

UNDER *a*
tin-grey SARI
a novel

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A Collaboration

The ayah came up to check the rumour that sahib types grunted less hard. With her nose under the window ledge she watched the glistening backside hump away between the memsahib's expert thighs. Noise was starting but the ayah was forced into the darkness by headlights.

In those days the rumour was fresh, it had a strong hold on the ayah. She would do plenty more checking in dim bungalow windows for polite grunting.

Back in that time of hot nights I lived at the bungalow, but these days you'll find me past Zakir Hussein Road, in a cooler place, down a slope of guava trees and headstones. A moss has blotted out the name on a headstone near the stream, my name.

The ayah, now a young woman, might visit my headstone to sit on the cool grass in the shade of the guavas, maybe stuck silently in remembering, for she will burst into laughter, and just as quickly might weep. She might place to the rock a kiss. Then I also weep, holding onto a sorrow. In some lore this is sad, but it is a sorrow to cherish, for it comforts with warped memory. Besides, a bargain is a bargain, and I possess the other facts: I have in my heart's cheery pocket secrets to which only the brave, the happy, the sorry and the foolish might choose

to bring the quieter attention.

I sometimes long for a stroller brave or happy—or sorry or foolish—to pass by and take to the headstone with a brush and bucket against that obstinate moss. But I should be grateful, only the name is blocked out. The rest is there for all to see:

*A wise friend educated in the simple
and the difficult things in life
1950–1967*

In those days I was plenty less than wise. A dunderhead, I admit. Nowadays I sprout a bit of wise stuff. It passes the time and amuses the mynah birds.

One source of destruction, in my own opinion, is the ignorance in ten fingers. Even harmless ignorance can bring destruction. A simple ignorance, like failing to recognise a guava sitting in the palm of the hand, can destroy all the things you love, or failing to see a favour sitting in the hand, or a friend, a rupee, a memory. As for the simple things in life: my reverence of the simple things was too fast—it was one of the culprits behind my downfall. But these days I have plenty to say about the simple things because I can see everything from a different angle. I can see the flesh of the schemes sahibs carry in their important heads.

Not every memory is etched in stone. Take Iqbal. He works as a letterwriter. If not for his unusual ear, his third ear, it would be difficult to record this tattered collection of rumours and secrets. He has a fine place at a junction by the harbour, sits on a cushion at his roadside desk and is protected from the sun by an old Thames black broolly. He utters very little. His age, though the arrow chin has

grown into the knee by saying hello and farewell to uncountable monsoons, is any sabjantawallah's guess. His eyes are the deepest pools of wonder I've ever encountered. A strangely neutral wonder, though you would assume his is the heart stung with the aching cries and shitty declarations of countless others, that's what you would reasonably think. I could not look into Iqbal's eyes without knowing he was full with the rumours of a bustling town under the flaking delta.

So, yesterday I asked how many other 'jobs' he had performed over the years. How many love letters had he taken down? And how many desperate cries for help? How many decomposing secrets had finally rested by his hand? Iqbal's are not the fingers of ignorance. From his hand the rumours are able to flow like a monsoon drain. I am able to remember what I remember, but Iqbal can complete the picture by using other memories too.

So Iqbal looked up from the page into a distance beyond the busy road. A smile came to his coarse lips, and his finger released the pencil.

He said, 'I have not been asked about other letters for a long time. Usually a customer can forget I do other jobs. Are you sitting next to me?'

'I am,' I said.

Iqbal leaned out from his Thames broolly and whispered, 'Hundreds, my friend!'

'And still you like the work?'

'Oh yes,' he whispered, 'very much. Thousands of strange jottings, and it becomes more strange, not less. Some even you—in your present state of wisdom—might not believe to be so.'

'What about this job for me?' I asked.

'Yes, yours is peculiar too. I remember those days. Do

you want to tell your name?’

‘No.’

‘Not at all?’ Iqbal asked abruptly. He was disappointed.

‘Maybe later,’ I said to reassure him.

‘Okay. Shall we continue?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Let’s dig into these rumours.’

The Hotel of Moans in the Night

When the ayah arrived nobody took any notice. The diamond stillness stole any interest in matters outside your own hand. The wail from town, tireless in its resolve to raise the earth, carried on the ancient air, and she rode into the fumes of Chittagong on the long notes, easily smoothing out the voice like a worn carpet at a landing. Her eyes were outlined in lovely black. The silver ring at the nostril glinted and lay on her skin as if it too had been born when she was born.

The boy placed her into the scheme with no more effort than a lazy stare. He then returned to the front garden of grass, shrubs and flowers to resume watching the household try to breathe. On the porch three sahibs simply gazed downwards at the grass, but they were puzzling a pathway to themselves. The boy did not ask them who she was; he knew who she was. And there was no hello. Unseen arrivals brush forgotten departures. Low clouds kiss roads coming to 'Ten-ten Zakir Hussein, next to the Sleeping Camel Hills please'. And a moment in the kitchen on a markless day brushes destiny: that too is as it should be.

