

Mirror in Rajabazar

By Anjali Mukerjee

"Anneke! Anneke!" her mother called to her from downstairs, "Wake up!" Anneke, meanwhile, had been lying in her bed, daydreaming as she was already awake. Swinging her legs around from her bed to the ground, she groggily got to her feet. It was eight o'clock in the morning but already the heat was oppressive - another lazy summer day, she thought.

Anneke lived with her family in a wealthy part of Calcutta called Rajabazar. Although she was now twenty-three, she had attended a school for English girls as Calcutta, and indeed the rest of India, up until recently had been under the rule of the British. Even her name was western; her family, despite being staunchly Hindu, prided itself on the fact that they had enough money to be on par with the people who had ruled their country for centuries. At this point in time, however, the British had left and the country was in turmoil – violence penetrated the sense of serenity that used to exist even in Rajabazar, with extreme animosity between the two dominant religious groups of India – the Muslims and Hindus. With Ghandi's assassination, a cruel paradox to his notion of progress without violence was now in play as bloodshed became part of every day life in Calcutta. Brutal, cruel bloodshed. The Muslims were fleeing the country across the borders at the east and west, finding sanctuary in what was to become Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Anneke was what her mother described as "peculiar". Having attended a school for the English, and being lucky enough to be able to attend university despite being a woman in a period in India's history that did not make such a thing easy, she was liberated compared to other girls her age. She was a dreamer – the notion of being married off to someone she didn't know as was custom in India seemed foreign to her. She secretly harboured notions of a "love" marriage, the term describing

marrying on one's own account rather than have a family arrange it for you. Anneke was politically orientated despite having her head in the clouds for much of the time – a strong supporter of Gandhi, an opinionated reader of the daily newspapers and passionately against the violence surrounding her. She pitied the Muslims forced to leave their homes in Calcutta and longed for when peace would be instilled once more and Partition a thing of the past.

Anneke made her way downstairs in her nightdress. She was of a small stature, fine-boned with unusually pale skin for a Bengali, long, black hair and eyes only an Indian could have – large and round and luscious with a permanent look of surprise on her face. Her mother was waiting for Anneke in the kitchen with a cup of sweet milky marsala tea ready for her. “Darling,” she said in her typical lilting voice, “Did you sleep well?” Anneke yawned and nodded.

“Why did you call for me? I was enjoying just lying in bed,” Anneke said, her mother bustling around preparing breakfast for her. A woman's job in India, in Anneke's time and today, is centred on looking after the family, making sure they are adequately fed, washed, clothed and prepared for the day ahead.

“Thanks, ma,” Anneke said, sitting down to a breakfast of samosas, a meal only wealthy Calcuttans could afford. Anneke, indeed, was lucky in that sense – she had *salwas* of fine fabrics, the family had servants, a car and a chauffeur and money for holidays to the coast. However, Anneke felt she lacked something in her life and was perpetually restless. Perhaps if she had a brother or sister the void that ached inside her would not be so obvious, but her mother had had difficulty conceiving Anneke and another child was not possible.

“I got you out of bed because it was high time you did,” her mother replied, “and...”

“Hey!” Anneke interrupted. “What's all that furniture doing there? I haven't seen any of that before.”

In the courtyard just outside the front door of the house that separated it from the footpath beyond, stood three pieces of wooden furniture, gleaming in the morning sun. There was a small chest of drawers, what looked like a bedside table and a mirror.

"Oh," her mother started, "your father picked it up from a merchant in Tala. As if we don't have enough junk in the house already, but I suppose it's quite interesting. You can have your pick of what you want."

"A merchant in Tala?" she wondered. "I think it's gorgeous, even if you think it's junk, ma. Look how smooth the wood is."

"I'm quite sure it belonged to a Muslim family. They probably left for the east and couldn't take the furniture with them. The table's okay, I could put it in the front room and burn incense on it. So typical of your father. He's a hoarder."

