

Geographies of Mourning

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Even now, nine months after *khalamoni*'s* passing, I cannot believe it is true. I was alone in the apartment in New York. On the stovetop sat a pan of catfish cooked with onions and peas, *daal*, rice, and a pot of cabbage. A cucumber salad was cooling in the fridge. We would eat once Alok came home. I was catching a few laughs over *Will & Grace* when I was interrupted by the shrill ringing of the phone. Usually I would let the answering machine pick up, but assuming it was Alok, who had gone to the Columbia University Library to pick up some books for me, I reluctantly walked across the kitchen to the study to answer it.

The caller ID box displayed my sister's phone number in San Diego. I answered expecting a routine weekend "catch up" session. The pitch and anxiety in my brother-in-law's voice signaled bad news. This was all too familiar. Seven years ago, I received news of my father's death in Bangladesh in much the same way. Then I was in Columbus, Ohio, one term short of completing my master of arts.

Now in that long second as I waited to hear the inevitable, my heart skipped a beat and my stomach tightened. "Listen, Mizan Bhai called three minutes ago." As Raza Bhai continued, a host of possibilities flashed through my mind: Could something have happened to my mother? My eldest sister, in Dhaka? "Your *khalamoni* has died." Raza Bhai's voice sliced into my wandering mind. I hadn't stopped to turn on the lights in the study before answering the phone. The darkness of the room seemed indistinguishable from the more powerful one enveloping me.

I remember gasping inwardly at the finality of that statement in the long moment before the circumstances of *khalamoni*'s death were explained to me.

* For translations of this and other Bengali words, readers should consult the glossary at the end of this essay.

"She went to Pakshi, developed a fever, and died this morning." It sounded like someone else's voice when I responded after a long pause, "She died in Pakshi?" Even as disbelief and shock overwhelmed me, I knew that it was real. That it had happened. That *khalamoni* was no longer.

"No, she had gone to Pakshi a couple of days back and developed a fever when she returned. She died at home this morning."

Dry sobs wracked my body as I collapsed on to the wooden folding chair next to the bureau where the phone sat.

I heard the tears in my sister's voice as she described in short definitive sentences what happened earlier that morning in the Shahjahanpur Railway Officers' Quarters in Dhaka where our aunt had lived for fourteen years with her husband and two daughters. I don't remember now what exactly Jhuma said next, only that she repeated what Raza Bhai had already explained. "I can't get ahold of *chotomama*. I've been trying to find him but he's not at home." Jhuma had rung our uncle, *khalamoni*'s older brother in Minneapolis, first. It had happened only an hour ago. "I called Dhaka and talked to *apuni*. Everybody is screaming on the other side. There are a lot of people screaming. Are you going to call there now?" asked Jhuma.

"Yes," I responded, realizing that is what I should do next.

"Can you tell Ruma to take care of *amma*? I don't think *amma* should be in *khalamoni*'s house right now. Tell Ruma to take *amma* somewhere quiet and safe." I nodded in silence. My mind was blank, my body numb.

"Do you have *khalamoni*'s phone number?" asked Jhuma. She recited it before waiting for an answer.

"Yes, I know it," I said quietly. How could I not? At home in Dhaka I dialed it daily, sometimes multiple times a day.

I dialed Alok's cell number first. My voice must have given away the urgency. "Is something wrong?" Alok asked as he drove home on Broadway. I replied briefly, "Yes, just come home, okay?"

I dialed *khalamoni*'s number without pausing, and miraculously got through right away. It was still not seven in the morning in Bangladesh, less than two hours since *khalamoni* left this world in her own home, on her own bed, with her family watching in ignorance and horror. I didn't know who would answer the phone or what I should say. Did it really happen? What was everyone doing there—in *khalamoni*'s room as she lay lifeless on her bed? A woman who had been always the caretaker, the organizer, the initiator, the planner, the doer, the knower. How was it possible that she had died of fever at the age of forty-nine? So horrifying yet at the same time ordinary. Tragic yet pathetic. We had all failed her.

Nabila, my cousin and a fifth-year medical student, answered the phone.

Between sobs she said, "We couldn't do anything to help her. It's all over. It was over by the time we arrived."

Foolishly searching for words, I inquired about Baishakhi and Falguni, *khalamoni's* twenty-four- and twenty-two-year-old daughters.

"They are out of their minds with shock," was the reply. Perhaps not knowing what else to say, Nabila handed the phone to Ruma, my older sister, who appeared calmer.

"What happened?" I asked bewildered and still disbelieving.

"It could have been a massive heart attack. Or typhoid. Or food poisoning. She had been traveling, you know. Maybe she ate something that caused an infection."

I wailed incoherently, "What's going to happen to Baishakhi and Falguni? I can't believe this . . ." My voice trailed off in tears.

Ruma responded, "Shoma, there are too many people here right now, I can't talk. Just pray . . . and call Enam and tell him what's happened." The phone went dead. Not knowing what else to do, and not wanting to dwell on reality, I obediently dialed my older brother Enam's number in Atlanta.

I wasn't sure whether Enam knew. I was the youngest in the family and not used to assuming the responsibility of bearing such grave news. I was usually informed last; nothing was expected of me. Also presuming a routine weekend call, Enam casually handed the phone over to his seven-year-old daughter Karishma who explained that her *abbu* was watching the basketball game and didn't want to be disturbed. It took some coaxing before my brother came back on the phone. To utter the truth was to actualize it, to validate it. It was also a betrayal of *khalamoni's* life. In one detached statement, I would realize the unspeakable tragedy that was my *khalamoni's* death. My words harkened back to Jhuma's words on the phone seven years ago, when she flatly informed me of our father's.

"Listen," I said to Enam. "I have some very bad news."

"What is it?" There was panic in Enam's voice.

"*Khalamoni* has died." My own voice shook. I heard a noise on the other side and then silence. Enam had dropped the phone.

My sister-in-law's voice in the background: "What's wrong? Hello?" She picked up the receiver and asked, "What's the matter?"

"It's *khalamoni*," I said again. "She has died." I couldn't logically explain what had happened because the events surrounding her death were not sensible. Nevertheless, I tried between sobs as Alok unlocked the kitchen door and walked into the apartment.

I remember watching him put the books down on the granite countertop by the sink before walking towards me into the darkness of the study. I was still

on the phone with Enam and Suhela who kept saying alternately, "But, we just talked to Jhuma a few minutes ago. She didn't say anything about this to us," and "I don't believe this." Alok's embrace could not console me. I didn't know how to find solace, even from my spouse who knew so little of my attachments to a life, a family, and a home that, by the time we were married, had been compartmentalized into a different world. A world that Alok had access to only through my eyes and words and memories.

True, we had taken a trip together to Dhaka in April a year after we were married in the Brooklyn City Hall. True, in those ten days packed with social activities Alok had met most of my extended family. But those had been familial obligations to get through rather than to enjoy. *Khalamoni* had been at the center of it all, picking dates, locations, and menus. She had informed everyone about the rather subdued but elegant reception thrown by my mother in honor of her youngest daughter's marriage to a *bideshi*. She had been the most enthusiastic participant in it, even more than my immediate family members. But then, I shared that bond with *khalamoni*. Some of my earliest memories were of and with her. Even the photographs confirmed it. There were none with my own mother but many of me on *khalamoni*'s lap, with a young and strikingly pretty *khalamoni* in her teens along with her friends. At the reception other guests teased *khalamoni*, "So much finery on your niece's wedding? What will you wear in your own daughter's?"

"Why not?" she shot back jovially, her whole body moving with the rhythm of her laughter. "I am the one who raised her."

She was resplendent that night in a cream Orissa silk sari with gold, red, and blue embroidered border and *anchal*. Her hair was parted on the side and coiled stylishly in the back. Her make-up was perfect and her jewels plenty. As the bride, I hadn't paid much attention to her that night. But I remembered *khalamoni* in her usual manner making sure that the evening ran smoothly, that all the guests ate well and had transportation to and from Samarkand, the restaurant in Gulshan where the event was hosted. Toward the end of the evening, as I sat with a few of my father's friends, *khalamoni* kept reminding me to eat something before the waiters closed the buffet. I had ignored her requests, choosing instead to mingle with the remaining guests. Later that night at home though, I ate the leftovers carefully packed by the restaurant staff at *khalamoni*'s insistence.

