

Chainbreaker¹

Izaz Khan

It was pitch dark and the pressure benzine lamps made the farmer's house appear like a beacon from a distance. The devotees were engrossed in their Hindu religious songs and prayers when they were disturbed by the crash of hooves over the gravel lying at the entrance to the yard. The children ran to their mothers, huddling in a corner. Hassan stopped his horse near the men and looked down menacingly, holding the butt of his pistol still wedged under his belt. His spirited mount was snorting and stamping its front legs.

When he pulled out the gun and fired it in the air, the ear-splitting bang split the air. The women and children screamed and the men cowered in fear. Holding the pistol in the air, he ordered them to stop and return to their homes immediately. They hesitated momentarily, showing their reluctance to comply. He fired another shot, this time at a coconut tree nearby. A punctured fruit with its milk dripping fell to the ground with a thud.

The men rose and rushed out with their wives and children. The horse was moving backwards and forwards in an agitated state. Hassan made it rear behind the departing group, making some scream and run. Then he warned the host never again to have such a religious gathering and rode off into the night.

The next morning, some of the farmers were at the cane field being harvested. They complained among themselves about Hassan, wondering what they could do to stop his intimidation. They felt helpless because they knew that if they reported the matter to the police, they would be subjected to more harassment and possibly violence. The police would not be able to do much anyway. They decided to bide their time and

busied themselves with their work, pretending that nothing had happened last night.

The cane cutters swung their long sharp knives high as they lopped off the *kantaap*, the leafy top of the sugar cane stick and tossed the cane in the heaps beside them. As it was June and the beginning of the harvesting season, they were more enthusiastic, joking and yelling a lot as they moved along their *tasa*, the portion each had been given to cut. Dawn had broken with a bright morning. As usual for this time of the year, there was not a cloud in the sky. The mynah birds and bulbuls were noisily flitting about in search of insects. The heat was intensifying with the rising sun. The *paniwallah* was busy with his four gallon kerosene tin of water. He went about satisfying the ever increasing and clamorous calls of the thirsty cutters who appeared to be dissipating water almost as quickly as they were drinking it, judging from their sweat soaked clothes.

Gradually the birds began to fly off to the cool shade of the large mango and sirsa trees nearby. Some of the cutters were finishing off their *tasa* and seeking shady cool spots themselves for rest and breakfast. As was usual at harvest times, working pairs of bullocks, cows and heifers, scattered all over the field munched on the *kantaap* with relish. The cane juice and saliva which dribbled down from the sides of their mouths turned into foam, making their lips appear white.

Prem Singh stood near his house on top of a small hill and gazed down. From there he could see the cutters and his new motor launch, the *Tui Wai*, king of the sea in Fijian. It was berthed in a tidal creek near a bridge on the King's Road a couple of hundred yards from the cutters. The place was known as the Dogo because of a large dogo tree used for securing the boats kept there.

It had an inboard diesel engine, a half-cabin and an ice-box. Its fresh white paint gleamed in the sun as it lay on its side in the shallow creek at ebb tide. The name printed in black appeared only as a blur. He was eager to take her to Nakasau, a distant fishing ground where he had never been before. He planned to take with him his friends Akbar Khan and Aquila Kuna. With that in mind, he walked down to the King's Road on his way to see them.

When Akbar and Aquila arrived at the Dogo at four the next morning, Prem was already there, organising the gear in the light of a kerosene hurricane lamp. The creek was full with tidal water. Akbar and Aquila had their fishing lines and other belongings in hessian sugar sacks slung over their shoulders. After untying the mooring rope, they jumped on board, causing the boat to tilt to one side. Aquila untied the boat. He

¹ This is the first chapter of the novel *Chainbreaker* by Izaz Khan. The novel (first published in 1993 by Eldorado) is being prepared for republication.

picked up the long pole leaning against the side and began punting along the creek until they reached a much deeper and wider part. Prem started the engine and they moved off a lot faster.

In a short while they reached a confluence of creeks, forming a web in the mangrove swamps. As though Prem had a sixth sense, he chose the right creek which took them out to sea.

