

**IN**  
**BLISSFUL**  
**HELL**

**NANDITA NARAKE**

**HUMAYUN AHMED**





HUMAYUN AHMED  
born November 13, 1948.  
Associate Professor,  
Department of Chemistry,  
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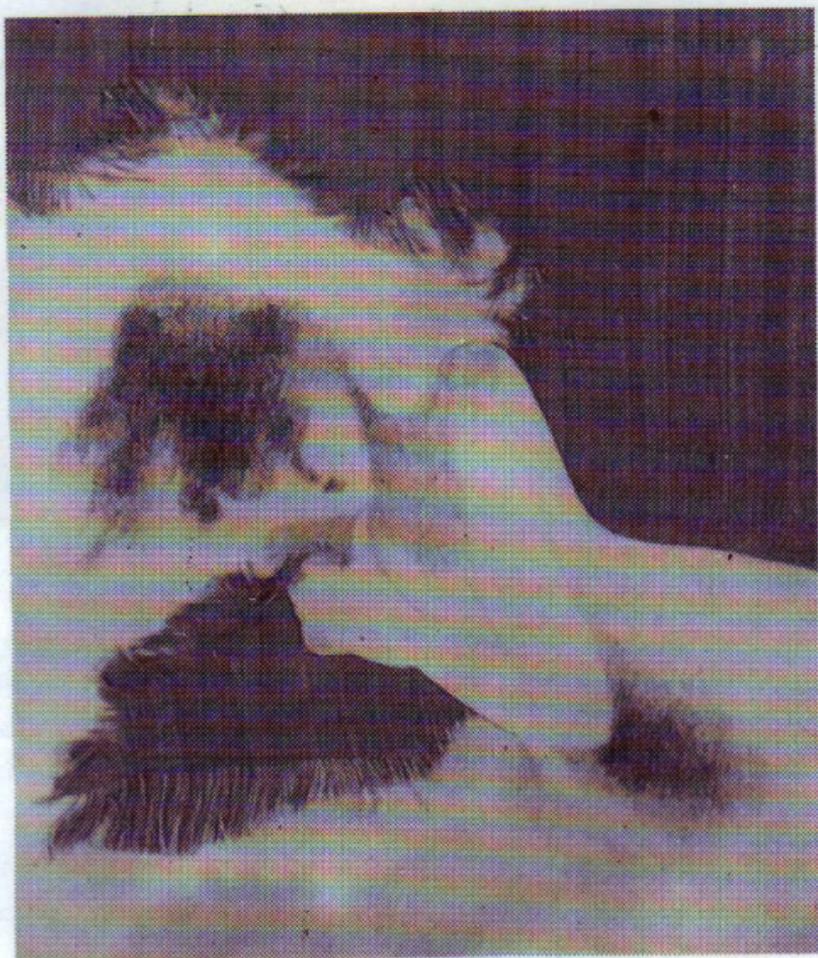
Started writing fiction  
in 1972.

Gifted with a unique prose-style --  
simple and unostentatious,  
subtle and spontaneous.  
Most prolific, most popular.  
The leading writer  
of today's Bangladesh.

Honours include  
Bangla Academy Literary Award,  
Bangladesh Shishu Academy Award,  
Michael Madhusudan Medal,  
Osmani Memorial Medal,  
Alakta Literary Award,  
Humayun Qadir Memorial Award  
etc.

Recently visited  
University of Iowa, USA  
as 'Honorary Fellow in Writing'.

Married to Gultekin.  
Three daughters  
Nova, Sheela, Bipasha  
and a son, Nuhash.



IN BLISSFUL HELL  
(*Nandita Narake*),  
starting with the theme of  
sex and adolescence,  
tolerance and violence,  
balance and ambivalence  
finally unfurls  
a twilight zone  
of complex human existence,  
of Blake's  
innocence and experience.

The characters  
mostly come from  
middle class,  
their hopes are enormous,  
their dreams are large,  
but all their struggles  
end in farce.

*In Blissful Hell*,  
the novel Humayun made his debut with,  
is still a best-seller,  
rightly called 'a contemporary classic'  
that stood the test of  
Time and Aesthetics.



**SOMOI 48**

First Published  
April 1993  
Baishakh 1400

Published by  
Farid Ahmed  
Somoi Prokashan  
38/2A Banglabazar  
Dhaka 1100

Computer compose at  
Cox's Computers  
34 Azimpur Dhaka 1205

Cover design by  
Samar Majumdar

Price  
Inland Tk. 70.00  
Abroad \$ 5

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**ISBN 984-458-045-5**

## **About the translator**

**MOHAMMAD NURUL HUDA**

born on September 30, 1949

at Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

At present working as Deputy Director,  
Bangla Academy, Dhaka.

A leading poet of the country.

Also a critic, a translator,  
an editor and a research worker.

Started writing since mid-sixties.

Widely travelled  
and represented  
Bangladesh  
in many international  
literary seminars.

Honours include  
Bangla Academy Literary Award,  
Alaol Literary Award,  
Jessore Literary Council Award,  
Abul Hasan Poetry Award,  
Cox's Bazar Medal etc.

**IN  
BLISSFUL  
HELL**

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a novel  
by  
**Humayun Ahmed**

translated  
by  
**Mohammad Nurul Huda**

**to carolyne wright**  
(translator's dedication)

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## Translator's note

I happened to be one of those fortunate few who went through the Bengali manuscript of *Nandita Narake* (In Blissful Hell), immediately after it was drafted in the early seventies. Humayun was then a student of Dhaka University doing his post-graduate studies in Chemistry.

The novel grows out of a lower middle class family, the focus remaining on Rabeya, the protagonist, who is physically grown up but mentally retarded. Rabeya's dilemma offers an interesting and convenient episode that the writer handles in a brilliant way. In fact, the novel starts with the theme of sex and adolescence, tolerance and violence, balance and ambivalence and finally unfurls a twilight zone of complex human existence. The novel, soon after its publication, claimed for its creator a place of honour in our literature.

The translation of this novel also began some twenty years back. Two young students, Khurshid and Bhuiyan, made the first draft, that I revised from top to bottom and published in one of the issues of the Bangla Academy Journal. The translator was named as Amin Ahmed, who never existed in person. However, I have been amply benefited from that earlier draft while preparing the present version that bears my name as its translator.

I am greatly indebted to the novelist himself who went through this version and suggested some changes and corrections. It is because of his collaboration that I completed the work and published it in book form.

Rabeya was uttering those very words over and over again.

Runu's head bent downward and her chin nearly touched her breast. I saw her fair ears growing red. She started scribbling in her geometry notebook. Then, all of a sudden, she stood up and said to me, "Let me have some water". Saying so she walked out hurriedly. Runu is over twelve entering the thirteenth year. She understood Rabeya's vulgar words quite well and blushed for shame. Perhaps she would have burst into tears, for she is inclined to weep easily.

I said to Rabeya,

"These are all dirty words, all rubbish. You're now much grown up, you should not say these at all."

Rabeya is elder to me by a year. I address her 'thou' as a mark of frankness. Though brothers and sisters belonging to same age-group call each other with such frankness, Rabeya addresses me with a different behaving like a true elder sister. She lent her ears to me with rapt attention. For quite some time, she had been wrapping a bed-sheet around a pillow in an attempt to make a doll. My words brought no change in her train of thought. However, she stopped making the doll and stretched herself out on the bed. With her legs swinging to and fro, she again uttered those dirty words in a raised voice. I said nothing. If opposed she would get furious, her voice would become louder and louder. A few inquisitive eyes, peeping through neighbouring windows, would try to discover what was going on.

Rabeya said,

"I'll say it again."

"Okay. Do it."

"What if I do it?"

"That's very shameful, Rabeya, very shameful." I tried to convince her in a persuading voice.

"But that he said it to me."

"Who?"

I do understand, Rabeya heard these words somewhere outside. But I cannot think that somebody could say such vulgar words to Rabeya, who became just twenty-two last August.

I said, "Who said it?"

"This morning."

"But who was it?"

"That tall and fair one."

Rabeya can say nothing more about the boy. Again, as she will wander here and there, someone may put this sort of vulgar words into her ears.

"Khoka, your milk."

Mother brought me a cup of milk and kept it on my table. Last night she had fever. Her temperature was quite high. As father knocked at my doors around midnight, I didn't wake up fully and yet I heard him saying,

"Khoka, Do you've Aspirin with you?"

I thought I was dreaming. I turned myself on the bed and tried to sleep. Right then I heard my mother moaning. She cannot bear illness. A little fever, a slight headache, and she grows extremely weak.

Father called me again,

"Khoka, Do you've Aspirin with you?"

Under the quilt was my personal dispensary. Tablets of various kinds including Aspirin and Dispirin were collected there. In darkness I began to look for middle-sized tablets. There was no light in this room. Maybe, electric wire got burnt somewhere. A lantern is lit at night. Runu puts it off at the time of sleeping as she cannot sleep in light.

Father said, "Khoka, did you get it?"

"Yes I did. But what's happened?"

"Your mother has fever."

"How would Aspirin help in fever?"

"She has a severe headache, too."

"Oh, I see."

As soon as I opened the door with three tablets in my hand, the light of the 25W bulb fixed above the verandah entered my room. To my utter surprise, there was no Aspirin in my hand.

Father got vexed and said,

"Can't you keep a match in your room?"

I remembered that there were a new match and three Bristol cigarettes in my drawer. I already had decided not to smoke more than five a day, but it was seven. And now at this midnight hour, I must smoke another one. My mind filled with pleasure thinking that I would light a cigarette within a few moments. Father went away with Aspirin. I made fire and saw Rabeya lying on the bed in an awkward manner. She had rolled up nearly the whole of her saree like a bundle upon her breast. There was no mosquito during winter, and so also no mosquito-net. That explains why no

concealment produced by a mosquito-net was needed. Father's voice was heard.

"Take it Shanu, take the tablet."

Strange! Father can still call her with such affection! I felt shy.

Father said again,

"Shanu! Shanu!"

Shortening the name Shahana as Shanu, father was addressing her beautifully. There is no barrier excepting a bamboo-wall that stands between my room and that of father. About three feet empty space rests above the wall. Even a slightest sound from that room reaches me. I can hear even the sound of a kiss.

Often I suffer from insomnia. Under my quilt I always keep four Valium-2 tablets which I never take. I know it well that sleeping pills do weaken human heart. My friend, Salil, died of two such tablets which he took for sleeping. He had been suffering from heart problems. Maybe, I have heart problems, too. At times I feel a tinge of pain in the left side of my heart.

I do not take sleeping pills even in acute insomnia. Time and again, I have to face much inconvenience for this. In the middle of the night my ears get warm listening to my father who calls, "Shanu, Shanu, Shahana". I can guess the whole thing. My nose perspires, my heart-beat accelerates and seem audible. This nocturnal episode is known to me from A to Z. Mother says in reply, "Hey, what are you doing? What a shame..."

And then father whispers something into her ears. His voice gradually lowers down. Mother chuckles with pleasure. I close my ears with both the hands. The sound within my heart seems more audible. But in a few moments everything seems quiet again. Runu and Rabeya talk incoherently in sleep. Again we hear the ticking sound of a table-clock. Gulping down the water from the jug on the table, I leave my room and stand outside.

There are two 'Hasna-Hena' trees on one side of the verandah. Mother pronounces it as 'Hasnu-Hena'. Both the trees are tall and large. The fragrance coming from their flowers seems to intoxicate me as I stand beside them. I have heard that the fragrance of 'Hasnu-Hena' attracts snakes. Montu once killed a big snake under these trees. That was a

'Chandro-Bora'. Seeing the snake mother got frightened and said, "What have you done, Montu! Its partner will now search you out!" I, too, was much frightened, though I never believed in such things. I looked for the other snake with utmost caution. Carbolic acid was sprayed around the house. Master uncle said, "The other snake is a male one." He could tell if the snake was male or female merely by seeing it. Some days passed in fear, though the male snake never made its appearance.

Rabeya said, "Mum, I want milk."