Brooms, toilets and groans on the hot darkness; these became the routine. The household thought of her as shy.

They thought of her as sweet and honest. But the cook knew sahibs could be idiots. He had a different idea. At every opportunity he grabbed a long look. Watching when she was not looking he saw tension, but this he didn't mind putting down to homesickness. He saw cleverness, maybe cunning. But this he didn't mind too because you have to get by. He could not shake the feeling that she was somehow a troubled child.

It was a big household: The Grand Old Man, a West Pakistani; The Grand Old Woman, English, very long ago from Leicester; and the seven adult children, mixtures who were given various labels—Anglo-Pakistani if you felt like keeping a straight face, Anglo-Banglo if you didn't, or Paklish as Khalid the cook preferred. Then there was the boy, the eight-year-old grandson, who lingered when he discovered anything of interest. Then the tumbling stream of friends and visitors.

One visitor came with the start of a play he had written to show the Old Man for advice. He was the engineer from a factory in the industrial estate. Writing plays was his hobby. When he first came out from Bristol he was inspired, he said, by the huge amount of raw material Chittagong offered. The Old Man took the first act and promised to read it. He read the first few pages but found it no good.

'His Bengali characters talk as if they are stupid,' he said. 'Listen to this. A Bengali guy at a factory asks, "What is the putting of respect into friends meaning?"'

'Wow,' the Grand Old Woman chuckled. 'All the characters talk like that?'

'Yes.'

'Oh well, seems to be about important feelings,' she said, 'but I do wonder why these writers make their

Bengalis talk in broken English.'

'It is a stupid device used by stupid people for stupid effects to amuse other stupid people.'

'That's a bit harsh,' she smiled. 'Don't go telling Brian to his face.'

'Here, do you want to read it?'

'No. I can wait until his production at the club.'

Often many visitors arrived at once and a small party sprung up. Khalid would make pakoras, samosas, maybe a feast. He called it the Paklish hotel. The ayah called it the hotel of moans. The cook liked her for the remark.

'Yes,' Khalid said as he turned off the flame under the giant pot he boiled for drinking water, 'The Hotel of Grunting.'

'No,' the ayah said. '*Moans.*'

'Okay,' Khalid said and smiled.

The ayah's own household, which she had left behind in the hills, ached with sex when it felt the urge, and no doors of fancy stopping jute would keep the entertainment from her eye. She often moved into position to see what she could see. It all became a bore, and she got on with life in the small village, welcoming the urges as a normal part of things and with the simple knowledge that one day they might involve her.

Late at night she crept up to a window to watch a sahib and memsahib making love. To confirm the rumour that these sahib types moaned differently. A candle burned a flickering circle on the far wall. The weak light fell across the naked limbs of one of the adult children and his wife. The wife had him in the hand, stroking him, and after she kissed his belly there was pulling and sudden sucking. The sucking became slow. Outside the window Zeythi caressed her thigh. The couple began to

make love. A car arrived into the driveway, and the ayah stepped behind the hibiscus. She moved down the laneway to her quarters. But it was how Zeythi became tangled in her own wishes in the last days of the dry season. It was how she would come to fall in love. That's what it really was. Sleep arrived, and her spirit curled into it with a deep sense of it belonging especially to her.

The morning was market day, club day, petrol day, and, by nine-thirty, the house was mostly empty. With a cake of yellow tar soap, she went to work outside at the cement tubs in the compound. The heat and the stillness baked the dusty compound. It was a rectangle of pale dirt, hard as a road. Tall trees of mango, mangosteen and almond gave it good shade in the corners, and behind the crumbling back fence rose a wall of thick jungle.

The boy stood solitary out on the paleness of the smooth dirt, lingering. He leaned on his bamboo stick, and he watched.

The scrubbing's making her bums bounce, he thought. When he'd had enough he called out that he was off to the pond. Nobody took any notice, but he liked announcing the bicycle journey to the pond.

But then Khalid came out the kitchen with a bag of garbage. The boy tossed away the bamboo and walked after the cook.

'When are you going to make the flying fox?'

'Tomorrow,' Khalid replied without stopping.

'You said last week.'

'Tomorrow, I'll get the rope from the bazaar.'

Satisfied, the boy rode his bicycle through a gate in the back fence and down a narrow path in the jungle. Riding down the shaded pathway to the pond, the boy considers

what he's seen since yesterday, and he concludes with satisfaction: She's a lot older than I am, but that doesn't matter a bit. She's good compared to the stinking boring grown-ups around here ... all they do is nothing and more nothing.

