# Funny-Looking People

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Masudul Huq pulled himself away from his blurred image in the window and tried to understand what his colleagues were talking about. The October leaves seemed to burst through the glass barrier of the meeting room. Everyone commented on their good cheer, a rare explosion in Houston. Masudul Huq also should have been touched by the warmth of the fall colors. But after three years in the same city he did not even know what kind of tree it was. The only October he carried in his heart was that of the soft green paddy bobbing in the receding water of the Srabon rains in Dhaka, and there was no reflection of that anywhere in this city.

He understood products, strength tests, the projects of the research division of the firm, but he always faded out when people talked of other things, like baseball, the Houston Rockets, or swim lessons for the kids. He just couldn't latch his mind onto these conversations and he absent-mindedly pushed his chair back out of the circle, tilting it on its hind legs. They were talking about the kids again, Halloween, laughing about ... yes, what costumes their kids were buying at Target or JCPenney.

"What about you, Huq? What are your—you have two children, no? What are they wearing?"

"We don't celebrate Halloween, Richard," he said. "My children don't even know what it is." He bent his head to flick a foreign object off his trousers.

"Oh, you must, Huq." Several voices at once. "My kids just have a blast. It's the most innocent and fun memory of childhood I have!"

Masudul Huq waited stilly for the focus to drift elsewhere. Smiling, he sat and he removed himself mentally, as he did frequently. It had never been easy for him to socialize with Americans, but it had been especially difficult since he returned in the fall, started the new job after finishing his Master's. He had made up his mind to settle in the US for a better future, brought his wife and children over, and the company had promised to sponsor him for immigration. All his plans were being realized, and yet, everything seemed unbearable to him suddenly. America promised his family everything he wanted for them, and yet he detested everything American. To live in America, he often said to his Halaqa party, was to sell your soul to the devil, or have it stolen before you even realized it.

His wife was the troublemaker. He had rented a house before bringing her to Houston, before even taking the plane to Dhaka, and when they returned in September, he had settled his family comfortably in the large house at West University Place. But that was just the trouble, they never settled. There was something about his wife in this new climate that continuously unsettled him. The house had been rented below price to him at six hundred dollars a month by a well-meaning Bangladeshi, one of those overbearing people who had lived in Houston for twenty years and had much charity to squander. He had had to accept because, as a foreigner, he was underpaid by his company. But he never felt comfortable in the house. His wife would take their three year-old daughter Meenu and two year-old daughter Ritu walking around the neighborhood, bowing her head to all the white neighbors that passed, the white neighbors who lived in those mansions with the innumerable rooms and gaslights and the towering columns, and he even caught her, from the half-lifted blinds of his bedroom window, trying to have a halted conversation with them. He scolded her immediately when she came back, telling her that these people were prejudiced.

"Do you know what they think of us and our children?" he said to her as she plopped down on the charity sofa, irritatingly happy. "They think we are dirt, the color of mud."

"Oh, Jaan, the kids are so cute! So fair and big. And the dogs! Meenu and Ritu really took to the dog."

"Fatma!" he said. "Don't you know dogs are dirty in our religion?"

But she didn't know, she didn't seem to see anything he saw. That the complexities of their lives had been taken away, that they had been transformed flat by some mathematical function, so that he could no longer hold on to the memories of their house in Dhaka with the myriad scents of the sheuli and gondho raj, the cotton saris his wife wore, a firoza blue or a bottle green, the checked blouse in Suchitra Sen style, the oxidized metal pendant that hung from her neck, his barefoot children who mixed green mango with chilli and salt and smacked their lips. All of these textures, these subtleties of their lives were gone, and all he could taste was the bitter disappointment of seeing his family and himself through the eyes of America. Brown children they had become suddenly, scrawny, undersized, and his wife's saris ugly, the chiffon or the nylons which did not need to be starched. Here they were boxed into this house on Vanderbilt Street, one of the richest roads in Houston, the ugliest house on the road even from the curb, the grass overgrown, the lights broken and dismal. Isolated from all the other houses. Worst of all, there were no mirrors in the house, not even in the bathroom, and so they lived in darkness, unable to see even their own reflections.

