

Iman BAKSH***Extract from The Dark of the Sea***

The first time Danesh ever saw the dark of the sea was the night of the fireworks.

He and Amit had wanted a good view of the show and the water tank tower in Amit's yard was an easy climb. Danesh complained about it anyway.

"You can't put a ladder pon this thing?" he asked as he pulled himself up the second concrete cross-post, about ten feet above the ground where Surwa the dog was resentfully watching them.

Amit looked down from near the top of the two-story tower. "Is not two good hand and two good foot you got?"

"That's not the point. You backside only giving me—" Danesh squealed and cursed, having reached his hand up and grasped the cold, bumpy flesh of a toad.

"What happen with you now?" Amit asked, amused. He was already on the platform with the two black water tanks.

"You got crappo up here." Danesh wiped his hand on the rough edge of the concrete, scraping it clean of—he wasn't sure what, exactly—and tried to make his voice deep to hide his shame at how he had reacted earlier. "How crappo even reach up here?"

"I got a special ladder for crappo." Amit sat on the edge, swinging his legs like a little child. "Still no ladder for you though."

Danesh sucked his teeth and moved left to avoid the toad he had touched, watching where he put his hand each time. He levered himself easily around the corner to the adjoining face of the tower and climbed up without speaking. At the top, he stood on the rectangle of unpainted wooden planks. The plastic tanks which rested there were two feet taller than him, holdin water that had been pumped up so the house could have running water on the second floor. Almost every house in Essequibo had a tower like this in the backyard because the water mains never had much pressure.

"Here," said Danesh, sitting next to his friend and swiping his palm against Amit's face, "Take back you crappo juice."

"Hey, behave you'self before I throw you off this place." Amit grinned and pointed a finger at him. "Don't think that 'cause I save you life one time I won't kill you if you make me vex."

This again.

Back when they were seven, the two boys had started 'borrowing' some of the smaller fishing boats at the koker channel when their owners were distracted. Until the day a stiff wave had upended Danesh into the water.

The way Amit always told the story, he had heroically gone hunting for Danesh's unconscious body and brought him back from near drowning. Danesh never contradicted him because the way he remembered things, well he must have indeed blacked out and been dreaming.

Hitting the water that day had jarred his eyes into seeing everything. The mud brown water of the Essequibo Coast became glass clear. He could see fish swimming in silver flashes all around him. Feel the heat of life from crabs digging under the gray silt. And he could breathe! Danesh had felt so comfortable in the water that he had chosen to float in its relaxing cushion, even giggling as he watched Amit desperately searching for him, one hand on the edge of the boat while he tried to peer through the opaque water with a desperate grimace and flung his other arm around to grab his lost friend.

It was only when Danesh realised that Amit was about to let go of the boat and come down for him that he had relented from his joke and let himself be 'rescued'.

And now his debt was a cornerstone of Amit's claim to him as a friend. One Danesh couldn't contradict, no matter how annoying the frequent reminders were.

Danesh gazed out towards Georgetown. The city itself was beyond the horizon, on the other side of the Essequibo River's mouth, but the glow from its lights hovered above the water to the south-east.

The ocean was calm as midnight approached. There was no moon but light rippled merrily across its surface, reflected from a hundred bright stars. On the arc of the clear horizon the lights of four shrimp boats stood out, looking like fallen stars floating on the water. One of those boats was probably his father's but Danesh didn't attach any significance to that. He tended not to give thought to the world beyond his immediate surroundings.

To their left was the shadow shape of the big koker, the sluice-way that drained the rice lands into the sea when the tide was out. A few coconut trees beyond that was the hang-out shack the local teens had been gradually erecting over the past two years. Amit and Danesh would have been down there now, except for Amit's obsession with seeing the Independence Day fireworks.

"You sure about this?" Danesh asked. "It so far—"

"I telling you. I see it last year. Clear."

"So why you got fo' see it again?"