"I'll have the mirror. I'll put it on my jewellery table," decided Anneke, and, finishing her somosa, she opened the door to the courtyard, picked up the mirror, came back into the house and started for the stairs.

Anneke moved sideways into her room, carrying the mirror. Propping it against her bed, she began tidying her jewellery table so as to accommodate her new possession. She moved her dishes of jewellery, perfumes and candles and lifting the heavy mirror up, she placed it against the wall on the far end of the table. Pleased with herself and the mirror, she sat down on a chair to examine it.

The mirror was surrounded by wood, dark and shiny and intricately, beautifully carved. It even matches the wood of my bed, Anneke thought, as if it was supposed to come to her all along. She held up her hand and ran her fingers over the wood, still warm from being in the sun and smooth, so smooth. She looked into the mirror at her reflection and sighed, for her shoulders were more stooped than usual as though the weight of the violence happening around her, that she so

detested, was forcing them down. She looked hard into the eyes of the reflection staring back at her, large and round...

Suddenly, she could see her reflection no more. Her body seized up with surprise as white light emanated from the mirror, so much so that Anneke threw her hands up to her face to shield her eyes. She almost toppled backwards in her chair, shocked as she was from the strange whiteness pouring out of the mirror. Unlike the warmth of the wood, the light was cool and felt almost like cold pin pricks covering her body. It was uncomfortable, yet she didn't scream, her breath taken away by what was happening.

The light suddenly stopped pouring. Meekly, Anneke took her hands away from her eyes and tentatively looked into the mirror. But it was not *Anneke* that looked back at her. It was a *boy*, a man – he was *in* the mirror, staring at her, an expression of surprise on his face that echoed Anneke's.

He spoke. "Don't be scared," he whispered, "it's okay, it's okay."

"Who...who are you? What is this? How..." Anneke stopped, stunned.

The man stared back at Anneke. He looked about twenty-five, dark skin like a southerner, eyes that looked sad but sparkled despite the dimness of Anneke's room.

"Cursed you are and your soul. Into a looking-glass you will go. Free you are when you find, a mai to free you from your bind," he chanted, from the mirror.

"Cursed?" said Anneke.

"That's how I got in here, I think," he began, softly. "A *sadhu*, I refused to give a *sadhu* money and we got into an argument; I made him angry. He said those words to me and I arrived home, some time later looking in the mirror in my room and that's the last thing I remember."

"Who are you? I'm Anneke," she told him.

"My name is Ameer. Ameer Kalphan. I'm from Tala."

"This is amazing...what's it like in there?" Anneke questioned.

"It's like nothing. It's like I'm not conscious. I told you, the last thing I remember was being in my room at home, that's my last memory up until now. It's like you woke me up, broke the slumber," Ameer mused, "My parents, they must think I was killed. We were in the process of leaving Calcutta."

"How do we get you out of there? Because..."

"Anneke!" her mother interrupted, putting her head around the door. "Who are you talking to?"

Anneke turned around in her chair in surprise, Ameer's image in the mirror disappearing as quickly as it had become visible. "No one, ma, just myself," she lied.

"The mirror looks good," complimented her mother.

"Thanks," replied Anneke, obviously distracted. Her mother closed the door and Anneke's eyes rested on the mirror again. Ameer's image reappeared.

"So...how do you feel, Ameer. I mean, are you sad?"

"I feel like I'm dreaming, this whole thing doesn't seem real; black magic, I suppose. I just ache for my family and how they must be feeling," he said.

"You're Muslim, was that why your family was leaving?" inquired Anneke.

"Yes," he replied, and sighed. "I just want to get out of here."

There was a pause in their conversation. Anneke was completely taken aback by what was happening and wondered how this most strange of situations could fall at her feet. She had heard of the magic woven by sadhus, but never seen it realised, and her heart went out to Ameer and the situation he was in. Her primary focus was a means of rescuing him from his glass prison.