They all slept in the same room, on one mattress, children and all, not able to fill the rooms of the house, too shy to venture out of the one

room they had made their own. Not that there was any want of space by any means. There were four rooms, which were like gaping holes waiting for their nonexistent furniture, and they were even able to use one of the rooms, an inner room, to hang their wash on lines, Ritu's cloth diapers, which smelled of urine and Clorox. He knew this was not a thing done in America, neither the cloth diapers nor the clotheslines, certainly not the smell of urine, nor even their second-hand stained mattresses laid out on the floor of the other rooms, and this knowledge, this separation gave him both a sense of enclosure and a sense of shame.

It was his feeling of isolation that had driven him home every summer while he was a Master's student at University of Houston. He felt an alienation from everything around him, trees, games, conversations, clothes, so that he longed for the sounds and smells of Dhaka, like the smoked pitha at the roadside paan joints or even the smell of drains, old car exhaust releasing half-combusted fuels, that would remind him of himself and his angularities. He had gone to visit three times in three years, impregnating his wife every time, but only two children had survived. The third, the son it had to be, was born dead five months early and had to be buried in Azimpur, where the graves were turned every few years so that they would certainly never be able to visit his ever again. Masudul Huq often thought back to his son, like a part of himself left behind, a self that he could not have brought to America.

"Surprise!" said his supervisor Richard, head of the research division in toys. "I have candy for you grown up kids." He plopped bags of Kit Kat in red wrappers on the table, a scattering of mini Milky Way fun size snacks and M&Ms. The table filled up like a candy store. His colleagues were laughing, reaching across, prying apart the wrappers and biting lazily. Masudul Huq turned away to stop the thought arising in his head, that these people must open candy wrappers the way they undressed their mistresses every night, casual strangers picked up somewhere.

"Hey, Huq, have some!"

"I do not eat candy, Richard," he said to his supervisor. "I am no longer a child."

The chewing sounds made his hands itch. The wrappers promised the satisfaction of all his childhood sweet fantasies, and he absent-mindedly jangled his thigh to close out the thought of how happy his own children would be at the sight of the offerings before him. He had grown confident over the years in these matters, even adopted a philosophy. You had to stand up for your identity, assert it, even create it, because otherwise it would get completely trampled by the foreign culture. He had learned to say at dinners at his professors' houses, "No champagne for me, thank you. I do not drink, Sir." Or decline Oreo cookies, explaining that they contained pig's lard. Yes, he really had worked hard at it. At the university, he had joined the Muslim Students Association. For

the past few months, he had been attending Halaqas, not only listening to the advice of others on how the Muslim community should conduct itself, but bringing his own analysis to the table, putting his mechanical engineering mind to work on this new problem. He advised others that their children should go to Arabic schools to feel the presence of a strong community, as well as their heritage and their religion, because without that reflection of themselves in those around them they would be lost souls. They would always feel abnormal.

He was determined to take the right steps for his own children from the start, armed with the knowledge of what had happened to other Bengali children who had to take part in Christmas plays or listen to Jewish stories on Jewish holidays, when they had no notion of Eid or Islam. Could one believe, could one allow? His Halaqa party had created a tradition of making Eid just as attractive as Christmas to the kids. Several families would get together and draw lots to buy gifts for the children and would set them around a tree at an Eid party, and the kids would each receive a gift, just as they would at Christmas. The boys could play basketball at the mosque, the girls have their own meetings about incorporating the head dress in fashion, and he was sure that slowly they could erase all traces of the outside culture and recreate their own.

But his wife got in the way. Just two weeks after she arrived, she wanted to order pizza, and when it came it was pepperoni.

