

## Blues for Allah

*Ahmede Hussain*

1

Shormi woke up from a long nap by the sound of a cat screeching. The rain had just stopped and the curtains were tightly pulled. Bright sunlight that fell on the mirror gave her face a raffish charm. There was a small photo-frame on the bedside table. She looked much younger in black and white, helping a toddler walk. The boy was holding a toy gun and was staring at the camera with a menacing look. Both of them looked forlorn, like the ice creams they consumed years ago on a holiday-trip to Cox's Bazaar – long lost and forgotten.

The cat crawled in and sat at the windowpane; its shadow fell on the Persian carpet and grew bigger as it walked past the room. Shormi got up to her feet, staggered down the room to pick up the cell. She was wearing a dainty yellow sarong and a white T-shirt; and there was something about her uncertain manner, as well as her clothes, that suggested a moth. The cat was gone when she returned: it started raining again. Shormi smiled approvingly as she looked through the window – she expected it to rain.

It had been raining heavily too when she and Iftekhar got married fifteen years ago. On their way home, the windshield was so blurry that the chauffeur could hardly see anything on the street.

But now it was only drizzling outside and there wasn't any cloud in sight; it should stop soon. She turned the cell off and lay down with only

half her body in the bed. It was getting dark outside; the yellow and red lights from the billboard entered the room. Beams of light criss-crossed over her face as she stared at the centre of the ceiling fan, large and overpowering. Small patches of silvery blue were coming out of the white centre. She turned her head left and saw the cat walk out of sight with a kitten. Suddenly the electricity went off with a loud bang from a fused transformer; the fan creaked shakily as it slowed down before coming to a complete standstill.

The blind look went out of her eyes; she sprung up to fetch some candles. She could not see anything on the tea table at first, gradually things started to get visible: an empty tube of hair conditioner, packets of used matchboxes, a blue box and two upturned mugs. The box was wrapped with an old newspaper. She forgot that she had stuck a safety pin on its cover the other day. Blood spewed out of her finger when she rubbed the surface. She licked it, fidgeted across and decided to give up the search for candles.

The cell started ringing when she turned it on again. It was Nouman; "Can I talk to Mrs Ahmed?" he asked in a girly tone.

She turned round and hobbled out of the room holding the phone to her ear and said, "Yeah Nam. Did you get the mail I sent?"

"Mum I am at the airport," he said.

She knew that her son was on the phone; but she expected him to be far away, in a remote place, in a private school in London or Chelsea. Nouman had been in touch with her for the last three months, mostly by email; she did not expect him to call her.

"Mum I am in Dhaka now. Are you home?" he asked.

"Yeah I am home. God why didn't you tell me you were coming?" she asked and then hurriedly added, "Nam, you just wait at the entrance and let me pick you up."

"I have a friend with me mum. We will be staying at a hotel." he replied.

"But baba you know nothing about the country. You can stay with me, I have spare rooms here," she pleaded.

"Don't worry Mum; we will be fine," Nouman replied and added: "My friend is calling, will catch you later."

She lit a cigarette after having lunch. The electricity had come back an hour ago; she reclined in the rocking chair and put the television on. Half the news had been finished; it was time for Business and Sports: the woman reading the Business news looks like an actor in an ancient farce. The sound was off and she was constantly tucking strands of her hair behind her ears while staring at the audience with a bleak look. She pulled the

T-shirt off and unhooked the black bra she was wearing. She wanted to sleep now. She had not had a good night's sleep for months. Whenever she closed her eyes, she saw the same old dream; that meadow, that black calf, that old woman and her shrill laughter.

A truck shrieked past the house. She placed a hand under her head and switched the TV to video mode and stared at the blue screen. It was her only way of getting sleep for the last eight years. Eight years, she said aloud and laughed. The cat was still screeching shrilly and she knew she would not be able to sleep while it wailed on like the impending sound of the train that was coming across the neighbourhood. She got up and opened the window; a gush of cold wave filled the room. The train came into the horizon, chugging and wheezing, past the house, past the park, past the mosque. She looked down at the passengers – at their fatigued faces. A woman, a child on her lap, held her head out the window and vomited on the track. Those who lay on the roof of different coaches either gaped at the star-less sky or at the glitzy life-size photo of Pierce Brosnan on a billboard. She wondered how frail and feeble humans became on a mechanised vehicle as she followed the train puff away, rattling on the track. At the entrance to the mosque it turned, and twisted its middle like an old man hunched by a bundle of twigs. From the back, it started to look innocent, wobbling like a baby. The cat, meanwhile, leaped up from the parapet. As she closed the window and turned round, Shormi saw the cat limp around with a broken leg. The cat did not resist when she reached down and took it on her lap.

It was dark in the hallway; she had to hold the cat tightly to her breast with one hand, pressing another hand on the wall as she walked by it. An old way of walking perhaps: if you just follow the wall, you won't bump into anything. She proceeded further down the corridor and could now see the mirror. Bunches of white flowers went up the frame of the mirror and there was a cold reddish glow about the edges of their plastic petals. She walked down further left; a yellow light from the lamppost reflected in the mirror, like the nightlight she had always used when they had been together. Iftekar would not sleep without the light on; she had always hated it, so the low-watt lights were the only solution acceptable to both husband and wife. Still lost in thought, Shormi opened the cupboard, took out the salve and put it on the cat's wound.

