### **SHORT STORY**

BRATYA RAISU

(Translated from Bangla by SAG and KI)

Flowers in hand, he comes calling when night descends. I see that he's smiling. So I too smile back. Asks how I'm doing. And when I ask him his name he replies 'Foolish'. Later I come to know that he loves flowers, that his name derives not from the English 'fool', but from the Bangla 'phul' (flower). He's come to carry out some duty, enquires how many times I've done it, and when I reply 'not once', suddenly turns grave and orders me, 'Go on, get in! At once!' And the moment I enter the toilet he

 $A\,middle\hbox{-}aged\,gentleman\,shows\,up\,with\,flowers.$ 

'What gives?' I say. 'Why the flowers?'

'I like you very much,' he replies. 'Please don't refuse them.'

I take the flowers.

'Don't you have a wife and children?' I ask.

'Wife, yes; children, no. These are from my own garden.' 'So I take it you love flowers?'

'Well, not exactly. I brought them because I like you so much.'

'Where do you live?'

'Round the corner. My wife's twenty-six.'

'Why twenty-six?' 'Don't know."

'All right, then, do bring her over.' He waves his hand as he leaves. The next day he appears with his wife. Now she has flowers in her

'You see, I love flowers', she informs me.

'Right! Well! And you are...?'

'I am Zuleikha.'

She pronounces her name as if an entire 'y' and a 'sh' had encroached into the initial 'z'.

'Zshyleikha,' I exclaim, 'the sultan's daughter.

She heaves her bosom and laughs ('haha'), a rippling undulation that causes her sari end to fall off her breasts onto her lap

'How long have you two been

She stops laughing. 'Six years.' 'No issue?'

'He's got problems.' She looks away from me, and then down fiercely into the flowers in her hand.

'I thought that wasn't a problem anymore these days.

Her husband smiles sweetly at me. 'The very reason we came to you', he says.

Predictably enough, the lights go out. A power failure! I light a candle and ask her, 'Your measurements?' I look deep into her eyes.

She starts to unwrap her sari. 'Could you please hold her down?' I ask the husband. 'I can't

function normally anymore. He obeys. She spits out "Son of

At whom, I can't tell.

I sow jute seedlings in the fields; why I do so, I don't know. There never was any need to know such things. My father, his father, his father before him, all of them trudged on

similarly, daily, uncomprehendingly. So when the jute pushes upwards, I do not know why plants grow tall

And when I dip them in the waters of the canal nearby and my mind turns over in sorrow. I do not know the reason and think it is the Chaitra Later, I separate jute fibers and lay them out in the sun to dry. Then I

go looking for Lailee to help me weave ropes. I find her fishing by the

'Lailee, so much jute all around us, and all you can do is fish?'

'Sounds like you're in a romantic mood today, Mama.

'These jute plants growing tall, can you tell why?

She says she does, then leans to whisper words into my ears that would have turned my forefather's brains, let alone mine, to mush.

"Let's go now, Lailee, you help me weave some ropes. We enter a jute field.

'So, Mama,' Lailee says, 'you plan on inserting some sex in this story too?'

'No, this is something quite differ-

And Lailee, what she does is fling off her clothes and emerge cleanly from them. Then we go home.

Oh Mama, I think, you've robbed of everything, robbed me clean of words. I'll just get some ropes from the storeroom and hang them like drying jute fibers from the trees, really, that's what I do...

The Advent of the Writer Afterwards what I do is I hand a cou-

ple of flowers not in the story over to the girl. The girl, Lailee, who is sharp, says, 'This trick you keep on playing! 'So what are you going to do now?'

E m b l e m

'What do you mean? You think I am a dumb ass? Come here, have a

..with that she, Lailee, bares her lonely belly--with the American family planning poster on it--and we kiss.

Khosru bhai introduces her to me, saying, 'Do you know her, Raisu? A Bratya Raisu is a poet and short story writer.

I join my palms before her and plead ignorance, 'You have to excuse me, but no. I live on the wrong side of the tracks. Though it seems like I have seen you somewhere.' Which, the last line, is just pure crap. Never seen her before

'Might I ask your name?'

'C. Konka.'

'I see. Great name. I've heard of it.' I place a stick of tuberose in her hands. She folds it seven-eight times and slides it into her pocket.

'Flowers won't get you any anywhere, mister', she says. 'Humans

'True. Plus it's unhygienic to eat flowers.'

I will meet her again three years later. On a ferry launch. She'll be headed for Barisal

'Barisal's a very beautiful place,' she will remark.