"Fatma," he said gently, "Pepperoni is pork, my dear."

"Oh," she said. She fussed around the table of the rusting metal edges. "Oh. Could we just pick off the pieces then?" she begged. "How can we let all this food go to waste?"

She walked the kids, the three-year-old and the two-year-old, to the upscale Barnes & Noble on Holcombe to read. What did such tiny children know of reading, and anyway, why not teach them Arabic then, some suras? But no, she said it was good for them, that they loved it, and she came back one day with a book that had the picture of a pig on it. She showed it to him, making bright eyes like his children and cupping her cheeks as he looked through.

"Fatma," he said, "There's a pig on the cover!"

"Oh," she said. "I didn't notice, Jaan." The two daughters were already grabbing the book, turning the pages as they lay on the sagging hardwood. "But they don't seem to know the difference," his wife continued. "Oh, that is funny, Jaan. Isn't that funny that I did that, Jaan?" Masudul Huq did not think that it was funny. He also hated being called by an endearment because this kind of address took away from his newly accruing gravity.

"Do you want your children to celebrate Christmas next?" he shouted. He had never before shouted in his life, but he felt the occasion demanded it.

He rose from the sofa. Fatma opened her mouth slightly, but she did not seem particularly affected. He brushed past his startled children and out of the dark house to take a walk. He walked for a long time that evening under the tall trees that lent the tall houses their majesty. As he walked, he remembered how tender he felt toward Fatma when they were first married, how Fatma's relatives and Fatma herself always said that there was no gentler husband than he. He walked and he cried. He couldn't see his own hands in the dark. Fatma, Fatma, he whispered into the moist leaf-laden air, if only you knew what dangers we face! If only he could explain to her. He ached to tell her.

When he returned, Meenu and Ritu were in bed sleeping. He grabbed Fatma and shoved her tightly against his chest. Then she started to sob, and they both knew for whom they cried. He had never even seen his son, for whom his heart broke every night.

The matter did not end there. When they went to Hillcroft, Fatma did not heed his appeals not to buy Hindu daal, the same daal being used by the RSS to slaughter Muslims. She bought bagels at the upscale Randalls, not even considering that it was Jewish food. He tried to explain to her, before she fell. As he had fallen. He nuzzled her neck at night sometimes, lying low on the floor on the faintly smelly mattresses, smelling of unknowable yet insidious smells, the aura of previous foreign owners. Lying like that, he told her stories of the Bengalis who had gone awry, the wives who drank and smoked, the husbands who had affairs or left their wives for foreign women, imitating the lifestyles of America.

"These Americans are characterless, Fatma," he said. "We have to be very careful or we could slide all the way down. We all have the human temptation. Specially men."

But Fatma only whispered in the dark, "They can't all be the same. I see our neighbors looking after their families. Playing with their kids. The grandparents come to visit." His Fatma had never disagreed with him back home.

Fatma soon made a blonde friend who came to their house with a red-faced gigantic kid to play with Meenu and Ritu. His wife said the child was an angel and wondered why their own children were so skinny. Masudul Huq lowered his eyes when he entered his house to avoid the bare midriff and the veined legs of the foreign woman. He went to his room whenever they came because to him, there was nothing innocent or beautiful about these children. They were mere copies of their future adult versions. He felt the smooth white skin and the cherubic faces were only a lie. When he was in his room, he squeezed his eyes to stop the memories that would come flooding to the top of his mind. At times, he thought he would fall to pieces because of what he had done, because of how this culture had engulfed him and paralyzed him and taken him

apart so that he was no longer himself. He wanted at those times to embrace his Fatma and pull her away because he knew he had to protect her.

He closed his eyes again now in the meeting room. He sat in front of everyone as they discussed a new product material, and he shook his shoulders to rid himself of what he did not want to remember. Richard was saying that the new material would make the toys heat-resistant and therefore safer. Masudul Huq slowly worked his mind back to his theory: Just like the beautiful nearly naked women, Halloween was a danger. It was really a commercial thing (his friends had discussed this over Halaqa), a Christian thing, and now it was passing for a children's event.

