The police inspector said, “The story can be narrated in three ways – relating to the sahib, relating to his house, or relating to his family.”

Hence, I examined the person sitting in the front berth minutely once again. His khaki corduroy trousers was nearly brown; white shirt, bright red tie— the pin of which was either gold plated or made of American diamond—or what if it was real? The jogging shoes were laced up several times; the big wristwatch with a few key heads, looked like some strange instrument. The waxed ends of his yellowish-brown moustache curled upwards – maybe the result of a dye; a slightly raised light reddish scar from surgical stitches stretched from the left side burns to his chin; and even within the compartment, a comical brown slouch hat made of felt – the thin leather strap of which was fixed beneath his chin – adorned his head. Below his left hand next to the open window lay his zippered canvas-cum-leather bag that could be used both as a suitcase and a shoulder bag. A translucent Borosil wine cup in his right hand contained some whisky, the half-pint bottle of which was peeping out from one of the pockets of the bag. On the right hand side of my berth, quite a distance from the window, sat a smart-looking passenger who was later identified as a journalist and he asked, “Sahib? Was Macduff Sahib your boss or a real European Sahib? Or was he an Anglo Indian?

Now I observed him minutely. He was wearing light brown casual shoes, cream coloured pants, and lemon-yellow lilac striped shirt. A huge pair of round spectacles, like those worn by executives, adorned his eyes. In his hand he held some whiskey in a china teacup. By that time I had come to know for sure that he was a journalist.

The express train in which they were traveling had halted underneath a flyover tunnel for quite some time now – part of it was still outside. After several groaning and moaning sounds and sudden jolts, it was now totally benumbed. Situated about twenty yards outside the tunnel, our four-berth compartment had at least sixteen people. But the way the train stopped brought in mixed reactions and comments from the people – “Checking going on,” “Damn it- bandh again,” “the bird has escaped,” “Sure, it’s checking – and most of them departed. Now only three of us were left in the compartment. Before leaving they have left proof of their existence in the form of foul smell of sweat and garlic, a lot of peanut shells, puffed rice mixture packets, Nescafe paper cups – all of which were scattered around the lower berths and floor.

The road above the tunnel stretched in an east-west direction. From the rail line the sloping ground gradually ascended towards it. A strong stench was wafting in from the two open windows in the west. Should the glass panes be closed? Probably all the three of us were of the opinion that it was better to endure the stench than risk the glass shredding into shrapnel if some boys threw stones at them.
It was a hot, humid afternoon. Sweat over the brow, a drink of water would be welcome. The co-passenger on my right side said, “If you don’t mind, will you tell us something about your hat? Or maybe, you could tell us about your experiences of an operation, I mean, the story.” One eye beneath the hat twitched a little, the moustache end also quivered slightly. I think I even heard the faint pronunciation of the word, ‘Chic’.

The passenger in front of us removed the handkerchief from his nose, opened his zip of his suitcase, poured some whisky into his wine cup, and extended the bottle towards the fellow passenger next to me and said, “Take as you wish. Is it radio or newspaper? Aren’t you a journalist?” The journalist also opened his VIP suitcase, took out a china cup and poured some whiskey into it. While the bottle was being kept back in its place, I saw the other contents of the bag for a split second – a few bottles of medicine, some cotton wool, some surgical gauze, and a firearms - either a pistol or a revolver – and nothing else.

Maybe the story itself wanted to come out. The forehead beneath the hat was full of perspiration and he sat there motionless, as if he could spend the whole year enshrined within him. It might or might not have been the effect of the whisky. The inspector said, “Anglo? His height was about six feet, no paunch, nearly fifty-six years old then. His retirement age was approaching. Also, the last promotion of his life as an assistant commissioner was soon due. As it is, it was very difficult to reach this stage. So the story could be narrated in reminiscence of one, three, seven, nine, or eighteen years from now.

The journalist added, “This kind of mathematics is puzzling. Doesn’t eighteen years ago mean 1972?” Sipping his whisky, the inspector twirled his moustache and added, “O.K. it’s ’72. That was Ahad’s year. The sahib was then engrossed in hunting like Jim Corbett, that is, sometimes laying baits, sometimes even trying to catch the man-eater barefooted. Ahad was a kind of criminal who committed dacoity at Panchghora, a betel-nut shop owner at Jorabagan contacted the police, this police station and that, and by the time Calcutta Police and the Bengal Police could come to a unanimous decision, he had fled to Uluberia and become a revolutionary there. Now his mission was killing farmers. On the other hand, does dacoity ever happen in poor people’s homes? But the trouble was, if he committed a crime at Kashipur and fled to Arambag or Shibpur, what could be done? Again, by the time Bengal Police and Calcutta Police could decide under which police station the crime was committed, Ahad alias Satyajit alias Nikunja had already married Madhumita Bhattacharya at Kasba. Once, a same side case occurred under the police station the sahib was then serving. Two brothers had been pulled down from a crowded bus and chopped to death. It was heard that they were going to serve as witnesses. One day, a rumour spread that a farmer, who also dealt in the jute business, was killed at Prafulla Nagar. Within seven days of that incident, the younger brother of a fishery dam owner was also killed by some unidentified person. The Sahib asked me, “Can you still bring in a trophy at a jeep hurdle race? Or were the races during the training period mere fabulations? Now we must arrange for a jeep with all four wheels intact and along with it about ten thousand rupees.”

After enquiry I told the sahib, “The ten thousand rupees will be provided by Akram, alias Nepen, the elder brother of those two people who were chopped to death. We must put him under lock-up. A yellow jeep owned by some drug mafia has been seized by the police station yesterday.”
“Can two figures in the number plate be changed?” asked the sahib. “And the name ‘Bidula Construction’ inscribed on it?”

“Isn’t this an illegal affair?” asked the journalist. “Were you then serving as the driver of a policeman? Otherwise how could you move about between such far-flung places as Malipanchghora, Prafullanagar Police Station under Chinsurah or even Uluberia? Under how many police station jurisdictions do these fall?”

“That too using someone else’s jeep that is kept in the police custody,” I added. “But why the money? And don’t you have to change costumes for this kind of a job?”

The inspector said, “That is easier. A jute agent or a white safari-clad owner of a construction company will always carry some money with him, especially if he has to live for some time in a jeep or in a small plastic roadside tent. There would be just one accomplice who would serve as his bodyguard, driver or cook-cum-bearer. He would have just one namesake rifle with him.”

The journalist said, “What is all this? Where was his own police station and where the different police stations in the villages. If there is a murder, then by the time it is decided whether it falls under the jurisdiction of the Calcutta Police or the Bengal Police, the murderer escapes and the murdered does not even reach the morgue. The police have their own laws, regulations and disciplines, don’t they?”

“You don’t have to think over it,” replied the inspector. “If you find it difficult to decide which police station jurisdiction, which village, you can imagine that it is any police station in Calcutta which borders some villages and police stations in adjacent 24 Paraganas. Though it is a small plastic tent – thee was the suitcase of money and only one rifle – as far as I can remember, it was a seized Chinese rifle that was lying in the police station along with its old magazines. Yes, undoubtedly, it was breaking the regulations. I can only add that my Sahib’s father, Dupp Sahib was also a police inspector, that too during the regime of Tegart. The sahib might have heard family stories. Anyhow, after crossing the wobbly bamboo bridge in he jeep, we reached that deserted house. Situated within a huge field of growing paddy, a few palm, coconut and mango trees, the house had mud walls and a thatched straw roof. The outer walls were made of bricks. From a distance the white and yellow ochre walls, the green doors and windows gave one the feeling that though it was damaged, it was habitable. On reaching it we found that there had been a hunting party that lasted from evening till midnight. The signs of festivity lay everywhere. The straw roof was partly burnt, the door shutters were broken, there was half-burnt coke in the oven, a lot of dark soot was drooping from the walls, a few boxes, furniture, and a broken transistor lay scattered here and there.

“What do we do in this house?” I asked.

“Maybe we will have to lay a bait,” replied the sahib.

“Why do you use such a language as bait?” asked the journalist.

