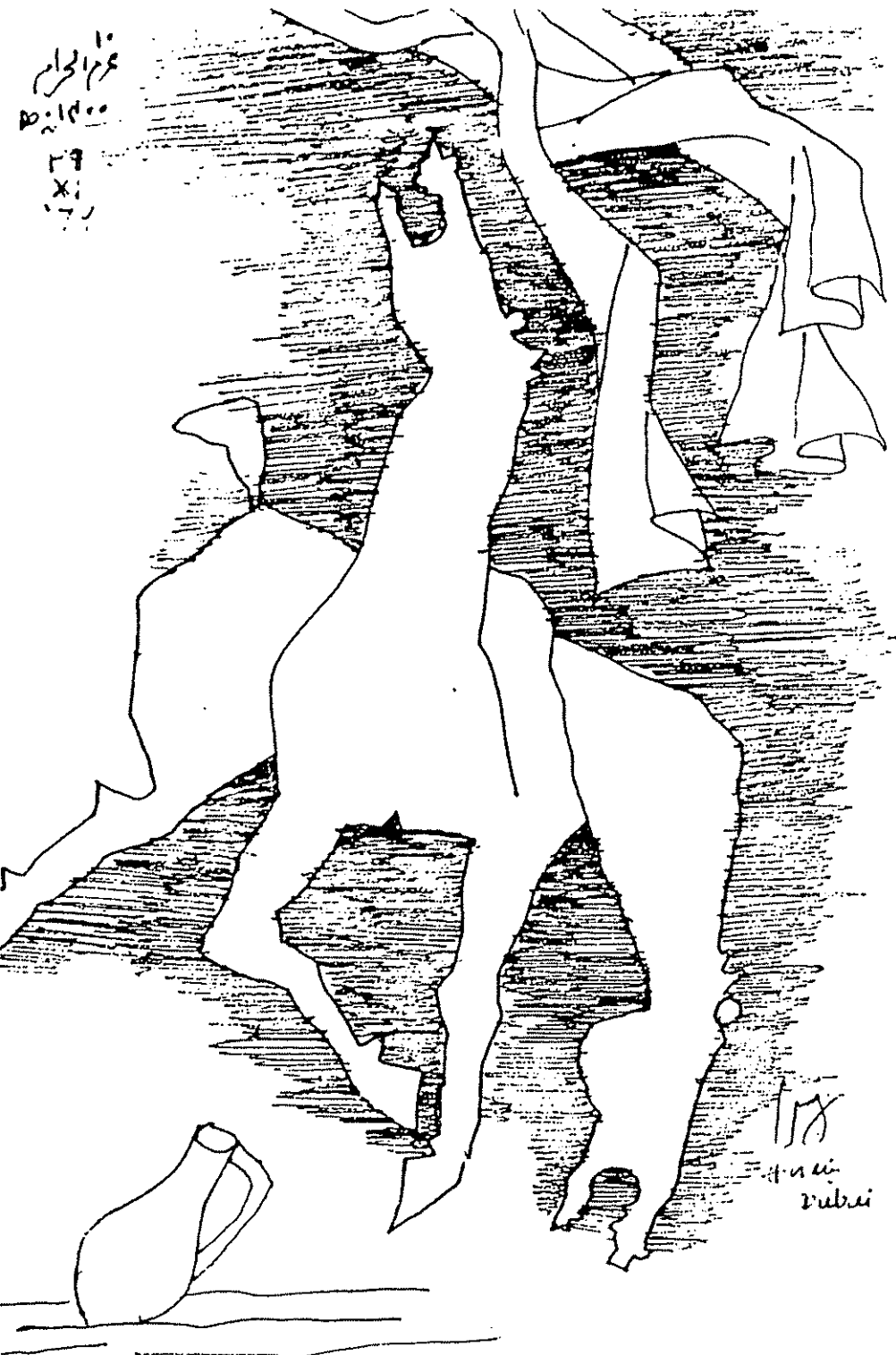


The Suspicions of Mr. Sadhan

Satyajit Ray

All



When Mr. Sadhan entered his home returning from work, he found a dry twig lying on the floor of his bedroom. The furniture in the room was quite ordinary — a cot, a cupboard, a stool to hold a pitcher of water. The smallest particle of dust in any corner was intolerable to him. His linens were snappily clean. Though he was a fastidious man, Sadhan took no practical interest in any of this as he had paid the price of a housekeeper. He wrinkled his nose at the sight of the twig.