Mother got fever last night. Her face dried up and grew smaller. Hearing Rabeya's demand, it shrivelled up more. She looked like a little girl. I know that when anyone of us importunes her for something, and she fails to give it, her face turns this way looking like a little girl's. Her nostrils quiver continuously. When I was a child I disliked this gesture of my mother. Suppose, I had wanted a thing which she was unable to give. At this her face would become like a little girl's. Her nostrils would begin to quiver as usual. This gesture of mother seemed to me the gesture of a guilty person. So I went on plotting all the time how to trouble her. I felt like throwing a house-lizard on her body. Mother was always scared of house-lizards. She says she hates them, but I know she fears them. One day mother was taking her meal and a small house-lizard fell on her head from the ceiling. At once she vomited in disgust. I tried to find a house-lizard whenever I got angry with her. But finding a house-lizard was not an easy task. You might find it, but you could never catch it. I used to make balls with clothes which I would hurl at some house-lizard on the wall. The tail of the targeted lizard would drop in no time. Mother would get scared seeing the tail. Affectionate as she was, she would never scold us. Father used to beat us often. Mother opposed him and said, "Ah, what're you doing! doesn't it hurt them?" And Father would retort, "Be off! Be off from my sight! They're all spoiled by your over-indulgence." Mother looked extremely helpless in these times. I used to think, the very next morning I would go away from home and never come back again.

"Mum, give me milk."

Rabeya began to insist obstinately. I gave the cup to her. Mother said to me in a low voice,

"You better take it, your exam is drawing near. "

Milk was a luxury to us. And this luxurious thing was specially arranged for me. My M. Sc. final exam was drawing near. So I prepared my lessons till late hours at night.

At about nine O'clock mother brings me milk. As I drink it, mother takes off pins, one by one, from Rabeya's saree. About ten pins remain fixed the whole day in her saree. The whole day she wanders about. None should be able to see her body's uncovered parts. That's why mother fixes the pins to her saree. Rabeya can neither be kept confined to four walls nor be dressed up in shilwar and kameez. Shilwar and kameez are meant for younger girls. Every one looks at her without hesitation. As boys grow up, they throw their looks towards girls. This is not unusual. But some amount of shyness and hesitation is expected in their looks. Contrary to it, they feel no need for such shyness or hesitation when they look at Rabeya. If anyone tells her some vulgar words she will hear it with a smile. Then she will come back home and tell repeatedly to everybody what she heard from the boy outside.

Mother kept her hand on Rabeya's head. I heard the sound of a brief but distinct sigh. Rabeya was gulping down the milk I gave her. Maybe, she is not beautiful in the true sense of the word. And who knows, maybe she is really beautiful. Her complexion is light dark. Her eyes are big, looks are clear, and lips are lovely. Dimples appear on her cheek as she smiles. Girls who produce dimples while smiling, deliberately smile every now and then. They are aware of the fact that they look beautiful as they smile. But Rabeya is not aware of that. Still she smiles every now and then. There is a scratch mark at the middle of Rabeya's forehead. Once she fell upon a door-frame when she was a little girl. Rabeya drank milk and said,

"The milk is bad, extremely bad!"

Mother stood up and said, "Will you go to the saint of Shobhapur?" This saint has made his name as one who can cure madness. Shobhapur is eight miles away from here. It takes an hour on bicycle to go there. I know that saints and fakirs can do nothing. It's only a doctor who can help a patient. But it takes lot of money which we cannot afford. Montu wears my old shirts which have become smaller in size and no more fit me. We buy clothes once a year, during the festival of Eid-ul-Fitr.

Runu came after a while. She gave sidelong looks towards Rabeya for a few moments. No, Rabeya did not utter those vulgar words. Runu yawned. She felt sleepy. Her eyes looked drowsy. God knows how Runu felt when she heard Rabeya's dirty words. Runu is thirteen now. Next november she will be fourteen. She is Scorpio. When I was of her age, I liked lending my ears to vulgar talks. I enjoyed thinking about girls, too. In the evening, I used to go to Togor Bhai's house to learn mathematics. He had a younger sister named Lilu. I felt much delighted with the thought of marrying this girl when grown up. But I did not feel free to talk to her. The words seemed to get stuck in my mouth. When Lilu, pulling my hand, used to say, "Come on, let's play ludu", my ears would turn red for no good reason. I would feel a weight close to my throat.

Does Runu like a boy, too? Does she ever think of marrying that boy when she comes of age? No one can be sure of that. Maybe she does, maybe she does not. Runu is a nice girl. She is well-behaved and mild. At times I feel sad for her. I do not know why, but I feel that girls of this sort hardly find happiness in their lives. I will make Runu great. She will grow into a lady doctor. The lady doctors look very beautiful with stethoscopes round their necks and black bags in their hands. Runu cannot do her sums well. I make her learn Algebra giving a break to my own studies. But I know, mathematics is seldom needed to pursue medical studies.

That day I got surprised turning the pages of Runu's mathematics exercise copy. The words 'I love' were distinctly written there. I felt shy as I read further. It was, indeed, a childlike poem. 'I love this beauty of the world, these trees, these plants, these songs I do love etc etc'. I said,

"What a lovely poem, Runu!"

Out of shyness Runu turned red and said, "Oh no, it's not. It's not at all a good one."

I said, "Then it seems you've written a lot."

"Oh, no."

Runu started smiling, bending her head downward.

I said, "Show me, Runu. You're a good girl."

Runu stood up blushing. She went and opened my trunk. All her confidential things were kept there. At this age many trivial things are kept in secrecy. But Runu did not have a box of her own. At one side of my trunk, she kept two big empty biscuit packets. And there were some exercise copies

also. Runu brought an exercise copy that had the sketch of an elephant on its cover page. As she brought it, she turned purple with shyness.

I said,

"You read it for me."

"No, you read it yourself."

"Give it then."

Runu tucked the copy in my hand, and fled away. I found that there were a total of twelve poems. Two were about mother, and one about Paula. (Paula was our pet dog. One day suddenly it went away for a destination never known.) One of the poems was on the theme of Montu's snake killing. It read as follows :

Montu bhai has killed a big snake

Six feet long, stout and strong, not fake.

I had a plan to buy her a nice exercise book. She would fill it with new poems. There is the character of a little girl in one of Tagore's stories. Since the moment she learned to write, she went on writing whatever she liked. She wrote everywhere -- on walls, on her books pages, in her mother's account book. Her elder brother bought her a beautiful note book. It became an object of great charm to her. But I had no money. Even then I should buy Runu a beautiful exercise book. I remembered that the elephant-sketched copybook, in which Runu wrote her poems, had been taken from me. Rubbing off my name from the topsheet of that copybook, Runu wrote her own name in big letters. I had bought the exercise copy to keep an account of the hours I read during the day. After a week or two had passed, when nothing had been written in it, one day Runu came and stood hesitatingly in front of my table. And curving herself like a snake, she said,

"Will you please give me the exercise copy?"

"Which exercise copy?"

"This one."

"Yes, you may take it."

Runu went away taking the exercise copy. I shall buy her an excellent exercise copy with a beautiful plastic cover worth taka three and a half. I shall again see the glow of joy on her face which I saw that day.

Though I had no money, I managed to buy Runu an exercise copy. I adore her very much. I feel like caressing her whenever I see her. Runu is a very good-natured girl. Her actual name is Saleha. The name Runu was given by me.

This name is quite appropriate for her. The very sound 'Runu' produces a sort of musical sensation and the articulation R ... U ... N ... U ... gives another kind of pleasing sensation. Runu said, "I'm going to sleep."

Mother has set the mosquito-net. There are lot of mosquitoes now-a-days. They will increase as the night deepens. Their humming sound around my ears will make it difficult for me to concentrate in my studies. But I must do good results in M. Sc. Examination. I need an excellent job with a handsome salary. Runu has gone to bed twining herself beside Rabeya. Of course, she will not sleep now. Runu won't sleep as long as the lights are on.

Runu and Rabeya are lying just beside me. They are lying so close to me that I can touch them merely by stretching my hand. Rabeya falls asleep soon after lying on the bed. Sometimes she cries in her sleep. Her cries are elongated and continuous. Paula, too, used to cry this way at times. Mother then used to shout, "Get off, get off." It is said that when a dog cries, it is a sign of bad omen. Domestic animals, like dogs and cats, cry whenever they see a danger for their master. We do not know why Rabeya cries. Perhaps her daylong suppressed weeping finds an outlet in torrents during night. Runu gets afraid when Rabeya cries in her sleep. She exclaims in fear, "Look, how Rabeya is crying!" I try to allay her fear by saying, "Nothing to fear, Runu." And then I call loudly, "Hey Rabeya, why are you crying? What's happened?"

On some nights there is splendid moon-shine. Soft light enters the room through window and falls upon us. It is said that 'Hasna-Hena' blooms well in a moonlit night. The room then becomes filled with the intoxicating fragrance of these flowers. And I call,

"Are you sleeping Runu?"

"No."

"Would you like to hear stories."

"Yes."

What story to tell I cannot decide. Stopping in the middle of a story, I say, "No, not this. Let me tell another." And Runu says agreeing, "All right." Even that story does not end. Suddenly stopping in the middle of that story, I say, "It's better if you tell a story, Runu."

"But I don't know any."

"Tell me whatever you know."

"Oh no, you tell another one."

I wish to tell Runu the story of Thomas Hardy's 'A pair of Blue Eyes'. It seems to me as though Runu herself is the heroine of 'A pair of Blue Eyes'. But she is my younger sister. Next November she shall be fourteen. How to tell her such an amorous story? Runu asks,

"Why have you stopped? Why don't you finish it?"

I stop telling the story, I ask her suddenly,

"Runu, whom do you like most?"

"You."

Maybe she really likes me. There is bright moonshine outside, the charming fragrance of flowers and a wind that could lift up the mosquito net. I feel a sharp pain in my chest.

"Hey Rabeya!"

"What's happened, Runu?"

"Rabeya has lifted up her leg on me."

Rabeya has lifted up her leg on Runu's body in her sleep. She is quite healthy. Perhaps healthy girls are called girls with brimful youth. There seems an amount of obscenity in the words 'brimful youth'. But I don't know why.

Voices of people talking in the neighbouring house could be heard. As the night grows old, the voices grow more audible. During the day, the clock-bell of the police station cannot be heard. It becomes distinct only after nine O'clock at night. Someone coughed from the neighbouring house, and a few moments later there was a giggling sound. It was high pitched. Certainly it is Nahar Bhabi. Nahar Bhabi speaks in a loud voice. She is playing the record, "O God, the big eyes thou has bestowed. ...". She often hears songs in the night. This song is her favourite. I like most Tagore's "In my lawn, on the boughs of Shirish ...". They play this record very rarely. "God, the big eyes ..." is a very sad song. Nahar Bhabi is usually jolly. Still then, God knows, why she likes such a sad song. Somewhere I read that music enchants those who are very jolly. Runu suddenly called,

"Are you sleeping?"

"No."

"Nahar Bhabi is playing records."

"Yes."

"Can you tell what she will play next?"

"No. Which one?"

"The modern song 'O sparkling fire-fly make light....'"

Indeed, that song was played next. Runu laughed.

I asked, "How did you know it?"

"I myself arranged the records this noon. Your favourite song is at the very end."

Rabeya uttered in sleep, "No, no, I've told I won't go."

If Harun Bhai would have really married Rabeya, we would not have got the opportunity to listen to songs at night. Rabeya does not like songs. God knows what she likes. Even if everyone in Harun Bhai's family would have agreed, this marriage would not have taken place.

If ever Rabeya gets cured, I shall get her married to some very generous youngman. He will be a perfect gentleman like Harun Bhai. He will also play records in the late hours of night. The moon light will fall upon both of them. The man will caress Rabeya's head with his hand and say,

"What's the scratch on your forehead, Rabeya?"

"I once fell on the door-frame."

The man will slowly rest his hand on that scratch mark for a long time. And then he will kiss that spot softly. Runu called me,

"Your song's being played."

I heard "In my lawn, on the boughs of shirish ..."

My eyes got moistened with tears out of emotion. I like this song very much.

While hearing the song, I tried to imagine the face of Nahar Bhabi. At times, by no means, I can recollect the faces of even the most intimate persons. The face of Nahar Bhabi is somewhat triangular. The faces of all other members of Harun Bhai's family are oval like eggs. All of them are very charming. God knows, the richness of how many generations produces this sort of extrinsic glamour in someone's appearance. I feel good to think that there is no sorrow in this family. The mother of this family need not do utmost effort to cut expenditure after the fifteenth day of a month. If they wish, they can easily go, as in English movies, by car for outing. On the Independence day, the girls of these families stand first or second in rifle-shooting competition.

