

Lucky¹

Somnath Batabyal

The television arrived in the afternoon. No one had been told, and the household was sleeping when the man, pushing a handcart, climbed the narrow lane. Several children followed him. It was their excited voices that brought Lucky to the courtyard.

‘TV, TV! TV has come,’ the children chanted.

Lucky’s heart beat faster as she ran towards the gate, ignoring the rubber sandals that stood by her bedroom door. The ground, like the inside of a clay oven, scorched her feet. She recognised the children. Some of their parents worked in the house as occasional day labourers.

The man crouched beside the cart, his hand resting on a large cardboard box that said Sonodyne Black & White Television. Pulling his grimy vest up, he wiped his face. Lucky, despite her mounting excitement, resisted asking about the box’s contents.

‘Let me get you some water,’ she said to him.

He must have made a mistake. He’s come to the wrong address, she told herself, as she poured the water from a brass tumbler into the man’s cupped palms. She cast another sideways glance at the box. Or, it could be for Sukanta, she thought with a sudden sinking feeling. Yes, that’s it. Her youngest cousin would have asked for the television to be delivered through this part of the house. Just to rub it in.

He drank at length, and then splashed water on his face and neck. Lucky hushed the children who had started their chant again.

‘Is this a TV?’ she asked, pointing at the box. The man nodded.

‘You have come to the wrong address,’ she told him.

‘No, he hasn’t,’ said Kalpana, Lucky’s cousin, and now the eldest of the house. She was smiling at them from the first-floor balcony. ‘Bring it in.’

¹ Excerpt from forthcoming novel (*Lucky*) scheduled for publication in January 2022. Indian Sub-continent: Westland. (Will be in submission in the UK and US in September 2021).

Lucky, usually restrained, squealed in delight, and joined the children in their clapping and jumping.

The news spread and soon a procession of villagers—men, women, children with their parents or on the loose—started to file in, past the river, and into the lane that led to Gopalpur Raj Bari, known locally as Gopalpur House.

The object of their excitement—the television—was placed on the main terrace, next to the courtyard, on top of a wooden cabinet that had been hastily dragged down from Kalpana’s bedroom. A sturdy domestic help was employed to ensure that no one touched it.

A chair was placed next to the television for Kalpana. She greeted the guests and failed in her attempts to appear modest. The elders spoke to her of Gopalpur’s development—the arrival of this television the final proof.

Kalpana nodded in agreement. Her intention, she said, was simply to ensure that the people of her village could share in the country’s pride and watch India in the finals of the cricket World Cup. The match was scheduled for the next day in London, and India were to take on the mighty West Indies. ‘Hearing it on the transistor is one thing, seeing it on TV is quite another. It is as if you are there on the playing field.’

Suppressing a smile, Lucky asked her cousin what the guests should be served.

‘Tell that useless husband of yours to get mishti for everyone.’ Kalpana raised her hand and then her voice. ‘Everyone must have dinner here tomorrow. We will all watch the game together.’ Claps and shouts greeted the announcement.

Lucky’s husband—Amol—was standing with their eight-year-old son, Samar, by his side. Along with some of the younger boys, they were discussing India’s chances. Amol waved as Lucky approached.

‘Kalpana Didi is astonishing, isn’t she? Not a word to us. I mean—’

Lucky cut short her husband’s exuberance. ‘Get some sweets for everyone. Take the money from the cupboard.’

‘You are angry?’ Amol looked puzzled.

'Oh no, I am delighted,' Lucky snapped. 'Your Kalpana Didi buys a TV, and I have to arrange dinner for the entire village.'

'What! Is everyone coming tomorrow? We will watch the game together? That is wonderful news.'

'Ma, can I go with Baba?'

Though reluctant to allow her son yet another trip to the sweet-meat shop, Lucky did not feel like arguing the point with his indulgent father. 'Yes, yes, go,' she said irritably and walked away.

She rushed into the kitchen and started washing the used cups and glasses. Several people had not yet had their tea, and more would arrive in the next hour when they woke from their afternoon nap. A child, stepping into the kitchen, announced breathlessly, 'The electrician has come. They are calling you.'

The antennae that came with the television needed installing, and the electrician was asking for a pole on which to mount it. Lucky had recently overseen the cutting of several bamboo plants for furniture, and they were now seasoning in the pond. She sent two boys to fetch one, and moments later, unsure of the choice they might make, decided to check for herself.

A cool breeze from the river brought respite, and a festive atmosphere spread across the courtyard. People were waiting for 6 p.m., when the evening broadcast would begin. No one knew what to expect. The local postmaster, who claimed to have seen a television show before, was telling those willing to listen that his wife had foolishly thought actual people hid behind the box. A young girl, smiling sweetly, stopped his flow, 'And what did you cleverly think, Uncle?'

Despite trepidations about tomorrow's feast, and the arrangements that would inevitably fall on her shoulders, Lucky felt triumphant. She looked across the courtyard towards Sukanta's dwellings—the doors and windows now shut—and uttered a silent prayer: thank god the television had not been destined for that half of the house.

