

SHORT STORY

Returning Home: 1972

PUROBI BASU
(translated by Khademul Islam)

MADAN comes forward as she steps down from the rickshaw. Jaya looks around for Modhu or Dhiron, but they are not to be seen. She had heard that Gayanath had died quite some time back. Even though this matter of death and dying had seemed unnatural then, she had heard that Gayanath's death had been entirely normal. In other words, Gayanath had been ill, had suffered the fear of death for a long time, then had died. A fate that the lucky ones among us escape. The last inhabitant of this old house standing at a cross-roads that Jaya now enters had been one such lucky man. Even though death had come so near, yet it had not time to frighten him.

'Didi!'

Are these tears in Madan's eyes?

'Yes.' Jaya busies herself in counting out the money for the rickshawallah. Aside from Madan, a scattered group of onlookers has turned up to greet Jaya. Though Keshtho the compounder's children hadn't come. Nor had the compounder himself or his wife. On the right-hand side, the four-storied building that housed the fourth-class employees was deathly silent. Jaya's eyes light on Tajul at the small shop out in front. The other shop is shut. Evening is still a long way off, and so it isn't time yet for the bells to peal deafeningly in the temple next door. The temple itself looks deserted, as if the sounds of conch shells or bells had never emanated from there. Jaya goes through the open gate and walks on the straight path set in green. Usually it does not take more than half a minute to get to the front steps. Today, it does. Jaya sees that the green is not in the slightest undimmed. In fact, freed from a spectacle-eyed scrutiny and the care of Modhu mali, the trees are extra green. The *hasnahena* bush on the left is now bigger. The *hasnahena*'s scent this close is oppressive to Jaya. The room near to the bush is the one in whose open window she had stood on many a night and counted the lights going out one by one in the men's hostels in front. On those silent, lonely nights the *hasnahena*'s scent would spread throughout the whole house. Jaya knew how overpowering and relentless the smell could be—especially on sleepless nights. Right in front of the house, where on both sides jasmine flowered during the rainy season, now grow roses. Red. The *bet* tree on the right is still there. The *shefali* tree in the distance looks larger.

Jaya had heard that Kalyan Babu had been appointed head clerk. He now steps through the gate and comes forward with a busy air.

'I'm sorry, I'm a little late.' He steps onto the front verandah and begins to unlock the front door. 'I came earlier. I went to get the key. I hope you weren't waiting here long? To have come from such a long way off...'

'No.'

The key to the house is still in Jaya's bag. Though the key with which Kalyan Babu is opening the door is not the same key. Nowadays nobody keeps the old key anymore. It has been locked away in an iron safe at the office.

Madan now makes a scene. As soon as Jaya enters the house he grabs her right hand and hangs on it. Then, seeming to swing from it like a monkey, the old man starts to sob like a boy, 'Didi, the house you left behind, look, what has become of it.'

Madan's crying is not something new for Jaya. He knows how to be dramatic. Back then, whenever it would be time to depart and Jaya would tell him to take care of the house, tears would invariably well up in his eyes. The same thing had happened when they had left the house for the last time. It hadn't been irritating then. In Madan this mix of part provincial, part simpleton, part affection, part calculation hadn't been too annoying. But today it is, which is why Jaya sharply rebukes him, 'Stop it.'

