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**THERE'S  
GUNPOWDER  
IN THE AIR**

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# There's Gunpowder In The Air

by Manoranjan Byapari



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CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

## CHAPTER 1

Long and slow, the jail siren wails. It's a quarter to six in the morning. The siren going off at this time means that the headcount has tallied. All the prisoners locked up last night have been located. None of them has succeeded in slipping past the alert eyes of the state-employed guards to escape. The message in the slow tone of the siren is just that. It signals relief.

It is the first phase of the volcanic seventies. No jail in the country is a secure fort now. One prison after another has been crumbling like worm-infested rotting wood. They have been broken by a group of arrogant and audacious fire-eaters, who are known politically as Naxals. Defying rigorous security, smashing all administrative resistance, they are escaping from their confinement with impunity.

True, not everyone is able to escape. The prisoners who fail have to atone for their transgressions with their lives. But no one is deterred. To them, killing and dying are like games children play. No law or regimentation or repression can obstruct those who are not afraid of death. It is because of these intrepid prisoners that the situation in the jail is extremely volatile. The tension is palpable, for who knows what might happen next? There's no telling what these firebrand youngsters will do.

One more night has passed. No, there has been no mishap. The strains

of the siren are carrying the message everywhere. For now, the jail authorities are freed of their anxiety.

The newly appointed jailer Bireswar Mukherjee has just appeared at the gate. There's an ordinary wooden gate here with wire mesh.

Beyond it is a short expanse, where the twenty-six guards on morning duty are standing in two adjacent files. In front of them stands a man with the rank of jamadar, holding an unsheathed sword. As the jailer walks towards them through the wooden gate, the jamadar bellows, 'Ten...shun!' The guards stamp their feet on the ground like skittish horses to indicate that they are at attention and prepared to combat any eventuality.

Walking between the two rows of guards at the slow, stately gait that suits his position, the jailer reaches the main gate. The jamadar lifts his sword in a salute, which the jailer returns by touching his forehead with his right hand. Almost immediately the gargantuan iron gates of the jail are opened with a rumble, letting in the lord and master of the jail.

Bireswar Mukherjee, jailer. This enormous gate is not for everyone to use. A small door next to it is meant for others. Those who enter or exit through it must stoop like cavemen. But it's different when it comes to jailer-shaheb. Having to lower his head to enter his own kingdom is not worthy of the supreme.

Opposite the iron gate is a wooden one of the same dimensions.

Between the two is a paved courtyard. To its left is the jailer's office.

The jailer pauses on the flight of steps leading to it, while the two rows of guards march off. They will now take up their positions in different parts of the jail. The responsibility for maintaining discipline and

applying the rules of the jail rests entirely on their shoulders for the next eight hours. Those who were on night duty will be relieved now.

The jailer's office is quite large, but not particularly well furnished. It appears to be in the same condition in which the British rulers had surrendered it to Indians fifty years ago. Not just the office but the entire jail, where none of the procedures has changed since then.

A large desk occupies the centre of the jailer's office. On it stand a small and charming model of a cannon, a tumbler, a pen-stand, an ashtray, and an idol of the goddess Kali. This last is the artistic output of a prisoner, which had been given space on the desk by a previous jailer. The present jailer does not have much faith in gods and goddesses, but he has not removed the idol. It isn't doing any harm, after all.

A hot cup of tea arrives almost as soon as he sits down. The tea has been made and brought by Shibua, a prisoner whom the jail authorities trust implicitly. From the jail office to the chauka – jail parlance for kitchen – the hospitals, the cells, the wards – he has unlimited access everywhere. No one stops him. Everyone knows that no matter what Shibua might do, escaping from jail is not the sort of misadventure he will attempt. And where will he go anyway if he escapes?

Considering that he comes to this jail twice a year without fail, what can he gain from such foolishness? On the contrary, he will lose the trust reposed in him.

After the morning headcount, he goes to the office, makes tea, lays out cups and plates, and serves the jailer, the deputy-jailer, the godown clerk, the gate warder, the security officer, and himself, after which he wanders around the jail, collecting information from its nooks and crannies.

