

**The Escape and
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The Tale of a Tulsi Plant

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The house stood just past the concrete bridge, which was arched like a bow. It was a huge, two-storeyed building, rising directly from the street. Footpaths were rare in this country, so there had been no need for the graceful gesture of leaving a little space between the house and the front. Behind the house lay a generous expanse of land. First, there was the courtyard, then the bathroom and the toilet, and finally there were trees, almost a jungle of mango, blackberry, and jackfruit trees. On the weed-covered ground beneath them, even on a sunny day, there lingered the pale gloom of twilight, and a smell of dampness.

With so much land, what would have been the harm in leaving a little plot in the front for a garden? They wondered about that, especially Matin. He was fond of gardens, though so far his garden had bloomed only in his imagination. He planned how he would make a garden if he had his own little piece of land. With great care, he would plant flowers: *gandharaj*, *hasnahena*, *bakul*, maybe a few roses, too. He would sit in his garden every evening when he came home from the office. He would buy a light cane chair or a carvas deck-chair in which to sit comfortably. He would stretch himself out there and talk. Amjad smoked a *hookah*. For the sake of his garden's prestige, he would even buy a proper, handsome *hookah*, with a long pipe. Kader was a lover of tales. His voice would pour out the stories in the gentle breeze. On a moonlit night, filled with the scent of flowers, there would be no need for stories. They would enjoy the soothing calm of the evening, just sitting there quietly, with their eyes closed.

These thoughts crossed Maini's mind as, tired from the day's work at the office, he climbed the stairs, which started from the very edge of the street.

They had moved into the house without a fight. It wasn't that the owner had fled at the threat of their military power. They had been searching day and night for a shelter after they first arrived in the city, during the frenzy of the partition of the country. Then, one day, they saw this house. There was a massive lock on the main entrance, but a little exploration revealed that there was not a living soul inside. The owner had run away. It did not take long to recognize a deserted house; it was a stroke of luck to get such a place. This sudden good fortune frightened them, but they soon got over their fear.

That very evening, they all came in a group, broke the lock at the gate, and entered the house with great excitement. Their wild enthusiasm was that of children picking mangoes after a *Baisakh* storm heralding the coming of the new year. It did not occur to them that they were committing a crime in broad daylight. If a pang of guilt rose in anyone's mind, it evaporated quickly in the thrill of their triumph.

When the news spread around the city the next morning, homeless refugees began to pour in. They came, cluster after cluster, in the hope of securing a roof over their heads.

The first group hid their own exultation and said, "What are you looking at? There's no room anywhere. The whole place is covered with beds. Even in this small room, there are four of them. And now you see only the bed, but when four cots, six feet by two feet, and a couple of chairs and tables are brought in, there won't be enough space on the floor to put your feet down."

Someone added in a compassionate voice, "Don't we understand your misery? Haven't we suffered the same way all these days? But you are just unlucky. That's it, just unlucky."

The disappointed faces grew darker at these words of consolation. "That room over there?" The room downstairs, near the street, seemed to be empty.

It was not really empty. Looking carefully, one could see, next to the wall, two bedrolls, covered by a carpet. The last place had been

taken two hours ago by fat Badruddin of the Accounts Department. He had gone to get his belongings from his brother-in-law. The brother-in-law, too, had set up his quarters on the verandah of a friend's house. If he had not had a family, he would have joined the others.

"Just a matter of luck." Again someone sympathized profusely.

"If you had come two hours earlier, you could have beaten Badruddin. There isn't much light in the room, but see that street light near the window? If the electricity fails some night, that street light will be enough."

"Or if one wanted to save money . . ."

And, of course, all these words stung like venom in the ears of the uninvited who had come to find a refuge.

The police came, in due time, to investigate the matter of the illegal occupation of a house. That was only natural. There was great change and upheaval in the whole country, but it was not yet a land without law.