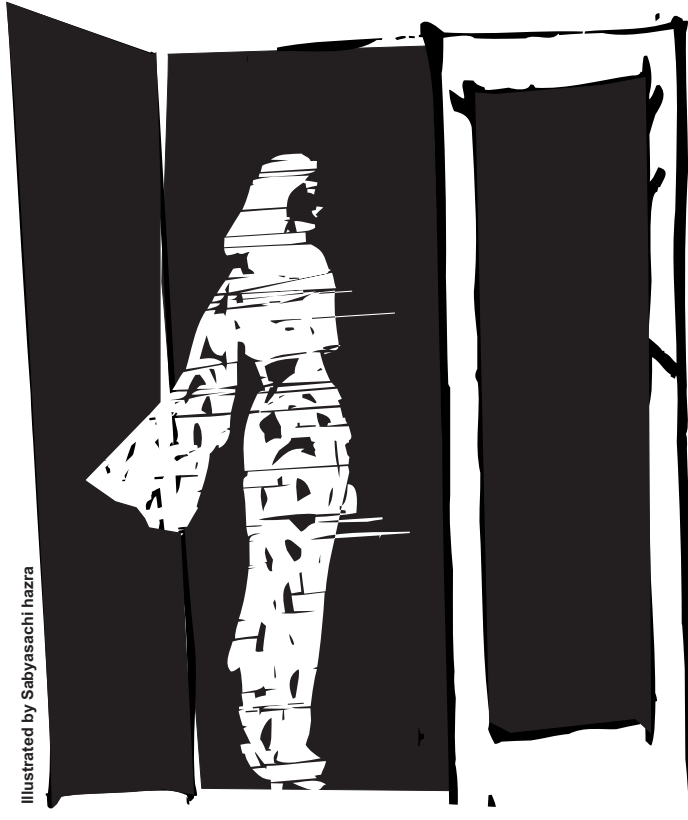
Madan at first is taken aback. Then lets go of Jaya's arm and starts to wipe his eyes with his lungi.

The house inside feels unchanged. The same old sitting room. Three cane chairs on the right-hand side with the small square table in the center. On top of the table are three newspapers—-one English, two Bengali. On the left is the heavy old wooden table. An easy chair, on which he would sit cross-legged as if in a mantrance when there was nothing else to read or write. Would murmur something to himself with his eyes closed and face skyward. Once in while a few Sanskrit words would escape his lips: 'Ai shahosho poromogoti, ai shahosho poromashompod.' On the table is a pen, an ink bottle, a red-and-blue pencil, blotting paper and a few blank pages. He had sat in this chair, dipped pen in the ink, perhaps dried with the blotting paper, then had mailed that last letter to Jaya, and by the time she got it, he was already gone.

Inside the inner room on the wall opposite the door was that full-length photograph. With the name beneath, and beneath the name the date.

Looking into the corner of the room Jaya is suddenly startled. 'This was not here before,' she exclaims, pointing a finger at a stone bust on top of a small three-legged table, its face more familiar to her than her own, a face that she is seeing everywhere in this house, laughing, forever laughing.

'There was not even one good photo of him, so the university ordered this bust,' Kalyan Babu says. Jaya is forced to remain silent. Because she had forgotten one large truth: When she had left the house it had been a zoo—and a museum. A zoo because here its inhabitants while wearing a human face yet had to act like non-humans, like animals at a zoo. Just like the monkeys there had to perform in order to get a banana or some gram lentils, so too in this house amid this greenery in order to keep the heart beating, in order to live, one had to listen to Tagore songs on the radio by strangling its voice and pressing it close to the ears. Just as out of fear of losing the banana, the caged monkeys would



Illustrated by Subyashchi Hazra

overdo their act, so too out of caution, they would overdo theirs. When even that caution failed, the house became an object to be gazed at, a museum. She remembers that once in a while leading such a life would be loathsome to her, as if she were being forced to choke off all her senses with her own hand. Today, she realizes that it had been necessary. Since despite all hope, support, strength and integrity, just because the heart did stop, everything came to an end for him.

Jaya goes across the sitting room to the inner room. This is the dining room. Eight chairs and a long dining table. Even though three persons were supposed to eat at this table, yet on most days there would be more. And therefore all eight chairs would issue invitations for people to seat themselves comfortably.

The small mattress on the right is missing—where Madan used to sleep. Because towards the end Madan had left this house. Now he has been re-employed to look after the house. Where there remained none to give him orders or scold him. Just officials who would come once in a while to check if everything was okay. Jaya goes to the verandah on the left. Facing it are two bedrooms side by side. A bathroom to the right. The bed is still made in the left bedroom, its mosquito net drawn up above. A phone on the side table, which does not work. A box of toothpicks on the side of the table. Parallel to the bed stands a clothes rack. A few *dhotis*, *punjabis*, shoes. A black *sherwani* hangs at the end. On this side some clothes are strewn in the glass almirah. On the other side a huge wooden wardrobe whose doors would always hang open halfway. Just like today. On the upper rack a pair of spectacles, watch, one pen and pictures of Ramkrishna-Vivekananda-Saradadevi bound in a single frame. Only paper on the other racks, sheaves and sheaves of it. The two trunks beneath the bed are still there. Inside them are all the important papers, writing, the product of a complete yet unfinished life.