In October, his wife began to say, nestled next to him and their two children at night, all huddled together for comfort in the silent big house that did not echo their presence, that her blonde friend thought she would look nice if she got a haircut. That perhaps she should start wearing trousers. He closed his eyes in pain and did not say anything.

"Jaan? Jaanu? You mind?" she asked, the flower stud on her nose turning in the dark. "Jaanu, you have become so stern, so strange. Why the beard? You're growing a beard, no?" He touched his prickly chin. "Jaanu, I found a picture of you as a student, and you looked so carefree then, so, so young, just like an American. You've changed, Jaanu. You weren't like this in Bangladesh. So serious. What happened to make you change?"

"Where did you find the picture?" he asked. He would destroy it, the evidence of his foolish fumbling years before he found himself, saved himself from falling into that awful black gaping hole that was the temptation of living abroad.

"Jaan, did you ever have an American friend?" she asked. "I find them very interesting, easy to mix." He didn't answer. A face ballooned up in his head. Yes, at one time he had thought friendship was possible. But he had been mistaken. He pretended sleep, shutting his eyes tightly to that remembered face. He thought instead about how his wife's coming had changed everything for him, heightened all the tensions of living in America. No, that was not true. How could he blame her entirely?

It was his children who hurt him most, even more than his wife. He couldn't bear their pitiful excited faces as they ran up to greet him when he walked in the door of that half-deserted house, where the lights didn't work, not on the front porch or in the hall. He felt an urgency of love for them, a love all the more tortured because they were like tiny mice hidden away in a dismal hole, because they had lost all the color and freedom of their sun-filled days on the roof of the flat in Dhaka. They had gone to Hong Kong market to buy fish and Meenu was in his arms

hoisted high to witness the way the fish were hacked, then sprayed with water from the hoses, the blood pouring down into the gutters, and he was thinking that maybe these men who were fish-cutters now had been doctors and engineers in their own countries, China, or Hong Kong, or Taiwan, now reduced to cutting fish, as he was reduced to doing research on toys, a farce of a job, when Meenu put her face close to his and said, "Baba, they are funny-looking, right?" She was pointing at the Chinese men. He asked her to repeat. His wife laughed, as if their daughter had said something clever. Meenu hid her face in his shoulder. But her words had hit him like that water spray. He felt wounded. Why would she think that these men were funny-looking? Funny-looking compared to whom? Why didn't she say the white people she saw at Randalls were funny-looking, since they looked different from her too? It was unthinkable to him, his scientific and observant mind, that a child of her age could perceive herself as anything but the center of the world, and everything else a reflection of herself. If she had said *they're* funny-looking, she also meant *we're* funny-looking. What would happen when she would be in an American classroom, surrounded by white kids? What would she think of herself then? That had happened last week, and it bothered him, it bothered him far into the sleepless nights.

The meeting had come to a close. Everyone was saying to him, "*Happy Halloween*." But he did not feel like repeating the greeting. He didn't feel like participating in a holiday that was not his. He asked Richard what the holiday was about. Something about saints, spirits, he couldn't pay full attention.

"Now buy some candy and get ready for those children!" Richard called to him as he gathered his papers. "Today you're going to participate in a truly American experience! Hey, take some of these for your kids. Sinful pleasures." He pushed the sinful pleasures in the direction of Masudul Huq and Masudul Huq could not help feeling offended. He backed away from the onslaught of the colorful wrappers sliding his way. It seemed to him that everyone in the room waited for him to pick up the candy. Furthermore, that they had commanded him to buy candy from the store and hand them out to the children who would come in the evening. Tomorrow he would be interrogated on his participation. He felt the intrusion unbearable. He frowned and rubbed his nascent beard. He cleared his throat.