How then could Alok understand what *khalamoni* meant to me? Born and raised in America, his family ties were mostly limited to his parents, one sister, and *naniji* who lived with them since the death of her husband thirty years ago. Alok had never met his deceased grandfather, whose death he experienced through stories recounted by his immediate family. The infrequent trips

to Lukhnow taken with his family every five years or so were not enough to develop the kind of community and closeness that I had with my own extended family in Bangladesh, where I grew up.

I talked again with Ruma, who said that arrangements were underway to prepare *khalamoni's* body for burial. Anu *khala*, a favorite cousin whom *khalamoni* thought was especially pious, had been summoned from Shirajganj to perform the ritual ablutions. Montu *mama* and Sharif *mama*, cousin brothers of *khalamoni*, had been sent to Kakrail to purchase the *kafan* in which her body would be wrapped. The apartment was swarming with a steady flow of people there to see for themselves that it was really true and to pay respect to the departed and her family. Her body would be transported to Shirajganj and Rajshahi later that afternoon after the *johur* prayers and a *janaja* at the Railway Mosque. She would be buried in her mother's grave, fulfilling a longstanding request she spoke of at times she felt particularly morbid.

Three days after her passing, when I reached Dhaka from New York, her family recounted tales of the dead and the dying. "She had three *janajas*. She will surely go to heaven." The freedom fighters had swathed her body in a flag of Bangladesh at the *janaja* held in Shirajganj, honoring her role and contribution in the War of Independence in 1971. Her obituary in the newspaper read, "Freedom fighter Shamima Parvin died in her own residence. She was 49. She left behind her husband and two daughters." By the time the burial party reached Rajshahi it was dark.

"I saw water streaming out of her nose when they bared her face for the final *janaja* at the graveyard," Baishakhi told me as we sat on *khalamoni's* bed four days later, recounting the day's events.

"*Khalu* cried like a baby at the burial," Ruma added.

"Baishakhi brought out a fresh bar of soap for Anu Khala with which to clean the body. She kept doing the errands, even under those circumstances. Who else would?" my cousin Bithi *apa* noted of the remarkable composure that Baishakhi demonstrated in the hours following her mother's inexplicable death.

"She died at home, close to her husband," Falguni rationalized when admonished for not taking her mother to a hospital that night.

The night I heard the news, I decided to go to Bangladesh even though my family didn't think it necessary. "Wouldn't I do the same if it were my own mother?" I asked my siblings, who reminded me of the expense of such an unplanned trip. *Chotomama* was flying from Minneapolis; we exchanged information on our itineraries. We would reach Dhaka on Thursday morning within hours of each other, both in time for the *kulqhani*, which was being arranged for Friday.

The rest of the night was a blur. I sat alternately smoking on the floral arm-chair in the living room and on the little porter stool in the kitchen by the stove where Alok sat every morning to put his shoes on. I lay in bed motionless all night next to Alok, who could neither imagine the depth of the loss nor console me for it. It was a fragmented reality of my life that could not be reconciled: the parts I couldn't fully share with my spouse, who was foreign to my upbringing. Or, was it because he had not experienced first-hand the death of a beloved? The reactions of friends and colleagues the next day left me feeling similarly empty. Again and again I felt inadequately consoled, unable to express the outrage I felt, falling short of expressing the anguish searing my mind and body. Yet, I couldn't unfold the horrors of that night to even myself. I didn't want to remember *khalamoni's* last hours, diminished by pain and suffering in that dark bedroom as Jhuma had described it. But that was the truth.

An e-mail response from a friend read, "I'm sorry for your loss. Please let me know if there is anything I can do." A recommendation from my boss when she stopped by to say goodbye: "Treat yourself to a spa day." The blank look on my coworkers' faces to whom the passing of an "aunt" did not seem as drastic a loss as an immediate family member. Why should I have to explain that *khalamoni* was like my mother? To do so was a betrayal of that relationship, to draw attention to myself instead of the one who passed. How were they interpreting this story? "A young woman, mother of two grown daughters in their twenties, died of a mysterious illness and inadequate medical treatment. Not surprising, because she lived in Bangladesh, an impoverished nation with poor facilities. What could have killed this unfortunate woman? Meningitis was mentioned. Food poisoning was another possibility. How was it possible that she hadn't been taken to a hospital?" Although the same queries had passed through my own mind, their detached speculations and condolences angered me. These conversations, squeezed in between their daily tasks in the office, reduced *khalamoni* to a casualty of misfortune.

Later the same day, my friend Lavina stopped by to help me pack, which took less than an hour. I felt somewhat comforted by her company. She knew my family in Dhaka and *khalamoni's* constant presence in our lives. Together we went through the mundane activities of getting ready for the trip: picking up the tickets from the travel agent on Twenty-Ninth Street, withdrawing crisp hundred-dollar bills from the Citibank, stopping at CVS for essentials. I bought a few items as gifts: Boxes of Earl Grey teabags, Tylenol pain medicine, Big Red chewing gum that Baishakhi loved so much, raspberry jam for *amma*, Kit Kat for my nephew Ruzan. There was the leather Kelly bag, all the rage in New York that season, that I had purchased for Ruma a couple of weeks ago, hoping to send it home with *chotomami*, who was planning to go to Dhaka

over winter break. But *chotomami* didn't have space in her luggage, she had informed me a few days earlier. Who would have known that I would be taking a trip to Dhaka myself, and under such circumstances!

Sitting down with Lavina to a lunch of leftovers from the previous evening, I realized I hadn't eaten in more than twenty-four hours. I wanted to hoard the food for the energy I would require when I reached Dhaka. I was reminded of the time my sisters and I traveled to Dhaka together from the United States after our father had passed. Jhuma meticulously ate every morsel of the meals served on the KLM flights from JFK to Amsterdam, and then to Dhaka. She urged me to do the same, "You must eat. You'll need the energy when you get to Dhaka."

As the youngest in the family, I hadn't needed sustenance to be the energetic one. It was Jhuma who oversaw much of what had needed to be done, along with *khalamoni*, the ever-present figure ensuring the smooth running of daily activities in a home shaken asunder by the death of the patriarch. My position would not be all that different this time. I knew my family would not count on me to get things done in the coming weeks; that was not my role. The least I could do was to be there with them, witness the moment, be a part of the period of ritual mourning. Above all else, I wanted to be with my two cousins.

What would Dhaka be like without *khalamoni*? Aboard British Airways from JFK to London on the night of November 18, a little over forty-eight hours after hearing of *khalamoni*'s passing, I finally let myself think about the question I had kept at bay. I was going home alone without Alok despite Jhuma's advice: "It's important for families to be together at times like these." It was a hard goodbye at the airport, but at a time of ritualistic mourning, Alok's non-Muslim identity would be jarring in my community. This was not the time to take on that battle.

What would it be like in Dhaka without *khalamoni*? It was hard to imagine beyond the immediate ways that her absence would be experienced. She would have been the first visitor after I arrived home, usually in the early hours of the morning before the bustle of rush hour traffic. Having finished her morning shift at the American School where she was a bus monitor, *khalamoni* would arrive just in time for a hearty welcome breakfast that my mother would have Hashem, the cook, prepare. Over plates of hot and spicy egg curry, *paratha*, and *shemai* we would comment on changes in each other's appearances since the last time we met. That would give way to the latest gossip about the extended family until it was time to open my suitcases and distribute gifts. For *khalamoni*, L'Oréal hair dye in shades of dark brown or burgundy, comfortable

walking shoes from Naturalizer, lipstick in shades of dark chocolate. For my cousins, handbags, shoes, cosmetics all in the latest styles and shades, and of course lacy lingerie. Soon, it would be time for *khalamoni* to leave for her mid-morning bus shift. But in exchange, her driver would pick up at least one, if not both, of her daughters from school and drop them off at my mother's flat. And so it would continue—*khalamoni* and her daughters dropping by daily, even just a half hour in between classes or shifts at work, but always bringing small gifts from the heart, my favorite dishes cooked with all her love and care—*shutki* with *aloo* and *begun*, *kathaler bichir torkari*, *loti*, *maach bhorta*, *til bhorta*, thick custard with pound cake, bananas and *mishti*—unique concoctions tested and perfected over the years.

