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Reflections on Violence - Three Short Stories

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Reflections on Violence - Three Short Stories

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

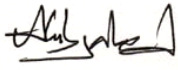
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Declaration

This thesis is a presentation of my original creative work as well as research. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.



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Dedication

To my parents.

Acknowledgement

I have been an aspiring storyteller since the first time I read a copy of *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. But it was my supervisor Dr. Syed Manzoorul Islam who helped me realize my way as a writer during my undergraduate and graduate years. Dr. Islam showed me how to be grounded as a writer, to weave my stories within the folds of my own surroundings.

Professor Kaiser Haq helped me a great deal with teachings on fiction. He taught me how

fiction correlates to practically every facet of life.

It has been a privilege being taught by the titans of literature in Bangladesh, and I will be forever grateful.

I would also like to express my gratitude towards my family and my friend Nafees Rahman for their support. Thank you.

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Abstract

This is a creative writing project done for a dissertation consisting of three short stories. Written from personal experience and my own family legends all three stories showcase violence, and how violence stems from different aspects of societal structure. Bangladeshis are inherently passionate. Passion can more often than not turn into violence given the

circumstances. That is what I tried to portray throughout my stories.

Critical Introduction

Short stories are snippets or windows that peer into the larger landscape of life. If novels are oceans for long voyages then short stories are a brief dip in the water and a small sandcastle on the beach. Stories are important, stories make the world. From the first prehistoric guttural grunt describing a successful hunt around a small bonfire to the modern hardcover behemoths, every story is important. Short stories allow us a glimpse in someone else's life. A glimpse about what it means to be the Other.

One of the first philosophers to seriously consider the implications of the face of the Other was Emmanuel Levinas. He wasn't referring to actual faces; rather, he was attempting to describe what is known as a person's "Gestalt" in German. What allows us to relate with and recognize other people as autonomous persons with their own thoughts, emotions, and inner richness is, in essence, their genuine look. Since we are all aware that other individuals exist and have their own identities and interiorities that are equally as complex as ours, bringing this up may seem cliché. Even though we understand that logically, on a more personal level, it can occasionally feel strangely overpowering.

As Bettina Bergo explains, "The face, in its nudity and defenselessness, signifies: "Do not kill me." This defenseless nudity is therefore a passive resistance to the desire that is my freedom. Any exemplification of the face's expression, moreover, carries with it this combination of resistance and defenselessness: Lévinas speaks of the face of the other who is "widow, orphan, or stranger."

Because to experience it, we do not merely logically admit the existence of others but we sympathize with them. It affects us psychologically and physically, which leads to what is essentially Levinas's central query: what is humanity and what does it actually mean for us?

Of course, this is also a core component of fiction. Because most fictional works begin with us believing that the characters are genuine, which is something that has always captivated me, regardless of the type of story they have to tell. Because when people discuss great stories, they often concentrate on the major moments, like the dramatic battles or grand affairs, however I have always been more interested in the subtle nuances, like the minor moments that truly make me feel like I'm reading about a real person rather than just a character. The way they talk, walk, move and breathe life into the pages. It seems so obvious that there is so much more going on behind the literal face, beyond the surface-level expression or emotion that is being communicated, and that there is a deeper interiority that we can intuitively sense, which denotes that humanity with which Levinas was so preoccupied. This is why I love little moments like these so much.

The apparent explanation for why I enjoy this style of storytelling—and more generally, why we want fictional characters to feel authentic—is that, well, we want to encounter real people.

Whether or not we can directly relate to them, they help us feel less isolated. They reassure us that what we feel is shared by others, the brightness in other people's eyes. They direct you as you travel. And yet, in spite of all of this, I believe that there is a part of us that

truly desires this and simply longs to be free. This feels particularly accurate in light of the fact that some of the most moving tales in human history have featured prominent human characters that we can sympathize with. When, for one unique moment, we put everything else, including our comfort, convenience, and time, on hold in favor of putting all of our effort, attention, and purpose into affirming and defending the humanity of others. Not because they have any particular significance to us or are essential to some larger purpose that indirectly benefits us as well, but just because they are fully acknowledged as human beings, and in those moments, we realize that that is enough.

