“Ma, Baba, come!” Bani cried in panic from the boat. She could see her parents and sister trying desperately to catch up with her. But she couldn’t do a thing. For, the waves were too strong and the enemy dangerously near.

An unusual story about two children, Bani and Khoka, who, separated from the rest of their family, find themselves stranded on an island in the Bay of Bengal.
ISLAND OF SEA-GULLS

By IRA SAXENA
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Bani sat huddled in a corner of her house, holding a plate of *maachh bhat* (fish and rice). The small kerosene lamp spread a dim light in the room, casting shadows on the walls.

Bani’s parents sat at a distance in the dark, while her elder sister Neela and brother Khoka ate in silence. Outside it was pitch dark and not a sound could be heard.

The silence was suddenly shattered by a shrill, screeching sound of an aeroplane. Bani stared at the dark ceiling. ‘So here they come,’ she thought. ‘The freedom fighters have no chance now’.

She looked around almost as though she knew this would be her last night here. She had spent fifteen years in this house and seen Khoka grow. He was now eight years old.

Quickly she swallowed the *maachh bhat* and was about to get up when she heard a knock at the door.

“Ghosh Babu, Ghosh Babu,” yelled somebody.

Bani’s father rushed to the door and opened it. It was Narendra Mukherjee, the young school master. “Naren, what’s the matter?” asked Mr. Ghosh.

“The soldiers.....the Pakistani soldiers are coming.”

A shiver ran down Bani’s spine as she dragged a chair for Naren. Neela brought him a glass of water.
“Abdul of our panchayat has received a wireless message from Dohajari that the Pakistani soldiers have made their own bridge on the Kali Nadi,” said Naren.

The people of Dohajari had pulled down the old bridge in order to keep the invaders out.

“That means they are only 30 kilometres away,” said Mr. Ghosh.

Bani clutched at her mother’s sari and said, “Ma, we will have to go.”

Her mother stroked her back gently.

“Yes, we must leave soon Ghosh Babu,” said Naren. “Khan Sahib has sent word that the town should be vacated immediately.”

“But where will we go?”

“I have arranged for boats at Phula Coast. We will have to dodge the enemy in order to get there.”

“But that is going straight into the mouth of……..”, Mr. Ghosh could not continue.

“Are you coming with us Naren Babu? ” asked Bani.

“I’ll come in a while. I have to inform some more families.” Naren smiled at Bani and left.

Khoka clung to his mother. Neela’s eyes betrayed the fear in her heart.

“We have no time to lose,” said Mr. Ghosh, breaking the spell. “Hurry up and gather whatever you have to.”

Bani swung into action immediately. She grabbed a sling-bag and pushed some of her clothes and some of her brother’s into it. A cup, a necklace of blue and yellow beads and her red bangles which she treasured the most went in next. Neela packed her things separately, while their mother made little packets of muri (puffed rice), chhola (black gram) and jaggery and tied these in white muslin cloth round everyone’s waist.

Bani swung the bag across her shoulders and walked up to their father. He was burning some papers.

“Baba (father), won’t we come back?” Bani asked softly.

“I don’t know.”

In her heart of hearts Bani was sure that she would return one day.

“Has someone informed Chhor-Da (younger brother) and Rukmini ?” asked Mrs. Ghosh.

Bani rushed to the adjacent house which belonged to her father’s brother. Her Uncle and Aunt were ready to leave.

“The bullock-cart is here. Bani go and call everyone,” said Bani’s Uncle.

Soon the two families piled on the bullock-cart. Bani’s father put away the lantern that hung under the cart as it moved slowly through the dark night. The rumble of the wheels was the only sound they could hear besides the odd gun fire.

After a few hours they came to the outskirts of a forest. They decided to take the hazardous route through the forest in order to avoid the enemy.

It was a long journey and soon Bani fell fast asleep. When she opened her eyes at crack of dawn, she found her head resting against Neela’s shoulder.

The cart had stopped. It stood off the track among the trees. Mr. Ghosh was talking to some men. Bani recognised them immediately. They were from her town. Naren, too, stood among them. They talked for quite a while. The sun was rising when Naren helped Bani and the others alight.

“Hurry up. From here we’ll have to walk,” he said. Bani shook her brother, Khoka, who was still sleeping. She smiled at him and told him not to be scared. Holding hands Bani and Khoka then joined the others. Together they walked over rough ground.
As they went deeper into the forest visibility became poor. Khoka fell twice. But nobody spoke. They just walked on in silence.

Soon Bani felt the soil soften under her feet. The earth had become sandy which meant the river was near.

Gradually the forest thinned. There were fields ahead. ‘The enemy will be able to spot us now’, thought Bani.

Just then a bomb exploded. For a split second the forest shone amber. Everyone was stunned. They hid behind a big bush.

Minutes later a jeep roared past. They stood still for a while. “We must hurry. We have to cover quite a distance,” said Mr. Ghosh.

Bani ran with Neela and Khoka. Naren was ahead of them.

