

Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802

BY WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Earth has not any thing to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Musée Des Beaux Arts

by W. H. Auden

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking
dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.



Ratan Babu and That Man

Stepping out of the train onto the platform, Ratan Babu heaved a sigh of relief. The place seemed quite inviting. A shirish tree reared its head from behind the station house. There was a spot of red in its green leaves where a kite was caught in a branch. There was no sign of busyness in the few people around and a pleasant earthy smell was floating in the air. All in all, he found the surroundings most agreeable.

As he had only a small holdall and a leather suitcase, he didn't need a coolie. He lifted his luggage with both hands and made for the exit.

He had no trouble finding a cycle-rickshaw outside. 'Where to, sir?' asked the young driver in striped shorts. 'You know the New Mahamaya hotel?' asked Ratan Babu.

The driver nodded. 'Hop in, sir.'

Travelling was almost an obsession with Ratan Babu. He went out of Calcutta whenever the opportunity came, though that was not very often. Ratan Babu had a regular job. For twenty-four years he had been a clerk in the Calcutta office of the Geological Survey. He could get away only once a year, when he clubbed his yearly leave with the month-long Puja holidays and set off all by himself. He never took anyone with him, nor would it have occurred to him to do so. There was a time when he had felt the need for companionship; in fact, he had once talked about it to Keshab Babu who occupied the adjacent desk in his office. It was a few days before the holidays; and Ratan Babu was still planning his getaway. 'You're pretty much on your own, like me,' he had said. 'Why don't we go off together somewhere this time?'

Keshab Babu had stuck his pen behind his ear, put his palms together and said with a wry smile, 'I don't think you and I have the same tastes, you know. You go to places no one has heard of, places where there's nothing much to see, nor any decent places to stay or eat at. No sir, I'd sooner go to Harinabhi and visit my brother-in-law.'

In time, Ratan Babu had come to realize that there was virtually no one who saw eye to eye with him. His likes and dislikes were quite different from the average person's, so it was best to give up hopes of finding a suitable companion.

There was no doubt that Ratan Babu possessed traits which were quite unusual. Keshab Babu had been quite right. Ratan Babu was never attracted to places where people normally went for vacations. 'All right,' he would say, 'so there is the sea in Puri and the temple of Jagannath; you can see the Kanchenjunga from Darjeeling, and there are hills and forests in Hazaribagh and the Hudroo falls in Ranchi. So what? You've heard them described so many times that you almost feel you've seen them yourself.'

What Ratan Babu looked for was a little town somewhere with a railway station not too far away. Every year before the holidays he would open the timetable, pick such a town and make his way there. No one bothered to ask where he was going and he never told anyone. In fact, there had been occasions when he had gone to places he had never even heard of, and wherever he had gone he had discovered things which had delighted him. To others, such things might appear trivial, like the old fig tree in Rajabhatkhaoa which had coiled itself around a kul and coconut tree; or the ruins of the indigo factory in Maheshgunj; or the delicious dal barfi sold in a sweet shop in Moina . . .

This time Ratan Babu had decided on a town called Shini—fifteen miles from Tatanagar. Shini was not picked from the timetable; his colleague Anukul Mitra had mentioned it to him. The New Mahamaya hotel, too, was recommended by him.

To Ratan Babu, the hotel seemed quite adequate. His room wasn't large, but that didn't matter. There were windows to the east and the south with pleasant views of the countryside. The servant Pancha seemed an amiable sort. Ratan Babu was in the habit of bathing twice a day in tepid water throughout the year, and Pancha had assured him that there would be no trouble about that. The cooking was passable, which was all right with Ratan Babu since he was not fussy about food. There was only one thing he insisted on: he needed to have rice with fish curry and chapatis with dal and vegetables. He had informed Pancha about this as soon as he had arrived, and Pancha had passed on the information to the manager.

Ratan Babu was also in the habit of going for a walk in the afternoon when he arrived in a new place. The first day at Shini was no exception. He finished the cup of tea brought by Pancha and set out by four.