Ameer, meanwhile, was watching Anneke intently. She was quite beautiful, although she seemed agitated.

Anneke heard her mother calling her, again. Her mother had a habit of doing so, screeching her name from the kitchen, or her bedroom, or wherever she was.

"I'll be back," assured Anneke, and met her mother as she was coming up the stairs. The two women quickly conversed, and then Anneke made her way back to her room. It seemed as though Ameer's image was only visible when Anneke was looking into the mirror, or seated just in front of it, because as she bustled around her room getting ready to leave the house with her mother, Ameer was absent.

Almost ready to leave, Anneke sat down in front of the mirror. "I'll help you, Ameer," she promised. "We'll get you out of there. I'm going out; I have to, but please rest easily that I will do everything to free you."

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Over the next few days, Anneke and Ameer became acquainted. Anneke would speak softly into the mirror, to avoid causing means for concern from her mother, and provided Ameer's only outlet from his life in glass. The two began to forge a relationship, getting to understand what life was like for each other; both the children of wealthy Calcuttan families, but of opposing religions.

"I never wanted to leave Calcutta," Ameer confided, "I liked my life here. But my family were forced into it; we were scared for our lives."

"I know, I understand," lamented Anneke, "I had friends at university who were forced into leaving as well, I just want all this to end, and at the same time I wish it had never happened. And my friends, they weren't bad people. They just happened to be Muslim. And I happen to be Hindu. If only we could live together, I don't understand this conflict."

"You seem tired of it," remarked Ameer. "So was I. So am I."

"Anil, why did the sadhu choose you to put a curse on?" wondered Anneke. "It doesn't seem right. You seem perfectly okay, like you wouldn't want to hurt anyone."

"He knew who I was and knows my family. I recognised him when I refused to give him money. When he's in Calcutta he lives near as in Tala. I don't know for sure but I think he had some kind of run in with my father; it wasn't really that I wouldn't give him money as to why he cursed me but I think he was harbouring some kind of vendetta against Baba."

"Tomorrow," began Anneke, "I'll go to the university library and see what books I can find about sadhus and their magic. There's bound to be something to help you. Things will be okay, Ameer."

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Anneke rose early to go to her university's library, and books she found, but nothing that provided any insight into curses of sadhus or otherwise. Despairingly, she relayed to Ameer her lack of findings, and together they pondered what they could do to help Ameer and his situation. Anneke could feel her stomach starting to rumble – she had been so preoccupied with her mission to the library that she had not had time to eat, much to her mother's suspicion, and it suddenly occurred to her that Ameer might be hungry. Anneke made her way down the stairs and into the kitchen. She took a guava, a plate and a knife and went back upstairs.

Anneke sat down in the chair in front of the mirror with a thud. "Ameer. Are you hungry at all?"

"I don't feel hungry. I feel as though I ate something about an hour ago. I feel like I felt before I looked into the mirror at home – that I'd had a meal in the not too distant past."

"Well, let's try something," said Anneke, taking the knife and cutting the guava in two pieces, then into four, then into eight. "Ameer, hold up your hand," she instructed, and Ameer did so. She picked up a piece and gently, gently pressed it to the mirror where his hand was.

"Oh!" Anneke cried, quickly retrieving her hand. It was though tiny electric shocks had passed from the mirror up her arm. Anneke, not perturbed, decided to try again. This time she held the piece of guava to the mirror, and, tolerating the little shocks, a blue light gleamed from the point where the fruit touched the mirror. Ameer looked at her and she looked back. It was obvious the fruit would not penetrate his glass enclosure, and she dropped it, but kept her fingers touching the mirror. She spread her fingers apart, and Ameer did the same, the strange blue light emanating from the point where their fingers met. Anneke could hear the faintest of buzzing sounds coming from the mirror.

Ameer and Anneke locked eyes as they slowly, softly moved their fingers across the mirror, back again, up and down, the tips of their fingers almost touching but separated by the glass.

