Brick Lane

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Chapter 1

Mymensingh District, East Pakistan, 1967

An hour and forty-five minutes before Nazneen's life began - began as it would proceed for quite some time, that is to say uncertainly - her mother Rupban felt an iron fist squeeze her belly. Rupban squatted on a low three-legged stool outside the kitchen hut. She was plucking a chicken because Hamid's cousins had arrived from Jessore and there would be a feast. 'Cheepy-cheepy, you are old and stringy,' she said, calling the bird by name as she always did, 'but I would like to eat you, indigestion or no indigestion. And tomorrow I will have only boiled rice, no parathas.'

She pulled some more feathers and watched them float around her toes. 'Aaah,' she said. 'Aaaah. Aaaah.' Things occurred to her. For seven months she had been ripening, like a mango on a tree. Only seven months. She put those things that had occurred to her aside. For a while, an hour and a half, though she did not know it, until the men came in from the fields trailing dust and slapping their stomachs, Rupban clutched Cheepy-cheepy's limp and bony neck and said only coming, coming to all enquiries about the bird. The shadows of the children playing marbles and thumping each other grew long and spiky. The scent of fried cumin and cardamom drifted over the compound. The goats bleated high and thin. Rupban screamed white heat, red blood.

Hamid ran from the latrine, although his business was unfinished. He ran across the vegetable plot, past the towers of rice stalk taller than the tallest building, over the dirt track that bounded the village, back to the compound and grabbed a club to kill the man who was killing his wife. He knew it was her. Who else could break glass with one screech? Rupban was in the sleeping quarters. The bed was unrolled, though she was still standing. With one hand she held Mumtaz's shoulder, with the other a half-plucked chicken.

Mumtaz waved Hamid away. 'Go. Get Banesa. Are you waiting for a rickshaw? Go on, use your legs.'

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Banesa picked up Nazneen by an ankle and blew disparagingly through her gums over the tiny blue body. 'She will not take even one breath. Some people, who think too much about how to save a few takas, do not call a midwife.' She shook her hairless, wrinkled head. Banesa claimed to be one hundred and twenty years old, and had made this claim consistently for the past decade or so. Since no one in the village remembered her birth, and since Banesa was more desiccated than an old coconut, no one cared to dispute it. She claimed, too, one thousand babies of which only three were cripples, two were mutants (a hermaphrodite and a humpback), one a stillbirth and another a monkey-lizard-hybrid-sin-against-God-that-was-buried-alive-in-the-faraway-forest-and-the-mother-sent-hence-to-who-cares-where. Nazneen, though dead, could not be counted among these failures, having been born shortly before Banesa creaked inside the hut.

'See your daughter,' Banesa said to Rupban. 'Perfect everywhere. All she lacked was someone to ease her path to this world.' She looked at Cheepy-cheepy lying next to the bereaved mother and hollowed her cheeks; a hungry look widened her eyes slightly although they were practically buried in crinkles. It was many months since she had tasted meat, now that two young girls (she should have strangled them at birth) had set up in competition.

'Let me wash and dress her for the burial,' said Banesa. 'Of course I offer my service free. Maybe just that chicken there for my trouble. I see it is old and stringy.'

'Let me hold her,' said Nazneen's aunt, Mumtaz, who was crying.

'I thought it was indigestion,' said Rupban, also beginning to cry.

Mumtaz took hold of Nazneen, who was still dangling by the ankle, and felt the small, slick torso slide through her fingers to plop with a yowl onto the bloodstained mattress. A yowl! A cry! Rupban scooped her up and named her before she could die nameless again.

Banesa made little explosions with her lips. She used the corner of her yellowing sari to wipe some spittle from her chin. 'This is called a death rattle,' she explained. The three women put their faces close to the child. Nazneen flailed her arms and yelled,

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as if she could see this terrifying sight. She began to lose the blueness and turned slowly to brown and purple. 'God has called her back to earth,' said Banesa, with a look of disgust.

Mumtaz, who was beginning to doubt Banesa's original diagnosis, said, 'Well, didn't He just send her to us a few minutes ago? Do you think He changes His mind every second?'

Banesa mumbled beneath her breath. She put her hand over Nazneen's chest, her twisted fingers like the roots of an old tree that had worked their way above ground. 'The baby lives but she is weak. There are two routes you can follow,' she said, addressing herself solely to Rupban. 'Take her to the city, to a hospital. They will put wires on her and give medicines. This is very expensive. You will have to sell your jewellery. Or you can just see what Fate will do.' She turned a little to Mumtaz to include her now, and then back to Rupban. 'Of course, Fate will decide everything in the end, whatever route you follow.'

'We will take her to the city,' said Mumtaz, red patches of defiance rising on her cheeks.

But Rupban, who could not stop crying, held her daughter to her breast and shook her head. 'No,' she said, 'we must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way, she will be stronger.'

'Good, then it is settled,' said Banesa. She hovered for a moment or two because she was hungry enough, almost, to eat the baby but after a look from Mumtaz she shuffled away back to her hovel.

Hamid came to look at Nazneen. She was wrapped in cheesecloth and laid on an old jute sack on top of the bedroll. Her eyes were closed and puffed as though she had taken two hard punches.

'A girl,' said Rupban.

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'I know. Never mind,' said Hamid. 'What can you do?' And he went away again.

Mumtaz came in with a tin plate of rice, dal and chicken curry.

'She doesn't feed,' Rupban told her. 'She doesn't know what to do. Probably it is her Fate to starve to death.'

Mumtaz rolled her eyes. 'She'll feed in the morning. Now you eat. Or you are destined to die of hunger too.' She smiled at her sister-in-law's small sad face, all her features lined up, as ever, to mourn for everything that had passed and all that would come to pass.

But Nazneen did not feed in the morning. Nor the next day. The day after she turned her face away from the nipple and made gagging noises. Rupban, who was famous for crying, couldn't keep up with the demand for tears. People came: aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, nephews, nieces, in-laws, village women and Banesa. The midwife dragged her bent feet across the hard mud floor of the hut and peered at the infant. 'I have heard of one child who would not feed from the mother but was suckled by a goat.' She smiled and showed her black gums. 'Of course, that was not one of my babies.'

Hamid came once or twice, but at night he slept outside on a choki. On the fifth day, when Rupban in spite of herself was beginning to wish that Fate would hurry and make up its mind, Nazneen clamped her mouth around the nipple so that a thousand red-hot needles ran through Rupban's breast and made her cry out for pain and for the relief of a good and patient woman.

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