He wanted to yell at his colleagues, tell them what he thought of their festivities, force them to open up their ears to his beliefs, his culture, the festivals that he celebrated. Force them to acknowledge that he did not drink, and that he would not celebrate Halloween. Slowly, as he ruminated inside the shutters of his own mind, the others filed out of the meeting room. Masudul Huq found himself alone in the room, shaking, the October leaves mocking him with their false colors.

Masudul Huq bent and picked up his leather box briefcase that he had bought from New Market in Dhaka, a box that looked funny now among his colleagues' sleek leather bags, and he walked out of the synthetic building that interfered with his breathing, the building with the multiple mirrors placed in elevators and foyers that only showed him how different he was. In the lobby, he looked discreetly ahead of him so as to avoid the secretaries in short skirts and bright lipstick. He went out to the parking lot, to his battered Toyota, where the breeze fluttered the individual leaves of different colors on a tree, and he got into his car slowly. He shut the door and sat breathing heavily, trying to compose himself. He was feeling very depressed, alone. He was determined not to participate in this American holiday presided over by the Saints, but he felt frightened by the challenge of the night. Children would come dressed in costumes, as they had never come to his dorm. He would have to stand up to the test.

He drove slowly past Airline Drive, avoiding that street because of the women who waited, pouting like children, on the corners, women who made him nervous and hot, crazy and frightened, so that he recited suras under his breath. He got onto I-45, and then missed the exit for the 610 loop so that he had to take another exit and make a U-turn to get onto I-45 in the opposite direction. He missed the exit for 610 again and then he found himself back on Airline Drive, where a tall woman in a leather jacket regarded him through parted lips.

By the time he was on 610, he felt that the drive was already too long for his restless mind. Someone honked at him and almost ran him over as he tried to exit the highway for the safety of his own street. Finally, he was on Holcombe, in the silent car, the radio turned off, because really, there was nothing to listen to, just all this vulgar music. Instead, he would let his mind drift back to Dhaka whenever he was in the car, and he did that now to calm himself. He thought of the clearing skies of early morning, the clearing of throats, running water from the different flats, different roofs, then the sweet long sound of the Azan that made him feel alive, present, real, imparting to him a whole sense of history and culture. He looked forward to discussing those days with his wife, but immediately he knew that she would only upset him. Her memories were contrary. She would challenge him with the account of days they had watched vulgar plays at Mahilya Samity, listened to songs on the roof of Art College, or lain on the grass of the university. He would have to protest that he did not remember those days. He drove slowly past the Randalls on Holcombe, remembering that his wife had asked him to pick up some onions, they had run out, but he was not going to venture into that store today. He did not want to go past the displays of candy, not even to buy for his children. He would completely ignore the day, defy the tradition. The temptations, he knew all about temptations. The temptation to give up one's own self, to be seen as others wanted to see

you, wear the right clothes, drink the right drinks. Once he had given up himself.

He turned into Vanderbilt and the skies had begun to darken already. The gaslights had come on in front of the houses with the columns, swaying with the elegance of history and tradition. Carved pumpkins leered at him through the bushes. He had to slow down. The children were already out, witches and fairies, cartoon characters he did not yet recognize, hanging baskets from the elbow, a swirl of moving lights in the darkness. He drove behind them sheepishly, afraid of running over someone, ultimately afraid of all the masked and eerie children in his way, and it took him a long time to cover the three blocks to get to his home, the one-story apologetic house on the corner. He knocked on the door because the doorbell did not work. As soon as Fatma opened the door, he pushed his way in and locked it behind him.

"Baba! Baba!" his daughters came running to him, the two year-old struggling to follow her sister. "Baba, Ma says it is Halloween, we can go trick or treating for candy," said Meenu. He put his arms around both of them and pulled them to his chest. He realized that they had been watching the street from the living room window.

"Close the blinds," he yelled to Fatma.

"Why? Can you take the kids out? They should join in, it's so beautiful. You know, one girl was dressed as Snow White. So pretty. . ."