After a few minutes' walk he found himself in the open country. The terrain was uneven and criss-crossed with paths. Ratan Babu chose one at random and after half an hour's walk, discovered a charming spot. It was a pond with water lilies growing in it with a large variety of birds flying around. Of these there were some like cranes, snipes, kingfishers and magpies which Ratan Babu recognized; the others were unfamiliar.

Ratan Babu could well have spent all his afternoons sitting beside this pond, but on the second day he took a different path in the hope of discovering something new. Having walked a mile or so, he had to stop for a herd of goats to cross his path. As the road cleared, he went on for another five minutes until a wooden bridge came into view. As he approached it, he realized that a railway line passed below it. He went and stood on the bridge. To the east he could see the railway station; to the west the parallel lines stretched as far as the eye could see. What if a train were suddenly to appear and go thundering underneath? The very thought thrilled him.

Perhaps because he had his eyes on the tracks, he failed to notice another man who had come and stood beside him. Ratan Babu looked around and gave a start.

The stranger was clad in a dhoti and shirt, a snuff-coloured shawl on his shoulder. He wore bifocals and his feet were clad in brown canvas shoes. Ratan Babu had an odd feeling. Where had he seen this person before? Wasn't there something familiar about him? Medium height, medium complexion, a pensive look in his eyes . . . How old could he be? Surely not over fifty.

The stranger smiled and folded his hands in greeting. Ratan Babu was about to return the greeting when he realized in a flash why he had that odd feeling. No wonder the stranger's face seemed familiar. He had seen that face many, many times—in his own mirror. The resemblance was uncanny. The squarish jaw with the cleft chin, the way the hair was parted, the carefully trimmed moustache, the shape of the ear lobes—they were all strikingly like his own. Only, the stranger seemed a shade fairer than him, his eyebrows a little bushier and the hair at the back a trifle longer.

The stranger spoke, and Ratan Babu got another shock. Sushanto, a boy from his neighbourhood, had once recorded his voice in a tape recorder and played it back to him. There was no difference between that voice and the one that spoke now.

'My name is Manilal Majumdar. I believe you're staying at the New Mahamaya?'

Ratanlal—Manilal . . . the names were similar too. Ratan Babu managed to shake off his bewilderment and introduced himself.

The stranger said, 'I don't suppose you'd know, but I have seen you once before.'

'Where?'

'Weren't you in Dhulian last year?'

Ratan Babu's eyebrows shot up. 'Don't tell me you were there too!'

'Yes, sir. I go off on trips every Puja. I'm on my own. No friends to speak of. It's fun to be in a new place all by myself. A colleague of mine recommended Shini to me. Nice place, isn't it?'

Ratan Babu swallowed, and then nodded in assent. He felt a strange mixture of disbelief and uneasiness in his mind.

'Have you seen the pond on the other side where a lot of birds gather in the evening?' asked Manilal Babu.

Ratan Babu said yes, he had.

'Some of the birds I could recognize,' said Manilal Babu, 'others I have never seen before in Bengal. What do you think?'

Ratan Babu had recovered somewhat in the meantime. He said, 'I had the same feeling; I didn't recognize some birds either.'

Just then they heard a booming sound. It was a train. Ratan Babu saw a point of light growing bigger as the train approached from the east. Both the men moved closer to the railing of the bridge. The train hurtled up and passed below them, making the bridge shake. Both of them crossed to the other side and kept looking until the train disappeared from view. Ratan Babu felt the same thrill as he did as a small boy. 'How strange!' said Manilal Babu, 'even at this age watching trains never fails to excite me.'

On the way back Ratan Babu learnt that Manilal Babu had arrived in Shini three days ago. He was staying at the Kalika hotel. His home was in Calcutta where he had a job in a trading company. One doesn't ask another person about his salary, but an indomitable urge made Ratan Babu throw discretion to the wind and put the question. The answer made him gasp in astonishment. How was such a thing possible? Both Ratan Babu and Manilal Babu drew exactly the same salary—437 rupees a month—and both had received exactly the same Puja bonus.

