

In the salon

He was yet to connect with the faces reflected in the mirrors, yet to feel any interest or any curiosity about them. He may have to get his hair-cuts for the rest of his life in this very salon, may have to live only with these unfamiliar faces, many of which may get involved with the course of events in his life—just as that wide, ugly, strange road outside the salon may become a part of the rest of his life. This is a road where dust and flies keep flying off the piles of garbage, where puddles of rainwater have not yet dried out from the potholes scattered all over it and where cars have left marks of tyres pressed on the mud, where hordes of middle-aged men in *genjis* and young boys wearing drain-pipes and rickshaw-wallahs with bare bodies are idly chatting away in small groups, where armies of *bhena* flies are humming and buzzing over mango peels and dried mango seeds scattered all over the road and where *paan*-and-cigarette shops raised on bamboo platforms, blaring a cacophony of sharp harsh metallic sounds from several loudspeakers are playing different Hindi songs with ear-splitting loudness to rend the morning air. He may have to tolerate all this for the rest of his life stuffing his nose into a handkerchief, putting fingers into his ears and wearing a pair of goggles on his eyes—but not at this moment. At this moment, he is immersed in his own thoughts; all these faces are mere reflections on the salon's mirror, staying for a while before disappearing—varied faces with varied types of hair and beards and moustaches—but nothing more than mere faces. He is totally exhausted after the long, crowded, sleepless train journey through the whole night and all his senses are shrouded by thoughts about his own life—about how he came here, about all that he had done, and about what's going to happen to him. What he had done is a long story, of course—only one among countless stories of failure filling up his world: dull, boring stories. But his mind is now refusing to go into their details; they are now behind him forever. He has left behind the town he had known so long and has come here with a lot of hopes, hopes of erasing all traces of his life so far, and with great hopes that he would get this job in this unknown town and lay the foundation for a new life. Now he will think only of the future. His interview is at ten o' clock and after getting down from the train and having a strong cup of tea at the station he was rushing in a rickshaw through the roads of a new town, he has got down at the first salon that met his eyes, where he would have a shave before the interview, and would then go to some good restaurant and after a thorough wash....

Outside, the sun has come up. Through the thin gauzy curtains of the salon he is already getting a clear idea of the furnace-like heat that seems to be building up. It is much cooler inside the salon compared to the harsh glare of the sun outside. The air inside the salon is dampish, wet, redolent with assorted smells of Dettol, cigarettes, *attar* mixed water, and spurious 'foreign-made' skin creams. This salon is very much like the familiar ones back in his home town, with its peeling floor covered with dust, hair and cockroaches, walls full of shelves and pigeon holes of drawers, calendars with pictures of Hara-Parvati hanging on the walls alongside photographs of film actresses. The snatches of conversation alone sound different: a potpourri of Bhojpuri, Hindi and Urdu. The salon isn't exactly small but it can accommodate only three persons at a time for hair-cuts. The others are sitting around, waiting for their turns. Outside the door and

leaning on it, a boy wearing drain-pipe trousers is whistling nonchalantly and people on the road are staring at him. One foot of the boy is resting on a piece of leather that an old cobbler has offered while the latter is hammering nails on a pair of the boy's pointed shoes. In the centre of the salon a fan is rotating feebly with a laboured squeak and whine but its air is not reaching the corner where he is seated. The strong cup of tea he had at the station seems to have made him even more thirsty and his throat seems to keep getting parched; his sleep-starved eyes seem to be closing every now and then, his whole body is feeling worn out, his mind is filled with exhaustion....

Someone turned a swivel chair with a screeching gharr, someone brought down a bottle of shampoo on to a shelf with a thuck, the chhik chhik sound of scissors suddenly died down in some corner—and he realized with a start that he was staring without batting an eyelid at the mirror to his left. There, under the chart for various cuts for moustaches and hair, the face he saw in the mirror was almost invisible under the frothy lather of shaving soap and the white cloth wrapped around the neck. The face was rectangular with faint traces of pock marks, a flat nose, darkish in complexion and he realized that the line between the firm lips, now tightly pressed together, resembled that of his childhood friend and his mess-mate and room-mate Bhola Bora. And he also realized that deep in his mind he was aware that it was not easy to erase old memories, at the bottom of his mind a fear was always lurking that whatever had happened in the past would leave some indelible impression for rest of his life. That could be the reason why suddenly, without his being aware of it, this reflection had come up to engross his numbed, exhausted mind and his drowsy sleepless eyes. Staring at the face he was idly trying to imagine what kind of a person this man would be. This man, he was sure, would have an innate firmness, a man who would not give up till he got what he wanted; he would be a persevering, tenacious man; not the type to make a fuss and become restless, nor could he be made restless by useless fuss. This man would know what was good for him. His firmness was coming through the thin line formed by the lips resolutely pressed together. It is not difficult to imagine that this man would have had a friend, a boyhood friend, a companion in football and *dang-guti*, who would have sat on the same bench with him in school and college, who would have later become a roommate and a mess-mate when, in course of time, they both were working and staying in the same room—and slowly a realization would have taken root in this man's mind that life could not be lived like that, that the world was highly competitive, that he would have to somehow go ahead in life, would have to look after his own good, that it wouldn't do to spend his whole life in the company of a pessimistic friend holding on to him like a leech. He would have known what was good for him, every night he would have rubbed various creams on his face to remove the pock marks from it (and this perseverance is paying off too, slowly, gradually), and his trusted friend would have had no inkling as to when he had quietly applied for (without telling anyone), had appeared for an interview, got a scholarship, and then suddenly one day left for the United States. His friend would have trusted him so completely, would have never done anything without informing him, and was so very dependent on him for every single step in life. This man would have told his friend sheepishly with a dishonest show of embarrassment, "I never really expected that I would get through, you know. If I hadn't, I would have felt so ashamed before all of you. That's why I hadn't told any of you earlier, can't you understand? Moreover, telling you had another problem to it.