Stories like these, in which the dulling influence of our everyday life is broken financially, in which we are briefly liberated from our abstractions, show how instinctively we are geared towards one another's humanity, how readily, almost reflexively, it prompts us to act in solidarity and cooperation, how suddenly it gives us a sense of purpose, the feeling of being quietly ecstatic that we are at last engaged in something truly meaningful.

However, it is clear that these are unusual circumstances, and it would be unrealistic to expect us to behave in this manner constantly.

But on second thought, perhaps we should. Perhaps the full weight of humanity will crush us, perhaps it will hurt us so much that it compels us to alter our behavior. Maybe we should consider others' humanity in all of our decisions and deeds, and maybe it should serve as the inspiration for all of our goals as a community and as individuals. We think excessively and feel inadequately. Humanity is what we need more than machinery. We need kindness and

tenderness more than intelligence. And I don't mean this as some unattainable utopian ideal; rather, I mean it as a basic concept that we all already understand and follow in times of need. In the face of the Other, in the humanity that gives us hope, courage, and creativity, with guidance for meaningful engagement and with a clear path towards the improvement of ourselves, of others, and of the human race as a whole, is a principle that, whenever we feel lost or fall short, can always be found again.

A Introduction to the Stories

The British Author Neil Gaiman had this to say to aspiring writers, “Tell your story. Don’t try and tell the stories that other people can tell. Because as a starting writer, you always start out with other people’s voices — you’ve been reading other people for years... But, as quickly as you can, start telling the stories that only you can tell — because there will always be better writers than you, there will always be smarter writers than you, but you are the only you.”

As the son of a government employee I had the opportunity to travel around the country and witness some truly awe inspiring stories. As a child I was quite insistent on trying to write Tolkiensque stories that span beyond the day to day worn regularity of my own life. A heroic battle, or the duality of human existence or such grand ideas.

Growing up I realized that the great battle of our time is not a fantasyland, it is being fought by people like me. The combatants are people with faces like me who all go through quite the same struggle as me. The mundane stories around me are no less valuable than the epic stories I envisioned, and these are stories worth telling.

I tried to showcase the violence I witnessed myself around me. Two of the stories share a prison backdrop. I drew heavily from my own experiences and tried to remain authentic to a degree.

The story *Dabir Miqji's Tale* draws inspiration from a real mutiny. I have seen creative pieces on the incident. But most of them tend to focus on a grand scale of things. I tried to focus my lens on individuals and how the mutiny can impact a father who is just trying to do good by his son.

The story *Warm Red* draws inspiration from a real historic event too. Our poverty stricken country often forgets about the people living in the periphery. I tried to showcase the interaction between people in power and the people in the periphery. Power corrupts, but what if the already corrupt are placed in a position of power? I attempted to create a character with psychological nuances and his own struggles.

The third story *Generous* is a period piece set in the backdrop of 1966. I came to know about a local property rights custom where a land worker is given ownership of property if he works on it for more than 12 years. The story stemmed from that discovery to showcase the interaction between the people in power and the powerless in a society rife with class division.

I tried to showcase how people in power deal with the powerless depending on class division, race, wealth and circumstances. The pitfalls of power and the emergence of violence was the main theme in all three.

Dabir Miaji's Tale

‘From highway to jailgate is 10 bucks, and 5 more if you go inside staff colony.’ Dabir Miaji said firmly. He had just gotten his rickshaw out of the garage and it was 10am already. 10am on a Monday morning without earning anything, unacceptable.

‘Are you having me on, mama? I am a daily commuter. 10 taka to the staff colony.’ The kid tried to reply just as firmly. His broken pubescent voice didn’t allow him the desired air of confidence though.

Dabir Miaji sighed and urged the kid to get on, just wanting to start his day at this point. He had to secure 500 bucks by the end of the day and wasting time bickering won’t do at all. Taking a last puff of the cigarette and he threw it away and put on his hat, the sun was quite bright for a monsoon day. It had drizzled a bit in the morning but you would never guess that from looking at the sun right now.

‘Where are you from mama?’ The kid suddenly asked. Trying to make conversation. He felt bad haggling about fare but it was his last 10 taka.

