

## GRACE

*Suchitra Samanta*

Anwar weighted down with small stones the bright blue plastic sheet that served as a roof and sides for his pavement home. The streaked and mildewed wall of a factory that manufactured batteries provided a back wall, while a dirty, discolored cloth, frayed at the edge and slung between the bamboo poles that supported the blue sheet, served as an entrance. A few feet away, along busy Hazra Road, tramcars rattled ceaselessly. In buses, in trams, bulging with an overload of passengers, in cars, and in three-wheeled rickshaws, the multitudes of Kolkata made their way noisily, raucously, right at Anwar's doorstep. If he had to move again, as he had had to many times already, well, with a little help, his home, poles, bricks, and plastic sheet were not too difficult to pick up and carry, to wherever he might set up next.

It was mid-morning. A storm hovered ominously on the dark, clouded horizon. Anwar put the bricks up closer, propping up the poles more firmly, so they would withstand the sudden gusts of wind, the sometimes-driving rain. He then sat himself down, cross-legged, facing the street, with his tin bowl next to him, and put his wooden crutch up against a pole so that it was visible. The chances of pedestrians throwing coins into his bowl were higher if they could see his handicap.

Hena, who lived and worked in the vast slum along Kalighat Road, just to the back of Anwar's home, threw a coin into his bowl as she walked by, wiping her nose with the edge of her sari.

"Consider yourself fortunate, that I can spare a *paisa* for you!" She flung at him as she wove her thin frame through the crowds that surged along the pavement.

"Why should I smile at a whore who throws me a coin," Anwar retorted, scowling.

"Mussalman! You are another species!" she said over her shoulder to him. "Go back to Pakistan!"

“Why should I go to Pakistan, I am from Bihar,” he called out. “Who are you to speak, a whore is all you are!”

Hena did not deign to reply, holding up the pleats of her gaudy synthetic-silk sari, with its red-green-yellow paisleys, as she headed to the teashop at the foot of the bridge, followed slowly by Anwar. Beneath the bridge ran a sluggish, shallow, muddy and malodorous stream, grandiosely named the Adiganga, that first of holy rivers, prior to the great Ganga itself. Among the many sparks of dissension that started off their day, this unsanitary, turgid yet holy stream in Hindu belief had often inspired Anwar’s derision, as he mocked Hena’s proclamations of religious superiority. On her part, ever quick to strike back, Hena informed him of the baths she must take after being in the presence of a Muslim, a cow-killer, a beef-eater, a polluted being. At the teashop the short, bald and past-middle-age owner, Ghoshbabu, would welcome the two, his regular customers, with a gap-toothed smile, “Come, come!”

Anwar would buy Hena a cup of tea while she would buy biscuits for both of them. The other prostitutes, who also worked in the extensive brothel that lined the road that led off Hazra Road towards the Goddess Kali’s ancient Temple, would on occasion throw him a coin, though they generally ignored the middle-aged, bearded Muslim in their midst. Some would come by Ghoshbabu’s teashop, but would then proceed quickly to the business of the day. Hair slick with fragrant oil, eyes lined heavily with kohl, they would festoon themselves along the rusted iron rails of the bridge, bright daubs of color on a dreary monsoon day. With Hena, over the past couple of months—since he had set up at this location—Anwar engaged in lively insults, reciprocated vigorously by her. Over tea and biscuits, interspersing their arguments with “Muslim” (a pejorative, here), and “only a whore,” shouting over the horns of buses and rattle of tram-cars, they argued and scolded. Hena would declare that her black Mother, Kali herself, was God, all powerful, the destroyer of evil, and would keep her, Hena, from harm. Lovely of face, all-merciful, Hena asserted, *she* was assured of her Mother’s grace. No matter how she earned her living.

Ghoshbabu, in between dispensing cups of tea to his customers and wiping his hands on a grimy rag, would add, “But her sword, the garland of skulls she wears, the severed head she holds, frightens me. Our mother is not predictable, who knows how she works.” Sighing deeply at the vagaries of life, its dreadful tragedy, clearing his throat with a drawn-out “harrrrh,” he would suddenly smile, and call out to Khoka, the young boy who helped serve the customers, “Ey Khoka, see who wants another cup of tea!”