It was *khalamoni* who made sure that I visited all the immediate, extended, and important family members during my stay in Dhaka. The last time I visited, in spring, *khalamoni* had proudly escorted me around in her Mitsubishi Pajero provided by the Bangladesh Railway on *khalu's* recent promotion. She sat up front in the spacious SUV next to the driver, receiving a steady stream of calls on her mobile phone, no doubt communicating with members of her vast social network with whom she had mutually beneficial relationships: contractors in Shirajganj who oversaw the college *khalamoni* had established in honor of her father, my grandfather, a renowned civil surgeon and benefactor in his native village of Shirajganj and the city of Rajshahi; distant and close family members in need of financial or other kinds of assistance; domestic staff whom she supplied to her friends and family in Dhaka, brought from destitute households in Shirajganj, all calling to inquire about unfulfilled promises or to express gratitude over ones fulfilled. Never a quiet moment in *khalamoni's* day.

I don't remember the details of the British Airways flight to London, except that I slept most of the time. It was nice to be able to freshen up at Heathrow and drink hot, frothy coffee before boarding the eleven-hour flight to Dhaka. As always, I encountered several familiar people on this leg of the flight: family friends or acquaintances traveling to and from Europe and America on business or holiday. "What takes you to Dhaka?" they asked, November not being a popular time to visit for those with jobs or in school.

"My aunt died," I responded over and over, steeling my heart that much more with each repetition.

"Oh, I'm sorry. What happened?"

How could I respond when I didn't understand it myself? "We don't know. It was very unexpected. She had fever and a stomach ache." In a strange kind of way though, it made sense to the Bangladeshis. They referred to similar deaths in their own families—unknown illnesses striking in the dead of night. Nothing could have been done even if the dead had made it to the hospital. It

was fate, they said, consoling me. Rana, a young woman I knew vaguely when I was a graduate student several years before in Boston, recounted her mother's passing as we were standing in the aisle of the British Airways plane, waiting to use the restroom. It was then that Rana had decided to return to Bangladesh. She now worked for the World Bank in Dhaka and lived with her father and younger brother. For the hundredth time I wondered: Should I have done the same after my father's death? I had returned to live with my mother but only for a year. How differently my life would have unfolded had I remained in Dhaka and not returned to the United States for higher education. Surely I would not be as disconsolate for having insufficient time with loved ones who passed away thousands of miles away, and the news of which always came over the telephone, through dispassionate messengers, disrupting the quiet and detached life of an expatriate. When the beloved leave you, whatever the circumstances may be, the only thing that matters are memories of time spent with them. And how many more I would have, had I lived in Dhaka!

When my father passed away unexpectedly seven years ago, I returned to Dhaka to live with my mother. The process of grieving had been much easier at home with others who were similarly coming to terms with the loss on a daily basis. Not having to compartmentalize the grief and by extension my other life in Bangladesh to a private space, as I often did in America, made coming to grips with the reality of losing my father more manageable. The road to meaningful grieving is full of rituals and traditions, and not participating in them compromises a proper burial of the departed in one's psychic space.

British Airways landed at Dhaka International Airport at three on Friday morning, almost twenty-four hours after its scheduled arrival time. Foggy weather conditions diverted the flight to Bangkok, where the non-desirable passport holders—mostly nationals of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and United Arab Emirates—were not granted transit visas by the Thai government. We spent seventeen hours roaming Bangkok's International Airport. It was the month of *Ramadan*. The tired travelers set up prayer mats in various corners of the airport lobby and broke fast at sunset with water, juice, and sandwiches. The British Airways ground staff was nowhere to be found to answer these weary travelers' questions. They, along with passengers with European and American passports, were resting in a nearby hotel. Who would receive me at Dhaka airport, I wondered. It wouldn't be safe for my mother or sister to drive to the airport at that early hour.

When I finally walked out through the green channel the next morning in the Dhaka International Airport, my cousin Swapan *Bhai*—my father's youngest sister's son—greeted me. We didn't talk much on the way to Swapan's home,

where I spent the remaining hours of the night. Ruma would pick me up in the morning, explained Swapan *Bhai*. I watched him eat *seheri* at three-thirty in the morning, preparing to fast the next day. Tamanna *Bhabi*, Swapan's wife, urged me to eat something. I couldn't stomach any food as I watched Swapan *Bhai* mash bananas and rice and pour warm milk over it. That had been *khalamoni's* favorite. She always ended a good meal with this concoction—thick, creamy milk with mangoes, bananas, and rice. If I closed my eyes, I could still taste it, having eaten it with *khalamoni* so many times. Swapan *Bhai* could not have known what a familiar sight that was to me as he licked his fingers clean and talked about visiting the house of the dead the day before, shocked and befuddled like everyone else.

I lay in bed until seven, wondering how it would be in *khalamoni's* flat later that day. Here I was in Dhaka, yet so far away. The streets of Dhaka would not seem the same anymore. I got up to fetch a glass of water from the kitchen and stood on the verandah overlooking a little park. There was none of the usual joy and excitement in being home. What had home become, after all? A place where I returned to mourn the losses? A place slowly yet surely changing and making ever more distant the fragile ties to my childhood?

Ruma picked me up at eight-thirty. She warned me not to be emotional in front of *amma*. I was always amazed at Ruma's composure in the face of tragedy and crisis. She didn't seem fazed. It was as though she had accepted what had happened and now was making room for it amidst her daily activities—of going to work, attending meetings, visiting *khalamoni's* family, making phone calls. Time hadn't stopped for her. That's how it was if you lived in Dhaka—you go on with your daily life and make room to grieve within that. There were organized times and spaces in which to grieve. The grief didn't sit heavily in your heart like a lump, without an adequate outlet.

My mother embraced me at the door and the usual activities that followed my arrival from the United States proceeded. Relatives called to ask about my trip. Hashem made me a cup of tea and breakfast. I opened my suitcase and brought out the Kelly bag for Ruma. I took a hot shower in my old bathroom with the blue floral tiles and put on a freshly pressed *shalwar kameez*. Joinab, the maid, gathered my discarded jeans and sweater for the laundry. After washing them, Joinab would put them away until the day I would leave for America.

Then it was time to go to *khalamoni's* house. The reason I had come to Dhaka, the moment of truth. *Amma* and I rode in silence as the driver maneuvered through the early afternoon traffic. The roads were relatively empty, not yet abuzz with people heading to mosques to attend the *jumma* prayer services. Not quite time for the call to prayers. It didn't take long to reach Shahjahanpur.

I could barely breathe as the car passed Bailey Road and slowly approached the gate of the Shahjahanpur Railway Officers' Quarters. My eyes brimmed with tears. This was not supposed to happen. How many times had I traversed these same roads in *khalamoni's* car, arriving in the late afternoon with her to have lunch, roll around in her bed and watch TV, gossip, and relax? I had visions of *khalamoni* drying her wet curly hair and putting on a cotton sari in the dressing room after her shower. She would put on her slippers and stride toward the kitchen to put at least six different kinds of *maach* and *bhorta* on the dining table, all the while calling on her daughters to fix this and that. As the honored guest, I would sit and watch the preparations, not having to lift a finger. *Khalamoni* would put away the leftovers in little containers, often mixing several items in one bowl, one of many of *khalamoni's* habits that my mother found unpalatable. "Parvin has no sense," *amma* would lament. "This is not the way you run a household, she has learnt nothing from me." My aunt would laugh, paying no attention to her older sister, and in turn make fun of my mother's meticulous domestic skills.