She had decided to name it Bobby. The television went blank after thirty minutes and she did not want to turn it on again. She reclined on the bed instead and lit another cigarette. The cat was lying on the tea table now, its head shone for an instant in the dark, as if it were just being rained upon. She stubbed the cigarette and lay on the bed. Another truck howled

past the house; and as the sound faded away, she started to count back from one thousand. Everything around her was gradually changing; she looked up at the sun as a narrow line of white light fell from the sky. She tried to change the course of the events now that the old woman started heading towards her, silently, but with an amazing firmness in her every step. The calf was seen in the horizon, too, looking much greyer in the white light. The woman got closer, opened her toothless mouth and slowly whispered something in her ears. She did not hear anything; her dreams were always silent, except for the laughter that inevitably followed when she walked her off through the meadow. Shormi, however, had not stopped counting backwards, but could not reach zero. She heard the sound of a car skidding off the street; someone hurled F-words at the driver. The words were almost unintelligible, but high-pitched enough to suggest that something grotesque was happening. She put both her hands down her neck, then on her thigh. A loud bang was heard; something must have gone wrong, she thought as she got up and looked down the window.

The pavement in front of her house was dark and desolate. Under the lamppost two young men were hitting the windscreen of a car with hockey sticks, their other friend, a third, pointed a dagger at the owner of the car, a young man with a face that looked vulnerable in the yellow light. Her eyes moved to the car; its front window had so far put up a fierce resistance, but soon it would break into pieces.

When they were done, two of them walked closer to their friend – who was now spinning the dagger – and whispered something in his ears. He laughed and walked down the footpath towards the owner and repeatedly thrust the dagger into his belly. The man's torso stooped as he put both his hands on his bleeding stomach. Blood continued to ooze out from his raw flesh. And when he turned and twisted before falling on the grass by the pavement, she recalled seeing his boyish face before. In the newspaper maybe or on the university campus, where she taught literature; he could be one of her students she guessed. She looked at him more intently, while the attackers, now forming a circle, kicked him on the butt and shoulder. The man screamed and asked for help in a piercing voice but she stood silently in the shivering cold, now hands crossed over her chest, in a Christlike calm. The cat strode to the window and stood at her legs, looking fixedly at her dreary face with its glowing eyes, as if trying to understand from it what had gone wrong.

They gave up their brutal ritual when the mosque nearby started calling the faithful to the morning prayers. She turned round and looked up at the grandfather clock, standing tall on the floor; it was nearly dawn. When she looked down again, the men were striding north, now forming a hori-

zontal line, she realised she had not noticed that all three had been wearing prayer-caps all along. The golden brocade on one of the topis glittered even from distance. They were getting smaller as they walked further down the crossing towards the mosque. She waited for them to disappear, put on her shalwar-kameez and hurriedly went down the pavement.

She saw that the flesh across his belly was hanging open in a loose flap. Blood flowed in a sheet trickling into the man's eyes too making his light brown hair glisten; it dropped onto the pavement, it was everywhere. She did not know blood could be so dark, so thick, so heavy. He muttered something when she walked closer to him; his eyes seemed to come out of their sockets with desperation as he moved his blood-soaked lips. Shormi went down on her knees and put his head on her lap. Above them, a branch of a mango tree was suspended solemnly; in the tree, a group of sparrows were lazily declaring the breaking of another noisy dawn. A blade of grass fell from their nest, hovered in the air for a while, and finally rested on the dark stain of the man's nose; she carefully picked it up with a trembling hand and called the hospital from her cell.

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Shormi was hungry when she got back home late in the afternoon. The doctors would not touch the man without a No-objection Certificate from the police; "It's caused by a sharp knife, I think," said a pale mouthed doctor staring at the man's wounds.

Another doctor, who knew Shormi before, said, "Ma'am you don't know this guy and neither do we. He could be a serial killer or a mugger. What if he turns out to be one of the people who had thrown grenades at that meeting? Just imagine what the police will do to us if he gets away after treatment and they find it out."

She looked back at the man's chapped lips; he had been trying to tell her something in the ambulance. But his voice was so stifled that she had to tell him not to talk. A familiar sense of responsibility, which she had at times found tiring during her three years old marriage, grasped her. She stared at the wall from which hung a long piece of cloth, "Be it a boy or a girl, one child is enough," it urged its viewer. The pale mouthed doctor meanwhile continued chattering with a nurse, Shormi turned round and said to the other doctor, "Mizan, you know me, right?"

Mizan nodded and tried to say something but stopped suddenly in the middle of his sentence as Shormi continued, "I know this man well and in case the police turn up or anything goes wrong I will take the responsibility. Now please take him to the emergency before he bleeds to death." And her words worked like magic.

Eighteen stitches were needed to close up the wound; the man cried out every time Dr Mizan put the needle into his flat stomach. She could not recall the last time she had seen a grown man cry. The doctors said, in a reassuring tone that all doctors had, that he would get well in three weeks.

She felt relaxed when she walked into her room after taking a long shower. A strong smell of fried chicken and French-fries, which she had bought on her way home and had put on the dining table, was wafting in the air. She got dressed and smiled at Bobby, curled up on her bed, coiled like a big rope. The window was wide open; sunlight that came through it and fell on Bobby's white fur had given the room a blanched look. She put a French fry into her mouth and sat on the bed to inspect Bobby's leg. The cat hissed and kicked her hand with its hind legs, but she did not let go of Bobby; upon close scrutiny, she discovered that the wound had healed a lot, but she also noticed that one of its paws was badly bruised. She rubbed some antiseptic around its injured claw. The cat groaned and clutched the white linen with its other paw.