At the slightest noise they would fall flat on the ground and inch ahead on their bellies. The thorns scratched Bani’s stomach but she ignored the pain.

The sound of the river could now be heard clearly. Bani stood erect and looked back. She was relieved to see that everyone had made it. Neela smiled triumphantly as she joined them.

“Look Bani, the river,” screamed Neela.

Some of the men in their group were already there, washing their faces and quenching their thirst.

Bani and Neela ran across to join them. Bani’s feet hurt. She was exhausted and hungry and almost fell into the water.

After a while when everyone had had some water to drink, they resumed walking along the bank of the Karnaphuli.

“Be brave my child. You have a lot more to face,” said Bani’s father. Bani looked up at him. She saw his affectionate face and suddenly felt stronger.
The Karnaphuli widened with every step and gradually became part of the ocean. The sand under Bani’s feet was cold and soothing.

One by one everybody sat down and relaxed, watching the vast spread of water before them. The gentle rustling of the waves sounded like music to Bani’s ears.

Some of the men brought food from a hamlet nearby and distributed it to everyone. There were chappatis (wheat cake) and sweets made of rice powder and jaggery. Bani relished the simple meal. She also managed to save some and tied it along with the muri in a muslin cloth round her waist.

An old bearded man said, “Don’t worry, sister. Have faith in God.” As he turned away, someone whispered, “Maulana Sahib (Muslim scholar)!”

It was past noon. Many people had gathered and were waiting for boats to take them to India. Bani saw the mast of an approaching boat and the sails flapping against the sky. Its dark brown timber hull was topped with a thatched covering like a hut. A couple of boatmen sat in front, while two others rowed the boat, at the far end. Their leader, Farookh, was a hefty man. He steered the boat with the help of the rudder at the back. In front of the boat there was a flag post with two flags rolled up.

Suddenly there was a commotion as everyone stood up. One of the boatmen made an announcement.

“We will leave after an hour.”

One by one people started boarding the boat. Bani and Khoka went ahead with their Uncle and Aunt. They occupied the centre seats under the canopy.

Neela helped her father carry the big pitcher of water to the boat while her mother gathered the things that were strewn on the bank.

“They are coming”, shouted a man running towards the shore. “The soldiers are coming in four jeeps. I have seen them.”

The next instant the boatmen weighed anchor and the boat started moving.

“Ma, Baba, come,” cried Bani. She was in a panic.

Bani saw her parents and Neela wading through the water. She pushed her way to the edge of the boat. Just then it jerked and she fell flat on the floor. Quickly she got up and screamed at the top of her voice, “Ma! Baba! Hurry up Neela.”

Khoka clutched at her sari and called out, “Ma! Didimoni (elder sister)!”

But it was too late. The waves were strong and prevented them from moving fast enough to catch up with the boat.

Bani turned to see if the boatmen would be of any help. But they rowed with all their might.

“Stop the boat. Oh stop it,” she shouted. But the boat kept moving away from the shore.

Bani caught hold of her brother and said, “Come on Khoka, let’s jump.” She was prepared to do anything to be with her parents.

Just then two strong arms held her back. It was Naren.

“Let me go. Leave me,” cried Bani, struggling to free herself. She tried to throw herself out of the boat but Naren’s clasp was too strong.

“Ma, Baba, Neela,” she cried leaning over the side of the boat. She heard her mother say “Bani, Khoka” as she stretched her arms out to reach her children.

The boat moved on and Bani could barely see her parents now. Khoka clung to her and cried aloud. Naren and her aunt held her by the shoulders.

“There will soon be another boat and they will follow us,” said Naren.

“Are you sure?”

“I was told two boats would be waiting for us.” And in a soft voice Naren added, “Don’t worry, Bani, everything will be all right.”
Bani nodded. 'You have a lot more to face, Bani,' her father's words came back to her and somewhere in her heart she knew that they would be together again. She picked up Khoka and hugging him tightly sat next to her aunt.

Khoka was all she had now. A wave of responsibility swept over her.

Bani's aunt patted her tenderly on her back. She had no children of her own and loved Bani, Neela and Khoka. She wept quietly, while Bani stared blankly at the blue surface of the sea.

Her Uncle was gloomy and helpless. A patient of asthma, he had managed to carry his frail body to this point of the escape. Now he felt totally exhausted. His bare chest heaved heavily as he tried to breathe in as much air as possible.

There were many others who had been separated from their families. They were all wiping their tears. Nobody spoke. Khoka's sobs subsided. He still held on tightly to his sister. Occasionally his entire body quivered. Bani stroked his head as she looked around her.

In a corner stood Naren lost in thought. He had been orphaned as a little boy. His grandfather had left him a palatial bungalow, where Naren ran a school. Actively associated with the patriotic forces, he was well regarded by the elders of the town.

Bani admired him greatly.

There were eighteen men and women including the boatmen. 'It could easily have accommodated many more,' thought Bani, 'Certainly Ma, Baba and Neela.' She felt a pang in her heart.

