

## SHADOWS OF SHIPS

My mother is cooking aloo jeera and the smell is making my guts gnaw.

I cannot concentrate on my work. My head feels unbalanced and unpredictable as a pot of boiling milk. My fingers feel swollen and they remind me of plantains. Rubbing my stomach makes me think of soft naans. Everything I think is contracted into food. Everything I feel is constructed of my hunger.

“Raheeni?” Mother is calling me from the kitchen. “Go and get Sanjit. Tell him to come home for his dinner.”

I wait.

She pauses. “Did you hear me? Raheeni?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you not answer me? You are a wicked girl. Go and get Sanjit. He will be down at the ships.”

The plastic slides off my lap to the floor and I kick it away from my feet. This batch of mats is made from very coarse plastic so they shred easily. Rajiv my boss said they maybe come from China and have been recycled so many times that the plastic fibres hardly have any strength. Still, he says, it will be good enough for another weaving – maybe small onion sacks. Carrots perhaps. Light things. Nothing too load-bearing. Certainly not potatoes.

Onions. Carrots. Potatoes. I am thinking about that damned aloo jeera – the potatoes coated with oil, fragrant with cumin. As I pass by the kitchen I breathe in deeply.

“Go and get Sanjit!” Mother has her back to me and does not take her eyes off the pot she is stirring, but she knows I am there. “There won’t be food for anyone until he comes home...”

I try pinching hard at the skin between my thumb and forefinger to distract my brain from its hunger.

“...Tell him his dinner is almost ready,” Mother’s voice trails behind me. “Don’t let him delay. Be firm with him.”

I pull the front door panel closed behind me. It sticks and scrapes at the bottom, carving an arc of dirt in the floor. My brother promised to replace the door’s rope ties with proper hinges, but I doubt he knows how to repair a door.

Sanjit is the man of the house now and is supposed to do those tasks. But he is 13 and would rather go with his friends to swim and play around the ships.

I would do that, were I a boy. There are many things I would do, were I a boy.

**... V Europe , a bulk carrier of 72,167 tonnes gross tonnage. Built by Kawasaki in 1982. Last known position: 25°41'24.36" N, 121°6'50.4" E. Status: Dead....**

My blue stole has gone. Sanjit used it to fix the broken downpipe. The rain used to flow straight down the wall to make a small lake inside the courtyard. Sanjit used my best blue scarf to tie the two broken pipe ends together, so I have to wear my old orange scarf.

The downpipe still leaks, but not as badly now.

So I am wearing my orange scarf now and I hold it against my face. Today the city smells bad. The smell is always here, in our part of the city but today it seems worse. Ours is the smelly part of Chittagong; 'the smelly place' people call it. Our place does not have an official name. It is not on any map. If you ask a policeman, he will probably say it doesn't exist.

The municipal council once built high wire fences around 'the smelly place', when foreigners became interested in what we were doing to the ships. They tried to take photographs. The municipal council did not wish it, so they built the wire fence.

The wire got a good price. The posts, set in concrete, were harder to remove. Some of them remain. The men now use them to tether stray dogs that might have rabies. Then someone takes them away. I don't know who. I don't think it's the municipal police.

The council never replaced the wire fences. Whatever threat we posed, whatever evil we represented, whatever it was that people were not supposed to see ... somehow didn't seem so important anymore. Or maybe it was just too expensive to keep replacing them.

**Glory B a bulk carrier, of 110,779 tonnes gross tonnage. Built in 1989. Last known position Latitude / Longitude: 3.5305 / 100.2695. Status: Dead.**

I hoist the bottom of my sari up to my calves, fastening it under the waistband. Then I head off across the mudflats to the ships. The tide is rising and the mudflat is covered knee-deep with thick black water.

Just beyond the line of ships, I can see fishermen casting their nets for ricefish.

I cannot see the end of the line of beached ships. Even if I turn my head as far as I can to my left and turn it slowly back as far as I can to the right, the line of them goes on. The sea spray makes those at the edge of my vision formless and shadowy. Their large, dark shapes drift in and out of the mist. I know they are there, even if I cannot see them clearly.

The ones that are nearer, I can see them well. And those that are closest – I am slowly walking up to them across the black mud flats – I can see they are already cut back to their skeletons.

The huge arched ribs are exposed, the spines of big ships have been cracked open and their bowels pulled away. All the metalwork on the top of them is gone and there is daylight spilling through holes in their sides.

Old ships. Unseaworthy, outdated and only worth scrap value. Useless to everyone. But they valuable to us. The captains are paid to bring them across the world to our beach and drive them up onto the mud flats. The black mud holds them fast. They are here because the mud is here, and because we are here and because this is the smelly part of town.

Our men pull them apart. They cut them up and the bosses sell the recovered parts. People call it the ships' graveyard ... but we know ships are not the only things to die here.

I make a slow path out across the flats. The closer I get to the ships, the more the mud grabs at my feet and will not let them go. I am calling for my brother all the time.

"Sanjit! Sanjit!.Sanjit you louse. Come home for your dinner. I'm hungry and I want to eat. Sanjit! You rat turd. Come here now!"

When high tide comes, the demolition crews got home. But it is not silent here. The incoming water gurgles through the broken bowels of the ships. Sometimes bits of metal collide and clank. I can hear the boys' laughter broken by the sound of diving. They are using pieces of cut-down steel plate as a diving platform.

My voice hits the canyons of metal and bounces around for a bit. "Sanjit! I'll give you to the count of three before I go home and tell Mother you've drowned and she'll give me all your food."

"Fatso!" The voice of a small boy hoots from somewhere within the ships. "Fatso and fart-arse!"

Other boys' giggles bounce around the broken-backed ships. The flecks of noise are sudden, like a flight of bats.