"Pocha!"

The servant Pocha presented himself.

"You called, Sir?"

"What do you mean? Do you have any doubt about it?"

"No, Sir. Why should I?"

"Why is there a twig on the floor?"

"That I don't know, Sir. Perhaps some bird dropped it."

"Why would a bird drop it? It would have brought it to build a nest. Why would he drop it, eh? Didn't you notice it when you swept? Or haven't you swept at all?"

"I sweep every day, Sir. That twig wasn't there when I swept up."

"Is that the truth?"

"Oh yes, Sir."

"Still, it's an odd business."

The next morning before going to the office Sadhan saw a sparrow and suspected that it was making plans to build a nest. But where? Where was there a place in his apartment? In the bay window? That could be it.

He began to wonder why, out of this three-storey seven-flat building, the sparrow's gaze had fallen on his particular apartment. Was there anything in it that could attract birds?

After giving this a lot of thought, Sadhan began to suspect that it was that new hair oil he had been using. According to that medicine man Nilmoni from the second floor, it was a cure for dandruff. Perhaps its strong scent could attract birds. He further suspected the possibility

that Nilmoni had been singing the praises of this hair oil as part of a plan to turn Sadhan's home into some sort of a bird sanctuary.

Actually, Sadhan's paranoia was well-known to everyone at 72 Mirjapur Street, and in secret they all had a good laugh about it. "Hey, what's the new suspicion today?" He had to listen to this kind of question at the end of almost every day.

And not just questions, they had other ways of pulling his leg as well. In the evening a card game which Sadhan usually attended was held in Nobendu Chatterjee's first floor flat. One day on his way to the game Nobendu gave him a twisted lump of paper and said, "Look at this, Sir, and see if there is anything suspicious about it. It was thrown through the window."

In truth, the page had been torn from Nobendu's daughter's maths exercise book. Sadhan flattened it and having looked at it for a while said, "It seems to be some kind of code written with numbers."

Nobendu had just stared at Sadhan without a word.

"But we have to figure it out," said Sadhan. "Just consider the possibility that it's some kind of threat. In that case..."

Of course, the code was never deciphered, but that was not the point. From this wad of paper Sadhan's suspicions could go off at a tangent. He believed that the entire city of Calcutta was a den of deceitful gamblers and scheming liars. In these circumstances it was a matter of self-protection to be always suspicious.

One day when Sadhan returned home from work he found a large package on his table. At first he suspected that it had come to his apartment by mistake. Who would send him a package like this? He had been expecting no such parcel.

He went over to it and saw that his name was not on the package. This increased his suspicion.

Having summoned his servant Pocha, he asked "Who brought this here?"

"Sir, a man came and gave it to Dananjoy this afternoon. He asked for you and said it was yours."

"What's in it? Who sent it? Was that all he said?"

"Yes, Sir, that was all."

Having put his shawl on the rack, Sadhan sat on the cot. It was a large package, almost large enough to hold a number five football. But there was no way of finding out who had sent it.

He got up from the cot, went over to the package and picked it up. It was very heavy, at least five kilos.

Sadhan tried to remember the last time he had received a package like this. Yes, his aunt who used to live in Karoda had sent him some mango pulp (*Aamsotto*) about three years ago. But she had been dead

about three months now. Today, Sadhan had no one who could be called a close relative nor anyone else left. Why a package? He never received more than one or two letters every three months. It would have been less perplexing if there had been a letter with the package, but there wasn't one.

Or was there? Sadhan concluded that it must have been lost due to Dananjoy's carelessness.

Now it was necessary to speak to Dananjoy.

Thinking that it would be improper to send for him, he went downstairs himself. Dananjoy sat in the courtyard with a mortar and pestle grinding something. He got up and came over when he heard Sadhan's call.

"Did someone give you a package for me today?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Was there a letter with it?"

"No, Sir, there wasn't."

"Did he say where it came from?"