‘Chandpur.’ Dabir mumbled out, not really in the mood for a conversation.

‘Ah? I am from Chandpur too, well my parents are.’ The kid rambled. ‘I never stayed there for more than a week though. My grandparents live there, maternal ones. They are nice.’

Dabir Miaji did not reply too, a bit irritated with the kid. Chatting after stiffing out on the fare didn’t sit well with Dabir. It’s monday already and he needed 500 bucks for his boy. Tomorrow is Tuesday, visitation day.

‘Which part of Chandpur are you from?’ The kid tried again.

‘Matlab.’ Dabir grunted. Tuesday tomorrow, visitation day. The commissary needs the 500 deposit, and he would need to bribe the guard too, so that’s extra 200. He would probably need to take out another small loan from the garage owner.

‘Hey, I am from Matlab too.’ The kid exclaimed happily at their common root.

Dabir Miaji turned to take a glance at the kid. The kid beamed at him. Dak buzzcut, college uniform and a cellphone on his hand. Dabir Miaji softened up a bit. ‘Does your dad work in the prison?’

‘Yeah, he does. Not a warden though, he is an accountant. Civilian.’

‘I see.’ Dabir Miaji nodded to himself. A civilian? Not much help then. Dabir Miaji’s son wasn’t a civilian. No sir, he was a soldier. A fine boy - looking all spiffed up in his pressed uniform. Combat fatigue he called it. Black shining boots that made noise like a thunderclap when he saluted Dabir, clicking his heels together. Dabir Miaji exhaled a chest heaving long sigh. ‘Fa inni ma’al usri yusra.’

‘What was that?’ The kid asked.

‘A verse from the quran.’ Dabir replied. ‘There is relief after every difficulty.’ A comforting thought for Dabir. He was unsure about how many more difficulties he could bear at this point. He certainly could do with some relief.

Dabir had been tremendously grateful when his son had been selected for the paramilitia. A good job by all accounts. Not as good as the Army of course, but paramilitia was good. Rations every month, and uniform. A government uniform is nothing to scoff at. It’s respect, it’s pride, it’s a sure gateway to wealth and prestige in society. Didn’t the stuck up snob Kalim

Member offer his daughter in matrimony after Dabir's son had been seen around the village in his uniform? Yes sir, he did. A government uniform is a fine thing for sure. Dabir's daughter had been married off by then - a happy household with two grandsons for Dabir. Dabir Miaji saw himself as a satiated man. Now only if his son had married and gifted him a couple of grandsons too. Dabir could then die a happy death joining his wife after assuring that his line would continue. A new generation of Miajis to inhabit his ancestral lands. But his son had Disagreed.

‘Abba, I just got the job. Let me save up some cash for the wedding, yeah?’ Dabir's dear boy had pleaded his case. ‘It'd be unmanly of me to get married with your money. Let me earn my keep.’

Dabir had relented. Why not? ‘Well then, you have already made me proud boy. I feel taller than mountains these days when people stop me on the street and ask about you. Do whatever you feel is best.’ Those were the days. Dabir's son sent money at the beginning of every month, and couriered home his government ration - rice, lentils, sugar, oil and a whole sack full of wheat. Dabir had bought a flock of pigeons to raise. They gouged on the wheat and multiplied by a dozen every other week. Dabir Miaji had been a content man.

‘Halt.’ The guard at the jailgate signaled Dabir to stop. The imposing iron gates loomed tall as two armed guards approached Dabir. Their black boots looked matte and brittle, the bayonets on the Soviet SKS on their backs gleaming under the sun.

‘Kaka, I live in the quarter, my dad is the second blocks’ accountant.’ The kid said with confidence.

The guards grunted and allowed Dabir to enter. Hmm, they were never this nonchalant with Dabir when he is here to meet his son. No, Dabir is never allowed such courtesy. With

every gate comes a guard, and with every guard comes a pair of palms to be greased. Dabir has to grease a lot of palms to see his son, inmate 5091 in the second block of Kashimpur Central Prison. Dabir's boy did not have the same shine in his eyes these days. Gaunt and unkept, sometimes Dabir really needed to focus to even recognize his son anymore, and with every recognition came the painful recollection of better days.