The car came to a stop at the roundabout in front of the apartment building. I couldn't bring myself to gaze up to the apartment on the right on the third floor. This was not how it should be. I ascended the three flights of stairs slowly, wanting to deny, confront, and be confronted with the reality all at the same time. I could smell death from the foyer—the burning incense and the scent of rosewater mingled with the thick sadness in the air. There were three men dressed in white *kurta pajama* and prayer caps in the living room. I recognized one of them as a distant cousin as I walked steadily past the dining room and down the long corridor leading to *khalamoni's* bedroom. A curtain shielded the doorway. Just as I was about to pull the curtain aside, Baishakhi appeared in a lavender *shalwar kameez*, her head covered with the *dupatta*. As we embraced, sobs wracked both our bodies. I wanted so much to be stronger but my knees started to tremble and buckled half way. I didn't know whether it was Baishakhi holding me up or the other way around. Hasina *Apa* pulled me away from Baishakhi. I saw *khalu* and *chotomama* getting dressed to go to the mosque. I embraced *khalu* and felt him shake with silent tears. There was really nothing to be said. I didn't want the grief to overpower me but exclaimed incoherently as I stared at my aunt's empty bed, which had been turned sideways facing south. One of the first rituals following her last breath was to turn the bed, someone explained later. When had they done it? Was she lying lifeless on the bed as they turned it? Who had thought of it? Who had helped? These questions raced through my mind and remained unanswered. "We laid in that bed and watched TV together the last time I was here," I sounded pathetic even to myself. *Chotomama* embraced me and said tearfully, "Don't cry. We didn't

come here to cry.” Those words made sense to me now. We didn’t come home all the way from America to cry. There were other things that needed to be done. There were reasons why we had made the trip, but nothing had prepared me to confront the truth!

I searched the room for Falguni, my aunt’s youngest daughter. She was on the floor at the head of the bed where a mattress had been laid out for people to pray. Falguni’s best friend Fahima sat next to the bed reading the Qur’an. I hugged Falguni and felt her body stiffen as she sobbed quietly.

The men departed for the mosque. Hasina *Apa* had ironed a *kurta pajama* set for *khalu*, who seemed to be going through the motions. He had always been a quiet man, but something in his demeanor that afternoon signaled guilt. His face was puffy and it was as though he had trouble looking people in the eye. I sat on the cane stool next to the phone booth at the foot of the newly positioned bed. My cousins and *amma* sat on the bed. Soon they started recounting the events of November 17. I didn’t know if it was the right time, but I wanted to understand, to hear and be overwhelmed with the truth. I wanted it to engulf me.

The truth was that *khalamoni*’s death was pathetic. It was aided by and shrouded in ignorance, known only through her family’s telling. On Saturday evening *khalamoni* and *khalu* had returned from a short trip to Pakshi where they attended the first birthday party of *khalu*’s nephew. Upon her return, she had learned of the death of her own elderly uncle who had suffered from heart disease. *Khalamoni* rushed to her uncle’s house that same evening, picking up *amma* and another cousin on the way. She returned home around two and was up again within a few hours to report to her morning bus shift at the American School. When she came home mid-morning, she was burning up with a very high temperature. She even broke her fast to take a couple of paracetamol tablets. The maid later told *amma* that *khalamoni* had sounded unusually morbid that morning. She had asked for the maid’s forgiveness because she believed that she would not live through the night. Knowing *khalamoni* often to speak of her own death, neither the maid nor her daughters had been moved. She lay in bed the rest of the day, her fever rising as high as 104 degrees. Baishakhi, who was studying to be a dentist, called her father at work. *Khalu* asked her to call the doctor from the Railway Hospital. The doctor came and took a blood sample to test for malaria and dengue fever. Baishakhi and Falguni spent much of that afternoon and early evening preparing food for an *Iftar* party that their father was hosting at the Railway Club. He came home at five, picked up the food, and left. Eventually, the doctor called back with the test results and said that they had not found any trace of infection. It was probably just the flu. Baishakhi called *amma* and Ruma around ten that night. *Amma* was already in

bed. Ruma didn't understand the gravity of the situation; after all, it sounded like the flu. She had thought, "If the temperature does not go down, perhaps she should go to a hospital," but had not verbalized her concern.

As *khalamoni*'s temperature continued to rise, Baishakhi and Falguni decided to give their mother a sponge bath around eleven. Falguni's friend Fahima, a fifth-year medical student, dropped by the house to help. While they washed *khalamoni*'s head with cold water, she became delirious. She kept talking about the trials and tribulations of the college in Shirajganj that she spent years establishing in honor of her father. Once she was back in bed, her fever subsided a bit. Assured that she was on her way to recovery, Fahima left, and Baishakhi and Falguni went to bed. So did *khalu*, on the bed next to *khalamoni*. *Khalamoni* awakened around one, complaining of a terrible stomach-ache. She got out of bed and sat on her leather recliner. She paced the room. She sat down again on the bed. She tossed and turned. She took a bunch of painkillers. Around two, she wanted to go to the bathroom but on the way relieved herself on the bedroom floor. Falguni, hearing the commotion, got up to find her father cleaning up the excrement with old newspapers. She took her mother to the bathroom, washed and changed her clothes, and took her back to bed. *Khalamoni* picked up the phone and called her older brother at two-thirty. "I'm dying, my stomach hurts. I don't think I'm going to live." Her brother, a doctor, told her to take more painkillers and assured her that he was on his way over. The rest of the night continued in much the same way. In the eyes of her family, *khalamoni*'s condition did not change. The girls and their father got up to eat *seheri* at four. By then, *khalamoni* was in a stupor, numb with pain. She threw up once more. She ate half a banana at her husband's request. Precisely at five, just when the *fazr* call to prayer sounded, she hiccupped loudly twice and died. Falguni recalled that her mother's hand fell to her side and very quickly the fingertips turned blue. The tip of her tongue was sticking out through the front row of her teeth and lips. Water was streaming out of her nose. Falguni awoke Baishakhi who tried to find a pulse. *Khalu* called the Railway doctor again. He also dialed *boromama* and *mejhomama*, asking them to come over immediately. "Parvin is no more," is all he said to them. The doctor and *boromama* arrived simultaneously a little after five. The doctor later said that he suspected it was over when he saw *khalamoni*'s feet—pale and devoid of blood—from the doorway. Nonetheless, he tried to push a lifesaving drug into her vein. To no avail.

Following *khalamoni*'s desperate phone call in the middle of the night, *boromama* and Nabila had stopped to eat *seheri*, perform the *fazr* prayers, and get painkillers from the twenty-four-hour pharmacy. They didn't realize the gravity of the situation when *khalamoni* called at two-thirty.

"She was still warm when we arrived," *amma* would tell me later. "She was laying in bed wearing a sari. I cried and said, 'Please take my sister to the hospital, she's still warm.' Your *boromama* had to tell me again that she has left us." *Amma* had been awakened by a phone call from *mejhomama* at dawn. He told her to get ready quickly, because he was on the way to pick her up to go to *khalamoni's*, who was very, very ill. *Amma* called Ruma, who was sleeping in her flat upstairs. Together they dressed in silence, not knowing what to expect in Shahjahanpur but with a chilling premonition barely beneath the surface. *Amma* described the event later: "Your father's death was hard, but I accepted it, even expected it. But this? This is unacceptable. It is unnatural. It was not supposed to happen. She was so much younger than all of us." *Amma* was referring to her siblings.