"You'll be okay, you'll be okay," whispered Anneke.

"You're beautiful, Anneke," Ameer softly said back. They looked into each others eyes, until Anneke heard an abrupt knock at the door. Annoyed, she asked between clenched teeth, "Who is it?"

Her mother opened the door. "It's time for lunch, darling, you must be hungry after no breakfast." Anneke's mother looked quizzically at Anneke, as it seemed to her that Anneke was spending an awful lot of time sitting at her jewellery-table doing nothing, apparently. She was aware, however, that Anneke was a young woman, not a girl anymore, and shut the door despite her curiosity.

"Ameer, it was no accident you came into my life," Anneke confided, "The sadhu said a girl would rescue you, and that girl is me. I just don't know how."

It turned dark outside as the sky was filled with clouds and the sun had become covered. Anneke opened a drawer in her room and took out two candles, placing them on the table where the mirror was and lighting them with a match. Ameer's image in the mirror began to glow.

"I wonder what would happen if I smashed the mirror," said Anneke to Ameer, "I'm not game to try though, I might lose you forever."

“Anneke – I have an idea. Why don’t we find another sadhu, explain the situation to him and bring him into your room, and see if he can help.”

“I don’t know any sadhus though. And they don’t generally live in cities. And they can be corrupt, like the sadhu who put you into the mirror. And...”

“Anneke,” said Ameer, “What else are we supposed to do?”

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The next day Anneke dressed properly and stepped outside into the afternoon heat. Walking to a busy street near where she lived, she jumped into a rickshaw and made her way to the largest temple she new of, in a place in Calcutta called Kalighat. The wind, as she travelled along, lapped at her face and cooled her down – it was mid-summer and Calcutta heat was notorious. Arriving at the temple, it did not take long to find a sadhu, or two, or three – a group of them sat together in the shade of a banyan tree next to the temple, their orange garb a tell-tale sign. The sadhus, generally, did not live in cities but would sometimes come in to find money for their travels. Anneke was tentative about approaching them, until she spied a solitary sadhu sitting by himself. He looks kind, she thought. She walked up to him, wondering if he spoke Bengali or Hindi.

“Hello,” said Anneke, “It’s hot, isn’t it?”

“Hello, my child,” replied the sadhu, “It is hot. What is your name?”

“Anneke. I’m sorry to disturb you, um, what’s your name?”

“Govind,” he said, his dark eyes staring inquisitively at Anneke, perspiration in little beads on his forehead. It wasn’t everyday that he was approached by young women.

Anneke crossed her fingers behind her back. “I have a request, to get straight to the point,” she said cautiously, “Um, I have a friend. He was cursed by a sadhu near his home in Tala. I was hoping you could help me, help me free him. I can pay you, of course.”

Govind raised his eyebrows, the idea of a little excitement in his day appealing to him. Of course he would help this girl, he thought; she seemed pleasant enough and he very much disliked the notion of sadhus inflicting curses on people – he had seen it happen before. “Ah, my child,” he asked, “How much?”

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Anneke and Govind made their way back to Anneke’s house in a rickshaw. Luck was on her side, Anneke thought, as her mother had gone out for the day to visit her parents. Anneke had declined going with her, as much as she was fond of her grandparents – this was far more important. Anneke’s father was busy with work. Anneke sat the sadhu down in the kitchen and went about preparing him some tea – strong, milky and sweet. She placed a *gulab jamon* on a plate and gave it to Govind, who put it in his mouth and ate it in one go.

Sitting down at the kitchen table with Govind, Anneke told him about the mirror – how it had come into her hands and Ameer’s curse, which he had chanted to her on his first appearance.

“Another gulab jamon, Anneke?” asked Govind. Anneke took a second one out of the box. He seemed very calm and composed to Anneke, Ameer’s story not seeming to worry him at all.

“Do you think you can help my friend?” inquired Anneke.