'Mama, drop me off in front of the house with the flowers.' Dabir stops in front of an apartment complex laden with bougainvillea. The kid gets off paying his 10 bucks, taking the stairs two at a time and he disappeared inside. Dabir pocketed the cash and turned his rickshaw around. The prison walls were visible from here. Tall gray walls, and taller rows of building rising beyond the height of the walls inside. My boy is at one of those - my poor boy, Dabir wondered.

'Abba, I am going to Dhaka for a parade.' Dabir's son had phoned him. Dabir had been busy feeding his birds. 'I am going to be at the headquarters for a week. Let me know if you need anything, I will get it for you.' His boy had sounded happy. 'It's' just a routine thing abba - paramilitary day, a parade followed by a speech from the director general and I'll be done. I might even swing by on my way back.'

A week later Dabir had been in a tea stall when the news broke. 'Dabir bhai, they are saying something went wrong in paramilitia headquarters. A mutiny they say.' Dabir hadn't replied to the errant remark, his eyes glued to the television showing soldiers in the yellow uniform with guns in their hand guarding the gates of their headquarters. Bandanas covered their faces. A cold feeling had settled along Dabir's spine back then. 'My son is in there, my boy.'

Dabir had met his son a month later in a visitation room of Dhaka Central Jail. A mesh wire fence separated the father and son. His son was still in his uniform. It wasn't pressed and missed the badges and tags adorning it before. No boots either, his son was wearing a pair of cheap plastic sandals.

'Abba, I did not kill anybody. Abba you have to trust me. I was in the hall when all the shootings happened. I hid in the barracks abba. I did not kill anyone.' His boy had sounded frantic. Dabir had believed his son. His son wasn't a killer, no sir. Dabir's boy would not kill those innocent officers. Dabir placated his son.

'Baajaan, I will hire the best lawyer. I will do everything I can.' Dabir had stated with steel in his voice. He did hire the best money could buy. It cost his farmlands first, then his fishing pond and then he had to sell almost everything trying to keep up with the lawyers and the bribes. His birds went too. He sold all his birds and paid for a bribe to get his son a decent couple of meals inside the prison.

His son wasn't released. His dear boy got sentenced for a decade of prison time. Dabir had wept on the courtyard watching his handcuffed son being loaded in the prison van. When his son was transferred to the Kashimpur Jail, Dabir transferred himself too. Better to be under the same sky as his boy.

'Krrng.' A phone rang. Dabir didn't realize that it was with him at first. He looked back and saw that the kid had left his phone in his rickshaw. He picked it up. It was shiny, and silver. It rang again. He looked around. He had cleared the jailgate a couple of minutes ago. Should he go back to return it? A moment of hesitation and then he pulled apart the back of the phone and disconnected the battery. The phone looked pricey. More than 500 bucks for sure.

‘Baajan, you look so thin. Inshallah baajan, I will get some cash in your commissary account. This week for sure baajan.’ Dabir had promised his son. But the monsoon rain and his flu medicines hadn’t allowed him enough savings to follow through the promise. They sold milk and eggs in the commissary. Surely Dabir’s son could use the cash. Surely.

Dabir stood in line to meet his son on Tuesday morning. He had a thousand bucks in cash in his pocket. Yes, sir - one thousand taka.

‘How’s that?’ Dabir looked up at the scream. There was a playground right beside the prison walls. A bunch of prison colony brats playing cricket with gusto as the line to the visitation room inched forward. Dabir smiled fondly, his own son had been a fan of the game too. Afridi Miaji he would call himself.

‘Chacha, can you come with us for a second.’ Suddenly Dabir was grabbed from behind and frogmarched to the side where a couple of guards were standing with a kid in cricket gear. With a jolt Dabir realized that this is the kid from yesterday, the one from chandpur - the owner of the silver phone.

‘Yes kaka, he is the one. I lost my phone in his rickshaw.’ Dabir tried to deny the accusation with a shake of his head but found his neck held in place. Strong hands grabbed him from both sides and he was hurled inside a dark room.