A sudden commotion made her hurry through the crowd. Kalpana, having lost her earlier magnanimity, had a boy by the ear. He was the last in a long line of young offenders

who had tried to touch the television. Lucky extricated the child's ear and eased Kalpana to her room with a cup of tea.

The electrician was urged to hurry, and several hands helped him on to the sloping roof, holding him up there. The more knowledgeable ones debated the exact position of the transmission tower and which way the antennae should face, others argued on where best to place the magic box. Wires and advice tempered the electrician's progress.

A few minutes before the clock struck six, he finally asked for Kalpana to be summoned. Lucky requested the excited crowd to move back and settle on the tarpaulin sheets that had been laid out on the courtyard.

Kalpana, wearing a new sari, came back beaming. She stood in front of the television, unsure of what to do. Someone shouted, 'Turn the knob.'

'Which one?' she yelled back irritably. 'There are eight. Lucky, do you know?'

Lucky guided Kalpana's hand. 'Turn it to the right. You will hear a click.'

A loud hissing made Kalpana step back in alarm. The screen came alive with countless black-and-white dots.

'What is going on, re?' she whispered.

'The broadcast is yet to start,' Lucky replied.

Just then the electricity went off and the screen went blank with a swoosh. A general groan of annoyance spread amongst the audience.

'The load shedding is scheduled for 8 p.m,' someone pondered. 'This is very early.'

The school Headmaster who, given his eminence, was sitting on a chair, along with a few of the elders, said loudly, 'I have heard that television consumes a lot of power. Maybe the transformer has blown.'

This elicited a murmur, and several in the crowd started to speak knowledgably on the dangers posed by television. One man, who last summer had been to the capital city where every neighbourhood had a TV set, said that children there all wore spectacles. 'Television weakens your eyes. I have seen this for myself.'

'Throw them out,' Kalpana hissed to her cousin. 'Ungrateful bastards. How much I do for them and this is what I get in return. Feed them green banana curry tomorrow, Lucky.'

It took Amol and his wife a while to calm everyone and usher them out. Amol agreed that TV spoilt eyesight, but only colour television; theirs was black-and-white. Lucky reasoned that, in bigger towns, where there were hundreds of television sets, power failures were less frequent. If one television could blow a transformer, then the capital would be in perpetual blackout.

Yes, and what did the Headmaster know, someone asked. Had he ever seen a television before? There was a second murmur of agreement. He doesn't even have a radio, another yelled, and others, afraid of losing tomorrow's dinner invitation, laughed in accord. Lucky and Amol, urging people towards the gate, reassured everyone that certainly a big feast would be organised.

After all, a television had come to their village and India was playing in the World Cup finals.

As the day's first passenger ferry blared its horn, Lucky ducked out of the mosquito net, carefully tucking the edges back. Running the plastic comb with its serrated ends through her hair a few times, she opened the wooden cupboard—gently, to minimise the creaking noise. She looked back at the bed to check that Amol and Samar were still sleeping. Then, shielded by the cupboard door, she changed into a fresh sari.

Standing at the window facing the river, Lucky rushed her prayers. She asked for the day to go smoothly, the television to work and the guests to be fed—if not well, then adequately. Finally, mentioning that this was for Amol and Samar, she prayed that India would win the World Cup. With eyes still closed, Lucky stood listening to the sounds coming from the river: the varied cries of hawkers, the bells of cycle rickshaws and the voices of daily commuters engaged in their battle to find space on the overcrowded steamer. Above this comforting din rose the first faint notes from a harmonium—Kalpana's adopted daughter, Leela, performing her early morning riyaaaz. Lucky opened her eyes and sighed.

Before she had taken two steps across the courtyard, the cassette player started at Sukanta's residence. The volume was even higher than usual, and Lucky smiled. Kalpana's youngest brother was jealous and very, very angry.

'Can he not give it a rest,' Amol grumbled from the bed when, a quarter of an hour later, Lucky stepped back into the room. 'I am of the mind to buy Sukanta some decent

music. If you are going to fight with a child doing her morning riyaaaz, at the very least, be melodic. Poor Leela, and she has such a beautiful voice.'

'Tonight is the match,' Lucky said, untying one end of the mosquito net. 'We're going to hear their anger all day.'

'Do you think they might come to watch?'

'Careful what you wish for,' Lucky admonished her husband. 'Instead of the television, everyone will be watching the epic family battle.'

Careful not to disturb their sleeping son, husband and wife looked at each other and fell into silent, helpless giggles.

'It might just be more entertaining than the cricket. I fear for us tonight.'

'Is the toilet free?' he asked, and then dashed out without waiting for a response. Lucky looked at Samar, oblivious to the heat and the noise, and decided to let him sleep. Whether India won or lost, the boy would be up late.

'Concentrate,' she heard Kalpana chiding Leela whose voice was struggling to rise above the din of the recorded music ... sa re ga, re ga ma ... On some mornings, Kalpana would join in to decisively tilt the scales of the battle. Lucky would then rush to open the windows, or step out into the courtyard to hear better. At times, she crept upstairs and stood by the door humming until she was waved in. How could this pitch perfect, melodious voice—which had been compared to the great Shamshad Begum and which, last year, was awarded the President's Medal for Folk Artists—turn so devastatingly coarse in a fight? The quarrels were increasing in their ferocity, Lucky thought, and her cousin rarely sang at home these days.

