

Anupama Mohan

Murgh-e-qibla numa (The Weather Cock)

Basheer jumped up and down in the cot wondering whether Baapa would bring home some treat for him today. Baapa always did bring sweets or a kite or, as with the one time he was sick with malaria, a box of colour pencils. Basheer went through a kind of delirium trying to imagine what it might be that his father was buying at that very moment. Could it be a train that could run on hot water and raise steam as it whistled through elaborate tracks? Something told him though that that kind of toy may well be out of his father's pocket. Or maybe it wasn't invented as yet. He resolved to grow up and invent a train like that for the children of the world. The hens clucking about annoyed him as he tried to picture Baapa's gift in his mind. He grabbed a handful of stones and aimed at the fat little *madamas* strolling noisily about. A squawk and a screech and a whole lot of flutter made him smile in satisfaction as the covey dispersed in panic.

Abida wiped the hair off her face with her right arm, as she bent over the *ammi-kallu* to grind coconut and spices into a smooth paste for the *koyi-biryani*. The good news was that Rizaak had purchased some good meat from the fresh market so that she at least did not have to kill a home-grown hen for the welcome meal. Who doesn't love a well-made *koyi-biryani*, but Abida shuddered at the thought of killing a pet, indeed, of killing itself. Of course, this was silly—after all, the fresh market *koyi* was also someone's pet and someone had killed it. She sighed at the way her thoughts were running away with logic this morning, like coriander seeds under the heavy grinding stone—always escaping from the sides, always causing her to stop the to-and-fro motion to quickly flick the errant ones back into the mix.

"Basheeré! *Eda chekka!*" Abida yelled from the back of the kitchen where she was. It wasn't likely the boy would hear her; he too was prone to fanciful thoughts. Would he be able to get through grade 7 in school, she wondered? He was so bright, but so unfocused. She worried a great deal about a number of things in life but Ikka told her that Basheer would grow up to do great things. Abida worried about greatness too—one shouldn't be great in life; one should work for the average or small things and leave everything to Allah to figure out the rest. Life is so fragile and so much can go wrong for reasons not within one's control. *Rabb* alone could save one from the fear, from the worry, from the shadows of one's life. Ikka had great dreams for his son; he wanted Basheer to have a future that would make him important, someone to look up to. For this reason, he had brought for Basheer a photo of Abdul Kalam, India's most famous president, he said, a scientist, a great man. But Abida had her reservations.

She worried if Basheer should grow up knowing such things. Of late, things had been so bad for them and the others; perhaps it was best to not draw attention. Would it be seen as *insolence*? It was such a fine line really and we are so poor—could we, should we dream so big? Abdul Kalam was perhaps an anomaly; all the rest being anonymous, insignificant beings, known only to one's family, not even one's neighbours. But Ikka was unbending. "See, Basheer, look at the smile on the face of Abdul Kalam saar. It is the smile of a man who knows he has made it. It is the smile of a man who knows that everyone *knows* he is an Indian. Not a Muslim, not a man, not a scientist. But first, an Indian. You must grow up to be like him. You must become a big man and make our country proud."

As he walked by the living room, Basheer looked at the photo in some perplexity. What was he to *do* with it? He couldn't possibly eat it. What did Baapa mean by bringing him something like a photo? He had smiled then because he wanted to show Baapa that he agreed with all that had been said. He wished though that Baapa had bought him the train set he had mentioned in their many telephone conversations. "Will you get me a train next time, Baapa?" Basheer remembered having asked, once again, with a big smile as his father tweaked his ears and pulled him close. He also remembered squealing as loud as his lungs would allow when the tickling began.

He looked into the distance to see if Baapa was coming. He heard Umma's voice and ran back to the kitchen. "Umma!" he yelled, "when is Baapa coming? Do you think he will bring me another photo? Did you tell him that I want a train? Or at least a geometry set?"

Abida looked at her son crossly. He looked far too small for a thirteen-year-old boy. He might still pass for a seven or eight-year-old. His ears were too big for his face and flapped about like two little flags. She smiled inside her head as she thought of her young boy as a small Ganesha whose idol she had seen in her friend Vilasini's home. "How many times have I told you, Basheer, not to come running like that? I can't see you and if you bumped into me while I was carrying something, we would all fall down, wouldn't we? And do you or do you not want your *koyi-biryani*?"

"Umma, I don't think you told Baapa anything about what I want. Why would he bring that photo last time? So what if the photo-man made missiles? I would have liked a missile for a toy. What good is that photo? Can I use that photo for geometry? Can I scare Ukru with it? Can I—"

"Ok, stop," Abida interrupted her son's breathless litany. "That photo Baapa brought for you to look up to every day. Abdul Kalam is a big man—see how much pride he has brought to our community. Each and every Muslim is proud of him."

"But Umma, Baapa always says he is an Indian. 'Not a Muslim. Not a man. Not a scientist.'" Basheer mimicked his father's slightly stentorian voice. "Are you saying Baapa was wrong?" and he widened his eyes a little as he needled his mother, who splashed him in response with some

cold water. “*Poda chekka!* Are you grown so big that you can argue with your Umma now?! Go and bring me the pot with the rock salt. And while doing that, don’t you upset the hen trying to lay an egg.”