Dabir was kicked, kicked with feet clad in matte black boots of brittled leather, he was punched and he was asked about the phone. His head felt like soft dough as his mind tried to wrap around the torture dealt to his body. Someone had picked up an iron tipped baton and it bludgeoned Dabir’s left kneecap. Dabir fell to the floor.

‘Sir, some eggs and a litre of milk, sir.’ Dabir muttered out. His vision was clouding and there was something coppery at the back of his throat, but Dabir had to pay for his son’s meal first. ‘Sir, some eggs and a litre of milk for my boy sir. My boy lost his mother at birth sir.’ Dabir tried to sit up but his back would not cooperate.

‘Won’t you do that for me sir?’

Warm Red

Deputy Jailer Afzal Hossain sat sweating in his leather recliner. The ancient ceiling fan whirled on noisily trying to dispel the stuffy air in the room to no avail. The officer wiped his balding forehead with a handkerchief as he stared at the inmate sitting on the floor in front of him. The inmate looked young, probably in his late teens, and annoyingly pretty. Pretty boy in a pretty pickle, huh.

‘Sir, we should transfer him to the hospital immediately,’ Chief guard Hawaldar supplied. ‘He coughed up a lot of blood this morning.’

Pretty boy in a pretty big mess. Drowning in his own blood. Red hot blood. Afzal Hossain blinked. Where did that come from? The stray violent thoughts plaguing him his whole life have been more intrusive than usual lately. Afzal Hossain looked at the boy again and felt his insecurities flare up. Why was the damned boy so pretty? Thick lashes, pale smooth skin, and a strange sense of familiarity. With a jolt Afzal Hossain realized why the boy looked familiar. The damned boy had the same face as his wife. The same jawlines, the same lips... Afzal sat up straight on his seat in a palpable effort to reign in his thoughts.

Afzal Hossain had gotten married very recently. His bride was about half his age, and devastatingly beautiful. So very beautiful and distant. Afzal Hossain floundered quite often trying to approach his aloof beautiful bride. His conservative mother had kept him away from the fairer sex growing up and he found women in general vexing.

Afzal Hossain leafed through the pretty boy's files. He was part of the separatist rebel bloc fighting for freedom in the hills. The boy apparently hailed from a family of separatist rebels. He was arrested only last week while acting as a courier, carrying ammunition and medicine.

‘Sir, I think it's malaria’ Chief guard Hawladar tried again.

Hawladar felt a bit agitated but he tried not to show it. The boy was barely out of his teens, he reminded Hawaladar of his own son. Hawladar’s boy had recently been enrolled in Dhaka University, the first in his family to do so. Hawaldar was mighty proud and more often than not found praising his son to whoever would listen.

‘The quota for prisoner patients is already filled’ Afzal Hossain stood up from his recliner and started pacing around the boy. ‘We cannot get him hospitalized today, unfortunately.’

Hawladar and Afzal both knew the backstory though. The seats were filled with inmates who were perfectly healthy. Filled with rich inmates bribed the officers to get better facilities in the prison hospital. Hawladar’s eyes darkened slightly. The devout muslim Hawladar never really got around the blatant corruption of the prison department.

Afzal Hossain sat down and looked at the prisoner again. The boy looked up and stared at him with bloodshot eyes. Afzal Hossain quashed down another stab of irritation. The boy's damned eyebrows were eerily similar to his wife's. Just this morning Afzal Hossain's bride stared at him with the exact same arched brow. Slap that expression off his face. Afzal Hossain shook his head.

‘When will I get a grandkid to spoil?’ Afzal's mother had been pestering him since his wedding. Afzal Hossain was an only child, and as such the only hope for his mother for a grandkid. Afzal Hossain certainly wanted a child himself, but his insecurities around his wife made that avenue a herculean challenge.

Just take the bitch. Make her yours. Claim her.

Afzal Hossain's inner voice had been growing more and more violent recently. On some level he knew that he needed help, but his pride didn't allow him to admit it, even to himself.

He stood up and kneeled in front of the boy, checking his temperature. The boy's warm skin felt smooth under his palm. Suddenly, the boy lurched and threw up a mess of half-digested food and blood on him. Afzal Hossain's vision became hazy.