When they came to this "Peace cottage", I do not remember exactly. But it was raining very much on that day. Rabeya, Runu and I saw them arriving. We were then standing on our verandah. All of them got down from a jeep. They got wet while alighting. First of all a girl of Runu's age, named Sheela, got down. Father calls her affectionately

Sheelu Ma ; mother calls her only Sheelu. After her the elder brother got down. Though he wore spectacles of an old man, he had a childlike appearance. As he got down from the jeep, he cried out, "What a beautiful house, Sheelu!" And then their parents followed them, and finally their servants got down from the jeep. Many days after the Aziz family left the house was once again filled. Winter followed the monsoon. The two brothers and sisters marked a court in their lawn, and started playing badminton merrily.

Runu is very shy. Otherwise, she would have gone and become friendly with them. I deeply feel that Runu should be intimate with Sheelu. I used to see that, as evening came, Sheelu would stand on her verandah, and would fly pigeons by clapping her hands. They had two pigeons. Rabeya used to visit their house every now and then. We would not prohibit her from going. If we did so, she used to get irritated. The brother-in-law of our elder aunt in Chittagong is an expert Doctor. He had advised, "Let her do whatever she likes. You'll see the abnormality she has will get cured by itself." We did not have money for treatment. So we took advantage of this free treatment with our utmost ability. One day I saw that mother kept something on the table weepingly. It was a beautiful penholder. Two snow-white penguins stood fixed on both sides of the penholder. In between the two penguins, there was a young penguin gazing upward with its mouth agape. Pen was to be kept in that very open mouth. I was not familiar with the price of this sort of thing. Still then I thought it to be very costly. Mother said in a trembling voice,

"Rabeya has brought it from that house."

The first thing I thought was that Rabeya had brought it not telling anyone. But Rabeya, bending her head like a horse, started saying, "I didn't bring it. They've given it to me themselves."

Rabeya does not tell lies. But why should they give it to her? Do we have the kind of long-term intimacy that is needed for presenting such a costly thing?

Runu wrapped the pen-holder in a piece of newspaper and went to that house for the first time. Rabeya started protesting with a nasal tone, "Why has Runu taken my thing? I'll teach her a lesson if she breaks it."

It was learned that Rabeya did not bring it. They themselves gave it to her. Not exactly they, but Harun bhai gave it. Harun bhai was the boy who would soon leave for

some foreign country and who was only waiting for a passport. Sheelu and her mother did not know of it. They were also surprised. Within this short time, Runu became intimate with Sheelu. She brought with her a big mimi-chocolate. She brought a book, too. It was Bibhuti Bhushan's "Drishti Prodip".

"What sort of people are they, Runu?" I asked.

"Very good."

"Hey, so you've melted for a chocolate!"

"Oh, no, Sheelu is really very good. Do you know she can drive car?"

"Is that so? But she is too young!"

"Really. They've sent their car for repair. When it's brought back, she will show that she can drive."

"What else did you talk about?"

"A lot of things, they've many records."

"Many?"

"Yes, too many. She has asked me to go there everyday."

"Only you'll go? Won't she come?"

"Why not? Certainly she will."

Sheelu indeed used to come, but very rarely. Whenever she needed to meet Runu, she would stand beside the window, and shout, "Runu, Runu". Runu would run leaving everything. In my heart I used to wish Sheelu to come frequently to our house. I intensely desired to talk to her. I had planned in my mind what to talk about if I met her. I had even seen her in dreams on two occasions.

In one of the dreams, Sheelu came and sat on the table with a very loving gesture. She was wearing a saree. I said, "Why are you sitting on the table? Sit on the chair."

Sheelu said smiling, "I like to sit on the table." Taking a spoon in her hand, and striking it mildly and repeatedly on a tea cup, she began to produce a sort of music.

The second dream I saw at noon. I felt asleep while hearing the programme called 'On Request' in radio. Suddenly I saw that Sheelu came before me. She was wearing a saree as before.

I said complaining, "Sheelu, why are you so late? What a beautiful song was being played."

"My name is Sheela. Why do you call me Sheelu?"

I used to have this sort of talks with Sheelu. It would happen that I was sitting on the verandah, and suddenly Sheelu would call,

"Hallo, will you please call Runu?"

Father got very angry when he saw the penholder. He had vanity possibly because he was poor. He did not like Seelu's family. He suffered all his life. That is why he did not have the mentality to take other's prosperity easily. He started his life as a teacher in a private school. His earning then was not fixed. We were all dependent upon his earnings. He left the teaching job and entered a firm. After serving for twelve years he became an Accountant from a Cashier. His monthly wage became 350/- Taka. Father was insisting repeatedly on returning the penholder. But Runu or mother none paid any heed to it. The two penguins of the penholder stood like meditating statues on my table. Only Rabeya at times said, "Khoka, don't think that it's yours, though I've kept it on your table. Of course, if you like, you may keep your pen in it."

Runu uttered in her sleep, "No, I won't drink water." Then she moaned for sometime. The clock bell of the police station rang once. It might be 12.30 p.m or 1 p.m. or 1.30 p.m. I feel like smoking another cigarette. Someone said that the pleasure of smoking cigarette is in fact psychological. One feels a pleasure destroying something by burning. Many say, "It's the companion of the lonely." It's midnight and I am awake. So, indeed, I am lonely. Once I saw an advertisement on cigarette in a Cinema Hall. The whole screen was dark. When it was lit dimly, someone was seen walking forward on a wide street. None was around. The atmosphere was ghostly with brooding darkness. The words projected on the screen read, "Is he companionless?" The man suddenly halted and lit a cigarette. Then appeared the words, "No, he isn't companionless. Here's his companion." A wonderful advertisement! I think that the value of the companionship given by a cigarette is greater than its intoxication.

I heard a mild sound of the door opening. My ears became alert. Who is it? Certainly not father. He does not get up silently, and does not open the door quietly. It may be Montu or Master uncle. There was sound of water being drawn from the tube-well. For a long time this noise could be heard. The sound of gurgling and sprinkling water was drawing near. Yes, he is Master uncle. He has a habit of sitting on the chair beside flower plants, and hum songs in the dead hours of night. When Paula was alive, initially, he

would growl as if he were a stranger. After that he could be heard welcoming an acquaintance. Master uncle used to say, "Hey, Paula. Even you don't sleep."

I asked, "Who's there?"

Master uncle replied, "It's me, Khoka."

"What're you doing?"

"Just sitting. What a heat-wave! You haven't slept yet?"

"No."

"Will you come out?"

As I opened the door and got out, I found Master uncle sitting on the edge of the verandah with his legs hanging.

"I'll fetch a chair for you. Please sit on it." I said.

"No. It's all right."

I sat beside him. It was not hot, rather it was the cold of 'Ashwin'. At times the cool breeze blew palpably. Perhaps Master Uncle also suffered from Insomnia at times.

Uncle said, "I was sleeping. Suddenly I woke up. After that I tried a lot, but couldn't sleep ...."

I said, "It happens if one gets awake in the early hours of night."

Uncle kept quiet for a long time. I heard the sound of a brief sigh. He exclaimed in a low tone, "Look, what charming fragrance!"

"Yes. Very charming."

When I lived in Shiuriteola, there was a 'Kathal-Champa' tree in that place. I met it on my way to school. It had a charming smell. My uncle disliked the smell of 'Kathal-Champa'. It was too strong for him. Uncle said, gazing at the stars in the sky,

"I can tell the time by merely looking at the stars." I also looked at the sky. It was a clear sky. Numerous stars were twinkling. Uncle said,

"Look, countless stars! I've heard when there are too many stars visible in the sky then famine stalks the country!"

I am feeling cold. Even then it was pleasant to sit there. I like Master uncle very much. He is a strange fellow. He never married. For more than twenty four years he has been living with us. We have no blood relationship with him, but no one outside can understand it. Not to speak of an outsider, even I myself took him for many years to be my father's own brother. That he is a friend of father and that being only a friend he has become so intimate with us, it is difficult to understand. Master uncle got acquainted with my father in

Ananda Mohan Colleg. It happened a long time ago. We heard it from mother, for it was not possible for us to know directly from father. Whatever father used to tell mother, she used to tell it to us. Perhaps father felt deep affection for Master uncle, which is why he told every detail to mother.

Master uncle had been very reticent as a boy. Occupying a seat beside the window he used to look outside throughout his class hour. He was not a boy whom you could distinguish easily. He was somewhat bent in his stature, his collar bones protruding, and his face rugged. Every one in the classroom used to call him 'Vulture Uncle'. Still then, father was strongly drawn towards him, being fascinated by his strange indifference to everything and by his uncommon proficiency in mathematics. They developed deep friendship between themselves within a very short time. Master uncle used to say, "I love two things : first mathematics, and secondly astrology." At that very young age, Master uncle was able to prepare an accurate horoscope.

Just before his examination, Master uncle had to leave the College. He had got entangled with a very particular trouble. It happened at a time when very few girls used to go to study science in Ananda Mohan College.

Anila Chowdhury, the daughter of Advocate Radhikaranjan, was an exception among all the girls. She had a very charming appearance. She could sing very well, and as a student was very meritorious. But she never used to talk to anyone. If anyone tried to talk to her, she would reply cold-heartedly. Perhaps, she was egoistic. To humiliate her the boys one day suddenly changed her name and started calling her 'Vulture Aunt'. They prepared many copies of a poem with the caption 'Vulture Uncle and Vulture Aunt', and distributed it among all students. Master uncle did not mind being called 'Vulture Uncle'. But in that particular incident, he was merely driven right at his wit's end. Being unable to cope with the adverse criticism of the boys, Anila Chowdhury left Ananda Mohan College. After a few days her entire family moved on to Calcutta permanently. Perhaps Master uncle had developed a deep weakness for Anila, for, simultaneously, he also left the College forever. After this, for many years, his whereabouts remained unknown.

Nearly after six years, father met him at Tagore para in Comilla. It was his own marriage ceremony. Father could

not at first recognize him. He could do so only when holding his hands Master uncle said excitedly.

"I'm Sharif Akand! Can't you recognize me?"

He had grown old before his age. Wrinkles had appeared on his face, and he had become more bent in his stature. Father said in surprise.

"What a surprise ! I never thought that we would meet again. Where do you live ?"

"I live in the family you've got married to. I teach their children."

"Will you stay with me?" father asked him.

Master uncle readily agreed to the proposal. From then onwards, he has been living with us. Father had managed a job for him in a school, and this sufficed his personal financial requirements. Since our very birth, he is attached to our memory. The things I can recollect of childhood are : we are reading on a mat in his room ; Rabeya is making noise ; Master uncle, while teaching, is suddenly saying, "Khoka, stretch out your palms."

After attentively studying my palms, his thoughtful mood was visible once again ; then his muttering could be heard ; when listened to it carefully, he was heard uttering, "fate is predetermined. Everyone is surrounded by a circle. No one can go beyond it. Not me and not even you Khoka."

There were not much conversation between father and Master uncle. Father is a man who talks less to others. And Master uncle is also a man who has an indifferent nature.

Though Master uncle seemed calm and quiet from outside, in his heart there was an intense restlessness. When I was in school, he had been deeply preoccupied with astrology. Even his usual work reflected his inner restlessness. In the dead hours of night, he used to walk about wearing a pair of wooden sandals. Hearing the clattering of the sandals, I would wake up several times ; many a time I clasped mother with my hands in fear. Mother then would say, "Don't be afraid, Khoka, nothing to fear. He's your Master uncle."

Father would call in a loud voice, "Hey Master Sharif Mia, O Sharif Mia."

The clattering of the wooden sandals would cease, and Master uncle would ask in reply,

"What's happened?"

"The boy is getting afraid. What're you doing at this hour of night?"

"I am observing the stars. So many stars I've never seen before. Would you like to see?"

"Ha, stupid! Go to sleep."

"All right."

Master uncle would then go away. While going, he would again produce the clattering of the wooden sandals.

All of us began our studies under him. I was his first pupil; next was Montu. Rabeya could not study. She did not show a slight interest in it. Runu now reads under him. He has no close relative. Even if there is any, he has no urge to meet them. He spends most of his leisure time in studying books on Astrology. As he is adept in mathematics, he understands astrology well. At times, I bring books from him and read them. Perhaps I don't believe in them. But I like to read. I came to know that I was born under the Pisces. People born under this become philosophers, and are fortunate. Their lives are marked with deep experiences. A lot of happiness, glory and wealth come to them. It is very pleasant to imagine these. Uncle said gazing at the sky, "Do you see that Great Bear? The little star on its right side is called Ketu, the last planet. It's a very fatal planet. It appeared at the very moment of my birth."