She spotted two women. Both were young. One was married. The centre parting in her hair was red with sindur (vermillion) and she wore red bangles. She sat next to a young man, probably her husband, and that was why she did not appear perturbed.

The other girl resembled Neela. She looked sad and forlorn. She closed her eyes again and again and it seemed as though she was praying silently. All of a sudden she became conscious of Bani's gaze. Bani looked away.

The sky was speckled with thin grey clouds. A light wind puffed the sail and the boat moved smoothly along its course. The boatmen kept their oars aside and relaxed.

"Have we come a long way from Phula Beach?" Naren asked one of them.

"Phula Beach is far behind."

From time to time Bani would look for the other boat. There were no sign of it. She grew restless again. What would happen to them if the boat did not reach the coast? What would she and Khoka do in India? Would she ever meet her parents again? Bani tried to fight back her tears but the pain in her heart was unbearable.

Khoka did not eat anything that night. Nor did Bani. She slept on the planks with Khoka nestling up to her for protection.

Another day passed and the boat was still on the move. Dark clouds covered the sky as everyone settled down for another night on the boat. There was a nip in the air. Bani covered herself and Khoka with her sari and closed her eyes.

It was well past midnight when she heard a furious sound of thunder and felt big drops of rain on her face. Her Uncle and Aunt moved under the canopy and beckoned Bani to join them. But Bani did not move. Khoka also stuck to her. Her sari was soaked but she did not care.

With every flash of lightning the slanting rain drops shone. There was water everywhere. On a dark night like this it created an eerie atmosphere.

Some muttered prayers. The elderly Maulana Sahib raised his hands and called out "Allah! Allah!" The young married couple held each others hands tightly. The
other girl did not show any signs of uneasiness. Her face was calm.

The storm worsened. The heavens unburdened their weight as the sea rose higher and higher. Bani held the wooden railing tightly. A big breaker crashed and the boat tilted. Khoka lost his grip.

"Didi," he cried. Bani swiftly glided across on her stomach and caught Khoka. Together they walked towards the canopy.

"We are doomed," moaned Bani’s uncle.

"No. We will survive," said Bani.

The boat was rocking furiously as the boatmen tried to pull down the sails. Naren rushed to help them. Again there was a big jerk and the boat tilted. One of the boatmen screamed as he lost his grip on the bar and fell into the sea. Naren bent over the boat’s edge and shouted, "Hold my hands." With the force of the waves the man was pushed against the boat. He grabbed Naren’s hand and somehow managed to pull himself out of the water.

Waves after waves beat violently against the sides of the boat. Piercing screams rent the air as they all fell on each other.

The boat swayed and drifted as the storm continued to blow on the sinking passengers.

It was dawn when the boat crashed against something hard and stopped moving. Bani rushed out of the canopy, expecting another calamity.

"Land," shouted two men.

Their cry was drowned in a dreadful screeching sound as a wave of white sea-gulls swept over the boat. They flapped their wings hard and quivered as they flitted by. Bani ducked just in time to avoid a hit. The others screamed as they covered their heads with their arms and shut their eyes tight. Some of the men tried to shoo them away but the birds kept hovering round the boat. They pecked at the intruders, dashed into them and tried to attack them in every possible way. Finally, after a lot of jostling and flapping some of the birds flew away, while some folded their wings and perched themselves on the rocks nearby.

Quickly the young people on the boat stood up and jumped on to the land. Bani and Khoka got down together and ran, along with the others, towards the bushes where they hid themselves. The old people, remained glued to the boat. So shaken were they by the sea-gulls attack that it took them quite a while to recover.

As the sun rose the sea-gulls flew off in search of food. An immense relief swept over Bani’s tired body as she threw her head back, took a deep breath and spread her arms wide. Khoka clapped his hands with joy. Bani could not see the soil and the trees clearly. The freshly washed leaves looked beautiful and serene.

To the eighteen people on the island it was almost like heaven. They had survived what seemed a journey into the jaws of death. The old people, helped by Naren and Farookh, stepped out one by one. They thanked God by calling “Ishwar” and “Allah” as they picked up some of the soil and touched it to their foreheads. Maulana Sahib knelt and said a prayer. “Bismillah-ur-Rahman-ur-Rahim” (with the name of God most merciful and great, this praise is for the creator).

A rickety old man supported by Niaz breathed heavily as he came out. Bani’s aunt followed muttering her Gayatri Mantra (prayers).

A flock of sea-gulls appeared suddenly and everyone grew tense again. Some tried to ward off the birds with a piece of cloth. This time the birds just flapped their wings and flew over.

“Didi where are we? Have we reached India?” asked Khoka.
“I don’t know. We drifted from our route when the storm came.”

“Come let’s go there,” said Khoka pointing to a small hill.

“We don’t know where we are,” said Maulana Sahib. “Let the women and children wait near the boat. The men will find out what is on that hill. There could be wild animals.”

“But Maulana Sahib, we don’t have any weapons”, said someone.

