The Water Tower

I climbed the ladder on the outset of a spring morning, once the mildly cold winter had just warmed up. It was one of the few days of spring that unfolded in southwestern Bengal, in the vicinities of a town called Ramnagar. It was a tall, thin tower which I thought distributed water amongst the several surrounding dwellings. It's cylindrical reservoir had a conical top and a four feet wide walkway that had a hole with a ladder welded on. I didn't know who owned the water tower and if anyone ever climbed it up periodically, but I used the water tower almost everyday. And only from atop the water tower, from the side opposite the ladder, I dreamt.

The slum below, on the ladder-side, was where I was from, and it's dwellers were my family. It was surrounded by trash-strewn hills of garbage, a sewage lake and a stream that breeded malarial mosquitos. Most of its inhabitants lived in lopsided squatters—ten to fifteen feet long, six to twelve feet wide, many lightless, and most, roofless. Some of their skins were broken, festered with discolored sores, or infected with maggots; others' fingers inched with gangrene or their eyes blinked with a defective yellow or orange iris or their bodies exhibited bizarre anatomical singularities; worse, several imbibed water from the sewage lake, catching jaundice or tuberculosis, ending up as unclaimed corpses near the lake or stream, with grief bagged all over their faces, and found only weeks after their death from their putrid smell. Many suffered from hunger cramps, something I experienced quite often. Fried frogs and rats or shrub grass and weeds were staple food here, though, I was often welcomed by few of the Muslim families that sustained on roti and salt, and it was from them I had probably developed a hybrid dialect of Bengali, but I would never know for sure being who I was.

The slum directly opposite the ladder-side slum, the thoroughfare-sided slum, was where Aanya lived. This was the side I sat facing from atop the water tower. The thoroughfare-side slum

was crammed with several metal-roofed shanties wall-to-wall, and even sheet-to-sheet for many; they were better erected than the slum I was from. This less ravaged side had shady brothels, liquor stills, a few muddy pools, and a common hand water pump, which was where I drank my water from. In the mornings, men were busy leaving for their day labors, in the afternoons, women would be applying stones to their wet cloths, and in the evenings, infants would fool around naked from shanty to shanty, while children would pull and push each other, trying to make a laughingstock of themselves.

The thoroughfare and it's pavement bustled all day long holding all sorts of activities: the fruit-sellers, toy-sellers and sweet-sellers bawling their euphonious, singsong calls; cleaners offering to cleanse vehicles with their rags and bottles of soap; shoe-cobblers mending torn up shoes and sandals; umbrella technicians fixing colorful assortments of distorted umbrellas; mobile bicycle shops wheeling with their stocks of bangles, combs or lottery tickets; undeviating cows navigating the slow-moving traffic of two-wheelers, rickshaws, cars and peddlers; and scattered along the pavement, cadaverous, ground-bound beggars praying to sympathetic passersby. All at once I could watch from the height of my water tower.

At first it was lonely atop the water tower. But then I discovered the potential of dreaming from it's height and it's range of vision: it looked below at the slum, on the pavement outlining the slum, on the thoroughfare before buildings and constructions of apartment complexes, to a mosque, to the peak of an Odisha temple constructed in the Kalinga architecture, and out over to a faraway forest cover on the east in the hazy distance, as far as where the horizon met a long sliver of blue from where tiny planes came and went.

One summer afternoon, after I spent a few hours begging under the shade of a eucalyptus tree that grew out from the pavement, I climbed my water tower. I sat at my usual spot—just below the hand rail, along the rim of the walkway, facing the thoroughfare—swinging my legs freely and catching a gust of the cold sea breeze from the south west, when a girl gazed up at me from the roof of one of the shanties.

Her clothing was as old as mine but not as greasy, which I expected since she was from the "well-off" side of the slum. She kept looking at me while approaching the ladder, hesitated a bit, and then slowly, cautiously climbed. Most children feared height, and that's why no one dared to climb the water tower, though, she seemed to be unafraid.