Jaya enters the bedroom on the right. Sees that the long bench used to increase the width of the bed is still there. The steel cabinet is shut. Jaya still has a set of keys for it. Three pictures on

top of the cabinet. The three who once called this their home, who were not connected to each other at birth, but came from different parts at different times to create a complete family. Above the door hangs a china plate with the twenty-third Psalm from the Bible engraved on it. On the dressing table among the bric-a-brac, the box containing the vermilion daub catches Jaya's eye. Her mother had given it to her on her wedding. Though Jaya has given up wearing it, even though her husband is alive by her side, the dressing table reminds her that once she used to put it on.

Jaya goes to the third bedroom on the opposite side, between the dining room and the verandah. On many nights it had been occupied by relatives and friends too numerous to count. Near the end, Jaya's younger brother had lived here for a long time. Some of his things lay scattered around. It was this room that was the repository of the household's entire collection of newspapers and books. If one looked out the window one could see everything that went on inside the temple next door. On the left, in the small open space inside the boundary wall, is the *kul* tree with its profusion of berries hanging red and green. But today the more intrepid neighbourhood boys aren't gathered beneath it. There used to be so many guavas in the guava tree. Perhaps, Jaya thinks to herself, it isn't the season for guavas now.

She has to go across the dining room again to enter the inner courtyard. She opens the glass almirah in which the china was kept and discovers that most of the expensive pieces are missing. She closes it and walks towards the courtyard. The locked kitchen on the right catches her eye. From this kitchen on myriad afternoons and evenings Madan, with his swiveling crooked walk, had brought steaming tea in slightly stained teacups for all those sitting in the outer room. A sip of it while listening to life's tales told by a mystic had been heaven on earth! During a large part of her stay in this house Jaya had had no companion except him. Especially on evenings when Moti, Duli, Guno, Atahar or Manju had not dropped by. Jaya and he, the house's last two residents, each with a cup of tea in their hands, would sit down inside on the cane chairs or on the steps of the verandah outside. There would be stars above. Maybe the moon, or maybe not. They would talk. So much to talk about! Jaya would talk, he would listen. Then he would talk, and Jaya would listen. Jaya's talk invariably centred around a small *mofussil* town, her mother, father, brothers and sisters—she would forget he was her father's age, would forget that if one were to judge the relationship by any worldly yardstick that it was nothing to her. There was never any problem too small not to be shared, about which advice could not be solicited: marital discord, the decline of her father's health, the anxiety over her wayward younger brother, preparations for the coming examinations, hopes and wishes about the bright future ahead. Nothing was left untouched. Jaya would forget who he was. Would forget about the need for friends. To her all that existed at that moment was a gentle, profoundly wise being, a *rishi*, a human being—father, mother, brother, sister, friend, teacher all rolled into one. Jaya never felt the need for anything else. She would listen, incomprehensibly at times, and remain doubtful, uncertain about many things, yet would feel initiated into the world of ideas about the uplift of the common man—mantras about their betterment. Would accept the concept that a third way was needed which would integrate materialism and idealism into a single vision, a new life. Jaya remembers a time she had been listening closely—he had said 'I am going to bury nationalism. Love and friendship is what is needed to unite mankind as one nation. That is the only way to achieve universal brotherhood.' Jaya would sit with her head lowered. She hadn't seen Buddha, hadn't seen Gandhi. But would feel she had witnessed Gandhi's and Buddha's selflessness and ahimsa in one person, who despite being older in years was nonetheless ahead of all others in his modernity, in his freedom from superstition and ignorance.