I will say ves

She will laugh. 'I want to talk to you about your stories.'

'Go ahead. 'Well, they are lifeless. Bone-dry stories. Perhaps it's better not to

write at all. 'I can't believe you're saving this.'

'Well, think. A story's one thing, a con job quite another. You've got to

get close to life, close to the human reality.' 'But I am! I love all mankind, especially womankind.

'That's the problem with you male writers. "Womankind" indeed! Is that how you view women, as commodities?' 'Yes, I do. Though as very precious commodities.'

She will fly into a rage then. Mane erect, stamping her feet against the floorboards, she will throw her head back and roar

Which (I don't know) may be the reason why our launch will sink in

And while last week Fakrul Alam went on vacation to Indonesia, this week another, and very different, Bangladeshi (a photographer/gearhead in loosekurtapyjamas) flings himself headlong into Singapore to arrange a photography exhibition. With very different results.

### Juggling, juggling, juggling...

SHAHIDUL ALAM

was getting closer to my usual time of arriving forty minutes before departure. The Singapore Airline guy had warned me to arrive three hours early. "The new computers... went on. I assured him I had flown several times since the new computers had been introduced at Zia. I had been there on day one, when these glistening new machines had led to long queues as confused immigration officers tapped in a letter at a time and constantly consulted more computer-savvy colleagues about the entry of some

Usually it was the migrant workers who were on the defensive, being made to feel worthless as they struggled with immigration forms. The roles had now been reversed. The workers seemed to enjoy waiting in line while their tormentors fumed in silence at the wonders of tech-

The flight was uneventful, except for the problems of trying to find a safe parking place for my six-foot print. Eventually the air hostess took my print away, leaving me nervously peering through the alleyway hoping she didn't fold it up to fit the container!

As we disembarked, we were greeted by another marvel of science. Another queue developed as the infrared cameras, revealed your body warmth. Posterised colours showed the relative warmth of every part of vour upper anatomy as you walked by. It was live television!

It took people a while to work out who those people with strange colours were, but once it dawned, then it was movie time. Many years ago, on a cold day in London, I had noticed the coldness of the tip of my nose, and the near frost on my beard. I had always been curious about how the hairs on my chest would appear in infra red which the Singapore climate was far more suitable for observing.

Lance and Gim Lay ambled in. Gim Lay was a gallery official and had to make an appearance for her visiting artist, so she didn't have a choice, but I felt sorry for Lance, having to wake up at the ridiculous hours that Singapore Airlines arrives at, just because he's a friend.

After a very short pit stop at Teek's spacious studio, it was down to the gallery of the Singapore History Museum. We had agreed to give the show a 'raw' look. So construction scaffolding, helmets, sandbags, bricks, warning tape and cones had all been set up. Canvas strips hung on the scaffolding were to be our exhibition panels. By now I had been nearly eight hours without Internet and was getting withdrawal symptoms. Lance hurriedly inserted the appropriate IP numbers and I was online. Singaporean broadband was considerably different from Dhaka 'broadband' and I quickly went through my backlog of mail Most of it was junk of course. After deleting the 101 tips for enlarging my privates, making 50,000 dollars a week offers plus the few Nigerian scams, I settled down to the urgent mail. Deadlines were looming. Salgado's images needed to be sourced, the workshop in Prague needed to be settled, and there were Pathshala exam sheets to be marked! I tried to get as much done using the museum connection. Even with these fast speeds, paying 15 Taka a minute at the hotel, took a bit of getting used to. The 15 Taka an hour Dhaka cyber cafés didn't seem so bad after all!

An army of volunteers had arrived, and I was expected to direct them about the setting up of the exhibition. It is difficult to appear intelligent when a horde of excited voungsters wait for each word to drop, especially when you don't have a clue as to friends had been mobilised to research the PDA phone scene. What was available, where could we get it, who would give the best discount and who was going to accompany me to ensure I didn't get ripped off. I also needed a local person who would get the account on my behalf, as the phone company needed a local address. Meanwhile Chor Lin, the direc-

tor of the museum, came in for a courtesy visit. Her husband Peter Schoppert had masterminded the "Day in the Life of" series books for the Asean region, and we had many common friends. Raghu Rai in particular had been a frequent visitor



where you are going. Still, the experience of having done this many times before did help, and with my eager volunteers, we were slowly getting the exhibition in shape. Gim Lin stormed in and out, pressing a row of panic buttons. The mounters were having problems with the inkjet prints. The precise positioning of my large prints needed my immediate attention. The television interview needed to be scheduled in, and what could I not