“We are not meant to know how she works,” Hena would retort, firmly. “But she will punish the wicked, that we know.” (Here she would glance obliquely at Anwar). “The head in her hand is a demon. She has beheaded him with her sword.”

Anwar, on his part, would proclaim loudly that Allah was the one true God. Unlike your Hindu idols, he would fling at Hena, his Allah would keep *him* safe and provided for. “I am poor. I suffer for Allah, I say my *namaz* five times a day—and,” (here Anwar looked significantly at Hena)—“I buy tea for a whore. Allah will reveal himself in my heart.”

There was, of course, no resolution to this argument, nor was it intended that there should be one. Each simply enjoyed their daily battle, relished not giving in to the other’s God, loudly, vocally, confirming their own, and the grace they hoped would be bestowed upon them as reward for their faith. On Tuesdays and Saturdays, auspicious days for worshiping the goddess, Hena would walk to the Temple in the afternoon, when business was slower, and bring back *prasad*, sharing her deity’s “grace” with Anwar and Ghoshbabu. Touching it to his forehead reverentially, Ghoshbabu would put the entire *pera* into his mouth. Anwar would eat the sweet, dense milk cake in silence, without thanks, or expression. It soothed, for a while, his yearning stomach. His silence would be met, he knew, by some sharp comment from Hena such as, if she did not throw scraps his way, he might well be dead. The goddess, declared Hena in a superior tone, worked through her, Hena, to feed a Muslim, such was God’s compassion. Anwar committed to nothing.

This place, thought Anwar, had worked out well enough so far. A stream of worshipers walked by, especially those returning from the Temple, and who were moved to charity after worship, so he had found. Of course, he had also found some friends—the amiable Ghoshbabu, whose hospitality he appreciated—not all Hindus were so generous to a Muslim—and Hena, if she could be called a friend, insulting and ignorant as she was, and of questionable profession. Through the mind-searing heat of May and much of June, just before the monsoons arrived, when the pavement burned underfoot, Ghoshbabu had allowed him to sleep on his shop floor, offering some respite.

Anwar had come from a village in Bihar state, many years ago now, seeking a job in the city. About two years ago, while laboring at a construction site, a cart carrying bricks had fallen on his leg, breaking it in several places. A cousin, who lived in the vast slums in the southwestern part of the city, along with other Bihari Muslims who

had emigrated to Kolkata to look for work, had reluctantly put him up as he recovered. But he had found it difficult to find work since, and had had to leave his cousin's. An extra mouth to feed had stretched relations thin, and Anwar sought a living elsewhere. Middle-class Hindu households, he had found, were reluctant to employ a Muslim houseboy, especially a crippled one. He had worked temporary stints for a while in sales in the Fancy Market in Ekbalpur, near the slums, though even Muslim shop-owners in their hurry had not always been sympathetic to his lame leg. In a desperate moment, hunger churning his stomach, he had set up with crutch and tin bowl at Gariahat Bazaar. Here he found the well-dressed ladies, shopping for saris and jewelry and household appliances generous enough with their charity. While he couldn't eat well, he was at least assured of one meal a day.

However, one day the police came by, the sergeant yelling threats and shaking his stick. The stall owners along the pavement, selling cheap cotton blouses, and nightgowns, plastic tablecloths, and brightly-printed bed linen were ordered to pick up and leave. The police also flattened Anwar's bamboo and plastic-roofed home. So he had moved, with crutch and bowl, sheet and poles, to the corner of Russell Street and Park Street, the city's playground. In the expensive restaurants, the many bars and discotheques, the affluent, both young and old, came for lunch, or to dine at night. Perhaps he could count on their generosity. But his stay was brief. Here especially, commanded by the rich and powerful to keep their playground clean, the police came by periodically to sweep up the street. So he moved again.

But, soon after he had moved there, the police came to Hazra Road too, but with other intentions in mind. When Hena failed to come by, he went to Ghoshbabu's in consternation.

"The police picked up the girls," Ghoshbabu informed him "They took them away in a black van."

"When will they come back?" Anwar asked.

"Who knows? I think they are getting the girls tested for the sickness," said Ghoshbabu, scratching his head thoughtfully. "And Hena looked like she's not well," he added. "She's been complaining of a cough lately, a little fever even."