Red. Red. Red.

Afzal Hossain saw only red.

Show this piece of shit who you are. Red. Red. Red. More red. Warm red.

Afzal Hossain saw only red.

‘Sir, sir. For Allah's sake, please stop.’ Afzal Hossain blinked. Hawaldar was holding his hand which had a baton. The baton had blood on it. Afzal Hossain looked down and saw that the inmate was on the floor lying on his back bleeding. Afzal Hossain staggered back in shock.

The room was soon filled with other officers and guards. There was a sudden great rush. Papers were filed. A death certificate was signed. The rebel prisoner was shown to be sick with Malaria and had died on a hospital bed. His body will be transferred to the zilla hospital for autopsy.

The body was on a stretcher by the prison gate. Someone had doused it with Phenyle to stop it from smelling. Afzal Hossain stood stoically by the body. The smell of Phenyle assaulting his nose. Red. Warm Red.

‘Should I reheat your dinner?’ Afzal Hossain's wife asked as he sat in the entryway removing his boots. The inmates' death had made his day extremely exhausting, he had to file a week's worth of extra paperwork.

‘Yes please. And a slice of onion with it too.’ Afzal Hossain told his wife without making eye contact.

The bitch's face. Her face. Her brows. His brows.

His inner voice mused.

Afzal Hossain rushed to the washroom. Splashing cold water on his face he felt a bit better. Suddenly, the smell of Phenyle assaulted his nose again. The haze around his vision was back again.

I see red. Red. Warm red. Afzal Hossain walked into the kitchen and grabbed his wife by the wrist. The girl looked up with shock on her face.

Red. Red. Warm red. I will show you red.

Generous

Rainwater made the already muddy floor filthier as the thatch roof started leaking from another spot. The floor was already covered with slowly filling up pots and pans under the leaks. Nawab Ali rummaged around the pantry and dropped a dry pan under the new spot. The roof was long overdue for repairs since last monsoon.

'Will fix the roof as soon as a dry spell hits.' Nawab Ali muttered loud enough for his wife. She had fussed about the repair for ages. Nawab had meant to get on it before the wet season started, but somehow time had slipped away from him.

'Oh Mina, can you go borrow some hay from the Mizi house tomorrow?' Nawab Ali tried again.

'Why? What do you need the hay for?' She replied with acid in her voice looking up from her two year old. The tyke had caught a fever and refused to eat. Mina had been trying to spoon feed him some barley to no avail. Her husband's remarks had suddenly flared her barely held together temper.

'Fix the damned roof I told you when the roof leaked in winter, broke my voice yelling about it when the summer storms hit.' Mina sneered. 'But no, no - why'd you listen?' She threw the bowl of barley at Nawab. 'Now you want hay? Now?'

The barley hit Nawab smack in the middle of his temple. He calmly wiped it off, trying not to let his anger show. Mina's rage was quite justified.

'I'll go then, and see if they can lend me some cash too.' Nawab was quickly running out of the money from last season's wages. The Mizis had laid him off at the beginning of summer. He had yet to gain any work after that - work that paid well enough. Mizis had been more than generous with his wages. They had given away paddy after the harvest, sacks of potatoes at the end of winter, and stacks of fishes after draining their ponds at the end of every monsoon. Yes, quite generous.

'Begging for money?' Mina snarled. 'Will you crawl on your knees and beg for cash? Have you got no shame?

Nawab Ali didn't respond. Mina had been in a snit since he had been let go by the Mizis. He focused on the roof again. The downpour outside seems to be turning into a rainstorm with strong gusts of winds that shook the hut sporadically.

'Cat got your tongue? Not man enough to reply when the truth hits you?' Mina hurled her bite again.

Nawab Ali sighed and picked up his son from the bed and frowned in concern. The little guys' skin burned in fever. 'Was he this warm last night?'

'The fever hasn't gone down since last night.' Mina replied without any bite in her voice. She looked worn. 'The medicine ran out yesterday. I tried to feed him some honey tulsi, but he can't keep it down. '

Nawab Ali felt a stab of guilt. He had been out listening about Sheikh sahib's new speech on radio at the bazar last night and forgot to swing by the dispensary on his way back. 'I will go meet Noren doctor as soon as the rain stops.' Nawab declared depositing his son on Mina's lap.