The trouble began with the sudden death of Kalpana's father—Lucky's maternal uncle—who slipped on a bar of soap while bathing at the household well three years ago. He fractured his skull and was dead by the time he was discovered.

He did not leave a will. His daughters, Kalpana and Geeta, and their younger brother, Sukanta—whom the sisters now professed to have cleaned and fed through childhood—soon found their minor disagreements turn vindictive. Fights broke out, kitchens were separated and, then, entire lives. The courtyard, arena for childhood's battles, was now the no man's

land across which abuses were hurled, and, at times when either Kalpana or Sukanta were drunk, plates and glasses.

Amol and Lucky aligned with the sisters. The couple's sole source of income was Amol's wages from singing in Kalpana's troupe. Lucky was also devoted to the middle sister, the unpredictable and temperamental Geeta, queen of the elephants. When Lucky arrived here twelve years ago, the residential elephant, Thumri, became her responsibility. Thumri travelled with her mistress, acting as bait, whenever Geeta vanished into the forests. But, at home, it was Lucky who groomed and fed this gentle animal. Two years ago, when Thumri gave birth—and Lucky had worked ceaselessly through a difficult and drawn-out delivery—Geeta gifted her the calf. It was an act of generosity that Lucky could not quite believe. For weeks afterwards, she resisted naming the baby, fearing that he would be snatched from her. Only when Geeta and Thumri left for the jungles did Lucky christen Opu.

To say that Lucky doted on the baby elephant—possibly even obsessed about him above everything else, as Amol had sometimes complained—would be to miss the nature of this love. Through Opu, Lucky connected to a world she had lost, seemingly forever.

Lucky's paternal grandfather, Surendra Mohan Ganguly, had named her Banalakshmi, the wealth of the forest. The Anglicisation came later. Surendra Mohan was a District Collector under the British and a local landlord who detested collecting taxes from a struggling people. Elephants were his preoccupation, and he had written three authoritative volumes on their nutritional requirements. Surendra Mohan's work had found international acclaim. He collaborated with zoologists from Britain, working hurriedly in the last days of the Raj. Gangulysaheb, though he would never admit it, delighted in the Rai Bahadur title that came with the recognition.

Each morning, Lucky and Opu would walk to the river Brahmaputra, which flowed a few hundred yards from the house. If his school was closed, Samar would accompany them, sitting by the banks, watching his mother scrub the animal who squirted her with gushes of water. Opu would let the children from the village ride on his back, delighting them by suddenly rolling in the river.

Lucky was as proud of his looks as she was of his intelligence. On his first visit to the local school, Opu, accompanied by the children's excited shrieks, lifted the schoolmaster off his feet in the middle of a speech and kept him hanging in mid-air. Lucky had to coax Opu to

put the terrified man back on ground. ‘This boy just knows how to get the claps,’ Lucky would say to anyone who would care to listen.

Then, a week after his first birthday, Opu vanished. Days of frantic searching yielded nothing, except the rumour that Sukanta had abducted Opu as dowry to save his daughter’s troubled marriage.

For a month, nothing could distract Lucky. She woke up in the middle of the night worrying that Opu had not been fed. Through the day, she sat listlessly in his stable or walked around the courtyard, muttering his name. The household sympathised, but could not really comprehend Lucky’s trauma. Kalpana, sure of her brother’s treachery, was apoplectic. Amol was concerned about his wife’s health. The three domestic workers were secretly pleased; Opu had not been the most docile of pets.

Then Geeta and Thumri returned, and Lucky found her anguish paled before a mother’s fury. Thumri searched the place for two days, and on the third, smashed the fences and disappeared into the forest. Five days later, in the dead of night, she came back. The old palace could not withstand the assault. The uninhabited southern wing collapsed within minutes. The residents, warned by the elephant’s angry trumpeting, managed to save themselves by running towards the river. It was Geeta who put her best friend down, shooting Thumri several times with her hunting rifle. After the incident, Geeta confined herself to her room where, finally, an en-suite facility, unheard of in these parts, was constructed. Lucky became her principal carer, and her only friend.

Gopalpur House changed irrevocably. Sukanta, acting as both the martyr and the benefactor, rebuilt the damaged portions, and relocated his family to the new quarters. Lucky’s earlier neutrality in the rivalry between the siblings gave way to a vicious, although unexpressed, rage against Sukanta.

‘Lucky Mashi. O Lucky Mashi.’

‘Shhh. Samar is sleeping. Keep your voice down,’ Lucky hushed her niece who had skipped in through the door. ‘What is it?’ she asked, kneeling down to re-tie Leela’s skirt.

‘You are being called to the kitchen,’ the child said and sped away before Lucky could finish. For a while, Lucky stared after her. Leela’s sudden and invisible illness had the household worried, but her usually garrulous mother had made it clear that it was no one else’s business and she would brook no curiosity. Lucky understood Kalpana’s reticence.

