

A Taste of Revolution

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A Taste of Revolution

In the blazing hot afternoon the six-year-old boy lies next to his grandmother, listening to the sound of her sleeping. He lies with his eyes open, listening for the *crack-crack* of rifle shots, for the sound of distant shouting. But this afternoon in Calcutta is silent. In this heat, even the Maoist revolutionaries are sleeping.

The boy's thoughts turn to chocolate. Ever since the violence broke out a week ago, Nani, his grandmother, hasn't been able to go shopping. But luckily there are still two pieces of Cadbury's milk chocolate in the fridge. The boy imagines the cold squares of chocolate dissolving on his tongue, and his mouth begins to water.

He slides out of bed and tiptoes out of his grandmother's darkened bedroom. The bungalow is dark, the dining room tightly shuttered, the old fridge humming in a corner. When he opens the door, delicious cold air flows over his face.

Inside are the remains of lunch: a metal bowl of rice and a leftover fish head, staring at him with baleful eyes. The boy avoids the glassy stare and opens the butter compartment. The golden foil wrapper of the Cadbury's bar is still there, but the chocolate has vanished.

The boy closes his eyes, then opens them again. *No chocolate.*

He shuts the fridge and is about to cry. Did he eat the last two pieces and forget? No, he keeps to a meticulous schedule, nibbling at a single square a day, making a bar of chocolate last a whole month. He suspects Zaheer and walks angrily to his uncle's bedroom door. But instead of snoring, he hears a girl's muffled giggle. He listens carefully, hearing the rustle of clothing, the *mmm-mmm-mmm* of kissing.

The boy makes a disgusted face. Uncle Zaheer has sneaked his college girlfriend up the back stairs again. Zaheer wears black-framed glasses, reads psychology textbooks, and thinks he is too clever to get caught. But the boy knows everything that happens in the house. It is his kingdom, and he patrols it vigilantly.

Maybe Nani, his grandmother, has hidden another bar of chocolate somewhere. Nani is a great hider of things. When she forgets where her keys are, or her diamond brooch, the boy helps her look. By now he knows all Nani's hiding places.

The boy looks in the linen cupboard and the back of the larder. He even sticks his hand into the bin of rice, sifting through the grains. Finally there is only one place left.

The boy slowly opens Nani's bedroom door. She is snoring now, her white widow's sari twisted around her. He holds his breath and tugs open the door of her cupboard.

He leans in, searching beneath the newspaper that lines the shelves. He slips, and his knee bangs against the wood.

Nani's eyes open, her face creased by sleep. "Who is there? Who?"

The boy sheepishly closes the cupboard. "It's just me. Go back to sleep."

"What are you doing? I told you not to disturb me."

The boy knows that Nani stays awake all night. If anyone disturbs her afternoon naps, she gets very angry. He has to think quickly.

"Nani, I thought Mama might have sent some chocolate and it might be in the cupboard."

At the mention of his mother, Nani's face softens. She holds her arms out to the boy.

"Come here, sweetie. You miss your mama, no?"

"Yes," he lies. "I miss Mama."

"Poor child. Lie down with me. It's very hot. Sleep a little."

Nani pulls the boy onto the bed. He lies next to her, his heart thumping in his chest. Soon Nani is asleep again, but the boy doesn't dare to escape.

The boy tries to remember his mother. All he can recall is the picture on Nani's dresser, a plump, cheerful woman with cat's-eye glasses. Mama has been in England for many years now. At first she used to send him bars of Swiss chocolate, but then they stopped. Now Nani buys the boy a bar of Cadbury's every month.

"Your mama told me to buy chocolate for you," Nani always says. "Send her a kiss."

And the boy obediently blows a kiss in the direction of England, imagining it flying across the ocean.

The afternoon sun wanes and Nani wakes the boy. She makes him sweet, milky tea and they sit sleepily on the verandah, feeling the first faint breeze of the evening. Zaheer soon emerges from his bedroom. The boy studies his uncle carefully, but Zaheer's long, handsome face is free of guilt.

They are all on their second cup when the cook appears on the lawn, waving his arms to get their attention. The adults ignore him. The cook has been drinking a lot lately and is always excitable.

The boy strolls onto the lawn. "What is it, cook?"

"*Baba*, tell your grandmother to come quickly. Something terrible has happened."

The boy goes to tell Nani. She grumbles under her breath but follows the cook out of the front gate, the boy skipping beside her. They all stop in astonishment in front of the white boundary wall.