“During those days the sahib was always reading Jim Corbett. So, we decided to spend a night at that dilapidated house, its walls filled with bullet marks, its door providing ample evidence of it. The bait was of course that story of a suitcase filled with money that the safari-clad owner of the construction company would rather childishly reveal in front of the villagers. Boasting about his company’s credentials, he would open his suitcase in public and even give advance of a hundred or two hundred rupees, often even without receipts. One day the sahib picked up a barefooted young man – partly a gentleman – who was clad in a lungi and a shirt and asked him to show where
supplies of good bamboo and jute were available. After listening to his stories, the sahib stage-whispered, “See, Janardan, ten thousand rupees is not enough. You better ask the manager and arrange for at least another fifty thousand rupees. Fix up a tent next to the creek. Make some tea. I will cook the dinner myself. No, no, you better take the rifle along with you. After all, you’ll be returning with fifty thousand rupees.”

After the young man alighted from the jeep, the sahib said, “Just see how before leaving for another jungle, the tiger will move constantly near the house.” It was only later that we realized it to be his sixth sense. After I left rather noisily with the jeep, the sahib spent two nights alone in the tent. Following the creek, there was a club in a jungle village called “Gandhi-Nayee-Talim Sangha”. A second bait could be laid there. In the meantime, I came back with the jeep to the police station, opened the sahib’s quarters, order both my meals from the hotel and eat it on his dining table. Whenever I sensed that the maidservant would come to work, I would hide myself in the bathroom. The sahib was unwell, so he was not attending office. Do-Not-Disturb. In the dark evenings, I would carry his food in a tiffin carrier and take it to that old house. On the third morning, the sahib said, “You stay here. I will sign all the official papers, chat with you and then you return with the jeep in the afternoon. After you leave, I will lay the bait again. I think I have seen pugmarks yesterday. It might be a mistake.”

So that’s how things occurred. Before evening that day, the first bait had been swallowed. When I returned next morning, I saw that the tent was burnt down to ashes. The sahib was nowhere around. He came half an hour later, very tired after being awake for the whole night. Giving a broad smile he said, “The ten thousand rupees suitcase is gone. A pair of binoculars used for watching the Mohanbagan-East Bengal matches worked fine. There were four of them and they came within an hour of your departure. One of the four was a woman. I could not see their faces from behind the bushes, but there were four pairs of footprints. Look, look carefully. There are two different pairs of keds, one is a small strapped ladies sandal, much smaller and lighter. The other is a heavy pair of boots. You will find footprints of various shapes and sizes, but whenever you see these two or three together, you must track them. Once it’s evening, you will go back, Sometimes picking up, sometimes losing, and again tracking them, towards the evening I found the sahib in that dilapidated yellow house once again. He ordered, “Go back. Keep the bedroom light switched on. Also keep a medical prescription for cough, cold and influenza ready. I can now see even your footprints next to these three pairs. If I do not return to the police station within twenty-four hours, come back and look for me here.”

“He’s really got a criminal mind,” the journalist said.

“That’s for sure,” said the inspector. “May be it could be considered as his sixth sense. The sahib later said the truth is that if you have a woman with you, you need four walls too. After I came back, he spent the following day asking for the price of bamboos but in reality was keeping track of those footprints on the dusty roads. Sometimes he found two pairs of keds, sometimes one pair, sometimes one pair of keds and that ladies sandal, sometimes the ladies sandal and the pair of boots. Finding and losing all these pugmarks, he ended up about twenty miles away from that burnt house where once again he found the footprints coming from two directions merge. Following them, he arrived at a deserted and dilapidated bamboo hut that had the nameplate of “Gandhi-Nayee-Talim Sangha” fixed on the wall. There were no sounds inside. In the meantime, he had been starving for the whole day. The thermos flask on his shoulders had only a few sips of water
left in it. It was a considerable distance – about twenty miles straight but by tracking the footprints made it probably around forty to fifty. After dusk, a dim light lit the hut. The smell of cooking emanated too. Either the fish was stale or was dried. Because it was possible to kill tigers on foot only during daylight, he spent the whole night on a treetop. In the meantime the few sips of water was exhausted too.

The following day, forty-eight hours after the sahib had left the police station; I met him once again at that old yellow house in the afternoon. There were reasons for the delay. Upon entering the village with the jeep, we heard several incidents from the local tea stalls. A village called Bijgaon – where earlier fishponds had been looted and then distributed to farmers – witnessed a lot of unrest and bombing that morning. Three or four dead bodies lay scattered on the roadside. They were probably travelling in a bullock cart. One animal was dead; the other one was still standing there stupidly shaking its head. My heart suddenly leaped up. Was the sahib in the bullock cart? The semi-circular top also acted as a sort of cover. The news that had reached that distant tea stall was also equally dismal. I went there and saw an upturned bullock cart, dried up clots of blood, quite a few torn and scattered limbs, body parts, heads, a ladies sandal, a pair of keds, a leg with the boot still one, a dead body and the dead bullock still beneath the upturned cart. The smell was that of fresh blood and fireworks and not of the stinking kind. It was very difficult to see through the crowd. A constable belonging to the police station, under whose jurisdiction this village fell, was trying to control the crowd with his baton. Not finding any bits and pieces of the sahib’s safari suit or his Gucci shoes, with a rather heavy heart, I proceeded as per orders towards that burnt yellow house. Having been without food or shelter for more than forty-eight hours, God knew whether he spent his night on a treetop or by trekking long distances. Also, the rifle was with me.

The sahib was sitting at the entrance of that yellow hut. At least fifty hours had elapsed by then. Unshaven for four to five days, his hair was dismantled, suit dirty, eyes red and sunken, and even his false crepe French beard was in a mess. Probably he was eating something. Wiping his hands behind his trousers, he said, “you’ve come. Let’s go. I’ll have to shave and take a good shower. God knows how many pages of the general diary has to be rewritten.”

“You have suffered a lot without food, sleep or water as well as in anxiety and tension,” I said. “I think probably a same-side bombing has killed Ahad’s group.”

“Let’s go,” the sahib repeated. “Did you see the half-dried creeper climbing the wall there? A six-inch long thin cucumber was hanging there. I’ve never tasted anything so cool, fresh, and life-saving before.”

“Damn it,” said the journalist in a disgusted tone. “Where was the tiger hunting story and where is a cucumber? They were selling whole baskets of it in this compartment itself.”

“Did Ahad and his wife Madhumita commit this same-side act for the ten thousand rupees?” I asked.

The inspector finished sipping the whisky from his wine cup. At last he said, “Many days later, one day I saw the sahib sitting in his bedroom cleaning his large pistol and asked him the question again. The sahib would usually be in a good mood during this time, and would often whistle to himself. I don’t know how he acquired it, but because of it, his revolver case often seemed to be larger than those belonging to others.

“Sir, I think you have probably heard that Ahad, his Madhumita, and one of his assistants have been killed in that bombing.”
“I saw all four of them,” replied the sahib. “A man with a big bundle of bedding was inside the cart. Following it, Ahad and another man were walking with Madhumita between them. My suitcase that contained the ten thousand rupees was in Ahad’s right hand, and in his left, he carried a jute bag. Madhumita was carrying the other handle of that bag, which dangling between the two of them, seemed very big and precious. The young man who was walking on the left of Madhumita was carrying a rifle. I had only my pistol to rely upon. Gradually, I could reach within thirty feet but was not confident of moving further as the hedges had thinned considerably and any twig or branch could break beneath my feet. I would have to run within fifteen or twenty feet once the man with the rifle was slightly absent-minded. That is how it happened. Aiming at that jute bag, it took me about five or six seconds to reach the road from behind the bushes and two more seconds to fire a whole lot of bullets. I heard the first two bombs burst when I was running back speedily.”

I was dumb-founded. At last I said, “How brutal! Killing them by firing at their own bag of bombs…?”

The inspector opened his bottle of whisky again and poured another peg. The journalist was still licking at his cup. Either he was unused to having it dry, on the rocks, or maybe he had taken too much.

“That’s better,” he retorted. “I thought this was a story of a fresh cucumber hanging from a burnt creeper.”