Finishing his tea, jailer-babu signs the attendance register. Another day begins, with its attendant trial by fire. That's the right expression. Fires are raging both inside and outside the jail these days, and every day has to be spent swimming across this river of flames. Bireshwar Mukherjee has never had to face such difficult circumstances during his long working life.

There were many crises in the jail he was in charge of earlier. Sometimes it had felt as though the entire jail, with its thousands of prisoners, would sink in a treacherous sea like the Titanic. But Bireshwar Mukherjee's intelligence, courage, presence of mind and forthright leadership had saved the day. The prison had remained secure and emerged untouched from every crisis.

But the nature of those problems was different, completely unlike the current one. Defeated in his attempts to tackle it, Bireshwar Mukherjee's predecessor has gone on leave, with the sword of suspension hanging over his head. 'Good morning, sir.' Returning the greeting, the jailer looks up. He knows who it is even without setting eyes on the speaker. He knows deputy jailer Mohini-babu's voice well by now.

Mohinimohon Dasgupta. It is difficult to justify the name, considering he oozes none of the charm it suggests. It is hard to imagine that anyone has ever been captivated by Mohinimohon-babu, despite the valiant efforts made by his name. Less than five feet tall, he is conspicuously bald, has a pair of beady eyes and a flat nose which constantly drips with a yellow phlegm. His moustache is discoloured thanks to his habit of using snuff.

Bireshwar Mukherjee is a handsome man in comparison. Dark, over six

feet tall, and a lean muscular frame.

The deputy jailer's office is further inside. After he ambles off in that direction, the jailer goes out to the wide courtyard to go on his rounds. The number of inmates is written with chalk on a blackboard on the wall opposite the entrance to his office. The capacity of the jail is about twelve hundred. But no jail can afford to stick to its capacity in current circumstances, when the youth are exploding with impatience against the system and rage against the state, and are desperate to bring about a radical change in society. There are widespread murders, violence, gunfire and bombing. Every ward is now stuffed with four or five times the number of prisoners it can actually hold.

The jailer looks away from the blackboard. Shibua, Bashudeb, Anil and two or three other prisoners are trying to suspend a giant scale from a hook in the roof. This is a daily task for them. The suppliers will soon be here with their vegetables or fish or meat. This team will weigh everything and clean it before taking delivery, after which the supplies will be despatched to the chauka for the cooking to begin.

A cart piled high with vegetables is already at the iron gate. Enough for two meals for nearly four and a half thousand people. The regular menu at the jail consists of dal and a vegetable curry. Fish is served once a week and meat, once a month. A prisoner died in the clash between inmates and guards last month. The quality of the food caused the incident, which led the previous jailer to be subjected to the baleful glare of an enquiry. Chinre and gur were served for breakfast that morning. It was a fact that the chinre was stale – smelly and a little bitter. Prisoners everywhere in the country have long been used to

substandard food. Jailed criminals consume it uncomplainingly. They assume they are in jail to be punished, and one of the methods is to be made to eat third-rate food. In this jail, the grubby, rotting rice will inevitably be full of grit, white insects will float on the surface of the dal, the unpalatable dish of mixed vegetables will include sand and dirt in plentiful quantities. Several sacks of wheat will be unloaded on the cement floor of the kitchen to be kneaded by six or seven pairs of filthy feet. There's nothing to be done. One has to survive on this food. Those who refuse to eat will die either of starvation or of beatings. But the Naxal prisoners were not willing to accept this age-old tradition. They made a huge fuss over the bitter chinre, rolling it into balls and flinging it at the jailer who was on his rounds, shouting slogans at the same time. Was this food fit for humans? This led to a skirmish with the guards, which quickly escalated into a pitched battle, followed by the death and a divisional enquiry. It is for all these reasons that the present jailer is particularly worried. A secure retirement awaits him, if he can only pass his remaining years on the job the way he has the previous twenty-five. He can enjoy the rest of his life on his pension, provident fund, gratuity and all the riches he has amassed over the years. But it doesn't look likely. These insolent Naxals will not allow his working days to pass smoothly. There are fifty-two jails in Bengal, in each of which they are sparking some sort of incident every day. Many jail superintendents are getting a bad name and being suspended. 'What if something happens to me too?' No one notices, but Bireshwar Mukherjee trembles with constant fear and anxiety. An invisible crack has appeared in the impenetrable wall of his courage. A large number of the people impris-