Amma was the oldest. Then came three brothers. *Khalamoni* was the youngest, fifteen years younger than *Amma*. In my parents' wedding pictures, a five-year-old *khalamoni* could be seen wearing a pretty frock with a bow tied on the side of her head, staring inquisitively at her new brother-in-law. Twelve years after their wedding, when my father moved to Cambridge, England, with a prestigious fellowship, my parents decided to leave their two youngest children—four-year-old Jhuma and nine-month-old me—behind in Rajshahi in the care of our grandparents and *khalamoni*, then only seventeen. There were endless tales of those years when *khalamoni* was our surrogate mother. So vivid were the images painted by *khalamoni* and her brothers, my uncles, that I could visualize them as my own memories, although I was barely a year old at the time. I remembered being bathed in the lake behind my grandparents' sprawling white two-story house by Montu *mama*, *khalamoni's* favorite cousin, who was a few years younger than she. *Khalamoni* would dry me off in a fluffy towel and set me gently on the large wooden dining table in the kitchen. We would eat juicy mangoes with rice and milk as often as we pleased. Food was always plentiful in my grandparents' home and it seemed that the whole town was welcome to the feasts prepared by our grandmother, *nani*, and *khalamoni*. I also remembered sleeping on a dark wood four-poster bed with intricate floral carving on the headboard. It would be swathed by a nylon mosquito net when I slept in between my *nani* and *khalamoni*, who alternately tended to me during the night. I was a very good baby, *khalamoni* always said. It was Jhuma who was the devil. She never sat still for a moment and constantly upset our grandfather's daily routine. Jhuma would sneak out of the house in the lazy afternoons when everyone was napping and feed the beggars on the street with *nani's* prize mangoes from the kitchen. She would even delve into leftovers from lunch or steal eggs from the basket in the pantry to give away to any wandering *fakir* who came to the door. She inherited her grandfather's big heart, our mother would explain away. But she was a terror nonetheless.

When *nani* died at age fifty, *khalamoni* was barely nineteen. My parents had moved to Dhaka by then. I was three. I remembered boarding the Bangladesh Biman flight from the old airport in Cantonment. This was only three years after the War of Independence. The international airport was not yet built. I remember sitting in a room with no furniture and a whole lot of women with white shawls wrapped around their heads as they prayed for my *nani*, whose body lay in a wooden *khatia* in the middle of the room. *Amma* brought *khalamoni* back to Dhaka with us.

How had it been for *khalamoni* to start a new life in Dhaka with her sister's family? She was born to Dr. Shamsuddin Ahmed and Mrs. Salma Ahmed, a prominent and influential family in Shirajganj, and raised in Rajshahi, the youngest and most adored daughter. Her siblings complained that she was spoiled and undisciplined. How had it been to move in with her older sister's family and conform to a new set of rules? For as long as I could remember *khalamoni* took care of the household and helped my mother with everything. She was *amma*'s "right hand," people would say. *Khalamoni* cooked with *amma*. She took care of *dadi*, my paternal grandmother, who lived with us until she died, a hundred years old and blind and bedridden, outliving all three of her sons. And, most especially, she raised me. We used to sleep together in my *dadi*'s room. The bed we slept on was positioned at the foot of my grandmother's cot by the double doors leading to a long verandah that wrapped around the sprawling white colonial house built during the British *Raj*. *Khalamoni* even slept next to me when I had the mumps, disregarding everyone's warnings that it was contagious. Inevitably *khalamoni* got the mumps, quite a serious case, since she was an adult. I felt guilty. I would lie next to her and gently massage her burning forehead at night.

My father was the vice chancellor of Dhaka University then. He arranged for *khalamoni*'s admission to the history department. *Khalamoni*'s poor grades became a running joke in the family. She was not a stupid woman. She just wasn't interested in academics. Perhaps she was even depressed: the most beloved daughter of Dr. Shamsuddin, now reduced to the status of the younger sister and helper under my mother's care. But the family always talked about her failure in the history department as an embarrassment to my own father's position in the university.

Then came the time to arrange her marriage. I was too young to understand, but I remembered the tales and the family conferences between my parents and *mejhomama*. Finally, when it was arranged, I cried like a baby. It was like being separated from my own mother. I remembered seeing *khalu* for the first time, in the living room among the guests. He was handsome in cream-colored pants and a rust-colored shirt. Always on the heavy side, he had a head

full of dark brown curly hair, a moustache, and much to everyone's delight, a fair complexion. My family was impressed with his looks that night. Not me though. He was the imposter who was taking my *khalamoni* away. My aunt teased me later about how I wailed that night after the guests left and forbade her to marry.

The formal reception was hosted in our grandparents' home in Rajshahi. Jhuma and I wore matching new dresses, especially tailored for the occasion, popularly known as "maxi." They were multicolored, had long and formal sleeves, and reached down to our ankles. We took great pride in carrying the gifts inside the house, almost wresting them away from the hands of the guests arriving at the gate. After dinner, the wedding party left for Pakshi. After *khalamoni* died, *khalu's* sister said in the funeral procession, "We brought her to Pakshi from Rajshahi as *tuktuke lal bou* (a radiant bride in red). And to Rajshahi we return her in white."

Khalamoni didn't have an easy time in her new family. Marriage to the eldest son meant responsibilities of caring for her elderly father- and mother-in-law and looking after seven sisters-in-law and three brothers-in-law; the youngest were nine and seven. Over the years she nursed her father- and mother-in-law through stroke, paralysis, and cancer, and she arranged marriages of their four youngest daughters and two sons. Not only that. She also had to find jobs for the young men who married her sisters-in-law, using her husband's influential position in Bangladesh Railway. *Khalu* (being an honest man, she always said, not without a hint of reproach) never tapped into various networks to increase cash bonuses. Thus tending to her in-laws' well-being put *khalamoni's* own family's finances in jeopardy.

She always managed. Nobody quite knew how she did it; perhaps that explained her vast social network of mutual beneficence. My own father would joke that *khalamoni* could never be found at home. At the crack of dawn she set out on her daily "excursions"—usually including stops at each sibling's home, always bringing small gifts: a few luscious mangoes, ripe jackfruit, perfectly round guava of the highest quality delivered from Rajshahi by her "network," leftovers from some delicious and exotic dish she had cooked. She also collected goodies on the way, in the same containers that she used to bring these gifts. The constant flow of Tupperware between the two sisters and households was no small source of entertainment for my father.

Khalamoni lived a full life, never a moment for rest or contemplation, always on the run from one destination to the next for work, social visits, or both. Wherever she went she brought a gust of energy and information. Now faced with the reality that those daily appearances were forever gone, I wondered what made her that way. Had she been a happy person? Her recent photos

indicated otherwise. As I fingered through the pile of Kodak studio albums in Falguni's room featuring various trips, weddings, and parties that the family had attended in the previous year, I was shocked to see the pale circles around my aunt's eyes, making her face and demeanor appear sunken. She didn't look that way in May, when I last saw her alive. However, I knew that my aunt had been extraordinarily depressed about her oldest daughter's relationship with Shimon, a second cousin whom she found much inferior to Baishakhi in every respect.

For *khalamoni* was a proud woman, born into privilege, raised as the youngest and dearest of Dr. Shamsuddin Ahmed and Mrs. Salma Ahmed's children in a family renowned for their patronage of the poor in Shirajganj and Rajshahi. In her adult years, she had taken on the benefactor's mantle from her father. Her influence over the masses in Shirajganj was legendary. I heard stories that when *khalamoni* visited her native village, the people would "flock around her." She was known to have power and connections. She brought them what they needed. To them she represented hope. Many times *khalamoni* had asked me to accompany her on one of her trips to the village but I had always replied, "Another time."

There was one thing *khalamoni* wanted more than anything, and that was a future of prosperity for her daughters. She wanted none of her own struggles to be repeated in their lives. Even as she struggled to make ends meet in her own family, she was determined to send her daughters to the best English Medium Schools in Dhaka and to give them the best tutors. In the last few years she had started talking about their marriages. She wanted them placed in good families with good prospects, preferably in England or America. Baishakhi and Falguni were beautiful young women. "What they lacked in intelligence, they made up with their looks," was the snide remark made by some members of the extended family when *khalamoni* was not in the room. Taking after the fairer side of the family, they had inherited their father's "peaches and cream" complexion and delicate features. Some would say that Baishakhi looked like my mother, who was the beauty in the Ahmed household, blessed with a creamy complexion and rounded features.

During my yearly visits to Dhaka, there was no end to stories about the steady stream of marriage proposals *khalamoni* apparently received for her daughters. Half of them are surely made up, Jhuma would say to me late at night as the two of us clandestinely shared a cigarette while the rest of the household slept. We laughed, recalling the details of *khalamoni*'s stories about the desirability and marketability of her beautiful daughters. She boasted about proposals from the rich and the influential of Dhaka high society, even gloated in front of her own brothers' families, whose daughters, a few years

older than Baishakhi and Falguni, she thought did not quite measure up to the beauty of her own. Admittedly, there were times when I, too, felt inadequate and lacking as *khalamoni* raved about the young men lining up at her door for her daughters' hands in marriage. After all, at the time I was eight years older than *khalamoni*'s eldest daughter, still single, and, more important, no great beauty.