Slogans have been painted across it in red. The paint is still wet and dripping.

"What does it say, Nani?"

"Bloody hooligans," Nani says. "How dare they do this!"

"Is it the Naxalites? What does it say?"

Nani reads the slogans, making a sour face:

KILL ALL CLASS ENEMIES!

THE ROAD TO REVOLUTION RUNS THROUGH MOSCOW, PEKING AND CALCUTTA!

GENERAL STRIKE TOMORROW!

The boy feels a shiver of excitement. He has seen the Naxalites roaring through the city in their trucks, their faces masked by bandanas, fists raised in defiant salute. The

boy knows that the Naxalites blow up post offices, shoot policemen, throw bombs. And now they have visited his house.

When Nani comes back inside, her face is red with anger. Still slurping his tea, Zaheer turns to the boy.

“What happened, shorty?”

“The Naxalites wrote some words on the wall. A strike tomorrow.”

Nani waves the cook over.

“Here’s ten rupees,” she snaps. “Go buy a pot of whitewash. Paint over that rubbish.”

“Ma, just leave it,” says Zaheer grandly. “It’s not a good idea to mess with the Naxalites. Besides, they’re right. The government is corrupt as hell. What we need is the rule of the proletariat and . . .”

“If you’re so chummy with those hoodlums, why don’t you join them? Go live in the swamps and survive on a handful of rice, instead of lying around the house and eating me out of house and home.”

She ends it there.

The cook paints over the slogans with two coats of whitewash. But the words are still visible, glowing menacingly through their veil of paint.

The next morning Nani and the boy sit in a speeding taxi, going to the bazaar. Because of the general strike the garbage lies uncollected, stinking up the roads. Nani sits with a lilac-scented handkerchief pressed over her nose. The boy can tell from her stiff-backed stance that she is very angry.

Usually the lane leading to the market is crowded with stray dogs and beggars, but today it is deserted.

As the taxi slows, they hear the sudden *crump, crump, crump* of explosions.

“Madam,” says the taxi driver hoarsely. “Please get out here. I cannot go any further.”

“Hooligans. All this way in a taxi, and now this. We’ll see who frightens whom,” Nani mutters. “Come on, child.”

Nani pays the taxi driver, opens the door, and gets out. The taxi’s tires screech as it reverses down the lane and disappears. Then everything is silent.

Holding hands, the boy and his grandmother walk down the lane, emerging into the vast, stone-flagged market square. It is empty, and in the sky beyond is a faint plume of smoke.

All the cupboard-sized stalls lining the square are shut. Gone are the boy’s favorites, the ones with the button man with his sheets of colored buttons, and the stamp maker, who always lets the boy stamp out letters on a sheet of waste paper. Already the day has gone awry, and the boy fights back his disappointment.

Under a sign that says GIVE AND TAKE STORES, a bespectacled shopkeeper is struggling to pull down a metal grille.

“What, Ganguly Babu,” says Nani, “shutting already? It’s only eleven o’clock!”

The man starts violently. “*Aare*, Mrs. Azeem. Nice to see you, but! There is bombing going on! Very danger! Come into shop, quickly please!”

Nani frowns angrily, but the plume of smoke is growing thicker. She sighs and takes the boy into the darkened shop. The shopkeeper follows them and jerks the grille down from inside.

The boy panics in the darkness, clutching Nani's hand tightly. Her lilac perfume is his only coordinate in the gloom.

Gradually, his eyes adjust to the darkness. The glass cases lining the walls are full of medicines, soaps, and perfumes, and on the counters are large jars containing treasures: orange sweets, which dye the tongue red when sucked; stick-jaw toffees in waxed wrappers; peppermint balls with black stripes. And there, distorted by the curved glass of the jar, are golden bars of Cadbury's milk chocolate.

The boy tugs at his grandmother's sari.

"Nani?"

"What?"

"Don't forget my Cadbury chocolate, all right?"

"Oh, so you've found your voice, you little *goonda*."

They laugh together, the boy's *hee-hee-hee* expressing his relief.

Outside there is the sound of running feet, the loose slap of sandals on stone flagstones, *pitter-patter*, moving toward them, then away.

A silence gathers, growing in his ears like the sound of the sea in a seashell.

"Nani? Can I have my chocolate now?" the boy whispers.

More feet running outside. A stampede of them. Hands pound frantically on the metal grille. A voice, pitched low, pleads in Bengali.