At dawn, they found the cool sea air exhilarating. As this was a good time for trawling, Akbar pulled out a line from his sack, attached a home-made lure to it and tossed it into the water. Aquila squatted in a corner of the cabin set aside for cooking and lit the little portable kerosene pressure burner. He pumped air into it and turned it full on. Its noisy whirr was drowned by the sound of the engine. He put the kettle on it and sat on a pile of sacks, waiting for the water to boil.

Akbar felt a strong jerk on the line. He jumped up and gave it a tug and immediately realised that he had hooked a large fish. He hauled it in. Prem was watching this and shut the engine off. As they slowly drifted, Akbar pulled in a ten-pound walu, spanish mackerel, yelling with joy as he landed it.

He cleaned it at the side of the launch, cut it into pieces and as he gave them to Aquila, he said, 'There is enough there for all of us for a feed.' Akbar threw the line out again and resumed his seat. Prem started the engine and moved off. In a little while Aquila emerged from the cabin with some tea and fried walu for their enjoyment.

'Oom, I'll get another one soon,' said Akbar with a mouthful.

'Don't worry, we'll get plenty at Nakasau,' laughed Prem.

Not to be left out, Aquila said, 'Yeah, that's for sure.'

The sun was beginning to bite. The clear blue sky overhead was typical and no one expected the trip to be spoilt by rain. The days were always like this in the dry and cooler months between May and September in this western zone of Fiji's main island. While the mornings and evenings were cool, the days were as hot as the rest of the year but without the severe humidity. The season would change dramatically around Christmas, the time for torrential rain. Then the heat and the humidity would intensify.

After travelling for a couple of hours, the trio reached a complex of reefs called Moko where they had fished before. Although they still had another few hours of travelling to Nakasau, they decided to try their luck here. If they caught enough fish, they could leave Nakasau for another day.

Prem took the launch along the edge of the reef until he found an opening and entered into the aqua of the calmer and shallower waters.

Aquila exclaimed, 'I love fishing here.'

'Yeah, because you know there won't be any big momos,' retorted Akbar referring to the dreaded sharks by their Fijian nickname.

'*Nomu sona*,' swore Aquila. They all laughed.

Excitement built up as they moved over an area of clear water revealing the colourful clumps of coral and white sand several feet below. There were splashes and sprays in the distance where the ocean met the edge of the reef.

Prem noticed some unusual movement in front. 'Will you take over Akbar? Looks like a large school of salala ahead.'

He went into the cabin and picked up an old paint tin. He opened it and carefully pulled out a red stick of dynamite wrapped in rags. He came out with the explosive and puffing his cheroot. Both Akbar and Aquila felt the pungent odour on their nostrils again.

Prem climbed up to the top of the cabin and went to the very front of the bow. He gazed at the water ahead, attentive and motionless.

Akbar had turned off the engine and was now moving the boat very quietly with the pole. Prem puffed regularly. His eyes had locked on the fish. The salala were moving across at twenty yards. Aquila and Akbar were expecting to hear a loud explosion at any moment. Their task was to dive in with their goggles and nets to collect the fish. They had to move fast. Not only would the fish quickly sink out of reach but the sharks would come too.

Prem lit the fuse and let it burn for just the right amount of time, without shifting his gaze on the school. At the right moment, he hurled the burning missile at it.

The movement of the throw and the flying object startled the fish which began to scatter frantically as it hit the water, sank a few feet and exploded. Prem squatted and held the anchor as the boat swayed from side to side. Akbar and Aquila leapt into the water with their nets and goggles.

The force of the detonation had caused huge quantities of water to be thrown out in a circle. Some of the fish near the surface were killed instantly and were floating with their bellies up. Others, dead, stunned or wounded had started to sink slowly. This was the crucial time and Akbar and Aquila worked hard. Prem put the catch into the ice-box.

Soon it was too late to collect any more. Prem noticed two sharks forty yards away and called Akbar and Aquila into the boat. They were glad to be out of danger and to have a rest.