When they saw the policemen, the occupants wondered if the fugitive owner had appealed to the government to restore his house. But they did not believe this. Surely, one who had left his home and fled the country in two days would now have other, graver problems to handle. They had no doubt that those others, those who had not come here in time and were now wandering about the town trying vainly to find another house, had informed the police. Bad luck was easier to recognize than to accept. A rightful claim was one thing, but sharing illegal booty was another matter. In a case like that, jealousy appears to be not only justified, but, in fact, a duty.

The occupants were defiant now. "We are poor clerks, but we are the sons of gentlemen. We have moved into the house, but the doors and windows have not been broken; nor have the bricks and stones been torn out to be sold in the black market. We know the law, too. Who has made the complaint? If it isn't made by the owner, then it's not in order."

Kader began to wail. "Where shall we go? Do you suppose we came to this house on a mere whim?"

The sub-inspector and his retinue went away and wrote a complicated, neither-for-nor-against and neither-right-nor-wrong report. Their superiors preferred to file it away on a shelf; probably, they

were afraid to try to decipher the meaning of the report. Or maybe they realized that in those frantic times, the official rules about illegal occupation were not quite clear.

Kader winked. "What's the harm in telling the truth? The second wife of the sub-inspector happens to be a relative of mine. But don't mention it to anyone."

Nobody believed Kader, of course, but it was easy to forgive him, because the lie was only an innocent expression of his happy relief.

Someone suggested gaily, "How about a round of tea and sweets?" Overnight, the large house began to bubble with activity. It was not merely that they had found a place to stay which no one could take away from them. It was as if this open, spacious, well-built house had infused a new life into them. Many of these people had lived all their days in the unspeakable stench and filth of Calcutta — in the sailors' quarter of Blockman Lane, in the bookbinders' quarter of Baitakkhana, among the tobacco merchants of Syed Sahab Lane, or in Kamru Khanshama Lane. In comparison, the vast rooms, the wide windows like those of the indigo traders' mansions, the enormous yard, and the orchard of mango, jackfruit, and berries in the rear — all these belonged to a different world. True, they didn't have a separate room for each one, like princes; but they had never enjoyed so much air and light. Now it seemed as if green grass might sprout in their lives, too, and fresh blood flow vigorously through their veins. The radiance of health and prosperity would light their faces, as it lights the faces of those who earn a few thousand rupees.

Small, scrawny Yunus had already noticed some change in his health. He had lived on McLeod Street. The narrow alley was like a dustbin in the morning, filled with rubbish. There, in a damp room near the kitchen of an unsteady two-storey wooden house, he had lived for four years with a leather merchant from Kutch. The neighbourhood was permeated with the nauseous smell of tanning hides, so that even the putrid odour of the roadside drain did not bother them. If a dead mouse or cat were rotting in a corner of the room, one would never notice it.

Yunus had often had a fever. Sometimes a coughing spell would seize him in the middle of the night. Yet he did not leave the neighbourhood. Someone had told him that the odour of hides killed

tuberculosis bacilli. Not only did he endure the noxious odour without a complaint, but often, after coming home in the evening, he would stand by the window, facing the solid wall of the next house and draw in deep breaths. Not surprisingly, his health had shown no improvement.

There could be no housewarming without a feast; and, in Mughal style, the celebration went on for a week. Many unsuspected culinary talents were discovered. Someone's grandmother's recipe for a special cake turned out to be something inedible, but hearty appreciation from everyone made it seem delectable.

Now and then, in the evening, they had a musical *jalsa*. Habbullah had got hold of an off-key harmonium which, accompanied by his powerful voice, provided an indescribable concert, lasting far into the night.

Then one day the *tulsi* plant was discovered, growing on a rectangular brick platform about a foot high, at the edge of the yard behind the kitchen.

It was a Sunday morning. Modabber was pacing the yard, brushing his teeth with a *neem* twig, when he began to shout. He was an excitable man and would raise a frightful uproar over a trifle. But this time it was not easy to ignore him. The other men rushed into the yard.