Sipping at his whisky once again, the inspector said, “Then let me talk about the sahib’s house. Even after the independence, there were several deserted garden houses on both sides of the railway line. Some of them had silted-up ponds too and probably that was why this locality was known as “Majapukuria.” As it happens, with the influx of refugees, all these ponds were being filled up gradually and houses were being built upon them. Who bothered about the real owner of these lands? To keep their possessions under control, these men became party cadres and the parties themselves became brokers for selling these lands. Clubs came up. No one could construct a single brick in his own plot without paying these clubs. On the other hand, the railways also owned some of the plots. They wanted to construct lines for the Metro or the goods train. The only hope was one of the local MLA’s house fell within this proposed railway route. So the sahib lived in this Majapukuria area where most of the roads were either made of bricks or filled with rubbish collected from old mansions. About a hundred yards of the MLA’s house, at the northern end of a thirty feet wide road was the sahib’s own house. Though not gorgeous, it was a little different from the rest. The construction of the probably railway line was perhaps kept in mind while designing it and the pillars, beams and walls were different. The entrance of the house was through a private road on the northern side. Ascending the front steps, one reached the large drawing room. Beyond that was the garage that housed a bright red ambassador car. There was a big room on the top of the garage.

The story ended about a year and a half from now. The house was constructed about ten years ago. The residents of the house were Aloka Bandopadhyay, the sahib’s wife and owner of the property, his only son Ronojoy, and Ashalata. The latter was a sort of domestic help who did all the cooking and cleaning. Anyone who visited the house in the afternoon would find her only at home. Mrs. Bandopadhyay worked as a headmistress in a south Calcutta school. She would only come home on some days for the snacks, if she found some spare time. On others, she would go directly from school to the women’s development association and come back around dinnertime. As the
secretary of her association, sometimes, she would even hold meetings in her own drawing room. Whenever he was not in college, Ronojoy would live in his room that was at the far end of the house. It was big, spacious and well ventilated. Except for occasional casual leave, the sahib hardly stayed home at a stretch. During off duty, he would once in a while come and spend the night here. This required no new arrangements as he had his own bedroom, bath, and a small eight by ten feet antechamber on the first floor. Aloka was too busy a person. About three years from now she measured 40-36-48, but even before that she had stopped climbing up the stairs. Her own decorative bedroom was on the ground floor next to the drawing room.

Before Ronojoy got married to Moni about two years from now, the house and Asha were synonymous for most of the time during the day. Working alone, she had developed the habit of speaking to herself, sometimes in whispers, sometimes loud enough. Towards the end, she even started speaking to the pots and pans, to the pillows and mattresses. Of course, Mrs. Bandopadhyay was the heavyweight of the house. By just paying twenty thousand rupees to the club, she had made arrangements to build the house in this neighbourhood. So, anyone who came to this house primarily enquired for her. After all, the house was in her name. Her importance was also a proven fact. Once, when there was a mass rape in the bustee near the railway line, her interview appeared in the newspapers.

Fiddling with his empty whisky cup, the journalist asked, “What did she say?”
“You can check that in the newspaper itself,” I added. “But from where did you get this woman called Asha? Macduff’s wife was called Aloka Bandopadhyay. Was she a Christian? Again, you mentioned that Asha spoke to herself for filling up her mental vacuum. Why don’t you mention that she filled up the vacuum of the house also?”

“Does it seem like a puzzle to you?” the inspector asked. “When both Ronojoy and the madam went to school, they would lock the empty house except for the part-time help who worked for them. Asha came there about five or six years ago. That had reduced the vacuum to a certain extent. With Ronojoy’s wife Moni living here for the last year and a half, the emptiness has also been partially filled up.”

“Doesn’t this emptiness feel absurd?” the journalist queried.
“It was a matter of habit,” replied the inspector. “There had been occasions when the sahib was in his police quarters, madam had gone for a vacation with her association colleagues either to a seaside resort or some hill station, and Ronojoy was all alone at home preparing for his school exams. After Asha’s arrival, there were also occasions when madam was away for a long time either at Delhi or at some conference in another city, the sahib was in his police quarters and only Ronojoy and Asha were at home.”

“With such an empty house, the talkative Asha, and the wife of an Anglo-Indian, isn’t the story becoming a fable?” I asked.
“And with such a shining new Ambassador in the garage, a strange whole timer in the house, yes it does seem like a fable” added the journalist. “That too with a police inspector and his school-mistress wife maintaining a car worth one lakh of rupees even after constructing a two-storied house.”

“Yes, the madam is a little misfit,” replied the inspector with a smile. “A graduate from the Diocescean School, a winner of several medals in debates, and then a pretty lady like her ultimately
becoming the wife of a police inspector sounds a bit absurd. And the Ambassador car? I think I shall have to begin all over again with the sahib. The story begins within his own police jurisdiction. Now you can well understand that I shall not provide the actual location. Also I shall break all laws related to police regulations. Earlier it was a three-star hotel. Within a year it was changed into a nursing home. The very next year, another floor made of glass and aluminium was added to it. Soon it became popular. The reception, office, emergency and a small operation theatre were all on the ground floor. The upper floors were for indoor patients including the male ward, the maternity ward, staff-quarters for the on-duty doctors and the gynaecologist, a dormitory for the nurses and ayahs. If you watched carefully, you will find that the address of this nursing home coincided with the address of the abortion clinic that is advertised on all stations walls and kiosks.

“Wait, inspector,” said the journalist. “Where have I seen it? Isn’t the third floor made of fibre-glass? Oh, it’s that Great Hope Health Home. Am I right? Isn’t Akram – the same man whose picture with a revolver held in his hands made rounds during the elections – its owner? Our paper did not publish that picture in the end. Leave that alone.”

“Who’s listening here?” asked the inspector. “Anyhow, since you have uttered the name, just stop there and do not mention the name of the police station”. Now the sahib saw that a number of expensive cars would create traffic jams in front of this nursing home. He suspected that by hoodwinking the necessary laws, more abortions than delivery cases were being carried on here. A few of his sources also hinted that the staff dormitory in the upper two floors ere also being used as a massage clinic. Though the house invited a raid, the sahib did not have the necessary courage to do it directly by issuing a warrant or by surrounding it by his police force. Who knew where strings could be pulled? So, one morning, dressed up in a decorative chikan kurta pyjama, wearing a pair of light blue sunglasses and dangling a camera on his shoulders, he took a taxi and arrived at the nursing home. Unable to identify him, two of his ‘sources’ offered him baits for massage. As he was confidently entering the reception area, the receptionist also arrived at the same time in a bright red Ambassador car. With full regalia she seated herself like a glamorous filmstar. The sahib was lost in his thoughts – he tried to ascertain how much make-up a receptionist uses, whether her nose-stud was of real diamond or not. Probably he was slightly puzzled. He identified himself as a journalist and said that he was very much impressed by the praises he had heard about this health home. He stressed upon the necessity of its location. So many cases of accident from the railways and the streets are treated at this emergency ward. Did they also store blood and treat serious cases apart from first aid?

“I want to write a feature on this nursing home. Earlier it was a hotel, so who inspired its formation? Can I meet the owner now? Can I look around all the floors?”

The sahib was stunned because the receptionist replied with a smile, “We can show you the emergency. But prior appointment is necessary to visit the other floors, that too during visiting hours. Since there are delivery patients, photography is strictly prohibited. And I am the owner. Asha of Great Hope. Why are you blushing?”

“No, no, I’m not.” Replied the sahib quickly. “I just wanted to know your rates.”

“The first aid is free. Oh! I’ve understood the reason for your embarrassment. Here delivery without caesarian is rupees one thousand; accidents that need to undergo surgery are five hundred rupees; ordinary stitching and bandaging is between fifty to two hundred rupees. Are you feeling ashamed to ask about the abortion rates? It’s the same as delivery – one thousand rupees. But why
are you feeling ashamed? Don’t you watch advertisements for Whisper, Carefree or Mala-D in prime time television programmes?
“Could I see the ground floor, the emergency and the male ward now? Do you also treat patients here who suffer from spondilitis, arthritis and rheumatic joints? Half the population of Calcutta is inflicted by these diseases after taking bus rides.”

