

## ALAM'S OWN HOUSE

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As the Bangladesh Biman aircraft left the skies of Dhaka and took off for Kolkata, the thoughts rushed back again.

'Like everything else, there's also a time frame for returning. And once that point is past, there's a feeling that it's not going to happen any more...' Raka had written in her last letter. That doesn't mean that my wait for you has made me tired or that I feel depressed. It only means that there's no point in threatening a visit in every letter.' These and many more words. After such a long time he couldn't recall everything word by word. [Alam felt Raka had picked up the language of Kolkata quite well.] According to the situation, she knew how to play around with it. He hadn't, however, understood her words, 'certain lands are meant for certain roots only.' He hadn't wanted his hesitation to turn into fear or suspicion, so he had read those lines again and again. But he hadn't been able to gather their essence.

Raka was a woman. And she would somehow manage to withhold some secret somewhere, he had reasoned. It was relatively easy to achieve freedom, but it was not so easy to wipe out prejudices. It had something to do with understanding. And if Alam failed to understand it, Raka had no responsibility of explaining either.

In reply he had written, 'a rise in temper also raises the level of enigma. If that's the reason, it's fine. If not, I have failed to understand quite a few things from your letter. What do you mean by certain lands and certain roots? If I understand it the way you mean it, then don't forget that I was born in Kolkata—in the very house to which this letter is being addressed. Doesn't that give me roots in Kolkata? Do you know there are far more women in Dhaka by the name of Raka than there are

in Kolkata? And none of them stick out here as being different.' But until Raka came to Dhaka, it was Alam who would have to rush to Kolkata—to his own house.

These and many more such exchanges, that were possible only through letters, took place. Yet language also had the ability to create human shapes by stringing meaning together and giving a sense of completeness to that shape. Alam's emotions were such that if he could, he would have carried the letters to Raka himself.

There was no reply. Alam waited for a month or so and wrote another letter—just a few lines. He mentioned about not receiving a reply and the news that he had been invited to a seminar being organized by the Maitri Sansad in Kolkata. If men were allowed to be sentimental, Raka would now get a taste of it.

This time there was a reply but the handwriting was different. He tore open the envelope and unfolded the letter. His suspicions were right—it wasn't Raka, it was her mother, Snehamashima. The first news was Raka was out of town. And even when she was in Kolkata, she was busy with studies—her research work hadn't progressed much either. So it was not always possible for her to keep up with writing letters. Nevertheless, Alam should write once in a while to tell them how he was doing. Finally, Raka's father, Meshomoshai, was very happy at the news of the seminar. And so on. → Victim of history.

That Raka was not around in Kolkata and that she was not aware of this letter, was quite obvious from Sneha's letter. He had countered his suspicions with reason. May-June were the summer holidays—the university was closed. And they had numerous relatives all over India. Ever since 1946, the family had been branching out in all directions—Delhi, Pune, Patna, Ahmedabad. She loved to travel. It was not impossible for her to visit one of those places on a sudden whim. What was, however, unclear were the words 'not always possible'. The problem was, he couldn't ask for a clarification either from Raka or from Snehamashima.

His breath had become heavy and he realized it only when the smell of a burnt cigarette reached his nostrils. He breathed out and in, and tried to get back to normal.

There was no need to climb thousands of feet in order to travel a distance of just forty-five minutes. Although not very clear, one could see the reality down below—of shrubs, trees, rivers and fields—if one looked down from the aircraft. And some concrete structures too. After having moved smoothly on a straight course, the aircraft had now started to sway. The blue of the sky was gradually being lost to the clouds. Alam felt a slight change in the temperature inside the aircraft too. It was the end of August. This was the time for the rains. Maybe there was a storm going on outside. At that moment there was the tinkling of the bell and the glowing of lights requesting passengers to fasten their seat belts, followed by a warning from the air-hostess. In the seat next to Alam, Feroze had been busy smoking and running through the paper he had prepared for the seminar. Now as he shut his briefcase he enquired, 'Have we reached?'

'Still about 15 minutes to go,' Alam looked at his watch and replied. 'At such a low flight there's bound to be some bumping.'

As he spoke, the aircraft entered a thick mass of white clouds. But it didn't bump as much as they thought it would. Soon they were out of it, the smokiness changing into a clearer sky.

'This sky space belongs to India.' There was the bell again and the warning lights were out. Feroze said, 'We have no, what you call, fundamental rights over it.'

Feroze looked sideways and glanced at Alam. But at that moment there was nothing Alam could think of to say.

Feroze had said it lightly but it was quite obvious that he was serious. Ever since the invitation for the seminar arrived, he had been constantly looking for counter arguments within his topic. As if otherwise his arguments wouldn't be valid enough. He had argued about this till very late last night. Feroze believed in the cultural difference of the two countries. He had said, 'friendship was a good thing. But it was dangerous to use it as a bait. People wore clothes because they wanted to cover their bare bodies. But that didn't mean they had to wear clothes that were identical in cut and colour as well. Where was the scope for individuality, then?' The problem was, Alam wasn't able to identify with Feroze's

thoughts. Was individuality limited to cut and colour only? Maybe, Feroze was trying to express something deeper, that was not quite clear even to his own self. His ideas were directed towards the concept of 'yours' and 'mine'. So Alam said, 'Does it mean anything? If we had the time and patience we could actually have covered this distance by foot. Things would have been very simple then. Where there was no distance, there was no need to organize a seminar especially on friendship.'