I don't know for certain if one has to pass all his life in isolation for being born under Ketu. With wakeful eyes in the dead hours of night, the fate-controlling planets should be examined. I like uncle. I respect the tremendous urge within him for knowledge. With most of his wages, he buys books on astrology, and reads about foreign lands. At times he visits unknown places. Those are places where there is a forest, or there is a dilapidated temple, or where may be lying the ruins of a gate built during the reign of King Babar. It cannot even be imagined that the range and interests of studies by a mere school teacher can be so diverse. As a man he is not very much social. He makes excessive endeavour to conceal himself. I never saw him talking to mother with his eyes lifted. I have never even seen him sitting in a homely manner bare-bodied inside his room.

At school uncle used to teach us history and mathematics. I did not like history. Because my name is Humayun, I had an excessive liking for Humayun, the king. In our history book is written grandly his defeat at the hands of Sher Shah. But Sher Shah was the one who constructed the Grand Trunk Road, introduced the system of postal communication by horse-riding. But despite all this,

he could not win the heart of a child of class VII. While writing on his life in the examination script, I felt very disgusted. From then onwards, I became bored of the whole subject of history. Uncle knew that. One day he said to me, "Khoka, I'll tell you about your favourite King Humayun. Come to my room in the afternoon."

I remember that day very well: uncle half lying on his bed, and I sitting beside him, Runu and Montu sitting in that very room and playing Ludu. Uncle went on saying, "Someone has written a short book on Humayun, named 'Humayun Nama'. In the book he showed Humayun helpless at the hands of misfortune. If I could become such an unfortunate king, I wouldn't like to be the great conqueror Caesar or even the great warrior Napoleon. He marched towards Chitor at the call of its princess. And what a noble act he performed when he enthroned Vistiwala! What a fascination he had for music, religion and books ...!" I had been listening to all these with wonder. When I heard that while Humayun, hearing the Azan, was coming down very fast from the library to join the prayer. He slipped and died, at that moment my eyes got moistened. Uncle said, "Very generous king! His heart was the heart of a real poet." I then felt as though I was myself that king, and all the credit of making me the king went to uncle alone.

On this Ashwin mid-night, uncle is sitting on the cold floor. The cold wind blew wildly. The moonshine was fading away. At any moment the moon may disappear and darkness may spread all around. I remembered the old days.

"Uncle, uncle." I called.

"What is it?"

"It's very late. Please go to bed."

"All right."

Uncle went away walking slowly. I came back into my room and stretched myself out on bed. Rabeya cried in her sleep, "Mummy, Mummy."

I remembered Rabeya getting lost one day. It was in the month of 'Choitro'. The day was very hot. When I returned from college, I came to know that Rabeya was nowhere to be found. Her places for wandering were limited. She moved about in a few houses. She used to come back before lunch. She'd have her food, taken short nap and venture out again. On that day Rabeya did not return even after evening had passed. Mother was then wailing. Montu was busy searching Rabeya right from noon. Father was stupefied. The sudden

disappearance of a deranged, but beautiful and young girl was painful for many reasons. I could not think what to do. Could she be found out again? Runu lay quietly on her bed. She had a calm way of expressing her sorrow. She was lying dishevelled on the bed. Her little body seemed emblematic of helplessness. When she saw me, she got up and sat, and asked anxiously,

"What'll happen now?"

Her eyes showed strains within a short time.

I replied in a consoling tone. "She'll be found, Runu, there's nothing to fear."

"But she doesn't know our address! If someone finds her, will she be able to tell anything?"

Rabeya would not be able to tell anything. She would perhaps look helplessly with her big eyes. Like some little girl lost in a fair, she would merely utter, "I want to go home. I want to go home." But where this home is she doesn't know.

Runu said again, "If she falls into the hand of some bad guy?"

Runu had learned to understand.

Girls get mentally matured before boys. From their very young age they are able to see the ugliness of this world. They are themselves the victims of world's ugliness, that is why, nature informs them of darkness at a very early stage.

Rabeya came back at 8 O'clock in the night. Master uncle was with her. In a moment the anxieties that were pressing upon our mind were dispelled. Master uncle informed, "I found her near the school. I didn't know she got lost."

I had no interest to hear all those. It was enough for me that she was found. That she was weeping standing near the school-house, that seeing Master uncle she crossed the road running, that while crossing she just escaped a motor-accident by a hair's breadth -- we no longer had any more interest to listen to all those.

Father fasted for two consecutive days. He had vowed to fast.

"Khoka, O Khoka."

"What is it?"

"Light the lantern."

"Why?"

"I need to go to the bathroom." Rabeya came out of the mosquito-net.

I said, "No need of lighting the lantern. Come, there's enough light in the verandah."

"No, light it."

I searched out a match-box and lit the lantern. No sooner had I opened the door then mother asked from her room, "Who's there?" As the night draws to its end, mother's sleep becomes very light.

I said, "It's us. Rabeya is going to the bathroom."

When we came out in the verandah Rabeya yawned. Taking a deep breath she said, "Isn't there a strong fragrance of flowers?"

"Yes. Do you like the fragrance of flowers, Rabeya?"

"No, it's not good."

Walking towards the bathroom, she asked, "When'll Paula come back, Khoka?"

It seems that Rabeya has a deep relation with Paula. Very often she wants to know about the dog. God knows, what grief made the dog homeless.

I won't be able to sleep tonight as well. My exams are after two months. One sleepless night makes it impossible to study the following two days. Somehow some mosquitoes have made their way into the mosquito-net. They are buzzing around my ears endlessly. This will continue till they have managed to sting and draw blood from my soft flesh. I didn't feel like fanning them away. Plunging my head into the pillow I made every endeavour to dispel all anxieties and get to sleep.

Suddenly light poured into the room. Some one has switched on the 100W bulb in Sheelu's verandah. Who can it be? Is it Sheelu's father or Nahar Bhabi? It might be Sheelu or her mother. Sheelu's mother is a wonderful lady. She once came to our house.

In the evening, this lady sits with her husband in the lawn and sips tea happily. Often in the evenings she plays badminton with Harun Bhai gasping for breath. She has a deep green saree which makes her look ten years younger than she is. This is the lady who came to visit us one day. It was a Friday. Runu's school was closed. Father was in his office. Sheelu's mother wore a light-blue saree with red embroidery on it. She wore spectacles with golden frame. It made her look like a lady Professor of some college. Mother became busy. She was perplexed how to entertain the guest. And what about Sheelu's mother? She sat like a statue for some time and then said something very astounding. We

looked towards her with surprise. Putting emphasis on each and every word, she said with pauses.

"Harun has gone mad. He wants to marry your daughter Rabeya."

None of us could utter a word. She went on saying, "Don't send your daughter to my house anymore. God knows by what witchcraft she has won the heart of my son. A girl who is not mentally balanced! What a shame!"

Mother almost shrunk in shame.

That day Rabeya was beaten for no good reason. Father had lost his temper when he heard about it. Why should she go there uncalled for? When father gets angry he goes out of his senses. He beat that aged half-mad girl relentlessly.

Rabeya was not sure why she was being beaten. Still she was repeatedly uttering, "I won't do it anymore. Why're you beating me? I said, I won't do it anymore." She was looking at us again and again. Mother was weeping quietly. And then a strange thing happened. Hearing Rabeya's cries, Harun Bhai came to our house for the first time. He stood on our verandah and seemed to tremble slowly. His eyes were red. He said mildly, "Why're you beating her?"

Father stared at Harun Bhai. Too became very annoyed. His sudden appearance in our house seemed like a joke on us. Rabeya said,

"Look, they're beating me nothing for."

I saw shadows of pain painted on Harun Bhai's pale face. Even then I said to him in a firm voice,

"Go home. Why've you come?"

Sheelu and her mother stood together at their window.

For some days Rabeya was kept locked in a room. It was not needed for long, as Harun Bhai got married to Nahar Bhabi. Nahar was his cousin, and she was doing her B.A. in Home Economics. Harun Bhai left for Germany to obtain his degree in Chemical Engineering. All this was planned earlier.

Nahar Bhabi came to know everything. Hardly a week had passed after her marriage, she came to our house and talked to all of us. She took Rabeya to her house. Rabeya came back smiling with a yellow packet in her hand. She said,

"Mother, look, what a beautiful saree that girl has given me. I didn't ask for it. She has given it herself."

Rabeya unfolded a blue saree in front of us. It was of beautiful colour and looked wonderful.

The crows cawed. Perhaps dawn was approaching. A soft light has spread all around. As I came out opening the door and stood outside, I heard the Azan. On the other side of the field, the dense darkness around the jack-fruit-grove was lessening. Nahar Bhabi stood on soft grass barefooted, her hands resting upon the bamboo-wall. She wakes up early in the morning. Looking at me she smiled and said,

"Strange, you got up very early today."

I kept quiet, and nodded my head lightly in the affirmative. Nahar Bhabi said, "I played your favourite song last night. Did you hear it?"

"Yes."

"Runu selected the songs. She herself set the records. Is Runu still sleeping?"

"Yes."

"Please wake her up. She should walk on dew barefooted. It keeps the eyes healthy."

Runu, her hands wrapped around Rabeya's neck, was sleeping peacefully. I called her in a raised voice, "Runu, Runu."

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Mother looked pale for some days. There were marks of weariness in her as if she had just recovered from some serious illness. She has grown old. Her excessive labour to look after the whole family has rendered her mind and body weak and wearied. Even then I don't like her helpless looks. Very soon I may get a good job. I want everyone to be happy in all respects. I shall take mother along with me to visit 'Sitakundo' once. When I was in college, I once visited that place with some of my friends. It was so beautiful! So wonderful! From the 'Chandranath' hills, a splendid view of the sea could be seen. Mother certainly will not be able to climb up the hills. We shall all climb up the hills leaving behind father and mother. Perhaps father too would want to go along with us. If we can reach the top just before evening, we shall be able to view the sunset. We shall carry with us a record player, and many records as well.

"Khoka, O Khoka."

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Come here, let's talk."

"Please sit down, You're always busy working all day long."

"Oh, no."

"Your health seems broken down very much, mummy."

"It's no use thinking of health!"

Mother sat in front of me. Under her eyes are black rings. She said slowly, "You know, Khoka, I couldn't sleep even last night."

"Why didn't you call me? I had medicine with me."

"I called you twice. You were sound asleep."

Mother heaved a deep sigh. I then realised that I slept a lot. I get asleep by 9 P.M. and wake up round 8 A.M. the next morning. Mother said

"I'll take Rabeya to your eldest Aunt."

"What's the matter?"

"Just for a visit."

"You must have received information of some saint?"

Mother looked outside through the window. Her nose seemed trembling softly. Suddenly I discovered a childishness in her. I said,

"What do you think about all the time, Mummy?"

"Nothing. I don't think of anything. Won't you take tea?"

"At this hour! It's noon!"

"Oh, have it. You used to like tea before."

Mother went away. There was an obvious change in mother. Surely, she is not in good health. She has to be examined by a specialist.

Runu's school closes at 4 O'clock in the afternoon. But she was back today at noon. She laughed and said,

"Classes are over."

"Why so early? What's the matter?"

"Our school-hour has been shifted to morning from today. I went to school at seven. You were sleeping then. My God, you can sleep so much!"

Mother came with tea.

Runu said, "Please, Mummy, let me too have a cup of tea."

"Bring an empty cup and share it."

"No, leave it then. Let brother have it."

"O, do share it."

Runu sat there beside me. As she was taking tea, she smiled for a while to herself and said,

"Mummy, I'm hungry. What have you cooked today?"

"Fish. Is it proper to take tea while you're feeling hungry?"

"It makes no difference, Mummy. Oh yes, I saw Rabeya and father on a rickshaw. Where have they gone?"

"I don't know. When is your summer vacation, Runu?"

"It's still a long time. It'll be from the 15th of the next month."

"I want to visit your Aunt. Will you stay back?"

"What's this, Mummy? Who else is going with you?"

"Rabeya and your father."

"So that's it. It means that I'm excluded."

We all laughed at Runu's words. She said looking at me,

"When you get a job, will you take me along with you for visits?"

"Certainly."

"But I'll go to Cox's Bazar. Sheelu and others went there last time."

"Good enough."

"And the day when you get your first pay. . .?"

"What do you want on that day?"

" . . . on that day you'll have to give me ten Takas. Will you?"

"Oh, yes. But what'll you do with it?"