oned in this jail are workers of different political parties. But no matter how militant they are in their own territories, in jail they are all docile and obedient. Appearing for the headcount five times a day, accepting their food three times a day, appearing in court once a fortnight, appointing a lawyer in deference of the law, trying to secure freedom through official channels, such as bail or an affidavit – they are not opposed to following any of these guidelines of prison life. But the problem is with the Naxals. Even if they agree to appear in court, they do not appoint lawyers. It seems they are in jail with the sole intention of defying and demolishing its solid walls as well as its rules and regulations. All prisoners here are equal and independent. But independence does not amount to anarchy. The freedom given to inmates must be enjoyed in conformance with the jail system and through cooperation with the authorities. The prisoners' status or position outside jail is not under consideration here. As long as an inmate follows jail discipline, he can stay here undisturbed, without fearing the tools of punishment, such as being thrashed with sticks or belts, having chains clamped on his ankles, or being put in solitary confinement. But there are some prisoners whose only reasons for being in jail are slitting the throats of landowners or killing policemen and grabbing their weapons, all with the aim of effecting a revolutionary transformation by grabbing state power. They have not become remotely well-behaved or less belligerent. Their objective now is to paralyse the systems and the tight security of the prison, so as to stage a jailbreak and escape. They never fail to convey this proudly to the authorities – escaping from jail is part of our revolutionary struggle.

Five prisoners have been transferred recently from another jail to this one. They have been kept in Cell No. 12, the most secure place here. They are the ones the authorities fear the most. They had planned a jailbreak earlier – what assurance did anyone have that they wouldn't do it again? Although they have been shifted from the sub-jail of a district town to Calcutta's most impregnable prison, they do not appear disheartened. If they do manage to break out of prison, Bireswar Mukherjee's spotless record of twenty-five years will have a bucket of black ink upended on it. The anxiety gnaws away at him every day. All will be well if only it ends well. Just a few years to go. Will they pass without incident? This is when the jailer is reminded of the Hindi saying: Jab geedar ki maut aati hai toh woh shaher ke or bhagta hai. When death is imminent the wolf abandons the jungle for the city... He feels the same way. He used to have a happy existence as the supreme commander of a sub-jail in a district town. Supplies of fresh fish, meat and fruit, and of vegetables grown in the jail garden – all the ingredients of a comfortable and relaxed life. The problems in that jail were nowhere near as impossible to solve, nor were they caused by people as undaunted and indomitable as these. Who knows what lies in wait? The jamadar on the shift has stationed each of the twenty-six guards at their respective positions, conducted a second headcount, and returned to the main gate. He will now play the role of companion and bodyguard to the jailer on his first round. He is accompanied by the guard Bir Bahadur. A no-nonsense man from Bihar, Bir Bahadur has unshakeable faith in both the gau mata and Bharat mata. Because of his devotion to cows, he considers Muslims his enemies. And his devotion to the

country makes him want to kill communists on sight. Gandhi baba ne kitna mushkil se desh ko azaad kia. And after Gandhi's sacrifices to secure freedom for the country, yeh saale firse humein ghulam banaana chahtein hain. But we won't let them enslave us again. His rage is concentrated on Naxals. The bastards are Chinese agents. Those same Chinese who had attacked us in '62.

It's said that a Naxal was sentenced to death in the jail where Bir Bahadur was posted earlier. But it was proving difficult to carry out the sentence because an executioner could not be found. The convict was not only a Naxal but also a Muslim. Bir Bahadur had volunteered his services. Koi baat nahin, saale ko hum latka denge. But his offer to hang the convict was not accepted, because the High Court reviewed the sentence and changed it. The jailer and his bodyguards are accompanied by two or three trusted prisoners. These people get no salary for their services, but they get favourable treatment from the authorities. For which they are ready to work four times as much as the employees here. Suppose an inmate is found to be defiantly rebellious, these people will fix him in the course of a single night. From forcing urine down his throat to making him perform fellatio, they have several weapons of torture at their disposal. No matter how cruel and partial to torture a guard or officer is, his job forces him to operate under some limitations. He cannot be tyrannical while following the rules, unlike hardcore criminals who can act outside the law. Even though these restraints are sometimes relaxed or even ignored to some extent in certain political situations, or out of sheer indulgence, they cannot be removed altogether. This is when help is needed from such loyal prisoners. They

perform the required task with great success.