Alam didn't know how clear he himself was. But he was happy to have said those words.

Feroze knotted his eyebrows. He pressed the brown lighter in his fist. It was not to light a cigarette.

'What do you mean?'

'I accepted the invitation because I wanted to come to Kolkata,' replied Alam. 'Otherwise, I find these seminars and stuff quite dodgy. We have the same language, similar clothes, same food habits and the same weather. The difference lies only in the politics. What relevance does anything else have?'

'Don't finish off the two-day seminar in five minutes. I sat up six nights and used a whole bundle of papers to prepare this paper...' This was how Feroze was going to build up his argument. He was stalling for time, as if, before getting to the main point. Then said, 'The difference doesn't lie even in politics. It lies in religion. Can you avoid this point however much you try?'

The aircraft had probably begun to descend. The silence at this time was deeper. It was quite possible for any comment to reach the other passengers as well. That is a matter of imposition—at other times he would have pointed out. Since it was the most blindingly assertive of all slogans, it was the most dependable. We concentrate more on the differences of religion than on the differences between the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed. And that is because it absolves us from responsibility and makes it easy for us to escape from reality. But then, he thought, there was no point in saying these things. Not, all questions had answers. And sometimes one didn't feel like giving an answer either. Was it possible that Raka too had had the same thoughts

and same ideas as the ones he had had just now? And was that why she had sent her reply through Sneha instead of writing herself? Or did language mean only the letters?

Confused by his own questions, Alam was trapped into hesitation. He knew quite a bit about Raka's feelings, but not all.

Feroze, of course, wouldn't agree to any of this. He was different in temperament. For the moment he sat ramrod-straight for landing and moved on to a different topic.

'Alam, are you really not going to stay with me?'

'I've told you, it wouldn't be polite.'

'You could have dropped in to see them even if you stayed with me.' Then hesitantly Feroze added, 'The people you are talking of aren't even related to you.'

'Are we related? Yet, if ever I left Dhaka and came back to it. I would always stay with you...'

The aircraft touched down and in the excitement of the impact they were interrupted for a while. Making their way through the standing passengers and climbing down the stairs, Alam picked up the conversation again.

'It's not that you are going to be totally alone. It's a matter of just one night. Rahman Saheb is going to be here tomorrow morning. Besides, there's Khan Chaudhury from the Mission...'

Feroze was quiet.

There must have been a shower sometime back. There was dampness all around. The air was moist, but the light sunshine was gradually taking away the humidity. The sun was soft enough to let it drape around the body comfortably. As he walked towards the customs enclosure a faint memory came back to him. Three years back he had walked in exactly the opposite direction-towards the aircraft. As he had walked away, he had been looking at the visitors' gallery, his eyes searching for Raka. She was there, and so were Sneha and Ananta. He hadn't been able to locate them immediately. There was a large number of people clustered together. And all those who came to say goodbye looked the same. But the wave of a white hand among them had told him where she was. He couldn't

bear the scene. Even after the flight had left, for a very long time, he couldn't think of anything else. Today he realized that it was hardly a distance—just forty-five minutes, or maybe a maximum of one hour. And it took him three years to make the journey!

The force of old memories compelled him to look at the gallery again. He was not looking for Raka, though. He was checking out his suspicion. About a week back he had sent two letters by post, containing almost the same information—confirming his visit with date, time and flight number. One was for Raka, the other for Snehamashima. One reason was that he wanted to make sure at least one letter reached, even if the other got lost. But mainly he wanted to be clear in his reasoning. Someone's address couldn't be just Kolkata! He wanted to make it clear that from the airport he was going to go straight to Park Circus. What more could he write! At this moment, looking at her watch, wouldn't Raka know that this morning Alam's address was Kolkata, not Dhaka!

Alam's imagination was being coloured by thoughts such as these. Confirmed that Raka was not there, he looked beyond the bustling crowd.

Khan Chaudhury had himself come to receive them. Along with him were two members of Maitri Sansad. Among them Alam recognized Sudeb Bose. He had been to Dhaka last year on a similar conference. But the assassination of Zia-ur-Rahman had led to its cancellation. On the way to the city in the car he was talking grandly about that. Neither Feroze nor Alam could be his listeners. It was an old story. Even Khan Chaudhury knew about it. Probably it was for the fourth person. Soon he changed the subject and started rattling off statistics on how many people had crossed over to this side after the creation of Pakistan. And Feroze had begun to find mistakes with the numbers. If this continued, the whole seminar would move into this car!

Irritated by the situation, Alam said, 'Feroze, pass a cigarette...'

