

Blind Cat

Nabarun Bhattacharya

(This story is dedicated to the memory of the cat ‘Gola’. His brief life was permeated with many loves and neglects from my end. Even his death taught me a lesson. Mortally ill, one night, he went away on his own to experience his death. No one saw him after that.)

There’s no way to know whether he was blind from birth or blindness was something he had picked up from his fights with other cats. He wasn’t an urban cat. He lived in a little village, soaked in the smell of fish with a river running right beside it. Cats like these have stories of a different kind. The two-storied hotel where he lived had a wooden floor. It stood right on the riverbank and had more than a tilt towards the river, as if deliberately leaning on the water. It made things easy. Dal¹, gravy, water, kerosene, liquor—everything that fell crawled away in one direction. Either it fell through the gap between the wooden boards or inched away towards the river. The water was salty. Eight thick wooden stumps and a few haphazard bamboo poles made the foundation for the hotel. The visitors in the hotel can’t be straitjacketed into one category. For instance, in the year 1972, a man with broken glasses had a meal of dal and rice, paid the bill and went away. He had a revolver attached to his waist, though he wasn’t a bandit. He used to write poetry for the people. But the blind cat hadn’t been there at that point. From a boat or a steamer in the middle of the river, it was difficult to notice the tilt in the hotel. Underneath the wooden floor was a thorny creeper where a newt came at night, making a scuttling sound. The blind cat lay down and heard intently. Before this, the man, mentioned above, with a revolver hanging from his waist, after years, died while vomiting blood. Though there were shouts of ‘we’ll not forget you’ during his funeral, people started forgetting him soon after. Looking at it like that, how many knew the blind cat anyway? He’d be forgotten in no time. So many people stayed in that hotel, had their meals, committed murders and suicides, took advantage of foolish girls by making false vows of marriage, calculated the benefits of fishing, counted notes with spittle on every note, slept on the shabby bed with a huge list of debtors under the pale pillow with the dream of trawlers being the only solace in hours of distress—all these boarders were so busy with themselves that they never noticed the blind cat, all ears, among the randomly

arranged furniture, sitting on the tilt towards the river. Not that he understood the meanings of words that were spoken or events that took place. He couldn't have made sense of the noise made by the burnt out ends of cigarettes, thrown towards the water when they finally hit the water with a sharp biting hiss on the surface. Not that he could understand the softly hummed song, a casually scattered word in the wind, a chuckle, a belch and a sob. There is a difference between listening and understanding. However, one couldn't conclude with certitude whether the blind cat understood or not, in spite of repeated interrogations.

In the previous section, we have mentioned the place like the head of a fish with eyes and fins where the blind cat lived, in that hotel with more than a tilt towards the river. We have talked about that side of the hotel so far which has the tilt. On the other side, there was an ascent towards the narrow lane with bricks covering across it but it always remained full of mud, going up to one and a half inches. It was used for carrying the fresh-caught fish and crab to the market. Just as in Kolkata, cars had a bumper-to-bumper jam on the road; here we sometimes saw the same, man-to-man. The one at the back, a man of course, called out jeeringly to the one ahead: "push it with your cock." Others laughed. It was on this road that one day a banker's bike had got stuck into the mud and after waiting for a while, he had said out of irritation: "What happened?" He had got an answer in the distance, from the man with a huge tin of Kanmagur², still alive, on his head—"It's a boy." Others laughed. The blind cat had heard these floating words. That afternoon, he had got hold of a half-eaten Kharasula³ and half of an Aar-tyangra's⁴ head and tail. There was always food in such a zone. That's the law of survival. How the blind cat had come to know of this, no one knows and not that they want to know either.