It was early in the evening when she decided to go for a walk. She was typing her class-lectures on the PC and then, as soon as the grandfather clock struck five and she had just typed "fantasies inability to overcome reality," as if to follow a long drawn-out ritual, the power went down. She closed the book and pressed her hand on the stain on the flapper of A Streetcar Named Desire. A blob of faded red made by either ink or wine. When she had decided to start afresh and join teaching, the book was in her mind. The Head of the Department was somewhat surprised, first at her sudden decision to join the department again and then at her choice of text. He was a short middle-aged man, who had to incessantly scream to get things done. "Shormi, I don't know what to say," he tried his best to hide his surprise; "You were a very good teacher. I was quite shocked when you decided to quit the varsity." He welcomed her back, but it took her a while to make him register that she was serious about teaching Streetcar. He frowned, yawned (he was getting late for his regular afternoon nap), smirked and after a brief cajoling budged.

As she kneeled on the pavement where the man was stabbed, she noticed that the place had been hurriedly washed away. Drops of water on blades of the grass were shining in the fluorescent lights like the yellowy teeth of the attackers. She looked down the street where those three men had melted away into the fog. A large group of people was walking down the narrow ally to say their evening prayers; some had sat at the reservoir for their ablutions. She looked up to see the white minaret of the mosque and glanced further up to two blue loudspeakers suspended from the tall slender tower.

Her cell rang as she remained lost in her thoughts; it was from the hospital, the man wanted to talk to her.

"Ma'am," he said, "Thanks for saving my life."

As his words came through the cell, she mused that the man had pulled through quite quickly considering the viciousness of the attack.

## 2

Power was still out when Shormi came back home after a long walk. Bobby sat idly on the bed watching her put on the white shirt. As she finished doing up the buttons it lost interest and leaped up to stretch lazily. She had changed the quilt while going out; Bobby strode down the hibiscus pattern on it and stood between the pillows. She walked to the bathroom while thinking about all that had happened a while ago. Immediately after she had finished talking to the man, Nouman called.

"Mum, I am fine. Can we meet tomorrow?" he asked excitedly.

Shormi was buying some candles in the street; trucks howled past the makeshift-shop and she had to put a hand on the other ear to hear properly. She asked, "Where are you Nam?"

There was a silence on the other side, a muffled voice in English, probably of Nouman's friend's; for a moment Shormi thought she had lost the line.

"Nam, God, say something," she screamed.

The other voice, meanwhile, argued with Nouman in a furtive manner; the boy seemed to have agreed to do something and said to Shormi, "We are staying in a hotel mum, we are fine, don't worry."

"When do you want to meet? You and your friend can stay at my house," she said.

The vendor put the candles and the cigarettes in a package and hunched forward to give it to her. She paid the man and walked briskly to cross the road. Silence, meanwhile, resumed on the phone again; and as the whispering got louder and became almost audible it sounded more and more like Iftekhar's voice. She knew it could not be him. Funny she had been thinking about Iftekhar for a month or so, especially since Nouman had started contacting her through email. In her mind, she had pictured Iftekhar in London working for a multinational bank, happy and content. So far, Nouman had deliberately avoided talking about his father, which Shormi found rather amusing. Her eleven-year-old son had been growing up and, unlike the Iftekhar she knew, had learnt not to poke at a healed wound.

She crossed the street; Nouman replied after a brief pause, "We are fine mum"; "Can me and my friend come to your house in the evening to-

morrow?" he asked.

Shormi smiled at the street urchin who offered her a bunch of dahlia. "Of course you can. Will your friend be there too?" she tiptoed on the street to avoid empty potholes.

"Yeah, sorry for that. So, tomorrow, at six mum?" he asked.

"No problem," she replied.

"I'll call you in the morning then," Nouman said.

Later that night when she had finished typing the class-lectures, Shormi got up and randomly picked up an old-newspaper. She sat on the rocking chair and sipped at her tea: Muslim Fanatics Raze an Ahmadiyya Mosque; Alleged Outlaw Lynched by Mob; EU Leaders Trumpeted Historic Constitution; Girl Raped in Kushtia. Her eyes fixed on a news piece; sandwiched between the news of a rape and the EU constitution lay the man's smiling photograph. She stared pointedly at the photo and smirked; now she knew where she had seen him before; he looked strong and macho in a short spiky beard. "Young Writer Gets Death Threat," said the heading. She read on:

"Young writer Nasser Hussein received a death threat today from religious zealots. In a letter sent to Nasser's home in Banani, Shaukat Osman, leader of a little-known group Harkat-ul-Zihad Al Islam Bangladesh (HZAIB), wrote: 'Your days are over; get ready for the final day of judgement.' The twenty-seven-year old writer, in fact, earned the wrath of the fanatics, when his first book *In the Name of Allah* was published this year. The book depicts the story of a Muslim man who falls in love with a Hindu woman and gives her shelter when riots break out.

"Little has been known about the HZAIB and its elusive commander Osman who is also known as Sheikh Farid. The group is thought to be an umbrella organisation for radical Islamic groups that operate in the country.

"Meanwhile, sources in the home ministry said extra police force had been deployed in and around Nasser's home. Different political and cultural organisations condemned the threat describing it as an attack on free speech. Attack on intellectuals is on the rise after a small member party in the ruling coalition government tabled a blasphemy law in the parliament."

She reclined further and put both her hands on the arms of the chair. The electricity went out with a loud bang; the cat, disturbed by the sound, sprung up and scurried to and fro on the carpet. Shormi lit a cigarette, took a long drag and closed her eyes.