By the time she steps outside the house, it is dusk. Jaya notes that, among the *sheora* trees lining the garden's edge, two have died. She hasn't noticed it before. Kalyan Babu says while pointing at the beaten path down below, 'Even a few days back there were bloodstains there. Before they went away, they left behind the signs of their sin here.'

Jaya goes near to it. Looks down as if searching the area very carefully for something. Doesn't find it. She remembers what her mother had said once. Jaya's father had died after she went abroad and she therefore hadn't seen her mother as a widow, and would still think of her with the vermilion streak firmly in the part of her hair. But now for the first time, looking down at the beaten path in front of the house, she saw her mother's wide forehead absent the red mark which the killers had rubbed off. Jaya knows her father is not alive anymore, but oh, if only she could see once more that red *sidhur* on her mother's forehead!

'If you have any ideas about the preservation of the house, please do let us know. We'll take your comments into due consideration.'

Jaya turns to look. A stranger's face. It has been with us this whole time, she thinks. As soon as she looks, he laughs and caresses a brass nameplate on a verandah pillar. On it she can make out 'National Preservation'. Along with some other words. The man then is saying 'I have been told to ask you this question.'

Jaya again looks at the lonely old house. Sees afresh the redbrick building. Then says, 'Change the red to white.'

'What?' the gentleman in front of her reacts as if he had seen a snake. 'This is a radical proposal. If we change it this much we won't be able to call it preservation.'

Jaya feels like laughing. 'What do you want to preserve? The memory of the man who lived in this house, or a 150-year-old structure that looks like a jailhouse? If I could, I would have painted these red houses gold. But that's impossible. So if you can, make it white.'

Jaya does not stand there any longer. The pit of her stomach has begun to hurt. Four-and-a-half years back on an autumn evening Jaya had first entered this house in the guise of a new wife. Nobody was there to greet her at the doorway with conch shells or rice-winning fans. The only one who could have stood there had accepted her as a daughter-in-law without waiting for the formal occasion, just as he had accepted her husband twelve years back. Yet this old house had issued such a warm invitation that Jaya from the very first had felt as if it was her own. She had veiled her head with the sari only once, because her second father had lowered it with his own hands. Not as a wife, but as a daughter had Jaya lived three years in this house. She had forsaken the company of a newly married husband and lived here for three long years, angering him a few times in the process. Today from this house, in whose every atom were the heaped memories of her happiest and most fulfilling time, the house where the god of her ideals had spent his best years, Jaya now turns away after completing an inspection of its premises.

After closing the door Kalyan Babu walks towards the gate behind Jaya. Madan has been silent ever since. Though looking at his expression she thinks it would have been better to have let him cry. Walking, it seems to her as if somebody is calling out to her from behind. Turning around, she stares disbelievingly at the figure of the man on the roof: he can't possibly be alive. Jaya had heard that no-one in the house had been spared, not a soul. So Panna was alive!

Panna used to live in the small room opposite the kitchen. A distant relative, he had grown to be a close member of the household. Quiet, shy Panna, who never looked anyone in the face while he talked. Who had lived here, and had worked at a small job somewhere. Panna, who even with his skinny frame would nevertheless uncompromisingly fast for the full thirty days. She remembers one time she had praised his fried *litar* delicacies. After that, every Ramzan month somebody would leave a plate of *litar* food in a dish outside her room. When asked about it, Panna would shyly turn his face away.

Jaya sees Panna tug on two slender ropes attached to a huge pole and pluck something out of the sky. Then skims down the drainpipe to the ground and stands before her. Tiny beads of sweat on his forehead. His lips tremble—uncontrollably. Panna's thin line of moustache is now fairly full. He seems to be excited. Looks straight into Jaya's eyes.

'Want to say something, Panna?'

After a few moments more of wordless trembling, the words spill out 'Mami, you left saying we had to watch the house. We did watch over the house. Just couldn't save the man. But we brought something new to this house, something that you hadn't left us with.'

Even though the words are heartfelt, they sound a tiny bit practiced. Jaya knows that Panna had been desperate to say them. He now looks far more at peace.