"Give us shelter, have pity, they are shooting us down like dogs, have pity, for God's sake."

The voice trails off in a sob, turns into running feet. The man thumps on grilles all the way down the arcade, repeating his plea, his voice turning into a wail.

Inside the shop they are all frozen still, as though playing a party game.

Booted footsteps sound outside, flinty on the cobblestones. Shouted orders, someone cursing in a monotone, *Shit, shit, shit, shit*.

Nani grabs the boy and moves toward the back of the shop. The boy can hear Nani praying under her breath, her lips moving quietly, *Alhamdulillah e-rehman, e-rahim*. To see her pray like this—head uncovered, standing in a shop—upsets the boy.

Then silence again—a long silence.

The boy tugs at Nani's sari.

"Tell me a story."

"What story do you want to hear?" Her voice is weak. "The monkey story?"

"No, tell me the one about how Mama met Papa." He loves that story; it is like a fairy tale.

"You know, the first time your mother met your father was here, in this very shop. By that wall, where they keep the brooms. They didn't even know the meeting was for marriage. Your other grandmother and I planned to bring them here, as if by accident."

Outside there is the sound of sticks hitting something hard, like coconuts being smashed.

"Your mother looked so pretty that day. She came straight from college, wearing a nice pink sari. And she chatted and chatted with your father! She told him she was

acting in *The Mikado*. Imagine—your mother dressed up as a Chinaman! Singing Gilbert and Sullivan songs and all!”

“And then?”

“Your father thought your mother was so charming that he married her. He got a job in England and took your mother with him. But they couldn’t take you because you were too small.”

“And then?”

Nani screws up her face.

From outside there is a volley of harsh sound. The boy clasps his hands over his ears.

“Nani!”

The sound roars on and on. The boy is lost in a tunnel of sound, a long dark tunnel without an end. Then it stops abruptly.

There is the clinking of brass. A stink of cordite drifts into the shop, a harsh, acrid smell that assaults the boy’s nose. A curt voice shouts, *Move the bodies, get them out of here.*

“Nani! I want my chocolate now!”

“Ganguly Babu, please give my grandson a Cadbury.”

“Mrs. Azeem,” the shopkeeper whispers, “please, not so loud! They must not find out we are inside!”

He opens a jar and with two trembling fingers takes out a bar of chocolate.

The boy presses the bar of chocolate to his cheek. He can smell the bitter cocoa within the foil.

The silence grows and grows. Slowly, the boy begins to make out familiar sounds: the cawing of crows, the far-off rustling of trees.

A siren sounds far away, followed by others. Ganguly Babu hesitates, then pushes up the metal grille. The low afternoon sun washes in, making the jars of sweets sparkle.

Nani goes to a corner of the shop to dial on the ancient telephone. The boy and Ganguly Babu stare out into the empty market square.

There are great green army trucks skewed at odd angles. Glinting brass shells lie in small heaps across the square, forming a ragged line.

On the phone Nani is talking quickly, arranging the folds of her sari as she talks. “Yes, of course we’re all right. *Oof*, Zaheer, don’t make such a fuss. Just come and pick us up.”

The boy sees the old green Fiat turn into the market square, recognizes it and begins to wave. Zaheer screeches to a stop and leaves the motor running.

“Ma, what the bloody hell are you doing?” he yells at Nani. “I told you there was a general strike today!”

“I don’t pay attention to such nonsense. You know that.”

The boy likes the way his grandmother says that. He files it away for future use. *Nonsense. You are a nonsense. Damn bloody nonsense.*

“Nonsense? You think this is a game? You’ll get killed! Think of the boy, if nothing else! This is how you take care of him?”

Nani makes a face. As the boy gets into the car, he is distracted. His fingers are still

on the doorframe when Zaheer angrily slams the door.

Pain hits the boy like the violet eye of a flashbulb.

“Zaheer!” Nani shouts, “*Aieee!* You fool. Lecturing me! You’ve gone and smashed the boy’s fingers in the door!”

The boy is bawling. One finger has been caught. The nail has cracked across, blood oozing from its edges.

Nani is holding the boy to her now, saying, “There, it’ll be all right, only a broken nail,” as Zaheer pops the clutch and lurches away down the narrow lane.

On the open expanse of Chowringhee, Zaheer speeds up, the car jolting over the potholes.