Asha then did something strange. Before he could realize what was going on, she rose from her chair, stood behind him and shouted to the people at the end of the hall, “This sahib has acute migraine.” Saying this, she started massaging his nose, earlobes and shoulder very deftly with her two fingers. With the touch of breasts on his back and the smell of her lovely perfume, he was completely bowled out. Later the sahib admitted that he had felt great relief by that massage and that probably he did have migraine, which he was not aware of.
But the next moment Asha went back to her chair and asked, “So, then?” The sahib kept wondering what to reply. Staring up at his face she added, “Can I say something? Hope you won’t mind. I think I have seen you somewhere. Since it a long time back, say about twenty-five to thirty years and in a far-off place, it might not be true. Anyway, since you wanted to see our outdoor emergency ward and the OT, please come.”
She stood up again and the reporter/sahib had to follow suit.
“Come this way,” she said as she entered a room next to which was a staircase.
It was a small room, about ten feet by ten feet, well-decorated, but somehow looked like a hospital cabin.
“This is my bedroom. Please sit down. No, I don’t keep any chairs in my room.”
The sahib felt scared. Was his disguise seen through? Did this woman want him to compromise?
“Sit down,” Asha said. “Let me shut the door.”
“No, no, “ said the sahib.
“Don’t worry. They will think that you are my personal boy friend.”
“Do you have anything to say?” asked the sahib.
“Asha smiled and replied, “Here, don’t you want to ask for anything? Give me that cigarette case. I too have a Japanese tape recorder of that kind.”
He took the tape recorder out of his pocket and handed it over to her.
“Before taking over this place, where you a hotel receptionist?”
“Why do all journalists want to know about our background?” she said with a smile. “No, I do not object to reply. Before this hospital, I was in a hotel. Before that I was at Nabadwip in a kirtan troupe, and even before that I was at Lohajung. What will you do with my background? Isn’t the present enough? Why do you want to investigate? Police? Are there any policemen to offer me protection? I’ve heard that they do not even register FIRs.”
“Did you mention Lohajung?” asked the sahib. “ Do you remember anything about that place? Did you know anybody there?”
“You’re not believing me? said Asha. “Why does your face look so faded? We are not real vampires. I can make some tea for you. The lease of this house is in my name. That Ambassador car has also been purchased under my name. Even the license is registered in my name. Should the door remain shut?”

Ten minutes later they emerged from behind the closed door. By that time the sahib had come to know that the name of this glamorous model or film star was Asha Dhop and she hailed from Lohajung in Bangladesh. This health home was really owned by Sudhin-Akram. Asha of course,
drove the Ambassador car. All the VIPs who could not come here in their own cars were brought in that car.
The sahib thought that it was an open and shut case and told her, “There still might be a few people who are willing to offer protection to a Dhop from Lohajung, provided that she really needs it. Moreover, Calcutta is such a big city, with so many hotels.”
He took the tape recorder from Asha and stood up with his camera. He seemed quite tall to Asha. She told the typist at the end of the room, “Tea isn’t ready here, so I’m taking the journalist out. Probably he knows about our native village.”
The sahib was perplexed. She led him to the red Ambassador and said, “Please come in. Either you drive or let me do so. On the way you can decide whether you want tea or me. I told you that you looked familiar – your forehead, your nose, your Imperial beard. No, no, you can’t do it here.”

Why did the sahib get into the car? Asha started it once he got in.
“In which direction should I go?”
“Wherever you please.”
“Of course, I’ve filled up the tank about an hour ago. Will our drive end in a hotel suit?”
“Drive northwards, wherever you want. Now tell me, what do you remember about Lohajung? Whom did you know there? Where have you seen a forehead and beard like mine? Are you a Brahmin?”
Asha giggled and said, “Are you a Brahmin? Won’t a lower caste suffice? My mother was the daughter from a lower caste.”
The sahib dictated in an authoritarian voice for the first time, “Have you drunk right in the morning? Give me the steering then.”
“No, I was thinking of my background.”
“Drive in a zigzag manner, I mean dodge. One tank full of petrol – why don’t you drive to Nabadwip? OK. Follow this road.”
Nearing Kashipur, Asha said, “Do you want to take me straight home?”
“Why not Nabadwip?” replied the sahib. “How did you get your father’s surname?”
“Please alight here,” said Asha annoyingly.
“And you?”
“I’ll drive on wherever I please. Or maybe, I might go back. We all want to devour each other, but don’t dare to offer protection.”
“You know nothing. I am a police officer.”
The car suddenly alighted upon the footpath. Holding on to the steering wheel the sahib said, “Move, let me drive.”
While crossing Chiria More, he said, “Call me Sir. Now tell me how could a lower caste girl from Lohajung become a kirtan singer and why doesn’t she want to go to Nabadwip?”
In spite of so much make-up, Asha’s face seemed pale. She reminisced deeply, “I’ve heard from my mother that both of them were Brahmans. Mother was a carpenter’s daughter but knew kirtan quite well. It’s passé in Nabadwip now, but one has to survive. My grandmother was also a good singer. After my grandfather’s kirtan troupe broke up, he would often come to her house to listen to her songs. My mother and grandmother both learnt from him. Whenever grandfather’s inspector son came home, he too would come to listen to their songs. My mother cannot recall whether I was the grandfather’s or his son’s daughter.”

Seething in silent anger, the sahib accelerated the car.
“How much longer do we have to wait?” I said. “It is so hot and there is such stale odour.”

The inspector said, “At least you can hear human voices from a distance. Everyone hasn’t left the train yet.”

“The situation under the tunnel is worse than ours,” said the journalist. “But the way Sudhin captured madam along with her car was a bit too risky, wasn’t it? Your sahib was either too adamant or was he more keen to take possession of the Ambassador?”

“Well said,” replied the inspector. “Even after they built a house, everyone including the vigilance officers would be envious about police inspector Macduff and school mistress Aloka Banerjee. On the other hand, a car always enhances the prestige of the house. More so, it suits the secretary of a woman’s association rather well. Both Aloka and her son Ronojoy learnt driving within six months and soon they heard Mrs. Bandopadhyay tell everybody, “It’s my sister in law’s car. A young widow, she has come away from her in-laws. What a sad fortune for such a beautiful lady! We use the car and deposit a monthly amount of rupees 250-300 in hr account. In this way we will pay off the cost of the car and she will also earn some money. She has already transferred the papers in my name.”

The journalist asked, “A lower caste girl also has a sister in law? But why are you silent about Sudhin-Akram?”

“No, I’m not. He appeared at the police station with an FIR within two days. A journalist along with his Ambassador car had kidnapped one of his beautiful employees. It was a bourgeois paper.”

“Was she very beautiful?” asked the sahib. “How old? If there is any monetary involvement, then your accounts will have to be produced in court. My sources say that the entire nursing home along with the car belongs to that beautiful woman. Since you claim it to be yours, let’s see what we can do.”

About fifteen days later, Sudhin-Akram along with some of his disciples attacked the police station. The sahib was in his chamber as usual. His left hand rested on the butt of his black service revolver, which hung from a silken strap over his shoulder. The drawer next to his right hand was partly open. If one could peep in, one would find his personal revolver there, which was much heavier than the service one.”

“I’m very sorry, Mr. Akram,” said the sahib. “You will have to fight a civil suit. That woman has sent a letter to our commissioner from a distant village near Purbasthali stating that the lease of the home, the assets, liabilities, trade license and whatever else you had acquired in her name are all being returned to you. See, I have a copy of that letter with me also.”

“With the mention of Lohajung, the story seems to have taken a different turn,” I added. “With all her make-up, smiles and bold statements, doesn’t Asha feel awkward to call herself the sister in law of the secretary of the woman’s association? Of course an efficient whole-time maid can be indirectly called a sister in law. Or maybe the whole story had been concocted to keep the red Ambassador away from the eye of the vigilance officers?”

“Oh the other hand, however beautiful and smart she might be, the sahib was unable to seduce her even in his own house,” added the journalist.

The inspector said, “How much time did the sahib spend at home? Even if he came for an afternoon, he would be upstairs in his own room.”
“Tell me mister, did the sahib really know or lived in a place called Lohajung? Or is it a coincidence like two people from Baghbazar accidentally meeting on the streets of London?” I said.

“Or maybe it is my accidental birth, my falling into an operation, meeting you in this compartment, the sudden breakdown of this express train – all these may either be termed accidents or we can seek remote causes in them. Or maybe it was the sahib’s car. The meeting of Lohajung with Lohajung can be termed as fate or coincidence. Maybe the characters often define accidents as fate, like winning one lakh of rupees in a lottery.”