'All of a sudden!'

'I'm coming back to Kolkata after almost three years. Let me make it stimulating.'

Sudeb stopped. Then he said to Alam, 'Kolkata is familiar to you,

isn't it?'

Accepting a light from Feroze's outstretched lighter and trying to light the cigarette with his unpractised hands, Alam replied. 'It is the land of my birth.'

With these words he could submerge himself in his own identity. Was the land of one's birth also one's native land? This question often made him feel homeless. It did now again.

The next subject was the war of 1971. Kolkata was then crazy about Sheikh Mujib. Sudebbabu reminisced about a meeting at the monument grounds of the Maidan. Suchitra Mitra had been invited to sing. Alam remembered that too. He was in Kolkata then. He had stood at the fringes of those millions of people and had heard the declaration of the name of a new country—a country about which he had no idea at all then. And now he was wearing the badge of that country.

As they proceeded a little further, the sky changed. Along with a moist wind there were also fine drops of rain. The advantage of sitting by the window was to be able to indulge in facing the onslaught of the breeze outside. From Nazrul Islam Avenue to CIT Road. The turning on the left led to SaltLake. Next they would pass through Maniktala and Narkeldanga. It was as if these were like responses to the roll call in the classroom—each and every face familiar. He felt a tingling in his veins. It ran through his whole body. He had wanted to experience these familiar faces intimately in the quiet privacy of his own company. And so he had been keen to take a separate taxi. But Khan Chaudhury wouldn't allow him to. He had insisted that the driver would reach him to the address at Park Circus after dropping Feroze at the hotel. It was Saturday today and eleven in the morning. By the time he reached the house it would be noon. Alam was sure Raka would be waiting for him. That is, if she had received the letter. The *kathchanpa* tree near the gate would spread at least some fragrance in this rain. He would be surprised if they hadn't received the letter. Today's Raka was probably not the same as that of three years back. He might be surprised though. They could start an argument on which fish was better—the *hilsa* of the Ganga or the *hilsa* of the Padma. Although he had moved to the banks of Padma, Alam had still remained

an admirer of the Ganga. This was something that would surprise Raka's father, Anantameshomoshai. Taste, he had once said, was like prejudice too. Once acquired, it survived forever. So, would Ananta, or for that matter Sneha, be very surprised if in a day or two, while he stayed with them, he proposed the same idea concerning Raka?

Alam had become absent-minded. It was impolite to remain so silent in the midst of others. Yet, reminiscences held him back.

It was 1970. Suddenly, one day, Baba decided to give up his medical practice. He shut down his surgery. Unless it was absolutely necessary, he stopped going out on calls. But he had been physically fit and had a thriving practice. He had become too sentimental, probably. It was a cumulative effect and the impact had set in gradually. Alam had come to know of all this much later.

The previous year his elder brother had gone to Glasgow to study Engineering. 'If possible, stay back there,' Baba had written to Dada. 'Technically there's no problem here at all. You won't have difficulty finding employment. But you might find yourself unemployed in matters of the heart.' Words of this kind had more mystery than simplicity. When the chamber was empty he would make the compounder sit with him and explain to him various theories. 'Partition had taken place in two forms—one political and the other mental. The second one had not been sealed and signed by Mountbatten. Earlier I used the same stethoscope for Ram and Jamal. Those days are gone. There are no Rams among my patients anymore, only Rahims; no Jadas, only Jamals; no Kanais, only Karims. Ram, Jadu and Kanai have all gone to Dr Gupta. We had our medical degrees from the same college and we had learnt the anatomy of the same human being. The dissected body of that human being had no name labelled on to it.'

I still remember Baba sitting with a mountain of rice on a big bell metal plate and chatting with Ma. That was when he had broken the news. 'Dr Gupta has taken a chamber at Ballygunge. His patients have dwindled in this part of the town. The Jamals and Karims don't recover from his treatment anymore. They come to me. Their numbers are reducing too. Those who can are leaving for Pakistan—some for East

Pakistan and some for West Pakistan. We should have gone too probably. I can feel a kind of illness in the heart...'

After all these years I didn't seem to remember the words very well. I could only recall Baba's lonely face that was surrounded by silence, and Ma's progressive quietness. And I recalled the depression of my two sisters at an age when their lives should have been bubbly and pimple-ridden. They were like dull bulbs engulfed in silence. Then there was the war. The slogan was—Bangladesh, our Bangladesh! One day Dr Gupta brought the proposal. Anantashekhhar had left Dhaka with his family. He had no intentions of going back. His house and property were lying waste in Dhanmandi. 'You were thinking of moving to Dhaka, too, doctor saheb, so I thought I'll make a suggestion. If you really wanted to move, how about exchanging the property?'

Baba's face had become serious. Later he had said, 'If that's our destiny, so let it be. Let me give it a thought. Bring Anantababu over one day...'