Wounded. He has been *wounded.* The thought pleases the boy. As the pain in his finger dulls, he looks out the window.

The city is deserted. There is nobody on the green plain of the Victoria Memorial, not even a goatherd.

“They were shooting the Naxalites, right?” he whispers to Zaheer.

“No, no, they were not bloody shooting. Forget about it.”

“I know what shooting is. They were shooting.”

“It’s nothing, forget about it, okay? Don’t ever mention this to anyone.”

The boy sniffs. He knows what he knows.

By that night, the cracked fingernail turns the dull purple of a snail’s shell. The boy does not cry when Nani cleans his finger with stinging antiseptic. As a reward, he is allowed to sleep in Nani’s huge bed with its canopy of mosquito netting. She tucks him in, and he talks to her through the gauzy material.

“Nani, when are you coming to sleep?”

“After the grownups have finished dinner. You know that. Now sleep, *baba.*”

Just before the boy falls asleep, he remembers the bar of chocolate that lies untouched in the fridge. In all the excitement, he’s forgotten to eat a piece.

Hours later, his throbbing finger wakes him from deep sleep. The nail has torn off, leaving a square of paper-thin skin. *Will it grow back, do nails ever grow back?*

The boy can tell from the distant clink of cutlery that the adults are still eating. He picks up his blackened nail and jumps off the bed.

The blaze of light outside makes him squint.

At the end of the long corridor, the boy can see Nani sitting at the dining table, her face hidden in her hands.

He hears Zaheer’s loud, bullying voice: “. . . something bad could have happened to the boy. These people aren’t playing games, Ma. They’re serious, they have guns.”

He cannot bear to see Nani like this, small and crumpled in her chair.

Zaheer continues. “And when are you going to tell the boy the truth about his mother? Are you planning to keep up this charade till he’s fifteen, sixteen, seventeen? *Hank?*”

The boy walks slowly into the dining room and tugs at his grandmother’s sari.

“Nani, don’t cry. Look, my nail came off.”

Nani stops crying, picks up the boy and puts him in her lap. She smells of tears.

"I'm not crying, baby. I'm just tired. Let me see your finger."

"My nail's gone. Like leprosy."

Zaheer snorts. He reaches for the dish of meat curry and pokes around before addressing his mother.

"This meat curry is terrible. No meat, only bones," he says in a supercilious tone. "That cook is a drunken fool. I don't know why you put up with him. You should fire him."

The boy's face reddens. This is too much. First Zaheer eats his chocolate, then slams his finger in the door, then makes Nani cry. Now he wants to fire the cook.

Zaheer chews on a bone. "And furthermore, no more trips to the market for you two. It's too dangerous."

"But . . ."

Zaheer cuts the boy off.

"You keep quiet. You're a kid, you don't know anything."

"Yes, I know!" the boy shouts. "I know everything. I know that you sneaked your girlfriend into the house yesterday! I know that they were shooting today!"

The boy knows he should stop, but he can't help himself.

"And I know Mama isn't ever coming back."

The boy stops abruptly, thinking about the picture on Nani's dresser, his plump, bespectacled mother smiling up at him.

Nani holds him tight. "What are you saying? Who told you that?"

"The cook. He told me you got a telegram from England and Mama is dead."

Zaheer has stopped eating and is gaping at the boy.

Nani hugs the boy tighter and presses her face against his.

"Poor child," she says. "Oh, you poor child."

But the boy is losing interest in the conversation; he has remembered the chocolate in the fridge.

"I'm hungry. Can I have some chocolate, please?"

Zaheer silently goes to the fridge and gives the boy the entire bar.

The boy eats one piece of chocolate, then a second, but his grandmother doesn't tell him to stop.

Nani and Zaheer begin speaking in soft tones about normal things. *The price of tea is going up. Zaheer is going to the movies on Saturday. The pump in the garden needs to be fixed.*

The boy stops eating and leans back into his grandmother's lap, shutting his eyes to hear better.

It is a while before Nani notices that the boy has dozed off. She picks him up and carries him down the long corridor, back into her bedroom. Half-dreaming, the boy hears the whir of the ceiling fan being switched on.

Nani gets into bed and puts an arm around him. The boy feels her breathing settle into a steady rhythm, her breath warm on the back of his neck. As he finally falls asleep, he thinks of the golden bar of Cadbury's lying in the fridge. Tomorrow he'll eat just one piece. He'll make it last.

If he's careful, he can make it last a long, long time.