

Jaws of the Moon

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Everyone knows that Kolkata's upper line of teeth is false. Everyone also knows that Kolkata's lower line of rugged teeth is not false. They are ill-shaped high-rises. Having uttered this tautology, I felt those who read stories and all, would recall Gorky's 'City of the Yellow Devil.' Meanwhile the plot has thickened out there. *Fida*¹ girls will always fall for *bindas*² boys. Earlier, the 'not-so-*fida*' girls who dazzled the lanes and by lanes of Calcutta would at least recognize those boys who weren't *bindas*. Now anything is cool! Why bother?

However, everyone knows that after having an uncouth *early* dinner, Kolkata drowns its upper line of teeth in the glass bowl of the sky which the people of Kolkata have christened moon. Glancing at the sky-bowl of night at that hour reveals nothing. The moon vanishes. Clouds entwine the layers of the sky like a crepe bandage or gauze as showers drip like drenched angels in incessant mazy motion. Awnings, ashes— everything gets soaked. The upper line of teeth is hardly visible. What would the people of Kolkata call the shape of filthy light, toned down just beneath the surface of a series of clouds under such circumstances? Jaws of the moon?

The place on which we have fixed our *focus* is a bus stop. Not a famous one. The final destination for the sole *minibus* that plies in this route from Howrah used to be the previous stoppage. But as a few concrete houses are being constructed, few other apartments are also scheduled to come up; the minibuses have started to run till this place, terminal to terminus. A few passengers get off. Then the minibus returns. A drenched night. Without a whiff of air. Sultry. How many people could read here is not known, but a big yellow and black *hoarding* stood behind the *shade* of the *bus stop*. To ensure that even at night the hoarding could be read cap-a-pie, three neon lights were fixed and angled towards it. Two of them were not working and the third was blinking from time to time. A few insects, even in that rain, were flying around the light. And two murderers sat on their haunches under that shade. They carried a chopper and a dagger wrapped in a *gamchha*³. They had kept *watch* for the past two nights. The man would arrive in the last minibus. They had received such information earlier. There was no light on that spot save the blinking neon, but the lights of the new flyover could be seen to the left. A scooter passed. Then a little silence. A C.T.C bus passed making heavy noise. A handful of people were inside. One of the murderers lit up a *bidi*.⁴ The other declined when offered. At a little distance a bicycle stood leaning on a wall.

--Won't come.

--He will.

--When did you call?

--Past two then, told you already. Said that the bastard was in the *gaddi*.⁵ Collecting *payment*.

--Then he will come.

-- Told you so.

--Me thinking, if the *mini* cancels the *tip*⁶...

--Ehh, why should it be cancelled? Last bus. It may get late in *jamp*.⁷ It will come.

No reply came. The man who could have answered spoke not a word but tried to softly whistle the tune of a popular song without touching the roof of the mouth with his tongue. He couldn't. Just then, from the far right, came a low noise, and the light of the minibus appeared.

The murder began. The chopper and the dagger came out from the folds of the *gamchha*. The handle of the dagger was made of black horn, *riveted* with nails. One of the murderers stood up and wrapped the *gamchha* around his neck like a muffler. It would make it easier to wipe the warm and sticky blood with it. The thumb of the left hand tasted the sharpness of the chopper held in the right hand for once. The chopper was meant for the blow and the dagger for penetrating into the *body*, making way through skin-meat-fat-bones. The face of the *minibus* grew bigger and more distinct.

The story would be *finished* in five more minutes. To the left, in the smoggy night, the light of the flyover seen a while ago, lying beneath the jaws of the moon, had emerged from the opposite direction. On the very spot from where it emerged, a police van had halted to collect *tola*⁸ from a matador carrying fish. An inspector and four constables were in the van. The man who went to collect *tola* owned a tea and snacks stall beside the police station. The inspector was seated beside the driver. With a lit cigarette. The matador driver handed over forty rupees to the henpecked man. The rogue walked towards the police van. Kind of lame. Lumps under his feet. While restarting the matador, the driver muttered something the meaning of which in simple language was that he wished to do many things with police's mother. When the henpecked man got up in the police van, it started with a jerk.

A short man wearing trousers and *punjabi*,⁹ and spectacles, with a discoloured, tampered briefcase, alighted from the minibus. Holding the briefcase between the knees, he took out a comb from the pocket of

his *Punjabi*. The minibus made a *u-turn* and the man, watching the bus, combed through his oily, closely cropped hair. Just as the minibus had turned and accelerated, the man put the comb back in his pocket and held up the lower portion of the *punjabi* in his hand to wipe the spectacles.

The spectacles were knocked off.

-- HE...YY!

Drizzle or drool dripped from the jaws of the moon. He didn't let go of the briefcase. Tried to run away. Couldn't manage at all. Fell on the street in the pushing and shoving. The man who kept the briefcase, pressed under his feet, held the dagger.

The other raised the chopper exactly above the man's head. And *froze* there itself.

On the opposite side of the road, the police van jammed its brakes and screeched to a halt. The inspector got down. The door of the van was left ajar. An oil tanker passed. Then he crossed the road clicking his boots. Came forward. The chopper and the dagger still remained, held exactly in the same position.

The inspector indicated with his right hand. With his finger. When the neon light blinked, it could be read. The hoarding.

--What's written in there?

TO CARVE AND SELL MEAT IN PUBLIC IS SUBJECT TO PROSECUTION.

--KOLKATA CORPORATION

The inspector, firmly walking, crossed the road and got back into the van. He muttered to himself—

--No civic sense at all.

After the police van had left, the chopper and the dagger dragged that short man into the soaked and clotted darkness behind the shade of the bus stand.

-----Translated by Adway Chowdhuri

Glossary:

¹ Infatuated or obsessed.

² Cool and casual.

³ A hand-woven towel.

⁴ A crude small, thin cigarette rolled in kendu leaves.

⁵ A business man's office cum shop where large scale transactions are made.

⁶ Mispronounced version of 'trip'.

⁷ Mispronounced version of traffic jam.

⁸ Illegal extortion of money.

⁹ A loose stitched upper garment worn over a pajama, trousers or dhoti.

- Other italicized English words are retained from the original text.