

Binayak BANERJEE

A story

Third Person

Satish's habit of reading the newspaper early in the morning was gone a long time ago. He had that urge when he had to dress up and go on duty, sitting in front of the wheel and narrating to his boss in nutshell the fresh news of the day within two minutes. It could be less but never more. But sometimes it happened that his boss wanted to hear the news in an elaborate manner and it took Satish fifteen minutes to narrate the news. But that was rare because the front page news was on politics, and the last page sports. Entertainment? What was that? When Amithabh Bachchan was injured on the set of *Coolie* and was fighting for his life in the hospital, Satish used to read at least two newspapers to know how he was. One paper would have the news on the seventh page, the other on the sixth. There would be five or six lines in the news. And now Saif Ali's picture of his marriage with Kareena Kapoor, with his seventeen year old daughter beside him, is front page news. Actually, time has changed. Not only for newspapers but also for Satish. So his time of reading the newspaper has changed from morning to evening at one go. In the words of Birenbabu, from Indian time to American time.

In one word one can say Birenbabu was Satish's classmate. Though the former is M.A. pass while Satish struggled to pass class twelve, yet among those old and nearly old people who came to read the newspapers at Saralabala Memorial Library they are the regular ones. The reasons for both are partially same and partially different. After Birenbabu's wife died, his daughter-in-law would not allow him to watch t.v. and instead would watch sitcoms endlessly. The disappointed Birenbabu had thought of buying a t.v. with the money from his pension but the idea has been vetoed by the daughter-in-law because in their three-room house his grandchildren study in his room. Satish, on the contrary, does not have the problem of a son or daughter-in-law because he is unmarried. He doesn't have a t.v. If he brings a t.v. in his eight by ten feet room in the slum, his room will always be crowded with young louts. Satish does not like a crowd and so he has not brought in a t.v. inside his cubby hole. He has however told everybody he has hardly any money to buy food and so cannot afford a t.v. But he understands that people know from his shirt, shoes, and the soap he uses that he is telling a blatant lie.

But whether he can buy an L.C.D., or needs one or not, Satish once had the ability to do many things. This was because the names of those people he had seen in front of him, those he had conversed with all day, those who reclined on his shoulders at night dead drunk, would make the people of this slum swoon. They would not possibly believe him and would think Satish was making it up. Would it have been their fault if they thought in that way? If a lion starts eating grass, a donkey will come about a month later and headbutt him. And there was no reason for anyone in that slum or the whole neighbourhood to believe that Satish Jha, who switches on the radio alone and falls asleep, was a man to have been honoured once upon a time. That there was somebody Satish himself does not want. The butter has been washed off his hand; why would he demean himself by make people smell it? That is why he comes to this library in the evening and turns the pages of three or four newspapers and tries to understand the time that had thrown him off.

Seeing his name, the young library assistant Tulika had given him a Hindi newspaper the first day. Satish set it aside and pulled up the Bengali newspapers instead. Seeing him immersed in the Bengali letters Tulika controlled her curiosity on the first day, even on the second day; but not after that.

But Satish didn't utter a single word more than was necessary in answering Tulika's questions. And since there were but some dry facts in that answer, Tulika found no way in continuing with the conversation. She fell silent.

But Birenbabu was not a man who would let go so easily. After a few days he pressed upon Satish to tell him what the matter was.

Satish smiled with difficulty: nothing was the matter. So many years ago he had come to Kolkata to drive taxis; now, having stayed here for many years, this city, its houses, and Bengali had become his spoken language.

Birenbabu took some snuff and nodded his head. "Many people speak Bengali, but I haven't seen Bengali become the mother tongue of a Bihari brother."

Satish had tried to evade: "I'll introduce you to a non-Bengali taxi driver who can speak Bengali better than me."

"Show me a non-Bengali who does crossword puzzles in newspapers like you."

Satish fell silent because he knew he had been outed by this old man. His secret weakness, solving Bengali crossword puzzles, for which he would come early in the evening to escape prying eyes, had failed to hoodwink Birenbabu somehow. That is why he had tried to delve deep into Satish, like some underwater diver. But Satish did not want to allow this. That is why he had told Birenbabu that one day he would tell him as much about his life as he wanted to share with him.