Basheer ran with glee to the adjoining room where kitchen supplies were kept and where also Umma would put the hens twice a day under a small bamboo basket so that, in the dark of the basket, the hens would lay their tiny, warm eggs. Basheer loved to peek under the basket to see the process first-hand—he claimed it was the spirit of the scientist in him—but egg-laying is a subtle, delicate process and usually, an interruption like that meant that the annoyed hen would growl and peck and then her whole momentum would be lost and she would have to start all over again. Still, on some days, as Basheer slipped his hand under the warm feathery underside of the hen, his fingers would wrap themselves around an even warmer, round little thing whose outer membrane was still so tender he could almost feel a vibration coming from within it. He would then gingerly draw the egg out, fling away the basket, and run to show his mother the new egg, as the semi-dazed mother hen screeched off into the alarming daylight. Basheer had often wondered if he too had been popped out by his mother under a small basket and if he had too ruffled her little feathers and snuggled in. He would then imagine his father trying to peek under the basket checking on Umma and Basheer the Little Egg.

As he entered the semi-dark pantry, a small room lit only by a single window with vertical wooden bars and two wooden planks, one of which was half-closed today, he could smell various kinds of foods and spices. The almirah that stood in the corner had metallic etching running all along its rims but over time, the frieze had lost its shine except when a sunbeam got caught in it at an angle and threw an ethereal light upon the almirah making it glow in the dark. Then the etchings would look like coily, snake-like threads glinting an ancient story and the almirah looked to Basheer like a square-headed giant whose head and body had been severed by the sword of the Great King Abdul Kalam, and while the head had fallen into his pantry, the torso had been scattered into a million different pieces in Ukru, Samir, Pareed, and Shaju’s houses. So now that the almirah was dead, it no longer scared Basheer who looked at it with pity and smiled in victory. He grabbed a stool to stand on and get the small pot hanging from the low roof. The three pots were strung like a pyramid, the smallest on top of the bigger two, each containing a key ingredient for Umma’s daily cooking. Basheer gently lifted the first pot on top, looked into it to check if it had indeed the rock salt that Umma wanted, and balancing the other pots from swinging too much, he stepped off the stool.

As the remaining pots swung together slowly, lazily in the air, Basheer dipped his finger into the small pot in his hand, felt the wet salt rocks and swished them around like pebbles on a beach. He sucked his index finger and tasted the sea and the fish and imagined himself on a small island with his geometry set, a train, Baapa coming with his green trunk, and Umma with her spicy *chammandi* and *koyi-biryani*. His eyes went through the half-open window and he started a little to see his mother

speaking to four or five policemen standing next to a police jeep with a sticker on it that said *ATS*. Umma's white headscarf was flapping in the coarse and grainy sea wind. One of the officers, a tall strong-looking man, came closer to her and Umma shrank away from him. Another was writing something in a diary. The others had fanned about Umma and Basheer thought it all looked a little like a television serial. Umma was now crying a little into her scarf, her hands making gestures that he couldn't quite see. He could hear only snatches of what they were saying.

"How many times" . . . "visited" . . . "Who gave" . . . "ticket" . . . "return" . . . "Bombay" . . . "Mohammed Kutty" . . .

Basheer swished the salt again with his index finger, the tiny grains swirling in the water that kept them moist and sea-like, water that would be poured into curries, taking some of the sea into the *koyi-biryani*, making the dead hen a part of nature once again. *Why did they take his father's name?*

Umma was crying a lot now. One of the officers made towards her but another stopped him. The tall man showed her a photograph that Basheer couldn't see. Umma wailed. One of the officers brought out a green trunk from the jeep and though it was dented in a few places, Basheer's heart leapt as he recognized it as his father's. Umma looked distraught and her head spun from left to right as she leaned forward to grab the trunk. The tall policeman motioned that the trunk be handed over and Umma took it, still sobbing into the wind.

One of the men, diary-man, handed her a piece of paper to sign which Umma did. But she fell to her knees suddenly and Basheer was so startled that the pot fell from his hands and broke into three big pieces near his toes. The water and tiny pieces of salt scattered on his ankles and feet as he jumped back, half in astonishment at Umma's falling and the pot's falling and half in fear for the mess he had made. It was like a cracker had exploded in that small space. He looked back immediately at the basket covering the hen and he wondered for an instant about the egg inside. And he looked again at Umma who had now fallen to the ground into a heap and was sobbing all over the green trunk. He felt the grainy salt under his feet and sensed a rising sting on his heel where salty water snaked its way into a small cut. Distracted, he ground his little feet against the salt and it stung some more. The tall policeman moved towards Umma but checked himself from picking her up. After a moment, he signaled to his men and they all got into the jeep and slowly drove away.

The "Murgh-e-qibla numa," as this fellow is called in Lucknow where he was made and from where Aatekh bhai, your Baapa's close friend, brought it to Bombay so that I could bring it to you, is a strange being of legend and science. You see, if this fellow only moved with the winds, he would be happy, as he turns and turns around on his pivot, letting the winds run over him and whip him around and make him see all parts of

the spinning world at once. He would see, over and above the roofs of all the houses, the wide skies, like a giant carpet of clouds for thousands of badrin as they ride to freedom and joy. But the murgh-e-qibla numa is also a being of science and so it has a function to perform. It cannot lose itself to the skies, you see, and always has to face the adverse winds so as to stick to its north-south position. So no matter how much he wants to, the murgh must face all adversity, all the mad rough winds, and he must stick to the one true direction that he knows—always north, always south.

Years later, as Basheer re-read the final entries in Baapa's old diary, he would—he could—of that day recall only the way the pot broke and the way his mind went to the hen's little egg, frail and unprotected even before birth, and in his mind's eye, Basheer remembered his little hands feeling all over the gaudy blue and green weather cock his father was bringing for him on the day that the train blasts in Bombay killed his father and forever changed his and Umma's lives.