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When she went to the hospital to visit him, Shormi found three policemen standing at the cabin. She peeped into the room; Nasser was lying on

the white bed in blue jeans and a black T-shirt. A nurse stood at the bed and leafed through a stack of papers. Neither of them noticed her presence; she turned round slowly and saw Dr Mizan walk down the corridor with a file. He said Nasser was doing well and would be able to leave the hospital soon.

She thanked the doctor and followed him into the cabin.

Nasser was awake and smiled at her. Sunlight came through the white curtains in abundance; a grey shadow of the grille fell on bunches of flowers put idly on the bedside table.

Shormi smiled back and sat on the chair; "So," she said, "How are you?"

Dr Mizan was talking to the nurse in a low tone while browsing through the pile of papers, which the woman was holding when they entered the room. He did not take his eyes off them and said, "He is fine ma'am."

Nasser smiled embarrassingly, first at the doctor then at her; she was wearing a purple sari and a blue blouse. "The room looks pretty clean," she said and looked at the apples on the table at the side of the flowers.

The comment, it seemed, had made Dr Mizan uncomfortable; he gave the papers back to the nurse, waved her to go and said, "The minister came to visit Nasser sahib last night. She brought the apples."

Shormi laughed and said to Nasser, "You have become quite famous; do you like apples?"

He got up smirking and drank water from a plastic bottle. Mizan came forward with the file in hand and put the back of his other hand on Nasser's forehead.

"The fever has gone," the doctor said and told Shormi that he would be back in an hour.

She got up, thanked him again and said, "Nasser, he says you will be able to go home after two days."

Shormi was thinking about Nouman, who had called early in the morning when she was getting ready to visit Nasser. "Mum, we are coming to your flat in the afternoon" he said.

Shormi was surprised; she said, "But, baba, you don't know where I stay, let me go there and pick you up."

"My friend knows you well," he replied and continued, "don't ask me who he is, but he knows you pretty well."

Shormi smiled and said, "Is your friend a Bangladeshi?"

"Yeah mum. Don't cook for us, we will have lunch before coming," Nouman said.

Shormi stared at her watch; she was getting late. Nasser, meanwhile, was staring at the flowers, he said, "The minister has assured me full police

security. But what I really don't get is why these people have been trying to kill me."

Shormi looked up and saw Nasser get down to his feet, fumbling. "The book is only an excuse; religion is a mere pretext," he whispered as if talking to himself.

Shormi got up; somehow, she felt a strong affinity with Nasser. In his eyes, she had seen a sense of vulnerability, which she was so familiar with, though she did not know the source of it. But she said, "Nasser, I have to run; getting late for an appointment."

He turned round, holding an apple, and said, "Oh I am sorry."

She patted his shoulder and said, "Don't be. I will be back."

When she entered the room, there was no sign of Bobby. But the cat came back later in the afternoon when Shormi was having lunch. It was limping badly and dragging itself on the floor. She got up, half way through her food, and walked closer to Bobby, but as soon as she reached down to grab the cat, it sprung up the window and sneaked away through the grille.

Shormi sat down on a cane-stool in front of the dressing table and looked in the mirror. While talking to Nouman in the morning, for a moment, she thought her son had been talking about Iftekhar. Shormi opened the drawer at the side of the table and looked down at the things: a small red box, full of her earrings; a big make up box; an Omega watch, a gift from Iftekhar on their second anniversary and a small revolver. The gun was licensed and it was licensed under Iftekhar's name; he had never used it, all the bullets were still in the chamber, unused for eight long years. Shormi had never thought of renewing the gun-permit and had not deposited the gun to the nearby police station either. She smiled and put on a pair of clay-earrings. A shrill cry came through the window, she got up and looked down; it was Bobby. The cat was lying on the sunshade, licking its paws. The doorbell rang; Nouman was standing at the door hand in hand with Iftekhar, who was smiling coyly.

Shormi did not know what to say or do. An inexplicable numbness, it seemed, had grasped her as she stammered and ushered them in. Both of them followed her to the hallway and sat on a big sofa bed in the drawing room.

She smiled meekly at Nouman and said, "You look much taller than you did in the photo you sent. I have some baby-pictures of yours... I want you to take them; remind me to give them to you." Then she added, staring at Iftekhar, "I forget things quite easily now-a-days."

He looked around the room, as if trying to find what had gone missing since the last time he came here. An uneasy silence followed before Nouman broke it by saying, "Mum I'm sorry; I didn't mean to hurt you."

She said, "Never mind, Nam."

Ifthekhar suddenly stopped scanning the room and asked: "How's your teaching going on?"

That was the last thing she expected to come out from his mouth; she could not help smiling. "Fine," she said and hurriedly added, "My maid hasn't turned up today; let me go and fetch you some tea."

Nouman got up and said, "Mum, we will have tea some other day, when we come to take the photos perhaps."

She smiled and looked at Ifthekhar; he got up and was staring at Bobby through the door. The cat was standing at the window of the bedroom and one of its hind legs was badly infected. Sensing human attention it screeched and jumped to the ledge.

"Didn't know that you liked cats," he said and smiled.

"Its legs are badly bruised, probably the cat has got gangrene," she replied.

When they were both gone, Shormi looked down the window to see Bobby. The cat was standing on the ledge and croaked weakly after seeing her. She looked at its gangrened legs – one of Bobby's limbs was completely decayed and the cat had to put its back on the wall for support; the other limb had started to decompose and Shormi could smell it rotting. She called the cat but it only gave out a high pitched cry.