"Fiftieth Independence, man. They say in the news that it gon' be a big celebration. Can't miss that."

Music drifted down from Norah's rum shop. A chutney song of course. The singer's girlfriend didn't love him anymore so he was going to drink rum until he died.

"You get them Ravi B tickets yet?" Danesh asked.

"Nah, work got me bad these days. The concert not for a while though, so I gon' get them when I got a day off."

Out on the water, a dark blur bothered Danesh. He got dizzy looking at the sea sometimes, years now since his near 'drowning'. His vision would shimmer and then it was like he could see through the water. See beyond it. The idea of going beyond anything made him nervous.

But this dark in the sea tonight bothered him for the opposite reason. It seemed impenetrable and dangerous.

The song at the rum shop changed. The new singer was telling his girlfriend's father that it was okay that the man wasn't allowing them to get married. Because it meant more time for the singer to drink rum.

The thought of forbidden love prompted Danesh to ask, "What happening with Susie?"

"Nothing. She mother and father still acting crazy, telling she they gon' call the police fo' lock me up and all that."

"So what you gon' do?"

"Same as ever. Every morning I pass them when I going to work, I gon' say, 'Good morning,' and I gone me way in peace. I ain't got time for stress."

Over in the shack, a cell phone lit up briefly. Their friends were probably down there right now, smoking cigarettes and other things.

"The job thing working out though?"

Amit didn't reply. He had dropped out of school two months before, as soon as he was legally allowed to. Being fifteen as well, Danesh was already old enough to follow him. His friend seemed to have spending money these days and, more importantly, freedom from the demands of school and parents, but his silence wasn't a good sign.

But that was probably just because he was having trouble in his love life.

A Whistling Thunder went off in the next village. Danesh didn't care for the screech of the little rocket or the abrupt explosion of the illegal firecracker it had boosted into the air, but the rumbling murmur afterward as the air settled with an mmmmbmm sat well in his soul for some reason.

More whistles and bangs called out as midnight arrived. Surwa's black and white shape slinked off to hide from the noise. Across the sea, a pink burst of light signalled the start of the fireworks being launched from the unseen city below. The spark was smaller than a fingernail held at arm's length. A green flash burst next to it. Then two yellow ones, each popping silently.

"Too bad we can't be there close up," said Amit. "Them thing does be impressive how they loud. I wish they coulda give we a li'l fireworks down here. But is like them Georgetown people don't believe Essequibo is really part of Guyana."

Surwa the dog emerged below now that the squibs and fireworks had gone quiet in the neighborhood. He checked that the boys were still safe up above and then got into barking at a hefty toad as it hopped along in the drain near the fence.

"Hmm," said Amit. "You might got a point 'bout them crappo. Been seeing a lot of them recently."

"Probably just 'cause of the rainy season is all," Danesh answered, only half paying attention. He was staring at the dark spot in the water. He could see someone swimming there whenever a firework went off. But that didn't make sense. It was much too far away. And who went swimming at night anyway?

After about fifteen minutes, the fireworks were over, leaving a haze of smoke thousands of feet high that glowed in the city lights. Danesh tried not to show how unimpressed he had been with the whole thing for Amit's sake.

But it was his friend who said, "End up being kind of small, eh? All that talk about celebrating fifty years as a country and nothing didn't really happen."

As they descended, Norah's rum shop played them another tune. This singer was telling his wife that she shouldn't complain about him staying out late because she'd always known he was a drinker. The song was still stuck in his head when he fell asleep ten minutes later.

The next morning, the dead whale washed ashore.

He left home already ten minutes late, having put on his school uniform like a prisoner headed to break rocks. The only thing that Danesh had taken any care over was setting each spiked strand of hair in place at the front. He thought about removing the glass bead 'diamond' stud he wore in his ear but decided he would keep on looking stylish until he was actually at the schoolyard. Since his mother was in the front, tending to the hibiscus plants around her new concrete altar, Danesh left through the door in the unpainted back half of the house. He opened the back gate with its wrought iron ॐ symbol declaring the house's residents to be Hindus, then crossed the plank set over the bushy back drain and circled around to the main road.