"I won't tell you now."

Runu has grown taller slightly. Her pupils seemed more dark. There was a restlessness in her too. The other day I noticed her standing in front of the mirror and combing her hair for a long time. Can she realise touches of glamour flooding her eyebrows, her yellow cheeks and her elegantly shaped chin? Nature is unlocking unknown realms before her with the secret key of youth. Often I have noticed her reading novels lying in bed at night. At times she wipes off tears with a handkerchief. I then ask her,

"What's happened, Runu?"

"Nothing."

"Why're you weeping then?"

"No, I'm not weeping!"

"Let me see what book you're reading."

Runu shows the book to me. There is nothing of the sort in it to make one weep. But there does come a phase in life when everything is touched by emotion. When I'd get my first pay I'll buy Runu a beautiful saree. It will be designed with white flowers on its green background. I have seen the girl with Roll - 13 wearing this kind of saree.

I saw Sheelu after a long time. They had all gone to Chittagong on a vacation. After many days they've returned. During these time, 'Shanti Cottage' looked desolate. In the evenings the guard would put on the light of the verandah and sit there quietly. The local boys and girls would play hide and seek finding the house empty.

"My dearest, don't spoil the flower trees," the guard would shout at the children. Even then the tone of his protest would seem empty like the house itself. At times, Rabeya would appear suddenly like a storm. She would shout from outside the gate.

"Hey guard. Hey old man."

"Yes, my dear sister."

"Where've they gone?"

"They've gone out on a vacation."

"Why?"

The guard would smile at Rabeya. He would then tell her in an affectionate tone.

"They'll come back, my dear sister."

"When? Tomorrow?"

"No. They'll come back on the 16th."

"No, they must come back tomorrow. Will you go to receive them at the station?"

"Yes."

"I'll also go with you."

"All right."

"Will you surely take me along with you?"

"All right, dear sister, I'll surely take you along with me."

"Pluck me some guavas."

The old man then would take a long stick and happily search for guavas. On the tree bent over the motor-garage, guavas had grown abundantly.

I too had been waiting, like Rabeya, for their return. When would Sheelu come back, whom I named 'Koruna' in my heart? She will stand like a statue in the garden, sing suddenly in her own fancy and look at our house and call in a soft voice,

"Runu, Runu, are you at home?"

I had been waiting for it. I did not have any idea of love, but I cherished it secretly in my heart.

I saw Runu after a long time. She saw me as she alighted from the car. She said in a very soft voice,

"Are you all well? Is Runu well?"

That same oval face with eyebrows drawn towards the forehead glanced everywhere while talking absentmindedly! My heart trembled within. I felt a strange pain when I looked directly into Sheelu's eyes.

I also asked, "Are you all well, Sheelu?"

"Yes."

While the luggage was being unloaded, Sheelu's mother looked at me through the corner of her eyes. Even at this old age she has coloured her lips and face. Denying her age this way and wearing a dazzling saree, she would look rather funny.

But still then she is Sheelu's mother. I looked towards her with respect. Nahar Bhabi got down last of all. She has become very charming. Her smooth skin seemed to shine in sunlight. Beads of sweat on her nose sparkled. Seeing me, Nahar Bhabi exclaimed like a child.

"How much I've thought about you all!"

"I too thought about your return."

"Where are Runu and Rabeya?"

"Runu has gone to school. Rabeya has gone out wandering."

"I've brought many story books for Runu. I've also bought a lot of new records."

Sheelu's mother said in a cold voice,

"You'll get headache in sunshine. Go and sit inside, girls."

Sheelu, I call you 'Koruna' in my heart. I dream of doing many things for you. Every night I think a lot about you. I imagine that you have fallen very ill. You are lying down on your bed, and merely counting the last days of your life. Oneday I stood beside your bed. And you seemed to complain like a child.

"You've come after such a long time!"

I said to you, "But you never called me, Sheelu. I would've come as soon as you called me."

You smiled palely. I sat beside you. The wind was rushing in through the window. Your bonde hair fluttered in the breeze. I kept my hand on your head. You said, "Did you know that I had a Myna which whistled like a human being? It has broken the cage and flown away."

What a ridiculous and childish thought! On many occasions I would go on imagining such things and the night would grow old. Stray dogs on the streets would bark. Sometimes, Master uncle would wake up and mutter away to himself.

My friend, Ramiz, got himself married to a formerly married woman. The girl had eloped with him, leaving behind her husband and her two children. Her husband had taken poison and committed suicide out of shame and grief. When I came to know about the incident, I felt an intense contempt for Ramiz. Many days after it, one day Sheelu went out for a visit with her family members, leaving the house in darkness. I do not know why then it came to my mind that Ramiz did not commit any crime.

I do not know wherefrom love grows. Ashfaq used to say : love is merely a desire, a sophisticated terminology for sexual attractions. But I do not think it to be so. I never imagine Sheelu sleeping, holding me in an embrace. One day Sheelu will be old. Her hairs will turn grey. Her worm-eaten weak teeth will become stained. With the dim eyesight of her cataract-affected eyes, will she be able to glance thirty years back, and see a sensitive youth standing with his attentive ears to hear when that soft voice would call,

"Dada Bhai, is Runu at home?"

These days I have grown somewhat emotional. Mother tries to understand me at times. Runu often keeps staring at me for a long time. Maybe, I do not understand her properly. Even then her manners seem strange to me. She is trying her best to know some secret. That day she asked me quite irrelevantly,

"Dada Bhai, does Sheelu seem very intelligent to you?" I tried my best to keep myself composed.

"Yes, she seems so," I replied pretending carelessness.

"But do you know what she says?"

"What?"

"She says, 'Your Dada Bhai looks foolish, isn't it?'"

It goes without saying that I felt very unhappy on that day. Not because somebody called me foolish, but because she was not aware of the deep emotion in my heart.

I do believe that when Sheelu will come to know everything she will certainly look at me differently.

"Did you feel very bad to hear that, Runu?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Is Sheelu a good friend of yours?"

"Yes."

There is a change, though I am not sure what it is, in our family. Its harmony is broken somewhere. Sheelu is walking in my thoughts taking possession of my whole being in such a way that I am unable to comprehend anything properly. Mother seldom utters a word now-a-days. She moves about worriedly. Her disappointed attitude, her drawlings in low tone — all these evince that something has gone wrong. Father often comes and sits in my room and talks about matters of little importance. He asks, "How are your studies going on?" and then exclaims, "What high prices of things in the market!" When I observe his way of talking, I can understand well that he wants to tell me something. He touches this and that while talking incoherently, and then gets up and goes away all of a sudden. I cannot guess what he wants to tell. We are afraid of father and have little courage to ask him anything directly. When I ask mother, "Mummy, what's the matter?", she replies as if she knows nothing. "Nothing wrong! What'll happen, Khoka?"

Mother cannot speak lies. She cannot keep anything secret. I ask, putting proper stresses on my words,

"Tell me, what's happened, Mummy?"

Mother, looking down fixedly at the floor, drawls out in a trembling voice, "Nothing, nothing wrong, Khoka!"

Even then I find father and mother whispering secretly between themselves. Father's eyebrows seem to twitch now and then. He sits outside late hours at night. The night before yesterday mother was weeping in a low tone. It seemed to me as though someone was humming a tune.

Rabeya said, "O Khoka, look, Mummy is weeping in that room." Runu exclaimed, "Really, is it Mummy weeping? I thought it was some cat!"

Rabeya called loudly,

"Mummy, O Mummy. Why're you weeping?"

Mother became quiet.

Rabeya called again, "Mummy, O Mummy."

Mother replied in a broken voice,

"Yes?"

"Why are you crying?"

I want to know everything. I care for everyone. I want to do more than what is expected of me for the family that father has so long supported. If any difficulty has risen, I don't want to keep myself aloof from it. I wish them all happiness in life. I want Runu to have a Myna like Sheelu which at times will whistle tune of happiness like human beings.

One day, while I was asleep, Rabeya woke me up. Her eyelids were quivering with excitement. She exclaimed,

"Khoka, have you heard, I'm getting married!"

I looked at her in surprise. She then said giggling,

"Don't you believe it? By God, I'm really getting married, you might as well ask Mummy."

"When are you getting married?"

"In the afternoon today. I'll take bath now, and then dress up. Don't go around telling it to others, Khoka. I'll feel shy if you do so."

When I asked mother, she said,

"Yes, the bridegroom's relations will come to see the bride in the evening." I said, astonished, "Who is going to marry a mad girl?" Mother said, "She isn't mad! The slight derangement that she has will get cured by itself."

"Does the other party know about it?"

Mother replied in a fearful tone,

"I can't say exactly. I don't know whether your father has told them. Khoka, you better not interfere."

"But why suddenly the need of this marriage?"

"I don't know. Your father has arranged everything. Go and ask your father."

They will come to see Rabeya at five in the evening. Everything was ready by four O'clock. Mother prepared food, exhausted. New curtains were hung in the drawing room. The table cloth, which was kept reserved in the trunk, was laid on the table. Montu brought some flowers from somewhere far away. He arranged the flowers in the vase. Runu moved about, wearing a lotus-colour saree of Rabeya.

Rabeya started whining,

"Mummy, why has Runu wore my saree ? She'll make it dirty."

"Don't worry. If it gets dirty, it'll be washed."

"But if it gets torn?"

"Stop whining."

"No, I'm not whining. If I were not getting married today, I would've torn off Runu's hair."

Rabeya has put on a sky-blue costly saree. She is not dressed up with much embellishment. Yet who knew that she would look so beautiful! Her large floating eyes, her elegantly shaped chin, her childlike looks — all this made her look like the imprisoned princess of some fairy tale book.

Master uncle is sitting in the verandah wearing a white Punjabi. He is waiting there to receive the bridegroom party. They were supposed to come at 5 p.m., but nobody came even by 6 p.m.. Master uncle took their address, and went for an enquiry. It was then known that no one would come. They somehow came to know of the conspiracy hatched by our side to induce the bridegroom to marry a mad girl.

Out of shame my eyes flushed with tears. What was the use of all this? It'd have been better had there been no marriage. Mother said in a broken voice,

"It was really necessary."

"What for?"

"I've a doubtful feeling, Khoka."

"What is it?"

"Tomorrow your father will take Rabeya to a doctor. You'll then come to know everything."

Father got down from a rickshaw. Rabeya also got down slowly. She said with a worried face,

"Mummy, doctor has prohibited me from doing any hard labour. From now on I'm only to take rest. Isn't it father?"

Father looked at mother and said in a trembling voice,

"What should we do now?"

I came to know the matter. Runu came to know it.

Only Montu, who had gone out to play football, could not know about it. Rabeya's continuous wandering has borne its evil fruit. Doctor has prohibited her from doing any hard labour. From now on she needs only rest.

Rabeya is mentally deranged. From her very childhood, she used to wander about. Each and every house is known to her. She calls the neighbouring people her uncle, grandfather etc.

Certainly some one among them took her along with him. It is not difficult to seduce such a girl.

Mother is unable to sleep at night. Black marks are visible under her eyes. Runu does not go to Sheelu's house any more to hear songs. While paying a visit one day, Nahar Bhabi asked,

"What's the matter? Now-a-days none of you go to our house, not even Rabeya."

Runu did not reply. Mother said in a low voice,

"Rabeya is ill."

"What is it ? I didn't know about it!"

"Nothing serious. Just her health isn't well."

While speaking, mother's voice seemed to quiver. She looked helpless.

I tried to know the cause of this mishap directly from Rabeya. In the evening, when Runu went to Master uncle to read, and when Rabeya and I were alone in the room, I started enquiring,

"Rabeya."

"Yes."

"Where do you roam about ?"

"To many places. I go to the known houses."

"Do you like them very much?"

"Yes."

"Who are the people you like?"

"Everyone."

"Do you like the boys?"

"Yes."

"Tell me their names."

She went on telling their names one after another. None of them seemed suspicious to me. All of them were mere boys. They call Rabeya their elder sister.

"Do they caress you, Rabeya?"

"Yes."

"How do they caress?"

"They play with me, and . . ."

"And what?"

"And tell stories."

"What stories?"

"About ghosts."

I asked hesitatingly, "Did anyone kiss you, Rabeya?"

"Oh no, how can it be!" She exclaimed blushing.

Mother's enquiries were more candid and direct. It embarrassed me. She asked Rabeya in an affectionate tone,

"Rabeya, who opened your saree? Tell me his name."