Shormi did not realise that her maid had come and was standing at the window, gripping the grille. "Something bad will happen madam; I am quite sure about it. When cats cry, bad things happen. They come to know about bad things beforehand and start crying," she said ominously. She was in her mid-twenties, and was wearing a yellow Shalwar-Kameez.

Shormi turned round and said, "Don't be silly Hasna. Cats are silly animals, even sillier than you. How will they know about the future?"

Hasna did not look at all convinced as she continued, "You know madam, a cat was crying near our shanty the day Karim was killed."

Hasna had had numerous paramours and Shormi had caught her going out with different men on various occasions. She had once introduced Karim to Shormi; he himself had told her that he had been a petty thief. Karim was beaten to death by a mob after being caught pickpocketing near the shanty. Hasna had watched the mob pin Karim down on the street and beat him with bricks and blunt machetes. But Shormi was not thinking about it any more; Bobby was having a painful death and she blamed herself for it. She put her hands into the grille and called the cat again; Hasna joined her, but Bobby did not respond. The cat only looked up the window and cried shrilly. Shormi turned round, gripping a bar and said, "Hasna I can't take this any more."

Shormi saw tears rolling down the girl's eyes. She held Hasna's hand tightly and said, "If the cat doesn't die by tomorrow night I will kill it with the gun."

Hasna started weeping. Shormi put her hand on her shoulder and said, "Listen, silly girl... I just want to relieve it of the pain." Then she added, "Just look at the way Bobby is crying... look..."

The two women then wept, holding each other. Shormi held Hasna's head to her neck and said, "Silly girl." The cat screeched even louder as it staggered around to lie on the other side of the ledge.

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Power was out when Shormi woke up in the evening. Bobby was still crying. She put on a pair of pyjamas and a short-sleeved shirt and drank a glass of water from the bedside table. Warm sunlight came through the mango tree and fell on Bobby's decaying body. The cat looked up and tried to leap up the grille. Shormi clasped the grille as Bobby missed it and fell on the garden below the sunshade before bumping on the edge of the façade wall. She ran down the stairs, almost toppling over the white banister, and found Bobby still alive. Blood spewed out of its neck and both of the cat's front legs had almost come out of its body. Bobby tried to get up to its feet when it saw Shormi walk down further towards the flowerbed. But the cat could not get up to its feet; it tumbled down and staggered on the thorny surface with its chest. She reached down, picked Bobby up, and took her to the house.

Shormi waited for Hasna to come before taking any decision about Bobby. She had placed the cat on a rag and it had not moved since. Meanwhile, she paced around the room, holding both her hands together, praying. She was born in a Muslim family, but had abandoned the faith as she grew up. The bell rang and, to her surprise, she found Nasser standing at the door. He had grown a beard and was wearing a white T-shirt and blue jeans.

"Hey," she almost screamed and said, "come in."

Shormi looked at him more closely. The long strips of thin white fabric that had been wrapped around different parts of his body were gone. Nasser sat down on the sofa bed and as if to give a reason for the visit said, "I was passing by and thought you might not dislike it if I drop in."

She smiled at his innocence. Bobby's cry came out before she could say anything. She strode down the flat, ushering him in, and sat down on the floor. Nasser followed her; and when he reached Bobby, said, "God... how did it happen."

Shormi did not reply; she looked pointedly at the cat's eyes; she

thought the cat had been pleading to save it from its agony. Cats did not shed tears, she knew, but she somehow felt it was telling her, begging her, with its green eyes, to rid it of the pain. She looked at Nasser, who was staring morosely at Bobby.

"Nasser, I want to kill it. Do you think it will be wrong if we kill it now, instead of let it suffer?" she asked.

Nasser did not take his eyes off the cat when he replied, "No. But I don't know how we will do it."

"I have a gun," she slowly got up and took the gun out of the drawer. "I don't know if it will work or not. It's my ex-husband's but he never used it," she said while leaning on the wall.

"Do you want me to do it?" Nasser looked at her and asked.

"Nah," she replied and walked down slowly to the rag.

Bobby stopped crying and stared at her eyes when she pointed the gun at her head. She could not fix her aim as her hands were trembling. It was almost dark; the electricity had not come yet and Shormi had forgotten to light a candle. Beams of red, yellow and blue light came through the window from the billboards and fell on the two impassive human faces. Nasser came forward and put his hands around hers to help her aim. Shormi turned round, surprised, and said, "Thanks."

Nasser, now holding her hands, could hear their hearts pounding. Shormi looked at Bobby for the last time, closed her eyes and pulled the trigger, but the thirteen-year-old lever failed to fire the gun. Bobby cried shrilly as she tried again; the gun did not let her down this time, blood splashed out of the cat's head and fell all over the blue rag. Shormi, eyes still closed, turned round, hugged him tightly and sobbed.

They dug a hole at the giant trunk of the mango tree to bury Bobby. Both of them cried when she wrapped the cat in a dark chador and put it in the hole. Nasser replaced the soil and walked back to the house with the shovel in hand. Shormi followed him and said, "You need to take a shower."

Shormi almost walked up to him when Nasser replied, "I should go home now."

"What a day for you..." she opened the main entrance and said, "But your home is far away from here..."

"I will take a cab, don't worry," he entered the house, following her, and said, "But I need to wash my hands first."

"Go straight and then turn left," she said and replaced the keys on the windowsill.