“Of course I can, Ameer will be freed by sunset tonight,” he said confidently.

“Okay, let’s go upstairs then. I hope you’re right – did I mention that Ameer’s parents probably think he was killed?”

“Death everywhere,” murmured Govind, “Darkness everywhere. I detest the darkness.”

Leading Govind up into her room, Anneke felt a twinge of panic. She did not know this man at all. She was all by herself in the house. What had come over her to do such a thing? Oh my *god*, she thought. She was about to take this stranger into her room, what was she doing...

"Maybe this was a bad idea," she garbled, but Govind, sensing her unrest, reassured her that he would help Ameer.

"I am a good man," he said. "A good man. Do not worry, Anneke."

Anneke's heart was thumping. She was not thinking clearly but sat down in front of the mirror anyway, the sadhu standing up behind her. Ameer's image flashed onto the glass.

"Ameer!" she exclaimed.

"Oh Anneke, a sadhu! Can he help?"

"My name is Govind," said the sadhu proudly. With his right hand he began stroking his beard, which was long and grey. Anneke watched him, as did Ameer, both of them wishing that this strange man would be of help.

"I *can* help you, Ameer," said Govind, almost as though he had read their thoughts. "Anneke can help you too. Just follow my instructions, and you will be free by sunset. Free from the curse. Free from the mirror. Just wait for my words, my friends."

Govind cleared his throat. "Anneke, you have to concentrate." Anneke, meanwhile, was looking at Ameer, Ameer looking back, and for the second time that day Anneke secretly crossed her fingers. Ameer smiled nervously at her.

"Pure thought will free you Ameer. Anneke, pay attention. Concentrate. Your purity will free Ameer, your love, your longing, your hopes, your dreams."

"I want you to imagine what you want most in this world. For you and for Ameer, for your family and your country."

Anneke spoke instantly. "I want the violence to end. I want the Muslims to live in peace with the Hindus," she looked at Ameer. "I want Ameer's love, and for that the Muslims must live without

opposing malice in this city. I want not one more drop of blood to be shed and I want Gandhi's vision to pervade the consciousness of every person in Calcutta and in this country."

Ameer's image in the mirror began to swirl, like the glass was turning to liquid. Without thinking she held up her hand and touched the mirror, where Ameer's hand was, and felt warmth.

"Now Anneke," began Govind, "Close your eyes and think only of what you just told me. Meditate, Anneke, meditating is my job. I want you to do the same. Remember, just concentrate on what you told me, and think of nothing else."

Anneke did as she was told and closed her eyes, trying as hard as she could to concentrate on what she had said. She found it easy, passionate as she was about an end to the violence destroying the peace of her city, and fond she was of Ameer.

"Concentrate, Anneke, concentrate," whispered the sadhu into her ear, and Anneke did so. Her cheeks were flushed, and she felt a breeze begin to circulate in her room, although the windows were shut, blowing against her face and creating a faint murmuring sound.

"Anneke, Anneke," repeated Ameer, until suddenly – his head emerged from the mirror, swirling it was, like pools of water. He leaned forward to where Anneke sat, who was in a deep kind of trance brought on by the atmosphere created by Govind. Gently, he pressed his lips to hers and they kissed; a long, lingering kind of kiss that shook Anneke to her core. And that was what it took, as the rest of Ameer's body tumbled from the mirror and he fell, face first, onto the ground.

"Welcome, Ameer!" cried the sadhu, elated. Ameer, dazed, sat up on the ground, looking around and smiling at Govind and Anneke. Anneke, too, had toppled over as Anil had materialised and she picked herself up and took Ameer's hand. Once again, he pressed his lips to hers, Govind doing a little dance of triumph and clapping his hands together in the middle of Anneke's room.

