

Shekhar Das

The Treasure Trove[†]

AK-47 is but a Russian gun! Russia is also an ally, a friendly nation. But why did my brother die of bullets from an ally's gun? The corpse was discovered after eight days, eight kilometres away from the hill station near the railway line, where the tunnel ends and poles start appearing. Eight days before, that is, on the third, after ten in the morning, my brother was abducted by them from the Siding Camp. Dada was at that moment busy with the survey map. The report sheet had to reach Dehradun before the fifteenth. The data sheet would have to be sent to Guwahati. From there the complete layout of the information would be sent through email.

There were six men in the camp, two cooks, two casual labourers and one overseer besides my brother. The rest of the staff were placed three kilometres away from Siding.

Four of them came that day after ten. They had *barandawala* caps on their heads and wore camouflage dungarees. One couldn't see them

[†] *Koshagar* (2000), Kolkata.

even if they were five yards away in the jungle. This is how the play of colours on the dress is strategically used. Each of them had technologically sophisticated guns that can turn everything into ashes in a second. They broke in through the data sheets, scattered them and carried away Dada. None could utter a word, neither the cook nor the overseer. Only the information was passed on to the base camp.

Who took my brother?

They took.

Only this much. 'They' means who?

'They' means *they*.

'They' are present in the nooks and corners of the globe, with different names, with different identities. They, who can take the lives of the powerful people in authority as well as of the wage labourers at the bottom.

They had cut the throat of a cabinet minister of the South a few days back. One evening last December, they had hijacked a plane full of passengers, shunting them from one country to another in order to get their demands fulfilled. Didn't they want to blow up Ms Kumaratunge a few days back? They are everywhere—in different geographical locales. Only their races are different.

Nobody knows why they took my brother, why they pumped seventeen bullets into his body.

Day before yesterday at seven in the evening my brother's body was brought home. Two days have been spent in formalities, legalities and post-mortem. Dada, that is Bikash, had completed his engineering studies from the little money that my mother had from my father's Life Insurance. The word 'engineer' proved to be only an ornament to him because he was unemployed for four years. But still, an engineer. He hid his identity from people and gave tuition. Our family was sustaining itself on our mother's family pension—my sister Aditi's college fees, my university education.

I, Bijon, am well versed in Althusser, Derrida and Roland Barthes. I write verses. Once a month or in two months I give radio talks, empty of contents. Aditi goes for recitation classes. She recites from Jibanananda Das—these days everyone is crazy about this poet.

My mother, Bokulbala is a widow, a family pensioner. Our only refuge is this small double storeyed house of ours.

People say I am a charismatic young man, five feet eleven inches tall. I am computer savvy, fond of smoking and *adda*¹ over black tea. I have a

¹ A long intimate session of polemics on various topics.

large circle of friends. I don't drink. I have no grievances. A happy wind is blowing outside. I can just fill up gasoline and enjoy a happy joyride on the highway. What else do I need in life!

I have a knowledge of many things. I know both poetry and the chemical formula of an atom bomb. A lot of this is in the newspapers these days. Why only me, many people know these things. Why Talibans are Talibans: to which world does Osama Bin Laden belong? Who or what is behind the Ranbir Sena and the Sunlight Sena? We all know whose blood is shed in the soil of Jehanabad, Palamu and Nalbari. We know. We understand everything.

But only since the last few days I do not seem to understand how an Indian youth, Bikash, is killed by the bullets of a Russian gun. How did the modest rose stuck to Nehru's chest button wither so fast?

My elder brother Bikash was a calm and patient man full of self-restraint, someone who would not kill even a mosquito if he finds one inside the mosquito net. He used to say—'They also have a right to live.'

Such concern for even insects which carry germs!

How could his body be thrown and dumped among weeds and leaves of the jungle?

The overseer was saying that even the wild animals did not touch the dead body of my brother as it lay dumped in the jungle. There was not a scratch on the corpse—only the seventeen holes made by seventeen bullets, shot by men on his chest and abdomen.