Birenbabu was a clever man who understood the hint. "To pressure someone to speak is to demand an explanation. I don't want an explanation, I want your friendship."

"Please be informal with me," Satish had said.

"That I can be. After all you and I are in the same boat."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I am running away from my family and you are running away from yourself." Both are runaways, isn't it so?" Birenbabu had laughed.

Satish had joined in that laughter but had felt he did not need to live like a runaway any more. He had come to that part of his life from where, if he turned back, he could not see anything. If the past is invisible what's the necessity to run away from that past?

Since there was no such necessity, the wall was becoming loosened. Satish did not feel it necessary to remain aloof from talking and so little by little he had started to join the conversations in the library. Desiring to read Bibhutibhusan and Sharadindu he made Tulika, who used to complain about the loss of the reading habit among people, surprised and happy. One day he recited to Birenbabu the verses from *Ramcharitmanas* that he had learned in school and still remembered. A different past, crystal clear, resplendent, was slowly blossoming through Satish's behaviour; it was opening up a future where new relationships between humans could be established at any moment.

It was blossoming. Till this moment. Till Satish sucked the last drop of tea from the plastic cup, folded the newspaper, and looked at the bottom of the first page.

The moment he looked, a bullet split into two pieces and pierced his two eyes.

Satish remembered that past of his. It wasn't; it is.

2

Twenty four hours haven't passed since an all-India television channel had aired the exclusive interview, and yet Mugdha Desai had received at least five hundred calls on her landline. She knows her secretary Sanjiv exaggerates at times but she knows this isn't an exaggeration. Mugdha had sifted through the call list of both the mobile phones of Sanjiv and seen at least two hundred missed calls. The funny thing is, Mugdha cannot be reached on her mobile phone because she does not use one, and Sanjiv has been instructed to reply to every call by saying, "madame is out of the station, when she comes back she will be told you want to talk to her." Of course Sanjiv is saying this to the important people, for the rest it is the answering machine that is doing this work. Yet every moment Sanjiv's tension is increasing, and he is repeatedly telling Mugdha that if a counter-step is not taken immediately, the matter might go to such a pass that nothing could be done. Mugdha knows a step has to be taken. When last night her mobile (that she has a mobile is not known to the world except three or four people) had started to ring, nobody had for a moment imagined what was coming from the other end. When the voice at the other end sounded serious nothing seemed amiss, but when the t.v. was switched on a huge load fell on the head. What were they talking about on t.v.? Why? Instantaneously Mugdha felt like calling the channel and lodge her protest. But the voice at the other end asked her to calm down. The voice told her not to invite trouble through a kneejerk reaction.

Mugdha had accepted Atul's advice because he was a friend of many years and her business partner. But she couldn't sleep at night even after popping two pills. She merely turned this way and that in bed. And even before her eyelids closed early in the morning, her head ached as if somebody was playing every word of that interview on a hundred microphones in it. She cowered at the thought that her delicately persevered image was collapsing like a pack of cards in millions of homes from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Millions or billions? Was it possible that those people, who had so long cried, loved, and turned crazy hearing her sing, would put her on par with the scores of actresses in Bombay? Those actresses who would go to bed with anybody to become a heroine? Or those who had actually gone to bed and had become heroines? When the interviewer with the feminine face had said in a sharp voice at the fag end of the interview, "we men would probably not understand but the whole world of a woman gets destroyed when her family gets destroyed," Mugdha had stared at the t.v. stunned. And when the man said right at the end, "so does an actress or a female singer, do all women have to pay a price for stardom? And to rise, a woman does not need to climb a ladder but has to get into a bedroom, which is true for Bollywood as it is for Hollywood?" Mugdha had thrown a paper weight at the t.v. If it had hit the t.v. the imported t.v. set would have received a wound, but would the gaping hole the t.v. programme had left in the very existence of Mugdha be healed?

"How did Bishwadeb Roy's wife have the chutzpah to say so many things about you," Atul asked at breakfast.

"Are you suspicious of me?" Mugdha sounded irascible.