"Mummy, you're being very indiscreet to me!"

Mother became angry. She said, panting breathlessly,

"Then why did it happen ? Tell me, you bitch!"

Rabeya did not say anything. Mother wept profusely. Rabeya looked at her perplexed. She asked,

"Why're you weeping. Mummy ?"

"Tell me, with whom did you lie ?"

Rabeya kept quiet. Perhaps she did not understand her words.

Father seems somewhat insane. He has become very ill-tempered. For trivial reasons he causes much trouble in the house. That day Runu was spanked, simply because she returned late from school. One day father brought an astrologer. He wrote the names of the youths of the locality, and muttered some incantation.

One morning, the evidence of Rabeya's ill-health became visible. Just after taking tea she vomited retchingly. Although her physical changes were not to become visible yet, there was an additional charm in her appearance. Her cheek seemed filled up, eyebrows more dark, eyes more sparkling and a natural calmness in her manners was noticeable. On her visit to our house, the headmaster's wife commented,

"Look, how your daughter is walking, as though she's really pregnant !"

These words pierced my heart.

Something should be done, and that too immediately, before others come to know about it. As each day passed we all felt ourselves getting nearer to inevitable catastrophe. But what could we do ? Father must have thought of something. Sometimes I wish to ask him. But I don't have the courage to do it. We all are afraid of him.

That night I heard father speaking in a low voice to mother. He said to her,

"Better kill the girl by poisoning her."

Mother retorted,

"Shame, you could say such a thing being her father!"

Father replied,

"My mind isn't working, Shanu. Please don't mind. Alas, Rabeya, my wretched daughter!"

I heard father's deep sighs. I could not sleep properly that night. At one moment Rabeya woke me up. She called me in a gloomy voice, "Khoka?"

"Yes, do you want to go to the bathroom, Rabeya?"

"No."

"What happened then? Are you feeling sick?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to vomit?"

"No."

"Did you have a dream?"

"Yes."

"What did you dream?"

"I don't remember."

"Go to sleep then. You'll feel well."

"Okay."

Rabeya lay down. After a moment she got up and called again.

"Khoka."

"What is it?"

"Paula has come."

"Who?"

"Paula. Open the door and look outside. He is sitting in the verandah. I heard him barking."

I opened the door, and we both came outside. There was nothing to be seen anywhere. It was deserted all around.

Rabeya called loudly, "Paula, Paula."

Mum asked, "Who's there shouting?"

"It's me, Rabeya."

Father said in an angry tone,

"Go to sleep. What are you doing at this hour of night?"

Hearing the sound, Master uncle came out of his room. He asked,

"What's happened, Khoka?"

Rabeya replied, "We were calling Paula, uncle."

"Go to sleep. Paula won't come here at this hour of night."

While getting into the bed Rabeya said,

"Khoka, will you buy Paula a rubber belt? I'll tie it round his neck."

"All right."

"Also a long chain?"

"Yes. I'll."

"And will you buy me another thing?"

"What is it?"

"I don't remember the name. But will you buy it?"

"All right, I'll buy it for you."

"When? Tomorrow?"

"No, let me get a job first."

Father said aloud,

"What nonsense are you talking? Go to sleep. I lie down after a long day. Even then it's not peaceful!"

At last the long desired letter arrived. Though it was officially sealed, I could guess nothing. I tore it open diagonally as I usually do with all other envelopes. The authority has asked me to report. I have been appointed as a lecturer of Chemistry in a college. Initial salary is four hundred and fifty Takas, with an increment of twenty five Takas per annum. What was written in the letter seemed somewhat strange to me. I could not feel happy. But, in fact, I became very delighted. I want to make everybody happy. I'd like to take everyone to the Sitakundo hills on a pleasure trip. I want to present Runu a deep green saree, like the one which the girl with Roll -13 used to wear. All these are, perhaps, within my reach now. But where is that fathomless happiness, that mad joy, which encompasses my whole being? We are brought up through much difficulty. Our parents could not fulfil any of our wishes and desires. They could not meet any of our demands. Our wishes rather gave them pain. Today I'll conceal every pain and sorrow. Aladin's lamp is in my hand, today his mighty giant is in my grip. "Mum, I've got a job."

Mother ran to me. After a long time her eyes seemed flushed with tears of joy. She said, "Let me see." I handed the letter to her. Mother does not know how to read. Yet she tried to read the letter. She was handling it with utmost care as if it were a very precious possession. She asked,

"How much is the salary?"

"Four hundred and fifty Takas."

Mother exclaimed in surprise,

"How come it is so costly?"

I carelessly replied,

"It's not too much." But instantaneously, I felt embarrassed within. I know very well that this amount is too much for me.

Mother said affectionately,

"I'll get you married off."

"Oh no, what do you say, What rubbish!"

"I'll have to get a nice girl, beautiful but simple like Nahar." Mother seemed drowned in her fanciful sea of happiness.

"Will you rent a house in the town?" She asked after a moment.

"That I'll have to do."

"Very nice. I'll go and stay with you at times."

"Why at times, Mum? You'll stay with me always."

"Oh no, my son. I won't go leaving the family."

Mother smiled like a child. I asked,

"Mum, What will I give you when I get my first pay?"

"You better buy your father a coat. He needs it badly. Worms have spoiled his previous one."

"Certainly I'll give, father'll have something too. But what will I give you?"

Mother replied jovially.

"Bring me a beautiful bride."

Master uncle also felt delighted when he heard the news. His delight is usually kept quiet within himself. But this time he made an excessive expression of it. He bought a lot of sweets with his own money. A lot of sweets. Everyone was to eat it as much as one wanted. He said to me,

"When happiness comes, it comes excessively. Khoka, mark it, you'll be very happy in life."

When Runu came back from school she asked,

"I heard you're going to get married?"

"Who said it to you?"

"Mum," replied Runu and giggled.

"You're giggling aye; If I get you married then?"

"Huh, you always joke. Whom will you marry?"

"Let me think."

"I know who you're thinking of."

"About who?"

"Isn't it Sheela?"

"Have you gone mad!"

Although I dismissed Runu's words casually, I could feel my ears reddening. I do not know why I suddenly liked Sheelu. Everytime I see her my heart starts pounding. I feel a sort of pleasant pain in my heart. Within my whole body I feel a pleasurable pain shouting 'Sheelu, Sheelu!' I said to Runu with a smile,

"I don't care to think of Sheelu."

"No, I didn't mean it. She is a nice girl."

"Oh yes, Runu, who will you marry?"

"Oh no, look, don't speak to me that way."

"I've a friend. He's a very nice person."

"Look, if you say anymore I'll start crying." Montu could not attend the happy occasion. He has gone to the house of our elder grand father. Father returned at about 9 p.m. Mother gave him the sweets without giving him the news. He asked,

"What are these sweets for?"

"There is an occasion." Replied mother.

Father took half a piece. He did not show any interest to know the reason. Mother said herself,

"Khoka has got a job. With a pay of four hundred and fifty Takas every month."

Father then became delighted. He said slowly,

"It's nice. I'll leave the job. I'm very old now. I can't continue my work any more. Rabeya, where's Rabeya?"

"She is sleeping. She isn't well."

"I hope she hasn't taken rice. Has she?"

"No, she took just a piece of sweet."

"Oh, why did you let her have it? I told you to give her nothing to eat. Why did you give her the sweets?"

I went to bed early that night. At about 1 a.m. Mother called me madly,

"Khoka, O Khoka, get up quickly."

When I was a child once mother had called me this way. She seemed very excited. It was an earthquake then; About forty yards away from our house, the house that the Nandis had left, collapsed. Tonight, at this late hour, mother's frightened call reminded me of that earthquake. As I came out opening the door and stood outside, mother said,

"Come to my room, come quickly!"

"What's happened?"

She seemed very nervous. She took me along with her pulling my hands. The door was open. Rabeya lay on mother's bed. Standing beside her head, father was staring at her with his eyes wide open. The floor was flooded with blood. I stood startled. Is it an abortion? Who has done it? Has father himself done it? Father said in a broken voice,

"Khoka, you fan her. I'm going to fetch a good doctor. The bleeding is not stopping."

A doctor came. He gave an injection to Rabeya. His face looked grave. He said to father softly,

"I know your daughter."

Father held his hands and said imploring,

"She is a very wretched girl! Kindly save her, doctor!"

The doctor did not seem to pay any heed to father's sentiment. He gave a number of medicines and advised to give two more injections the next morning. He would come again at 10 a.m.

Father said panting,

"Doctor, I hope no one will know it."

The Doctor said, "First save your daughter. Honour comes later."

Rabeya uttered faintly,

"Mum, What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing. It'll be all right. Lie quietly."

"Why do I feel empty?"

"It'll be all right. Will you take some milk?"

"No."

I stood dumb-founded. A shadow fell across the room. I turned and saw Master uncle standing at the door. He coughed voluntarily.

"Sharif Mia, please save my daughter!" Father wailed desperately.

Master uncle said in a consoling voice,

"I'll bring a specialist from town. Khoka, bring out your bicycle."

I asked, "May I go uncle?"

"No, you won't be able to explain properly. You better stay." Father retorted. "Don't listen to his words, He is a stupid boy. You better go yourself, Sharif Mia"

I was not aware when Runu had come in. Standing close to me she was trembling with fear. There was an offensive smell of wasted blood in the entire room. Rabeya lay with her eyes closed. How pale her face looked!

Father said, "Dear Rabu, please take some milk."

"No."

"Shall I pour water on your head."

"No, father."

Rabeya opened her eyes and looked at him. She said,

"Father!"

"Yes, dear."

"Why do I feel so empty?"

"It'll be all right, dear."

"Will you keep your hand on my bosom? Here . . . ."

It was dawn. Montu returned home around six O'clock. He was stunned. Father has gone out to bring a compounder for injection. She uttered again,

"Montu, I'm sick now."

Montu was looking around astonished. Rabeya said again,

"Montu, I feel empty."

Montu placed his hand on her head. Mother was quietly sobbing. Standing close to me, Runu was still trembling like a leaf. The morning sun fell on the congealed blood.

Rabeya called me,

"Khoka, O Khoka."

I stood beside Rabeya. Covered in a blue colour sheet, Rabeya's body lay motionless. A fly is buzzing close to her nose. Rabeya uttered suddenly,

"Where's Paula? I don't find him anywhere. O Khoka, where's Paula?" She anxiously looked around for Paula.

And how strangely Rabeya died quietly at nine O'clock. It was then a radiant winter morning.

Last year we visited our elder Aunt. Her daughter, Neena, was expecting her first child. Her mother had brought her to her own place. How happily Neena used to move around! She was to give birth to her first child — what an expression of profound joy lit her face!

"If it's a boy, I shall name him 'Kingshukh'. And if it's a girl, I shall name her 'Rakhi'. Neena would often merrily say this. Rabeya too would exclaim excitedly, "I shall also name my son 'Kingshukh'. We all would laugh heartily.

Rabeya, you are lying wrapped in a blue sheet. The yellow sun has fallen on your face. The child named 'Kingshukh' is in your bosom; the bosom that seemed so void a few moments ago.

At noon Master uncle returned with a specialist. And Montu, in broad daylight amongst people chopped Master uncle into pieces with a fish chopper. Two to three persons came from a nearby 'paan' shop. A rickshawalah came rushing leaving behind his rickshaw. The overseer's eldest son, Jasim, hastened to the spot. The doctor screamed for help. As I came out hearing the uproar, I saw Montu standing with a chopper in his hand. Some were holding him tightly from behind. A stream of blood was flowing towards the drain. Montu said looking at me,

"I've killed him."

I remember Montu had once killed a big snake by beating it with a stick. He had killed it under the 'Hasna-Hena tree.

A crowd sat around Rabeya. As I entered the room Nahar Bhabi asked me.

"Why is there so much noise outside?"

I looked at Mum, and said to her,

"Mum, Montu has just killed Master uncle. Come outside. They are taking Montu to the police station."

Montu had killed a big snake under the 'Hasna-Hena' tree. It had a violet ring on its head. It was more than six feet long. As Montu lifted up the snake with the end of a stick, and went and stood in the verandah, the small children started jumping with delight. Rabeya said delightedly.

"Montu, give me stick."

Paula barked happily. At times he would try to bite the snake, and then would retreat repeatedly. Looking at Paula, Rabeya said,

"Aye Paula, aye, I'll slap you."