It was only the day before yesterday that my brother's dead body was brought home in a mini truck. We didn't have to pay them any money. God knows who bore the expense. May be the government agencies.

We knew that the body was coming. The lifeless body stirred the life of many. More than shock, it generated curiosity and astonishment. My mother and sister cried inconsolably. The house was flooded with relatives. Aditi wanted to embrace the body but was stopped. Innumerable incense sticks could not suppress the disturbing mortuary smell.

AK-47! What a celebrated name worldwide! How many mothers owe to it their desperation and tears and how many sisters like Aditi in their ninetens have been numbed by this shock? Nothing happens to me, neither tears nor desperation. Only an uncanny restlessness.

I am astonished. Dumbfounded. What new light will the world see by the killing of a full-grown youth like Bikash?

Two house away from ours stands a double-storeyed house named 'Nest of Peace'. With loud music blaring out from an audio album,

the house stands unaffected by what has happened in its immediate neighbourhood. It is evident that shock and sorrow are not contagious. My mother's sorrow is a combination of a sense of loss and a sense of economic helplessness. On the one hand the loss of her son, and on the other the loss of his earning.

Each death explains itself through its own circumstances. First my father's, now my brother. Is 'Being' spontaneity? Bakhtin also wouldn't know.

Now the family is back to the cycle of earning and spending around the family pension. The spark of prosperity brought in by Dada's earning of fourteen months has died down. Just a while ago our family managed to buy a fridge of a hundred and fifty litres, two sets of ornaments for Aditi's marriage and a furry divan in the sitting room which Aditi so desired to have. My brother had given me two thousand rupees from his salary saying, 'Keep it. Buy whatever you like. Don't smoke too much. Change your brand. And when you go to the Book Fair next time, spend these and take your girlfriend Ruchira to a restaurant. And just check out whether you get any books on Hawking-Raditian Cosmic Archaeology.'

I had laughed and said, 'Cosmic archaeology for a survey engineer! I'll get transparent sheets for you, is it OK?' My brother had replied, 'Why can't one still read and do these? Besides, don't you know that archaeology is an entry point for so many disciplines? And you are a poet?'

How can one reconcile oneself to the bloody death of such a brother!

My father's ailment was because of dearth of bone marrow. My brother was in his final semester. Aditi was still in school. I was in college. My father served as an officer in a department where there was a flood of unaccounted money. But my father was always firm in his honesty. I had read a few poems by him composed in his youth and published in paperback. He had all the promises of a great poet but never achieved anything. He had no regrets.

Poets and poetry are no more relevant. My father used to say—'The old journey of poetry is over; it's good you all are writing. Try to find a new language.'

I still remember the last time Dada and I had quietly got back home after watching a matinee show of *Subarnarekha*. Normally I would never get back home so early but that day I did. Aditi served us tea and inquired, 'Went to see the movie?'

My brother said, 'You have rightly guessed.' My brother was not in a mood to express more than this.

Aditi said, 'Its very depressing. I was sad for several days after Baba and I had watched the film together.'

Aditi has a strong sensibility to understand films. Once after watching the film *Amok* she had commented that the film had brought alive the soul of Africa. Aditi and I had not known anything about films beyond *Sonar Kella* or *The Encounter of the Third Kind*.

Baba used to suggest something very different to Dada, 'Whatever you may say Bikash, feature films have a big limitation.'

Aditi and I just listened.

Dada used to reply, 'No other medium can create such an effect, audio as well as visual, Baba.' 'But Bikash, you are allowed to see and hear only what the camera reveals and the soundtrack plays. In writing so many other things come alive—like the invisible picture, the unheard sound, the fragrance and the drama of it all. The print media always enlarges and extends human feelings. Of course the case of Kurosawa is different.'

After listening to all this Aditi used to ask me, 'Did you understand any of these, *Chhorda*?² Or did it all go above your head?'

I used to reply, 'Some I have understood. You can understand the rest, my Mary Seton!'

Aditi would still pull my leg and say, 'Why don't you raise your antennae a little higher? Look there is a long bamboo out there.'