The whole village seemed strangely silent, with just Shivani Ramgopal checking messages on her phone while she waited to catch a taxi to school. Shivani was actually Danesh's cousin, but ever since their grandfather had bribed a Ministry official last year to get her a place at the 'good' school several villages away, they hardly spoke. Which was too bad, Danesh thought—the girl knew a lot of dirty jokes, and more importantly, she knew how to tell them the juiciest way.

Nobody was at Aunty Pinky's phulourie stall. Not even Aunty Pinky. And a further blanket of isolation came from the rainy season sky which extended a gray haze from one end of the straight road to the other.

Up near Norah's empty rum shop, a small shape resembling an alien antelope crossed the road with nervous steps. When Danesh got close, he found it to be a stray dog, licking up stale vomit from the concrete where some drunk had thoughtfully left it the night before. The dog's body seemed like it was made of just shoulders, spine and hips draped with a burnt carpet. The animal kept its head bowed in shame until he passed.

"Danesh!" shouted a young voice. This was Clarendon, a kindergartener, who had decided several months ago that Danesh was his best friend. The boy was standing on the footpath that led to the rocky shore. On the opposite side of the main road, Danesh caught sight of Miss Lily and the other teachers inside the low kindergarten building, teaching the students who hadn't given themselves permission to leave. Clarendon said, "Danesh, you not coming fo' see the whale!?"

Danesh's first instinct was to wave the annoying child off, but the word 'whale' penetrated and he started running up the path himself.

"Carry me! Carry me!" Clarendon shouted as Danesh neared. As much as he disliked the boy, it seemed only fair to reward him for letting Danesh know about the new arrival.

Still, the boy was heavy for Danesh and he struggled through the loose sand before he got to the solid ground at the top of the sea dam.

The massive black and gray carcass lay at the high-water mark, where the narrow strip of sand that crowded the boulders of the seawall gave way to gray-brown mud. The whale was on its side, one giant fin in the air. One milky eye, as large as Danesh's head, stared at the cloudy sky.

Even from a distance, Danesh could tell the beast had died in battle. Jagged ribs were slashed into its side and their shape and placement spoke to him of malice.

He wondered for a moment why the villagers had formed a wall at a distance from the body rather than moving close and touching it. But when he walked closer, the stench hit him.

"Oh Lord," said Clarendon giggling. "That thing smell worse than Miss Lily armpit."

The whale was freshly killed. In fact, Danesh was sure now that this was the shape he had seen drifting in the ocean the night before. Strange that it should already be so rotten. Over to his right, a few disappointed men were walking away with hatchets, cutlasses and empty buckets.

Small hands pulled at Danesh's belt. Clarendon again, loud and insistent. "Is how big is it, Danesh? Measure it and see!"

Edging as close as he could tolerate, Danesh walked a path parallel to the dead whale. Twenty-seven steps. Now that he was standing near the tail end, Danesh admired the gentle swoop of the tail's shape. He pictured this animal in motion beneath the waves, easing itself along like—

"Clarendon!"

Miss Lily had come to the waterside to reclaim her escapee. Time for Danesh to head to school too. The whale would still be here this afternoon. He took a last look back to see the teacher chasing Clarendon around the other side of the carcass and then he turned south, deciding to walk to school along the sea dam.

To his left, across a wide stretch of water, was the start of Tiger Island. It was an abandoned place, visible as a bushy line of dark trees that ran parallel to the coast for about four miles.

As he watched the brown wave tops of the river break into silver flashes, Danesh again felt like he could sense someone swimming just beyond his vision.

The stench of the whale followed him to school and grew throughout the day. By morning break, the students were sniffing the air and making disgusted faces at each other.