"This is not a matter of me being suspicious. I want to understand the matter."

“I too want to understand,” Mugdha had a sip of tea and set the cup aside.

“Haven’t you?”

“If I could I would not have asked you to come to my house. This is my time to practice.”

“I know that. But one can’t equate this morning with other mornings. Today there’s gossip going on in many households in the country.

“What is my fault?”

“The fault may not be yours but the accident is. So it is not right to think that you’ll be able to avoid injuries completely.”

“I did not call you here for you to talk stoically like a sadhu, Atul. Tell me if my insult has touched you, tell me if you think my problem is yours as well, or else I’ll go back to my room.”

The sun’s rays come to the terrace of the new house of Mugdha Desai at Andheri as if filtered. Such soft glow plays in this house throughout the day that one feels like forgetting that there is such a thing called violence in this world. As if no blood has been shed anywhere, nobody has stretched his hand to snatch away something from someone, as if on the tender world tenderness showers, and every day decks itself as if every day were Christmas.

But today is not Christmas but Good Friday. Today a hundred newspapers have published music composer Bishwadeb Roy’s wife Sumana Roy’s claim that the responsibility for destroying their conjugal life was on none other than Mugdha Desai. In order to sing the best songs composed by Bishwadeb Roy, Mugdha had alienated him from the other female singers and for that she did not hesitate to use her body. Sumana claimed that as Bishwadeb’s melodies played in the voice of of Mugdha, so did his body play on hers. It was such a game that in excitement it would surpass an East Bengal-Mohun Bagan or an India-Pakistan match. Mad with the intoxication of the game Bishwadeb searched for Mugdha, even in Sumana. And when he failed to find her in Sumana he would abuse her and even beat her. Reaching the height of her fame Mugdha, however, removed Bishwadeb. She started to work with new composers but forgot easily the man who had given her, a little known Gujarati singer, the throne from where she could make the whole country her empire. Those days Bishwadeb did not burn from the fire of his disrespect, he burned from his desire for Mugdha whom he couldn’t get. He used to get inclined towards dark, slim young women probably because he saw a glimpse of Mugdha in them. Sumana said another thing that is shocking. She claimed Bishwadeb was neither a lecher nor characterless. Rather he was a devoted lover. Mugdha Desai rose using his love. And because he was abandoned in love, Bishwadeb faded into the background despite composing some memorable songs. Because after Mugdha went out of his life, he could not stick to anything in his life, neither to his harmonium nor to Sumana.

People around the world are lapping up these words like some delicious chutney and Mugdha Desai, who was thought to be so devoted to music, and who lived life as if a sage, is popping up in this channel and that, too, as food for the media.

“I’ll think about your insults later. Let’s think about your danger. And before thinking about it I must remind you of something: that you have to keep a cool head in danger.”

“You have been asking me to keep a cool head since last night but if I remain silent won’t that Sumana bitch’s words get legitimacy? Everybody will think I’m silent because the allegations are true.”

“They may not think so. Rather, if you get down to quarrel like those women who squabble on the street for water, your dignity will be injured. But since you want, I will make a release today itself, stating that the allegations are baseless and done with an ulterior motive. But my suggestion is, don’t allow any channel to come in, despite their requests. They’ll try to increase their TRP by putting you into a fix. Despite your efforts you will not be able to prove yourself innocent because they will ask such questions that rather than the resolution of the issue, the matter will roll on. You will give an interview and immediately after it is aired, they will invite Sumana Roy to their studio. This they’ll do to refute your claims. The scandal will continue in this way. This is your loss, not Sumana’s, because she wants publicity.”

“Then what shall I do? Will I sit idle?” Mugdha shouted.

“No, but you need to remain calm. And you will give the name of a person from outside this industry who was close to both you and Bishwadeb.”

“What do you mean? How much do we interact outside of the industry? When we worked together, only people from the music world used to stick around with us.”

“Nobody other than them? Think a little. If we can find that person we’ll bring him in to a press conference. If the man is from the industry people will say he has come to gain something from you ...”

“People can also say I have bought the man from outside the industry.”