There were seven scholarships in all, but you would have never applied anyway. There was no point in telling you, the pessimist that you are. And in the process, I too would have missed the opportunity. You just don't want to do anything. You couldn't even open up your heart to Aimonu after knowing her for so long, while this Lahkar chap, who is plotting so many schemes, will supersede you one of these days and go up above you leaving you behind. You have seen everything, known everything, but haven't bothered to take any step and have only kept idly watching things with an open mouth. However, next year a few more scholarships are being announced again... so if you want to.... "

His throat is drying up again, he is feeling terribly thirsty... This man would be fully aware of what exactly is good for him; if he was required to give up something for his own good, he would do so without any qualms... Does he stand the ghost of a chance in the face of this man's sure-footed self-assurance? Would he have any hope left, any aspiration, if this man were to appear at today's interview at ten o'clock as a competitor?

Suddenly the quiet humming of the salon was shattered by the violent impact of a huge commotion.

"Hey, you, Yunus? Tell me how is life, Brother, and how are you? What's this, Brother, how come not a single chair is vacant today?" The Hindi words shouted at the top of his voice were coming from a man who had entered the salon waving his hands wildly in the air, thumping backs here and there as he came in with a huge sparkling smile spilling from his face. Must be an old customer: a man with a clean shaven face, well-polished shoes, a fat briefcase in his hand, one stem of his goggles sticking out of the pocket of his bush-shirt, a fountain pen too nestling there: maybe he is a sales rep of some firm or an agent of some insurance company; he knows everybody, he is on excellent terms with everyone. "Everything is all right, no, Brother? Well, tell me how is the summer heat, and how's business?" Then switching from Hindi to broken Assamese, "Come now, give me a fast and first class haircut, I have an important appointment! Here, Brother, if you do me a small favour and allow me to get a few chhik chhiks of haircut ahead of you... after all it does not matter to you even if you do it ten minutes later, no ?... What? Oh this kid has been waiting since morning, has he? OK, OK, that's not a problem. Here, Karim Bhai, why don't you come and give this kid a fast and fine haircut, he has to go to school. I will wait... it's not an issue... I'll make up these ten minutes somehow... Here at least we have a fan; it is so hot... Last night I thought I would go and see *Sangam*, but...."

Even that 'drain-pipe' boy leaning outside the door has stopped whistling to listen to the insurance agent, who has caught hold of whoever was available close by to start a discussion on films-politics-environment. The outward nature (not the face) of his victim somehow resembles his Bheku Mama's: a commotion-free face, with a not-too-long dhoti and a pair of patched-up pumps: quiet, unhurried, pious, law-abiding, one who always follows the straight and the narrow, never tells a lie, does not take bribes, nor offers bribes, does not compromise, does not harm anyone, nor allows anyone to harm him—that was his Bheku Mama, his maternal uncle. That's why possibly, there are no knots in his unpretentious life, no complications. Mami, his wife, is happy, their children are studious; and he goes to market, bag in hand, looking for fresh fish for

everybody, and when he is successful, Mami and the children are all pleased in different ways.