Feroze got off at the hotel and along with him Khan Chaudhury, Sudebbabu and the others. They wanted to have a chat about the programme. Maybe there would be other people too. Then there was dinner. Although he nodded at Khan Chaudhury's request, Alam wasn't sure if he would finally be able to make it. As the car moved away from the hotel, he was overcome with a sense of deep loneliness. Then why had he been pining for some privacy all this while? Did he want to swim in a one-way current of memories? Or did he want to experience some happiness—a happiness steeped in the memory of his destination? And now that his destination was nearing, was he being pursued by a sense of fear?

Alam didn't know. At this moment he could only identify a sense of hesitation that existed between him and his destination.

Kolkata had changed a lot in three years. In his efforts to gauge how much Raka had changed, he had been unable to gauge how much he had changed. Whenever we stand in front of a mirror we see our image reflected in it. We become so used to seeing the good or bad aspects of ourselves that we don't feel the need to analyse these. Yesterday's change

becomes imperceptible today. The following days merge with previous days. And in the midst of all this, the heart grows too. Any perceptible change in both, the outward looks and the heart of a person, could be identified simultaneously only by a person for whom the past and the present lay in separate compartments. Again, it was time that helped Alam identify that there hadn't been so many potholes on the road or so much graffiti on the walls in this area. (The slogan, 'the gun is the source of power,' had faded. A quick look around gave the feeling that the letterings on the walls were a kind of defacement of smooth surfaces. In their rush to cross the roads, even the people on the streets changed constantly. It was difficult to study them.

That Baba had changed so much internally was quite evident the day Dr Gupta brought Anantashekhhar to our house. He didn't move an inch beyond polite conversation. He had said, 'I've heard of the exchange offer. Have you brought any documents related to your property in Dhaka the house, the blueprint of the lands, inventory etc?'

'No, not really. I just have the deed. But I could give you a rough idea.'

'Rough ideas won't be enough.' Baba had looked straight at Anantashekhhar, 'Look sir, I have made up my mind. You have a good look at my house today. Tell me if you like it. Then let's go to Dhaka — I'll have a look at yours. A man's hard work has a lot of value. It took me four years to complete this house.' This was the first double-storeyed house in this area. We moved in only after it was fully complete. The terrace is more like a courtyard. After the death of Mahatmaji we held a memorial service up there. After the service was over there was a feeling of emptiness. Standing on that newly built terrace on a winter evening, the sky had seemed unusually big..'

Alam had asked the driver to go slowly so that he could direct him when to turn left and when to turn right. Although he tried to be natural, his eyes got stuck at various places. In places where he had expected single storeys there were now double storeys; the crude exterior of a motor garage shielded a beautiful garden of flowers; new signboards announced that old things could be discarded. But he had no difficulty locating his

own house. He would never have. 'It is not possible for anyone to be born twice in the same house...', he had once told Raka, 'except for me.' At least, that was how he thought of it.

The exchange took place in about two months. Alam stayed back. He had been studying for his M.A. at that time. Before sticking to his decision he had reasoned it out with his own self. Baba's problem was not his problem. Ma's problem was Baba. The two sisters had been counted amongst the luggage. So why should Alam go?

'You'll study, that's all right. But where will you stay?' Baba had asked. 'Find a hostel for yourself.'

Alam was shaken. He was sitting in his own house and having this discussion in front of Anantashekhhar.

'Alam is going to stay here.' Anantashekhhar had said. 'If he would have gone with you it would have been different. But if he stays back in Kolkata he should not stay anywhere else. Moreover...' seeing Baba sitting quietly, he spoke more freely, 'the desperation was mine, doctorsaheb, not yours. You gave us an opportunity to find shelter, and in return can we not give shelter to your son? I have a son too. They'll stay together as friends...'

'That's a relief,' Baba had said, 'you know Anantababu, once bitten twice shy. I'm a cow without a shed, so I feel scared at the sight of a crimson cloud.<sup>1</sup> We had stayed together as friends in our respective places too. You've never mentioned of any violence. Why then were you uncomfortable? We were fortunate to have been able to find an exchange deal. But keeping my son with you is a responsibility you have taken on by yourself. Make sure you don't regret it later.'

Then came the crossing of the border. In the early hours of dawn, before leaving for the station, Baba went up to the terrace and offered *namaaz*. He climbed down the stairs and never looked back. As he followed his father around that day, Alam had realized that man's continuity survived in his blood, not in his address.

The attic room was off the terrace. And even after the houses were

1. There's a proverb in Bengali that a cow whose shed has been burnt once, will always be scared by a crimson cloud.

exchanged, his room hadn't changed. One evening Raka came up panting. Alam had, of course, already heard about the trouble. Raka said, 'There's great trouble outside. Houses are burning. Dada called to say that you should not step outside the house...'

At that moment Raka's face was more valuable to him than the words that flowed from it. Without concealing his surprise Alam had said, 'You've worn a sari today?'

Raka looked at herself. Then forgetting what she had been saying earlier, she said, 'Am I looking bad?'

