not happening." "Why not?" I shouted again.

"Go on, don't make any trouble here."

"What do you mean, 'trouble'? This is a rip-off! You're selling sheep as khashi meat right in front of my eyes . . ."

"Don't shout. Just be quiet and go home."

"Hey, *mia*, what do you mean, 'go home'? What the hell is this, you just do whatever you want?" "Yes, I do. Don't give me that heat. Go home."

"What heat, you damn fraud!"

"Just go home while things are still okay. Otherwise it'll take a bad turn." "Is that a threat? Are you threatening me?"

"Yeah, I am. Shut your trap right now and go home. Or else . . ."

I'm not a brave man. I should have been terrified by such grim threats delivered in such a cold manner by the butchers. But who knows why, I wasn't the least bit frightened. Instead I flew into a rage. Belligerent, I said, "Or else what? What are you going to do to me?"

Gangly Soleiman raised his bloodshot eyes to mine as he honed one knife against another, and said, "Slaughter you."

I was livid. How dare a shopkeeper speak to a gentleman like this? Who did they think I was? I shouted, "You sons of pigs, do you know who I am? Do you know what I can do to you? I'm going to destroy this scam of yours and, as for you . . ."

Before I could finish, the first butcher stood up straight, reached out his right hand, and grabbed me by the throat. Newly arrived customers joined the earlier ones and stood in a circle around us, preparing to watch the scene. I moaned and flapped my fingers, blustering. As my breath was cut off, my eyeballs spun, ready to pop out.

The butcher dragged me by the throat and shoved me against the shop wall. Gangly Soleiman came forward with a long, shiny knife. The butcher's other companions slammed me onto the ground, flat on my back, and held me down. I screamed as I flailed my legs. But the gentlemen waiting to buy meat merely watched like silent spectators. No one stepped forward to help me or restrain the butchers. They looked on with childlike curiosity, some with their hands resting on their hips, some with their weight resting on one leg, as if watching monkeys perform on the street.

One of the butchers received a kick from my desperately thrashing legs and was knocked aside. Immediately two others rushed forward. They gripped my legs hard and, pulling them straight, climbed onto my knees and just stood there. Another man yanked my arms above my head and pinned them down with his knees. It became impossible for me to move at all. Gangly Soleiman grasped my rough, unshaven chin tightly with his left hand and yanked my head back. I pulled my head down closer to my chest with all my strength to try to protect my throat with my chin. But Soleiman possessed demonic strength in his hands. He pushed my chin upward so hard that my neck bones cracked loudly. Goggle-eyed, I saw Soleiman's bloodshot eyes turn into fireballs. Hot air spewed from his nostrils, scorching my eyes and face. He bit down on his lower lip and bent the arm holding the long, shiny knife.

3

Soleiman's long, shiny knife settled on my taut throat, sawing forward, and then, after a moment's pause, slid backward, moving deeper every time it moved forward, and my spirit was released completely from my body. Utterly unburdened, as if floating in the air, I watched as gangly Soleiman hunched over Aminul Islam (which was my name in your world), the shiny, sharp blade sliding in deeper as it moved forward and almost disappearing in the meat, fat, bones, and cartilage of the neck as it slid back. Blood poured out in gouts from his throat in a thick stream, while the blood coming out of the veins emerged in a spray with more force. After running the knife through a few more times in

the same manner, Soleiman pulled back his hand and wiped the blood from his face with the flat of his palm. Aminul's body thrashed and thumped on the black tar of the road until his flailing limbs gradually slackened.

Aminul's slit throat gaped at the sky. His stilled eyes, wide, gazed to his right. The gentlemen who wished to buy meat surrounded him, looking on with their hands folded at their chests or their bellies as if standing at prayer. They were waiting. They were very amenable gentlemen. They preferred not to embroil themselves in any trouble. They never poked their noses into other people's business. They bought meat. They knew that beef is spiked with water buffalo meat.

That the meat of she-goats and sheep was mixed in with khashi meat and sold as pure khashi. They were quite used to these things. They never went to the shops or the marketplace intending to buy the meat of water buffalo or sheep. They knew that you can't buy sheep, she-goat, or water buffalo meat in this city. Every night they saw herds of sheep, she-goats and water buffalo in the city streets. But they knew that the meat of sheep isn't sold in this city, the meat of she-goat isn't sold in this city, and the meat of water buffalo isn't sold in this city. They had no qualms buying or eating the meat of sheep passed off as khashi.

And not just the meat trade; they weren't troubled or dissatisfied or in turmoil over any issue related to society or the world. They were citizens of the happiest nation on earth. Foreigners uncovered this fact by conducting public opinion surveys.

A little while ago, when I was still Aminul Islam, at the moment I was being slaughtered, I wondered in astonishment, had this country fallen into anarchy? (Perhaps one is only faced with this question when one is personally in danger of being slaughtered.) I was thinking, this attempt to slaughter a human being was taking place in broad daylight, in a public place, right in front of so many people—how was this even possible? I couldn't imagine that it was possible. Even in my last moments I thought, these butchers are certainly enraged, but even if they injure me or whatever, they're not going to slit my throat. Slaughtering a human being just because you're angry—does that really happen?

But the whole thing was over before I could even comprehend what was happening. After my release from the prison of Aminul Islam's body, I saw that such things take place very easily in this country. In fact, things even more unthinkable occur. (Unthinkable for you. As you use words like unthinkable, unimaginable, impossible, unprecedented, gruesome, you can see for yourselves, day and night, night and day how many different incidents are taking place all around you. You yourselves are making them happen.)