Unless it stormed or rained, the first launch arrived from the other side at around seven thirty in the morning. A young widow with two kids boarded it every day, without being able to pay the fare. The girl washed the plates in the hotel and cleaned the two little rooms, upstairs. Both kids were male, pot-bellied and naked. They both had a black thread going around their waists. There was a stick knotted with the thread to what end, no one knew. The girl's husband had died of snakebite. She collected the leftover rice, dal and gravy into a bowl. She had to manage like that. The owner of the hotel gave her a plate of rice with two serves of dal. That's what the three had for meal. The fish bones went to the blind cat. He was a mix of black and grey. Due to age, his wools had become jaded. The two eyes were two deep dark holes. Sometimes blood trickled down those holes and left a dry mark around the nose. There were many cats and on occasions they

came for the blind cat's bones. The two boys shooed them away. When the cats quarrelled, outside or in the distance, the blind cat's ears flapped up and down as he tried to capture the sounds of conflict. The owner of the hotel cooked and served the food to the boarders. He didn't shoo away the blind cat. The first time he saw the cat, he did try to banish it with his broom but the cat had stood motionless in spite of the blow. It was the girl who had noticed then that the cat couldn't see. From that point onwards, the blind cat had stayed. The tin surface of the hotel room had become rusty and dented. If one went out that way, there was a wet spot inside the shop which stood beside the hotel. Sometimes, the blind cat went there but generally he didn't leave the dark spot under the table. He stood silent there and slept sometimes. When cats sleep, their dreams give them shivers in the body, the claws move; the nails come out from the paws and then go back in again. The blind cat perhaps didn't dream. His sleep was all too stagnant.

After the suicide of the couple upstairs, the owner of the hotel rented rooms to couples during the day but not at night. The boy and girl were apparently so delighted that no one could imagine that at night they would finish all the sleeping pills in the pack. The owner was late in doing his cooking that night. The girl from the other side used to go back home, taking the last launch in the evening. It was drizzling but there was hardly a wind. The river was calm as well. The girl in *salwar kameez*⁵ was scribbling strokes in the water, on the dining table. And the boy was singing a Kishore Kumar⁶ song—this river goes to the sea...the owner had often heard this song on radio. The boy was singing it quite well. He had melody in his voice. They didn't notice that under the table, in the dark and cold spot, the blind cat was all ears. After finishing their meal of egg and rice, when they went upstairs with refreshments in their mouth, the blind cat had started to feel drowsy. There were mild sounds of walking upstairs. The owner of the hotel had cleaned up the table and made a bed for himself there. The boy had stealthily come down with his torch and taken the dirty plastic water jug with him upstairs. The blind cat, half-asleep, suddenly became alert by the sound of his footfalls on the wooden stairs. Later on, when the girl had sobbed, the blind cat was already in his deepest sleep. When the morning slowly turned into afternoon, it all came to be known. There were heavy sounds of police boots on the stairs. The crowd, the din and bustle and the difficulty of bringing down the bodies through the narrow stairs—in all this, nobody noticed that the blind cat was right there cloaked in a dark silence.

The two pot-bellied naked kids squatted down on the floor and observed the blind cat for hours every day. He smelled them too. In the lane outside one day, two big containers

full of small fishes had fallen on the ground with fishes jumping everywhere. The kids had collected ten odd fishes in a piece of paper and served them to the blind cat. The fishes were still very much alive. Under the wooden floor, the newt which scuttled along didn't enter the room but large rats certainly did. They were not afraid of the blind cat.

Three men were relishing their rice with Boal⁷, chilli and onion on the day when the trawler owner was murdered. It was still an hour and a half before the murder happened. They had dropped an old half-torn bag on the floor, without noticing that it had almost touched the blind cat. The chain was off and the bag had to be closed with a *gamchha*⁸. In it was a new and loaded pistol, two daggers and eight handmade bombs. While having food, they were chatting along but it was difficult to guess their intentions from what they said. They had asked the owner of the hotel to bring some sweet curd for them. After finishing their lunch when one of them stooped down to pick up the bag, he was frightened to see the blind cat. He thought that the cat would swipe. The elder of the two kids said that it couldn't see and won't do anything. The man was still cautious in picking the bag up. Boal had strong bones and the cat had to take his time and be cautious while having them. Sometimes bones get stuck in cats' throats and even if you offer all kinds of foods, they can't have anything and simply sit silently in front of the food. So in this respect, the blind cat was more than alert. After finishing his food, he was leaking his right paw and wagging his tail because a blowfly was buzzing around him. When he heard the gunshot in the distance, his ears leaped up sharply. There was silence after the shot and then three bombs exploded.