This man also might have had an only nephew, his sister's orphaned son, who might have done his schooling staying with him. So quiet a boy, so doleful by nature, so dispirited, so diffident even to raise his voice to speak, so vacillating—his nephew would have made even a hassle-free, unworried man like him get worried. He would have been made to wonder what was ailing his nephew; his wife too would have worried. He would have done everything that was required of him; he would have looked after his nephew just like another son. His *mami* too would have been like a mother to him. Eventually, this man would have arrived at the conclusion that loss of parents alone could not have caused this sadness... this... Yes, this cowardliness (so many similar children are there the world over). Something else must have happened... Yet there are people and there are minds, each different from the next... Later, when he grew up and moved out to a mess, when he could not be cajoled to continue staying with them, this man would have wondered what exactly it was: dissatisfaction with something or sheer lack of gratitude. But his own conscience would have been very clear... Suddenly today, his nephew's abrupt disappearance from the town would not have rattled him at all, Mami might have shed a few tears, ("Such a moody boy... what if he does something silly... I am so scared ...") but was not surprised. Where could he have gone? How would he survive? What could have happened? What crisis? What difficulty? Separation from a boyhood friend, could that be such a great shock? Or sorrow over that girl Aimonu's marriage (like in a novel)? Or was it the pent up disillusionment, accumulated resentment with life? They, of course, all knew that daughter of the lawyer, Suren quite well, since both the families had been quite close for ages. But he also would have known quite well that with his dispirited, cowardly nature, his nephew could never have made her his own (they would certainly have been surprised if he had). The amount of simple drive, self-assurance and enthusiasm that is required to go ahead with something, to keep persisting with something was possibly lacking... if only his nephew had, just for once, spoken his mind (if not to him, at least to his *mami*) the two of them would have tried their best to set up his home according to his wishes, but his nephew was so inarticulate, so hesitant, his mind was so complicated....

So inarticulate, so complicated... that's why he is grateful that this insurance agent and this Bheku Mama-type man are, very likely, not his competitors in today's interview. If they were, one by the sheer gusto of his non-stop talk and the other by the sheer force of character would have just blown him away. So hesitant, so complicated... because of which he not only cannot articulate his thoughts clearly and forcefully but cannot even look straight at others' faces, starts faltering whenever his eyes meet another pair of eyes. Even now he is watching the unknown people in the salon as if from under a cover, only through the mirrors: as if getting caught watching them would land him in a highly embarrassing situation. He is not sure if the face that is getting its hair cut, sitting close to the chair of the school kid and under the coloured picture of Nehru-Kennedy, is watching him through the mirror, because from where he was sitting, he could see only a side view of the face and the mirror was already getting foggy with tiny droplets of water and with a thin film of cigarette smoke getting drawn over it. Almost all the reflections were such side views or views from the back, or at an

angle, and he could see only a cheek here, a chin there, or somebody's neck in one mirror, forehead in another. And each mirror was uneven, making some fat faces look emaciated and some thin arms look massive with huge bloated fingers. That's possibly why that man's nose was looking so long and bent and his gaze from the left eye was looking a little squinted. Or it could be that he has intentionally made his mind imagine those warps—though the similarities were only slight or totally imaginary—because the nose of Aimonu's husband is also long and bent and the gaze from his left eyes is also slightly squinted. Yes, if this particular man appears at the interview at ten o'clock today he would not possibly get scared. He is surely not inferior to this man in any way. What does this man have that he does not? In fact if one goes by looks, he clearly... What did Aimonu see in this man, then (whose appearance on the scene too was only two years ago, not like the twelve or fourteen years of knowing each other as in his case)... what did she find in him that he did not have? Maybe what she found was that this man knows what he wants, knows what he is looking for, knows whom he likes, what he desires and can clearly articulate his earnest longings, he does not keep hesitating with an embarrassed face year after year, he does not keep sitting, undecided, with folded hands on a park bench or on his bed, but tries to achieve whatever is possible through his innate manliness...business, land, house... Finally, taking advantage of his passivity and lack of enterprise his subordinate Lahkar has superseded him, he does not know by employing what ploy, and has gone and got himself promoted to sit above him... He has not put in his papers, he has not filed a suit nor has he got into a fight ... Now in the end he has fled from the town without telling anybody anything.

Bhola would have got into a fight, Aimonu's husband would have submitted his resignation, Bheku Mama would have even sold off Mami's ornaments and gone to court and this bubbling insurance agent would not have allowed this to happen at all in the first place. To sum it up, no one would have accepted this gross injustice passively without any resistance as he had done... And maybe like this, day by day, moment by moment, his unsure, undependable face has gradually gone away from her disgusted mind, and its place has been taken over by this strange, impossible face, within the ordinariness of which lies a disproportionately long bent nose, a left eye with a squint... No, if this man really goes and appears in today's interview, compared to whom he is in no way inferior, is he really sure that...