“Let them say so. Still, people from outside have more credibility for people from the outside. And I want somebody like that.”

“Where will I get such a person?”

“I take the responsibility to find the person. You just think and let me know if there was somebody like that. Cook, servant, driver will do. Is there someone?”

“Cook, servant, driver, driver, driver ...” a tune played in Mugdha’s mind despite the trouble she was in.

3

At that time Satish used to drive taxis on Kolkata streets. He had come from Darbhanga a couple of years ago. Now he lives near Kidderpore, sharing a room with three others, where nobody ever finds him except when he comes back to sleep. He drove the taxi from nine in the morning till nine at night, sometimes even ten. He drove the taxi like a possessed man. The owner of the taxi, Brijlal Shaw, was sometimes astonished seeing his craziness. Whereas the other taxi drivers could not do duty more than four days a week, Satish worked for six days and then asked to be allowed to drive half days on Sundays. Whereas the other taxi drivers got into quarrels with the owner about paying them, Satish, did not give the owner of his taxi even a paise less, whether wind or rain, So though Brijlal gave scant respect to the other taxi drivers, Satish was treated with respectfully, and Brijlal thought this fellow would go far.

Whether far or near, Satish never refused a single passenger because for him the passenger was Lakshmi. With the blessings of goddess Lakshmi he had been able to marry off his sisters and let his brother study in college. When he went home before the previous Holi, his mother was coaxing him to marry. But Satish declined. He wouldn't marry till he had his own taxi. And for that he needed another two years. He would organize himself within those two years. He would rent a house near Bhawanipur, not a rental share with three people. The two of them would live there. And before the second person came into his life, that beloved, his bride, was his taxi.

Before he took out the taxi he sprinkled the holy water of the Ganga inside and outside. Brijlal saw this many days and asked him why, to which Satish replied that his mother too used to sprinkle Ganga water at dawn in their house to make it free from pollution and that his house was where he spent twelve hours a day.

Brijlal fell silent hearing this. He could not say anything, only patted his back in appreciation. And a few days later the other taxi drivers who drove Brijlal's other taxis surrounded him and asked what magic Satish had done that the stingy Brijlal praised him whenever he was mentioned. Satish did not give any answer, only laughed inside himself. Had said to himself he knew no magic, only work.

That sincere devotion to work had brought Satish to the notice of Bishwadeb. His car broke down on the road as he was going to the Dum Dum airport to catch a flight. When his secretary had screamed to flag down a cab, Satish was right there as the flight was about to take off. The good part was that one needn't wait in the airport four hours before scheduled departure. The bad part was Kolkata was yet to hear of the freeway in those days. And though Satish forgot, Bishwadeb had not forgotten how Satish dodged the car through the narrow lanes and by-lanes of Kolkata before bringing the car on the main road so that the flight was not missed. On arriving at the airport Bishwadeb offered a tip of hundred rupees, which Satish refused because he had only done his duty. Why would he take extra for that? Satish had understood from Bishwadeb's voice that he was a touch surprised. But whether the gentleman was pleased or not, he could not understand because Bishwadeb was wearing a pair of sunglasses. Before entering the airport he gave Satish his card and asked him to see him at his home seven days later. Why he had asked Satish to do so he did not tell him and Satish too did not want to know and even if he had told Satish he wouldn't have gone because to miss work was an inexcusable waste of time. One night before he went to sleep Satish took a second look at the card to see. The gentleman's name was printed on one side in English and in Bengali on the other side. He had studied English a little when he was a boy, and at that time Maithili was written in the Bengali script, which is why he could read Bengali fluently before he came to Kolkata. And as he lived there, the meaning of words entered through his ears and entered his soul. This is why he read Bengali newspapers and not Hindi, like the other taxi drivers. And one day he saw Bishwadeb Roy's photograph in one of the newspapers. He recognized him easily because his eyes were covered by the same pair of sunglasses. The news below told him what Bishwadeb did. Having read the story Satish's curiosity was aroused. And before the trail of that curiosity disappeared, he himself became the object of curiosity. The reason was strange: police had come into the neighbourhood looking for him.