When it rained cats and dogs, the girl couldn't come with the two kids, not because of the launch. She had to walk through a muddy road for two kilometres to reach the jetty. Canals, ponds and roads all got flooded. And then there's the fear of snakes while returning in the dark. So the girl had to wait for others to come alongside her. Some of them had torches. On the other side, the girl bought some *muri*⁹. The person at the shop gave her more than usual. He even gave her free *batasha*¹⁰ and *nokuldana*¹¹ at times. At night they had *muri* and water for dinner. The girl didn't have a set salary. The hotel owner gave her some money at his will. Those who came for fishing and other business became familiar with her and often gave her some money for the kids. The girl was generally silent much like the blind cat. No one had ever heard it make any sound. When the girl and the kids didn't come, the owner of the hotel had to do everything. He would get irritated then and forgot to give food to the cat for a day or two.

An NGO had arranged for a workshop with the villagers about how to make a dam nearby. The resource persons who had come for the workshop came to the hotel for dinner. It was a three day workshop. And all three nights, the owner had cooked local chicken along with expensive rice. They had quite elaborate meals all along. One of them came drunk. He was a generous person. He used to give cigarettes to the hotel owner and tell him stories of different countries. Because of them the blind cat got delicious chicken bones. They didn't have the chicken's head and the cat got that as well. When the workshop came to an end, the blind cat had to go back to his old routine of fish bones, fins and tails. When he ate, the kids looked at him wistfully. One night, the man was a little too drunk and the match fell from his hands as he was trying to light a cigarette. He saw the blind cat when he lowered himself to pick it up. He couldn't understand that the cat was blind. It was the owner who told him. He told his two friends a real life story about the blindness of cats which he had read in a book. There was a scientific experiment with seven newborn kittens in England. It was conducted by the defence department. As everyone knows, the kittens only begin to see a few days after their birth. They had stitched the eyes of the seven kittens so that they wouldn't open. The kittens grew up like that and they did various experiments on them. They tested their reactions to loud sounds, blows and burns. Then they killed the cats and analysed what impression the attack in the dark had made on their brains. When the British animal lovers came to know about this, they had created a furore. They had demanded that such brutal experiments be banned. Though the blind cat heard the story, he didn't understand it. Before going away, he had congratulated the hotel owner for giving shelter to a helpless cat and said that it would do him and his place, a world of good. But attack can always come in any dark shelter. Who can say that something sinister isn't awaiting the blind cat, just as it had been for the kittens? And there's nothing to guarantee that the attack would only come from human beings.

The blind cat's fate rests on the storm which would be forecast with heavy warnings on radio and television. The river would undulate with waves as high as two men. The mad deluge would destroy the dam and in such inclement weather, it would become impossible for the girl to come to this side with the two kids. The hotel would tremble among howling winds and monstrous waves and the stumps and poles on which it had stood, would fall off one by one. Perhaps the owner would then assemble the furniture and utensils on the lane to save them from the disaster. He wouldn't even forget to take the lantern, swinging to and fro in damaging winds. When the water would start flooding

inside, it would do so from the tilted end. The blind cat would then move towards the other end at the most. However, he would never leave the room. Let there be two possibilities at this point. Either the water level in the room would keep increasing or the whole structure of the hotel with the two storeys would crumble into the river in one sweeping wave. Whichever possibility realizes itself, the blind cat can't do anything. Either the water would overwhelm him or he would be buried in the river alongside the room and the hotel. But if the storm for some reason takes a different direction or doesn't unleash itself so destructively, the hotel in that case would remain as it is. And under the table would the blind cat be, sitting rapt in silence. In the morning, the two kids would come and see that he is, as he always was, in the old and familiar spot, sitting rapt in silence.

-----**Translated by Arka Chattopadhyay**

Glossary:

1. A common Bengali-Indian food to be consumed with rice.
2. A type of fish.
3. " "
4. " "
5. A popular Indian dress for girls.
6. Kishore Kumar (1929-1987) was a famous Indian singer who sang both in Hindi and Bengali as a playback in movies and otherwise.
7. A type of fish.
8. An Indian variant of the towel.
9. An Indian food made by parching rice on hot sand.
10. A common Indian food made of sugar.
11. Another variety of sugar made food.