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The First Man

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I am Jhara. Jhara Basu. Strange name, isn't it? Everyone is surprised at first. They ask, "Jha—a—a—r—aaa? Can Jhara be a name?" Some of them twist their mouths and say, "Jhara? Oh my God! What an ugly name!" Some people say, "There are so many good names in this world, yet your parents couldn't find a suitable one for you?"

Initially, I used to be angry. Very angry. I was angry with my mother, my father, and my sisters too. My two elder sisters were named Abhishikta and Mehuli. And I was only Jhara? Like falling leaves!

Actually, I used to be angry with everyone. I suffered from paralysis—an incurable disease. I suffered from anger. I suffered from pangs of sorrow. Age has a mind of its own, and with time, that mind acquires beauty. I am no exception. As I grew older, my perspective changed. I realize it every moment, every second.

My mother used to tell me when I was a child, "Jhara, look at the sky. How beautiful it is!" I would look at the sky, but do you know what happened? I couldn't find anything special there. I never expressed that thought, but I wondered, what beauty does the sky possess? What did my mother see? There was the blue sky, the ash-colored sky, or, during sunset, a reddish sky.

But my mother used to gaze at the sky during sunset. I used to look at her and then at the sky, sitting in my wheelchair. I understood nothing.

Time flows rapidly, like the tide of a river. No, I have never seen a river. I watched everything on television—rivers, their dense waters, black depths, and the tides making a unique sound as they tumbled onto the riverbank. When I was a child, I used to wonder how the river tumbled on the bank. Now, my perception has changed. Do you know what it seems like now? It seems as if the river kisses the bank. It comes with full tide, kisses it, and then returns to the other side. She loves both banks equally. That is why she rushes back, eager to embrace the other. Otherwise, that bank would be angry. Is the river a "Swairini"—a profligate woman? Nonsense! Can it be so? When there is no male equivalent of Swairini, then the word itself should have no meaning. At least, that is how it seems to me. Take, for instance, illicit love. What is illicit? Who decides what is valid and what is forbidden? Love is love. There is no sin in it. That is why love can never be illicit. Similarly, the river is not a "Swairini," a profligate woman. It should not be.

Yes, time flows like air. Our lives do too. Along with the passage of time, the mind matures quickly. Now, when I look at the ordinary sky of my childhood, I see things that defy definition. Now, looking at the sky is intoxicating. Not in the morning—no, that would be a mistake. Nowadays, I wake up before dawn and sit, watching the rising sun slip from the lap of the night. What a wonderful sight! How beautiful! How beautiful! The sunset sky is my favorite. A golden hue spreads across the horizon, and clouds become canvases for painted landscapes. Now, I understand why my mother looked at the sky with awe. Her thoughts from that time now touch my mind. Or perhaps, my mind today can reach back and touch hers. Now, my mother is transparent to me. To me, she is no longer just a married woman with red vermillion in her hair.

All vagueness disappeared when I turned eighteen. That mystery, which once baffled me, has now taken hold of me at twenty-two. Youth is written all over my body. The youth of a girl whose legs are paralyzed from the waist down surprises many. Who will convince them that there is nothing surprising in this? I am like the river, whose tides rise on both sides. My mind is like that too.

I have two elder sisters. They are also beautiful, but neighbors and relatives say they do not look like me. Many people say my beauty is coquettish. Can you believe it? One of my distant grandmothers once said, "Even though she is lame, her beauty knows no bounds." She whispered, "Even though that girl is lame, her beauty is mesmerizing. Grown men will be naturally attracted to her. Don't you understand why they come to bathe in the pond? They always have an excuse." And that Jhara, she sits near the window like a "Kamini," a temptress!

From behind the curtain, I saw my elder sister's face harden. There was vengeance in her eyes. The way a cat sharpens its claws before pouncing on its prey, my sisters ground their teeth in silent fury.

Grandmother said, "Tell her to cover her chest with a dupatta! Oh my God! What a figure!" Saying this, she winked and laughed heartily. "Beware. An idle mind is the devil's workshop. Any grown man would be drawn to her blooming body."

Grandmother was not entirely wrong. My body was coming into full bloom. My sisters' lovers also secretly looked at me. They looked, but they weren't interested in marriage. They were interested in my body. Under the pretence of joking, both Binoy Da and Korok Da had touched me—places that made me shiver with satisfaction. I did not withdraw. Instead, I fantasized about a deeper touch. Because I knew I would never marry. Though my elder sisters couldn't match my beauty, they had one thing I lacked—working legs. That is why they would marry. But their future husbands would be drawn to me, captivated by the aura of my body. And that is why, these days, a sense of vengeance grows within me.

Let there be no marriage for me. But let there be something akin to marriage. Sometimes, looking at the sky, I wonder—what is marriage? Am I like my mother? Do her genes dance through my blood? Is marriage merely a ritual that grants ownership of the body? If so, then my brothers-in-law are already claiming that right—without the sanction of marriage. The thought troubles me. It is complex. Otherwise, why did my mother vanish one day while looking at the sky?