Even before he would find out why the police had come and what they had asked, Brijlal became convinced he was a fugitive criminal and refused to give him the keys of the car. The flummoxed Satish tried to explain Brijlal in many ways but found he wasn't even looking at him properly. Was that the Brijlal same he knew? Was that that neighbourhood which had accepted him as one of its own? If something changed when some uniformed men came looking for him, can one call it love? Searching for the answer Satish went to the police where the fifty rupee bribe taking men cordially invited him to get into their jeep and took him to a neat and posh two-storied house in Ballygunje.

When Satish entered the house he realized that it was Bishwadeb Roy's, and since Satish had not come to meet him, Bishwadeb had given the number of Satish's taxi to the police to find him. The police told him that Satish should thank his luck because a famous person like Bishwadeb Roy had remembered the number of his taxi and was searching him, and went away. But when Satish heard Bishwadeb wanted to make him his driver he felt like bursting in anger. Why did he send the police to look for Satish? Weren't there other drivers in the city? But before he said this in so many words he remembered Brijjal would not give him a taxi to drive. And where was the guarantee that other taxi owners in Kidderpore would give him a taxi when Brijjala refused him? Instead it was better to put on a uniform and drive a private car. He would see what it felt like to wear that uniform that was the cause of so much chagrin.

To see that, Satish agreed to Bishwadeb Roy's proposal and within a few days became Bishwadeb's most trusted companion; so much so that Bishwadeb needed him all the time. As if to send the message that Satish was indispensable Bishwadeb increased his salary three times in six months. And suddenly one day he called Satish in his room and told him, "you will have to do a much more important work than simply driving my car. I know you are able to do this."

Before Satish could ask what that work was, another person entered the room.

"Do you know her?" Bishwadeb asked lightly.

Satish tried to say something but couldn't. His eyes got fixed on the face of the girl who had come into the room.

4

What was Mugdha's age then? Hardly twenty six or twenty seven. Bombay had not become Bollywood yet, and playback singers could sing from behind the scene and need not dance on stage wearing sleeveless tops. The good side of this was that one could spend hours practicing. No problem anywhere, no cutthroat competition to show one's face while sacrificing one's voice. But there was one problem. Since the media was not strong, those in power could openly display it.

When Mugdha came to sing, she had four or five hits in two or three years, which was why she became popular among producers, directors, and music composers. But she also became the subject of gossip. She had an inimitable range of voice which enabled her to sing songs from bhajans to party songs, something that drew many people's attention to Mugdha. And it was then that she drew attention of a bad but influential group. A leader of that group, a feisty Punjabi producer asked her not to sing for a South Indian producer. The songs were splendid and the producer had increased Mugdha's remuneration many times, which was why Mugdha found no reason not to sing. Besides she felt nobody had any right to dictate to her which films to sing in and which not. But as soon as the songs were recorded she found a caucus getting active against her. Those were days not like nowadays. In those days the singers' pictures, even their interviews, were not published by the newspapers and magazines. And t.v. was nearly non-existent. So as she stepped onto to the first step of fame, somebody seemed to pull the carpet from under her feet. And wherever she tried to speak about this she was silenced as nobody wanted to face the ire of the caucus.

If the cuckoo is asked not to sing what will it do? Commit suicide? Probably not because it is a bird. But when a human being's dreams are murdered in front of her eyes she would think of dying. Mugdha too thought she would commit suicide. It was exactly at this time she found Bishwadeb Roy

beside her. Day after day Bishwadeb gave her pep talks about how great her voice was, which revived her lost confidence. But even though damaging his career he could not give Mugdha a chance to a good film in Bombay. In reality the situation was such that anyone who heard Mugdha's name would start in fright. As this continued the disgusted Mugdha openly declared she would give up singing. The next day Bishwadeb gave her a plane ticket.

Mugdha turned the ticket this way and that and asked, "Why would I go to Kolkata?"

"To sing," was Bishwadeb's brief reply.

"Where?"

"In Bengali films. I'll compose the tunes. You'll sing. Nobody would plot against you to stop you from singing.

"But I don't know Bengali," Mugdha replied in a helpless tone.