"He mentioned a name like 'Madan' or something. I'm not sure."

Sadhan couldn't remember anyone by that name. Who knows what the man had actually said? Sadhan had long suspected that Dananjoy was a fool.

"Wasn't there any slip of paper or receipt with it?"

"There was a slip of paper, Sir, and he signed it."

"Who? Shorashi?"

"Yes, Sir."

Well, it was fruitless to question Shorashi. He had signed a slip of paper... Sadhan, but had not paid any attention to where the package had come from.

Sadhan returned to his apartment. It was November and one could clearly feel the chill of winter in the evening air. Soon it would be Kalipuja. The preparations were in progress and from time to time one could hear crackers exploding.

"Boom!"

That cracker had exploded right in his neighbourhood. Just at that moment a shock ran up Sadhan's spine.

"A time bomb!"

Could there be a time bomb in that package waiting for some pre-determined moment at which it would explode and bring Sadhan's activities in this world to an end?

One heard about these time bombs everywhere these days.

It was the weapon of choice for all international terrorists.

But who would send a bomb to him? And why?

As soon as he had formulated that question in his mind, Sadhan

remembered that in his profession there was never any lack of enemies. Even he had to butter people up in order to win contracts, just as his business adversaries had to, and when he won the contract, all the other competitors became his sworn enemies. That was often the way things worked.

"Pocha!"

He could see that his voice was barely audible. His throat had become dry as a board.

Pocha showed up anyway.

"You called, Sir?"

But was this really a good idea? Sadhan had thought he would tell Pocha to put the package to his ear and listen to see if there was a ticking noise. The mechanism of a timebomb goes tick-tock, and at a specified moment this ticking is transformed into an enormous explosion.

Just when Pocha put it to his ear, what if the package...

Sadhan couldn't think any more. Pocha was still standing there awaiting his master's order. Sadhan was forced to say that he had called by mistake, that he wasn't needed.

Sadhan would never forget that night. It was not uncommon for him to lie awake at night due to indisposition, but this was the first time he had spent an entire night sitting in his bed soaked in a cold sweat at the very edge of conscious terror.

Having gained some confidence when the bomb didn't go off by morning, Sadhan resolved that he would have to open it that very evening and see what was inside. Even he realised that his suspicions were getting out of control.

But that evening something happened and the package remained unopened.

There are many people who read the whole newspaper, but Sadhan was not one of them. He glanced at the headlines at the top and middle of every page, and today was no exception. That was why his gaze had skipped over the news about a murder in north Calcutta. He learned of the event when he inquired about some commotion he had overheard passing by Nobendu Chatterjee's apartment on his way home from the office.

A murder in Patuatola Lane; the victim's name was Shibdash Moulik. Hearing this a long distant memory jumped to life in Sadhan's mind. He once knew a Moulik very well. Was his first name Shibdash? It was possible. Sadhan used to live in Patuatola Lane where Moulik had been his neighbour. There used to be a card game at Moulik's every night. Everyone had called him Moulik, so how could Sadhan know his first name? Two other men belonged to that card game; Shukhen Datta and Madhushudan Maiti. Sadhan had never met anyone with so

treacherous a character as this second man. Sadhan was absolutely convinced that he was a superlative hustler at cards. One day, he finally had to confront him with his accusation. Madhu Maiti's reaction to this had been terrible. Sadhan found out then that there was always a knife in Maiti's pocket. It was thanks to Moulik and Shukhen Datta that Sadhan was alive today.

After some success in business, Sadhan left his house in Patuatola Lane and moved to his present apartment on Mirjapur Street, severing his connection with Moulik and company. Though he could not give up his addiction to cards nor his manic paranoia, there had been other great changes. His dress improved; he gave up biris for cigarettes, and he would sometimes go to a resale shop to buy some bric-a-brac for his apartment — a painting, a vase, or an imported ashtray. All of this had come about in the last seven years.

If the murdered Shibdash Moulik was the Moulik he knew, then the murderer had to be Madhu Maiti. About that Sadhan was certain.

"How was he killed?" he asked.

"Brutally," said Nobendu Chatterjee. "There was no way to identify the corpse. They found the name on a diary in its pocket."