Shattering *khalamoni*'s pride and ambition for her own daughters, her oldest had fallen in love with Shimon—a second cousin—whose roots and prospects were all too meager. Shimon's father, although a professor of Bangla in Rajshahi University, came from a family of laborers, and his mother, Henna, worked as a clerk in the National Museum, a job that had been acquired for her by my father during his tenure as the vice chancellor of Dhaka University. Henna was the daughter of my grandfather's sister, making her *khalamoni*'s first cousin. The relationship between the two families, however, had always been one of patron and beneficiary, *khalamoni*'s father being the most successful and prosperous among his siblings. Thus *khalamoni*, who had inherited the role of the benefactor from her father, was put in the embarrassing position of stooping to the level of her subject of patronage. That would not do under any circumstances, she announced firmly and repeatedly to her daughter and to her sister's family, who had come to know about the relationship. "Over my dead body," she had said in a fit of rage.

In the last several months before her death, the knowledge of this relationship consumed her like a fire. It crushed her spirit, her infectious love for life. Baishakhi had been in America from July till October of that year on a long vacation. While visiting me in New York, she confided in me that she could not think of marrying someone else just to please her parents and that her mother should stop maligning Shimon's family because of their so-called lack of status. After all, Baishakhi reminded me, Shimon was a very bright student with good prospects. What he needed was time to prove himself. I pleaded the case with *khalamoni*, who vehemently rejected all such overtures. She feared the day her husband got wind of the situation, she told me. For he would blame her, *khalamoni*, for enabling this relationship. *Khalamoni* was distraught and desperate to convince her daughter to come to her senses.

Perhaps it was a stretch to claim that her disappointment in her daughter's actions led to her untimely demise, but incomprehensible deaths such as *khalamoni*'s open the door to all kinds of speculations by those who are close to the deceased, and even by those who are not. The shock and disbelief that *khalamoni*'s extended family was experiencing seemed to have found a palliative in endless discussions of what would become of her daughters. In other words, how soon could they be married off to eligible men of good families

who would provide them with security? The two beautiful daughters—*khalamoni*'s pride and future—were reduced to objects to be taken care of so that the rest of the family could rest guilt- and-worry-free. Not that they didn't love the two young women and want the very best for them. They did. The thing that left a bitter taste in my mouth was the family conferences of elders coming together to determine my cousins' futures while my aunt's body had lain lifeless in the same grave as her mother's for only four days. To add to the outrage, they did it sitting in *khalamoni*'s own home, on the cane sofa set in the living room that she had probably dusted herself less than a week ago.

Then there were those, I squarely among them, who were the "illegitimates" in such conferences of the elders. Let's take Mirzu *Bhai* for instance: almost fifty, never having held a steady job, never married, deeply spiritual, a trusted ally of *khalamoni* yet intensely disliked by her brothers. My *mamas* had never appreciated him and made no secret of that. They called him a fraud, and he in turn would leave the room when any one of them entered.

Ruma had recently graduated into the socially fit circle of elders. For a long time she had been the family scapegoat. Married against her family's wishes to Mizan, her classmate in Dhaka University who was considered "not good enough" by our family, Ruma moved to Canada with a Commonwealth Scholarship to pursue a PhD the same year that she gave birth to her son, Ruzan. She left the newborn baby in her parents' care, eventually separated from her husband, and finally returned to Bangladesh with a prestigious job in the Dhaka University. It was the last bit that had given her stature among the patriarchs, because there was still plenty of talk about her nonexistent maternal instincts and abandonment of wifely duties.

If being younger and a daughter weren't enough to disqualify me from the membership to this elite club of family elders, my recent marriage to a Hindu had once and for all relegated me to the realm of the ineligible and worse, the faithless. Mine wasn't considered a real marriage because Alok had not converted to Islam. It was probably a last resort marriage on my part, many relatives had been heard to comment, since I was thirty and without prospects. Then there were all the young and unmarried cousins—Nabila, Samia, Shazlee, Sadil, Saad, Ruzan, Baishakhi, Falguni, and their cousins from the paternal side. Not meeting the criteria for admission into the elders' club, we misfits gathered in Falguni's room to hold our own alternative family conference.

To be perfectly honest, that wasn't the only reason why I didn't participate in the club of elders and conformers. When the Ahmed siblings gathered, the conversation often focused on memories of a time when they were young and carefree, all of them unmarried except for my mother. Much of the reminiscing revolved around memories of the growing-up years of my own siblings.

Quite a bit older than her own brothers and sister, my mother married and had children years before her own siblings did, and thus her brothers' and sisters' childhood memories were intertwined with those of their nephews and nieces. As the youngest of the bunch, I was often forgotten. I had been just a baby, not as involved in events as my elder sisters or brother who were the focus of these stories. "Remember the time when Enam said this, and Jhuma did that, and Ruma brought the house down with this, . . ." and so they would continue to recollect stories and laugh uncontrollably at the pranks they had played on their sister's kids. It was only *khalamoni* who always included me. For *khalamoni* had been my mother. She had raised me. She knew and remembered what I had been like—stubborn and quietly determined even back then. She regaled me with stories of how I kept *khalamoni* and *nani* up all night tending to my itchy rashes. *Khalamoni* would recall what a good baby I was, that I would sit quietly for hours if told to do so. *Khalamoni* would bathe me, set me down on the large dining table in the kitchen, and go for her own bath. When she returned I would still be sitting in the exact same spot, content to play with the toys she left me with. But Jhuma was another matter. Our grandmother would always say that Jhuma would spoil me. And the story inevitably turned to Jhuma. I wasn't interesting enough because I hadn't caused any trouble. This pattern set the course for the rest of my life. It set the premise of my vying for my parents' attention and failing to get it time and again. Never able to measure up to my siblings' charms, beauty, and engaging personalities, I simply couldn't compete with them. Now, with *khalamoni* gone, no one remained to love me, especially me.

This conference of the misfits was more fun anyway, I decided. For the focus here was on jeering at and poking fun at the elite club members. At times laughter emanating from certain comments and play-acting would be so loud as to bring a disapproving elder from the other room to see what could possibly invoke such ruckus during a time of official mourning. But the laughter was laced with hysteria rather than joy. Ours was a family of far-flung individuals brought together by an event of unimaginable pain and loss, healing and coping through remembrance, trunants, and traditions.

In the days following, I learned what it was like to live in *khalamoni*'s household, cloaked as it was in her ubiquitous nonpresence. How quickly one resumed the normal activities! Falguni, still unable to sleep at night, studied for her exams in the dining room. Baishakhi went back to college and *khalu* to work. Relatives and friends continued to stream in at all hours bringing with them gifts of food. It was customary not to cook in the house of the dead for three days, but enough food accumulated in the refrigerator and deep freezer

to last the family at least a month. Magically, though, the food seemed to disappear. The visitors filing in and out apparently didn't go hungry. On Eid day, just ten days after *khalamoni's* passing, her siblings' families gathered at her flat once again to partake in the ritual feast as well as to say a special prayer.

Typically, Eid was a big day at *khalamoni's* house. As the director of Bangladesh Railway, *khalu* hosted a grand breakfast for the officers and their families living in the Railway Quarters. *Khalamoni* and Baishakhi would prepare the special *firni*, *shemai*, and *chotpoti* as guests filled their home in the morning bedecked in all their finery. *Khalamoni* would put on one of her new saris: a gift either from her husband or one of her siblings.