Ratan Babu found it difficult to believe that the other man had somehow found out all about him beforehand and was playing some mysterious game. No one had ever bothered about him before; he kept very much to himself. Outside his office he spoke only to his servant and never made calls on anyone. Even if it was possible for an outsider to find out about his salary, such details as when he went to bed, his tastes in food, what newspapers he read, what plays and films he had seen lately—these were known only to himself. And yet everything tallied exactly with what this man was saying.

He couldn't say this to Manilal Babu. All he did was listen to what the man had to say and marvel at the extraordinary similarity. He revealed nothing about his own habits.

They came to Ratan Babu's hotel first, and stopped in front of it. 'What's the food here like?' asked Manilal Babu.

'They make a good fish curry,' replied Ratan Babu. 'The rest is just adequate.'

'I'm afraid the cooking in my hotel is rather indifferent,' said Manilal Babu. 'I've heard they make very good luchis and chholar dal at the Jagannath Restaurant. What about having a meal there tonight?'

'I don't mind,' said Ratan Babu, 'shall we meet around eight then?'

'Right. I'll wait for you, then we'll walk down together.' After Manilal Babu left, Ratan Babu roamed about in the street for a while. Darkness had fallen. It was a clear night. So clear that the Milky Way could be seen stretching from one end of the star-filled sky to the other. What a strange thing to happen! All these years Ratan Babu had regretted that he couldn't find anyone to share his tastes and become friends with him. Now at last in Shini he had run into someone who might well be an exact replica of himself. There was a slight difference in their looks perhaps, but in every other respect such similarity was rare even amongst twins.

Did it mean that he had found a friend at last?

Ratan Babu couldn't find a ready answer to the question. Perhaps he would find it when he got to know the man a little better. One thing was clear—he no longer had the feeling of being isolated from his fellow men. All these years there had been another person exactly like him, and he had come to know him quite by chance.

In Jagannath Restaurant, sitting face to face across the table, Ratan Babu observed that, like him, Manilal Babu ate with a fastidious relish; like him, he didn't drink any water during the meal; and like him, he squeezed lemon into the dal. Ratan Babu always had sweet curd to round off his meals, and so did Manilal Babu.

While eating, Ratan Babu had the uncomfortable feeling that diners at other tables were watching them. Did they notice how alike they were? Was the likeness so obvious to onlookers?

After dinner, the two of them walked for a while in the moonlight. There was something which Ratan Babu wanted to ask, and he did so now. 'Have you turned fifty yet?'

Manilal Babu smiled. 'I'll be doing so soon,' he said, 'I'll be fifty on the twenty-ninth of December.'

Ratan Babu's head swam. They were both born on the same day: the twenty-ninth of December, 1916. Half an hour later, as they were taking leave, Manilal Babu said, 'It has been a great pleasure knowing you. I don't seem to get on very well with people, but you're an exception. I can now look forward to an enjoyable vacation.'

Usually, Ratan Babu was in bed by ten. He would glance through a magazine, and gradually feel a drowsiness stealing over him. He would then put down the magazine, turn off the bedlamp and within a few minutes would start snoring softly. But tonight he found that sleep wouldn't come. Nor did he feel like reading. He picked up the magazine and put it down again.

Manilal Majumdar . . .

Ratan Babu had read somewhere that of the billions of people who inhabited the earth, no two looked exactly alike. And yet every one had the same number of features—eyes, ears, nose, lips and so on. But even if no two persons looked alike, was it possible for them to have the same tastes, feelings, attitudes—as it was with him and his new friend? Age, profession, voice, gait, even the power of their glasses—were identical. One would think such a thing impossible, and yet here was proof that it was not, and Ratan Babu had learnt it again and again in the last four hours.