Leela was adopted, and the village folk, if given half a chance, would indulge in nasty talk. Now, every three months, Leela was taken to Calcutta for check-ups, and Kalpana spared no expense on her daughter's treatment.

As she walked towards the kitchen, Lucky crossed Amol humming in the courtyard. 'When Samar wakes, bring him to me,' she said. 'I have to see to the shopping and cooking.'

The day was going to be long, and she would have to be inventive with the dinner arrangements: the budget was limited and Kalpana Didi's and the villagers' expectations disproportionate.

Lucky found her son playing a game of cricket by himself in the shade of the bathroom wall. Last week, he had thrown a tantrum about not owning a bat, and she had pointed him to the clothes-washing stick, not an impossible approximation. Leaning against the dead banyan tree, she watched him play: throwing the ball against the wall and hitting it on the rebound. He's putting on weight, she thought. The image that had haunted her these past months reappeared now.

There was no picture, just words in the front page of the newspaper describing what the journalist had seen: amongst the dead lay a child, each limb torn from its body, eyes open, staring at the heavens above. 'Perhaps asking the Almighty for an explanation,' the journalist had added dramatically. No, Lucky had thought, telling god, 'Look, this is the world you are credited with; these humans are your greatest creation.'

It had been a coordinated attack, spread over several villages, not far from Gopalpur. Once the men left for work, the killers had appeared out of the early morning mist, armed with machetes, pick axes, knives and sharpened bamboo sticks that they had stuck into women's vaginas. Two thousand were massacred in just over six hours, mostly women and children. Their sole crime, the journalist wrote, was that their ancestry could be traced back to Bangladesh, today a foreign country.

The thought had come to Lucky almost immediately: those murderers, one of these days, would come here too, and the high walls of Gopalpur House would not deter them. In her nightmares, she now saw her son, spread-eagled in the courtyard, his limbs being pulled in four different directions by faceless neighbours.

As she walked past him into the bathroom, Lucky could hear his muttered commentary. 'Willis to Gavaskar from pavlon end ... and FOUR.' She had frowned when

Amol bought a transistor radio to listen to the cricket matches. Now the money seemed well spent. Samar was learning some English. ‘Pavilion,’ she corrected him from behind the closed door.

Until yesterday, when the television set arrived, Lucky had hardly taken any interest in the game or her adopted country’s fortunes. Amol’s enthusiasm both amused and irritated her. He sat out late in their portion of the courtyard. If Kalpana was drunk, she would join him. Her intermittent singing and snatches of cricket commentary on the radio became Samar’s lullabies as he dozed off on the charpai. Sometimes, unable to sleep, Lucky would lie beside her son. The still air heavy with the smell of champa, the mysterious shadows cast by the banana leaves and a silver moonlight persuaded her, if only for a while, that perhaps, just perhaps, this was an acceptable way to live.

The last big match had ended in a row with her husband. India, despite all indications, ended up winning the semi-finals against England. And Amol, who throughout the evening had paraded the nerve-wracking zone between euphoria and despair, let out wild shouts of jubilation. Samar woke up, as did Sukanta and his bitter wife, and they exchanged harsh words with Kalpana, who immediately opened another bottle of rum in delight. Lucky had made her displeasure evident to her husband.

Abandoning his make-believe game, Samar now ran towards her.

‘Ma, are you going to watch the match with us?’

She smiled at him as she carefully descended the slippery steps. ‘If I do that, who will look after the cooking? Do you know how many people are coming?’

‘If we win, Baba has promised to buy me a bat,’ the boy declared, eyeing his mother.

‘We will see about that. But first, come and have your lunch. And sleep in the afternoon if you are to stay up late.’

The mid-day sun was scorching, and Lucky moved briskly past the gaps between trees. In the courtyard, old bed sheets were being spread for the children to sit on. Two earthen water urns had been placed in the shade. The chairs, ordered last night from a tent shop, had just arrived. Amol, entrusted with the task of finding an appropriately high table where the television could be enthroned, was examining various possibilities.

Though Sukanta's cassette player had fallen silent now, Amol was worried that the evening would be ruined if it started again during the match. At lunch, he tentatively asked Kalpana if her brother should be invited, if only so they could watch the game in peace.

'Have you gone absolutely mad, Amol?' Kalpana retorted angrily. 'First, he steals that elephant. Next, he will kidnap your child. I will break his legs if he steps into my part of the house.'

Lucky indicated irritably to her husband to shut up. It was not their place to intervene in a fight between a brother and his sisters, not when they were at the mercy of both in this household.

'I was only trying to ensure we get to watch the game in peace,' Amol mumbled apologetically as he carried the sleeping Samar back to their room after lunch.

'Oh, stop it with you and your game. The match will be over tonight. This fight will continue down the generations. Mark my words.'

'Why do you say that?'

'The quarrel between my mother and my uncle went on for nearly three decades, and all because my mother was not happy with the bed she was given in dowry. Bitterness runs in this family's blood.'

'But your uncle took us in, don't forget that.'

'Only because of the money and jewellery that my parents had been sending. And we never saw any of it, did we?'

'But we have a place to stay.'

'For now,' Lucky replied.