Where there was attraction, there was neither good nor bad. Only what was imperceptible became perceptible. Raka wouldn't understand that. Alam had conveyed only what he could with his eyes. Nothing more. Coming out of his room, he stood beside Raka on the terrace. In the distance, as the fire spread rapidly, they noticed the sky burning more and more fiercely. The roar of the attackers and the wailing of those being attacked were lost in the general din of confused outcry. It was difficult to identify the attacker from the attacked. And then gradually the sound transformed into a deafening silence. After a very long time Raka had said, 'Here too!'

Alam hadn't said anything. But he suddenly realized they had been standing there like a couple of dolls,<sup>2</sup> and wondered what value life held for such experiences. He thought no further. Not even when they were called away by Snehamashima in the course of her busy chores, and separated.

'Hey! Hey! Stop...'

At his sudden instruction, the car stopped. And Alam let out a long breath. He opened the door and with suitcase in hand emerged out of the car. Before letting the driver off he wanted to be sure that this was indeed the house. But he asked himself if there was any cause for suspicion. Ananatashekhar Sanyal—the words were written clearly on a marble plaque right next to the little gate. After Baba left, the previous name had been erased in about a month's time. There was nothing emotional about it. Most people were unaware that doctor babu had

2. Traditional handicrafts of dolls of men and women, which come in pairs.

gone away leaving the country forever.

The odd patient would often come and knock on the door. They didn't believe what they heard. The idea of changing the name had finally come from Alam. He had made himself 'care of Anantashkhar'. But that was not the reason. Doubt now crept in at the absence of the *kathchanpa* tree. And exactly at that place the width of the wall had been reduced and a new room had been constructed. It was a sweet shop. The signboard read 'Madhur.' Earlier the mention of the street and the *kathchanpa* tree were enough for people to find the house. Now probably they identified it with the sweet shop. Raka had never written about these things. There was nothing emotional about this either. There must have been a reason. The house was so big but there were very few rooms... Anantashkhar had once said, 'the planning wasn't right.' Alam had smiled quietly at this observation. If Baba had heard this before the exchange, he wouldn't have agreed to seal the deal. He had planted the tree in such a way that it was directly visible from the windows of both, the bedroom upstairs and the living room downstairs. There was no point in saying those things to Anantashkhar. Probably he had put the open space to better use by building the shop. Necessity guided actions.

Alam stood in front of the closed gate for a while even after the taxi had left. He was looking at the house. He could see Baba standing at the window upstairs. He was wearing a *phatua* over a checked lungi, the light from a sunny cloud shining on the hint of a red beard covering his cheeks and chin. It was raining on the *kathchanpa* tree.

His breath longed for that lost fragrance. There was no Baba, just a yellow curtain. Feeling the beginnings of a very mild drizzle, Alam looked up at the sky. There were clouds. Then he realized that his entire journey from the airport had been through the rain. But he knew that thoughts such as these had only emotional value, nothing else. The gate led to a flight of stairs, a covered portico and then the door. It would open at the ring of the bell. Would it be Raka at the door? No, he had gradually given up that hope. Maybe it would be meshomoshai, or Snehamashima.

He waited for quite sometime and then rang the bell again. Half-past twelve wasn't too late in the day. Moreover, they knew he was coming.

The door was answered by Sneha. She was trying to shield a hand that had traces of food. She looked at Alam with a combination of surprise and embarrassment.

'Oh! Alam!'

As always, he bent down to touch her feet.

'Did you receive my letter?'

'Come in,' she avoided the reply and said, 'We were having our lunch... sit down...'

Alam put the suitcase down on one side. In the well-kept living room there was no dearth of place to sit. Yet, a look at the curtain, leading to the interiors of the house, transformed his hopes to a sense of unease.

'You finish your food, Mashima, I'll wait.'

'Right!' Now there was a faint smile on her lips. 'In the meantime your Meshomoshai will also finish his.'

Then she stopped. She took a look at the suitcase and asked, 'You'd like some tea, won't you?'

'Yes please, but only after you've had your food.'

'Why don't you have a seat? Sit!'

Even three years back Alam would have gone right in through the door that Sneha had used to leave the room. There was always someone or the other at the door. On his return it was usually Raka. Of course, he had never returned at any other time. Now there was a yellow curtain there. It was quite possible that the next person to come in through that curtain would not be Snehamashima or Meshomoshai, but Raka. His wait would last only till the next person walked in. And even that wait would have been reduced if Sneha's hand didn't have traces of food on it. Alam thought no further.

The big photograph of Gandhiji was still on the wall. It had come down to this room after the memorial service on the terrace. He had been seeing that photograph in the same position since he had been three or four years of age. On the wall opposite to it was a pair of deer horns. Yet a thin line did not escape his eyes. Of course, that space couldn't be theirs forever. There had been an oil painting there once. It depicted a scene from the battle of Plassey, showing a man fighting shoulder to

shoulder with Mohanlal. His descendants used to live in Murshidabad. Baba had pointed to that unknown man beside Mohanlal on the painting and had introduced Alam's grandfather's father to him. The painting had come to them as an inheritance from the house at Baharampur in Murshidabad. That man's son became a magistrate and his son became a doctor. Alam had absent-mindedly travelled into history while sprinkling soil on Baba's grave at Dhaka. Now the deer-horns didn't allow him to think of anything else.