This time, I watched guests bring *shalwar kameez* sets for my two cousins. They must have received at least a dozen outfits each. But the ones they put on that morning reflected the atmosphere in the house—Baishakhi in a drab light brown and Falguni in pale green. I chose a pale yellow set—an unusual color for me—given by Mizan *Bhai*, Ruma's estranged husband, and purchased at Rina Latif's, the exclusive boutique in Gulshan. It fit me badly, as most readymade garments did. I was just too small for them. That day, I felt lost in the folds of the *shalwar kameez* and *dupatta* as I wandered aimlessly from room to room in my aunt's house. Baishakhi was busy serving the guests. The elite club as usual sat in the living room. Even the misfits today seemed too engrossed with the three- and four-month-old babies of my younger cousins Adila and Juicy. Their husbands were in Japan and Australia respectively. Both daughters were not staying with their in-laws as was customary, but with their own parents. I marveled at how much attention they got as new mothers. It made me jealous, that familiar feeling of inadequacy seeping in. They reminisced about how much *khalamoni* had loved their babies, how she had hosted their baby showers and stayed with them overnight at the hospital when they delivered, how she had visited them daily afterwards. Eid day had conformed even the misfits.

But not me. I wished Alok would call. Without me, Eid meant nothing to him thousands of miles away in New York. Had I been there with him, both of us would have gone to work in the morning just like any other day. We probably would have gone to Jackson Heights for a special dinner. There would have been no new outfits, no homemade *firni* or *chotpoti*. No ritual prayers and gatherings. No *biryani*. How ironic that I was spending Eid at home with family after seven years, yet felt no joy at the occasion. *Boromama* cried loudly as he led the prayers after lunch in the living room, and the women sat in the adjoining dining room. Why hadn't he come sooner that night, I wanted to ask him. Why had he waited to eat *seheri* and say his *fazr* prayers before responding to *khalamoni's* desperate phone call at two-thirty in the morning? That would remain forever unanswered, explained away by others as fate.

That night Baishakhi, Falguni, and I took stock of *khalamoni's* jewelry stored in various nooks and crannies around the house, wrapped in soft hand-embroidered kerchiefs and stuffed into little tin chocolate boxes. She hadn't believed in safe deposit boxes or banks, unlike most women of her community. She wanted access to the full array of her jewels, to wear them to parties whenever she pleased. Now that she was gone and the house thus that much less protected, her daughters decided to transfer the jewels to a bank. They took inventory that night and kept one copy of the list at home and another in the jewelry box to be put away the following day in the bank. I lovingly touched the gold choker that *nani* had given *khalamoni* and that I had borrowed many times for parties, the set of six gold *churi* that had also belonged to my grandmother and that I had worn at my own reception back in April. There wasn't much, certainly very little if one were to compare with my mother's collection. Earlier that year when I was in Dhaka, *khalamoni* ordered a pair of gold bracelets for Falguni and a pair of *kundan jhumka* for Baishakhi at Amin Jewelers. We went together and chose the designs, sipping cups of hot and frothy Nescafe offered by the jewelers to their preferred customers. She had just begun to build her daughters' trousseau, planning as always for their weddings. Since *khalu's* most recent promotion, the family had access to more disposable cash. I fingered the bits and pieces of earrings and bracelets and chains. The girls would need much more than this for their weddings, I thought as I helped my cousins wrap the jewelry in thin sheaves of tissue and pile them into boxes.

I was reminded once again of my aunt's dashed hopes and her unfulfilled dreams of seeing her two daughters married to influential and wealthy families. How much love she would have showered upon her sons-in-law! *Khalamoni* had a boundless capacity to love, her nieces and nephews and their spouses had all benefited from it. Sadly, her own daughters and future sons-in-law would be deprived of it. And she would never be the grand host of the grand weddings that she had been planning for her daughters for much of her adult life, perhaps to make up for the loss of grandeur in her own status since the death of her mother, when she had moved into her sister's home. Had we loved *khalamoni* adequately in return for as much as she had selflessly given us all?

It was ironic that death had brought her back to Rajshahi, the same place from which she was torn at nineteen, the place where she had reigned freely. Had it brought peace to *khalamoni's* soul (Bengali Muslims believe that souls of the dead preside over the material world for forty days after death) to be returned to her childhood home? My mother and I flew to Rajshahi to pay respect at the grave a few days before our scheduled departure for America. *Mejhomama*

picked us up at Rajshahi Airport in a dilapidated jeep befitting the overall condition of this old city. He had flown there the previous day on business. He was the director of the sugar factory, which had its headquarters in Rajshahi. We stayed overnight at the factory guesthouse. The circumstances of the visit were so unnatural that none of us spoke to one another at the airport. In the ride to the guesthouse my mother broke the silence, stating the obvious: "I never imagined that one day I would be praying at Parvin's grave."

That afternoon, after an excellent lunch prepared by the guesthouse cook in honor of the Director *Sahib* visiting with his family from the capital city and featuring a variety of fresh fish, vegetables, and rice, I accompanied *mejho-mama* to the sugar factory. It looked every bit its age, built in the early 1900s under the auspices of the British Empire. The staff was determined to extend every hospitality to the director's niece from New York, which included tall glasses of green sugarcane juice that I swallowed graciously if unwillingly and suspiciously. Dressed in a glossy pink silk sari, the factory manager's wife, Rukhsana, insisted on leading me on a tour of the dusty factory. Up and down we went on rusty old iron staircases and rickety planks, my head spinning as I gripped the cold metal railing and tried to focus on Rukhsana's running commentary and simultaneously veil my fear of falling into the crevices and spinning wheels of the ancient, degenerating machinery. The dilapidated factory chugged away painfully in this old city of a postcolonial nation surviving in staggering misfortune and beauty, like memories of *khalamoni's* once glorious childhood in Rajshahi reverberating in the dry and dusty landscape, the young girl whose life had taken such unexpected turns of joy and misery and who now lay in eternal rest in the place where it all began.

The factory was at the brink of a shutdown. The machinery was too old, too outdated. It had not brought a profit in years and was increasingly unable to keep up with the private sugar production industries. The situation was similar to the paper factory, the staff said, shaking their heads, which had been shut down the previous year, leaving thousands unemployed. What would become of these people who had worked here for generations and had no other trade?

Sometimes, I have tried to make sense of that day and a half I spent in Rajshahi. It was the most real goodbye I could bid *khalamoni*, for it is there that she would rest until eternity. Rajshahi was as dusty and lazy as always. It was my own birthplace. My previous visit there had been in the winter of 1996, when *khalamoni* organized a trip for me and my American friend Rebecca, who was visiting Bangladesh over winter break. *Khalamoni*, Rebecca, *amma*, Baishakhi, my nephew Ruzan, my cousin Shazlee, and I flew together on Biman. We were greeted in Rajshahi by a Bangladesh Railway officer in a microbus. We

stayed at the railway guesthouse, toured the city, and drove up to the northern tip to see the Buddhist ruins and the historic sixteenth-century Shona Masjid (Golden Mosque) by the Indian border. It was dark that night when we drove back from Shona Masjid, for the roads and surrounding areas had no electricity. We stopped at a roadside vendor to buy hot sweet tea and *bhapa pitha*. I have pictures of that trip. All of us standing in a row in front of the historic ruins, *khalamoni* in a black and white georgette sari and a black shawl wrapped around her head: pictures that I still cannot bring myself to look at.

My mother sprinkled bottled spring water on the grave that evening. She said it was good for the parched new soil that had been used to bury *khalamoni*, who lay in eternal rest with her own mother. The soul apparently craved water too. Standing in a row at the head of the grave, my mother, *mejhomama*, and I cried without restraint and oblivious of bystanders. It was eerie and strangely calming at the same time, this final and ritualistic goodbye before I started my journey back to New York. As a cool breeze fluttered across my face, I wondered if *khalamoni* was content to be back in Rajshahi. Would I visit her again?

Unknown to us, Shimon had arrived to meet us at the graveyard. Shimon's father lived nearby in the professor's quarters, not far from where my family lived during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when my father was professor of chemistry at Rajshahi University. We lived in the same professor's quarters, not far from my grandparents home where *khalamoni* grew up. As we turned toward the jeep, I saw him standing quietly, wearing a red silk shirt and black patent leather shoes. He was clearly dressed to impress, although he explained that he was on his way to a dinner party that night. How tangled these lives were! It suddenly and inexplicably became clear to me that *khalamoni's* eldest, her pride and joy, Baishakhi was heading for Rajshahi too. Baishakhi's fate was tangled with her mother's. She would follow her mother as a young bride to Rajshahi.