No one really expected the television to work, yet nearly a hundred people were crammed into the courtyard, expecting miracles. The electricity returned ten minutes before the match was to start, and Kalpana insisted that Lucky should switch the set on. From the grey screen emerged hazy figures that slowly clarified into men on a field. For a few moments, there was a total and stunned silence—followed by jubilant cheers.

Kalpana grasped her cousin's arm gleefully 'Arre, see why I told you to turn it on? Not just like that do we call you Lucky. Come, sit with me.' She made space for Lucky between herself and Amol, shooing off the electrician who had been on stand-by.

A man with a transistor approached them. 'Dada,' he asked of Amol, 'the game is yet to start on the radio. But there,' he said, pointing at the screen, 'it has already started.'

'These are the replays from the semi-final game with England,' Amol explained. 'The game will start in five minutes. West Indies has won the toss and will field first.'

The sun was harsh and, one after the other, people sitting or crouching on the sheets began opening their umbrellas. Some objected, saying that they could not see the TV screen, and stood up; others behind them protested and followed suit. As India's batsmen walked out to open the innings at Lords, the villagers of Gopalpur were engaged in a tussle of pushing, shoving and edging forward.

Amol sat with his son in his lap, staring at the screen and oblivious to the chaos around him. 'Watch closely, Samar,' he told his son. 'That is Sunil Gavaskar, the best opening batsman in the world.'

Moments later, Gavaskar was out and Amol looked as though he had been shot. He glanced at Lucky and shook his head. 'I knew it, it's over.'

Even from her vantage position at the front, the sunlight on the screen made viewing difficult and Lucky decided she had seen enough. In his excitement, Amol had persuaded Kalpana to announce that dinner would be served only after midnight, once the game was over. There would be snacks and tea during the innings break, of course. It meant more work for her, but Lucky, seeing Amol's pleading eyes, had not protested. Negotiating her way through the crowd, she headed towards the kitchen. Cigarette and bidi smoke rose intermittently into the hot afternoon and Lucky wished she had a camera. 'The place resembles a refugee colony in Calcutta,' she thought to herself, a trifle disgusted.

Four of the village women, ignoring the joys of cricket, were already in the kitchen, dicing up the aubergines and potatoes for frying. Picking up a bag of unpeeled onions, Lucky joined them.

'Where is the cook?' she asked one of the hired hands who was heating oil over the wood fire.

‘Maharaj went to take his afternoon nap.’

Lucky, hiding her annoyance, left the man to his cauldron.

‘Can I ask you a question, Didi?’

‘Yes, of course.’ Lucky could not immediately place the woman, sitting on her haunches, chopping vegetables.

‘How come the game will take place in the dark?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, Kalpana Didi said that dinner will now be served after midnight when the game finishes?’

‘No, no, it is daylight there.’ Seeing their blank faces, Lucky explained that England was in a different time zone. ‘Their clocks run behind us.’

‘They should get new clocks then. I hear it is a rich country,’ another woman remarked snidely.

‘The clocks are fine,’ Lucky smiled. ‘The sun reaches us first, and then travels to London. So, when we sleep, they are still awake.’

‘How do you know so much? Have you been there?’

‘Yes,’ Lucky nodded. ‘Many years ago.’

‘Ja,’ the woman looked shocked. ‘You are teasing us, Didi.’

‘Na re, I am not. I lived there for a long time.’

‘You lived in London?’

‘No, I was in a town called Cambridge. It is very close to London.’

‘Is it like our Gopalpur?’ one of the women asked.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ another replied. ‘That is bilet. Everything is different there.’

‘Well, people live there too,’ Lucky said as she began chopping the onions. ‘They also eat, shit, sleep. Just like us.’

'Yes,' replied one, 'but they don't eat like us. They only eat cakes. Not aubergines and onion fries.'

'Uff, everything with you is about food. Lucky Didi, please tell us more. When did you go to this England?'

'Many years now.' Lucky thought for a moment. 'Nearly sixteen, seventeen years ago. In 1967.' She smiled at them. 'Do you know how I reached England?'

No, they shook their heads.

Bending her arm at a right angle to her elbow, Lucky made an upward motion. 'Plane?' the women gasped in unison.

She nodded. 'We were in Dhaka and came first to Calcutta to meet some of our relatives in India. We then went by train to Bombay. From there, my father and I flew to London.'

One of the young boys hired for the day was listening, his mouth agape. 'Were you not afraid?' he asked

'No. My father was with me.'

'Are you then from Bangladesh, Didi?'

'There was no Bangladesh in those days, re,' Lucky said quickly. 'Bangladesh was created out of Pakistan, which even before that was just undivided India. My mother grew up in this house. I have not come from anywhere.'

'So you came from Pakistan then?' the woman responded.

Lucky called out to one of the hands. 'Take the tea out,' she said. 'And tell Amol-da that the fries will be coming out soon.'

'Didi, have you ever seen a TV before?' the woman crouching next to her asked.

'Why do you ask?'

'You knew how to switch it on.'

'I have only seen it once, a very long time ago.'

'Was this, too, in your bilet?' she sounded sarcastic.

Lucky nodded.

