



Shaam-e-Lucknow..



The day's light had darkened away inviting the shades of a silvery blue twilight on the ageless silhouettes of Imambara, dimly lit stars began to appear and disappear in the sky. A child and his mother sat on the steps of a masjid looking at the stars wondering about the charismas of Allah.

The floating whiff of saffron buried in steaming rice caught the child's attention "*Ammi aap bhi hamare liyea biryani banaiyea naa*". The mother turned her eyes towards her son and kissed him softly on his forehead "*Hum aap kae liyea zaroor biryani banayenge, aap kae abbaa ko bhi biryani bahut pasand hai*".

An airplane appeared high up in the sky flashing its tiny beacon lights, they looked up. The twilight darkened further, stars became brighter, the boy smiled and hugged his mother.

Meanwhile, nine kilometers away in a 1895 haveli, an elite looking man sat at the head of a marble topped table. Sitting around the table were both his wives, his three young daughters, an old uncle, a film maker friend who was in town, a jovial neighbour with his attractive wife, and a visiting family friend who was a writer. They were being served dinner. It consisted of choicest Awadhi delicacies specially prepared by his bawarchi an undisputed master of culinary skills.

The boy and mother began to walk back to their nearby home, her husband would soon be back from his work, he had been out in the city all day long and must be tired. She remembered him mentioning to her in the morning that he was attending to a group of eleven foreign tourists from another country who had arrived in their city. It was his job to show them Lucknow and make them encounter the unique essence of its energy.

On a small terrace elsewhere a flock of white pigeons rested inside a wooden box-like cage with their eyes shut, ready to take off into the skies the next morning at the command of their master. Downstairs, the master was occupied on his cell phone, negotiating the betting stakes for the next day while his wife sat on the sofa delicately embroidering the collar of a kurta with colourful silk threads, dimples appeared on her cheeks when she smiled. On the terrace a shooting-star streaked through the dark sky.

The guests at the man's dinner table began to talk about the city and its connection with the pulse beat of artists, writers and film makers.

"The film Shatranj ke khiladi, which was directed by Satyajit Ray was shot here in Lucknow, it was based on a short story by Munshi Premchand, it was later subtitled in different languages..."

"Your Awadh region has also inspired other films for the Hindi cinema, Ganga Jamuna, Umrao Jaan were also shot here", the film maker said. An attendant served him another helping of kakori kebabs.

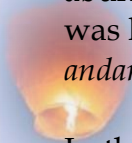
"Yes we have something in the air of Awadh that attracts men and women of great thoughts and renown", the host remarked. One of the daughters passed around the dish of Nargisi Koftas. He started speaking about the bygone days of Awadh, their conversation went on for a long time.



The retinue of his loyal attendants began to clear the table, one of them lit up the glass covered lamps along the wall. Dinner was over, it was time to celebrate the night.

There was a loud knock on the door, the little boy rushed to it, his Abbaa was returning home after a day long nostalgia of the city he had grown up in. Lucknow was his love, he adored its sounds, its aromas, colours and streets. Earlier in the day, he had proudly told his tourist group *"Our city is very different, you have to experience its atmosphere once in your lifetime, it will stay in your heart for ever!"*.

The little boy took his hand and lead him out onto the balcony *"Abbaa can you see those tiny stars above those minarets, Ammi told me they are a charismas of Allah"*. The man did not answer, but he did know Allah had been overly benevolent to grant their great city an abundance of visual and cultural wealth which gave them their livelihood. Lucknow was his home, he had so much to share about it a lifetime may not be enough. *"Aap dono andar aiye, humne khana laga diya hae"*, his wife called out from inside.



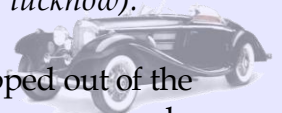
In the wide open courtyard of his ancestral kothi, somewhere along the Gomti river at the eastern edge of the city, a newly wed young man and his bride were rejoicing. They let off an orange coloured fanush from their hands, it stalled for a brief moment then began to rise up slowly into the dark sky radiating the bright glow of its camphor lamp. It soon became a simmering speck in Lucknow's night sky and faded away into infinity.

At the haveli all the wall lamps were still alight, the night was still young, the neighbour was trying to recreate some verses from Asrarul Haq Majaz, his favourite Awadhi poet.

"Firdaus-e-husn-o-ishq hai daman-e-lucknow, aankhon mein bas rahee hai rooh-e-lucknow"
(heaven of beauty and ardour is the environ of lucknow, in my eyes lives the soul of lucknow)

"Mutrib bhi hai yea, sharab bhi, abr-e-bahaar bhi, har lamhe mein basar hai jaan-e-lucknow"
(my music, my alcohol, my cloud of spring too, in every moment lives the spirit of lucknow).

A black vintage car rolled into the gates of the haveli. The person who stepped out of the restored 1936 Mercedes-Benz Roadster also had aristocratic bearings, he was a nawab. Dressed in a long kurta and churidar pajamas, he slowly walked up the stairs leaving a trail of ittar scent behind him. *"Adaab!"* he greeted, and joined them amidst the lamps.



It was 10 am, the pigeons were circling in the sky, the Couple was still blissfully asleep, the Elite man was being served tea in a silver tray in his garden, resting next to him was a brown doberman dog, the Little boy was at his school flipping through the pages of an illustrated history book, his Mother was at a shop buying spices to prepare biryani for him, his Father stood below the city's Rumi darwaza narrating the history of Awadh to a curious audience of tourists surrounding him.

- *Neel Thakur (Author)*