"What's the matter?"

"Open your eyes and look!"

"What? What is there to see?"

They were probably expecting to find a snake, so they did not notice the *tulsi* plant at first.

"You don't see it? You don't see the *tulsi* plant set up in the ritual way on the platform? It has to be torn out. While we're in this house, no Hindu symbols can be tolerated."

They looked at the little plant dejectedly. It was dying. The green leaves had taken on a brownish colour, and weeds grew thickly beneath it. Probably it had not been watered for a long time.

"What are you staring at?" Modabber cried. "Haven't I told you to pull it out of there?"

They all became very quiet, taken aback by this unexpected discovery. The house had appeared to be empty, deserted, in spite of a few names scratched by an untrained hand on the wall by the stairs leading to the roof. But now it seemed different, as if this half-dead,

dried, insignificant *tulsi* plant, caught unaware, had revealed the secrets of the house.

Confronted by this inexplicable silence, Modabber shouted again. "What are you pondering so hard about? Why don't you pull it out by the roots?"

Nobody moved. They were not entirely familiar with Hindu customs; but they had heard that in a Hindu home, the mistress of the house lighted a lamp under the *tulsi* plant at dusk, and, with the end of her sari wrapped around her head, made a *pranam*, bowing to touch the earth with her head. Though it was overgrown with weeds now, someone had lighted a lamp every evening under this abandoned *tulsi* too. When the evening star, solitary and bright, shone in the sky, the touch of crimson paint on the bowed forehead had burned red, like a steady, quiet flame.

Today, where was the mistress of the house who had lit the lamp under this *tulsi* plant? Main had once been a railway employee. Now the picture of many railway colonies passed before his eyes. Possibly that woman had found refuge with a relative in a railway colony in Asansol, Baidyabati, Liliua, or Howrah. Now he seemed to see a fine black sari with red borders spread to dry in the sun beside a huge yard. That sari probably belonged to the mistress of this house. The sari fluttered sadly in the breeze. But the woman was sitting near the window of a moving train, looking out as if she were searching for something in the distance, beyond the horizon. Maybe her journey was not finished yet. But wherever she was, when the shadows of dusk thickened in the sky, she would remember the spot under the *tulsi* plant and her eyes would fill with tears.

Yunus had had a cold since the previous day. He said, "Let it stay. We aren't going to worship it. But a *tulsi* around the house is useful. The juice of the leaf is very good for coughs and colds."

Modabber looked at the faces of the other men. Apparently they were all of the same opinion. No one put his hand forth to uproot the tree.

Enayet was something of a *mouzi*; he wore a beard, said his prayers five times a day, and recited the Quran regularly every morning. Even he said nothing now. Was he, too, thinking of the woman whose eyes filled with tears every evening?

The *tulsi* stood untouched; it had escaped their hands. But they did not completely forget it. Rather, a sense of weakness lingered with them, an uneasy feeling that they had retreated in the face of a duty. It was because of this that an argument began at their evening gathering. They wanted to wipe out that uncomfortable sensation of impotence by their verbal force. The topic this time was the Hindu community, instead of the usual subjects of politics and economics.

"They are at the root of all this," Modabber said. His well-brushed teeth shone under the unshaded electric bulb. "The country was partitioned because of their wickedness and meanness and fanaticism."

The argument was nothing new. But there seemed to be an extra edge to the words today. In support of their contention, innumerable examples of Hindu atrocities and injustice were related. Soon their blood became hotter and their breath quickened.

The recognized radical of the group, Maksud, protested. "Aren't you going too far?"

Modabber's teeth glistened again. "What do you mean, too far?" Leftist Maksud was alone now. Perhaps that is why the pendulum of his faith began to move. It shifted doubtfully and finally stopped a little toward the right.

A few days later, Modabber was surprised when his eyes fell upon the *tulsi* beside the kitchen. The weeds that had grown under it were gone. And not only that, the leaves which had grown brown with lack of water were turning dark green again. There was no doubt that someone was tending the tree. Someone was watering its roots, surreptitiously, if not openly.