As she ascended the ladder I noticed, through her broken zipper, that her spine was prominently knobby, like my knuckles. She had short, dark brown hair, tied together with a single bowtie-shaped red ribbon. Her eyes and her complexion were dark brown just like her hair. She was long-limbed, about half a foot taller than me, a little less bonnier than me, and her feet was caked with speckles of dirt. She must have been about twelve years old and me seven or eight.

"Hallo," she said with a friendly smile.

I suspiciously eyed her. "Who are you?" I asked.

"First, who are you?"

"I am the repairman."

She laughed and her smile somehow, bit by bit, eased my suspicion: "You might look just like one! A tiny little one, if only you wore a blue shirt and a pant."

I didn't take her response good-humoredly, though I had asked for it. She told me that she had spotted me on the water tower for the past couple of days.

"What do you do here everyday?" she asked.

"I dream."

"A repairman who dreams?" she laughed again, and then asked, peering into my eyes, "Dream about what?"

"Why don't I show you rather than tell?"

I walked her around the walkway from the ladder-side to the thoroughfare-side and I didn't need to show her anything either, about what I dreamt. She said nothing but gazed out past her slum, past the thoroughfare, slowly gaping further and further away, and finally towards the horizon. We were both quiet and after some time she turned to me, smiled, and said, "Now I am dreaming too."

I smiled back at her, we sat down together at the rim, and that's how we became friends. I learnt that her name was Aanya, and that she lived below on the thoroughfare-side slum. And she learnt that I was from the ladder-side slum, and that I wasn't really a repairman. Our Bengali dialects were distinct in their own way: she spoke a local dialect of Bengali that had similarities to Odia, and I, a broken *pidgin* dialect—an overlap of Bengali, Hindi, Urdu and Bhojpuri. But since our dialects had part Bengali, we comprehended each other with no difficulty.

"It is like we are one of the Gods," Aanya said the next day, "We get to see everything from up top."

Then on, she climbed up the water tower almost every day and sat next to me, on the rim of the walkway, facing her slum. For hours on end we would watch and talk and dream of lives and places below and beyond ours, as far as our eyes and minds could reach. Aanya told me tales—about construction workers laboring on rising buildings, about farmers sweating off on their fields, about birds migrating and nesting deep within the sal forests, about fisherman angling at sea, and about humans like us flying planes into the clouds—many that her parents told her, and in turn I

would ask her more about the characters and she would convincingly continue to make up specifics and side stories of her own.

The sky grew grey and the rain clouds rolled in with the first raindrops of the monsoon season. By then I was so used to Aanya's presence next to me on the water tower that even when she was with her family I would reach for her hand besides me.

Drenched in rain we would watch children craft paperboats and sail them on streamlets coursing merrily along the thoroughfare's pavement and the slum's footpaths; women would place a hand above their heads and leave earthenwares and colorful plastic buckets outside their shanties to collect the rain water; stray dogs would jerk their rain-soaked fur next to children paddling in the many gullies and would go about sniffing in the gutters for offals; and the different sellers on the thoroughfare would pitch up sheets above their stalls as passersby plodded in raincoats or under an umbrella.

We would sit unaffected by the rain that pelted our water tower, which often triggered outages throughout both the slums. We took no cover, but only took in the fresh fragrance of the rain-quenched earth, that loveliest of smells. While the lightning flashed and the thunderclap boomed and the gale blustered, Aanya would pull me closer, down to her lap, and draw my long, dripping forelocks to my forehead, a calming gesture for both me and her, that she continued even after the rainstorm passed. And when the end of a rain shower would reveal an incomplete rainbow in the misty skies, opening it's curtain to the Bay of Bengal, we would be reminded of our dreams again.

"We will reach the end of the rainbow one day," Aanya would say, holding my hands. "We will keep making wishes."

"And what's at the end of the rainbow today," I would ask. To that, Aanya would go on with her many tales.

One morning when the dry cold winds of the nearing winter brushed our skin, Aanya said, "Let's make a home here on the water tower."

"What? How?"