Meanwhile I had other concerns. I had been surreptiously relieved of my Nokia Communicator the week before in a tram in Brussels, and being the techie freak that I was, not having a PDA phone was almost as bad as not being online 24 hours. So printed in Singapore. The technicians interiected in between: What did I need for my presentation? What program was I going

to use? It all seemed so serious! I managed to ring Justin. The last time we had met was when he had come over to Pathshala with David Wells for the workshop that led the lead story on Aramco magazine. Since then I had seen his Dhaka pictures in Time magazine, and I remember that ex-minister Abdul Mannan, during an earlier flight to Dhaka from Kuala Lumpur, had waxed lyrical on his slide show on Bangladesh. Justin was off the next morning to Shanghai, so that night was our only chance to meet. Eddie dropped me there and after a few mobile calls (how did we manage in the Dark Ages

before mobiles?) Justin appeared at the other end of the park and directed us to the flat. Γhe flat was a spacious house in Newton Circus and couldn't have been more ideally placed. Kaychin, Darren and Nick appeared bringing along P and P, who had set up the new photographic school Objectives and we all went to the food stalls. The food at Newton Circus was always nice and Justin knew where the best sting ray, guava juice and satay were to be found. Leaving Justin to pack for Shanghai, we went back to the museum, where I showed Darren the Chobi Mela II catalogue. They had been there throughout the circus that we

oral

had with customs and hadn't had a chance to see the shows that the customs had blocked, so the catalogue was the first chance they had to see the Malaysia and Salgado shows. We trundled home at around 3 a.m. to Tuck's Geylang Road studio, ready to drop.

The next morning the museum had geared up for action and every visitor was being asked to fill in a SARS form. Had you had any fever? Which countries had you visited. Any other symptoms? Who should we contact in case of trouble? A big A4 sheet every day for all gallery staff and visitors. More awaited. Chor Lin took us out for dinner in the evening, and the other speakers and the moderator were all there. As we walked towards the entrance of the restaurant and riverside point, a woman approached us with a thermometer in hand. Held rapier like, this tiny but evil looking device was clearly something she would relish inserting into some unsuspecting orifice. Gingerly we suggested we would sit outside in the patio. We didn't really need the airconditioned interiors and we were not going to have the buffet anyway. They agreed to make room for us by the river bank, but the rapier had not been sheathed. Gloved fingers tugged at my ear as it was brutally inserted inside. Chor Lin was delighted. This was a photo op! Being a photographer I could hardly say no. I was the only one with a camera,

so I had to face the indignity of having my own camera used for immortalising on celluloid my ear-pulling session. The photographer was fussy. We had to stand in front of the aquarium, and crouch a bit so he would have the right composition. Not too much movement, as it was a slow shutter speed, and could the tester crouch too? At least my mother had not raised me for nothing. My one offering to humanity could be the pleasure I had given to so many Singaporeans as they chuckled to this spectacle. Oh how I

waited for their turn! It was refreshing to see so many photographers working into the early hours, as we mounted, trimmed, adjusted, hung the photographs. It reminded me of the early days of the Bangladesh Photographic



Thursday was the big day. The opening was in the after-noon, and we still had plenty to do. Sandwiched between interviews, captions, a final edit and lighting adjustments took up most of the next day. Still no PDA phone. What was I going to do? Eddie suggested second-hand phones. Singaporeans apparently change phones every 2-3 months. A six-month-old phone was passé. So we should have been able to find a very good deal on a decent sixmonth-old set. The press had done their job, and friends whom I hadn't been able to contact. came over as they had seen me on TV. I had to sneak off to the computer several times as MC was breathing down my neck: were my exam papers marked vet? Some of the photographers had brought in their portfolios in between. Would I have time to review them please? It was going to be another long night. The next morning Nick and I went for a recce to Bugis. The salesman was quick to spot the techie freak and impressed me with the virtues of the operating system of the OX2. The Nokia and the Ericsson didn't stand a chance, and he was going to give me a special deal! I did have the judgement to take the time to consult my friends. and do some further research. Ed had mentioned scouting the Saturday papers where the best deals were to be found. But the salesman had done his job, and

I was well and truly hooked. Choy had asked us to arrive early to the auditorium to plan the presentation, and I arrived a hit late: There had been so many phones on offer at Bugis!

But everything went fine, all according to plan. And on the plane back home, I slept the sleep of the dead.