His one-time room-mate and boyhood friend 'Bhola Bora's' haircut is over, the young barber, trim in his multicoloured check shirt, is massaging his head making those massaging sounds, Bhola Bora is sitting still, pressing both his lips firmly, his face now clean shaven, the faint pock marks there, in a flash of the sun coming in through a gap in the curtains, are indistinct. He possibly likes to get his head massaged—it suddenly occurred to him—otherwise, he would never have allowed it. He knows what he likes; others cannot force anything on him. Barbers always make some horrid sounds while massaging heads, and make the head ache with squeezes and kneads, with slaps and taps, all very uncomfortable really, but till today—he recalled—he could not say forcefully enough that he did not want a massage. Even if he had said so sometimes in an uncertain feeble voice, the barber had shot back, "But why not? It will be great; your head will feel really nice. Everybody gets it done. Come on, I will do it nicely for you." And he would just offer his head docilely. It is also clear (he thought again) that even 'Aimonu's husband' would object, if he didn't want his head slapped around. And Bheku

Mama? In fact, he had never allowed the barbers coming to his house to massage his head but had always got up from the *pira* with a polite smile, saying, "No, I won't need that."

The school-going kid also had just got his hair trimmed. The barber in a lungi is turning his head around to see who are still waiting... He is so very thirsty, if only he could have gone and got himself a glass of water somewhere... The barber (whose own face had a two-or-three-days' stubble) doing the long-nosed one is sharpening the cut-throat razor on a strap of leather. The squeak of the fan has by now merged with the hum of scattered pieces of conversation and the *chhik-chhik* of the scissors to become part of a familiar ambience, but he has not yet lifted his head to look up well at anybody, he has only watched the faces on the uneven mirrors, various parts in distorted reflections, from the right, from the left, from the front, rear, sideways, near, far. In one mirror he could see the insurance agent explaining something, rubbing his goggles with a hanky, and with ardent gesticulations, to 'Bheku Mama' and 'Bheku Mama' listening silently with a polite smile (that is, tolerating him, finding no other alternative). In another, the fair face of the school-going kid is peeping out from under the white cloth in amazed disbelief—wondering what happened to his mop of tousled hair. Once in a while, on a distant mirror, flashes of the annoyed face of the waiting drain-pipe boy is seen peeping in only to go out again. In another mirror he sees two more men coming in to sit and wait, one a man in specs and white pyjamas, a middle-income type, looking at his watch off and on, a medicine bottle in his hand, maybe an office goer or a teacher or... the other, whose terylene trouser leg alone is visible in the mirror, has two open pages of a newspaper dangling from the top of the trousers and cigarette smoke drifting out from behind them. And in another mirror farther off, one can see through the haze, a thin man sitting with a stubble on his hollow cheeks, black circles around his sunken eyes, lost in deep thought with one hand on his chin, the other hand hanging loosely over a suitcase kept on the floor.

However, there is no question of his contest with this pyjama-clad spectacled 'teacher'. The man is quite advanced in age; he can't possibly appear at this interview. The face of the terylene-clad man is still hidden by the newspaper; so he cannot say anything about him. But if this thin man with unshaven stubble appears at the interview today, then --he has a feeling--he stands a chance... a very good chance, in fact. A mere glance is enough to make out that this is one man, beating whom will not pose a problem. See how idly the man is hanging his hand over the suitcase, just like a boxer one sees in news reels getting knocked about and hit by a flurry of fists sitting down in a corner of the boxing ring, spreading out his dangling hands, a gesture that is a symbol of defeat. This man has stopped trying, and look, how lifeless, how benumbed, how careworn his face is, how dejected, how dull. A glance tells you that this is a defeated man.

At least this is one man he would be able to defeat. Till this moment in life he himself has been an oft-defeated man. True, innumerable tornados of resentment and frustration have blown over his head. But he has not yet surrendered and raised his hands in utter defeat like this man has. He is trying to make a new beginning in life. He is trying to figure out why he does not feel any sympathy for himself; he is trying to learn from his past mistakes; he is trying to analyse what it is that he does not have that his boyhood friend has, his Mama has, Aimonu's husband has, Lahkar, who has

gone past him and captured his post, has, this insurance agent has; he is trying to understand what is happening to him, what he wants, what he needs....

"Come, Sir."

Coming out of his reverie he took his hand off the suitcase and stood, flabbergasted, and went ahead; the thin, defeated man with a stubble of unshaven bristles on his face advanced towards him through the mirror. Rubbing his black eyes he faced himself for one moment and stared firmly eye-to-eye, and then went and sat down under the razor.

Assamese words retained in the translation

genji: a man's vest, an undergarment for the torso;

bhena fly : a larger variety of the common fly usually associated with garbage, carrion, etc.;

attar : Orig. Arabic attar. A natural fragrance extracted from fruits and flowers;

dang-guti: a local, rural game in Assam where a **guti** (a piece of short wood tapered at both ends) is thrown up in the air and is then struck with a **dang** (a long wooden rod) by the player who is required to send the **guti** as far as possible;

mama: maternal uncle, one's mother's brother; *mama's* wife is addressed as **mami**;

pira: a flat wooden seat just few inches in height placed on the floor where one sits in a squat.