They sat, exhausted, catching their breath, water dripping from their bodies. Prem came over and joined them after he hauled in the anchor he had thrown out soon after the explosion. A few fish were lying about on the floor, either dead or opening and shutting their mouths in the process as though they were gasping for air.

'If we get two more schools like this one we will fill the ice-box,' said Prem with satisfaction as he lit another cheroot.

'Then we can go back home. We'll go to Nakasau some other time,' retorted Akbar who did not like sleeping on the boat.

Prem began moving the launch towards the circumference of the reef lying some quarter of a mile away. They came across a small strand of coral and he adeptly manoeuvred the boat through the openings until he reached another promising open space.

'Looks like another school ahead,' said Prem with expectation as he gazed over the top of the cabin.

'I'll take over,' said Akbar as he stood up straightening his sticky wet khaki shorts.

Prem went into the cabin and brought another stick of dynamite. He returned to the front of the boat, puffing away as before. Akbar shut off the engine and began punting. Prem saw a large school of mullet locally known as kanace, slowly moving towards them. This time he did not have the chance for reflection and preparation. In moments he was within throwing distance and he lit the fuse. Akbar had placed the pole in its usual horizontal position at the side of the boat and was sitting on the ice-box with his goggles and net. Aquila was sitting on the opposite side, similarly ready. Both were tense, as usual, before the bang. When the explosion came it was unusually loud, followed by a heavy thud. They sensed that something had gone wrong and dashed up to Prem.

Both screamed in horror.

He was lying on his back, dead. The upper part of his body was covered in blood. As Akbar and Aquila got closer they saw that his right arm and shoulder had been blown off altogether. The right half of his head and face were also missing. All around was bespattered with blood and matter. Shreds of red paper, forming the casing for the dynamite lay about the area. Even the breeze of the salty air did little to lessen the mixed smell of blood, torn flesh, and explosive powder. This heightened Akbar and Aquila's trauma and fear. They stood in silence and in awe, refusing to believe what had happened.

The boat was slowly drifting towards a ridge of coral over a few feet of water. Alerted by the swishing, Akbar turned his head. He rushed to

the back, started the engine and steered the launch to safety. 'Throw in the anchor,' he called. Aquila slowly and squeamishly lifted Prem's legs, freed the anchor, trying to avoid touching the blood on it, and threw it. Akbar shut off the engine and entered the cabin to fetch a couple of sacks.

When he pulled one he noticed a red soft drink bottle roll off the end. The neck of the bottle was wrapped with a thin piece of red cloth and tied to it was a dried cane toad carcass which dangled down. A couple of withered marigolds were also hanging limply from the mouth of the bottle. A closer examination showed that it had been half-filled with what appeared to be ash and strange signs were painted on it. Akbar jumped back in horror, knocking his head on the roof when he realised the purpose of such items. Slowly, he mustered enough courage to pull out two sacks and hid the bottle under another.

He walked out ashen-faced, cut the sacks open, doubling their size and took them to where Prem's corpse lay.

He and Aquila lifted it, trying not to look too closely at it and wrapped it in them. They carried it with difficulty to the cabin and placed it in a corner. Akbar did not tell Aquila about the bottle at this stage.

While he started the engine, Aquila returned to the bow, brought in the anchor and doused salt water on the area where the body had lain. He pulled the water up with an empty paint tin tied to the anchor rope.

Not a word had been spoken since the accident. All the joy and thrill which had elated them just a short time ago had been replaced with sorrow, fear, anxiety and guilt.

They both knew that death from dynamite could not be hidden from the police. Also, that fishing in this way was not only dangerous but also illegal which could lead to imprisonment.

Prem's wife and family had disapproved of this, saying to Prem's fishing friends that if they did not go with him, he would stop using this method of fishing because there would be no one to bring up the catch. But the friends had ignored these warnings.

Akbar began to think that Prem's death was not accidental. He felt very confused. He found relief by concentrating on taking the launch out of Moko.

Aquila had joined him, thankful that the task of cleaning the area where Prem had fallen was behind him. Akbar moved the vessel towards the opening through which they had entered and took her out. Neither was looking forward to getting home.