At about midnight, he got out of bed, poured some water from the carafe and splashed it on his head. Sleep was impossible in his feverish state. He passed a towel lightly over his head and went back to bed. At least the wet pillow would keep his head cool for a while.

Silence had descended over the neighbourhood. An owl went screeching overhead. Moonlight streamed in through the window and onto the bed. Slowly, Ratan Babu's mind regained its calm and his eyes closed of their own accord.

It was almost eight when Ratan Babu woke up the next morning. Manilal Babu was supposed to come at nine. It was Tuesday—the day when the weekly market or haat was held at a spot a mile or so away. The night before, the two had almost simultaneously expressed a wish to visit the haat, more to look around than to buy anything.

It was almost nine when Ratan Babu finished breakfast. He helped himself to a pinch of mouth-fresheners from the saucer on the table, came out of the hotel and saw Manilal Babu approaching.

'I couldn't sleep for a long time last night,' were Manilal Babu's first words. 'I lay in bed thinking how alike you and I were. It was five to eight when I woke this morning. I am usually up by six.'

Ratan Babu refrained from comment. The two set off towards the haat. They had to pass some youngsters standing in a cluster by the roadside. 'Hey, look at Tweedledum and Tweedledee!' one of them cried out. Ratan Babu tried his best to ignore the remark and went on ahead. It took them about twenty minutes to reach the haat.

The market was a bustling affair. There were shops for fruits and vegetables, utensils, clothes, and even livestock. The two men wove their way through the milling crowd casting glances at the goods on display.

Who was that? Wasn't it Pancha? For some reason, Ratan Babu couldn't bring himself to face the hotel servant. That remark about Tweedledum and Tweedledee had made him realize it would be prudent not to be seen alongside Manilal Babu.

As they jostled through the crowd a thought suddenly occurred to Ratan Babu. He realized he was better off as he was—alone, without a friend. He didn't need a friend. Or, at any rate, not someone like Manilal Babu. Whenever he spoke to Manilal Babu, it seemed as if he was carrying on a conversation with himself. He knew all the answers before he asked the questions. There was no room for argument, no possibility of misunderstanding. Were these signs of friendship? Two of his colleagues, Kartik Ray and Mukunda Chakravarty, were bosom friends. Did that mean they had no arguments? Of course they did. But they were still friends—close friends.

The thought kept buzzing around his head and he couldn't rid himself of the feeling that it would have been better if Manilal Babu hadn't come into his life. Even if two identical men existed, it was wrong that they should meet. The very thought that they might continue to meet even after returning to Calcutta made Ratan Babu shudder.

One of the shops was selling cane walking sticks. Ratan Babu had always wanted to possess one, but seeing Manilal Babu haggling with the shopkeeper, he checked himself. Manilal Babu bought two sticks and gave one to Ratan Babu saying, 'I hope you won't mind accepting this as a token of our friendship.'

On the way back to the hotel, Manilal Babu spoke a lot about himself—his childhood, his parents, his school and college days. Ratan Babu felt that his own life story was being recounted.

The plan came to Ratan Babu in the afternoon as the two were on their way to the railway bridge. He didn't have to talk much, so he could think. He had been thinking, since midday, of getting rid of this man, but he couldn't decide on a method. Ratan Babu had just turned his eyes to the clouds gathering in the west when a plan suddenly occurred to him with blazing clarity. The vision he saw was of the two of them standing by the railing of the bridge. In the distance a train was approaching. As the engine got within twenty yards, Ratan Babu gathered his strength and gave a hefty push—He closed his eyes involuntarily. Then he opened them again and shot a glance at his companion. Manilal Babu seemed quite unconcerned. But if the two had so much in common, perhaps he too was thinking of a way to get rid of him?

But the man's looks didn't betray any such thoughts. As a matter of fact, he was humming a Hindi film tune which Ratan Babu himself was in the habit of humming from time to time.

The dark clouds had just covered the sun which would in any case set in a few minutes. Ratan Babu looked around and saw they were quite alone. Thank God for that. Had there been anyone else, his plan wouldn't have worked.