He emptied some of the water filled pots and pans and took a seat in front of the door on a stool. The wind was whipping the rain around in strong torrents. The horizon seemed a blur of green meeting grey. If his damn roof wasn't leaking Nawab Ali would probably enjoy some rain gazing. It really was a lovely weather otherwise. The air smelled of wet soil, hyacinth and burflower. Nawab Ali inhaled the smell and let his mind wander. 'Sheikh sahib has thrown down the gauntlet in Lahore.' Jalal master had yelled out last night in the middle of the radio host describing Sheikh sahib's talks with the party kahunas. 'About time someone stood up to the rascals.'

Nawab Ali had remained silent though. He remembered how his own father had been ecstatic when the British had left, adamant in his belief that Jinnah sahib will lead them out of poverty. They got a green and white flag in exchange of a red and blue one but nothing really changed. His father had slaved away for the Mizis, and from the looks of it so will Nawab. No sahib will lift a finger to help them out.

'My son Nawab will be working with me this harvest season.' Nawab's father had proudly introduced him to the eldest Mizi when he was just thirteen. Nawab had planted the paddy seeds with his father and then helped him replant the seedlings at the beginning of that monsoon. The rice grew on par with the rising marsh water as the season progressed while Nawab kept vigil with father at night for thieves. 'Hooshiyar.' His father had some lungs on him to yell like that, he was heard from miles around. Nawab had to do all of it with other workers the year after that, his father had been let go.

'This is not unfair, baajan.' His father had consoled him. 'Eleven years, it's always eleven years. The Mizis have been good to us, no? This is the way. And besides you are here to

take over for me.’ His father had been so proud. Pride at being a slave? Nawab Ali scoffed.

Nawab’s father had died that year. Nawab stepped up, took care of his mother and married off his sister, and he had faithfully worked for the Mizis next ten years. Nawab Ali didn’t wait for any sahibs to help him out.

The rainstorm had turned into a pitter-patter of slow drizzle. The sky thundered with the occasional thunder but it was slowly clearing up. Nawab Ali stood at the imposing iron front gate of the Mizi house, debating if she should really go in or not.

‘Is that you Nawab?’ Nawab turned back hearing the gruff voice of the elder Mizi. ‘This is a surprise. Come inside, I was actually looking for you.’

Nawab sat waiting on the veranda nibbling on a piece of palm sugar. Mina must be wrought with worry. He should hurry back but Bahar Mizi wasn’t someone who could be rushed. The man followed his own schedule, and a nobody like Nawab had no sway over it.

‘Treat the old master with respect, you hear me boy.’ His father had warned him. ‘A tiger can grow slower with age, but it’s always a killer.’ Nawab had been in awe of the elder Mizi, his ruthlessness and exploits had been the stuff of legend. Nawab Ali had witnessed the old coot in action himself one night when he was fifteen. He had been on a nightwatch. ‘Hooshiyar.’ He had nothing on his old man’s booming voice, but he was getting there. The ripened paddy swayed with the gentle breeze on the quiet night. A rustle and a splash alerted Nawab. The huge fishing pond was right along the entryway of the Mizi house. Nawab had covered his lantern and crept along the banks. ‘Who goes there?’ He busted forward and was immediately hit on the head with something. He tried to put up a fight but he was no match against the three burglars

stealing fish. There was a fierce yell and suddenly the elder Mizi was there. The fight was over in seconds. Bahar Mizi had picked up Nawab like a child and carried him inside to tend to his injuries. Nawab never quite forgot that night or how terrifying Bahar Mizi had been.

‘I need you to accompany me to Comilla.’ Nawab Ali nodded along as Bahar Mizi explained. ‘Talkudars want the swath of land by the canal. Well tough luck I say.’ Nawab Ali remained silent. The trek to Comilla was a day long hike and then some. The Mizis often needed to present themselves in court to protect their vast property. Nawab had accompanied them countless times for extra muscle.

‘But I thought I was free this year. Won’t that be a problem?’ Nawab asked.