The advantage is that no blame can be attached to the employees of the jail. No one can be suspended or dismissed. Human rights organizations and journalists are kept in the dark. 'The incident involved two groups of prisoners. We are investigating to find out who was responsible. Suitable action will be taken.' The situation can be managed with such assurances. Jamadar Raghbir Tiwari is carrying a fat register, with a cane baton tucked under his arm. He is bald and bespectacled, and there are drops of milk on his moustache. A drum filled with milk arrives every day, meant for patients in the hospital. The patients get only what is left over after the milk is distributed amongst eighteen guards, three jamadars and prisoners loyal to the authorities.

Raghbir has extracted his due. His moustache holds the evidence.

The jailer smiles at Raghbir without saying a word. That would be inappropriate, beyond the bounds of decency. As everyone knows, if you fancy having an elephant in your yard, it's no use mourning for the trees it will eat. Bireswar Mukherjee begins his rounds slowly.

The guard on duty unlocks the large wooden gates. Outside the iron gates is the free world of free people. Two guards take up position alertly on either side of this gate whenever it's unlocked, not allowing any of the prisoners to come close. But there is no need to observe so much caution when unlocking the wooden gate. It is a prisoner who pushes it open. Beyond this gate is a green field, at the far end of which stands the watchtower, set against the high wall. The inmates used to play football here earlier. This has been stopped for reasons of security. Unlike the other walls, there is no ten-foot-high iron railing in front of

this one, which makes it relatively vulnerable. That is why the movement of prisoners here is restricted. The jailer walks eastward along the path bordering the field. He is followed by the jamadar, who leads the entourage. Ahead and left lies the case-table. This is the internal courtroom of the jail. It has nothing to do with the crimes committed by the prisoners outside. This is for judging crimes committed inside the jail. Someone may have been found with a razor-blade or some marijuana, someone else may have fought with other inmates or been caught in a homosexual act – there are arrangements for suitable punishment based on the gravity of the crime. Among these are suspending the wrongdoer by handcuffs from a railing for five or six hours; clamping chains around their ankles to prevent them from moving about, sitting, or lying down comfortably; placing them in solitary confinement for a week or ten days. As the prisoners put it: there's a jail inside the jail, its name is the cell. Spending a month or two in these five feet by seven feet compartments with no light or fresh air is bound to break any prisoner. But there are exceptions. Who knows what life force it is that enables Naxals to spend years inside those cells without their spirits being killed? They laugh loudly, they talk, they sing, some of them even write poetry. This is an extraordinary affair. The ward by the case-table, facing the field next door, is called Amdani. All new imports brought to the jail from the courtroom spend their first nights here. About thirty such fresh prisoners are now squatting on their haunches in pairs outside amdani. The jamadar will assign them to different wards after the jailer has completed his round. Six cells are situated adjacent to amdani. A high wall surrounds the

cells, with an iron gate leading into them. The guard here is always on high alert. The cells are currently occupied by five Naxals found guilty of heinous crimes. They have conspired and declared war against the state. The jailer walks on eastward, looking around him. Wards on either side, each surrounded by high iron railings at a little distance from the buildings. A twenty-foot wide unpaved road runs between the railings. It could easily have been paved with bricks, but what if the prisoners were to rip the bricks up and use them as weapons?

The two-storied buildings on either side have been divided into separate numbered wards. There are twenty-four wards in all. Ward No. 7 on the ground floor of the building on the left is reserved for Naxals. It has fifty-six occupants. The path between the wards ends at another ten-foot-high iron railing, on the other side of which runs the same high wall, with a watchtower looming over it. An alert sentry mans the tower, his finger always poised on the trigger. If a prisoner clambers over the iron railing and approaches the wall, he will fire at once – that is the rule. Another path wends northward from this spot. Next to it stands the enormous kitchen. The dal, vegetables and rice are cooked here in a dozen gigantic vessels, each placed on a huge earthen stove. Fifty or so prisoners have begun cooking for the day. The boiled peas meant for breakfast have already been despatched to the wards.