Panna places a bundle in Jaya's hands. A folded piece of dark green cloth. Mutely, inexpressively, she opens it. Sees that it isn't completely green, but also has red and gold. Reminds her of her childhood. A local or national, or even a world map would set her off searching for her own locale and address. Jaya sits down and stretches out the cloth tautly on the ground. Feels her adult eyes become an infant's in searching for their *mofussil* home, searching for her mother, brothers, sisters, aunt—amid the green fortress with its gold embroidery within the red circle. But no. Can't find them. Having crossed the golden land, swam across the red sea and sped through the green forest, they have made a green home for themselves whose address is not on the piece of cloth that Panna has given her.

The above is a translation of the Bangla short story *Ghoray Phera: Bahattur* in Husne Ara Shahed (ed) *Mukti* by Mukti Shiksha Kendra Library Private Ltd., February 2001. Purobi Basu works at BRAC, Dhaka. Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

A Mukti Operation Inside Dhaka

Literature EXTRACT

Of Blood and Fire

The Untold Story of Bangladesh's War of Independence

Jahanara Imam
Translated by
Mustafizur Rahman

Wednesday, 25th August, 1971

Rumi asked 'Mother, could you drop me at Road No. 28'

It was almost 6:30 in the evening and the western sky was glowing with crimson rays of the setting sun. In the car I asked him, 'When will you return? Would you like me to come for you?'

Nonchalantly Rumi said, 'I don't know but you might try after half an hour.'

But Rumi looked worried. He had left home yesterday after lunch and had come back today

night guard.

After dropping Rumi, I did not return home. He wanted me to come back for him after half an hour which means he will stay home tonight. So I should have a special dinner for him. Rumi loves good food. I went to Dhaka Club and bought some smoked hilsa and chicken chops from the takeaway service. After half an hour I went to pick up Rumi. As I went near the gate I saw a Fiat 600 coming out. The car stopped beside me. Haris was driving. I asked him, 'Is Rumi in there?'

Haris replied, 'No, Aunty. He

left about five minutes ago.'

'Okay. Best of luck.'

I returned home. Now everything is uncertain. I don't know whether Rumi will come back tonight or not. I kept the food in the fridge. If he doesn't come tonight he could have it tomorrow.

Shortly after, someone was impatiently ringing the doorbell. Sharif and Jami (the author's husband and other son respectively) were upstairs. I ran from the kitchen and answered the door. Rumi, Kazi and another young man stumbled in. I was surprised but realized that something exciting had happened. Their faces were flushed and they were trying to restrain their jubilation. Rumi shut the door and said, 'Mother, let's go upstairs. I would like to talk to you.'

When we went into Rumi's room, I asked Sharif and Jami to join us. Rumi excitedly whispered, 'Mother, we just carried out an operation! We finished seven or eight of them.'

I was stunned. I said, 'What are you talking about?'

Kazi said, 'Yes, Aunty. At Road No. 18, after gunning down some Pakistani soldiers, we were driving through Road No. 5. An Army jeep followed us; Rumi smashed the rear window of the car and brush-fired at the jeep. Swapan and Bodi also joined him. The jeep turned tur-

tle and many of the soldiers died.'

Rumi said, 'Look, Mother, there are blisters on my neck and shoulder.'

There were also holes in his shirt. I asked him, 'How did this happen?'

Rumi said, 'There are sparks when you fire a sten gun. Bodi and Swapan were on my two sides and the sparks from their guns caused these blisters.' Then he started laughing. 'The sound was so loud that I have become almost deaf'...

A little later Kazi and Salim left. I met Salim for the first time tonight. He was a student of the 10th grade of Shaheen School and had gone to Melaghar (Mukti Bahini training camp in India) in April. After dinner, Sharif, Jami, Masud and I asked him to tell us the details. This is what he told us:

A senior Chinese diplomat lives in a house on Road No. 20 in Dhanmondi. There are some army guards in front of the house. Nearby on Road No. 18 another house where a senior army officer lives is guarded by the troops. Bodi, Alam, and Shahadat planned to ambush the soldiers. They decided to carry out the operations on 25th August, exactly five months after the brutal attack on the civilians by the Pakistan Army. They brought

the weapons from the Pirulia Camp on the afternoon of the 25th. Haris and Zahir picked up Rumi, Bodi, Alam and Kazi from the Gulshan jetty and took them to the house on Road No. 28 (a house used as a meeting place for the Muktis in Dhaka). They divided into two groups. Bodi and Alam in one group, Haris and Muktar in another. The two groups hijacked two cars. Bodi and Alam hijacked a Mazda from Road No. 4 belonging to Mahboob Alam, the elder son of Mr. Abul Mansoor Ahmed.