She put on a sari after having a shower while Nasser washed his hands in the bathroom. Electricity had come back; she went to the kitchen

to make tea. Nasser, meanwhile, came back from the bathroom and stood in front of the bookshelf; he carefully pulled a book out of the rack and leafed through it absentmindedly. A print of Jackson Pollack's "Moon Women" hung on the wall of the bedroom, just above the dresser. He looked through the door, still holding the book, and gazed at the painting.

A soft clatter of pots and spoons came out of the dining room, as he went back to the book. Shormi called Nasser and told him to have a cup of tea.

"Were you reading something?" she asked, sipping at her tea.

"Not really," Nasser replied, "I was just browsing through a book."

"Which one?" she asked, smiling; she was half-sure he had already forgotten the book's name.

"God... I forgot," he smiled meekly and sat besides her. "I feel really sad for the cat," he continued.

Shormi had cried continuously the whole evening and the bath could not take the signs of it away from her face: her eyes were still blood red; and there was a pinkish glow about the edges of her nose. She crossed her legs and sipped at the tea again. Nasser thought she might start crying again; he put a hand on her hand and patted softly.

Shormi put the cup down, looked at him and said, "Thanks."

Nasser stared back at her watery eyes, held her hand and said, "You look good when you cry."

She smiled, a teardrop rolled down her cheeks and fell on the saucer, and said, "I know that."

Nasser laughed and said, "Let's go for a walk."

She went to the bedroom and opened a drawer at the side of the dressing table. As she was rummaging through it to find a lipstick, Nouman called. He was sorry, he said; he should have informed her earlier that dad had been with him, he continued. But Shormi stopped him and said it was ok. She also said that she was about to go outside with a friend, so she would not be able to talk now. Nouman was surprised and he could not hide it; he said sorry twice before hanging up.

Shormi looked at Nasser's face as they walked down the narrow streets. He was tall; almost six feet, she presumed; she had to move her head up to have a look at the mole on his chin. It was almost late in the evening; the traffic on an otherwise busy street had thinned down significantly. There were hardly any passers-by, and those who were still there, waiting in queue for the last bus to come, tired and exhausted, did not even look at the woman in a purple sari walking by holding the hand of a man younger than her. When she was putting on her clothes she had thought about it too; if it was in the morning or in the early evening people would

have ogled at her; she could not rule out the possibility of something more obscene happening. A truck loaded with baskets-full of vegetables and dried fish shrieked past them. She held his hand firmly and said, "Dhaka kills me."

He stared at her and said, "You studied in England, right?"

"How do you know that?" she was somehow surprised.

She playfully punched on his chest; his eyes only grinned through his horn-rimmed glasses in reply. "Oi," she said, "tell me how you know this."

He continued laughing, now wholeheartedly, put his arm around her waist and whispered in her ear, "You are so beautiful."

"Hmmm," she replied.

Just then a cab slowed down at them; a middle-aged face came out of the window and said to Shormi, "Get in the cab honey; I will give you more."

Nasser chased the yellow taxi as it speeded past them hurling more abusive words. All of a sudden a group of men crept up on her and started asking questions. One of them was the little boy who had sold her flowers that day; Shormi recognised him as he came out of the throng and shouted, "Madam, what are you doing here?"

Shormi could not answer; she was shivering violently. Realising that nothing was wrong, the mob, disappointed, scattered away.

Nasser was panting heavily when he came back; he said, "Bastards!"

That pinkish glow about the edges of her nose-tip returned, though she had put a hand on her mouth in a dazed way; both her hands were still shivering, she still did not know what to say. Nasser held Shormi gently, stroked her back and said, "Let's go back home." But she did not respond.

Shormi, in his embrace, seemed to have shrunk. She felt relaxed; that overwhelming sense of insecurity that had been eating at her all these years melted away.

Nasser kissed her forehead and muttered, "Let's go back baby."

She smiled, looked up and said, "Oi! I was seven-years-old when you were born."

Nasser looked surprised; he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, stroked her chin with his long fingers and asked, "How do you know my age?"

She put her head on his chest and said, "I read it in the newspaper that you were twenty-seven. 'Twenty-seven year old writer gets death threat from zealots' or something like that."

"Hmmm... So?" he grinned and asked, taking his mouth closer to her earlobe.

She pushed him away, laughing and both of them started walking back

home.

### 3

The azan had just started when Shormi woke up early in the morning. She looked at Nasser; curled beside her like a baby. He turned and muttered something as she raised his head up from her shoulder blade and gently placed it on the pillow. She turned round too, hugged him from the back and stroked the mole on his chin. Shormi wanted to wake him up; Hasna might come at any moment for her housekeeping chores and she did not want the maid to find Nasser here. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and stared at his face again – at his nose, jawbone and neck.

Hasna did not turn up at work that day. Shormi, meanwhile, had watched television, and later stood at the window to look at the ledge where Bobby used to sit. She made breakfast, lit a cigarette and when the clock struck past twelve, woke him up. Nasser smiled and looked across her face.

"I am so sorry," he said and smiled.

Last night when they got home Shormi gave Nasser one of Iftekhar's T-shirts and a pair of shorts to wear. It had been there in the chest-of-drawers for so many years; but they still bore his smell. She did not know why she had kept his clothes for so long; Shormi had never thought that Iftekhar would come back. A common friend had been updating her regularly about Iftekhar's whereabouts, which mostly covered how he had emigrated to England and got married again. The latter was illegal as Shormi and Iftekhar had not been divorced; they, in fact, were still officially married.

She had been surprised by Iftekhar's behaviour that day. Contrary to what he had been in his last days with her, Iftekhar looked benign and mellow. Those hysterical outbursts of anger were gone, replaced by a docile expression. She was amazed that he did not reproachfully stare at her exposed navel. She remembered how during the last few days he had frantically talked about sins and atonement, and had blamed her for ruining his life.