Like her mother, she became a bus monitor at the American International School in Dhaka, taking over *khalamoni's* job within a month of her demise. This job required no particular educational skills other than minimum fluency in conversational English, and it paid well in comparison to local salaries. For four hours a day, one drew a salary that by far exceeded many full-time salaries of government employees. Baishakhi was training to be a dentist. To keep up the family cash flow after her mother's unexpected death, however, she did not hesitate to aggressively pursue the position. It was unsuitable for a young and unmarried girl to be a bus monitor, objected numerous elite club members. I also tried to dissuade my cousin, knowing that the four-and-a-half-hour schedule was a hectic one, given that each shift was an hour and a

half long and that one had to report to the school at seven in the morning and at two and four in the afternoon. *Khalamoni* herself had found this to be a cumbersome schedule, since the American International School was no short distance from her Shahjahanpur residence, and to report to work on time she had to get up at five in the morning. Moreover, during the long hours between shifts she could not return home. I can still hear my aunt complain, "This job doesn't let me sleep in peace." I didn't wish this life on my young cousin, who should rather be focusing on her studies. In the last phone conversation I had with *khalamoni*, she had lamented the long hours of the job and how she felt tired but tied to it because of the money.

"If I had the skills to do an office job, I would. But I don't. This is what I can do," she said, with some bitterness in her voice.

My aunt was often reminded of her own inadequacies in the education and credentials department by her older sister, who took pride in being married to an intellectual and producing children who had all followed their father's footsteps. My mother generated a sense of moral superiority around her own family and against her siblings when she talked about the "value of education" and how her children were its living proof. Absent in these discussions were the different circumstances of her sister's upbringing and life sequence in comparison with her own. This relationship of patronage and disdain had caused a rift between the two sisters recently, especially since *khalamoni's* own daughters were now adults. She took great pride in them and did not suffer well such jibes against their apparent lack of intellectual achievements.

Therefore, I wanted to be careful not to resurrect that moral superiority through an outright disdain of my cousin's choice of employment as the bus monitor at the American International School. I listened quietly, hiding my contempt of the Americans who could pick a few candidates, based on fluency in the English language, out of hundreds for this ridiculous job. That was the extent of locals' involvement in the American school. There were, of course, other service employees—cook, cafeteria worker, guard, janitor, receptionist, peon, clerk, assistant librarian, teacher's aide. Baishakhi had her eyes on the last position. "Then I could be inside," she said. "I'm slowly going to try to move into that position. What's wrong in making a little money?"

The night before my flight to New York, we attended an event and reception at the American International School honoring "Strong Women of Bangladesh." My aunt's family was invited because the school wanted to recognize the twelve years of service *khalamoni* had provided for them in her role as the bus monitor. I didn't know quite what to expect, unsure if the event was celebratory or solemn. It didn't seem like the kind of ceremony where one mourned the loss of a beloved. Rather, the reception was grand and festive with musical enter-

tainment and a lavish dinner buffet. The elite of Dhaka came, dressed in their best, having bought expensive entrance tickets. The guests of honor, including a musician, a pilot, a writer, and a social worker, sat at a long special table set in the middle of the reception hall. They were dressed in silk saris with *zard-ozhi* embroidery and heavy gold jewelry dangling from their ears and encircling their throats. Baishakhi and I were seated at the same table. After dinner, when it was time for announcements, *khalamoni*'s name went unmentioned. The event program, on the last page, in the very last paragraph, mentioned a faceless Ms. Shamima Parvin, freedom fighter, founder of the Shamsuddin Ahmed College in Shirajganj, bus mother at AIS 1992–2004. Baishakhi, seated next to me, silently shed tears. She looked beautiful that night in a brown silk *shalwar kameez*, her thick curly hair pulled back from her face, her mother's gold hoops dangling from her ears. I wanted to take her in my arms and shield her from the anguish of the reception. It had been a mistake to attend, I realized too late. On the way home, we didn't talk about it. Baishakhi's job had been secured. The memory of *khalamoni* had been honored AIS-style. It was the beginning of a new era.

My mother, who spent half the year in the United States with her three children living in New York, Atlanta, and San Diego, accompanied me on the trip back. We landed in New York in the middle of a December blizzard. JFK was shut down; ours was one of two planes allowed to land that evening. When we had arrived at London's Heathrow Airport, we learned that our flight to New York was cancelled. After standing in line for hours, I secured two standby tickets on a British Airways flight to JFK. The last ones to board, we were seated in first class, the only section with available seats. Thus we flew in style, although the events of the previous month had left us too exhausted to enjoy the amenities. I watched my mother fall asleep in the middle of dinner, the napkin dangling from her blouse, her glasses askew as her head lolled from side to side. I was angered at the fear of losing her; she looked so old and vulnerable. I wanted her to be more like *khalamoni*—strong, reassuring, promising to hold everything together forever even though the fragility of that promise was shattered in the unexpected events of the last month. I beckoned to the flight attendant to take away the food tray, and gently placed a warm blanket on my mother. There hadn't been time to call Alok from Heathrow; he had no information about our arrival. It was past three in the morning when we cleared the long immigration line at JFK and headed to baggage claim. There was no sight of Alok; my cell phone didn't work. I walked outside in the cold December night, my toes numb in thin socks and open-toed sandals. The line for taxis was too long: *Amma* would not be able to wait outside in the sub-zero temperature. Uncharacteristically, I hailed a gypsy cab. Next to the driver, on

the passenger seat, a young woman was sleeping soundly. He didn't explain her presence and we didn't ask. There were at least two feet of snow on the ground and more piled high on the sidewalks as we trudged towards the front entrance of our Harlem Brownstone. It was nearly dawn when a sleepy Alok let us in to the warmth of our home.

GLOSSARY

Abba/Abbu	father
Amma	mother
Anchal	end part of sari that goes over one's shoulder
Apa	older sister, cousin, friend
Apuni	term of endearment for older sister
Bhabi-	wife of older brother, cousin, friend
Bhai	brother, cousin, friend
Bhapa Pitha	winter cake made of ground rice and coconut
Bideshi	foreigner
Biryani	a rich preparation of rice and meat
Boromama	oldest of mother's brothers
Chotomama	youngest of mother's brothers
Chotomami	wife of mother's youngest brother
Chotpoti	a savory dish made of chickpea and potato
Churi	bangle
Daal	a dish made of lentils
Dupatta	scarf worn with shalwar kameez
Eid	Islamic holiday that marks the end of Ramadan
Fakir	beggar
Fazr	morning prayer
Firni	rice pudding
Iftar	meal eaten at sunset to break the fast during Ramadan
Janaja	prayer gathering immediately preceding burial
Johur	afternoon prayer
Jumma	Friday afternoon prayer
Kafan	white cloth used to cover the body of the deceased
Kathaler bichir torkari	a vegetable dish cooked with seeds of jackfruit
Khala	mother's sister or friend, aunt
khalamoni	term of endearment for an aunt
Khalu	mother's sister's husband
Khatia	a cot made of wood to carry the deceased

Kulqhani	prayer gathering usually held three days following the death
Kundan Jhumka	antique cascading earring
Kurta Pajama	Loose tunic and straight pants worn by men
Loti	a vegetable
Maach	fish
Macher bhorta	fish mashed with spices and herbs
Mama	mother's brother or friend, uncle
Mejhomama	second of mother's brothers
Mishti	sweets
Nani	maternal grandmother
Paratha	a type of fried bread
Raj	empire
Ramadan	ninth month of the Islamic calendar when fasting is observed
Seheri	meal eaten before sunrise during Ramadan
Shalwar Kameez	loose pants and tunic worn by women
Shemai	a dessert made of vermicelli
Shutki with aloo and begun	dried fish with potato and eggplant
Til bhorta	sesame seeds ground with spices and herbs
Zardozi	intricate gold or silver embroidery usually on silk, velvet or brocade

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