'What news, Alam?'

That was Anantashekhar. He had begun to ask from the other side of the curtain, even before he had entered the room fully.

'Fine, Meshomoshai.' Alam quickly touched his feet and said, 'You look a little different, though.'

'What do you see? My health has gone down?'

'You've reduced a lot.'

'Maybe. I don't keep too well these days.'

The vest was less clean than the *dhoti*. It looked as if he had put on whatever he could lay his hands on quickly. He opened the window facing the street and sat with Alam.

'Your Ma and sisters—are they all fine?'

Alam nodded.

Sneha came back. Probably she had changed her sari as well. But there was no change in her absent-mindedness. Alam couldn't recollect what the colour of the earlier sari had been.

'I had heard you were coming.' Anantashekhar emerged from his thoughts and spoke, 'You didn't inform us that you were going to stay with us.'

'What are you saying?' Sneha intervened even before Alam could understand the question properly. 'Where else should he stay when he is in Kolkata!'

Sneha was so clear and forceful that Anantashekhar could not conceal his embarrassment. In a disconcerted tone he said, 'Well, I didn't mean that.'

'Come Alam, would you like to have a wash?' At that moment Sneha

had come forward to rescue him from any kind of discomfort. 'Tea will be ready soon...'

Alam stood up. Following Sneha inside the house he realized that a gap of three years could take away a lot of the easiness. Was it three years, or more? It was quite possible that the details of the letter hadn't reached Anantashkhar. He was an old man and had understood the whole thing differently. And in that case it was also Alam's responsibility to create a sense of ease.

Sneha had taken out a fresh towel, and a soap case. As she handed these over to him, she asked, 'Would you like to have a shower?'

'No. I've had one in the morning.'

'Have an early lunch today. And then get some rest...'. As if showing him the way, she stepped into the courtyard and said, 'that's the bathroom. We've put on new fittings. You know the way don't you?'

Alam smiled. If one took a count of the time Alam spent in getting to know each corner of the house, Sneha hadn't spent even half of it there. But to have a right to it was, of course, a different matter. But then, as he bent over the basin and splashed water on to his face, he realized that the bathroom adjoining the courtyard was for him in a way new. Eight steps down from the attic was the first floor. And the bathroom. It was almost exclusively his own. Once in a while though, Srimantada, Raka's elder brother, used it. And very occasionally, Raka. She had once taunted him in jest, 'Even a son-in-law that lives in his father-in-law's house doesn't get such pampering. We have to fight over our share, but for you the arrangements are all exclusive!' He hadn't known then that he would receive the news of Baba's passing away at Dhaka, and then gradually he would have to leave his lecturer's job in Kolkata and move to Dhaka permanently. So he had been able to give a repartee too. Giving Raka time to prepare herself for it he had said, 'In terms of share it is best to have exclusive rights. And I would be more happy if I was pampered less.' It was not that Raka did not understand. The impact of his repartee had reached the pupil of her eye and the lobe of her ear. Then she had controlled herself and replied, 'Those who try to win the world only with empty words, also get kicked out by their fathers-in-laws.'

The memories kept Alam smiling. Just a memory of the voice created before him the whole scene in flesh and blood. It seemed as if he could reach out and touch Raka if he wished. And memories only increased his anxiety.

During lunch Alam couldn't control himself anymore.

Sneha spared no efforts in her hospitality. But that also helped to serve as concealment. The vapour on the plate told Alam that the rice had been cooked while he was having his tea. And the extra fries on the plate were meant to make the plate look good. She stood right next to the table and served various items with her own hands. She also continued to speak.

'Your attic has now been converted into a prayer room. After Srimanta's transfer to Delhi, the room next to the living room has been converted into a guest room. How many guests do we have anyway? About a month or so back a cousin's son had visited from Jalpaiguri for an interview.' Then suddenly she seemed to have realized something, and said, 'Have you reduced your intake, or are you not eating properly?'

'I'm fine.' Alam looked up at Sneha. He waited till the last limit of his patience and said, 'I don't see Raka around, Mashima. Is she in college?'

'Look! I had completely forgotten to tell you.' Pouring water from a jug Sneha said, 'Raka's in Delhi. She's visiting Srimanta. She is supposed to be back either today or tomorrow. She knows you are coming. Today's arrival time has passed. So maybe she will arrive tomorrow. It is so difficult to get train tickets from Delhi...!'

Alam lowered his eyes and looked at the plate by now almost empty. Seeming to start his meal all over again he asked, 'Which train is she going to take? The Kalka?'

'I think so...'

He didn't know what to ask next. Or maybe the sound of an elderly cough kept him silent.

Anantashekhhar came over from the living room. Pulling a chair facing Alam he said, 'I had been hearing of some seminar. So what is the subject?'