Having inspected the kitchen, the jailer walks on. Now the path turns to the west. The hospital is situated a little further down. Next to it is a small lunatic asylum. A mad man locked in there bursts into laughter at the sight of the jailer, and then breaks into foul language. The jailer knows that although the guard on duty at the hospital isn't reacting

now, the lunatic will be beaten up mercilessly for his invectives.

The jailer doesn't spend too much time at the hospital, entering through one gate and exiting through another. The hospital is empty now. It is being cleaned. The doctor hasn't arrived yet. He will be here at ten.

The doctor is known as Pagla Daktar, the mad doctor, in jail. He cannot stand thieves, robbers and pickpockets. And if it's someone convicted of rape, he flares up in rage at the very sight of the person. Sometimes he even snatches the stick from a guard and lands a couple of blows on the convict. But despite all this the man is honest. No one has succeeded in accusing him of corruption. Normally, the supply of essential lifesaving drugs to jail hospitals is minimal. Still, he uses whatever little he gets strictly for patients. When he has a cup of tea at the hospital, it's made with tea leaves he has bought outside with his own money. While others sip tea with milk that isn't watered down, he drinks nothing but black tea. But just like the one proverbial bad apple that spoils the crop, all his qualities are eclipsed by one little flaw. He is sympathetic towards Naxal prisoners, a fact that he makes no attempt to hide, declaring openly, 'They're not criminals, for heaven's sake. All of them well-educated boys from decent families. Decent families. Does a single mistake mean they've become animals now?'

Thanks to his sympathy, anyone who falls ill in the cells or in Ward No. 7 does not have to visit the doctor; it's the doctor who visits the patient. 'Ei Bijon, why are your eyes red? Come here...' The doctor drops by twice every day to check on everyone's health.

The jailer would not have been able to leave so early if the doctor had been there, for that would have meant a conversation. Bireshwar

Mukherjee has run into all kinds of people in jails. There's been no dearth of mad men among them, but he's encountering a mad doctor for the first time. Nor has he met such a workaholic government employee before. It is normal to have the working day defined by the clock, but here is someone who doesn't care how many hours he spends working, be it day or night. Who else but a mad man will behave this way? After the hospital, the jailer turns to the south. This path leads back to the case-table. On the way, he stops abruptly at the door to the cells. Chhotelal, the guard on duty here, swiftly hides the cup of tea with the unadulterated milk that is his due and snaps to attention. Five faces belonging to five prisoners can be seen behind the thick iron gate. They have just started their hour of freedom outside their cells after being locked inside them for twelve hours. They will use this hour to clear their bowels and have their breakfast before trooping back into their cells. They will be released again for an hour before noon for a bath and lunch, and then for a couple of hours between four and six in the evening. They remain locked inside their cells during the remaining twenty hours every day. The five of them are pacing up and down in the corridor outside the cells now, chatting and laughing amongst themselves. They don't seem to be afflicted in any way in mind, body or spirit. In fact, they are in a constant state of unbelievably heightened excitement. Stopping in his tracks, the jailer spots five pairs of eyes trained on him through the gaps in the bolted iron gates like powerful flashlights, whose beams seem to transmit mockery, amusement and contempt.

Bireshwar Mukherjee comes to a quick decision. He's not going to bow



before them or reveal any sort of vulnerability. It's a war of nerves. A display of anxiety will provide extra ammunition to his opponents. It will be foolish to allow this. It is essential that they understand how capable the state and its security forces are, and that this strength is multiplied further when it comes to prisons. He knows how much power the state has put in his hands so that he can maintain peace, regulations and discipline in this walled zone which is cut off from the rest of the world. Then why should he weaken?...

How short and yet how deadly the names were: Little Boy and Fat Man.

They had caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands in an instant.