Some days in the evening may be a Saturday, when Dada came home from his hostel, Baba also returned early from work and Aditi didn't have her recitation classes, Maa would make some snacks and tell me, 'Don't go out in the evening Biju. Everyone will have tea together.' Everyone means the five of us, our Parliament.

Baba used to tell Maa, 'Srimatiji! Let the session begin with a song from you.'

At first Maa would refuse but after a while she would sing a few lines from Shantideb Ghosh and Kanondevi. Aditi would also join Maa. Even if the lights went off there was no problem. Aditi would light a coloured candle. Aditi is a perfectionist.

When Baba lighted a cigarette, seeing me feel very suffocated, Maa would say, 'Put it off now.' And after a while she would add, 'Do you know, Biju has started smoking.'

² Youngest of the elder brothers.

'Is it so Biju?' Baba said looking at me. 'I also started smoking at this age. Smoke less.' Maa, astonished by Baba's reaction to my smoking would say to Dada and Aditi, 'Did you see your Baba's method of disciplining his son?'

Baba often recited poems from Premendra Mitra, Bishnu Dey; Aditi recited from Jibanananda, Shankha Ghosh. I recited lines from *Leaves of Grass*, *Ash Wednesday* and Dada parts from Gulag Archipalego. Dada was very fond of *Farewell to Arms*. Aditi used to refuse to recite from *Banalata Sen* saying that people had destroyed such a beautiful poem by reciting it or singing the lines in their own self stylized manner.

Baba would ask, 'Why? Why so?'

'You don't know Baba, the other day a girl recited the poem at a function in such a manner, dragging the lines as if Jibanananda had come face to face with Banalata Sen at the footboard of a city bus, asking her where she was all these days and the conductor was rushing them.'

Baba laughed, 'So what? Let each recite in his own manner. How you recite is important. Why don't you take that girl to your recitation class?'

I would poke in and say, 'What will that girl say of *Banalata Sen*? Instead of, "*Your dark tresses/ are like the dark nights of the Bidisha of Yore*", she would say, "*Your dark tresses are sitting like the nights of Bidisha—go get a bottle of sauce*".'

Aditi would be furious, 'Chhorda!'

Then Dada would intervene, 'Don't start this Biju? Biltu, why don't you recite the way you would like to? I know that your sense of poetry is much better although Biju writes poetry'.

Aditi now pampered by Dada's support and appreciation would enthusiastically say, 'One thing about this poem is that there is already an underlying gloom, so when one says *where were you all these days* one has to carry the sense of gloom and weariness without being casual. One can't afford to sound casual in reciting Jiibanananda because not a word of Jibanananda is casual.'

Baba, sounding impressed would say, 'Our Biltu sounds like an authority now, why don't you write what you have said?'

Aditi has never written. She only recites in a full-throated manner with a certain sophistication.

This is what our Saturday evening used to be like until the ailment in Baba's bones announced the end to our family adda, our own parliament.

Aditi was right when she said that my brain has a high frequency antenna. I am not boasting. But there are also things which my antenna doesn't catch. For example, when a plane is hijacked and the issue of national security is flashed by the media citing reactions of public persons and leaders, why is it that before the bulletin ends, our attention is shifted to Melbourne cricket. Does the media not feel committed to understand that nothing can be more important than the issue of national security?

The news of Dada's death had also found place in the third page of a few local newspapers.

Around a hundred and a fifty people had come for Dada's cremation. A crowd of drunkards was also there. Everything ended with the cremation of Dada's bullet-ridden body, which turned to ashes, in the furnace in no time—the body of a man whose favourite novel was *The Farewell to Arms*.

Someone had suggested—'Keep the head-bone.' Later it can be immersed in Allahabad or Gaya. I objected. 'This has no meaning. We hadn't kept Baba's also.'

Nothing can be more pathetic than a grand exhibition of sorrow.