Haris and Muktar hijacked a Fiat 600 from Dhanmondi Road No. 22. It was decided that Alam, Bodi, Kazi, Rumi, Swapan and Salim would carry out the first operation in the Dhanmondi area. Haris, Zia, Muktar, Anu and two other boys would be driving up and down the road by the Rajarbagh Police Station. After carrying out the Dhanmondi operation the first group would join them and they would jointly carry out the operations near the Rajarbagh police lines and other places in the city.

At 7:25 in the evening, Rumi and his friends left Road No. 28 and reached Road No. 20 through Road No. 32. Alam was driving and Salim and Kazi were in the front seat. On the rear seat Rumi was sitting in the middle with Swapan on his right and Bodi on his left. When the

reached the house of the Chinese diplomat, they found that the sentries were not there. They decided to go to Road No. 18. There they found about seven or eight sentries sitting and chatting in a relaxed mood. Alam said, 'It seems the Brigadier is not at home, so these people are relaxing. Okay, boys, we have three minutes. I will go ahead and turn the car from Sat Masjid Road. The house is on the right now. After I take a U-turn it will be on the left. Then Bodi and Kazi both could fire at the sentries from the front and rear windows.' As Alam took a U-turn he said, 'Kazi, Salim and Bodi will fire. Rumi and Swapan will keep a watch.'

As the car was slowly passing by the house, Alam commanded, 'Fire.'

Immediately the two sten guns went into action. Bodi aimed at the stomach level and Kazi fired at the chest. Salim also leaned forward and fired a few shots. Before they knew what was happening, most of the soldiers dropped dead on the road. The whole operation took a few seconds. Alam stepped on the accelerator and again went to Road No. 20. There was still no sentry there. It was not safe to wait any longer. Alam drove through the residential area and came near Mirpur Road. As they neared Road No. 5, they found that soldiers were check-

ing every car. It seemed that the news of the action on Road No. 18 had already reached the Army bosses.

The road was barricaded in front. No more than one car could pass at a time. Two trucks blocked the Mirpur Road. There was a jeep parked facing them. There was another jeep in front of the petrol pump on the left facing New Market. Some soldiers were lying in position on the roadside with light machine guns. As the military police raised his hands to stop them, Alam switched off the headlights and switched on the left indicator light as if he was moving to the left lane. Then he suddenly speeded up and took a U-turn. Bodi and Rumi jointly screamed out, 'There they are, lying on the ground with their LMGs!' Alam commanded, 'Fire.' Swapan and Bodi fired at the soldiers. Rumi looked out of the rear window to make sure they were not being followed. The soldiers did not return fire. That meant that they were hit. Alam entered into Road No. 5

and as they came near Green Road, Rumi saw an Army jeep following them. He screamed, 'Look! Look! They are following us!' Immediately he shattered the rear window and opened fire at the jeep. Bodi and Swapan also joined in from his two sides. The driver of the jeep was shot and the jeep hit a lamp-post. They didn't know how many others were shot. Alam switched on the left indicator light as if he would go towards Green Road but took a right turn instead towards New Market. Looking back they saw two Army trucks and a jeep turning to the left towards Green Road.

All of them burst out laughing at this successful deception. They entered New Elephant Road and Alam switched on the headlights again. They left the weapons in the house of one of Alam's friends. Rumi, Kazi and Salim took the car which they later abandoned on a quiet road.

NOTICE

Due to unavoidable circumstances, The Daily Star literature page will not be published on December 27th, 2003 and January 3rd, 2004. We regret any inconvenience to our readers.