Everyone went to the pond to bury the snake beside it. Rabeya was at the front of the procession. The snake hung vertically on the stick in her hand. Montu, taking Paula along with him, was walking with the procession. A long grave was dug for the snake. Montu sat at the edge of the pond with a heavy heart.

After the killing of uncle, everyone held Montu tightly. Holding his hands tightly, Jasim shouted,

"Inform the police! Inform the police!"

The chopper was lying on the grass. There was not even a trace of blood on that spot. From the spot where uncle lay dead, a stream of blood was flowing towards the drain. Seeing me, Montu said,

"I've killed him."

Montu stood silently. There was a large crowd. The fat doctor was still shouting desperately in a broken voice, "Help, help." An grey-coloured dog was trying to get near the dead body.

Montu's dog was white. There was a black mark on its neck. Montu had brought the dog from 'Kanchanpur'. Within a few days, he became quite a pet. He built a wonderful kennel with pieces from a wooden bench. I had named the dog 'Paula'. Rabeya had bought the dog from Montu for eight annas. Montu did not want to sell it. But Rabeya insisted, "Montu, I want to buy Paula."

"No, I won't sell Paula."

"Oh, please, Montu, I'll give you eight annas."

"I told you, I won't sell."

"Montu, please give. Why're you refusing?" Rabeya always used to wander about with Paula. While visiting her known houses, she would say,

"Aunty, give my Paula some milk. Better put some sugar also. No one wants to drink milk only."

One day, Montu brought a baby parrot from somewhere. Though it was little, it was beautiful. It was kept in a cage in the verandah. One day it died of cold. Overwhelmed with grief he did not take his meal.

Montu and Master uncle used to live in the smallest room of our house. There was insufficient light. During summer, it's too hot. It was not airy. How is Montu passing his days in confinement? He is now nineteen. If seven years are excluded, twelve remains. So, Montu and Master uncle have spent twelve years together in the same room. Can he feel the absence of Master uncle? I have heard that people are terrified after committing murder. They have hallucinations of the murdered and the murder scenes. But this will not happen to Montu. His nerves are very strong. When his mother, our stepmother, died, he passed the day very calmly. The next day he went to see a football match in the village of Shimultala without telling anyone at home. He was then a mere boy. Perhaps he was not old enough to feel the sorrow. But I don't think it was his age. Like his mother, he had very strong nerves. Montu resembles his mother a lot in his looks and in his way of talking. In the master bedroom there is a picture of father and Montu's mother (whom we call Boro ma) taken together on their wedding day. Montu is discernible by looking at it. The photograph has become blurred due to dust. In spite of that the photograph of Boro ma in her young age attracts us. On the fourth of August, we have a festival at home. No, I am wrong. It is, in fact, a sort of a gathering for condolence. After 'maghreb' a 'milad' is arranged. Father visits 'Boroma's' grave. A few beggars are fed. Father wails for a few moments in memory of her death. His emotional outburst must be genuine, but the whole affair seems superficial. Particularly, on this day, mother moves about fearfully with a dark face. It seems as though she were responsible for this sad occasion. On this day, father loses temper with Mummy for trivial matters. It hurts me.

Boro ma is a very respectable person to all of us. Rabeya and I used to sleep embracing her for a long time. When grew up, Montu was born. After Rabeya and I were transferred to the southern room, she would occasionally come and say,

"Khoka? Won't you sleep with me tonight? Previously you cried a lot to sleep with me. Why're you so quiet now?"

"I'm grown up now?" I would reply.

She would then exclaim, "Oh, what a grown up boy!"

Every evening we would embrace her neck and dive our heads into her bosom and make childlike whims,

"Mother, tell us stories, the ghost stories."

She would then begin her story,

"We were then very young, not more than twelve or thirteen years old. We were all going to visit our grandfather's house. It was the month of 'Bhadra'. The river was flooded with water. We sailed the whole day. Evening came. The boatmen tied the boat to a date tree, and started making arrangement for cooking meal. At that moment, Rusturn, who was an old boatman, suddenly shouted loudly, 'Sir, what's there on the palm tree! Hearing this, I held father tightly. I didn't have the courage to look at the tree!' While telling the story, mother would suddenly stop. We would then at once importune

"Why've you stopped? Please go on."

While hearing the story, we would freeze with fear. What a charming way of telling stories she had! That is why I never like father's extreme behaviour on her death anniversary. I used to think that instead of displaying the sorrow outwardly, it would be better to feel it inwardly and silently. I said in my heart,

"Boro ma, your son is in great danger today."

Yes, Montu is in great trouble today, in very deep trouble indeed! Is Boro ma in Montu's mind now? Montu had an irresistible passion for football. One day he broke his leg while playing. He was brought home by the other boys. About nine inches of her leg beneath, the knee, was black and swollen. As Boro ma came out hearing the noise, Montu said,

"Mother, I've broken my leg!"

"Don't worry, it'll heal up." She replied.

Montu was taken to the hospital. When X-rayed, it was revealed that a small cone-shaped bone lay broken. It had to be operated. Montu was laid on a white bed. The anaesthetist held the face-mask close to his mouth and said,

"My boy, say one, two, three . . ."

And Montu merely uttered,

"Mummy, Mummy, Mummy . . ."

Montu is in great danger today. Is Montu calling out his mother with his head plunged into a blanket? No, Montu is a very strong boy. His nerves are strong like steel.

The Police Inspector asked him,

"Did you kill Akand?"

"Yes."

"With what?"

"With a chopper for cutting fishes."

"How many times did you strike him?"

"I don't remember."

"Did he say anything in his last breath?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"Baba Montu."

"Didn't he say anything else?"

"No."

"Was he very respectable to you?"

"Yes, he was."

"What do you do?"

"I'm doing my B. A."

The Police Inspector paused for a few moments. Then he started interrogating with a respectful tone,

"Why did you kill him?"

Montu kept quiet. The Police inspector assured him,

"You can trust me. You may easily tell something else in the court. Everybody has, indeed, a right to live. Any family scandal with the gentleman ...?"

"Oh no, never!"

"I think you're lying."

"I never lie."

Montu said these words standing upright. While pronouncing them, his chest seemed expanding with pride.

A fan rotated above Inspector's head. Montu's hair fluttered in its wind. I sat humbly on a chair in front of the gentleman. Does Montu tell lies? I did not have much communication with Montu. From his very childhood he has been reticent. I could not know him properly. About Runu I can say that she has a slight habit of telling lies. When she tells lies, she lowers her head and smiles a little. I cannot say anything like this about Montu.

"Did you kill him deliberately?"

"No. Not deliberately."

"I suppose you're very much repentant."

"No."

"Did you think before killing him?"

"No, it was sudden."

"What sort of a man was he?"

"A good man. He was very learned."

"What kind of relationship did you all have with him?"

"Good. He loved us all."

"Was it necessary to kill him?"

"I don't know. I'm very hot-tempered."

Yes, it's true that Montu has excessive temper. His temper is outrageous. I know it very well. It was not even two years ago. I had come back home after appearing in my Honours final examination. I even remember the time. It was the month of 'Poush'. It was very cold.

An overseer used to stay in the house opposite to ours. He had only one child, a girl named Mina. She was of my age or one or two years elder to me. She was a very affectionate daughter and the father always kept an eye on her. The girl used to pass much of her time sleeping on an easy chair in the verandah. One day the overseer came to our house with a letter in his hand. He seemed aggressive. I was sitting outside. He asked, looking at me,

"Have you written this letter?"

He threw an anonymous letter towards me. I was astonished.

"What're you saying?" I asked him.

"It must be you. How dare you write such vulgar words to my daughter!"

The gentleman started shouting with anger. I was simply dumb-founded. I was embarrassed. Basically I am very shy. This sort of accusation made me completely speechless.

"Do you think I'll leave you, I won't! The honour of a gentleman's daughter ..." He said in a cold voice.

"You better leave. You better go back to your house."

"No, do you think I'll do so if you merely ask me? You'll write obscene things and I'll remain quiet?"

In the twinkling of an eye, before I could understand anything, Montu grasped the neck of the gentleman, and shouted out,

"Shut up, you mean!"

Mother came out. People gathered around us. I was bewildered.

Montu went on shouting.

"Everyone knows about your daughter's indecent activities, and you accuse my brother ...!"

The overseer was transferred to Rajshahi. He must have got his daughter married to some one. If he had been here now, he would perhaps have been delighted to see the consequence of Montu's rage.

A man came from the house of Master uncle. He had a shrivelled face, and a stubbly beard. He wore canvas shoe. There was a nickel spectacles on his eyes.

"I'm the elder brother of Akand. I've come to take his things and his money."

I said to him, "There aren't many things. But, of course, there are a lot of books."

"What's the amount of money?"

"He had two hundred and fifteen Takas."

"Only! But I heard there was a lot of money he had been murdered for."

The man looked sharply. At times he kept licking the saliva of the chewed paan that trickled down the corner of his mouth.

He said, clearing his throat,

"What you say now will have to be accepted as truth. Well, give me the mentioned amount. I had to spend twenty five Takas to come here."

"All his things are at the police station. Please go there."

"Where?"

"Police station."

"I see."

The gentleman went away disappointed.

Runu asked,

"Is he really Master Uncle's brother?"

"Yes."

"How could you understand?"

"His face seemed similar."

I remember Master uncle's face. In the last hours of the night before yester night, I saw him in a dream. I saw even Boro ma was saying astonished,

"Khoka, you've bought this yellow saree for me! Am I still young to wear this?"

"I got my salary, that's why I've bought something for each and every one. Please accept it."

"You've bought for each and everyone!"

I started telling her the names one by one. Boro ma then stopped me and said,

"You've bought for each and everyone. Didn't you buy anything for Master? It seems that he has been excluded, isn't it?"

I then said with surprise,

"Don't you know, Master uncle has died?"

"Is it! Ah, how did he die? He was a very good man." Boro ma treated Master uncle very affectionately. She would often have talks with him. Master uncle used to consider Boro ma as his elder sister. Though he called my mother Bhabi, he called Boro ma his elder Bubu. Boro ma often used to say to him,

"O Master, will you not study mu fate?"

"Boro bubu, I've studied the fates of all of you."

"You're telling lies. Tell me then what's in my fate."

"You're lucky. You'll have a fortunate child."

Boro ma would then start laughing. She would say, "Your mind doesn't seem to be in order. Is this your study of fate? Are these rubbish written in your books? Burn your books. If you can't, give it to me. I'll prepare tea for you by burning them."

Uncle, getting disappointed, would merely turn the pages of his books. His calculations would not work here. After failing all hopes of having children through Boro ma, father married for the second time.

But surprisingly, Uncle's calculations proved correct at one time. Boro ma gave birth to Montu five years before Runu was born. She was very surprised to find Uncle's calculations correct. She called him and said, "Please study the fate of my son. Strange, how did you learn all this? I feel tempted to learn it myself."

Master uncle said smiling,

"It's also a kind of science, Bubu. The science of darkness. If you really want to learn . . ."

Boro ma said impatiently,

"But at first tell me the fate of my son. After that your science of darkness can be learned."

Master uncle started speaking a lot of astrological terms that were completely incomprehensible to Boro ma.

"Oh, what rubbish are you speaking! Do tell me quickly the conclusion." She said impatiently.

"The son will be intelligent, courageous, strong and a lover. Your son will be fortunate. Make him wear a 'Topaz' stone, Bubu, it'll be very useful."

Boro ma died when Montu was eleven. Montu could not wear any 'Topaz' stone. Had Montu worn the stone, could he have escaped from the present trouble?

In the court there were a lot of curious spectators.

It seemed that the judge was not hearing anything carefully. The cigarettes smoke, the smell of perspiration around, the low voices of the people, all these seemed to produce a strange atmosphere.

Though two shaky and shabby fans were rotating noisily over our heads, the atmosphere was very sultry. The lawyers clad in black-gowns sat with an indifferent attitude. Montu was sitting staring straight ahead. Father, Runu and I were sitting close together. Montu coughed a few times, placing his palm on his mouth.

"You're saying that the idea of killing didn't occur suddenly, but that you had been planning it for some days."

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"I don't remember."

"But for what reason did you decide to do this cold-blooded murder?"

"I don't remember the reason."

"Are you ill?"

"No, I'm quite well."

At the very beginning of the cross-examination, father stood up in excitement. And suddenly he burst into loud sobs. Everyone looked at him. The low voices around the court increased. The Judge uttered, "Order, Order". After a while, the court was adjourned. Mother asked in a trembling voice,

"Khoka, when will the trial end?"