Though we had no dearth of humanitarian concerns, we did not have enough to make both ends meet. Still with whatever resources were available, we had got Baba checked in Chennai. My mother had left no stones unturned. Her ornament box was all empty by then. But it was all in vain. Dada, Uncle and Maa had gone with Baba. Sitting next to Baba when Maa was restlessly turning around her last bangle of solid gold, Baba said—'Enough Bokul. No more now.'

'What no more?' Maa had responded.

'Don't pour any more water in a broken pitcher. Now nothing is left for Biltu', Baba cried.

Maa ran to the next room wiping her red eyes and wet cheeks with her sari-end.

They who shot my brother dead with AK-47, did they know this tale of Bokulbala?

In those last days of Baba's life Aditi would wipe drops of sweat from Baba's forehead and ask—'Do you feel like eating anything Baba?'

'No my child. I don't feel like eating or sleeping anymore.'

'You will be alright Baba.'

'A pitcher with a hole cannot last long.'

'How can you be so frustrated Baba? You write poetry.'

'Why do you say so?'

'Because poetry weaves dreams. If frustration finds place, poetry is no longer poetry. Chhorda and I have read all your poems secretly.'

'You have read? What do you think of them?'

'I feel that a poet who has so much of dreams in his poems cannot afford to use the metaphor of a pitcher with a hole.'

'But dreams also have an end Biltu.'

'No. Dreams never end Baba.'

'Biltu' is Baba and Dada's pet name for Aditi. Aditi's relentless effort to bring alive the imagery of the 'golden-winged kite' or the rhythm of the waters of Dhansiri, through poetry to Baba's bedside in his last days used to bring tears in his eyes.

Aditi used to wipe the tears with one end of her sari. She sat beside Baba's bed all the time, nursing him and attending to him everytime he said 'Biltu' in a soft voice.

'Yes Baba.'

'Tell Biju to recite Mir-Taki-Mir to me. No, Khalil Zibran. From where did Biju learn such good pronunciation?'

'I will tell him Baba.'

I had quietly heard all of this standing speechless in the next room.

We were all in Baba's room that night. Around ten minutes past eleven, his heart stopped beating. Gasping for breath had already started after ten.

Our family doctor declared him dead.

We never heard Bokulbala sing anymore in the house. Days passed and would have passed in the same way. The gloom in the house had cleared a lot after Dada got a job.

Marriage negotiations for Aditi from Siliguri was slowly progressing. The boy's family had come to see her. It wasn't easy to reject someone like Aditi. Five feet seven inches tall, with a complexion as bright as the flame of a candle. Aditi had a calm yet firm personality with showed on her fair face. I say this not because she is my sister but anyone who sees her is charmed by her. So the marriage was almost settled. The boy had given word to Dada. They had no demand for dowry.

I often teased her, 'Forget your poetry. Be a model.'

'Model?' Aditi screamed.

'Yes, model. You'll catwalk on the stage, give a foolish smile and popular magazines will carry your photo.'

'Photo?'

'Yes, photo to sell washing powder, or chilli and cumin powder.'

Such teasing sessions with Aditi was very common.

Aditi is very smart. She used to say that she wants to study Mass Communication in the university. In college she had English Honours. She was our pride but she was also the cause of our worry. Will she settle down? Will she be happy?

We were all so happy then. Dada had one more year to go for his engineering final. Baba was still alive. There was music in my mother's life then. She often sang this line from Tagore—'If my days pass off in this manner let it ...'

But her days didn't go in the same way. Our days never pass in the same manner always.

There were no savings from Dada's fourteen months salary. How can there be? Maa's ornaments and Baba's savings had all been spent on Baba's treatment and Dada's last few months in the engineering college. Now the only hope is Maa's family pension every month. My tuition classes won't yield much money even if I increase the number. And Aditi's recitation classes? The grief that has captured Aditi's heart; will she be ever able to recite her poems? Just one day of grief has shattered my 'supermodel' sister.

There's already a thick layer of dust on her favourite divan in the sitting room. No one brushes it anymore.

But this can't go on. Dada and Baba's loving Biltu has to overcome this. But how? We have no words to console each other. With economic poverty, has poverty of language also crept in?