"We can use bricks for the walls, bedclothes for the floor, a broken umbrella for the roof, and some chalk to color the outsides."

"A repairman might come and stop us," I said, and we laughed heartily.

No one bothered us. Aanya did all the planning and I did most of the hard labour. We spent a week finding and carrying up bricks, bedclothes, and a ribless umbrella, another half a week putting them together, and a few days coloring the bricks and the unsightly fonts of betel-juice splattered on the surface of the reservoir.

When our home was set in stone Aanya brought a dark blue woolen shawl from her shanty below. Wrapped in the shawl and in each others arms, we spent the quiet winter days under our new home looking down at the charcoal fires in and out of the shanties, and at the beggars shivering in their long loin clothes, who would thrust their begging-bowls to strangers in fleeces and whine in a mournful voice a line that we beggars often cried:

"Give in the name of God, mother, and may thy children live long."

With the foggy forests in our view, Aanya would bring a snack or sometimes even roti with a fish-and-mango curry that her mother had cooked. She handfed the food to me, and then loved to sing Bengali rhymes that her parents had sang to her as a kid. One that she engraved into my

blissful memory, that I always fell asleep to sprawled on her laps, was called "*Gol koro na"* or "Be Quiet":

Be quiet, be quiet,
My little boy is sleeping.
This sleep was bought at the market
Near the king's palace.
Not gold, not silver,
I gave him only a pearl necklace
That's why he is sleeping so peacefully
Making the room so bright.

Many streets passed the thoroughfare, an apartment complex's construction progressed at a surprisingly fast rate and was completed few weeks after we had built our home.

"Now we can't see the source of the prayer," Aanya said, disappointedly.

We had developed the habit of listening for the muezzin's amplified calls, almost three times a day, and we loved picturing ourselves atop the mosque's beautifully towering dark green minaret, but now all of it's structures was obscured by the apartment complex. The insides of the mosque and the religion it contained were all unknown to us, and so we could only dream of it's interior to be majestic and magical.

"Well at least we can hear him," I said.

The muezzin's golden voice never ceased to ring from the minaret, calling forth the faithful to prayer and bringing peace, rest, and a sense of transience to people's lives.

And it was only few days later in the night that we spotted a pinkish hue from behind the apartment complex where the mosque stood. The mosque had been festooned with strings of electric lights in celebration of *Mawlid,* the birth day of one of the Islamic prophets. We reveled below

the green and white fireworks that burst from behind the buildings, coiling and sparkling and smoking up the dark skies. Once the celebration ended, we remained silent and snuggled in her shawl, listening to the calls that resounded from behind the apartment complex, from the minaret of our memories.

Kites in all shapes and colors came floating with the spring winds. Hawk cuckoos woke up from their hibernation, singing and swooping above the electrical lines to the whistles of traffic police officers, while wild pigeons and crows glided above terraces and beside scaffoldings.

"We have someone to take care off now," Aanya announced one morning, bringing up a half-cut plastic water bottle packed with earth. It had a tiny neem stem that Aanya found dying next to the ladder. We pledged to water it daily, protect it in our home, and keep an eye on it till it grew tall and was well-nourished to sustain itself on the earth below.

By then me and Aanya spent more hours together on the water tower, sometimes being there before sunrise. We would watch the sky turn from a dark blue to an orangish red as the sun rose from the Bay of Bengal, and as the first rays of hope splashed on the water tower, edging down onto our home and our neem plant. Under the afternoon sun, we would watch mothers gossiping and hanging soggy clothes on shared clotheslines. In the evenings, children would run along the tangled network of paths playing *gulli danda* (with wooden sticks) or *guli* (with marbles), and occasionally we would hear husbands swear and curse at their wives, ranting on about their petty lives, and their wives wailing along for their neighbors to concern. And on few days we stayed together usually a few hours past sunset when the crickets began tuning up, when we could catch the first sightings of the stars.