‘And what did you see?’

‘I saw the first man landing on the moon.’

‘You don’t need a TV for that,’ the woman burst out laughing. ‘My husband sees men on the moon every evening after his drink.’ She shook her head. ‘Such stories, Lucky Didi. You must have no trouble putting your Samar to sleep.’

Lucky smiled back. She indicated to the potatoes. ‘Come, put those in the pan. The oil is hot.’

‘Ma,’ her son came in screaming. ‘India has lost.’

‘What! Already?’

‘Yes. Can I have some?’ he asked, pointing at the fries.

‘They are very hot,’ Lucky warned. ‘Come, let us first go and see what has happened.’

The crowd had spread whilst she had been in the kitchen. A few still clustered around the television, Amol at their centre. In the fading light, a group of young boys had initiated their own game of cricket, using the dead banyan tree as wickets. Lucky did not want to disrupt the fun, but was wary of a ball hitting Sukanta’s closed windows. She told them to be careful as she passed. Six men sat in a circle, playing cards, just outside her room. To demonstrate her displeasure, Lucky walked through their midst. They barely looked up.

Another loud groan went up and Lucky saw Amol, holding his head in his hands, walk off towards the toilet. She asked her son to call his father. It was not considered proper for a wife to call her husband by name in public, and she was mindful of the traditions of Gopalpur House.

Amol came towards them. ‘How humiliating. This is a massacre.’

‘Will the game end early now?’

Amol looked at her sheepishly. ‘You think I am overreacting?’

‘I still have to serve the food. Just tell me what to do.’

‘Our innings will be over in less than an hour. Maybe the snacks can come out then?’ he mentioned tentatively.

‘Okay. Now keep Samar with you. I don’t want him wandering into the kitchen again. I will send out some fries for him. Please see that he eats them and no one else.’

The Indian batting, as predicted, folded early and the sun was setting when Lucky, with the help of four women, set out several plates of aubergine and potato fries and three large kettles of tea. The men, angry at their team’s capitulation, devoured the snacks. Gulping down the tea their wives had secured for them, they cursed their country’s lack of fight. From the Mughal invasion to subjugation by the British, a thousand years of Indian history was held up as evidence that led to tonight’s abject performance. Dietary habits were the problem, one opined.

‘We don’t eat beef. Look at the Pakistanis. They are strong because they eat cows.’

‘But we are playing with the West Indies,’ Amol intervened.

‘Dada, they eat everything. Even people.’

After a quick conference, the women asked Lucky if they could have dinner earlier. The children needed their food and sleep. Kalpana overheard this and immediately stepped in. ‘If you want to eat earlier, go home. Food will be served when the match is over.’

Lucky was glad for Kalpana’s intervention. She knew the cook would not be happy with any changes now. Maharaj had been in foul temper since the feast was announced, and Lucky had to bribe him with the promise of a new set of clothes. Kalpana had solved the tricky argument about the menu by agreeing to donate three of the ducks in their pond. This had pleased Maharaj, for his daughter and son -in-law were visiting. Lucky knew that the best pieces had already vanished from the cooking pot. Despite his regular tantrums and gentle thieving, there could be no arguments about Maharaj’s culinary skills. The smell emanating from the kitchen was making everyone hungry.

Two of the hired hands were splitting a mound of banana trunks and fashioning them into rectangular bowls when Lucky re-entered the kitchen. Fresh banana leaves were heaped in the corner, next to the wooden shelves. Lucky instructed the boys to wash each leaf separately. There will be consequences, she warned, if a speck of dirt was to be found when the rice was served. Kalpana had expressly forbidden the use of any family utensils for the

feast tonight. When Samar was born and Lucky had insisted on a lunch for the villagers, some brass plates were said to have gone missing. Kalpana claimed that they were priceless family heirlooms, and frequently reminded Lucky of the loss.

She checked with Maharaj again about food quantities.

'If they don't start putting it in their saris and dhotis, there is enough,' the cook snapped, and Lucky decided to leave him alone.

'Do you want to taste the meat?' he asked as she was slipping away.

Picking up a bowl, Lucky returned eagerly.

'Tell me if it is soft enough?'

With eyes closed, she nodded an appreciative yes.

'Does it need anything?' Maharaj persisted.

'No, Maharaj-da. It is delicious.'

'You know nothing of cooking. I am asking the wrong person.'

'But I certainly know about eating. I have been consuming your meals every day for years now. Who can question my taste?'

'Achcha, achcha,' the man relented. 'Now stir in the spices. I have to go to my room.' Maharaj, scratching his stomach, gestured at the boys. Lucky knew she was being told to guard the food.

'This government is mad. What is the point of getting a TV?' Amol charged into the kitchen, his transistor on full volume. 'They have interrupted the broadcast with the evening news. Fifteen minutes of the match gone.'

'Please turn the volume down, Amol. I cannot hear you,' Lucky said impatiently.
'You will go deaf, and so will I.'

'Yes. But look at this. Vivian Richards is batting. I mean *the* Viv Richards. And what is our response? Cut off the live broadcast and put in the evening news. He is the greatest ... Wait.'