"You know music. That'll do," Bishwadeb replied with a laughter.

There was no alternative which is why Mugdha packed her suitcase like an obedient girl and accompanied Bishwadeb to Kolkata. And it was here in Bishwadeb's drawing room he introduced her to Satish. He said Mugdha could go wherever she wanted and the car she would ride would be driven by Satish.

From Bishwadeb's words Mugdha thought Satish was just a driver. But Satish quickly became her Kolkata guide. Satish knew everything in this city.

"But you were not born in Kolkata, neither did you grow up here?" Mugdha wanted to know one day.

"You must love the city where you want to make your life. You'll have to love from your heart. Then only will the city accept you as its own," Satish replied.

She thought of replying to these words but didn't. She too had wanted to love Bombay. But Bombay was a city where love was measured by money. Human relations were determined by power. Some might be successful, others not. But did Bombay accept anyone as its own?

That Kolkata did so, Mugdha realized through Satish. Though Bishwadeb's wife Sumana behaved nicely with her, she lacked cordiality. In her behaviour there was a chill. That was why, when he had to go to London on some important business, he kept Mugdha in his flat on Lake Road. And he gave Satish all her responsibilities. He could do so because right from the first introduction Bishwadeb had realized that Satish did a job given to him as if his life and death depended on it.

He had looked after Sumana similarly. From getting hot water to clear her throat in the morning to bringing her Gujarati food from the alleys of Bhawanipur, nothing that was necessary for Mugdha evaded Satish's eyes. But there are some things in human life beyond necessity. And who knows, that is probably the heart. And when her heart got tired in this unfamiliar environment, she sought someone known to her to open up her heart with words of happiness and sorrow. And whichever way she looked, she could only see Satish and so Satish became the only audience to her words.

Initially Satish was merely an audience perhaps but as time went by he got more involved. Within a few days he started to give his comments about Bombay film world and its music industry he had listened about, awestruck. Mugdha felt amused. Probably was a little surprised, too, but she told herself, if Hanuman could make Rama's war his own why couldn't Satish fight for Mugdha, at least in his thoughts? Particularly when he recites Hanuman Chalisa' with devotion 'every morning and worships Bajrangbali?

As long as worship remains worship there's no problem. When it converts into love, there is a problem. In Satish's case there was no possibility of that. When he said he would have beaten up that

Punjabi producer if he was near him, Mugdha laughed loudly. Or when he used to memorize the novels of Bankim Chandra to make Mugdha read each paragraph to improve her Bengali pronunciation so she could get success in the world of Bengali music, Mugdha would suppress her laughter and become serious. She used to think, why wouldn't she put in some more effort if Satish had gotten so involved in her affairs in such a short time--so much so that he was always thinking of what'd be good for her? Instead of pining for Bombay, what harm was there in becoming the empress of Kolkata?

Time would have flown like that, a stream of reliance having flown between caretaker and singer where on one bank was admiration and indulgence on the other. But Bishwadeb Roy's return to Kolkata destroyed everything. The problem started when the hand that she thought would establish her in Kolkata's music world tried to probe her body. Yet Mugdha tried to adjust as much as possible. She tried to reason with herself that if the person who helped her make her first puja album a gold disc, or two of whose songs she sung became such a super hit that the news reached Bombay, hugged her or kissed her, it was not a big deal. But coming from a conservative Gujarati family she couldn't go beyond this. Nevertheless Bishwadeb tried to get her entirely. When Mugdha tried to dissuade him, he would keep saying that his songs got fulfillment through her; now she must take Bishwadeb inside her and make him part of that fulfillment. If not, Bishwadeb would not be able to create music. As he said this he would try to cozy up to her and she would evade under the pretext of a hundred excuses.

Since he was entrusted with the job of looking after her by Bishwadeb himself, Satish noticed everything. But Mugdha never talked to him about this matter. She did not because how could a servant dissuade a master who was crossing his limits? So as she wept profusely in her room alone one day and Satish came in front of her and told her if Mugdha gave him permission he would beat Bishwadeb black and blue the next time he tried to be smart with her, she was somewhat surprised. She chided Satish and told him to remember Bishwadeb Roy was a respectable man.