"Baba, I want to be Snow White."

"Why close the windows?" Fatma asked again, not moving.

"Just do," he said. He went around the house turning off the lights. He had no notion that he was going to do this before Fatma had suggested the unthinkable. "Are you crazy suggesting to take the children out?" he said as he shut down the house. "People kidnap children on these nights, poison the candies! Anyway, it's a Christian thing."

"Oh, I didn't know that," Fatma said. His family was following him through the house, closing blinds, turning off lights in a flurry of excitement. He felt relieved that they followed him, fell in line behind him, especially Fatma. It didn't take much to give the house a completely deserted look. At last they reached their sanctuary, their bedroom. He sat on the floor with his daughters on each knee.

"Listen," he said to them, "we are going to hide out and pretend we're not home, since we don't have anything to give them. Although I don't think anyone will come. It's hardly a nice house, and we don't know anyone. The doorbell doesn't work. No one will come."

"Baba, where should we hide?" asked Meenu. Fatma didn't say anything, but she obeyed him. They crouched low below the level of the windowsill and the two girls giggled quietly. They could hear faint bells in the air, a mother calling to her child, a child's laughter.

"Come," he said to his children. "Let's lie on the mattress and tell

stories in the dark. I will tell you a story about the prophet, how he survived on three dates only." He lay down and pulled Meenu and Ritu onto his chest, and with Fatma leaning on his side, they had almost formed a tent, a perfect enclosure, when there were knocks on the door.

"Happy Halloween," came a chorus. Then again. Meenu started to clap but he shushed her and she was quiet, and so was Ritu. They waited, still in suspense. Fatma pushed herself closer to the window and peered out between the blinds. He wanted to tell her no, but he didn't want to make a sound. As they waited in the stillness, his wife's head bobbed up and down, marring their sanctuary. Such a long time passed that he was sure the party had given up and gone away. Masudul Huq and his family waited behind the closed blinds, with only Fatma's head sticking out in the dark.

"Trick or treat!" came the voices again. "Happy Halloween!"

"I can see them," said his wife in an exaggerated whisper. She raised the blind a little, and glimmers of light streamed in. In the gap she had created, he also could see outside. He saw a band of children, three or four, with parents in tow. How long would they stand? He noticed they were using the time to go through their candy. There was a golden-haired girl wearing a puffed-sleeve dress. Was this the famed Snow White? She was taller than Meenu, maybe five. And beside her, an older sister or a mother, but young, plump arms cascading out of a T-shirt. Still wearing shorts in October, the kind of shorts that rode up the thighs. Masudul Huq was uncomfortable, but he couldn't help seeing, now that the blind had been raised, taking in the roundness of the smooth knees. The pink flip-flops out of which peeped pearly nails. His face was at an awkward angle, and he felt immobilized. He could not look away. His thighs began to grow hot and he was sweating. He felt his heartbeat rising. He wanted to jump up and run, but his children sat on top of him, and he lay there, unable to stop the memories anymore.

Masudul Huq remembered Margaret, his classmate in school, a close friend, and he realized then that Fatma was not the trouble-maker. His mind had been tortured long before she had ever come to Houston. Margaret was one of the few people who asked him questions about home, his family, his country, and made him feel alive. Yes, they had been friends, and he had kept his surprised eyes away from her midriff, her cleavage, the plunging plumpness of her bodice, until that project his final year. They were working late, heads together, doing strength tests, and they had to stay in the department the entire night to finish the project. So they had collapsed on separate couches in Cullen building, laughing, conversing in whispers. At three in the morning, Margaret stood before him and pulled violently at his pointed shirt collars.

"Masudul," she called. "Get up. We only have a couple hours, Masudul." Then she got out a wine bottle and the plastic cups that littered the lounge and offered him some.

"No," he said. "I do not drink."