A gust of strong odour suddenly filled the compartment. Probably warm wind was blowing over the ash heaps.

“At least it is some breeze,” said the journalist. “We are much better than those stuck within the tunnel. So, please continue inspector sahib. Moreover, we journalists are used to situations like this.”

Both the inspector and the journalist poured another round of whisky.

“Now, twenty-six years ago, my Macduff sahib got married to madam Aloka. Maintaining all the official formalities, he got orders from the higher authority to change his surname to Bandopadhyay as well. There was nothing wrong in that. Though he was called Macduff for long time, his original title was Bandopadhyay.”

The journalist was thrilled. “See, I told you before! Now the cat is out of the bag.”

I had to admit that I was also surprised. “It’s good that your sahib comes closer to us by becoming a resident Bengali of Calcutta.”

The inspector added, “There was difficulty also. The surnames have a long genealogical history. You can identify the profession of some families by looking at their surnames. With changes in society, the pronunciation and spelling of these titles also undergo changes. For instance, during his days, Macduff’s grandfather would write his title in English as ‘Dap’; the sahib’s father, who was a favourite inspector of Mr. Tegart would write ‘duff.’ So, when our sahib went to school, his name was changed to ‘Duff.’”

Interestingly, the first names were always reminiscent of Lord Krishna. For instance, our sahib’s father was called Murali Madhav Chandra and he was called Dhrita Murali Chandra. When he joined service, his name in English spelt Dhirit M.C.Duff, or in a shorter form, DMC Duff. This was pronounced as Macduff. While marrying a beautiful convent educated lady, the sahib had to go back to his ancestral title of Bandopadhyay. Since Calcutta and Lohajung were not the same, this was quite suitable for Calcutta society. After seeking permission from the higher authorities, he changed the name in his service book and pay bills to Bandopadhyay. Before that he was Macduff. About three years ago, when he was reminded of his impending pension and promotion, he realized the complication. It was seen that in the first six years of his service he was Macduff; in the next twelve years, he, along with his wife, was Bandopadhyay, and the next twelve years again Macduff. When he found this out from the Accountant General’s office, he was a bit worried. The services of the first six years could be modified according to the departmental permissions and affidavits but how could one account for the last twelve years when he went back to his own surname? There were no departmental permissions for this. All his pay bills had been mysteriously drawn under the name of Macduff. Did he not apply to go back to his old surname? Or maybe his application was still gathering dust upon some dealing clerk’s table, who went on postponing its processing. Or maybe, because of apathy on the part of some dealing clerk, the corrections on the first page of the service book had not been made? The sahib could not say
anything for certain. One might suspect that after twelve years of marriage, he himself had secretly changed his title to Macduff. Well, it was his own duty to trace out why his papers had not been processed properly. He had enquired at several places – at all the police stations where he had been posted and at all the offices of the deputy commissioners under whom he had served. In between, under the instructions of a deputy commissioner, he had even been transferred from the police station to the IB department for two years. Actually the trouble began about fifteen years ago. Out of the eighteen years, already he had served for twelve years under the title of Bandopadhyay and had been promoted from sub-inspector to inspector. By that time his wife Aloka had also become middle-aged and authoritarian. Working as a social worker and as an assistant head mistress, she had trimmed her hair and had become double-chinned. It was during this time that a deputy commissioner whom he knew earlier, called him one day and advised him to go back to his old police station which had become uncontrollable.

“Go and join day after tomorrow after handling over your charges to the second officer. I shall send the orders immediately.”

Now the dictation that this DC sent read that he was sending D.Macduff as the officer in charge of that particular police station. It was the same police station where he had overpowered Ahad. Upon coming back he found that a few constables and two assistant subinspectors were still serving there. At the end of the month, when the pay register mentioned him as Dhirit Macduff, he signed it in a jovial mood. This went on. Six months later, the clerks discovered that he was Macduff in the pay bills but where was the service book in his name? Unable to find it, they thought that it was probably lying somewhere in an old controlling office, and the easiest solution was to open a new service book for him. In the meantime, the sahib was a bit reluctant to change his name to Macduff officially and this was probably thinking about his wife. Again, it might have been that when the old service book did arrive at the new controlling office, the dealing clerk was that the name of Macduff on the first page had been cancelled and overwritten as Bandopadhyay. He thought that probably someone had done it by mistake. This name Dhirit is quite uncommon, so he cancelled the Bandopadhyay and made it Macduff again. In the meantime since another service book had been started, this could be attached to it and the signatures of the sahib could be attained later. But ultimately that was never done. Are you laughing? A police inspector had been divided into three pieces with the middle one bearing a new personality that was sometimes quite unfamiliar. Well, all pensioners are sufferers. You might say that it was really the sahib’s fault. When everyone in the old police station started addressing him and writing his name as Macduff, he too participated in it. Since his bank passbook bore the name of D.Macduff from the beginning, probably he would face no problems.

“Was the inspector feeling tired of waiting?” I asked.

“The damage began about two or two and a half years from now,” replied the inspector. “To put the pieces of his life together, he thought of a plan. He would often take casual leave for a day or two and venture out to find copies of salary slips from his old police stations and ultimately trace out the file, which contained the order of changing his name from Bandopadhyay to Macduff.”

About two years ago, he was going on a similar enquiry mission to get acquainted with the officer in charge of one of his old police stations. That day, he was off duty till noon and so had decided that if he availed the five o’clock morning train, he could easily return by twelve. It was a foggy winter morning and the train was about to depart. Since he would have to walk less upon reaching his destination, he decided to board one of the rear compartments. Walking alongside the train, he found it exceptionally empty with hardly fifty passengers. He saw a few passengers leave one of
the compartments and proceed towards the bus terminus. Was there a sudden strike or bandh? The sahib decided to wait till five thirty at least. He boarded a compartment towards the end of the train and saw a single person leaning on the wall and fast asleep. He thought that this was probably the result of waking up too early to board the train. But was it so? Proceeding a few steps towards the passenger, his criminal mind sensed danger. Was it a dead body? Should he get down? Moving a little closer he saw the pale face of a girl. Her ruffled reddish hair was tied in an untidy knot over her head, she was wearing a torn dirty frock, and a dirty cotton sheet covered her from waist downwards. Was she quivering or was it her dying throbs? The sahib stood in front of her. Cautiously lifting the thin and cold arm, he felt her pulse. No, she was still alive. He lifted her eyelids gently. The dark big pupils seemed still. She breathed slightly, as if just a few moments before her death. What should he do? Suddenly he remembered his shoulder bag. What did it contain? Bandages, gauze, cotton wool for first aid, a small bottle of whisky, a small thermos full of coffee, a cup, a Borosil wine cup, his pistol and a warm shawl. After pouring about half a spoon of whisky in her mouth, she seemed to move a little. This movement removed the dirty sheet covering her knees. The sahib recoiled in fear. The lower part of her body was wet with blood. Goodness! What should he do? She had either to be fed or first her bleeding should be stopped. Or should he tell her, “Look here, don’t worry, I am a policeman.”

It was already five fifteen and the sahib feared that other passengers would soon arrive. Should he raise his voice and ask for help? Was it a dagger injury and could a bandage save it? As if undertaking a check up, he lifted her frock very gently, careful not to let the blood stain his hands. There was no sign of stabbing. Her panty was missing and her thighs were also blood stained. What a shame! She was a rape victim. How could he manage this trouble? Should he take out his woolen shawl and cover her up? O my God, he thought. This must be done before the other passengers arrived. Covering her up from neck to toe with his shawl, he mixed half a spoon of whisky in half a cup of coffee and called her, “Here girl, have this. First you should survive and then your treatment.”

Staring at him with huge anguished eyes, the girl did not lift her hand. Her lips just quivered. “I am a policeman,” the sahib said. He held the cup within her quivering lips and its warmth probably strengthened her a little. “Drink it, drink it,” he said. The girl drank it up in fear. There seemed to be some meaning in her vision now. The sahib again whispered to her, “See, blood is life. Before we go to a doctor, the blood should be stopped. And hurry up before other people arrive. I am giving you cotton wool and bandage cloth. Go to the toilet and dress up. Why are you staring at me like that?” His tone was rather annoyed.