It was strange that even though his mind was bent on murder, Ratan Babu couldn't think of himself as a culprit. Had Manilal Babu possessed any traits which endowed him with a personality different from his own, Ratan Babu could never have thought of killing him. But now he felt that there was no sense in both of them being alive at the same time. It was enough that he alone should continue to exist.

The two arrived at the bridge.

'Bit stuffy today,' commented Manilal Babu. 'It may rain tonight, and that could be the start of a cold spell.'

Ratan Babu stole a glance at his wristwatch. Twelve minutes to six. The train was supposed to be very punctual. There wasn't much time left. Ratan Babu contrived a yawn to ease his tension. 'Even if it does rain,' he said, 'it is not likely to happen for another four or five hours.'

'Care for a betel nut?'

Manilal Babu had produced a small round tin box from his pocket. Ratan Babu too was carrying a metal box with betel nuts in it, but didn't mention the fact to Manilal Babu. He helped himself to a nut and tossed it into his mouth.

Just then they heard the sound of the train.

Manilal Babu advanced towards the railing, glanced at his watch and said, 'Seven minutes before time.'

The thick cloud in the sky had made the evening a little darker than usual. The headlight seemed brighter in contrast. The train was still far away but the light was growing brighter every second.

Krrring . . . krrring.

A cyclist was approaching from the road towards the bridge. Good God! Was he going to stop?

No. Ratan Babu's apprehension proved baseless. The cyclist rode swiftly past them and disappeared into the gathering darkness down the other side of the road.

The train was hurtling up at great speed. It was impossible to gauge the distance in the blinding glare of the headlight. In a few seconds the bridge would start shaking.

Now the sound of the train was deafening.

Manilal Babu was looking down with his hands on the railing. A flash of lightning in the sky and Ratan Babu gathered all his strength, flattened his palms against the back of Manilal Babu, and heaved. Manilal Babu's body vaulted over the four-foot-high railing and plummeted down towards the thundering engine. That very moment the bridge began to shake.

Ratan Babu wound his shawl tightly around his neck and started on his way back.

Towards the end of his walk he had to break into a run in a vain effort to avoid being pelted by the first big drops of rain. Panting with the effort, he rushed into the hotel.

As soon as he entered he felt there was something wrong. Where had he come? The lobby of the New Mahamaya was not like this at all—the tables, the chairs, the pictures on the wall . . . Looking around, his eyes suddenly caught a signboard on the wall. What a stupid mistake! He had come into the Kalika hotel instead. Wasn't this where Manilal Babu was staying?

'So you couldn't avoid getting wet?'

Somebody was talking to him. Ratan Babu turned round and saw a man with curly hair and a green shawl—probably a resident of the hotel—looking at him with a cup of tea in his hand. 'Sorry,' said the man, seeing Ratan Babu's face, 'for a moment I thought you were Manilal Babu.'

It was this mistake which raised the first doubts in Ratan Babu's mind. Had he been careful enough about the crime he had committed? Many must have seen the two of them going out together, but had they really noticed? Would they remember what they had seen? And if they did, would the suspicion then fall on him? He was sure no one had seen them after they had reached the outskirts of the town. And after reaching that bridge—oh yes, the cyclist. He must have seen them. But by that time it had turned quite dark and the cyclist passed by at a high speed. Was it likely that he would remember their faces? Certainly not.

The more Ratan Babu pondered, the more reassured he felt. There was no doubt that Manilal Babu's dead body would be discovered. But he just could not believe that it would lead to him being suspected of the crime, and that he would be tried, found guilty, and brought to the gallows.

Since it was still raining, Ratan Babu stayed for a cup of tea. Around seven-thirty the rain stopped and he went directly to the New Mahamaya. He found it almost funny the way he had blundered into the wrong hotel.