There's an equally beautiful and melodious codeword used in jails:

pagla-ghanti. The incessant clanging of a huge bell. Those who have never been inside a jail do not know that the pagla-ghanti is in fact the official announcement of a hellish ritual of human slaughter. Even the boldest prisoner's blood runs cold at the mention of the pagla-ghanti.

The moment a guard on duty in a jail senses anything abnormal or out of place, or a potential breach of security, he is supposed to blow the whistle in his pocket. Any other guard who hears it is also supposed to start blowing his own whistle. From one guard to another, the sound will be relayed to the main gate, where the guard on duty must immediately start ringing the large brass bell hanging over there. The clanging of the bell will be joined by the wail of the siren, very similar to air-raid alarms in wartime. The siren rises to a crescendo and then drops to a low note before climbing again. Amidst these peaks and troughs of the siren, accompanied by the clanging of the bell, the guards' barracks will spring into action. No matter where they are or

what they are doing, they are supposed to dash towards the main gate of the jail with their sticks. Never mind if someone is barely dressed for he has been in the bathroom, or if someone has flour dough on their hand for he has been busy making his dinner. Someone may have been in the arms of his wife or a woman not his wife, he too will gather at the gate, lipstick stains and all. The main gates will be opened with a rumble. All of them will rush in. The jamadar on duty will be leading them with an unsheathed sword. If it's dark there will be flaming torches everywhere. At the same time, armed sentries from a battalion stationed next door will surround the jail on all sides. One group will follow the guards into the jail. If the stick-wielding guards do not achieve the desired results the sentries will step in. The constant ringing of the pagla-ghanti is a simple message: 'No restraint needs to be maintained.' Once this message has reached everyone, there remains just the one instruction to come from the jailer: 'Act as you please now.' At once the guards will pounce on the prisoners like mad dogs. They will use their five-foot-long sticks, which are no less than clubs, to attack the inmates on their heads, chests, stomachs, backs, hips, knees – anywhere they like, as mercilessly as they want. Skulls will be split and grey matter will be splattered on the walls, the floor will be afloat in blood, an apocalypse will be heard in the shrieks and screams of countless injured people. Let it be heard. No one will witness what goes on inside this walled universe, out of sight of people. It's enough to dispose of the corpses under cover of the night in a black van, and to rinse off the bloodstains. All that remains is the discrepancy in the headcount, which can be easily explained as a successful escape on the

part of the dead men. No authority with such absolute power at his disposal can possibly betray weakness. Even if he has any, it must not be seen. Going up to the door leading into the cell, the jailer instructs the guard tersely, 'Unlock the gate.' Surprised, the guard complies. Bireshwar Mukherjee approaches the five young men in the corridor. 'I've come to meet you. I hope this unannounced visit is not a problem.'

The five of them come to a halt. Porimal, tall, fair and with a face like a poet's, says with a smile, 'This is your kingdom. You can come and go as you please.' 'That is true. But your response will help me decide whether to visit you again or not.' Porimal smiles again. 'You're the full-time head of this jail. Visiting the cells is part of your duty. It's natural for a prisoner not to be elated by proximity to the jailer. But in the course of our long years in prison, we have come across many people whose sensitivities have not been killed by the work they do. It will be a pleasure for us if you're one of them.'

After a pause the jailer says, 'You can trust me when I say that I will not be unduly harsh with you. I won't hesitate to give you all the benefits allowed by the rules and regulations of the jail. But you will also have to promise you will not misuse these benefits.' Bireshwar Mukherjee was a schoolteacher before joining the jail service. He continues declaiming like a lecturer in class, 'The immense landmass from Kashmir to Kanyakumari whose name is India has its own culture of creativity, literature and art. Some ten million military and civil defenders are perpetually prepared to protect its independence, sovereignty and integrity. To declare war against such a country or such a force with a dozen bombs or homemade guns is not the sign of a mature mentality. Whoever it is

who has deluded you will certainly repent eventually. I try to appreciate your situation not in terms of the law but with my heart. I don't want you to do anything that will cause you irreparable harm.'