Their disgust wasn't enough to put them off food, however. They crowded against the counter where the school canteen sold snacks and drinks. Danesh held his cash folded lengthwise, hoping the supply of plantain chips hadn't sold out already.

"Nobody don't beg!" Robot walked into the cafeteria. Not even the teachers called the boy Nicholas anymore. He was tall, with a loose afro—in which he kept a long-toothed comb. In one hand was a small paper bag giving off the spicy scent of the plantain chips he had smuggled in from a street vendor. As he walked with an exaggerated chip-step he kept the other hand up, palm open in a blocking position. "I ain't got nothing for no beggar-man, so keep all you mouth shut."

"Robot," said a girl standing in line, "nobody don't want you dirty plantain no how."

Nadira was an old enemy of Robot's. In fact, it was she who had first called him 'Robot' back in Grade 4. A whip-shaped girl, her neck swayed as she spoke. "God know the whole bag must be cover in spit from all what you talking with you slobbery mouth."

"Alright," answered Robot. "That's one beggar-man open they mouth." He pointed at Nadira. "I mark you down."

"Who beg?!"

Robot ignored her and turned to Danesh. "You ain't beg. If you ask nice, I gon' give you some."

"Who beg!?" Nadira had left her knot of friends and was halfway to Robot now, hand on hip while he continued to ignore her.

Danesh looked at the greasy bag. "How nice I got fo' ask?"

"Sweet like you mouth make with sugar."

Nadira was shouting in Robot's ear now, but he kept his eyes locked with Danesh.

"Robot," Danesh said, "Please..." He grabbed the bag from Robot's hand and shouted, "Please don't bother me with you and Nadira rickiticks and dramatics." He handed the bag to the girl and said, "Take this gift as you skin so shine and you teeth so straight."

Nadira stuck her tongue out at Robot as she palmed the bag. He reached for it and Danesh took the money in his hand and whipped him across the forehead with the two blue bills.

"Get back," he said.

At first Robot seemed angry, then Danesh whipped him again. "Bad dog. Get back."

By the third time Danesh struck him, Robot had gotten the joke and lowered his head while making growling noises.

As Danesh and the children near him erupted into laughter, Nadira flicked her hair and walked away, saying, "Keep you dog pon he chain, Danesh, otherwise I might—"

"What is going on here?" a shrill voice cut through the cafeteria from the front door. Miss Geeta was there, her mango-shaped body blocking the light. "What nonsense y'all carrying on with? This is why none of y'all can't pass no exams. Don't know anything in you books but you happy to skin your teeth and make joke whole day over nothing."

The students in the suddenly silent canteen were all looking at their toes, afraid to accidentally volunteer themselves for the teacher's attention. She pointed at Danesh. "I see that one there laughing

with his jaw open big like an alligator, and don't care that he can't read two words in a row or that—" She loomed into the room theatrically. "Are you wearing an earring in school, boy?"

Instinct told Danesh his best chance was escape, so he started walking to the side door, while removing the stud.

"Don't turn your back on me!"

But he knew Miss Geeta wasn't going to treat him better for staying, so he kept moving. He waited out recess in the boy's washroom, though he wasn't surprised to find a summons to the principal's office waiting for him in his next class.

He fiddled with the stud in his pocket. This thing had been trouble from the start. His mother had forbidden him from buying it.

"You want to be a girl or what?" she had asked. "Men don't wear earrings." She was so old-fashioned. When Danesh wore it anyway, telling her that lots of boys wore studs, she had teased him about looking like a girl for a week, until his grandfather had come to his rescue. "Earring doesn't mean anything," he said to his daughter-in-law with dismissive cheerfulness. "Look at all them old-time Bollywood movie stars. They used to wear big earrings on all two ears and you can't tell me there was any girl. They had all them women crazy for them."