“You’re a stupid woman. Don’t you know what to do? If you cut your finger, don’t you press it with cotton wool and then tie a bandage over it so that it stays in place?” He refrained from mentioning about Carefree and understood that she hadn’t reached her puberty yet. But the bleeding had to be stopped anyhow. All these were the doctor’s problems. He would look after it when the case came to the police station.

“Oh my God! Save me from this shame!” he muttered to himself. “I’ll take you to the toilet and then you dress up….” But as ill luck would have it, though he was not a doctor, he had to do the dressing himself. Before the GRP came he would have to get down from the train. What a shame! Wrapping the shawl around the girl twice, he tied it in a knot behind her back and got out of the compartment. She could not walk properly and kept on leaning towards him. “Walk properly, I’m holding your hands,” he said once. “Don’t keep leaning upon me.”
Once he even muttered in anger, “Damn the woman. Even after childbirth she has to get up and walk if necessary.” Disgusted with himself, he held the bundle of the thin girl within his firm wrists and led her to the GRP outpost.

“There are a group of ruffians in the GRP lock-up. Someone has dirtied the women’s lock-up,” said the constable on duty. “This train will not run. The next one will come at six a.m. and the officers will arrive then.”

Suddenly the sahib remembered that the police station behind the railway station was one of his old workplaces and the second officer during his tenure was now the present officer in charge. Coming out of the station, he hired a taxi and reached there around six o’clock.

The inspector finished sipping his cup of whisky.

“That was the end of the case,” the journalist said.

“No it was very easy,” said the inspector. “The officer did not have to be woken up from his sleep. After conducting a night-long raid, he had just returned. Putting the two culprits behind bars, he was busy preparing the report. The sahib told him everything. As luck would have it, the gynaecologist of the Police Hospital, Dr. Bhusan still resided there. His chamber did not open before eight. The doctor was rather reluctant when the officer in charge called him and advised to remove the patient to some hospital. But when the OC handed over the telephone line to Macduff sahib, his tone became rather obliged and agreed to do the check-up immediately.

The officer said, “She’s still in a state of shock and cannot say anything. Go and get the medical check-up done and ask the doctor to submit his report later. After you come back, we will see how the case can be represented.”

Things happened accordingly. Leaving the patient under the care of the doctor, the sahib forcibly opened a shop and bought a frock and a panty for her.

“She’s still lying on the operation table,” said the doctor. “A few stitches were required. But luckily the damage was not internal. I have given her an injection and fed her with half a glass of warm milk. Come, let’s drink some tea. We’re meeting after a long time.”

At around seven thirty, the doctor brought the girl to the police station. She was speaking a few words then. Her name was Umasashi. When she admitted that she had dropped the plastic bag containing her old frock and bandages, which the doctor had handed over to her out of the taxi window in utter contempt, a lot of confusion cropped up. After a lot of discussion, both the OC and the sahib agreed that however tactfully they might present the case; one scolding query from the opposition lawyer would bring out the truth from the girl. So, the story that she had been recovered from underneath the culvert of the station would not suffice. The officer said, “After some time, if she can disclose the name of the culprits, they could be arrested. If they are not political creatures, the case could be arranged accordingly. But if someone came and said that it was a routine affair, then of course, nothing can be done. Now she could be kept in the lock-up. I am leaving some space in the general diary.”

The sahib agreed and said, “Keep her. Will it be correct to send her home, even if she has one? See if somebody comes to claim her.”

He told Umasashi, “Here girl, you stay here. Don’t be scared. I’m going.”

Umasashi then did something strange. With her two lean hands, she held on firmly to the sahib’s arm. He tried to pacify her, “Don’t worry. Leave my hand. They are all policemen here.” Suddenly he felt quite powerful, as if his spine was expanding upwards, his chest widening. The sweater and the uniform over the sweater would burst any moment and his cap would touch the ceiling. He said, “I think she cannot be kept here.”
“If you think so, you can send her to some home where we can have access to her whenever necessary,” said the OC.

“Are you talking about psychology?” I asked. “Did the sahib think that this little girl at least felt all policemen to be saviours with revolvers around their waists and not all of them were eunuchs?”

“It might be that the sahib had been behaving like an ordinary human being from the morning and not like a policeman” said the sahib. “Anyhow, it so happened that about two and a half years ago, all her prescribed medication was complete. The hotel that supplied food for the sahib in his quarters now supplied for two. The sahib worked in his office downstairs, Umasashi swept the rooms upstairs, washed the crockery, tried to make the beds. One evening, she even managed to make tea. Soon she tried to learn cooking. These poor girls learn household work from a very early age. But there was one difficulty, a sort of fixation, you might say. The sahib was forced to fix her steel and plastic camp cot in his own bedroom. Earlier she would sleep on the floor underneath his bed. Whenever the sahib occasionally went home for a day or two, Umasashi would accompany him and sleep on the floor of the first floor antechamber next to his bedroom. Yes, fear was not leaving her.

It was about two years that Umasashi was staying with the sahib. To make her normal, he taught her to cook, bought her new clothes and even taught her to read and write. He even bought her a false diamond nose stud set in gold and some lac bangles. By that time her name had been shortened to Sashi or Sasha. One day, the sahib had gone home for some business and madam said in disgust, “What a name for a maid servant? Here Sasha, go and get some tea for the sahib in my room.” Sometimes the sahib was put in a difficult situation also. This was nearly two years after Umasashi was staying in his quarters. One day when he found her weeping profusely behind the door, he understood.

“You’re a fool,” he said. “Some day or another you’ll have to be a woman, isn’t it? Go to the bathroom and I’ll arrange something.” He sent the constable to get a packet of Whisper and told a lady constable, “Go upstairs, Uma is calling you.” The journalist was perturbed. “But sir, do you say such things in a story?”

The inspector took the bottle of whisky from the journalist’s hands and put it back in his suitcase. “Sir,” he said, “Don’t you watch Whisper advertisements during prime time TV? Don’t you often have young nieces or daughters sitting next to you? Have you ever sent an objection letter? Or don’t you know the story behind the famous Kamakshya temple?”

“A lot of things have still remained unexplained,” I said. “Like Asha turning into a sister in law.” The inspector thought for a while and said, “What is the harm in keeping it like that? Asking for explanations is not good always. But I can quote a dialogue for your benefit. Asha was living in that house for about a year. Madam was going to South India with some of her friends. The sahib had come home to pay some money and said, “You won’t be home for a month. Rano has his exams soon and how he even has influenza.”

“But you cannot detain me just for that,” replied madam. Seeing her double chin, her short hair, the sahib though how her voice had turned so heavy and harsh. Posing a smile the madam asked, “How many days does influenza last? All these days, just because I had to leave Rano under queer maidservants, I haven’t stayed more than ten days outside
the house. Now, don’t create problems before my trip. At least now there is a whole time sister in law.”

“Sister in law? Who? Asha?”

“Look here, we will have to continue the story about sister in law’s car, On the other hand, that she hails from Lohajung is also an advantage. Nowadays people are envious even if you buy documents. Even this month we could not deposit the money against the car. God knows when we will be able to repay the loan in this manner!”

“Not in this lifetime,” said the sahib mentally and moved away.

“Anyhow, the sahib drove the red Ambassador to reach madam and her friends to Howrah Station. Later he left for his quarters along with Umasashi. That took place about two years from now. Madam was going to North India. It was a dark evening, as it is now. Umasashi was in the back seat and the sahib was driving the car. Instead of taking the main road, he took a short cut through a narrow bye-lane.

A sudden, stinking odour in the compartment made me hold my breath. Even the smell of whisky could not outdo it. At last the journalist took out his perfumed handkerchief and waved it.

“See, the sun is setting and the last heat is turning all dead objects into gas,” said the inspector.

Humming a tune from a Tagore song, the journalist started to wave his handkerchief to its tune. The inspector said, “Where was I? Oh! The lane next to the bustee. The sahib knew that at the turn of the lane there was a small one-storied house and just opposite to that was a square plot of vacant land. Someone had tried to construct a house there but what remained were a few scattered walls with many of their bricks missing. The sahib knew that the younger brother who lived in that house had been killed in a skirmish while trying to keep control of the bustee. Now his whole family had taken shelter within the bustee. The sahib assumed that the owner of the plot had lost courage to build the house, or he might have had altercations with the local club.