'We have studied this extensively,' says Porimal. 'We have visited the interiors of India to understand the causes of the widespread oppression, deprivation, poverty and malnutrition. We have come to the conclusion that the disease cannot be cured without surgery. Everything has to be dismantled and rebuilt. Complete change, in other words. You can call it delusion or aberration or immaturity. We realise that when a person speaks, when he presents an argument or an analysis, it isn't just the person alone who is speaking, but also his earlier history, class, family, blood-group, economic and social status, education and experience.

What you just said is not just your personal viewpoint, you represent an entire class. We don't share this view. That leaves the power of the state. We all know that the state wields unlimited power. But whom does this power depend on? The police, the military – who are they? All of them have been born into starving and penniless families of peasants. Is it possible that they never think of their own past, of their families, of other impoverished and subjugated people? That would turn history into a lie. All equations will change the day they turn around. They're bound to change. And what was that you were talking of...oh yes, you were talking of harm. Harm to us. Thank you for your advice. It's just that we know that in order to ensure freedom for millions, it might be necessary for thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, to become cripples, to rot in jail, even to be hanged or shot. The ruling classes do not give up power voluntarily. There is no example of any tyrant

abdicated without using all the power at his disposal. Therefore we may indeed come to grave harm. Assuming you consider losing one's life harmful. If such a situation does arise, we won't retreat, you'll see. We have had two paglis here, two jailbreak situations. No one died in the first, but many of us had to spend a long time in the hospital afterwards. Two of us were martyred in the second. We hope we've been able to prove on both occasions that we won't cow down.' Beads of sweat have appeared on Porimal's brow after this long speech. He is a little worked up. 'All right, all right,' says the jailer. 'You must do what you think is best. Who will prevent you? And why will you allow them to? But I give you my guarantee that I won't make any pre-emptive moves. As a gesture of goodwill, you no longer need to go back into lock-up at eight in the morning. Let me know if you face any other problems.'

'Why don't you say something?' Porimal tells Bijon, who's standing next to him.

Bijon is an extremely fair, extremely thin twenty-two-year-old.

'We don't have any particular problem,' he says a trifle sarcastically.

'We're quite well. As well as can be in a jail, that is. We don't need any other benefits. But a right that was given to us under court orders is being denied us right now.'

'What! Please explain.'

'We pay for a newspaper to be delivered to us. It is not through secret channels, nor is it published by our own organization. Still we find that some news items are being cut out of the newspaper before it reaches us. This is completely illegal. We hope you will look into this.'

Bireshwar Mukherjee shrugs off the sarcasm. 'I've asked for this,' he says, 'keeping in mind your mental state. Personally I feel it would be best if you stopped reading these newspapers. Why bother? It just creates unnecessary pressure. I've seen your case files. I think you'll be sentenced to twenty...yes, twenty years. Mankind is making so much progress in the fields of science and arts and health and education. The nation is marching ahead. While all of you are rotting in dark cells. Anyone will be depressed in this situation. So...'

'Are you certain things will turn out as you just predicted?'

'What things?'

'That we'll rot in jail for twenty years.'

'Or you might be hanged.'

Suddenly a dark young man with large eyes, whose name is Nemai, says from the back of the group, 'Or we could be free in a day or two.'

'How?'

'We know how, and it's not as though you don't know either.'

'You'll escape?'

'That's not a question which can be answered.'

'Why not?'

Porimal, who is probably their ideological leader, says, 'Look, the jail is a symbol of the conceit and arrogance of the state apparatus. It pats itself on the back every time it puts a revolutionary behind bars. It considers itself secure. The imprisoned revolutionary's duty is to destroy this arrogance. In the process, he tears down not just the walls of the jail but also the determination of the ruling class. He proves that no fortress of

the administration is impregnable. Therefore, breaking out of jail is part of our strategy. We will never give you our word not to attempt a jailbreak. Even if anyone promises as much, they won't keep it.'

'Hmm,' says the jailer. He's got an impression of the resoluteness of the prisoners in the cells. Suitable action will have to be taken. But something rankles him. A sensation of defeat...How can they be so steadfast in their cause?

He then continues on his way. There's no point lingering here.

He feels five pairs of eyes boring into his back.

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