On the evening of *Holi*, the Hindu Festival of Colors, while children below hurled colorful water balloons at each other and fought and frolicked with their water guns, Aanya all of a sudden pulled at my cheeks and my ear lobs, and then patted my nape, very unlike herself. Her hands were all yellow, as though she had dipped them in turmeric powder. She had indeed secretly brought a packet of yellow-dyed powder to our home, which she then tucked behind her back away from me.

I scrambled for the packet so that I could smear her in yellow too. She resisted initially, holding my hands together, but playfully gave in when I pretended as though I was going to bite her hands. I emptied the contents of the packet into my hand and swiftly flung it towards Aanya's face. What a mess it had become! Not just a face, but her hair too was sprayed with the yellow powder now. My stomach ached from laughing, and that's when Aanya caught hold of me and hugged me tight while I shrieked in vain. She relentlessly rubbed her cheeks all over mine, making a mess out of me too, though, our faces were alighted with an infinite happiness. And this was how we celebrated our first and *only* Holi together.

"I'm leaving tomorrow morning, moving to a new place," Aanya said, just a week after Holi, as the sun sank behind us.

"Where to?" I asked, hearing an irregular heartbeat from within.

"Another slum, many, many bus stops away from here, somewhere in Calcutta."

We were silently holding hands and swaying our legs from the rim of the walkway, though now, our legs enfeebled. The sunlight crept up the water tower, up the bricks of our home, and up the walls of the reservoir to it's conical tip, taking away with it a vitality I felt I was losing only today.

"If I visit here sometime later will you still be here?"

"I don't know," I said, "but our water tower, our home and our neem tree will be here. I will bed our neem tomorrow, down next to the ladder." Our neem plant had grown stronger and taller, putting forth new branches, and was ready to live back on earth.

Once the sky lost all traces of the sun and turned into a dying violet, Aanya hugged me from the side and kissed my temples. I felt a quiver in her grip that I never felt when we held hands. She undid her red hair ribbon, tied it onto my hand, kissed my cheeks, and then left without another word. I couldn't tell if she shed tears or not, for I couldn't bear to look at her and say a goodbye as much as she couldn't. I felt an impulse to get up and stop her at the top of the ladder, to ask her if this was what she wished for every time we saw a rainbow, and to ask her to take me with her wherever she went, for she was more than a friend to me now: she was more a sister I could not hold onto forever and the only family I felt I had. And I didn't know if she knew this or not—that I had never truly known how it felt to call someone Abba, Ammi or Didi.

I was too numb to leave the water tower, to climb down to my side of the slum, and to look for food and a home where I could sleep tonight. I laid down on the shawl she left behind, breathing from it an earthy fragrance of Aanya that awakened in me only now, that reeled back all my year-long memories with her. The quarter-moon shun it's faint light through the pavement's only tamarind tree under where a street dweller dressed in patched clothes lived, and next to him, a trio of drunkards were rocking and lolling besides a gutter. And all over the thoroughfare-side slum, the moonlight peeped and lined shadows under every shanty, silvering their corrugated roofs under one where Aanya would spent her last night.

I woke up in our brick-walled home on the water tower feeling a warmth on my temple, as though Aanya had tiptoed up to me a last time and left a kiss on my temple while I was sleeping. Though, the warmth could have been the first rays of the sunrise touching me.

A bus was at the bus stop, overflowing with passengers, many of them hanging out from both it's doors, and a few clasped onto it's rear ladder. Aanya, her father, and mother loaded their few bags and boxes atop the bus and somehow squeezed and jammed themselves through the back door. The bus conductor pulled the bell and the driver honked as he pulled into the moving traffic. The bus puffed clouds of smoke through an open-sided rickshaw, and then, from the last window of the bus Aanya waved up to me at the water tower. I waved back at her with my hand that had her red ribbon tied on and smiled. Lamppost by lamppost, the bus took her away from me, and all the time Aanya waved and I waved back at her.

Once the bus was out of sight I fondled a blooming leaf of our neem plant. I undid the red ribbon from my hand, tried to tie it at the base of the plant, and then carefully carried it down the ladder to plant it back to our earth.