Modabber had a thin, long bamboo rod in his hand. He slashed it across the plant as if to chop it off. But the branch passed over the plant harmlessly.

Nobody, of course, mentioned the *tulsi* any more. Yunus's cold was gone the next day, so he did not need the *tulsi* juice.

Now they began to believe that they had really left behind the life of McLeod Street, Khanshama Lane and Blockman Lane, and had begun a new life with abundant light and air. It was not long before they learned their mistake. But it was enough time to let their belief grow quite strong, so that the sudden shock struck them brutally.

That day they came straight home from the office and, according to the plans they had made in the morning, began to prepare to cook *khichuri*. Just then they heard the squeak of heavy boots on the outer stairs. Modabber peeped outside and hurried back in.

"It's the police again," he whispered.

"Police? Why the police again?" Yunus thought that perhaps a petty thief from the street had taken shelter in the house and the police were after him. But then Yunus remembered the story of the rabbit: when it found no means of escape before a hunter, it crouched on the ground with closed eyes and thought that no one could see it.

Weren't they, themselves, the thieves? Hadn't they refused to admit everything they knew, and weren't they trying to create here a false, beautiful life for themselves?

The leader of the police group was an old-fashioned man. He placed his hat under his arm and wiped the sweat off his forehead, which bore the mark of his hat. He looked like a harmless man. The two constables standing behind him with their rifles seemed to be innocent too, in spite of their big moustaches. Their eyes were turned upward, as if they were counting the roof beams. A pair of pigeons had built a nest in the ventilation hole. They were probably watching the pigeons. Animals and birds caught the attention of good, harmless people, even when they had guns in their hands.

Matin asked politely, "Whom do you want, please?"

The police leader's reply was curt and rasping. "All of you. You have occupied this house illegally."

No one could deny that. They did not protest, but only looked at the policemen with mild curiosity in their eyes.

"You'll have to leave the house within twenty-four hours. Government orders."

They looked at each other silently. At last Modabber cleared his throat and asked, "Why? Has the owner complained?"

Fat Badruddin of the Accounts Office stretched his neck and looked for the owner behind the constables. But no one was there except some people who had come in from the street to watch, always eager to enjoy the spectacle of someone else's humiliation.

"The owner?" The policeman feigned sarcasm, but he did not succeed.

One of the occupants laughed too. Was there a glimmer of hope?

"Then?"

"The government has requisitioned the house."

Nobody laughed this time. For a little while, nobody said a word. Then Maksud came forward. "Aren't we government people?"

The two constables lowered their eyes from the roof beams and the pigeons to look at Maksud. There was wonder in their eyes. The stupidity of people still surprised them.

In spite of all the light and air, a deep shadow descended upon the house. At first, blood rushed into their heads, and they muttered rebelliously. They wouldn't go away, they would stay there, clutching the pillars of the house, or they would move out only in coffins. But their heads cooled before long and a depression fell over them. Where would they go?

The next day Modabber brought news that their time had been extended from twenty-four hours to seven days. They sighed with relief, but the shadow remained over them, as dense as before. This time Modabber did not speak about his relationship to the second wife of the police sub-inspector.

On the tenth day they all left the house. They had come like a storm and they went away in the same manner. The mementos of their residence—a torn newspaper page, an old piece of rope on which they had hung clothes, cigarette and *birji* butts, the broken heel of a shoe—lay scattered about the empty house.

The *talsi* plant on the edge of the yard began to wither again. Its leaves were tinged with brown. No one had watered it since the advent of the police. Nor did anyone remember the tearful eyes of the mistress of the house.

The *talsi* plant did not know why it was so. It was for people to understand.

Slightly edited from the author's own translation. The Bengali original, "*Ear Talsi Gachhar Kalini*," was anthologized in *Dui Teer* published by Nawroze Kitabistan, 1964.