The light from outside was fading quickly and Anneke flung open the door onto her balcony. Govind, Ameer and her stepped outside, Ameer drawing in deep breaths after the muskiness of his former abode. He stretched his legs and his arms, and the three of them turned to the west, taking in the sunset over the polluted atmosphere of their city. Ameer, turning to Anneke, said, "I am so hungry, Anneke. Let's have some food to celebrate. You said your mother won't be home until after dark, didn't you? How are you going to explain me to her?" he said cheekily, pushing her shoulder. "I hadn't thought about that," she said, and then it suddenly occurred to her – what would be of Ameer after this? Would he return to his family who had fled to the east or stay in Calcutta? A myriad of thoughts flowed through her mind, but she was interrupted by Ameer, who gently took her hand. Anneke smiled uneasily, and they made their way downstairs and out into the warm air, to a local food vendor. Ameer still had a few rupees in his pocket from before he was banished into the mirror, and they ate triumphantly, Ameer and Anneke then thanking Govind profusely for his help and saying goodbye. He paused, winked and disappeared into the crowd and his uncertain, sadhu future.

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"How am I going to hide you?" Anneke asked Ameer, "My mother will be home soon, and my father too, but dad keeps to himself. Ma, on the mother hand..."

"You could banish me into your cupboard," Ameer laughed, his eyes sparkling. Ameer was full of elation it was like being born again, he thought, and to add to his sense of joy he was with a girl, a girl beautiful and smart, and for the next few days Anneke and Ameer forgot about the bloodshed around them, and the future, and revelled in each others company. It was like a game, avoiding Anneke's mother – Anneke kept her door locked and explained that she was depressed and needed her privacy. A feeble excuse, she thought, but she really couldn't care less – it was like a dream being with Ameer and for as long as they could they basked in the glow of their friendship and growing love for each other, until they could no longer avoid the fact that Ameer would most likely

be leaving. It was a Thursday night and Anneke's mother had left Calcutta for a couple of days with her parents, to be returning in the morning.

"I can't stay here forever, Anneke. My parents, my family, I have to find them. I can't stand the idea that they think I was killed, they must be grieving for a child who's still alive."

"Ameer, why can't you stay? I want you here, I want you to be near me. Can't you come back, you don't even know where your family are, you..."

"I have to find them Anneke. As much as I love you, I love them," and after another, soft kiss, Anneke laid her head on Ameer's chest and he stroked her hair until, together, they fell asleep.

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"Anneke! *Anneke!*" cried her mother. Her mother's voice pierced her sleep and she awoke suddenly. "Ameer," she said sleepily, looking around, but Ameer was not there. She looked frantically around her room, and ran outside to the bathroom and downstairs, but to her misery he was nowhere to be found. She felt a prickling sensation behind her eyes and tears began to flow down her cheeks. That man, Ameer, why did she fall for him? Why was he Muslim? Why are the Muslims fleeing Calcutta? Anneke cried angry tears and herself cursed the people of her city that could not tolerate these people, simply because of their religion.

Between sobs she looked at the mirror, that mirror that had brought her love to her and incarcerated him at the same time. On the glass, attached with a bit of candle wax, was a note from Ameer. She took it off and sat down on the bed. It read:

"For you, my love; Anneke, angel from above:

When the violence stops, and peace restored,

I will search for my love and whisper her words

Of love and peace and all things pure

For you, Anneke, are my lure,

Back to Calcutta and beyond the dark,

On my heart, love, you have made your mark.

Anneke held the poem up to her face and inhaled deeply, the tears still streaming down her cheeks. She reached underneath her bed and pulled out her special box, where everything important to her was kept. Placing Ameer's poem on top she put the lid back on and slid the box back to where it had come from. She composed herself and went downstairs; she was hungry.

"Good morning, Anneke," greeted her mother. Anneke sat down at the kitchen table and opened the newspaper, which she would do every day for the coming months, looking for signs of an end to Partition, heralding Ameer's return. She would wait, she decided, and wait she did, for an end to the bloodshed and hatred that tainted her country's history. Ameer would return, and with it, the peace Anneke and India craved.