Danesh's mother had wavered a bit. Old Bollywood was one of her weaknesses. But she shook it off. "That doesn't matter. We ain't live in them times no more."

Danesh's grandfather—his *aja*—had simply followed with a gentle knockout argument, pointing at the line of framed deities on the narrow shelf of the living room wall. "And what about Ram and Krishna and Vishnu? All of them got earrings. You gon' call them women?"

His mother gritted her teeth and left. Danesh punched his *aja*'s shoulder and they covered their laughter with their hands. His mother still scowled sometimes at his stud, but she never complained about it again.

He trudged up the stairs then along the empty corridor that lined the inside of the school courtyard.

Danesh preferred Bollywood movies, but his favourite movie in English was *Shawshank Redemption*, about a man wrongfully imprisoned for thirty years. He was not the kind to analyse things, but if he had, he would have realized that the movie was very much in the spirit of Bollywood: epic length, plot twists, despicable villains and most of all a pervading sense of justice delayed and denied, but ultimately achieved. It was only lacking the song and dance numbers.

Danesh didn't need to analyse anything to realize one fact, however: His school was built a lot like Shawshank prison. It was a rectangular ring of classroom blocks with a concrete-covered yard in the middle where the students were expected to spend most of their free time. On Monday mornings, they held assembly in the shadowed half of the courtyard, next to a flag of Guyana that hung above everything from a steel flagpole.

The walls of the classrooms around the space were designed for airflow with vertical vents in the concrete. They reminded Danesh of the spaces between prison bars. There was a room number across the top of each door, like it really was a prison cell. The teachers were the guards, watching over the students like they were planning a riot.

Yes, this was Shawshank Secondary School.

And it was time to face the warden. He sat on the bench near the secretary, waiting his turn. Behind the door of the inner office, he could hear the principal, Miss Corrine, investigating a fight between two groups of boys.

Danesh wrinkled his nose. The dead whale's stink was definitely stronger now.

In the corridor outside the office door, one of the women who cleaned the school was complaining to her colleague about the office clerks who had called them to wipe up a spill even though the office had a mop of its own. "Is disrespect and eye-pass for we in this place. Like they too good fo' do real work." The women left without touching the puddle.

The boys who'd been in the brawl exited the inner door, their faces blank. Miss Geeta called Danesh in and made him stand before Miss Corrine's desk, the one with the varnish all rubbed away near the bottom edges. To the principal's left was Sir Karan, one of the younger teachers on staff and old Sir Carl, the deputy principal.

Four against one. Seemed fair. He wasn't worried though. It wasn't like they could beat him anymore. His aja had taken care of that too, at the start of the year.

That had been another day of suppressed giggles for Danesh, right here in the office with the principal and Miss Geeta.

Aja was the traditional Hindi word for 'father's father'. Danesh's aja was sixty-four, with hair that had gone gray at the sides. He refused to dye it, but he did keep it styled the old-fashioned way, with coconut oil and a slim, black comb. He was always shaved clean to his firm jaw and kept the top two buttons of his shirt open at all times because, as he put it, 'girls like fo' see chest hair.'

Danesh wasn't so sure about that last part. Even the Bollywood heroes seemed to shave their chests these days. But his grandfather wasn't doing too bad at romance. His wife had died ten years before and he had declared her the only woman worthy of being his wife, so he refused to re-marry. He was now a notorious 'sweet man,' visiting wives while their husbands were at work—and fighting off those husbands when they found out about his visitations, usually after the men fueled up with a few hours in the rum shop.

Aja was therefore no stranger to the lock-ups for his frequent squabbles, but all the policemen were his friends and as long as he took the arresting officers out for a few beers, no charges were ever filed. Of course, not even police friends could save you from a knife or cutlass, and Aja had a few belly scars to testify to his reflexes and good luck.