“Your hands are your weapons, my friend. Have faith in God.”

Four men walked towards the hill. Naren went with Prabhakar to the left and two men went to the right.

The boat, more than half damaged, rested against a rock on the coast. The sail was in shreds.

Bani’s uncle sat on the beach breathing heavily. He was about to light a cigarette, but his wife stopped him.

Bani walked up to the girl who looked like Neela. “I’m Bani and this is my brother Khoka,” she said.

“My name is Salma. Do you know any of the people here?”

“My Kaka (uncle) and Kakima (aunt) are sitting there, but my parents and sister were left behind on the Phula Beach.” Bani quickly narrated her sad story. “And you.......?”

“I am all alone,” said Salma. A single unshed tear sparkled in her eye.

The young married girl joined them. She raised her hands and said, “Thank God we are saved.”

“You are married, aren’t you?” asked Bani.

“Yes. Last month.” The colour rose to her cheeks as she spoke. “That is my husband, Javed, over there.” She pointed to the man walking back with Naren and Prabhakar.

“What’s your name?” asked Salma.

“Mahu.”

“Isn’t that a flower we have in our garden, Didi?” asked Khoka. Mahua pinched his cheeks lightly and nodded.

“Look, they’ve come back,” said Bani. “Let’s see what news they have.”

“We are on an island,” said Maulana Sahib. “That hill is the highest point. From there water can be seen all round.” The only activity on the island seemed to be that of the sea-gulls and their chicks. “No human beings appear to be living here,” said one of the men.

“Oh! Allah, from the frying pan into the fire,” said Mahua.

“This island must only be two square miles,” said Naren.

“We’ll make the best of it. Allah is merciful,” said Maulana Sahib optimistically.

“Are these the Bali islands?” asked Javed.

“No, can’t be. It takes more than a week to reach Bali from Chittagong Port,” said Farookh.

All of a sudden Bani heard her aunt cry. She saw her uncle coughing and gasping for breath. Maulana Sahib and Niaz rushed towards him. They massaged his back gently. Bani brought him some water from a pitcher. Maulana Sahib and Naren looked at each other gravely. Before she could figure out what it was, Khoka came and pulled her away saying, “Didi, I’m hungry.”

Bani looked for the muslin cloth round her waist. It had gone. But Khoka’s share was still tied around his waist. She untied the cloth and offered him some muri and jaggery.

“This!” said Khoka, making a face.

“My good little brother, eat it now till we find something better.”
Bani felt sad as she spread the cloth on the sandy soil.
“What is it Bani?” asked Niaz.
“Nothing, nothing at all. It’s Khoka........ he’s hungry,”
Niaz patted the boy and smiled.
“Food and water. We can’t live without them. We must
arrange for them immediately,” said Maulana Sahib.
They were surrounded by millions and trillions of gallons
of salt water, but they had no water to drink. Bani felt a
spirit of adventure within. She wanted to explore the
island.

“Let’s go Salma. We’ll try and find something to eat,” she
said. Bani liked Salma because she looked so much like her
sister Neela.
“Didi, I am also coming with you,” said Khoka, running
behind them.
Together they climbed the hill, the highest point of the
island. Bani felt thirsty and hungry. And so did the others.
The little water in the earthen pitcher had finished long ago.
“Didi, look, what is this?” said Khoka. Bani and Salma
walked up to him and found a plant with large green and
red leaves.
“Tapioca,” they both cried excited. Then, very carefully
they loosened the soil around it and pulled the roots out.
“These are much larger than the ones at home,” said
Salma.
They tied the roots in their saris and around their waists.
“Thank God, something grows in this island,” said Bani.
From the hill-top Bani had a glorious view of the deep
blue waters. The island looked like an emerald amidst blue
bays. The wrecked boat swayed in the water.
The west coast had similar silvery sands, but no vegeta-
tion. The southern coast, on the other hand, was lined with
trees. On the northern side Bani could see only rocks.
Captivated by the beauty of the island, Bani clasped her
hands, and forgot all about her thirst and hunger.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. The sea breeze felt cool on her eyelids.

"Look. There are coconuts too," said Salma, pointing to the line of trees.

"From here I’ll take a long jump in the air straight into the sea," said Bani stretching her arms.

Salma threw her head back and laughed. She looked very pretty. It was a change from the pensive look she always wore in her big, black eyes. Together they hurried back to the coast, hand in hand with Khoka leading them.

Karim and Naren returned with some coconuts and red palm fruits.

"There isn’t a single stream or spring on this godforsaken island," said Karim.

"In these tropical islands drinking water is scarce. It is stored during the rains. The south-west monsoon is in full swing, so there should be no lack of rain," said Naren like a teacher addressing his students. "Meanwhile we will live on coconut water."

"Come, lets see what’s left in the boat," said Prabhakar.

"I’m also coming. I may find my bag," said Bani.

There was an earthen pot, a fishing net, some aluminium utensils, a few spoons, some bottles and a metal pitcher. Naren also found his small transistor radio intact. He fiddled with it but could not get any station.