Back then, we hadn't yet moved to this house in Ranikuthi. We lived in Kutighat, and Sukanto Mama often visited. He was a friend of my younger maternal uncle. Mother told us, "Don't call him Mama. Address him as Uncle." But I argued that Mama's friend was naturally a Mama. Mother did not answer. We three sisters addressed him as Sukanto Kaku. And one day, that Sukanto Kaku left for the sky—taking my mother with him.

My father, who always wore a dhoti and kurta, was depressed for a few days. I was thirteen then. My elder sisters were fifteen and seventeen. My father was forty-eight.

Time flows. Our housemaid became the ruling queen of the household. She was promoted. She became a full-fledged queen of the house. She took care of us like our mother had. She cooked and waited for my father at night. They ate together. Over time, my father's face brightened again. Back then, I didn't understand why. Everything was a mystery. Now, each mystery has unravelled itself.

Our mother is dead in the house at Ranikuthi. From the portrait of her on the wall, a string of beads dangles. But I know my mother is alive. She lives within me. She planted all her seeds of desire in my blood. And sometimes, those desires rise within me—desperately.

I passed matriculation as a private candidate. I did not wish to study further. And sometimes, the devil took full advantage of my idle mind. Was it Satan or a witch? Who knows? Always looking at the sky, always soaring through the air.

My elder sisters got married yesterday. So many rituals! The chanting of complex mantras! What is the purpose of these mantras? What a grand arrangement for the union of two bodies! Does it truly mean anything? Yet, the warmth of the wedding home and the elaborate decorations pleased me. I, too, wore a red Banarasi saree for the first time. My sister-in-law was astonished as she draped it around me. She exclaimed, "Jhara, you are so beautiful! If I were a boy...!" She trailed off, leaving her words unfinished, only to follow them with a few venomous remarks. I nearly died from the blend of shame, unease, and pride they evoked.

I couldn't help but think—because of a Hindu ritual, my sisters would sleep on flower-strewn beds in two days. I saw it all, vividly, even what wasn't meant to be seen. Shouldn't I have

been married too? Shouldn't I have embraced Korokda or Binoyda on a bed adorned with flowers?

Tonight, the moon hangs drowsily in the sky. My elder sisters are gone. The house feels hollow. Empty. I feel empty. Were they my rivals? Perhaps. I had always competed with them—matching their makeup, striving to outshine them whenever Korokda or Binoyda were around. But deep inside, I knew the truth. If my legs had been whole, no one could have defeated me.

But from today, there is no competition. No silent war. No vow to win against anyone.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I am beautiful—undeniably so. A sudden wave of sadness engulfed me. The room felt suffocating. I turned to the window and saw the moon floating like a boat in the vast night sky. Am I obsessed with the moon? Otherwise, why does it drive me to madness? Why do I crave a scent like a restless witch searching for fish? The moon hovers above me, its light hazy, half-asleep. The night wind stirs, carrying a strange, unspoken call. A restlessness surges within me. My back burns—as if carrying unseen wings of fire, desperate to take flight.

I wheeled myself to the garden. The trees swayed, their branches stretching outward like tangled weeds.

Strange! I was crying! I don't know from where these tears came, shattering me from within. I don't know! I only knew that I clung to the Arjun tree, pressing my head against its sturdy trunk, sobbing. And in that very moment, an unbearable relief spread through my body. My chest pressed into the rough bark, and a wild delight overtook me. I wrapped myself around Arjun, surrendering to something primal. Desire. A reckless, shameless hunger. A desperate grasp at stolen pleasure.

I was moist. Breathless. Trembling. Whispering words I couldn't understand.

Then suddenly, the air thickened with a scent. A pungent, arrogant smell. My body stiffened. I turned my head, searching for its source.

Two eyes gleamed beyond the fence. Staring. Unblinking. Their sharp gaze cut through the darkness, more intense than the damp scent of the pond behind them.

I stared back, entranced.

Was it human? Or something else? A specter? A beast? I didn't know.

The scent of water drifted from the pond, but the smell of those eyes—piercing, untamed—was sharper. Wilder.

Leaving Arjun behind, I moved forward.

For the last time, before losing myself, I realized—my eyes were burning.

The wild civet cat was coming closer.

Note: The story was originally written by Ms. Kaberi Roy Choudhury in Bengali and translated into English by Subhajit Bhadra.

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About the translator: Subhajit Bhadra is a gold medallist in M.A from Tezpur University. He is a freelance writer, poet, critic and translator. He has published a number of books including The Masked Protagonist In Jewish American Fiction, The Man Who Stole The Crown, The Rising Sun, a book of poems in Bengali and a translated work titled Selected Stories of Arun Goswami.

He has written a book on History of English Literature. He has also been published widely in Indian literature, a bi-monthly journal of Sahitya Akadami. At present, he is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Bongaigaon College, Bongaigaon, Assam.

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