Anwar ate his biscuits in silence, and listened to some men who had stopped by on their way to work, loudly discussing the latest civic elections over tea. He missed the round of insults and arguments with Hena, that morning. He also decided that he would move again, away from the brothels, but not too far, to be near his new-found friends.

He declared his intention to Ghoshbabu. "I'm moving nearer the temple. I think I will make more money there. And who knows what the police will do to me here?"

Ghoshbabu nodded. "Yes, more pilgrims there, and Anwar, they give a good meal to the poor at the temple, you know that."

Anwar asked if he would be fed, leaving his real question unasked.

"The Mother's grace is for *everyone*," replied Ghoshbabu, with emphasis on that last word, and sighed sentimentally. Had Mother Kali not looked upon him favorably, once a destitute refugee from Bangladesh? Now he was the owner of a tea-stall that did brisk business, which had paid for a modest two-roomed flat in Behala, where so many refugees had settled. "Besides," added Ghoshbabu kindly, "You will always get a biscuit and tea here!"

Moving to the vicinity of the temple would mean a walk down Kallighat Road to get to Ghoshbabu's, a half-mile or so, not so far even on a crutch. In the narrow, crowded lanes along the Temple walls, he knew, drugs were bought and sold—but the *paladars*, the Brahmin caretakers of the Temple, were powerful. Perhaps then, he hoped, the police would be wary of raiding the vicinity of this vastly sacred place for Hindus. And, though he would find few Muslims in the area he also knew that a diverse population had set up on the pavements outside the Temple to beg for alms from those who came regularly to worship, but especially from the thousands who came on festival days and often from great distances. Those days were especially good pickings for Hena and her friends too. He decided to try his luck.

That evening, as the melodious, sonorous sound of the conch-shell, the ringing of brass bells at evening worship reached his ears, a black dog with three legs, its fourth missing at the knee, sat itself down in front of him. "Go away, go on! Run off! Nothing for you here!" Anwar raised his hand as if to strike it. It skipped back, then sat again, facing him expectantly. He could see it was hungry. Well, it wouldn't have much luck with him. He shook his crutch at it threateningly—it emitted a series of high yelps, as though he had beaten it, and limped, still yelping, down the street. He decided to walk to Ghoshbabu's and ask if there was news of Hena.

"Too soon," said Ghoshbabu despondently. "But those girls can look after themselves. Hena has the mental strength of a man. If those police give her a hard time, she will fight. And anyway, if they are doing tests, that is a good thing."

Anwar did not doubt Hena's spirit, but reflected privately that

she had been looking rather drawn lately. He walked back with two slices of bread, which Ghoshbabu gave him with his tea, to find the three-legged dog sitting patiently outside his lean-to. He broke off a piece and threw it to the dog, which ate the bread swiftly, hungrily, and looked at Anwar for more. The worshipers were emerging from the temple, and Anwar, not wanting the dog in his way, made as if to throw a stone at it. Yelping shrilly, it hobbled off again down the street. It did not show up again that night. Anwar, to his delight, made a few rupees in alms that evening. It was a Saturday, and the worshipers had come in great numbers. He treated himself to some deep-fried eggplant in chick-pea batter from a kerb-side seller doing brisk business, and then to hot, fresh *chapatis*, and warm curried lentils. Maybe his move had, after all, been a good thing. Maybe, he thought, the powerful Mother Kali looked out for him after all. Or maybe it was Allah. On a full stomach he felt generous.

The next morning, to the sounds again of the morning rituals that awoke the goddess, Anwar slowly walked to Ghoshbabu's. Again, Ghoshbabu informed him that Hena wasn't back, and that he had no news of her. After his tea and biscuits, back at the Temple, worry niggling at his heart, Anwar set up with his bowl. The dog arrived, and keeping a safe distance, sat down facing him. *Neri kutta!* Street dog! He let out a string of colorful curses and shook his fist at it. It moved back a few feet, and sat down again. He flung it a piece of bread that he had saved from the evening before, for himself, not for the dog. But there it was, hungry creature. The dog devoured the bread, then crept up on its belly, nearer to him, but carefully out of his reach and to one side.