"This fishing-net should come in very handy," he said.

"Come let’s go fishing."

"Let’s first share the food. Come, my friends," Maulana Sahib called.

The Maulana had already been accepted as head of the group.

"Where is your son, Maulana Sahib?" asked Bani.

"Son?

"Yes. Niaz Bhai (brother)."

"Oh, Niaz! He is not my son. But now he is," Maulana Sahib added with laugh. "And you are my daughter!" He patted Bani on the head.

Khoka giggled as they all sat down to eat. Bani thought of her mother’s delicious maachh bhat which she had eaten just before escaping.

Soon after the meal some men began to dig pits to collect rain water.

Bani was tired and soon fell asleep under the shade of a tree.

She was woken up by the shrill sound of a bird. She saw Salma smiling at her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You were smiling in your sleep," said Salma.

"I don’t know......must have been dreaming."

Bani felt more relaxed now, but was sorry to find Salma gloomy and sad again.

"Bani, you always see the brighter side of things don’t you?" said Salma. "I can only see darkness."

"There is nothing but darkness," joined in Bani’s aunt.

"It’s a matter of a few days only. The boat can be repaired and we’ll get help," cut in Bani....... "Salma, you are young. Atleast you should not feel so helpless."

Salma’s tear-filled eyes shone in the dim light of dusk. This girl appeared mysterious to Bani. She was young, kind, enterprising, yet so unhappy.

"Salma, the sea-gulls have returned," said Bani, trying to change the subject.

"It is their kingdom."

"We are going to kill some for food," said one of the men.

"No," shouted Bani instantly. "I do not like slaying innocent birds."
The screeching of the gulls and the flapping of their wings filled the atmosphere as they settled down for the night. The noise reduced as each one settled down. Karim was about to kill one of the birds when Maulana stopped him. He too felt that the birds should not be disturbed. “After all, we are their guests here,” he said.

Bani and Salma lay down to sleep under a tree.

“You have never told me anything about yourself,” said Bani.

“Let’s sleep. It’s very late,” said Salma.

Khoka slept next to his aunt. Some people spread themselves under other trees.

Early the next morning Bani awoke to shouts of ‘Hoosh’
and ‘Dur Dur.’ A sea-gull dived past Naren’s head, screeching. Another came, then another and soon hundreds of them were attacking the men.

Bani jumped up and tried to drive the birds away. One of the gulls dashed past her and pecked her hard on the shoulder. Her blouse tore and blood oozed from the wound.

“Aaah!” screamed Bani as she pressed her shoulder and sat down.

Naren ran to her side, looking most worried.

“Don’t worry, I will be all right soon. It’s just a scratch,” said Bani.

“It’s more than a scratch,” said Naren looking at the wound. Gently he led Bani towards the sea.

Bani’s aunt panicked at the sight of blood on Bani’s shoulder. “Oh! Ma, what’s happened to my child?” she said as she ran towards Bani.

“Nothing Kakima. Just take care of Khoka.” Bani was afraid the gulls might attack him. Naren washed the wound and pressed it with his palm till the blood stopped.

“Thank you,” said Bani softly.

“It’s my privilege,” said Naren looking straight into her eyes.

Salma arrived just then and asked, “What’s the matter Bani?”

Then noticing her wound, “Oh my god, how did you get hurt?”

“Nothing. Oh! you look so fresh and lovely after a bath,” said Bani. Drops of water trickled down Salma’s face.

Bani felt like having a bath herself. Naren was there and she felt self-conscious. Salma looked at Naren and then at Bani and smiled mischievously.

“The sea-gulls,” said Bani as she hurried to the boat to get her bag.

She bathed in the sea and wore a fresh blouse. While Bani was drying her clothes she heard Khoka shouting, “Didi look what I’ve found.”

“There is a room here,” he screamed again. He was among the thicket at the foot of the hill. Bani ran to him. She found a cave hidden among the bushes and creepers.

“How lovely!” she exclaimed. “We can sleep here.”

She called out to Salma and together they cleared the bushes.

Maulana Sahib saw them and asked, “What are you girls doing?”

“We have found a cave, Maulana Sahib, a shelter for us,” said Bani.

“Allah is great.”

“Let’s leave some of the creepers hanging from the top. It will make a natural curtain,” Salma suggested.

“We’ll call it ‘Khoka’s Nest,’ said Bani. Maulana Sahib ruffled Khoka’s hair affectionately and walked away. Soon Bani, Salma and Khoka had cleared the path to the cave.

“Our highway,” said Salma. “No, we’ll call it the Mall Road.”

“Fine,” laughed Bani, as they all climbed the hill.

“Didi, how long are we going to stay here?” asked Khoka.

“I don’t know.”

“Nobody knows,” said Salma.

“Didi, Karim Dada (elder brother) says that the boat is beyond repair and cannot be used.”

“How does he know?”

“He’s a carpenter,” said Khoka.