Aditi has become like a stone. Yesterday she was trying to smell Dada's coat. She picked out a one-inch hair that had got stuck to the coat and preserved it.

Could those men with camouflaged dress and AK-47 have imagined this?

Dada—a man who in such simple terms explained to us the idea of 'paradox of information' by showing the galaxy of stars in the night sky, had to die with seven bullets in his belly?

Dada also used to say, 'We have seen so many mountain ranges—Sohadri, Aravalli, Vindhya, Mahakal—but Barail is Barail. It is a unique mountain range.'

Dada died surveying the Barail Hills.

It was just the other day when Dada had said, 'I'll have to go touring to Kolkata. Give me the name of some good books, OK?'

I had jotted down a few names—Stan Raft's *Cancer Ward* and Joe Winter's translation of Tagore. Aditi's Banarasi sari was also to be bought

by Dada from Kolkata. Our Aunt from Kankurgachi would help Dada choose one.

Nothing could materialize.

So many human expectations turn out to be bubbles in the air.

There was a lot of controversy centring Dada's cremation. I stopped everyone. What's the point in arguing as to which part of the body should be lighted first. Cremation is important. Or, is it better to give back the body to those who made it lifeless? Let them keep the body as a souvenir of their triumph.

A few of Dada's friends kept coming home in the morning and in the evening. They would sit near Maa. A little conversation would follow in bits and pieces. One of Dada's friends had gone to Aditi's room probably to console her. Aditi reacted with such a sharp look that Dada's friend had to turn back like a docile cat.

Again there was also some controversy over the rules of the last rites to be performed for the peace of Dada's soul. Relatives are always very generous in giving advice. Everyone seems to know the rules of the rites so well. They said that in the case of an accidental death the last rites had to be performed on the fourth day.

Fourth day has passed long back. Despite our running to family elders and priests, no clear-cut rules could be spelled out in Dada's case.

Then something very unbelievable happened. Maa suddenly came up and said, 'Here is some money left from Bikash's earning. Distribute this among people who could be benefited. There is no need for last rites.'

An elderly relative exclaimed, 'What are you saying Bokul? What will happen to his soul? Will it rest in peace without any rites?'

Bokulbala replied with a heavy but firm voice, 'I know what will bring peace to my son's soul.'

Our double-storeyed house is on the outskirts of the town. My father had built it bit by bit over a long period of time. On the upper storey is mine and Dada's room side by side. The very next day after we came to this house Aditi had written something on a chit of paper and giving it to Baba said—'Get this written on a steel plate. This shall be the name of our house.' So Baba got it written out and fixed it on the first pillar of the staircase leading to the upper storey. Our house was named 'Sindhu Sarosh', echoing Jibanananda's poetry. Baba looked at Aditi and said, 'Perhaps poet Jibanananda will not find a greater fan than my daughter.'

Remixes of old Hindi songs were still being played in the house in the neighbourhood. I sat alone in the varandah. My heart was heavy with grief. Dada's room was locked. Ever since Dada's death there has been no cooking in the house. Only tonight food has been cooked and three of us sat down to eat. Maa and I swallowed some, Aditi tried but couldn't swallow anything. I said to myself, 'No, this can't go on, I have to lift this girl out of her grief.'

I went down to her room. She was sitting on her bed looking out of the open window. The winter wind was blowing over the empty fields stretching beyond our garden. Silence and darkness existed side by side. It was as if life had come to a halt. Only in the faraway highway the dim lights of the speeding trucks brought a flash of life. Seeing me she turned her face and said, 'Chhorda, come in', still looking out of the window.

'What are you doing Aditi. Its cold, why don't you shut the window?'

'Its OK.'

'Why didn't you eat Biltu?'

That's where I made the mistake. Only Dada and Baba used to call her by that name. Her eyes flooded with tears. She said, 'Chhorda, I can smell Dada in that coat.' Once again she sank into her grief and desperation putting her head on my chest.

A sister's heart pangs are beyond the comprehension of those who hold the AK-47s.