Shahidul Alam heads Drik Picture Gallery in

## Monica Ali denied Bangladeshi visa

### On roots and moments of triumph

KHADEMUL ISLAM

OW can this be? How can Monica Ali be denied a visa to visit the land of

The answer, at least partially, has to lie in our London High Commission's colossal ignorance about the vast gulf that exists between mere hired hacks and a genuine writer, between dozen-a-dime journalists and a hot young novelist who's pushing Bangladesh to the forefront of fiction writing, an ignorance finally about the influence of celebrityhood in our satellitestitched, global news culture.

What do our diplomats do sitting in that building in London? Play cards all day? Don't they read British newspapers and journals? What is their level of knowledge about British society and culture, about London's literary and artistic life? Ever since Monica Ali got onto Granta's list of twenty best British writers, she has been given full blast, nonstop exposure by the British press. Her book has been widely reviewed even before its publication date, her photo has been on a lot of newspaper pages, albeit the better ones. How could our foreign service officers in London, presumably the cream of our diplomatic corps, have thought of her in terms of 'planted' journalists wanting to do a hatchet job on the government? By now, given the nearuniversal reach of Western media outlets, a huge slice of the world's literate population, including Bangladesh, know about Monica Ali, know that her book "Brick Lane' is about a Bangladeshi woman who comes to London, that Monica Ali herself was born in Dhaka, know that it is the most natural thing in the world for the Bangladeshi inside her, now that she is on the brink of genuine fame, to want to come here, to the land she left as a child, to see it for herself, to just taste it, to roam its streets, maybe to just stand in a rice paddy and draw in a lungful of Bangladeshi air. It is at the very

moments of our triumph that our roots beckon the most. The pull is the strongest then. We should respect it.

Everybody knows that,

except of course our finest, our thin blue line-- ever so up on the latest things, so very much on the mark-- in that sorry High Commission of ours. One has to wonder, why

would the term 'writer' bring about such a paralysis of judgement on the part of our government? Why this spasm of fear and anxiety?

While I do understand that foreign journalists/international media coverage and domestic politics have tended to intertwine in the recent past, that no doubt the poor devils in our High Commission in London must have been tersely put on notice about issuing visas to people with only partly credible journalistic credentials who then end up questioning Bangladesh's commitment to secularity, good governance, social justice and fundamental decency, yet that risk has

to be run. That's just the cost of doing business, the price we pay for having an open, democratic system. And nobody ever said that politics in Bangladesh has to be pretty. Like politics everywhere it can be a rough (we repeat, rough, not murderous) business. eople wanting to discredit the government will want to plant the wrong news stories, will try to influence the media. even international media. But that does not mean that we should implement policies reminiscent of totalitarian regimes (the old Soviet Union, the present China), regimes reviled for persecuting writers, poets, film-makers, and other literary and cultural figures, policies of harassment, of visa denials, of refusing them their right of association, of freedom of travel, and by extension, freedom of speech.

There is also a practical reason why the government should reverse its decision: never, ever, bully a writer, especially one posi-

have that strange power of a universal language, they have access to influential audiences worldwide, they can shape national images, the face we show to the rest of the world, in a way that is inconceivable to the dull minds inhabiting the upper reaches of rickety Third World states. Writers such as Monica are not toothless. They can sting you for decades. In other words, the very thing the present govimage, may be the one it is least able to defend from an angry, popular writer. The whole world knows about the evils of the Narbada Dam simply because one seemingly frail, 5' 4" woman named Arundhati Roy got pissed off about it. More dangerous to the ex-Soviet Union than missiles in a certain sense were two

tioned crucially in the West. They

her that damn visa. But beyond all these considerations, of course, is the fact that she has openly embraced us. We should embrace her in turn. She is one of us. She is a gifted and sincere daughter of Bangladesh. She has written a novel in English and succeeded at a level the rest of us should aspire to. She has written in anguished terms about 1971. She should be issued a visa and then told: "Our apologies. Now go. Feel free to wander this land where you were born. Wherever and whenever you wish."

men named Solzhenitsyn and

Nabokov. So it is in the present

government's basic self-interest

to do the decent thing and give

# The Female the Species

Gauri Deshpande



Sometimes you want to talk about love and despair and the ungratefulness of children. A man is no use whatever then. You want then your mother or the girl with whom you went through school, and your first love, and her

first child - a girl

and your second. You sit with them and talk.

She sews and you sit and sip and speak of the rate of rice

and the price of tea

and the scarcity of cheese. You know both that you've spoken

of love and despair and the ungratefulness of children.

Gauri Deshpande is a noted Indian poet who writes in English.