That morning the takings were few. The dog disappeared, then showed up, then disappeared again. Anwar wondered if he should have fed it the bread. It would keep coming back. Who knew what diseases these street dogs carried. Anyway, it kept its distance from him, leaping to its legs each time he shifted position. Around three in the afternoon, his stomach churned with hunger. A passer-by threw him a coin and said, "Why don't you go to the temple, they are giving out food to the destitute. You can get some *khichuri*." Why not? Ghoshbabu had said no one would be turned away. Anwar walked to the Temple gate and joined the crowd waiting to be fed.

He savored the steaming hot lentil and rice preparation, though not the muttered comment of the man who served him the food, "Why don't you go to the mosque? Go and eat there." But, Anwar thought, hunger changes the rules. In another situation he might have responded with a sharp retort. But not now. He ate in silence.

The dog showed up again the following morning, just after he had returned from Ghoshbabu's, sitting with its head between its paws, expectantly. Hena was not back yet, and no one had news of her. Anwar threw the dog a piece of bread. Through the day, again, it disappeared and reappeared, no doubt foraging for food elsewhere. Now it sat outside his shack, its head between its paws, expectantly. Sitting with his bowl, Anwar noticed that despite its protruding ribcage—much like his own—the dog carried itself, even on three legs, with a certain grace. She (Anwar determined) held her head high, elegantly even, unlike the mangy curs that slunk along the city's streets. Her dark coat too, was surprisingly glossy, not dull and dusty like the other street dogs. Her expression, increasingly to Anwar, was one of gentleness, and a bright intelligence. A handsome animal, he thought, despite its missing leg. He stretched out his hand gently towards the dog, holding out the remaining bread. The dog crept up to Anwar on its belly, wagging her tail, and gently took the bread from his hand.

The following day the dog showed up with a raw wound on her rump. Evidently someone had flung a stone at her. Anwar called the dog to him, making a variety of noises, drawing her closer. She approached fearfully, hesitantly. He wiped the wound with a wet rag and gave the dog some bread again. The dog took the bread and backed away slowly, sitting as she always did, at a distance, while she ate. That afternoon Anwar went a little early, to make sure he would get in when the afternoon *khichuri* was given out at the Temple. He tore off a bit of the plantain leaf on which he had been served, and wrapped a fistful of the rice and lentils in it to give to the dog, should she show up. He found her waiting outside his shack, and laid the leaf with the *khichuri* in front of it. The dog ate ravenously, running off after she was done. Anwar picked up the leaf and threw it off the kerb. A cow ambled up, and chewed slowly on the leaf. Anwar struck it on the rump, driving it off.

That evening, as the bells and conches sounded the evening worship at the Temple, putting the goddess to rest for the night, the dog returned. She sat, this time, closer to Anwar's shack. He called her nearer, to check the condition of her wound. The dog approached with greater confidence, and patiently waited while Anwar inspected the sore, which had, by now, dried up. To Anwar's surprise, when he offered the dog a piece of dry bread, she swiftly licked his hand before taking the bread from him. That night the dog stayed, sleeping just outside Anwar's shack. The next morning she accompanied him to the tea stall, trailing him at a safe distance. Anwar thought that he rather liked the dog's company. What a gentle animal. What could

have taken off her leg, he wondered. Anyway, she filled, even a little, some place in his heart. He was surprised at this unaccustomed emotion. If Ghoshbabu could give him a bit of bread, if he could salvage some *khichuri* from the Temple, he could keep this dog, Anwar thought, as his own.

Hena was there, sitting at the wooden bench to one side of the stall, sipping a cup of tea. They looked at each other without smiling, raising their eyebrows at each other in silent, non-committal greeting. He asked with a scowl, "So are you back at work?"

"Of course," she snapped haughtily. "Who will feed me otherwise? I see that you have set up at the Temple?"

"Yes," replied Anwar. "It's better for me there. So why did the police take you away?"

"They made us take blood tests," she answered. "All the girls got the tests." A shadow crossed her face as she looked away for a moment. Then she glared fearlessly at him, as usual, and said, "We will be informed soon about the results." She sipped at her tea, noticed the black dog sitting outside the stall. "Whose dog is that, did it follow you here?"

"Whose dog can it be, it is a stray!" Anwar replied sarcastically.

"But it seems to have come here with you!" Hena's mocking laugh ended in a cough. Then she called the dog to her with clucking sounds, and gave it a piece of her biscuit.