Anantashekhhar's words sounded faint. Alam was in no hurry to respond. He glanced at the wristwatch and told himself that the Kalka mail reached Howrah in the morning. Only sometime back—when he was in Kolkata—he had taken the train a couple of times to return from Delhi after an interview with the UGC.<sup>3</sup> If she returned tomorrow morning, Raka would be on the train now. And that meant still 18 or 19 hours more to go.

His breath carried the heavy burden of that long wait. And that heaviness, combined with a suppressed belch, spread into the empty recesses of his heart. The only advantage was that tomorrow was a Sunday and he would have the time to wait. He could ask Sneha if he should go to the station tomorrow.

Anantashekhhar was still waiting, his chin resting on his palm—it was a strange posture. There was white stubble on his cheeks and chin.

'Cultural exchange you could call it,' Alam said. 'An exchange of ideas, so that the people from the two countries can get to know each other better...'

'That is fine,' replied Anantashekhhar in his very own manner. 'But can oil and water ever gel together? If they had, then your dad wouldn't have left Kolkata and I wouldn't have left Dhaka either.'

It was as if Anantashekhhar had begun the discussion well prepared about what he was going to say. Even in the midst of his discomfort Alam was amused. He waited to see if Ananta wanted to say anything more and then said, 'Meshomoshai, we talk about oil and water because that's what's been instilled in us. But none of us really knows which one is oil and which one is water. Maybe one day we'll realize that it's all oil or all water...'

'I don't understand it at all—the way you explain things.'

'And you don't need to understand it now!' Having been quiet all this while Mashima interrupted. 'Why have you come up here suddenly? Let Alam get up. The poor boy is tired. Let him relax for a while...'

A distance of 18 or 19 hours could not be reduced to five or seven minutes. It only allowed sadness to settle in. Sneha was right. Tiredness

3. University Grants Commission of India.

was setting in. If only 18 hours could be passed away in the course of an afternoon's rest! Nothing would have been more wonderful!

Alam got up. He had organized himself while speaking with Anantashekhar. Now he said, 'I'm not going to have dinner, Mashima.'

'Oh, dear! But why?'

'I've promised them. There's a dinner. I might be also be late...'

Sneha stared at him. She was calm. He couldn't bear the look and got busy in trying to wash his hands and mouth.

The guest room was next to the living room. Sneha had described it to him. The moment he lay on the bed, sleep seemed to be rushing towards him at the speed of a storm. He could only feel it. Was it the speed of the Kalka mail? He turned sideways, made himself cosy on the bed and gradually drowned in his own smile. The comparison could be used in the language of a letter, but wouldn't work in a face-to-face conversation. And then the rain came down in large drops.

He was woken up by Sneha.

'Didn't you say you had to go somewhere?'

Alam looked out and saw it was dusk, or maybe time had travelled further. He felt a damp earthy smell of the rains. Not the fragrance of *kathchanpa*. But the rains had gone. There was a knot of burning sensation in his throat. Maybe because he had eaten late in the afternoon. He pulled the wristwatch towards him as Sneha switched on the light. It was almost seven. If only he could spend about twelve or thirteen hours more in sleep.

Alam straightened his back and stretched himself out of sleepiness.

'I've overslept, Mashima. In fact, I'm a little late already...'

His eyes met Sneha's and he became conscious that through the course of his absent-mindedness, she had been watching him. Now as she moved away she said, 'You get ready. I'll get some tea for you.'

Not Sneha's, it was like Raka's voice. She would probably have spoken this way too. And maybe she had. The continuity remained—even though all the links were not always retrievable.

A little later, while walking towards the tram tracks, Alam had had the same thought. The cloudy sky had lent a smoky look to the lights all

around. The trams and buses were not particularly crowded on Saturday evenings. Moreover, he had come to Kolkata with just one address—his own house. If he wanted to recall other addresses now, his memory would be blurred like that of a fast-moving scene from within a railway carriage. A sense of unfamiliarity interfered with relationships. So aimlessly, Alam boarded a tram for Chowringhee. Till it was time for him to get back, he would just wander around. After that, he would return and then would have to wait for some more hours. But that may not be too hard. The sooner he got to sleep the faster the distance would be reduced between Raka and him. The house had kept him alive emotionally as it was his own house. He hadn't realized that it was actually Raka that he saw when he saw his own house. If her anatomy could have been analysed, instead of her body, arms, legs and head, he would have seen graceful doors, windows, stairs and attics!

Sneha opened the door for him again. Alam knew where the bathroom was and where the guest room was. He entered the room and found Mashima had laid out everything with great care—a glass of water, a torch and a box of aniseed. There was no room for complain.

'Will you need anything else?'

'No.' Alam tried to smile, 'and once I sleep it'll be morning...'

'Your seminar is from Monday, isn't it?'

Alam nodded. He wanted to say something, but didn't. He usually woke up quite early in the morning. He could talk about it then. There would still be time.

He found Sneha looking at him and asked, 'Do you want to say something, Mashima?'