Shormi recalled Nasser had said something. She smiled and said, "Get up."

Iftekhar called when they were having lunch. "Something bad happened to me Shormi," he said in a laid-back voice.

"I am having lunch Iftekhar," she replied and asked, "How is Nouman?"

"He is fine. I am just screwed up Shormi," he said, faintly trying to add up bits of emotions in his voice, "Laura left me three years ago. I quit my

job."

"I don't know what to say Iftexhar," she replied. Then she added, "And I don't know what you want from me."

Nasser leaped up, came across and put a slice of watermelon into her mouth. Shormi gave him a playful poke in the ribs; Iftexhar, meanwhile, replied, "I want to meet you Shormi... Please meet me once... Please."

Nasser came closer and whispered, "I am going down to fetch the newspaper."

Shormi nodded and said on the phone, "I don't see the point of meeting you."

But Iftexhar insisted, "I just wanted to see you once. Please don't be so cross."

Shormi hated the idea of seeing him again, but she agreed. "All right. I will meet you for the last time. But don't expect anything from me," she said; then added, as if to mock him, "Please don't expect much. Things have gone too far."

When she went back to the bedroom she found Nasser sitting on the rocking chair, absentmindedly holding the newspaper. He did not finish his lunch and within moments he seemed extremely worn out. Shormi came round and asked, "What happened?"

He looked up and said nothing; as she got closer her eyes caught the headline of the newspaper – "Zealots Declare Bounty on Young Writer's Head," it said in a black-and-white numbness. She picked up the newspaper; Nasser did not look up, he just stared blankly at the red Persian carpet.

"In an anonymous letter sent to all the major newspaper offices yesterday, the so-called Harkat-ul-Zihad Al Islam Bangladesh (HZAIB) has declared a bounty of Tk 10,000,000 (\$16,66,666) for young writer Nasser Hussain's head. In a fatwa issued by Shaukat Osman, the militant outfit's chief, the group said, 'We, on behalf of the Muslims in the country, in the name of Allah the most beneficent and merciful, declare writer Nasser Hussain an apostate. It is now the duty of every Muslim to kill him as our beloved religion tells us to do so'."

An otherwise coloured front page of the Star ran a black and white portrait of Nasser, probably to make the news look grimmer. Newspapers crave for and bank on morbidity, Shormi thought as she read down further:

"The HZAIB, which is believed to be an umbrella organisation for all religious extremists groups working in Bangladesh, in a previous letter sent to the dailies, had told Nasser to publicly apologise for his writing. The group had also called the beleaguered writer to reconvert to Islam; Nasser had denounced the call and had urged the group to shun the path of terrorism.

"The writer was attacked last week by a group of young men on the Dhaka University campus; though the police have blamed it on 'unidentified muggers', many suspect the hands of HZAIB in the incident.

"Nasser could not be contacted for comments, as he was not home.

"The home ministry has beefed up security in the Banani area of the city, especially around the writer's home. But when contacted last night, the police headquarters had refused to give us any detail of its plan to reign in on the extremist group, which is blamed to have carried out numerous terrorist attacks in the country."

Shormi stopped reading, looked down at Nasser and caught him looking at her face. She put her head on his lap. He bent down, kissed her and said, "Baby I am so scared."

Shormi did not say anything; she kneeled on the floor, cupped his head and kissed him. As they made love, a roaring locomotive snaked through the rail-line that had curved past the mosque. Inside the room, on the CD Sting sang on:

There's a little black spot on the sun today  
It's the same old thing as yesterday  
There's a black hat caught in a high tree top  
There's a flag pole rag and the wind won't stop

It was National Revolution and Solidarity day today, a public holiday; her Uni was closed, but they did not go out. Nasser lay down on the bed while Shormi cooked. When she was done, Shormi walked up to the bed and said to Nasser, "I haven't read your masterpiece."

He smiled and said, "Don't. You might try to kill me after reading it. Even political parties that deplored the stabbing, in the same statement, said I wrote something regretful."

She laughed and said, "You don't know..."

"It's really funny, you know," he continued matter of factly, "Even the so-called liberals believed that the government did a pretty good job when the book was banned. Suckers!"

She had been thinking about this while cooking. The big political parties needed general people's vote to win the elections; and, Shormi had thought that they could spare one or two Nassers or Humayun Azads to go to power. If public opinion ran swiftly against Nasser – which she believed was going to happen – no one would give a damn about his plight. Votes were all that mattered to Bangladesh's political establishment; the socialists, she mused, were ready to make an alliance with the HZAIB if it meant a few seats in the parliament.

It was late in the evening; a grey light sneaked into the bedroom. Shormi stared intensely at Nasser, who was reclining on the bed, fidgeting

with a jigsaw puzzle. Shormi heard the sound of another rail wagon coming through as she leaped up and sat on his lap. He tried to get up to kiss her; but she pushed his shoulder down, put her head to his ear and softly said, "It's my turn now to forget everything."

The Police's "The King of Pain" was on repeat-mode; Sting was saying:

I have stood here before inside the pouring rain  
With the world turning circles running 'round my brain  
I guess I'm always hoping that you'll end this reign  
But it's my destiny to be the king of pain

The song was rhythmic and steady, and shortly they had forgotten it, the sound no more of an interruption than the consistent rain.