The surrounding is desolate, too quiet. Father has locked Montu's room. Runu, lying quietly on her bed, remains awake till late hours at night. Previously she could not sleep with the light on. Now-a-days the light is kept on throughout the night. In the dim light of hurricane everything in the room seems ghostly. A long shadow of my head falls on the wall of the room. At times father weeps in his sleep. Runu gets startled and asks frightened,

"What's happened?"

I remain quiet.

Runu asks again,

"What's happened?"

"Father is crying in his sleep."

Father sobs loudly. In the verandah there is splendid moonlight. The fragrance of 'Hasna-Hena' comes floating in the air.

Runu asks,

"Father, What happens after death?"

I do not give reply. Rather I speak in my mind, "Nothing happens. Everything comes to an end. Alas! the life of doyel and grasshoppers ... that man cannot enjoy ...!" A lot of incoherent thoughts cross my mind.

"What'll happen to Montu?"

"I don't know."

When I look at the long shadows on the wall, my heart pounds in agony. "O God, the beautiful eyes Thou hast bestowed / Will it never glance at me by mistake?" Nahar Bhabi hears this song in a low-volume.

I hear it attentively.

At times, Nahar Bhabi comes to my room. She sits there sadly. The other day too she came. I was then sitting with the windows closed. It was raining heavily outside. Evening light had dwindled, and darkness had descended earlier. Nahar Bhabi came and sat on Runu's bed. She said to me,

"I'm going away day after tomorrow."

"Where're you going?" I asked in surprise.

"At first I'll go to my father's home. From there, I may go abroad with my elder brother. He has written me a letter to go."

I kept quiet. Nahar Bhabi said after a while,

"I'll remember you all. I like you all very much. I remember Rabeya intensely."

Nahar Bhabi wiped her eyes. Runu brought two cups of tea. While sipping tea, she said suddenly in a broken voice,

"If you don't mind, will you please tell me why Montu committed such a crime? People say many different things. I hate to hear all these. I love you all very much."

I said,

"Bhabi, I suppose you know the cause of Rabeya's death."

"Yes."

"Perhaps uncle was responsible for it. And Montu knew it. Of course, he didn't tell us anything about it."

"When you meet Montu, please tell him that I'll always pray for him. I haven't even seen him properly."

"Bhabi, Montu is a very reticent boy".

"My prayers might not do anything. Even then I'll pray for him."

Nahar Bhabi was sitting with her head lowered. It seemed to me that she was our very own, very familiar to us.

"Will you please give me a photograph of Rabeya?"

"Photograph?"

"Yes, I want to take it with me. He'll be happy to see it. He liked Rabeya very much."

"But we don't have any. There's only one group photograph. It was taken after Montu's birth."

"I see."

Nahar Bhabi went away. I opened my trunk and took out the photograph. It is an old one. It has turned yellowish. Still then how lively it looks! Rabeya is sitting on the floor a smiling face. Runu is in father's lap. Montu is lying in Boro ma's lap with his eyes closed. I felt a deep pain in my heart. Memories -- whether it's happy or sad, is always painful!

It rained throughout the night. It was the rain at the advent of 'Ashar'. It seemed the rain water would carry off everything with it. Runu said,

"Do you remember, one night it was raining like this, and you told a ghost story." I did not say a word. Rather I covered myself with a bedsheet and gaze at the flame of the hurricane.

Father called suddenly in a weak voice,

"Khoka, O Khoka."

"Yes father"

"Come here, come to me. My heart is aching for Montu!" A deep dark sorrow! A darkness of deep pain seemed to engulf us! Outside, the wind rushing through the leaves of the trees, seemed to produce a fearful hissing sound.

Montu was ordered to be hanged on the 17th of August.

Uncle had said,

"This boy will be courageous, intelligent, knowledgeable and a lover."

We begged for Montu's life filing a mercy petition. I remember the day before the day Montu was ordered to be hanged. A thin and dark, yet sweet complexioned girl came to our house. She had a simple face with childlike looks. After stepping down from the rickshaw she stood perplexed in front of our house. When she saw me, she was hesitant.

I asked her,

"Who are you looking for? "

The girl seemed to be thinking with her head bent downward. Suddenly she seemed to gather courage. The next moment she said,

"My name is Yasmin. I am your brother's classmate."

"Do you read with Montu?"

"Yes."

I then said to her frankly,

"Come in, come inside. Don't mind my treating you like my younger sister."

"Oh No, why should I mind? I'm indeed younger to you."

"Father, mother and Runu have gone to see Montu."

I took her to my room and said,

"Sit down."

"Who sleeps here?" She asked pointing towards my bed.

"Runu and I."

"Where's Runu?"

"She has gone to see Montu. Father and mother have also gone."

"Oh, I could've also gone with them had I come earlier!"

"Do you want to go?"

"No. He'll feel bad."

The girl, moving her shoulder, started looking quietly around the room. I asked,

"Will you take tea?"

"No, thanks."

"Where do you live?"

"There," she replied ambiguously.

Perhaps the girl did not like to tell me where she stays. I was looking at her with surprise. She said,

"I knew everything. Several times I thought of coming here, but I didn't get the courage."

"What would you have done?"

"Nothing, there wasn't anything to do. Still then, at times, I wished to come. I know everyone of you. He used to tell me everything."

"What did he tell you?"

The girl smiled for a moment lowering her head, and then said,

"You had a dog. His name was Paula."

"O yes. He used to run away from our house often, that's why I named him Paula."

"What'll be Montu's punishment?"

"Perhaps he'll be jailed for twelve to thirteen years."

"He won't be hanged, will he?"

"No, the lawyer has said that he is young and has committed the murder out of rage."

"Is he hot-tempered?"

"What's your opinion?"

The girl smiled at my words, and said,

"I don't know" and then added after a moment, "I'll leave now."

"All right, please do come again."

"I was nice talking to you."

"Why?"

"He loved you very much. He used to tell me about you all the time."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. You know, he doesn't tell lies."

The girl went away. Perhaps, Montu used to respect me very much. As he was very reticent, it was not easy to know about it. But there was no doubt he respected me. No, it was not respect, but it should be more accurately termed, 'love'.

I remember one evening Runu came to me and said,

"Montu won't come home today. He has told he is sitting on the jack-fruit tree?"

"Why?"

"He has torn his shirt by quarrelling. That's why he won't come. He has told me if you go to fetch him, then only he'll come."

Had there been no deep love, one would not have waited all evening for his elder brother to bring him down from the tree and take him home.

Just after Montu was taken in, father locked his room. It hasn't been many days that Montu has gone but it seems the lock has been hanging there on the door for a long time. The girl who was here a few moments ago, did not want to see Montu's room.

Who knows, somewhere in that room, one or two letters of this girl are lying in the dust. I opened the lock of Montu's room. As I opened the window on the western side, a beam of light entered the room. There are two wooden beds placed side by side. There is nothing left of Master Uncle's belongings. Everything has been seized by the police. Montu's bed, the pillow without its cover, the shirts and trousers hanging on the rope, all are in the same positions as they were. On the bamboo walls news papers are

beautifully pasted. As I bent towards the wall I marked written on it with a lead-pen. "The days pass away! The days pass away!" God Knows what he had in mind when he wrote this.

On the seventeenth of August Montu was ordered to be hanged. The Judge declared,

"It's a cold-blooded murder. There are many eye-witnesses. He is a college boy with conscience and intelligence." The judge declared the punishment with ease.

The mercy petition was rejected on ninth September, and I came to know that he would be hanged in the last hours of the night of eighteenth September. To take his dead body we will have to wait at the jail gate with the jailer's letter.

I went to see Montu. Father, mother and Runu also went with me.

Montu appeared sickly. When he saw us, he smiled abnormally and asked me,

"Did you get any reply to the mercy petition?"

Perhaps he was not informed of its rejection. It was better this way, I said to him,

"No, it has not yet come."

Father, mother and Runu were crying. Montu said to them,

"Why're you crying? I know I won't be hanged. Last night I saw Mummy in dream. Mummy was telling me, 'My boy, don't worry, you won't be hanged'."

I said,

"Montu, a girl came to our house to see you. She is thin and tall."

Montu said,

"O yes, she's Yasmin. She studies with me."

We all kept quiet for some time. After a while, Montu looked at Runu and, breaking the silence, said to her laughing,

"Runu, I don't want to die, I don't."

Father asked in a trembling voice,

"What do they give you to eat?"

"They give me good food father. Previously they used to give bad food. But since a few days they have been asking me daily, 'What would you like to eat today?' The jailer is a nice man, Father. He has sent me a book by Shibrām. This book is really very funny."

Mother asked,

"Montu, do you want to eat anything from home?"

"No Mum. They cook quite well here."

The sepoy came and asked,

"You've talked for a long time. Do you want to talk more?"

Father replied,

"No."

He kissed Montu's hands for a number of times. Montu coughed a few times. He seemed to feel shy. As we were coming out, Montu called,

"Please stay back for a while."

I went back and held Montu's hands. He did not say anything.

I asked him,

"Do you want to say anything ? "

"No."

"Anything about Yasmin ?"

"No, no."

"Then ?"

Montu smiled for a moment. Then he said slowly,

"I love you all very much."

There is a deep darkness under the tree. What tree is it ? It's quite shaggy. Numberless birds have built their nests on it. I can hear their noises. Behind, on the vast field, there is the canopy of faded moonshine. The moon will go down after a while. The two sentries of the jail are smoking cigarettes. I can see two sparks of fire flickering in the dark. The two sentries are not visible clearly. From a distance, they look like a pair of statues. Right above the jail-gate, a 100 m.w. electric bulb is burning. Flies have gathered around it. Father said, "Khoka, what's the time now ?"

While asking, father put his hand on his chest. In his chest pocket, there is the jailer's letter. If we produce this letter, the authority will handover Montu's dead body to us. We shall carry it home, where mother is reciting from the Holy Quran throughout the night.

Outside, the moon has grown dim and dull. The moon will go down after a while. Father and I are sitting close together on a cold cemented bench. Above our head there is a dark shaggy tree. Father changed his position. I could hear him breathing heavily. A few moments ago he wanted to know the time.

All of us, at times, would sit on the cold floor and enjoyed the moonlit night. What lovely flowers used to bloom on the 'Hasna-Hena' trees! There is a jack-fruit tree in front of our house. It was the abode of numberless fire-flies that used to glide about sparkling in the air. Nabar Bhabi often played the record, "O sparkling fire-fly make light . . ."

Paula's nose -- Paula, our pet dog -- was as cold as the cement floor. Montu wanted to know, "Why is dog's nose so cold?"

Sitting outside, Master uncle used to gaze at the stars in the sky. He would say, "Khoka, I can tell the time observing the stars."

Rabeya had once got very angry and said, "I'm the eldest among all. Still then why doesn't anyone bid me salam on Eid-days?"

I sat dumb-founded gazing ahead, feeling cold. Father called me in a heavy voice,

"Khoka, O Khoka."

"Yes, father?"

"What time is it?"

I clasped father's hands. He was very cold. Father was trembling like a leaf. All of a sudden a lot of crows, from the shaggy tree standing above our head, flew away cawing over the jail.

Dawn was approaching. I saw the moon going down. The canopy of faded moonshine hanging on a vast field is no more there.

*Translated by Mohammad Nurul Huda*

ANNOTATIONS OF BANGLA WORDS  
USED IN TRANSLATION

Ashar, Bhadra,	:	Names of Bangla months.
Poush, Ashwin,	:	
Falgun, Chaitra	:	Names of Bangla months.
Bhabi	:	The wife of elder brother.
Bubu & Apa	:	Elder sister
Blouse & saree	:	A kind of dress Bangalee women wear in general.
Boro ma	:	Step mother (first wife of father).
Boro Bubu	:	Elder sister.
Bou	:	The wife of one's son.
Dada	:	Elder Brother.
Dada Bhai, Dadu Bhai	:	Grand Father.
Hujoor	:	
Hasna-Hena	:	A kind of flower.
Kathal champa	:	A kind of flower.
Mitad	:	A kind of religious activity.
Maghreb	:	Just after sunset.
Kathal-Champa	:	A kind of flowers.
Paan	:	A kind of leaf used for masticating.
Rickshawada	:	Rickshaw-puller.
Salam	:	An act of saluting.
Shilwar & Kanij	:	A kind of dress Young girls wear in general.
Shimultala	:	A village.
Shirish	:	A kind of flower.