‘The law says you get property rights if you work more than twelve years in my fields. This is just helping me out with something, not working in the field.’ Bahar Mizi said as he slowly cleaned out his tobacco pipe.

‘Sir, my roof badly needs a repair, I have put it off till now but it needs to be done within the week. Mina is alone with the baby. The little man caught a strong fever recently.’ Nawab Ali stopped rambling after he noticed the scowl on Mizi’s face.

‘I will get someone to fix the damn roof.’ Mizi grumbled. ‘One of the maids can go help your wife. I will tell the missus to send some honey and basak.’ There was a tone of finality in his voice.

Mina had been surprisingly calm when Nawab had left with Bahar Mizi. His roof was being given an extra layer of thatch when he had set off. It was just the two of them. The weather was cloudy but there was no hint of rain. That suited Nawab just fine, he was carrying the old

master's bag and a sack full of dry food and such on his head. Bahar Mizi only carried his documents and a sturdy cane with a silve peacock engraved on it.

Bahar Mizi had always been kind to Nawab Ali. Tough, but kind. And before this year, Nawab had never felt any resentment towards the man. 'They will rather die than give up their land baajan.' Nawab's father had told him once. 'Twelve years on the field makes you an owner of it. So it's always eleven years. We work for eleven years, and then rest for one.' The old man had worked almost all his life for the Mizis. Nawab will likely do the same.

They had stopped by a pond around midday for ablution. After praying they sat down for a bit under the shade of some coconut trees. Nawab brought out the puffed rice and jaggery as the old master lit his tobacco pipe.

'How was your boy this morning?' Bahar exhaled a long trail of smoke and stared at a woman going down the banks towards the pond. She had a pot of rice with her and a stash of laundry. Her cotton saree stuck to her body like a second skin.

'Alhamdulillah, better than yesterday.' Nawab gulped down the last piece of jaggery. They got on the road after some time and kept a brisk pace. They were a bit behind their schedule.

Nawab was ten when he first came upon Bahar Mizi leaving his house like a thief at night. It was right after Isha. Nawab Ali's father was hard at work, busy with the wheat harvest. Nawab had tagged along with his old man and decided to head back alone when he felt drowsy. Nawab hadn't quite understood the significance of his discovery back then.

‘The Mizis had brought our family from Assam for work. We have served them for generations.’ Nawab’s father had told him once. Servitude, yes. To be of service to their patrons, such was their lives.

By sundown Nawab and Bahar were at the end of their trek. Stopping beside a small lake they made ablutions for prayer. Lounging near the lake banks they stared at the setting sun going down beyond the horizon.

A sudden noise brought both their eyes to a young girl filling up her pitcher from the lake. Bahar Mizi stared with rapt attention. Nawab had seen this stare before.

‘Aareh, girlie, I have this terrible ache. Come massage me for a bit.’ Nawab’s mother had been blindsided while working at the Mizi house. Nawab had been seven back then and didn’t quite pick up on his mother’s fears.

‘Do you live near?’ Bahar asked the girl as she rose from filling up her pitcher. He had stood up and helped the girl to climb the last steps of the banks, but he didn’t let go of her hand.

‘My house is by that alley.’ The girl pointed. The poor thing looked quite terrified. They were at a secluded grove hidden from the road. Nawab felt a hint of anger bubbling up within him.

‘Why don’t you sit with us for a bit.’ The girl was trying to get her hand free, but Bahar Mizi held tight.

Nawab slowly picked up the peacock cane Mizi had hung from a low lying tree and struck his head. The girl yelped but didn’t make much noise.

‘He is the master, he takes care of us. What can I do? Nawab’s father had consoled his mother the year before his death. Nawab still remembered the expression on his mother’s face. ‘Hasn’t he been generous to us?’

The girl fled after Nawab nodded at her. He held the cane tightly and struck Mizi a couple of times more. Dragging the body he took submerged it under the water. The trek back won’t even take the whole night for him alone. Mina and his boy would be up for sure. Nawab Ali had heard that there are good jobs for hard workers like him. Didn’t it say on the radio? Sheikh sahib is going to bring back jobs from the west.

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