“Well, then he can make another boat.”

“But he has no tools or nails.”

“Never mind. Somebody will rescue us,” Bani said.
When they reached the top of the hill they found Naren digging a deep pit with a conical rock.

“Naren Da, what are you up to?” asked Salma.

“Preparing my SOS,” Naren finished digging and tied a piece of rag on one end of the pole. Khoka was puzzled, “What are you doing Naren Da?”

“Hoisting our flag to indicate that there are people on this island. A plane or a ship might notice it from a distance.”

Khoka smiled at him.

“Wonderful,” said Bani. Salma helped Naren lift the pole and held it as he fixed it in the hole. The rag blew in the breeze.

“Joi Bangla. Amar Sonar Bangla Desh (Our golden Bangla Desh)” murmured Bani and they all raised their hands. Khoka clapped with joy.

“What are we going to do next?” asked Bani.

“Find something to eat,” said Naren.

“Let’s look for more tapioca,” suggested Khoka.

“That’s a good idea. Come,” said Naren.

As they walked down the hill Khoka asked Naren, “Is there any way of escaping from here Naren Da?”

“Yes, you can swim. Now let’s go and catch fish,” suggested Naren pointing to the rocky shore on the northern coast.

Khoka was attracted by what looked like white bowls stuck on a steep and slippery rock. “Dada what is that?”

“They are nests.”

“Nests?”

“Yes. They are Ababil’s nests. Ababil is a swallow found in these parts.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve read about it. The Chinese eat these nests. It’s considered a delicacy.”

“Then we can also eat it,” said Khoka.

“Yes, it makes a good soup when mixed with tapioca and is very expensive too.”

“How much?” asked Bani.

“The price ranges between 700 and 1000 takas per kilogram.”

“Oh! Ma!” exclaimed Bani.
“Anyway who’s paying for it here? Let’s collect some,” suggested Salma.

“Look! there are some over there below this rock,” said Khoka.

“We’ll come for it some other day,” said Naren, “Let’s catch some fish first.”

Bani and Salma sat with Khoka by the sea, while Naren went off to get the fishing net. Soon they found Naren in the water with his trousers folded to his thighs. “Come on. Hold the net from that side you two,” he shouted. Khoka went forward.


“Ready?” called Naren.

“Yes?” said Bani and Salma together.

“Now throw.”

Bani, Salma and Naren took a short jump in the water as they threw the net with all their might. Then they dragged the net to the shore. It was empty.

“Oh! you won’t get any fish so near the coast,” said Zia, an experienced fisherman, who had been watching them for a while. “You will have to go at least a kilometre or two into the sea before you get any.”

“We will build a raft. I saw some planks on the floor of the boat,” said Mohammed confidently. He was also a carpenter.

In no time a raft, about two metres by one and a half metres was constructed by Mohammed, Karim, Farookh and Naren.

Zia and Naren then hopped on to the raft while Farookh, Karim and Mohammed pushed it into the sea. The raft moved slowly but steadily. The rest of the group watched anxiously and prayed for the safe return of the two.

Zia and Naren returned a couple of hours later with a good catch of fish.

“We won’t starve for at least two days,” said Maulana Sahib. Everyone had a good meal of fish cooked with a little sea water that evening. They had some tapioca and a few pieces of coconut too.

Bani, however, was unhappy as her uncle’s health was fast deteriorating. He had another of his fits of coughing. He sat panting for breath.

“Water. He needs some water,” said her aunt.

Zia peeped into the empty pitcher. He looked helplessly at Bani’s aunt and then he looked up. One by one everyone looked up and started praying for rain. Javed started humming, “Allah Megh de, pani de, chhaya de re tu, Rama megh de...” Prabhakar joined in the singing. (Allah give us rain, give us water and shade.)

Maulana Sahib made a gesture for all to sing. Some more voices joined in. Bani and Salma started dancing as they sang.

Bani felt miserable everytime she looked at her uncle. He could not eat. Secretly she prayed that he would survive this ordeal. When she turned she couldn’t see Salma. She looked for her and found her sitting under a tree.

Bani approached Salma very quietly for she could hear her sob.

“Leave me alone Bani,” cried Salma as fresh tears trickled down her cheeks.

Bani cleared her throat and said, “We all have our stock of sorrows and we share them with friends.” She held Salma’s hand and sat beside her.

“The memories still haunt me, Bani. Only a few days ago life was a rainbow and today I’ve lost everything.”

“Look, Salma, my sister Neela is your age. I like you very much. Tell me, where did you live in Dohajari?”

“Kucha Dilbara, behind the old theatre. Ours was a joint family. My parents, two sisters, my younger brother,
two uncles and aunts, we all lived together. Seven days ago all of us were dancing in the house. We were so happy.”

“Was it a festival?”

“No. It was my engagement.”

“Your engagement!” Bani exclaimed in disbelief.

“Yes Bani I loved him dearly. He was a distant cousin. We were to get married next month.”

“Then.............. ?”