Amol rushed to a corner of the kitchen, a finger in one ear and the transistor stuck in the other. Moments later, he turned towards Lucky with a slightly embarrassed grin.

'Richards is out,' he said in a barely audible voice. 'Three down for fifty-seven. Tonight might be extraordinary.'

As he walked out in a daze, Lucky called after him, 'Does this mean India will win?'

Amol, afraid of jinxing things, for once, ignored his beloved wife.

For the next hour, as Lucky tended to the meat, ensured the rice was boiled and dry, and cooked a separate, less spicy dal for Samar, she also kept an ear out for the shouts that erupted from the courtyard frequently. She was amused at herself; her heart, too, was beating faster.

Finally, she called for Maharaj. If history was truly being made, she did not want to recall it as the moment she was watching the rice boil over.

The courtyard was poorly lit, yet the change in mood was palpable. Gone were the dispirited and defeated villagers who, a just a couple of hours earlier, was cursing their country's lack of fight. The group that surrounded the television set now oohed and aahed at each ball, advice was being freely directed at the players on screen, and grown men clung to each other, acting out in Gopalpur a solidarity felt across the nation.

Lucky pushed through to the front where Amol was sitting with Samar on his lap. Every single chair was taken, sometimes with two and even three men sitting on one. Several low bamboo stools had been procured, and Lucky spotted a couple that had emerged from her bedroom. Seeing her, three young men sitting next to Amol looked at each other, and then, abused by an elder, reluctantly gave up their seat.

At the end of the over, Amol told Lucky that just one wicket remained between India and World Cup victory. It should all be over soon, he said, eyes flashing.

Ten minutes later, India still hadn't won. After each ball, Samar would ask, 'Baba, when will we win?' until Amol snapped, 'You will know if we do. Now watch the game.'

Three more overs were bowled, and yet the last West Indian pair hung on obdurately. Jubilant cries turned to anguished prayers, the gods were invoked and curses hurled again. One of the young men displaced by Lucky crouched next to Amol and whispered in his ear. Her husband, Lucky observed, looked distressed.

'What is it?' she asked.

Amol stared at the youth, and then back at Lucky.

‘We have a superstition, it’s kind of a silly thing really.’

‘What?’ she insisted.

‘Well, just that nobody should change their seats while the game is on,’ Amol stammered.

‘Meaning?’

And then she understood. ‘Oh, I have upset your seating plan, have I? Please, be my guest,’ she said, looking at the displaced youngsters.

Amol refused to meet her eye as she walked away. Three balls later, as Lucky was still pushing her way through, a scream went up. ‘Out,’ the crowd shouted in one voice. ‘Out, out,’ they kept screaming. Chairs fell as men scrambled to their feet, kids were flung in the air, people rushed towards each other, arms outstretched. Lucky sidestepped the frenzy and walked towards the television screen. The hordes had descended on the Lord’s cricket field, and she saw the players, running back towards the pavilion, being mobbed. For a moment, the camera zoomed in on the anguished face of a West Indian fan. He sat alone, the seats beside him empty, tears streaming down his face. Then the jubilant Indian fans were back on screen, running through the haloed greens. This was the winners’ moment.

Amol emerged from the crowd and walked towards Lucky.

‘The nation thanks you for giving up your seat.’

‘Have they left?’ Geeta asked Lucky, peering from her bedroom on the first floor.

‘A few are still hanging around. Come and sit with me.’ Lucky patted the empty space on the wooden bench beside her. ‘I am sorry I was so late bringing your dinner. It is just that there were so many people and India winning and—’

‘You were busy,’ Geeta hushed Lucky. ‘You look after me very well, sister.’

Resting their chins on the balcony railing, the two women observed the revellers in the moonlight that filtered through the leaves of the tall coconut trees. Dinner was over and the village women had left. The men, however, enticed by Kalpana’s generous distribution of rum, showed no signs of letting up. Some were trying to set off firecrackers, probably last Diwali’s leftovers. Damp had set in and the rockets refused to fly, and the rather

optimistically termed atom bombs went out with scarcely a whimper. India's unexpected victory was not being well expressed.

'Opu would have liked the crowds today, no?' Geeta said to Lucky.

'Yes, he would. He hated being alone.'

'His mother loved the jungles. Thumri and I could get by for weeks without seeing another human being. She even avoided other elephants.'

After shooting Thumri, a guilt-stricken Geeta could not bear the mention of elephants. She had banned Lucky from her room. Every night for a month, Lucky had stood outside the door. When she was finally allowed to re-enter, so did the stories of their beloved friends. On one such evening, Lucky had asked her cousin, 'Didi, do you think Thumri will be reborn?'

'I don't think of rebirth the way most people do, sister.'

'Then?'

'I think my mother is reborn through me, in my actions. You are reborn in your son's. Much after you are gone, he will continue to evoke you. His children will learn and remember from him. Rebirth is nothing but tradition, Lucky; rebirth is our stories. In our words, Thumri is always alive.'

'Didi, please, tonight you must sing,' someone was pleading with Kalpana.

'Why? Am I your father's concubine?'