She continued, "I have just been to the Temple to offer worship. The Mother Kali will look after me, she will keep me safe. Who else do I have?" This with a dramatic flourish, as she arranged the pleats of her red and black flower-printed nylon sari. And then, as she pulled out from a knotted bundle in her sari a *pera* for Anwar, she said, "Here is our Mother's grace. Give some to your dog."

Anwar mocked, taking the *pera*, "Your Mother is a black stone, nothing else. There is no God but Allah!" He gave a piece of the *pera* to the dog who ate it with alacrity.

Hena left to take up her place on the bridge.

Would he lose his friend, such as she was, Anwar worried. The dog followed Anwar back. Irritated, he waved vigorously at her. "Go away!" The dog looked alertly at him, and retreated. He shook his fist at her again and yelled, "Go on, go away!" He made as if to fling a stone at her. The dog looked surprised, then slowly hobbled off down the street. In sudden fear Anwar wondered if she would return.

The rains were heavy that morning, and the limp rag of a door



could not keep Anwar dry. His blue plastic roof, too, leaked, soaking his cotton quilt. Wet to the bone, he took shelter in the doorway of a shop across the street. He would not eat much that day, he thought, as worshipers, with black umbrellas unfurled, hurried to catch buses and trams to their destinations. He looked down to see the black dog, shivering, wet, looking up at him. He called her in, and together they waited out the heavy shower under the sheltering archway.

At dawn, as conch and bell awoke the goddess, Anwar lay on his damp quilt aching in every limb, feverish and thirsty. The dog, lying just outside his door, sat up as he got up on his elbow. There was no going to the tea stall today—he felt too ill. Suddenly the dog got up, and trotted off. Some half an hour later, Khoka, Ghoshbabu's young assistant, showed up with a cup of tea and biscuits for Anwar.

"The dog came to the stall," said the boy, "it seemed agitated. It wouldn't go away. Ghoshbabu said, and Henadidi was there too, they said maybe something is wrong, Khoka, go and see. So I came."

Anwar thanked him, paid him for the tea, and then threw a portion of his biscuit to the dog. That day he was unable to sit with his bowl, unable to get the *khichuri* in the afternoon. But then he didn't feel much like eating. The dog spent the day lying outside his shack, and remained by him through the night. She didn't eat either.

The next morning, feeling better, and hungry, Anwar went to the tea stall, followed by the dog. Hena wasn't there. "Is she with a client?" he asked Ghoshbabu.

"She has been taken to the hospital," said the stall owner. "She was very unwell last night." Ghoshbabu looked down at his hands, then off to the side. Anwar drank his tea in silence. He bought a whole biscuit for the dog this time, which the animal devoured hungrily.

About mid-morning, as Anwar sat with his bowl he heard the sound of shouts further up the street. The dog sat up on her haunches, alert. Suddenly a black City Corporation van stopped across from him. Men with nets jumped from the van, running here and there, chasing the strays, which scattered with shrill yelps. Anwar leapt to his feet in panic, calling the black dog to him, *Kalua, Kalua*, Black One, Black One! "This dog's mine," he shouted as a catcher approached. "Leave it alone!"

"Of course it is," the man said sarcastically, "it guards your fancy home! Just like the rich folks!"

The dog dodged one catcher, but it was slow. Another catcher netted it, and bundled it into the back of the van, which roared off down the crowded street. Weeping, cursing, shouting, Anwar flung

a stone at the receding van.

In the afternoon he went to the Temple, and returned with a little *khichuri* wrapped in a banana leaf. He opened the banana leaf with its contents and placed it on the pavement, outside his rag-door. When the bells sounded at the Temple that evening, Anwar looked around his shack and along the road, just in case. There was nothing there. He turned to the Temple, and implored silently, "Dark Mother, grant us your grace!" Catching himself, he repeated, again and again, "Allah is great, there is no God but Allah!" He picked up his crutch and set off towards Ghoshbabu's shop. Perhaps there would be news of Hena. He called on the goddess again. This time he did not catch himself.

That night, he looked hopefully around, in case, miraculously, his dog had returned. His dreams were full of dark dogs, the sounds of bells, and conch shells, and of longing.

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