It's Nothing, Nothing

Khalid stood at the top step. Today he became, he felt with a sense of new manliness, seventeen. He noticed the stillness in the compound seemed strange, something more than simple heat. A touch slid over the shoulders, unlike a thought, more like what they call a premonition. The new day was as hot as standing next to the tandoor but he shivered. Drops of water from the clump of wet cloth in his hand darkened the cement. He took the loongie to the clothes line. As he crossed the compound dark spots appeared on the dry dirt like a trail of small footprints, maybe an invisible thing, just a *thing*, following him into the quiet morning. The days of stillness would soon end, replaced by a violence that came to remake the delta into another bold and sparkling image of itself. The arrival and departure of the season that had no use for the passport would destroy rambling bungalows and lovers holding hands.

Khalid shook off the eerie feelings and returned to his new day. He felt full of what he thought of as 'sahib stuff'. A polish shined in his eyes. Carefree pleasure lifted his hands to the clothes line and the cool water brushed the sparse hair on his forearms. He sensed in himself a refinement, or maybe today at the wild teahouse he could

call himself a man. As he pinched the loongie with clips he whistled his favourite radio song into the curious quiet, and his head responded by bouncing to the tune. As he hung it, the loongie dangled and bounced too.

The boy would ride back around lunchtime with a bag of clay shovelled from the shores of the dark green pond. Khalid decided he would have to ask for a supply. Khalid needed clay. For clay he had the type of grand plans sahibs had for jute.

Spooky feelings returned. The cat, a wild creature with big fighting paws, was nowhere in sight. Every morning he would emerge from the vines to sit on the wall. Then he would cross the compound on slow, relaxed legs. Khalid would put out a plate of leftover meat. The cat would clean the plate with his sandy tongue, and then bathe in the invisible sun before disappearing into the jungle. Maybe Khalid had nothing to worry about. He switched on the radio hanging from the beam. Not much happened in '67, especially just before the monsoon. The Fall of Dacca was four years off. In '71 came Mujibur Rahman's declaration of independence on the twenty-sixth of March; Ziaur Rahman's competing declaration came two days later on the twenty-eighth when he made a speech from the Chittagong radio station. But for now the radio simply played another hip-shunting love song.

The ayah had settled beneath the skin of the bungalow, under a protective layer. Over the delta the bitterness of hunger did nothing to make girls outside the bungalow want to smile. Zeythi had heard of bungalows like this since she was very small, and she had dared to hide away from hunger. She turned off the tap and used her arm to sweep the foam over the side. She stopped to watch it

slide down the outer wall of the stone tub, and she felt a small lightness.

She called out to Khalid, 'Have you seen the Minisahib?'

The Minisahib, Khalid thought. Yah, funny, I will say nothing. Let this clever new idiot carry on with it. She is very strange, this girl. Tonight I will ask that smelly sabjantawallah Khan to check her out.

'Yah, funny,' Khalid called back. 'Let him catch you calling him the Minisahib.'

'Don't worry, he will not find out,' Zeythi said.

She learned quickly from the memsahibs certain ways of saying things. But Minisahib she made up herself.

'Do you know where he is?'

'The pond,' Khalid said.

Zeythi carried on with her work, but she had caught the cook's blank expression.

'You look worried, what is it?'

'Everything is fine.'

'Truly?'

'Yah.'

Khalid frisked his forearm of the icy chill of the premonition and he walked back inside to the kitchen.

The Scent of a Small Wisdom

And the moan of a Minisahib? Is this also different? Finding out had to be under cover of the gully of banana leaves. You can fly off a broken trunk into the green light and flap your wild arms before falling to the grass. You roll down the slope until your neck is twisted like jute on the bridge past the teahouse.

They spoke in whispers.

'It's your turn,' Zeythi said gaining her breath.

'No, I've had enough,' the Minisahib said.

'Why?'

'I'm tired. And all this grass on me, it's too itchy.'

She ignored him. When she reached the ledge she removed her shirt and flung it away into the gully. She jumped down to the slope after it. He followed into the green air, landing on the soft grasses and then rolling down the slope.

They fell to their backs on the grass. He rolled over and he watched her chest swell. Catching his eye, she looked down to see grass sticking to her chest.

She said, 'Wipe them off ...'

'They're all over you.'

'Wipe them off ...'

He began at her breast. One of the greatest sources of

destruction, I believe, is the ignorance in ten fingers. But here was not the hand of ignorance. Neither was his the hand of innocence. He picked at the grass on his fingers to toss them over his head one by one, and he brought his fingers down to his nose. He smelled a hint of coconut oil. And he could smell a strong sweat, but he was trying to bring back what he hoped would be the smell of her breast. He gave the fingers a powerful sniff.

‘Quiet!’ She sat suddenly upright.

‘What is it?’

‘Listen!’

The voices near the compound grew more distinct. She held his head.

‘Lick them off,’ she said.

A tongue too can store a world of ignorance. She drew him to her chest, and his head was the right height. He could see nothing of the exciting world but her chest. And he could now breathe the scent. He ran his tongue up a small rise. She drew a breath, and they continued.

They went on enjoying the sensation. They were falling into a still rhythm of embrace. Well, from its tenderness their hands gained the scent of a small wisdom. Bigger wisdoms would come to them later—as the big shifting of sky drew itself nearer to remake the delta.