I remember those nights of Laxmi Puja in our house. The house used to be full of relatives and neighbours. Baba would invite everyone he met on his way back from the market. With a pair of hilsa fish in his hands, he would tell us, 'My brother in Naihati used to bring three or four pairs of hilsa. You should have seen him.'

Maa used to fast for the day and Aditi would join her in making little snacks items. In the evening the priest would come and read the *Panchali*³ and the whole area beyond Maa's puja altar would be full of the sound of the conch shell and the fragrance of Ajmeri incense sticks. Aditi would run around the house and cater to whoever wanted it. For her it was the carnival night of 'Sindhu Sarosh'.

As usual I would be after Aditi, 'Supermodel, are you dieting. Take a bite of something. I won't tell Maa.'

³ A narrative describing the grace and powers of the goddess.

The autumn sky was bathed in moonlight on the full moon night of Laxmi Puja and I watched the whole festivity from the balcony, smoking my cigar.

There was also a lot of festivity on *Mahalaya*, or the beginning of Durga Puja. Maa used to ensure that there were enough sweets in the house. Whoever came home next day should not go without having sweets. During the Puja days we often went out sightseeing. Railway reservations would be done by August. Sometimes we went to Palamu, Ranchi or Chaibasha. Sometimes to Nasik, Pune or Bombay. Once we went to the south, past Rameshwaram towards the south-east to places which touched the Bay of Bengal. This is supposed to be the Cape Point of the mainland from where one can see the hazy clouds of the Sri Lankan skies.

Aditi's dupatta and Maa's sari were flying in the wind. Maa started complaining, 'Where have you brought us Bikash? If we stand till evening we'll get fried here.'

But Aditi was excited, collecting sea shells from the sands.

Will those men with AK-47 ever imagine these happy moments of our family? Could they have heard of them from Dada to be jealous enough to snatch it away from us—The family trips during Pujas and the carnival nights of 'Sindhu Sarosh'?

Nobody listens to anybody.

The thick forests of the mountain range have become the seat of destructive weapons. Human language, human passions have died here long back. Only the venomous smell of the gunpowder prevails here; and the language of the bomb. No one listens to the little narratives of harmony, travel and togetherness.

I have made a mistake. Instead of lifting her from her state of grief I have pushed Aditi further into it by reminding her of Dada and Baba. Dada's hair stuck to the collar of his coat is the only souvenir left with Aditi. When Baba passed away we were frozen with grief. After Dada's death we have lost the strength even to mourn.

No emotion no tears can describe the depth of Aditi's grief. Will she be lost forever in grief?

'No Biltu. I won't let you get lost. No tender words of consolation for you. I have to transform your grief into anger—the energy of anger alone can redeem you from your current state. I have to teach you to be angry.'

I threw away my cigarette. God knows what Aditi and Maa are doing downstairs.

Some very simple questions always trouble me—where are we? What is the role for people like me? Who will ensure the security of our lives? Who gains what by killing weapon less, harmless people like us? Why individual grief cannot become collective grief? Why even on the day of Dada's cremation my neighbours play the loud music of Baba Sehgal? Why even our relatives enact a caricature of grief? Why my brain—my high frequency antenna, has answers to every other thing except these simple questions?

I lighted my cigarette once again. The burnt end of my cigarette appears to me like a spot of red blood. Sticky nicotine enters my lungs like the smoke wailing after a nuclear explosion. My nerves become more restless with pain. A deep conviction haunts my being—I must resist, I must stand with firm feet on the ground, my hands on my waist. I must stand—stand and resist, if needs be all alone. I don't see anybody else with me. Will anyone sponsor my protest, my rebellion, because every event—every action in today's world has sponsors and patrons.

Many days have passed. The earth revolves at sixteen hundred kilometres per hour—not more, not less. An erroneous countdown of the millennium has already started. The media is also celebrating this erroneous arithmetic of counting ninety-nine years as one century. Life goes on, even for the three of us, our life goes on. Aditi eats a little now but I can't tease her anymore. Our teasing sessions have come to an end. Aditi has stopped reciting. The passion in her voice is lost.