"But when a respectable man destroys his own respect himself?" Satish looked straight into the eyes of Mugdha and asked.

...

The day the incident happened, Satish's eyes too fell on Mugdha's. But not directly. Driver Satish looked into the rear-view mirror in front of him and saw the pain in Mugdha's eyes. In the back seat Bishwadeb Roy was nearly molesting Mugdha. Without an iota of concern for Satish's presence Bishwadeb's hand tried to get inside Mugdha's blouse and Mugdha was trying in vain to remove the hand. That failure welled up as tears in her eyes, and the tears lit up a fire inside Satish's head without his being aware of it. In his excitement Bishwadeb stood up a little to pounce on Mugdha. And it was exactly then that it happened. The car hit a tree beside the highway. Bishwadeb was taken off balance and thrown off. His head hit the glass of the car hard. Satish got injuries on his neck and head. Only Mugdha was unscathed, as she was covered by Bishwadeb.

Of course to be scarred is not to speak only of the body. So when Bishwadeb was in the hospital with eleven stitches on his head and a compound fracture, Mugdha hugged Satish, forgetting in the Lake Road flat of Bishwadeb all her conservatism. She kissed him on his cheek and said, "you did it on purpose, What if something happened to you?"

Satish, the devotee of Hanumanji, took Mugdha's touch not only on his body but also inside himself and said, "who cares."

"You will have to live for me Satish. If not how will I live among such demons?"

“You don’t need to live in this world. What is the use of tolerating such ugliness and surviving in big cities like Bombay and Kolkata? Let’s go to Darbhanga. There we’ll live in peace in a small room. Two meals of vegetables and bread and at night a rainbow, what more do you want? Satish embraced Mugdha tight.

Mugdha was short of breath by then. Vegetables, bread, rainbow, Darbhanga ... what was this man talking about? Had she practiced twelve hours a day from the age of five years for this? This was the first time she felt pity for Bishwadeb Roy. She wriggled out of Satish’s embrace and said, “I’ll have to go back to Bombay immediately.”

5

“But the problems of Bombay?” Tulika asked interrupting the story.

“How Mugdha solved them, I have no idea,” Satish said.

“You never met her again?” asked Birenbabu.

“I had gone to Bombay once to meet her. After the accident, Sumana madam sacked me from my job, a decision that Bishwadeb Roy too supported. I was in such a mentally disturbed state that I couldn’t even peacefully drive taxis. In these circumstances I went to Bombay and after three days found out where she was living. At that time she had just bought the second storey of a house at Dadar.

“What did she say to you?”

“She didn’t meet me. Even after I sat on the street for two days. In the end, through the durwan I sent a photograph of the two of us together. The durwan came back and reported that she had said she had photographs with cats and dogs too. That is no reason why they can be let into the house just like that. She did not give back the photograph of course,” Satish laughed.

“But she too hasn’t married?” Tulika said.

“Who said she hasn’t? She has married her fame. And since a crack is apparent in that fame now, she has sent out her servants to look after me. One of them has given me a secret letter and told me that I’ll have to go to Bombay, sit beside Mugdha Desai in a press conference, and say all Sumana’s claims are false. For that you’ll get five lakhs or ten lakhs immediately.

“What was your reply?” Birenbabu was agitated.

“What’d I say? That I am a patient of alzheimer’s. I can’t remember anything.”

“What are you saying?” Tulika was dumbfounded.

“Two boys from the slum said this. I just looked at the man who was blabbering like a fool. At one point the two of them dropped a box of sweets on my bed and left. And as I was about to give the boys two hundred rupees along with the box of sweets for acting as I had directed them, I saw that in the room of the alzheimer’s patient they had left a tremendous proof, the letter with Mugdha’s own handwriting.

“If you flash this letter in the newspaper you’ll become a hero,” Tulika couldn’t help laughing.”

Satish tore the letter into three or four pieces, made it into a bolus, and threw it out of the window of the library. Then he said as he laughed lightly: “What are you saying! Mugdha must have written letters like this to many cats and dogs.”

Translated from the Bengali by Arnab Ray