“My mother and sister were busy stitching sequins and beads on my deep-red garara (divided skirt) and chunni (veil). It was my bridal dress. Then a man entered our house. We were told the Pakistani soldiers were coming. Minutes later all of us were running in different directions.

“I ran Bani, I ran madly. And in just one minute I lost everyone.” Salma broke down as she buried her head in Bani’s lap.

Salma had unburdened her heart’s sorrow and felt much better now. Bani consoled her with a heavy heart. Big raindrops fell on them. They ran towards ‘Khoka’s Nest’! The islanders welcomed the rain and quenched their thirst. The newly dug pits would soon be filled.

Bani’s uncle was coughing again that night. He could neither lie down nor sit up comfortably. Her aunt kept rubbing his back. Bani sat next to him. But soon, he gestured to her to sleep.

Bani dozed off a little while. Her aunt looked gravely at Bani but quickly turned her attention back to her husband. His breath came at irregular intervals and he was unconscious. Maulana Sahib cupped his hands in the air and prayed, “Allah, the greatest of all, be merciful.......”

Bani woke up when she heard his voice.

“Kakima, I’ll get aakh leaves. The scent will revive Kaka.” she said.

Bani had seen an aakh plant on her way to the hill-top. Tense and nervous, she picked up a burning stick and looked among the bushes. “There, it is,” she said. She plucked a branch and ran back.

When she entered the cave she heard Maulana Sahib saying, “Ma, he is with Allah. In-nallaha o inna Ilaahi raaja’oon (whoever comes from God goes back to him).”
The branch of aakh leaves fell from Bani’s hand.

Her aunt wept loudly. “Oh! I am ruined. I’ve been punished for my sins in my previous life.”

Salma and Mahua held her tightly. Khoka took the end of her sari and wiped her tears. Bani was unable to restrain her tears.

“Ma, bear it with courage, you have these children to look after,” said Maulana Sahib.

She cried her heart out and was uncontrollable when they took her husband away in the morning.

“We all have to meet the same fate,” said Mohammed.

That day, the fourth day on the island, the sun shone brilliantly for the first time. “It’s a bright day,” said Naren and tonight we can send fire signals. We’ll light a fire on the beach.”

“Go ahead children, may God bless you,” said Maulana Sahib as the youngsters walked away.

Soon everyone was busy collecting twigs and sticks. At night they lit a big fire.

But nothing happened. A few days later Bani suggested that they use bottles for sending messages. She had read about it in some book. She and Naren sent several bottled messages into the sea.

But this too showed no results. Seven days passed and everyone began to feel very depressed. Naren looked pulled down. Javed and Mahua had dark circles round their eyes, Khoka’s shirt hung loosely on his body.

Food and water were scarce and disease on the increase. One day, while Bani was watching from the cave, Khoka ran into her arms. To her horror she found Khoka’s body burning with fever.

“Didi, my head hurts.”

“It will be all right Khoka, try to sleep.”

“We are all doomed,” said Bani’s aunt. “Why should this little child be punished, Oh God!”

“Kakima, please don’t talk like that,” said Bani. Her voice quivering.

“Didi moni, ma......” murmured Khoka in his sleep.

Naren came along after a while with a leafy branch in his hand. “This is gab-patta,” he said. “Its leaves are supposed to have medicinal properties.”

Bani crushed a few leaves and squeezed a drop into Khoka’s mouth.

That night Bani did not sleep a wink. Khoka woke up much after sunrise. He opened his eyes wide, stretched his arms and legs and got up as if nothing had happened. Bani felt his hands. His body temperature was normal.

“Kakima, Khoka is fine,” she screamed, grinning from ear to ear. Naren’s face also lit up.

“Thank God,” said Salma breathing a sigh of relief.

A wave of relief swept over everyone, as if they had won a victory over a powerful enemy. Javed resumed his singing as he walked away with Mahua.

“You stay here in your ‘Nest’ and rest like a good boy,” said Bani.

The next morning Zia and Naren prepared to catch some fish. The sea was unusually calm. The Maulana looked at the sky apprehensively and said, “Zia, Naren, don’t go now. I do not like the face of the sea. Look, all the gulls are returning to their nests.”

“But Maulana Sahib, we have not eaten anything since yesterday. The storm will not come for another half an hour. We will catch a few fish and return.”

As the raft disappeared over the horizon, the Maulana and the rest started praying. The Maulana’s prediction came true and a storm broke out. There was no sign of the raft. Heavy rain lashed the island. The Maulana advised everyone to go into the ‘Nest’. Khoka and his aunt, however, refused to budge.
Mohammad and Karim volunteered to jump into the angry sea and go in search of their comrades. Just then Zia's and Naren's heads appeared above the giant waves. Their raft was nowhere in sight. But the two men, both expert swimmers came ashore.

Back with the group, Naren said, “We can’t go on like this. We must get out of this island. Let’s collect wood to make a huge fire, bigger than the previous ones.”