"It's just wine, it's not bad," she had said. There was music on, some punk rock or something she had said, and he drank some. He watched Fatma's profile as he remembered this, the way Fatma's face angled under her ears, the outline like an innocent painting. That night in March, when he drank, just barely aware that he had a wife who waited for him at home, he looked at Margaret differently. The lines became blurred, everything became possible. Her pants hung low on her hips, her midriff was baby-like, soft, innocent, the back of her neck scented, almost the odor of baby milk. Everything became possible because he had not closed himself.

After that, and it was only the one time, he could not live with himself. He began to cry in the darkness now. Still the Halloween party waited, still his family hid in the darkness.

"Fatma," he called in a hoarse whisper, calling for help. "Fatma, I was with another woman."

"Oh, Jaan, look, they are trying to peer in through the spy-glass, I wonder why they wait so long. They must be tired and don't want to walk. Why, it's my friend, that's why!" Either she had not heard, or she didn't understand. Masudul Huq lay there on the mattress, crying, his chest crushed under the weight of his two baby daughters. Then in the darkness, Fatma's body began to shake, it rumbled, her shoulders went up and down, her dupatta choked a burst of laughter.

"What?" he said.

"It's so funny," she said. "It's so funny! We're hiding from children! Jaan, it's so funny! You're so funny." Meenu and Ritu began to laugh also.

"It's so funny, Baba," said Meenu. "We're playing hide and seek."

The party outside must have registered the sounds and they stood with their ears at attention. Fatma stood up. Her nostrils flared as they did when she tried to suppress laughter. Watching her at that height, he felt light-headed. The seriousness of their meeting melted away in her laughter. He tried to compose himself.

"I have to cook the rice. Jaan, do you mind if I turn the lights on in the kitchen?" She went away still choking, and he could hear her from the bedroom. The party outside was beginning to disperse. Meenu and Ritu were shrieking at each other. They pushed themselves up suddenly and ran through the house. He followed them. He tried to remember his own lectures at the Halaqa meetings. He tried to recall the philosophy with which he could hold the world fast. He tried. What was it that he believed? He tried again. But he couldn't keep everything straight as he tried to keep up with Meenu and Ritu. He couldn't think straight since the moment Fatma had lifted those blinds and dissolved the perfect darkness of his home, and then dissolved it again with her laughter. Her laughter mixed with Margaret's. And all he could feel, to his horror, was

love. A large love that encompassed everyone, Meenu, Ritu, Fatma, the children who waited outside, even Margaret. He closed his eyes to shut out Margaret's open face, her laughter. But he only felt a warm feeling as Meenu and Ritu urged him on.

"Turn on the lights, Baba!" He turned on the lights in every room. The bedroom, the dining room, the living room. Meenu and Ritu ran ahead of him, bobbing up and down and singing, "Round and round, round and round."

Meenu said, "Do you on the lights, Baba? I want to on the lights." The one in the hall didn't work, but never mind. Meenu and Ritu reached the front door and banged on it.

"Open the door! Open the door, Baba." He couldn't think. He wanted only to be filled by the love of his children. He wanted only to follow them. He opened the door, fighting with the bolt and chain. He opened it wide and came out squarely from his shabby house. He was breathing hard. He felt a great desire to greet this Halloween party that had waited at his door. He didn't have anything to give them but he wanted to see them.

The costumed children who had come to call were already shadows in the distance, flashlights hovering in the air, little shadows and bigger shadows. He stared after them, disappointed. One was a dog, another a chicken. They skipped and they twirled, they laughed that silly laughter that was Meenu's. Children really, only children and nothing more. Meenu and Ritu had come out also and they watched the receding lights silently. The night was ink, which pushed up to the stars and allowed them to penetrate, welcoming them. In the distance, bells rang and doors opened. He leaned against the wall and stuffed his hands in his empty pockets, breathing in the night air. Then he turned back toward his house and through the dirty glass of the window, he could see Fatma quietly setting the table.