At the turn of the lane, he accelerated his speed and lit the headlights. The lights focused upon three young men sitting on the verandah of the one-storied house. As he turned further, the lights fell upon the vacant plot and he heard someone desperately shouting for help. At the same time someone else was asking to be quiet or the tongue would be pulled out. Someone else shouted in even more slang expletives, “Before you die, see your own mother being raped.” Pressing at the brakes, the sahib switched off the headlights. He was inside the car and his regulation revolver just had six bullets. Were the wheels of the car also sinking?

The young men sitting on the verandah came towards the car. “What’s going on?” one of them asked. “Why are you focusing a floodlight upon a naked woman?”

“A red new Ambassador!”, another one added. “Weren’t Sudhin’s boys saying at the meeting that they had lost one like this?”

The third one put in his head through the window and was ashamed, “Here, here. This is our local inspector. But sir, this is being same side! Moreover, someone said that your promotions are due. Here, come and push the car backwards.”

Switching of all the lights, the sahib drove the car backwards till he reached the main road.

“What kind of a reporter are you?” asked the journalist. “Why didn’t you keep a record of this classic rape case? Maybe they would snatch your camera, but might have let you off if you shouted that you were journalist.”

I remember reading about this kind of an incident in the newspapers. One can easily assume what the sahib had seen in that vacant plot of land.
The journalist added, “What’s this going on? Why don’t you supply us with a little more drinks? See how the darkness is creeping into the compartment.”

“Does darkness ever enter anywhere?” asked the inspector. The lights go out. The businessmen have lit up raw coal and so more black smoke will come in.’

I said, “No, not that. By switching off the lights and driving back a hundred miles, do you mean to drive back from your memories too?”

“Are you a writer?” asked the inspector with a smile. Anyhow, one year passed since that incident and the sahib did not leave the neighbourhood. For once or twice a month, he even stayed back at home catering to their requirements. His regulation revolver still hung from his waist and his own pistol was kept under his shirt fixed with an elastic belt. Occasionally he took Umasashi along with him because if she stayed alone in the quarters, he had to hurry back before it was too late. On such occasions, he did not order food from the hotel. He brought bread, which was toasted, in the small gas range and sometimes egg curry would be prepared. By that time Umasashi had learnt to cook.

Sometimes if he came late to his quarters, he would find the girl fast asleep upon his bed, covered up with a heavy sheet. What fright she still had! She still considered him her saviour. The sahib would make fun of it, fry some parathas and have dinner together. The girl would then be all smiles and her nose stud would radiate with light. If he sometimes said, “Now I’m growing old and you’ll have to gain courage to stay alone. A girl of thirteen should not be afraid,” Umasashi would ruffle his hair and say, “How much of it is grey? I’ll pluck them all out for you.”

What would the sahib think of in these occasions? His promotion was of course inevitable. And what about the service book that had been split into three parts? He had to surrender to the Commissioner through the DC. He still had five years to go before his pension and during his long retirement he would run around the offices to get things in order. Now, for the time being, let the promotion take place in Macduff’s name.

“But didn’t he feel occasional pangs of guilt? He could not raid Sudhin-Akram’s massage clinic because he had been transferred elsewhere. What about that woman from Lohajung and the red Ambassador car? What protection could he offer? And what could he do in that long drive backwards in his car? They had identified Sudhin’s car and there were only six bullets in his revolver. Probably they had brought in people from other neighbourhoods to take action here in this locality. Sometimes the sahib felt an itching sensation in the soles of his feet. Whenever he entered the locality in the police jeep he felt the same sensation in his palm, which held the steering wheel. He perspired and felt thirsty.

“It’s been more than an hour and a half,” I said. “The train was supposed to reach Calcutta in forty five minutes. What a misfortune today!”

“What if it is closed for the day?” asked the journalist. “Here give me some more whisky.” Soon he helped himself by pouring some of it in his cup.

The inspector continued his story. “About a year from now, the sahib’s health and physique started deteriorating. He went on feeling that burning sensation and constant thirst. He visited the doctor, had his blood pressure checked, and took medicines for acidity. By that time the driver-cum-constable during Ahad’s reign had been posted as an officer in the local police station. On meeting the inspector he advised, “Take some leave Sir and go home. I shall enquire daily, call the doctor and bring all the necessary medicines.”

The sahib started thinking. Sometimes prolonged thoughts upset him too. He remembered the occasion when madam alighted from the red Ambassador while coming home from a trip to
Chunar. She had boy-cut hair, and if not obese, would look well in a safari suit too. He smiled to himself and thought that probably she was the cause of his trouble with the service book.

One day, feeling restless, he would say, “Now it’s really becoming impossible. Sashi, will you go to Aloka’s house? Let me take leave for a few days.” Sashi had turned thirteen and she had to be taken care of too.

“You can live in that house as you stay here, Sashi. Once in a while there is no harm in cooking the food,” he said. He thought that as long as she did not go out of the house, it would be all right. There was a telephone in his bedroom and he could keep in touch with his doctor and the local police station. This would be full-fledged rest. Since the burning sensation remained unabated, he thought that the medicines were useless and he needed to consult a dermatologist to solve his problem.

“ In the meantime, while the sahib was just going to climb the stairs one day, he heard someone from behind the doors speak of a bottle of potassium cyanide. Startled, he turned back but strangely enough, he could not see anybody. A bottle of potassium cyanide in this house? What was its purpose? Did he commit a mistake in hearing?

That night, after Sashi was asleep, he called the police station. “Officer, can you still do bugging? The officer replied, “The beep, beep sound can be done through wireless only. If you want to listen to words then you need to draw wires. I mean, this can be done under the guise of changing electrical lines.”

“It has to be done in my house, in my wife’s, son’s and Asha’s bedrooms and also probably in the kitchen,” said the sahib. “I’ll tell everyone that an electrician will come to test all the lines, change the roses and joint boxes.”

That was done. Within three or four days a few old joint boxes were replaced and a new line was fixed in the sahib’s bedroom. The sound was very faint but could be heard clearly if held next to the ears. When the officer was leaving his house that day, the sahib said, “I was feeling very happy to talk to you for the last two days. Please come every morning for a cup of tea which Sashi will make for you. For the few days that I am on leave, we will walk around our locality. Though in plain dress, bring your revolver along. I shall also take mine – that small one that I have. What are you thinking? Tell them that the electrician comes everyday because he belongs to our department and was also once upon a time my orderly.”

The very first night after the bugging was done, just as soon as Umasashi fell asleep in his ante chamber, the sahib held his tape recorder to his ears. In the beginning there were some static and strange sounds, then very faintly he heard Asha talking to herself, probably trying to maintain her sanity by reciting an English poem. Later he heard the sound of footsteps, the pulling of a chair. Then he heard her say, “A small bottle but so powerful. Let it be here behind the old tins and bottles, hidden under the cobwebs.”

That night, after all the lights of the house were switched off, the sahib stealthily moved around like a thief in his own house. In the kitchen he discovered the bottle from one of the shelves and his forensic-trained mind instantly identified it as potassium cyanide. Carrying the bottle to his bedroom, he kept it in a drawer. The next moment he felt scared. Should he try and learn anything more?
The inspector helped himself with the remaining whisky from the bottle. At first I thought I will ask about his subconscious mind but kept quiet. Already being criticized for being a writer, I just simply said, “But the story does not end here.”

“ It takes time for courage to build up,” he said. Walking with the departmental electrician every morning, undergoing health check-ups were gradually changing for the better. The regular jogging and the long walks around the locality after the morning tea continued for some time. During this time, the small revolver would always be either hidden within his palms or covered up with a handkerchief in his pocket.

About five or seven days later, around eleven at night, he fixed the pin of the tape recorder into the plug and held it to his ears. Surprisingly, two clear voices of Rano and Asha were heard.

“Thank goodness you’ve come. It’s eleven at night.”

“Can I come earlier even if I want to? Don’t I have to massage your mother?”

“Do you massage her for the whole night?”

“No, sometimes I fall asleep after that.”

“I have seen it. Not in your own room.”