A few students come to her for tuition. Aditi has also finished her undergraduate final examination. Will her dreams of going to the University get fulfilled?

Life has become very grave. Aditi serves tea mechanically. I can't joke with her. When asked, she replies in monosyllables.

Maa has become very irritable and forgetful. May be she is also aware of this. The other day after I got back from the market, she emptied the bag and screamed out, 'Biju, who has asked you to get green peas?'

'Why, you Maa?'

'I? Impossible!'

When I calmly reminded her that she did ask me to bring, she replied, 'May be I said. But henceforth don't bring green peas anymore. Your father and Bikash were very fond of green peas cooked with potato and paneer.'

Bokulbala's voice carried the heavy air of reminiscence of a long lost evening. But in a moment she recovered and in a coarse voice frantically

cried out, 'Aditi, where are you?' Aditi came running. 'What happened Maa?'

'Throw away these green peas. Biju brought them without knowing ...'

I myself threw the green peas away. The whole thing left us awed and motionless.

I don't go to university anymore. I give tuition classes to seven students; I also teach computer. Maa's family's pension has gone a little higher due to increase in DA. We are living life as if it was not there in us. Aditi has also learnt darning and art as well as the management of the hearth.

I have reduced smoking and drinking tea. I have stopped using lights, fans and the telephone. It had cost Baba one thousand rupees to get the connection. Now we only receive incoming calls.

Maa's eyes are getting blank and expressionless. Aditi has also marked this. That is why she always keeps watch on her. At night Maa has to be given a high dose of zolam. Maybe she gets some sleep then.

Aditi has disturbed sleep. I can feel everything as I lie on my bed upstairs—full of angst, yet helpless.

Dada's friends do not visit us anymore. We hardly have visitors. A kitten had tried to get inside the gate one day but I resisted in a mild manner and it left. Maa is sometimes normal, sometimes indifferent—not really abnormal either.

I returned home that evening and went straight to my room. I sat smoking the fourth cigarette for the day. Aditi had left a cup of tea for me and had gone to attend to four of her students in her room. My room was dark but the light from the adjacent house and the street neon light lighted my room partly.

Suddenly I heard soft steps on the staircase. Who is coming at this hour? Surely not Aditi. Then who?

A shadow fell on my door and I wondered, 'Why is Maa here now?'

'Why are you sitting in the dark Biju? Where is the light?'

'Let it be. I have got used to it.'

'Are you crazy, sitting like a ghost in the dark?'

Maa switched on the lights and the two fancy lights in the room chosen by Aditi shone bright.

I asked anxiously, 'Why at this hour upstairs Maa? Do you want to say something?'

Yes, that's why I have come. Look at this.'

'What is this?'

'A letter.'

'Whose letter?'

'Theirs.'

'Theirs?'

'Yes, theirs. From Bikash's office.'

'What have they written?'

'Read. Aditi has also read it.'

Bokulbala's voice was unusually light. Once again she said, 'It arrived this afternoon through registered post. They have asked for some papers after receiving which they will send the cheque. Quite a big sum! Isn't it compensation?'

Bokulbala sounded more and more light and bright. I looked at her with astonishment. She was hovering restlessly between normalcy and the abnormal.

With an illumined voice she went on, 'This money will be useful for Aditi. Won't it be? The groom's party from Siliguri is asking us to hurry. If the boy goes out of our hand it will be difficult to get another. How long will they wait? Biju, you write to them tonight itself—we are ready.'

Maa went back downstairs.

A terrible, long-stretched grief has also died its natural death, here in this room a few minutes back! Was the world, fumed with smell of gunpowder, ever aware of this ruthlessness?

Has the explosive world ever realized this cruel reality?

Dada and Baba's 'Biltu'—Aditi—did not hear those words spoken by Bokulbala just now—Bokulbala, who always sang, 'May you always bless us, make us pure, O Holy One ...'

God knows what she would have said if she had heard.

—Translated from Bengali by
Sukalpa Bhattacharjee