At dinner, he ate well and with relish; then he slipped into bed with a magazine, read an article on the aborigines of Australia, turned off the bedlamp and closed his eyes with not a worry in his mind. Once again he was on his own; and unique. He didn't have a friend, and didn't need one. He would spend the rest of his days in exactly the same way he had done so far. What could be better?

It had started to rain again. There were flashes of lightning and claps of thunder. But none of it mattered. Ratan Babu had already started to snore.

'Did you buy that stick from the haat, sir?' asked Pancha when he brought Ratan Babu his morning tea.

'Yes,' said Ratan Babu.

'How much did you pay for it?'

Ratan Babu mentioned the price. Then he asked casually, 'Were you at the haat too?'

Pancha broke into a broad smile. 'Yes, sir,' he said, 'and I saw you. Didn't you see me?'

'Why, no.'

That ended the conversation.

After his tea, Ratan Babu made his way to the Kalika hotel. The curly-haired man was talking to a group of people outside the hotel. He heard Manilal Babu's name and the word 'suicide' mentioned several times. He edged closer to hear better. Not only that, he was bold enough to put a question.

'Who has died?'

The curly-haired man said, 'It was the same man I had mistaken you for yesterday.'

'Suicide, was it?'

'It looks like that. The dead body was found by the railway tracks below the bridge. It seems he threw himself from it. An odd character, he was. Hardly spoke to anyone. We used to talk about him.'

'I suppose the dead body . . . ?'

'In police custody. He came here for a change of air from Calcutta. Didn't know anyone here. Nothing more has been found out.'

Ratan Babu shook his head, made a few clucking noises and went off.

Suicide! So nobody had thought of murder at all. Luck was on his side. How simple it was, this business of murder! He wondered what made people quail at the thought.

Ratan Babu felt quite light-hearted. After two days he would now be able to walk alone again. The very thought filled him with pleasure.

It was probably while he pushed Manilal Babu yesterday that a button from his shirt had got ripped and come off. He found a tailor's shop and had the button replaced. Then he went into a store and bought a tube of Neem toothpaste.

As he walked a few steps from the store, he heard the sound of keertan coming from a house. He stood for a while listening to the song, then made for the open terrain outside the town. He walked a mile or so along a new path, came back to the hotel at about eleven, had his bath and lunch, and took his afternoon nap.

As usual he woke up around three, and realized almost immediately that he had to pay another visit to the bridge that evening. For obvious reasons he had not been able to enjoy the sight of the train yesterday. The sky was still cloudy but it didn't seem that it would rain. Today he would be able to watch the train from the moment it appeared till it vanished into the horizon.

He had his afternoon tea at five and went down to the lobby. The manager Shambhu Babu sat at his desk by the front door. He saw Ratan Babu and said, 'Did you know the man who was killed yesterday?'

Ratan Babu looked at Shambhu Babu, feigning surprise. Then he said, 'Why do you ask?'

'Well, it's only that Pancha mentioned he had seen you two together in the haat.'

Ratan Babu smiled. 'I haven't really got to know anyone here,' he said calmly. 'I did speak to a few people in the haat, but the fact is, I don't even know which person was killed.'

'I see,' said Shambhu Babu, laughing. He was jovial by nature and prone to laughter. 'He too had come for a change,' he added. 'He had put up at the Kalika.'

'I see.'

Ratan Babu went out. It was a two-mile walk to the bridge. If he didn't hurry he might miss the train.

Nobody cast suspicious glances at him in the street. Yesterday's youngsters were not in their usual place. That remark about Tweedledum and Tweedledee had nettled him. He wondered where the boys were. The sound of drums could be heard from somewhere close by. There was a puja on in the neighbourhood. That's where the boys must have gone. Good.

At last he was all by himself on the path in the open field. Until he met Manilal Babu, he had been well content with his lot; but today he felt more relaxed than ever before.

There it was—the babla tree. The bridge was only a short distance away. The sky was still overcast, but not with thick black clouds like yesterday. These were grey clouds, and there was no breeze; the sky stood ashen and still.