Gangly Soleiman positioned a wooden chopping block under Aminul Islam's neck and hacked at it with a fairly heavy cleaver. With a thwack, he separated Aminul's head from his body. He transferred the cleaver from his right hand to his left and grabbed a handful of Aminul's hair. He stood up straight with Aminul Islam's head dangling from his hand. Aminul's eyes stared toward the right like before.

Soleiman swung the head as he took it inside the shop. Two other men hoisted Aminul's body and followed him. Inside, Soleiman placed Aminul's head on the floor and thumped it with the handle of the cleaver. The cleaver hit with a *phat* sound, but Aminul's brains didn't spill out so easily. It takes

some effort to get at the brains of goats or cows; a human's skull is no softer. Soleiman had to work at it. After a couple more tries, he managed to crack the skull open on one side. It became easier. He pulled Aminul's brain out with his fingers and, using his palms and fingers, positioned it nicely in an aluminum pot.

The other two butchers were a little bewildered due to their inexperience and pondered how to skin Aminul. Human skin isn't so thick or furry that one could just pull it off like the hide of a cow, goat, or sheep. The man Aminul hadn't been at all plump. But when the butchers tried the knife on him, they observed that under his very thin skin it was just fat. If they tried to insert their fingers between the skin and the fat and tried to press it apart, the skin simply ripped.

Which actually helped. Someone came up with the idea that boiling water would make the process of skinning Aminul's body much easier. By then, Ruchita Hotel and Restaurant, located across from the meat shop, had opened up for business. A bucketful of boiling water was brought over from there and Aminul's skin removed. Extremely skilled hands began the butchery process, separating the carcass into pieces. Within a short time, they extracted at least forty-five kilograms of sellable meat from Aminul Islam's sixty-five-kilogram body.

Aminul's fatty meat was mixed in with the cuts of khashi, sheep and she-goat and was put out for sale. The customers bought the meat in a peaceable, simple, and normal manner before heading homeward. They knew that there is no such thing as pure khashi meat in the market. It's adulterated with sheep and she-goat meat. It didn't make that much difference if it was now also spiked with some human meat. Therefore, the meat market continued as usual. There was no disruption anywhere.

4

It was already seven in the morning but there was no sign of Aminul Islam returning with the meat. His wife was seething and began to rant against her useless husband. When the clock hands crossed seven-thirty and were about to reach eight, Aminul Islam's wife Rubina Sultana jerked her younger brother awake from his happy dreams.

"See what your Dulabhai's done? He went to get the meat ages ago but there's no sign of him anywhere. He's just hanging out somewhere for sure. Just wait till he's back, I'll teach him to have fun. Get up, come on. Go and bring back ten kilograms of khashi meat. Ah, will there be any pure khashi left this late? We'll have to eat meat doctored with sheep and goat, and that's what we'll have to feed our guests. What, why aren't you getting up? Can't you hear me?"

"If I bring ten kilograms, what if Dulabhai also brings back ten kilograms? Where are you going to store all this meat?"

"I'll store it on your head. Does your Dulabhai even remember that I sent him out to get the meat? He's completely forgotten about all of this and he's just chatting away somewhere. He's going to come back with that cash still in his pocket and then bite his tongue and say, oh, I forgot. I'll teach him to forget. Now come on, get up!"

“Why are you assuming that Dulabhai is hanging out somewhere? There might have been an accident. Who knows if the muggers got him?”

“Don’t blather. It’s a three-minute walk from here; are muggers going to come right into our neighborhood? You think I don’t know him?”

If, within that three-minute walk, right in the neighborhood, muggers had caught Aminul Islam, taken his money, and stabbed him in the gut, it really wouldn’t have been surprising. Because in reality something worse had happened. But no such apprehension arose in Rubina Sultana’s mind. The people in this country no longer lived with anxiety. They saw the man next door being murdered in the middle of the street in the middle of the day; like foxes snatching a chicken, young men grabbed a young woman on her way home from her job at a garment factory and they gangraped her in the sliver of space between two houses right on the street; because the *paan*-seller paid ten takas less than the extortionists demanded, his shop, including the seller, was doused in petrol and burnt to ashes; but everyone thought these calamities would only descend on other people. I’m safe; nothing can happen to me.

Rubina Sultana was also in possession of a normal sense of safety. Until she received confirmation that her husband was in the clutches of muggers, she would think that such a disaster might befall someone else, but not her husband. Her husband had merely forgotten to buy the meat and was holed up somewhere, unworried, drinking tea, and talking up a storm.

5

My brother-in-law came home with ten kilos of khashi meat. It included meat from my thigh, my arm, and my ribs, some fat, and some tender bones from my chest area. Although the meat was meant for Eid, he asked his sister to cook a portion for lunch today. The sister was always very loving toward her brother. It had never happened that he asked for a particular dish and she hadn’t cooked it for him. So, with a lot of care and a lot of spices, she cooked the meat.

Brother and sister sat down to lunch together in the afternoon. She lovingly served pieces to her brother, and then placed a few pieces on her own plate.

I shouted, “Rubina, don’t eat! Rubel, don’t eat!”

But perhaps my shouting could no longer be heard. I had left the world of sound.

My wife bit down on one of my ribs with pleasure and praised her brother, “You’ve bought some wonderful meat, Rubel. From now on, you’re in charge of buying meat. Your Dulabhai is just useless.”



Translated from the Bengali by Shabnam Nadiya