'No.' She seemed to be taken unawares. Then regaining her poise she said, 'you go to sleep, dear. I'll leave...'

Alam switched off the light. He didn't know why he felt so sleepy even after having slept during the day. But it was better this way. As he thought to himself, Alam yawned...he put his hands over his eyes. As he was being overcome by sleep, he became aware that the sounds around were becoming quieter gradually. That was how sleep arrived.

'Alam?'

Even in his trance, the sound pierced his ears and spread all over him. The voice was familiar, but the feeling was unfamiliar. He wanted some time to get back to normal. So he didn't respond.

'Alam, are you asleep?'

'No. Is that Mashima?'

'Can I come in for a while?'

This time he switched on the light himself. He opened the curtain and made way for Sneha to come in.

'Do you want to say something?'

'I hope you are not uncomfortable in any way?'

'No.'

Although there was no particular need, Sneha re-arranged the pillows on the bed for Alam. Then she replaced the cover on the half-empty glass of water and said, 'There is no dearth of cockroaches in this house. The pesticide people had come a few days back and sprayed some medicine. Just a couple of days and the situation is back to normal.'

Alam assumed that she hadn't come here to say that. After a bit of hesitation he offered her a chair.

'After such a long time it was so satisfying to have food prepared by you.'

'Oh, you didn't eat much. And it wasn't anything special—just some fish and rice. We had already done the shopping in the morning.'

Alam kept quiet. Now it was Sneha's responsibility to carry the conversation further.

'I wasn't able to say it to you in front of your Meshomoshai...' Sneha suddenly blurted out in a very different voice. 'Please don't mind. But if you have any intentions concerning Raka, try to forget it. The fault lies with my daughter... she has behaved inappropriately...'

Before Alam could be totally shell-shocked, Sneha brought out an envelope from the hand concealed behind the loose end of her sari and handed it over to Alam.

'A letter. Raka has left it for you...'

As he continued to look at Sneha's face, Alam tore open the top of the envelope and took out the folded piece of paper. It was Raka's

handwriting—'My commitment towards you was, I had thought, the same as your commitment towards me. But when I received your last letter and realized its meaning, everything seemed to turn upside down. When I asked myself, I found that I had been asking you to come because I knew that you couldn't! Your intentions are noble. You want to take me up to where you are. I am eternally grateful to you for that! But, Alam, I lack the mental strength required of me. There's a kind of resistance, a kind of hesitation—something, somewhere. I cannot explain what it is. And I don't have the strength to break that wall. So there's need to make the wall higher. It was, because of this hesitation that our addresses had changed—yours and mine. And many people's before us. But if that hesitation wouldn't have been there, we would probably never ever have had the opportunity to meet. And there would have been no need for this love—the stringing of letters one after another. I wouldn't have had the strength to say these things, standing before a person as honest as you. So I'm running away. The language of this letter may sound somewhat romantic. Maybe that's because I truly love you. I'm running away because your love is stronger. Your pain will be much more than mine. If you can, forgive me. If you can, keep in touch. If you write, I'll surely respond. Besides, there are things in life that we know are illusions, yet we love to keep them alive. Don't we?'

By the middle of the letter, he had begun to make his breathing normal. Now he folded the letter and placed it inside the envelope. A tiny piece of the torn paper had fallen on to the ground. He bent down and picked it up. Then he looked at Sneha and smiled easily.

'Raka has picked up the language beautifully, Mashima. She writes really well.'

'I don't know, dear, why you're saying such a thing,' Sneha said. 'As soon as she heard you were coming she became strangely anxious to get away.'

Alam did not reply.

'Go off to sleep now. I've told my husband to get some *hilsa* tomorrow. I'll cook for you.'

Alam smiled and said, 'Yes, I haven't had *hilsa* from the Ganga for

a very long time.'

Sneha walked to the door and stopped.

'Shall I put off the light?'

'Don't worry. I'll put it off myself.'

'At least you still have an opportunity to visit. For us the road is completely shut. We spent our lives there—were born and grew up and often there's the call of the umbilical chord. It's more so for your Meshomoshai. It's been ten years. Now everything that we have—our own house and property—is here. Yet I don't know why we have this constant feeling of being homeless.'

Silence started where Sneha's words ended. It was quite late at night. He picked up the wristwatch from the table. It was half past midnight. One or two cars passed by after long intervals. There was some noise. There was the musical ringing of the bell from a rickshaw passing by the house. Alam released his suppressed breath. He switched off the light and sat on the bed.

He knew what he wanted to do now. Man's continuity lived in his blood; not in his address. A long time ago, before leaving this house, Baba had gone up to the terrace and offered *namaaz*. Alam had been a witness to that act. Even after having lost everything, Baba still had his faith to kneel down to. Alam didn't have even that. In the darkness of the night, he was quite capable of wiping away the tear that appeared at the corner of his eye.

Alam took the suitcase in his hand, and said, you too are no less honest, Raka.

**Translated from Bengali by Sarika Chaudhuri**