Ratan Babu's heart leaped with joy at the sight of the bridge. He quickened his pace. Who knows, the train might turn up even earlier than yesterday. A flock of cranes passed overhead. Migratory cranes? He couldn't tell.

As he stood on the bridge, Ratan Babu became aware of the stillness of the evening. Straining his ears, he could hear faint drumbeats from the direction of the town. Otherwise all was quiet.

He moved over to the railing. He could see the signal, and beyond that, the station. What was that now? Lower down the railing, in a crack in the wood was lodged a shiny object. Ratan Babu bent down and prised it out. A small round tin box with betel nuts in it. Ratan Babu smiled and tossed it over the railing. There was a metallic clink as it hit the ground. Who knows how long it would lie there?

What was that light?

Ah, the train. No sound yet, just an advancing point of light. Ratan Babu stood and stared fascinated at the headlight. A sudden gust of wind whipped the shawl off his shoulder. He wrapped it properly around him once more.

Now he could hear the sound. It was like the low rumble of an approaching storm.

Ratan Babu suddenly had the feeling that somebody was standing behind him. It was difficult to take his eyes off the train, but even so he cast a quick glance around. Not a soul anywhere. It was not as dark as the day before, hence the visibility was much better. No, except for himself and that approaching train, there was no one for miles around.

The train was now within a hundred yards.

Ratan Babu edged further towards the railing. Had the train been an old-fashioned one with a steam engine, he couldn't have gone so close to the edge as the smoke would have got into his eyes. This was a smokeless diesel engine. There was only a deep, earth-shaking rumble and the blinding glare of the headlight.

Now the train was about to go under the bridge.

Ratan Babu placed his elbows on the railing and leaned forward to watch.

At that very moment a pair of hands came up from behind and gave him a savage push. Ratan Babu went clean over the four-foot-high railing.

As usual, the train made the bridge shudder as it passed under it and sped towards the west where the sky had just begun to turn purple.

Ratan Babu no longer stands on the bridge, but as a token of his presence a small shining object is stuck in a crack in the wooden railing.

It is an aluminium box with betel nuts in it.

Translated by Satyajit Ray
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The Tell-Tale Heart

IT'S TRUE! YES, I HAVE BEEN ILL, very ill. But why do you say that I have lost control of my mind, why do you say that I am mad? Can you not see that I have full control of my mind? Is it not clear that I am not mad? Indeed, the illness only made my mind, my feelings, my senses stronger, more powerful. My sense of hearing especially became more powerful. I could hear sounds I had never heard before. I heard sounds from heaven; and I heard sounds from hell!

Listen! Listen, and I will tell you how it happened. You will see, you will hear how healthy my mind is.

It is impossible to say how the idea first entered my head. There was no reason for what I did. I did not hate the old man; I even loved him. He had never hurt me. I did not want his money. I think it was his eye. His eye was like the eye of a **vulture**, the eye of one of those terrible birds that watch and wait while an animal dies, and then fall upon the dead body and pull it to pieces to eat it. When the old man looked at me with his vulture eye a cold feeling went up and down my



back; even my blood became cold. And so, I finally decided I had to kill the old man and close that eye forever!

So you think that I am mad? A madman cannot plan. But you should have seen me. During all of that week I was as friendly to the old man as I could be, and warm, and loving.

Every night about twelve o'clock I slowly opened his door. And when the door was opened wide enough I put my hand in, and then my head. In my hand I held a light covered over with a cloth so that no light showed. And I stood there quietly. Then, carefully, I lifted the cloth, just a little, so that a single, thin, small light fell across that eye. For seven nights I did this, seven long nights, every night at midnight. Always the eye was closed, so it was impossible for me to do the work. For it was not the old man I felt I had to kill; it was the eye, his Evil Eye.

And every morning I went to his room, and with a warm, friendly voice I asked him how he had slept. He could not guess that every night, just at twelve, I looked in at him as he slept.