"Please Sanjit. It's getting dark. I am hungry."

"Please Sanjit," the voices mock mine in exaggerated falsetto. "It's dark. I am hungry. Please Sanjit. Puleeeeeez...."

The sting of brine and the diesel fumes is making my nose run. I turn. I pull my foot out of the mud, plant it and, having taken a step, pull it back out again. I am heading back to the beach. I reach firmer ground and look back. Sanjit is also leaving a track of pock-marks across the slick black surface. There is a setting sun that is putting a smoky pink tinge on the sea spray. There are fingers of reddened light between the ships. Shafts and jagged lines. And there are shadows. Shadows of ships soon not to be ships any more.

**Front Breaker, built in South Korea in 1991 by Daewoo. An ore/bulk/oil carrier of 89,004 tonnes gross tonnage. Last known position 25°21'44.28" N, 120°50'6" E. Status: Dead.**

Mother hit us both when we got back. After Sanjit had wolfed down his plate of aloo there was scarcely any left for me. I put away the dishes, swept the courtyard and smoothed the dirt of the kitchen, sprinkling the floor with water to dampen down the clouds of stirred grit.

Sanjit was already asleep. He has school tomorrow. He will be a doctor maybe, some day. Mother hopes he will be a doctor, or a politician. Then he can buy her a house in Chittagong with a proper address and a letterbox.

"And I would go to the letterbox every day and open it. And when there was a letter I would bring it up the path to the house and you would read it to me," she said. "That would make me very happy."

"But what if it's bad news?" I asked.

"No bad news ever comes by letter. Bad news comes from a man visiting the house. Men from the ship-breakers. They don't send letters. They come to the house to tell you themselves. In person. Never a letter. Not for that."

She is seated on the ground near the fire, using a piece of torn cardboard to fan the flames. Satisfied that the blaze has taken hold, she dropped the cardboard into the fire and unfolded her crossed limbs. With a groan, she levered herself up from her squat to standing and pauses a moment to lock her limbs into place.

"I am getting older. Soon I will need you two to feed and care for me," she said. "You will need to get good paying jobs to look after me and buy me a house. A widowed mother is a burden that you must bear. But if Sanjit marries well then I shall be happy. Maybe she will be a doctor too."

The daylight had vanished by the time I had washed my face and hands and curled up on my mat.

Sanjit is not a good student and sometimes he runs away from classes to play with his friends around the ships. I was a much better student but there was no chance of me going to medical school. Better to be at home and make some money shredding plastic for Rajiv. Before I left school last year I asked the teacher if I could take with me my favourite book from the library. She said no.

It was a big book of photographs. They were mostly black and white and the book was called *Our Magnificent Empire* written in big gold letters on the red cover. And it had a photograph on the front of the King George the Sixth, looking sideways, wearing a crown and a blue velvet cloak edged with soft white fur. That photo was in colour but all the other photographs inside were black and white.

All the photographs had some words. "The King and Queen inspecting the guard of the Highlanders Regiment ... The young princesses in the spring sunlight of Buckingham Palace garden ... His Highness enjoys a mellow pipe resting between shoots at Balmoral during the grouse season. ... HRH Queen Elizabeth launching a ship." She is a plump woman with soft white skin and a funny half-smile. She is wearing a bright yellow jacket and hat, with lots of people around her lifting their hats in the air and cheering. There is a slight chop to the water and the sun is shining. Everyone is smiling.

That ship would be long gone now. Like all the other ships. Broken up and crossed off the inventory. They call them dead ships.

**Marathonas, of 52,181 tonnes gross tonnage. A container ship built in Denmark. Last known position: 1°12'6.8" N, 103°33'32.4" E. Status: Dead**

My mat is thin and my hips are prominent and I have to turn often in the night. Sometimes I don't sleep very well. And it is then, at night, when I can't sleep, I try not to forget. I try to remember my father.

His face is vague, like the outline of the ships far down the beach, swathed in the mist and almost out of sight.

His smell, however, still pinches at my nose. At night he came home to eat and the room was filled with the sharp, acrid tang of his skin, I would sometimes lick his forearm to taste the sharp bite of metal. His filthy clothes, heavy with the stench of diesel, were a dirty heap on the floor at the end of each workday.

"Valuable ships mean dangerous work," my father would say. "And dangerous ships mean valuable wages. It gives us money."

If we'd had money I would have bought that book. If we'd had money my mother would have let me stay at school. If we had money Sanjit wouldn't eat all the aloo jeera and there would be more left for me.

People say the ships are filled with poison. They said you could smell it in the sharp stench of metal being cut apart. The smell of the welders and the steel and the diesel and the poison and the clouds of dust. White dust. It gets in your lungs and the poison spreads from

there. They say it kills you if you don't wear a scarf tied around your face. It gets in your eyes too. Your nose, your mouth, your eyes, your ears.

"If you are lucky you make it to be an old man and then you die a long, slow death," he said. But he was not lucky and he did not die an old man. The other men ran up from the mud flats to bring us the news. In our part of town, 'the smelly place', bad news does not come in letters.

I wish I had that book. The lady in the yellow hat looked happy. The ship she is launching has been cut down by now, but at least there is a record of it somewhere.

Ships are never completely forgotten. They are simply delisted and declared dead and their details are listed in a big book somewhere. But there is no record of my father in any book. The ships are shadows. And my father is but only a shadow of their shadows.

**Australia Bridge, built in South Korea in 1991 by Samsung. A container ship of 37,410 tonnes gross tonnage. Last known position 22°5'51.36" N, 114°13'1.2" E . Status: Dead.**

Outside, a dog is tied to one of the poles and is howling. By the morning it will be gone. Someone will take it away.