

THE CAGE

CHHANDA CHATTERJEE

Translated From The Bengla
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The Witness

Soujanyo was leaning against the banister of the first floor, balcony and watching, in fact enjoying, children frolick. A gynocologist by profession, Soujanyo scarcely gets this opportunity. He has joined service in North Bengal Medical College about a year back, and has already earned some fame. This neighbourhood of Siliguri is very peaceful. There is hardly any trouble in the main road except the traffic horns. There are no multistoried housing complexes, nor any congested slums around. The houses in the locality are by and large one or two storied. In the vacant area adjacent to the houses there are gardens of fruits and vegetables. When his friend Bandhan got the news of his transfer to North Bengal, he told him, “If you put up with us in Siliguri, we will be immensely happy. My parents live alone, and staying this far from them, I always live in worry. If you stay with them, I will be relieved.”

In his student life, whenever Soujanyo came to North Bengal he stayed at Bandhan’s on many occasions. The uncle and aunt were very cordial and amiable. They took great care of their son’s friends.

Bandhan's proposal came as a windfall to Soujanya. To look for befitting rooms in an unknown locality is not an easy task. Soujanya said, "This really is an excellent offer, Bandhan. Yes, I may stay, but there is a condition. You must accept rent." After an initial hesitation, Bandhan agreed. They were roommates when they studied at Calcutta Medical College. After the completion of MBBS, they both flew to London for higher study. Soujanya came back after the course, but Bandhan stayed back, because he wanted to settle there. His parents were not at all happy with this decision, but they had to accept it because they had no other option. After his return, Soujanya spent a few days at Bankura Medical College, but got transferred to this place a year back. Bandhan's parents gave him accommodation with great pleasure. There are three rooms, a kitchen and a dining room at the ground floor. And at the first floor, there are two rooms, a kitchen, a dining room and this spacious balcony. In the garden are trees of almost all fruits like mango, jackfruit, papaya and guava. And besides, there are tubs of various flowers. Madhukaku, the old gardener, looks after them. Their cook and domestic help serve Soujanya too. Aunty has arranged everything. And, as such, Soujanya has a smooth ride here. He always feels at home here. Whenever some delicious dishes are prepared in the household, Aunty makes Soujanya a party to it. From time to time, on auspicious days they dine together. In the last one year, Manjari, Soujanya's mother, came and stayed with Soujanya a couple of times. She was immensely happy that her son was so splendidly lodged. But, there is one problem. Uncle and Aunty love to travel. They are on tour every two or three months. And sometimes, their itinerary spans about one month. Soujanya feels lonely then. But, he himself doesn't stay much in his house, does he?

As he hears the children's twitter, Soujanya watches the flow of crowd on the street, and reflects how the coursing river and the moving life both flow with time. Banya's phone ring interrupts his contemplation. Before he can respond 'hello', he is distracted by a thunderous sound from below the street, and is horrified to see that a motorcycle has rammed against something on the pavement in front of the main gate of their house, and has overturned. A woman is thrown off the seat and falls some distance away, and the bag she

was holding in her hand strikes the gate and drops down. The man on the driver's seat has his leg pressed down under the heavy wheel of the vehicle. Putting his cellphone down on the chair beside him, Soujanya rushes down helter skelter. A crowd has already gathered by then. A couple of men from the crowd have been trying hard to pull the man's leg from under the wheel. Soujanya feels the pulse of the woman, and says, "She is out cold. Please, help me take her inside."

The man's leg has been pulled out by then. One says, "They should be rushed to the hospital." Soujanya says, "First, let me give them first aid. Then we will decide what to do next." Another says, "Ok. You are a doctor after all. What you deem fit will be done. That guy's leg seems to have been badly wounded. We are bringing him here too."

The woman is laid on the sofa cum bed on the ground floor. The man too is unable to walk. He limps into the house leaning with both hands, on the shoulders of two men, and asks Soujanya in Hindi in a frightened voice, "What is her condition? Is she alive?"

Soujanya says, "Don't worry, she is alive. Let me check what her injury actually is, then I'll tell what to do with her." By this time, Kamala the cook has come in through the open doors. She looks on, bewildered.

Soujanya says, "Kamala masi, please get me my first aid box. Be quick. And you people, since Kamala masi has arrived, push off please. This thick crowd is not going to help matters."

As the crowd melts, Soujanya asks the youth, "Your wife, presume? She is pregnant, I see."

The youth replies, "Yes, Sir, she is four months pregnant."

— "Why have you taken her out on the motorcycle?"

— "I'll tell you everything later. Now..."

— "She fainted. I have pushed an injection, and she will come round soon. Don't worry for her. But the condition of your leg is such that you need hospitalization right at this moment. And your wife has to undergo a USG so that the condition of your baby can be ascertained."

The youth's face turns ashen. He says, "You are a doctor, after all, so you please examine her. Going to the hospital is a difficult proposition for us."