And it poured heavily all night. She almost freaked out when someone called up and asked for Nasser. She wanted to say no one with that name stayed here; but a sense of urgency in the caller's tone had forced her to ask back, "Who has given you this number?"

"Ma'am I am sorry. Dr Mizan of the Dhaka Medical gave me your number. My name is Inam; I am a reporter, I work with the Star. I want to interview him," he continued, "Dr Mizan thought you might help me out."

Shormi held him gently from the back while Nasser talked to the reporter on the phone.

"Listen... there are people out there in this country who will kill anyone who does not subscribe to their version of the religion. Who the hell are they to call someone a murtad or an apostate or whatever it is when the religion itself prohibits it?" he said; anger glinted in his eyes, Shormi came forward, holding out her hands, telling him to cool down.

The sound of another locomotive raging across the rail-line was heard and it started to vibrate in the room when it closed by and passed through.

"Listen man," the reporter said gingerly, "this would not help your cause. They want you to apologise in public and they said that would do..."

"Oh come on! Why should I make an apology? And for what?" he asked defiantly, shaking with fury.

Shormi put both the hands on her hip; frustrated, like a schoolteacher faced with a transgressing pupil.

Nasser continued, "If I had written anything against Islam, I would have apologised to Allah. Since when have these idiots started playing God?"

"God! Why can't you be reasonable?" the man replied; he sounded disappointed; "I don't know you, Nasser bhai, but I loved your story. And I want you to be alive to write more," he went on.

"I don't see the point," Nasser said, "I didn't write anything wrong. Hin-

dus are being systematically repressed everyday in this country. This is a fact. They are robbed of their freedom only because they belong to the minority, only because they are Hindus. What is wrong if I write it?"

"No one is saying that," Inam replied. "The fanatics have popular support you see and are taking advantage of your callowness," he gave a pause and then asked, "Are you happy with the way the government is handling the crisis?"

"Why are you calling it a crisis?" Nasser shrieked on the phone, "It is not a crisis. It can never be called a crisis. Some faggots want to kill me because I have exposed something in the eyes of the world that they want to hide. And you call it an emergency? Today it's me; tomorrow it can be you. If you want me to feel sorry for writing a book, everyone who believes in free speech should apologise to these faggots."

Inam swore loudly in exasperation.

Shormi sat on the rocking chair and stared at the ceiling fan in a vacant way; she knew what was going to happen. Nasser slouched against the door and stared at the teeming rain through the window. For a flickering moment she thought of Bobby: what had the cat been thinking when they had both raised the gun in unison at its decomposing body?

A month ago she was reading Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, the story of a lonely old woman in apartheid South Africa dying of cancer. In an extended letter to her daughter Mrs Curren expresses her anger, shame and frustration. What do the dying think before they breathe the last?

What goes on in a killer's mind before he raises a blunt machete on a fellow human? When the terrorists lobbed those grenades at that meeting, for a flashing moment, did they look at the people – all of those who would be killed by those fruit-like bombs? Did any of them want to stop the direction of the objects they had just thrown – midway in the air, falling smoothly in a line, like Cupid's bow? What did they do after seeing the charred body of their four-year-old victim – eyes wide open, surprised by the ferocity of pomegranates?

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Silence fell as they ate supper; Nasser did not have much, all through the meal he fiddled with the fork and knife like a nervous schoolboy would. As she leaped up from the chair and walked into the bedroom, she knew she did not have any word of comfort for him. But she wanted to be by his side till the end and for that she decided not to meet Iftekhar.

A narrow line of light came into the room through the bedroom door. Nasser was still awake. She sat to email Nouman.

"My dear Nam," she wrote and hunched over the table to abandon

herself, first to a quiet, decent sobbing, then to long wails without articulation, emptying the lungs, emptying the heart.

She could not write more; an inexplicable numbness, it seemed, had grasped her body. She got up, sat on the rocking chair and skimmed through the newspaper. A train of thought shuffled on, badgering her with an uneasy feeling. She knew something bad was in the offing, something grotesque and grisly. She stared vacantly at the sheets of paper she was gripping so tightly. The small print from the newspaper hurt her eyes; she rubbed them and looked at the newspaper. Everything was a blur.

She waddled across and lay on the bed. Nasser was awake but he did not move. Shormi held him from the back and touched his eyes; his eyelids fluttered. He grasped her hand and sighed.

She closed her eyes and saw Bobby walk lazily on the rag with a kitten. It was drizzling outside and would soon start pouring heavily. She could see a wisp of cloud shading the skyline. The sun was at its low, though it was early in the afternoon; neither of them could see anything. She and Nasser were wading through what looked like a hill of sand; the cat followed. Then the path grew musty and it started to rain heavily. They looked up at the sky; suddenly a flash of light came across and they had to close their eyes, dazed and startled. When they opened their eyes an oasis was on the horizon. They thought their steps were so light that it was possible to fly; it was possible to be both body and spirit. Then just as suddenly it had come into being, the oasis dissolved into a dune. Without even knowing where to go; where to hide themselves and from whom, a man and a woman along with their cat walked through. They walked days and nights and at times when day and night looked and felt the same. They did not feel sleep; neither could hunger touch them. They ate everything they got on their way; they peeled the bark of dead trees and ate beetle-grubs, and burped after having grasshoppers.

They did not stop when they reached that elusive oasis. They did not cross the path of any humans; neither did they see any living being. The yellow mosque that they came across was empty of any human presence; she saw the dead, shrouded in cerements, waiting for the funeral party to arrive.

They sped out of the mosque and ran through the desert. They ran as if there was no tomorrow. As if nothing but their existence was true.