The next two days saw hectic activity. More than half the cave was stocked with wood. Salma and Bani stood outside the cave with their hands on their hips. They were exhausted.

Karim and Naren came along dragging a big tree behind them.

“Wonderful. How did you manage?” asked Salma.

“It lay uprooted,” said Naren panting.

“Where?”

“Behind the Jarul grove.”

“You mean you’ve dragged it from there?” Bani was most impressed.

“Yes,” Naren crossed his fingers and said, “I hope it does not rain tonight.”

The sun shone brightly the following day.

“Tonight let’s keep the fire burning as long as possible,” said Naren.

Bani was tense. ‘Would this be their last attempt to escape?’ she wondered. They had all worked so hard to get this fire going. ‘O God. Tonight let someone see our signal,” she prayed.

Like the day, the night was also clear.

Bani walked up to Karim and asked, “Shall we light the fire, Dada?”

“After a while. We have to keep it burning the whole night.”

“Yes,” said Bani softly.

They carried all the firewood to the beach. One pile was made for burning, the other was kept aside. Khoka danced round it, while Salma and Bani sat together on the sandy soil.

Karim brought a burning log and threw it into the pile, saying “Bismillah,” (Begin with the name of God who’s merciful) loudly.

Bani closed her eyes and prayed, ‘O God! Don’t let it rain tonight.’ When she opened her eyes she found Naren watching her. He smiled as if he had read her mind. Bani smiled back at him.

Soon the pile of wood was burning. The island shone. The sea-gulls screeched. Some flew off while others grew restless.

As the night advanced Naren and Karim added more and more wood to the fire. Gradually the pile of branches were used up. Then they dragged the tree to the fire. The men arranged it so that the flames rose high. The entire island brightened as the huge tree burned furiously.

It was just before dawn when Bani and Salma returned to the cave with Khoka in Bani’s arms. When they woke up the fire was still burning.

Two more days passed. Everyone was tense. Bani was exhausted and depressed. She wanted to rest but she could not.

“Salma, I am tired. My whole body hurts,” she said.

“Rest a while and you will feel better.”

Bani closed her eyes and put her head down. A couple of hours later Salma came running and said, “Get up, Bani!”

“I can’t open my eyes. The light hurts my head,” she screamed.

Naren touched her head, “You have fever Bani,” he said, his voice trembling. “Your eye-lids are swollen.”
“Didi, Didi,” yelled Khoka clinging to his sister.
“Salma, it hurts, it hurts,” cried Bani.
“You will be all right, Bani,” said Naren.
Bani felt as though she was diving into a deep pool.
Salma, Naren and Khoka’s voices became faint. She could
not open her eyes.
“Didi, open your eyes,” Khoka shook Bani violently.
She could hear many sounds. Men were talking and
sea-gulls were screeching.
“Open your eyes,” she heard someone say.
Bani’s head throbbed and she was unable to speak.
Then she realised that she was hearing actual voices.
Ignoring the pain in her head she forced herself to open
her eyes. Khoka smiled.
Bani saw the smiling face of a sailor with a white peaked
cap. Her mouth opened in bewilderment. Behind the
sailor was Naren. He came forward and held Bani’s hand.
“We have been rescued by the Indian Navy, Bani,” he said
in a choked voice.
Bani touched Khoka and then Naren, to make sure that
she was not dreaming. Her face then broke into a big
smile.
Naren, along with the sailor carried Bani to the beach
on a stretcher.
The pain in Bani’s head had almost disappeared. She
asked the sailor, “How did you find us ?”
“Early this morning we received a wireless message that
a fire had been seen in this direction.”
“But that was two nights ago,” said Bani.
“The people on Blue Island saw the fire. They communi-
cated the news to our headquarters, who in turn con-
veyed the news to us. We looked up the map and knew
that the fire must be on an uninhabited island. We started
moving in this direction. When we looked through our binoculars we saw some men waving. And you know the rest.”

“Are you feeling better?” Naren asked as he helped Bani to get into the motor boat.

“A lot better.”

Bani looked around for Salma, Karim and the others. They were all there. The motor boat started with a big roar.

“Where are you people from?” the Commander asked.

“Dohajari,” said the Maulana.

“Dohajari? What a strange coincidence. A few days ago we rescued 20 people in the Sunderbans. Their boat had capsized and we evacuated them to Diamond Harbour.”

“Do you know the names of those people?” asked Naren.

“Yes. We should have a list somewhere. Here it is.”

Naren went through the list. “Robin Ghosh, Bala Ghosh, Neela,” he read the names out loud. Khoka jumped into Bani’s arms and they hugged each other tight.

Rafiuddin Haq, Salma’s fiancé also figured in the list. Everyone was elated. They would soon be reunited with their families.

A single gull swept into the sky as if bidding farewell to the survivors. Bani looked back. The island of sea-gulls was getting smaller and smaller.

“Khoka”, she called and pointed to the gull.

“There is your jet escorting us,” said Naren. “At last, we have returned to the birds their empire.”