From her vantage position on the balcony, Lucky giggled. Kalpana was in a good mood. She would sing.

'But, Didi, India has won the World Cup,' the man continued bravely.

'And, in celebration, you have demolished half a mound of my rice and your wife has taken home the other half. Now you want me to be your baiji too? Your requirements keep growing.'

'Come, Didi, one song at least,' the others joined in. The harmonium had already been brought out to the courtyard, Lucky noticed. That must have been Amol's doing.

With an immense display of reluctance, Kalpana dragged the instrument towards her.
 ‘Ufff, you lot are impossible. Ei, someone get me some cold water. Now, listen, just one song. And then I am going to kick you all out.’

‘Saaa … sa re … Saaa … re ga …’

She was a meticulous performer. Even in an informal setting such as this, Kalpana took her time, warming her voice and the instrument. She drank a sip from the pitcher that had been placed beside her. Clearing her throat a few times, she smiled at her audience, closed her eyes and began to sing one of Lucky’s favourite Goalpuria songs.

Tomragele ki ashibe mor mahout bondhu re?

Amol added his sonorous baritone to Kalpana’s voice. Lucky’s fingers kept beat on the balustrade. Geeta stood up, startling her.

‘Are you leaving, Didi?’

‘I will go and read a while.’

Lucky did not join the others. Most in the audience were inebriated, and even Amol had not been shy of the rum. It reflected in his singing. He was challenging Kalpana, and their vocal flirtation inspired a few of the men to start dancing. Lucky closed her eyes, and her thoughts flitted from Opu to Samar to the conversations with the women this afternoon.

She watched Amol get up now and cross the courtyard to go to the toilet. Her husband would have to be persuaded, but she had made up her mind—they would leave Gopalpur. Her parents had made the mistake of ignoring the signs until it was too late. That Lucky was alive tonight was due to an Indian army officer. She soon found herself smiling.

‘Where are you tonight, Kabir Singh Chowdhury?’ she asked, almost aloud, pushing back a few strands of hair from her forehead.

Joi Aai Asom. Hail Mother Assam.

The slogan pierced through the raucous celebrations and interrupted Lucky’s reminiscences. A shocked silence descended. The gates, at a distance, creaked harshly. Several young men emerged from the darkness onto the courtyard. Lucky checked the clock on the balcony wall as she rushed down the stairs. It was nearly 3 a.m.

Amol was standing next to Kalpana. A thick-set, bespectacled young man was speaking. As Lucky approached, he paused briefly. ‘What are you all celebrating?’ he asked, looking around. ‘This is not India. This is Assam. There is nothing to celebrate.’

Kalpana, for once, seemed lost for words. ‘Not India? Then who are we?’

‘You are Assamese. Or you are a foreigner and must leave our motherland.’

‘But, son, we have lived here all our lives. My great grandfather—’

‘We know your family history, Didi. And talking of family history, you are harbouring foreigners.’

Next to her, Lucky felt Amol tense. The young man was smiling, enjoying their discomfiture.

‘We have no one but family here, son,’ Kalpana replied.

‘Then who are these?’ He pointed to Lucky and Amol.

‘My aunt’s daughter and her husband.’

‘They are from Bangladesh. Is that not true, sister?’ He was staring at Lucky.

‘I have never lived in Bangladesh,’ Lucky replied.

‘But your family is from Dhaka. You grew up there?’

‘My mother was born in this very house.’ Lucky could feel the anger rising in her.
‘And now, may we ask who you are?’

‘We are sons of our motherland. We have taken an oath to free her from the foreigners who have subdued her for centuries. You and your family must leave. Consider this an ultimatum.’

‘Come here, young man. Let me see your face.’

Geeta was standing on the balcony, outside her room. The moon had moved behind the clouds, and Lucky could barely see her cousin. ‘Here,’ Geeta waved. ‘Come here.’

Without a moment’s hesitation, the young man left the group. He walked up to stand directly below Geeta.

‘Didi, nomoskar.’ He joined his palms in greeting.

‘Do you see this rifle, boy?’

‘Yes, I see it.’

‘I have killed my elephant with this. Do you know?’

‘Yes, Didi.’

‘Then you also know that I will not think twice before shooting you.’

‘Didi,’ the youth held a hand up. ‘How many of us will you shoot? You will run out of bullets and patience. There are thousands like me. Look at these boys. They are all ready to die to your bullets.’

He stood there looking up at Geeta until she brought the gun down. ‘We too have guns, Didi. But out of respect for your family, we want this to be peaceful.’

The young man turned around, as if daring Geeta to shoot him in the back. Even in the darkness, Lucky noticed the confident smile that played on his lips as he walked with slow, deliberate steps towards them.

‘Let us go,’ he said to rest of his group. He placed a hand fraternally on Amol’s shoulder. ‘Seven days, brother.’

Somnath Batabyal is the author of two books, *The Price You Pay*, a political thriller set in Delhi and *Making News in India*, an ethnography of television news practices in Rupert Murdoch's ventures in the country. Prior to this Somnath was an investigative reporter working in both print and television in India. He now lives in London where he teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies. This chapter is an excerpt from his forthcoming book, *Lucky*.