“So what? Whenever anyone thinks that a woman has loose morals, he becomes hungry for her. This anyone can be a woman too. Now her boy-cut hair is like Navratilova.”

“So, won’t you be able to come to me occasionally?”

“The summer vacation will commence soon. Won’t madam go to the hills? By the time your wife returns home after her exams, the summer vacation will end. Then again you will be alone. But listen, I can’t find the bottle.”

“Bottle? Meaning the potassium…..?”

“Yes.”

“So, was the bottle all these days with you?”

“Thank goodness I had removed it. Do you know how many people could die from that entire amount you brought? You left for college that day and did not return till night. I was feeling scared that out of repentance you might commit something serious. And then you came back with that bottle of potassium.”

“Now tell me, is this true? As you say, if someone loves his mother very much but does not get her affection, then confronted with sickness and fear of exams, finds somebody else like his mother in that empty house and comes close to her……”

“I don’t remember what I had said.”

“And those words too. The potassium was on the table. You goaded and coaxed me to have the food and then came into my bed. Later you said that regular habit kills all sense of repentance.”

“Find that out for yourself. Now Rano, there is one more thing. You have to promise that tonight is the last time and never after that. Go to your in-laws house. Mani is a very good girl and I love her.”

The sahib could take it no more and unhooked the pin of the tape recorder. He couldn’t sleep for the whole night. In the morning the office found the sahib burning the tape from a broken cassette. Upon seeing him he said, “You’re late today. Come let’s go. We’ll start jogging from today. We can drink tea at some roadside stall.”

“Won’t you take your revolver?” asked the officer.

“Let it be. What’s the use?” replied the sahib.
That was how the routine continued, said the inspector. The officer would board a bus at four o’clock in the morning and reach the sahib’s house around five. Sashi would be ready with the tea. The sahib was already dressed and by quarter past five, they would both leave.

One day, the sahib said, “Do me one last favour as an electrician. Shift the calling bell from the main door into my bedroom. I don’t want Asha to get up every morning and open the door. Sashi can do the job from now on and once we leave, she can close the door.”

On another day he said, “Come, let’s run.” A little later he was ashamed and said, “I mean, I’m asking you to move faster. Don’t we have to keep our bodies fit? The promotion is soon due.”

After their morning walk was over around six, the officer would accompany the sahib till his doorstep. His revolver was always with him. If he were off duty on any morning, he would come in for another round of tea. Again on other days, the sahib would say, “You don’t have duty in the morning? Come let’s go and have a Limca in some shop. You know I always feel like having very cold and very sweet things. By the way, do you know any good homeopath doctor? You know, that burning sensation and thirst is not going.” On that day the sahib had a big ice cream after his Limca.

On another instance he said, “Let me know the day when you have duty from nine. I want to but a few things. We will roam around the locality for some time.”

Three days passed in that manner. That day, after jogging, they sat in a tea stall, drank tea, and then spent some more time roaming aimlessly around the lanes. Suddenly he saw an inscription on the wall of a house that read, “Tangail sarees sold here” and stopped. That was fine. Getting hold of someone, he called the lady of the house and bought a medium-priced light blue saree. Walking further down, he stopped in front of another shop from where he bought eyeliner and lipstick. Then he said, “If you have the courage, why not? After all, she’s a poor destitute girl and these have to be given to her. Every morning she wakes up so early to make our tea. What’s the time now? Has the sun come up? Eight-thirty? Then let’s go home.”

On the way he halted again in front of a fruit shop. Looking around, he didn’t like anything in particular. “Let’s go,” he said. “Nothing is good here. Do you remember that old burnt yellow house?”

“Yes I do remember,” replied the officer. “After being without food or water for forty eight hours, how you survived on a small cucumber.”

“Yes, how pleasant and tender it was and how it quenched my thirst,” added the sahib.

Around five in the morning about a day or two later, the officer heard several excited voices within the house even before he rang the calling bell. Almost immediately Rano came out of the door. Seeing the officer he said, “Here you are. I was just going to look for the police. Please come in.”

Once he was inside the passage both madam Aloka and Asha spoke out together. “Destruction! Trouble!”

“Please speak one at a time,” the officer said.

Asha said, “When I opened the door thinking that she had probably come to fetch water for the tea, I found her whole saree full of blood. She was crying and said that there was trouble. Who else, but that Sashi. I told her that it was inevitable. Why did she wear a saree last evening, put on a bindi and kajal in her eyes? She has brought in her own destruction.”
Aloka madam added, “He never goes out of the house in the evening. But yesterday he went out and bought a bunch of flowers. Why did he have to do it? Don’t I buy flowers for the vase? And she is a shameless woman too. As soon as she saw the flowers she rushed to grab it from his huge masculine hands. He was bubbling with joy. I should have understood then. But that doesn’t mean that just because he is a policeman, just because he is a member of this house, just because his promotion is soon due, just because she is a dirty servant – being a member of the woman’s association I cannot allow this kind of a rape case be hushed up in my own house. These words of mine are my confession.”

Red with anger, Rano did not know what to say. “I’m sorry, ashamed. But law must take it’s own course.”

Just at that moment the officer heard a strange moaning sound coming from upstairs. Without further thought, he climbed the stairs and reached the sahib’s room. Umasashi was sitting in front of the closed door. Yes, there was blood on her saree. She was kneeling down, tearing her hair, and beating her head on the floor, oblivious of where she was or what she was doing. Shouting and groaning she cried, “O Babu, open the door. O Babu, open the door. I can’t see it anymore. O Baba, get up!”

Suddenly the officer remembered that the sahib’s room could be approached through the antechamber. The door was open and probably Uma had come out from there. Now, probably in a state of shock, she seemed to forget it. The officer decided that before anybody else entered the room, he should have a talk with the sahib. Also, Umasashi should not be allowed to say anything. But she cried out, “Oh, I am the culprit. Why did I wear a saree?”

Rano had arrived there by that time, but in an authorial tone the officer ordered him to stay where he was. Pulling up Umsashi he dragged her to her bed in the antechamber. She held on to her pillow and went on weeping.

“If you have to weep, do so. But don’t say a word now,” the officer said.

The sahib was in his bed. The officer ran quickly towards the telephone and contacted the officer in charge, “Sir, please hurry up. Our Macduff sahib has been fatally injured. The bed is flooded with blood. His body is still warm and his pulse is beating slowly. Please come immediately with the jeep. Bring a doctor and some injections to prevent further bloodshed. Please make all arrangements and ask the ambulance to come with a surgeon, oxygen, stretcher etc. Please sir, I beg of you.”

“I cannot understand. Someone has tried to stop the blood loss by pressing cotton wool over the wound. I cannot really understand. It is his left jaw. The flow of blood has stopped and probably it is clotting. A bottle of potassium cyanide was lying next to his bed. Near it was the sahib’s machine pistol. I think the wound was from his small revolver. Sir, please start immediately and bring a doctor. I am serving a little brandy to him.”

The inspector now took off his hat, wiped his forehead with a handkerchief, and concentrated upon his wine cup. The journalist said, “Wow! Covering up blood with blood!” He made a gesture by covering one hand over the other.
There was total silence in the compartment. Cricket calls could be heard in the dark. The sense of time seemed to have been lost in the darkness and weariness. The journalist probably fell asleep. Was this Macduff an imaginary character? Otherwise, how could a man who debated all night between machine pistol and potassium cyanide, commit it in the early hours of the morning for fear of minimum suffering? Probably he used the smallest revolver for the act. Should I ask him what happened afterwards?

Suddenly there was a huge sound of applause. The filament of the bulb on the ceiling gave a reddish glow, the stalled fans recovered as if from a state of shock, and one bright light suddenly lit up to end the darkness of the compartment. Staring at the berth in front of me, I received a terrible shock. The head that was covered with the hat was a hundred times better. There were a few sporadic strands of hair on his bald scalp and the wound upon his cheek spread above his head towards the back. Thank goodness the inspector quickly lifted his hat and covered his head.

With his right hand above his head and the left one held over his waist in a dancing pose, the journalist stood up shaking himself. He was about to say something. But before that the engine made a heavy sound like a huge braying donkey and the train started moving towards Calcutta carrying the dead spirits within it.

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