The eighth night I was more than usually careful as I opened the door. The hands of a clock move more quickly than did my hand. Never before had I felt so strongly my own power; I was now sure of success.

The old man was lying there not dreaming that I was at his door. Suddenly he moved in his bed. You may think I became afraid. But no. The darkness in his room was thick and black. I knew he could not see the opening of the door. I continued to push the door, slowly, softly. I put in my head. I put in my hand, with the covered light. Suddenly the old man sat straight up in bed and cried, "Who's there??!"

I stood quite still. For a whole hour I did not move. Nor did I hear him again lie down in his bed. He just sat there, listening. Then I heard a sound, a low cry of fear which escaped from the old man. Now I knew that he was sitting up in his bed, filled with fear; I knew that he knew that I was there. He did not see me there. He could not hear me there. He felt me there. Now he knew that Death was standing there.

Slowly, little by little, I lifted the cloth, until a small, small light escaped from under it to fall upon — to fall upon that vulture eye! It was open — wide, wide open, and my anger increased as it looked straight at me. I could not see the old man's face. Only that eye, that

hard blue eye, and the blood in my body became like ice.

Have I not told you that my hearing had become unusually strong? Now I could hear a quick, low, soft sound, like the sound of a clock heard through a wall. It was the beating of the old man's heart. I tried to stand quietly. But the sound grew louder. The old man's fear must have been great indeed. And as the sound grew louder my anger became greater and more painful. But it was more than anger. In the quiet night, in the dark silence of the bedroom my anger became fear — for the heart was beating so loudly that I was sure some one must hear. The time had come! I rushed into the room, crying, "Die! Die!" The old man gave a loud cry of fear as I fell upon him and held the bedcovers **tightly** over his head. Still his heart was beating; but I smiled as I felt that success was near. For many minutes that heart continued to beat; but at last the beating stopped. The old man was dead. I took away the bedcovers and held my ear over his heart. There was no sound. Yes. He was dead! Dead as a stone. His eye would trouble me no more!



So I am mad, you say? You should have seen how careful I was to put the body where no one could find it. First I cut off the head, then the arms and the legs. I was careful not to let a single drop of blood fall on the floor. I pulled up three of the boards that formed the floor, and put the pieces of the body there. Then I put the boards down again, carefully, so carefully that no human eye could see that they had been moved.

As I finished this work I heard that someone was at the door. It was now four o'clock in the morning, but still dark. I had no fear, however, as I went down to open the door. Three men were at the door, three officers of the

police. One of the neighbors had heard the old man's cry and had called the police; these three had come to ask questions and to search the house.

I asked the policemen to come in. The cry, I said, was my own, in a dream. The old man, I said, was away; he had gone to visit a friend in the country. I took them through the whole house, telling them to search it all, to search well. I led them finally into the old man's bedroom. As if playing a game with them I asked them to sit down and talk for a while.

My easy, quiet manner made the policemen believe my story. So they sat talking with me in a friendly way. But although I answered them in the same way, I soon wished that they would go. My head hurt and there was a strange sound in my ears. I talked more, and faster. The sound became clearer. And still they sat and talked.

Suddenly I knew that the sound was not in my ears, it was not just inside my head. At that moment I must have become quite white. I talked still faster and louder. And the sound, too, became louder. It was a quick, low, soft sound, like the sound of a clock heard through a wall, a sound I knew well. Louder it became, and louder. Why did the men not go? Louder, louder. I stood up and walked quickly around the room. I pushed my chair across the floor to make more noise, to cover that terrible sound. I talked even louder. And still the men sat and talked, and smiled. Was it possible that they could not hear??

No! They heard! I was certain of it. They knew! Now it was they who were playing a game with me. I was suffering more than I could bear, from their smiles, and from that sound. Louder, louder, louder! Suddenly I could bear it no longer. I pointed at the boards and cried, "Yes! Yes, I killed him. Pull up the boards and you shall see! I killed him. But why does his heart not stop beating?! Why does it not stop!?"