"Why couldn't they identify the body?"

"It was just a torso. There was no head."

"No head! That means..."

"Chop-chop!" Nobendu demonstrated this by lifting his folded hands above his head and violently jerking them down. "They haven't yet been able to find out where the murderer disposed it."

"Have they figured out who the murderer was?"

"There used to be a card game at this Moulik's place, and the police think it was someone connected with that."

As he walked up the stairs, Sadhan realized that his head was spinning. The time he accused Madhu Maiti of cheating at cards appeared vividly in front of his eyes. He had escaped the knife attack, but for a long time afterwards he remembered how Madhu Maiti's gaze fell on him with burning hatred. And he remembered Madhu saying, "You don't know me, Sadhan! You got away today, but I'll have my revenge. Maybe today. Maybe ten years from now!"

It was a sworn threat. Sadhan had thought that by fleeing Patuatola Lane, he had saved himself, but...

What if that package was from Madhu Maiti? Dananjoy had said "Madan". Dananjoy was hard of hearing; there was no doubt about that. Is there much difference between Madhu and Madan? Almost none at all. Madhu or his people sent this parcel and the slip of paper was to make sure that it reached him.

Shibdash Moulik's head was in that package!

In the distance between the top of the stairs and his door, Sadhan's mind locked onto this idea. From his door, he could see the package placed on the table next to the vase. Now, both the weight and dimensions of the package clearly indicated what was in it.

Pocha stood there a little surprised to see his boss just standing in the doorway. With an enormous effort of mind, Sadhan cut through his confusion and told his servant to bring him some tea.

"And, did anyone come by today, looking for me?"

"No, Sir."

"Hmm."

Of course, Sadhan suspected that the police had come on a raid while he was out. What would happen to him if they found the head of a murdered man in his apartment? As he thought of this, he broke out into a sweat.

It was as if some strength returned to his mind as the tea reached his stomach. At least it was not a time bomb.

This much, however, was certain. If he had to spend the entire night sitting up next to a box with a head in it, he would go mad.

A pill put him to sleep right away, but he could not escape from his nightmares. At one point, he saw himself playing cards with the headless Moulik. At another, he saw Moulik's bodiless head coming towards him saying, "Friend, I can't breathe in this box. Have a heart, set me free."

Despite the sleeping pill, Sadhan awoke at half-past five as had been his lifelong habit. Perhaps it was due to the clear light of dawn, but Sadhan awoke with a solution to his present problem.

His troubles began when the head arrived, but where was the obstacle to sending it away? Once he bade farewell to this thing he would be free from worry. As dawn was breaking, before doing anything else, Sadhan stuffed the package into a market sack and went out. He had to admit that the packing was good: even though it contained blood, none had soaked through and stained the wrapping.

It took twenty-five minutes to reach Kalighat by bus. From there he went on foot to the Adiganga river and finding a relatively secluded spot, threw the package as far into the middle of the river as he could.

"Splash!"

The package was out of sight, and Sadhan was out of the woods.

It took thirty-five minutes to return home. When he entered the outer door, Shorashi's wall clock was just striking seven.

Suddenly it occurred to him that for a few days now he had been feeling he was forgetting something. Once you are over twenty-five, these things start happening. Nilmoni had told him to eat lots of spinach for this.

Today, Sadhan had to leave half an hour earlier than usual, because

he had some things to take care of on the way to work.

Just as he walked into "Modern Exchange", the resale shop on Russel Street, the owner Mr Tuli came up to him with a smile.

"So how's the table clock?"

"Have you sent it?"

"Of course, I said I would, didn't I? Hasn't it reached you?"

"Well, yes, that is, I mean..."

"You liked it so much, you put down five hundred rupees in advance. You're an old customer. Would I go back on my word to you?"

"No, no. Of course not."

"You'll see. That clock's a first class timepiece. By a famous French company too. And you got it for next to nothing. Great luck."

Mr Tuli went off with another customer, and Sadhan left the store. A clock for next to nothing had become nothing now.

Could there be any doubt that Dananjoy had heard "Modern" as "Madan". And can anyone deny that Madhu Maiti has had his revenge?

*Translated from the Bengali
by Doug Varley and Vinay Lal*