So the old man had not been intimidated when the Head Teacher had thrown on her best English and said, "Mr. Seeram, contrary to popular belief, the laws of this nation has not outlaw corporal punishment. It is a valuable tool regarding to the discipline of—"

"Listen, lady," Aja had said, waving his hand in annoyance, "The regulation say that any student get beat in school, it got fo' record in a punishment book and only a senior teacher can put the licks pon the child. So let anybody touch me grandson and I gon' come here first thing to see where in the book he name write and if you had proper cause. Don't play with me. I's a old lawyer-man from long now."

He pointed at Miss Geeta. "And let this witch behave she self. She done threatened fo' beat Danesh and I know she still ain't get no promotion fo' be senior teacher. I gon' drive the police here to you front door pon me tractor fender if that's what it take, and get she lock up for child abuse."

Miss Geeta had been circumspect these last few months, but she still had it in for Danesh.

The inquisition in the case of the ear stud began with her laying out the tale of Danesh's evil disregard for manners and rules, ending with the teacher saying, "These children nowadays just don't care fo' they own self. And is we the teachers that get the blame. We can't let this behaviour stand."

Years in this system had taught Danesh that the fastest way out of any bad situation was silence. Speaking ran the risk of upsetting the adults. So he just let his mind be as blank as his face and offered no defense.

Sir Carl wanted to suspend Danesh for two days. Miss Geeta thought a caning was called for. Sir Karan stayed silent—being just two years removed from his own time as a student, he was one of the few teachers that didn't have it in for the children he taught and actually spent time getting to know them.

The Head Teacher called a break in the trial when her phone went off. "Excuse me everyone, I has to take this. It's the Regional Education Officer."

What Miss Corrine had clearly expected to be a brief, business-like conversation, rapidly turned bad. From this side, all Danesh could hear was the principal being interrupted by an angry voice as she said things like, "But we never received—" and "I can assure you that if I had—"

For the first time since she had started this job a year ago, Danesh felt sympathy for her. Sure, she had been the one to create the plantain chip shortage by banning students from visiting the street vendors because of 'misbehaviour', but as Danesh watched her hold her temple and try to bargain her way out of whatever trouble she was in, she seemed defeated by life. The conversation ended with a contrite Miss Corrine saying, "Yes, sir...Yes, sir...Yes, sir."

As soon as she put down the phone, Miss Corrine lost his sympathy, however, because she shouted for her secretary and promptly began verbally hammering the girl. "Why you didn't give me the project forms that the office send since January? I look like a big dunce now in front of the officer, because I giving him out of date forms with the wrong information. You supposed to be keeping track of these things and you- you incompetent!"

The secretary took deep breaths and told her, "Ma'am, the documents I would have been given are the documents I would have handed over." It sounded to Danesh like she was trying to twist her lips until they magically squeezed out an answer that would get her out of trouble. It didn't work.

"Don't give me useless excuses," Miss Corrine said angrily.

The secretary stayed silent as the tirade continued for another minute, then she left to find the errant papers.

The principal turned her focus to Danesh. "You will write an apology letter."

Miss Geeta laughed sarcastically at the idea of him writing. Danesh smiled inside anyway. He could get Nadira to do it for him.

Sir Carl demanded a sterner punishment, but the Head Teacher waved him off, a tired look in her eyes.

"At least take the earring from him," he said.

The lie floated off Danesh's lips before he could even think. "I ain't got it, sir. It fall in the toilet bowl."

Miss Geeta took a step closer to Danesh. "So if we search you we won't find nothing?"

Again, Danesh thought of prison movies—and all the places guards would check for smuggled items. He handed over his stud, head down. Why hadn't he hidden the earring? His grandfather would have known to do that.

As he turned the corner after leaving the office, Danesh found Miss Corrin9e's secretary escorting the two cleaners back to the neglected spill. As the two women passed him with glum faces, he heard the secretary's voice chastising them like a fading police siren. "Y'all just lazy. Look how I got fo' bring you all the way up here and make sure you do you job..."

[...]