

career plan, I stammered. My mind flashed back to my Rajshahi days. I smiled awkwardly. I kept mum after a few false starts.

He said, "We all told you to Study BBA or Computer Science, which are in demand. You wasted one valuable year in Rajshahi and then coming back you chose to study English Literature. Before choosing a subject you must ask yourself how much it will earn. Anyway now it is useless to talk about it. It was your decision. Now you have to face the music." I felt very embarrassed. What he said was true. I never denied that. But it is also true that BBA or CSC is not my cup of tea. I wanted to study something. I would enjoy studying. Studying was like swimming to me. I wanted to swim in an endless sea. Maybe I wanted to be a writer. A word was not only a mere signifier to me. I felt like twisting it, and playing with it. I ended up studying literature at East West University, as the admission tests of all other public universities were over by the time I came back to Dhaka. Little by little I started exploring a very different world—a world of ambivalent understanding, a world of literature.

I am pacing up and down the wide corridor in front of the female ward. My mother is lying on bed 25 and on saline. It is strictly forbidden for men to walk into the female ward at night. The light was still on. I can see two nurses sitting inside and chatting casually. One has buried her face in her hands and the other is arranging some phials. I feel very tired and feel like collapsing on a bed. But can't do that. The thought of her illness disturbs me in sleep and in wakefulness. Her presence never seemed extraordinary before; it was as natural as breathing. Now a silence has taken possession of our home. An awkward, unusual silence. My sister called up in the evening and said that the house looked ghastly and deserted. She wanted to come to the hospital and take over. But I did not agree. She persisted. I hung up.

It is 2:30 am now. I have taken out my notebook and glanced over the jottings scattered over the pages. I feel like writing, working on my jottings. I have jotted down everything, that has taken place today, from morning to night. I did that without being aware what I would do with them. I just did it. Actually I don't know how to write and why to write. I frequently asked myself, "Do I have the makings of a writer?" Maybe I do. Maybe I don't.

Some difficult-to-answer questions frequently haunt my mind:

What is art?

What is aesthetics?

Why do people write?

And finally

Why do I want to write?

I do not have any book for writing. Suddenly I feel helpless. I fumble in my pockets for a piece of paper. No use. A kind-looking nurse is passing through the corridor with a tray in her hand. I approach her and ask for a piece of paper. At first she is confused, then asks me to come to the enclosed place she is sitting in. I follow her to her room and she hands me a sheaf of white papers. I thank her. She does not say anything and turns her back on me.

Gradually a skeleton of a story emerges—people are swarming in to see a patient without any genuine feeling for her. Their honeyed words, and sympathetic smile sooth the patient. But she is going in and out of sleep and cannot always reciprocate to the care and concern of her beloved ones.

I come back and sit down on a vacant orange-coloured chair in a verandah-like space and look at my jottings. After thinking for some time I start writing. I keep on writing without deciding on the genre. After half-an-hour, it occurs to me that the fragments of a story are scattered in my notebook. Gradually a skeleton of a story emerges—people are swarming in to see a patient without any genuine feeling for her. Their honeyed words, and sympathetic smile sooth the patient. But she is going in and out of sleep and cannot always reciprocate to the care and concern of her beloved ones. Some of them try to wake her up by talking a bit loud so that she takes notice of them and smiles at them gratefully; then they would wear a priestly face—it's our duty; we didn't do anything except our duty. The patient is assured of her importance. She is needed. By everyone.

In the middle of my writing, it starts raining. I am greeted by a gust of wind containing small droplets of rain. I stop writing and look into the ward. The light is off. A shaft of light from the verandah partially lights my mother's face. She is sleeping soundly. But the rain has woken up some patients and they are looking outside to see the rainfall.

I feel like going down and sipping a cup of tea. The thought of sitting at a tea-stall at midnight when it is raining outside fascinates me and I decide to go down.

When I wake up in the morning the rain has stopped. Coming back from the tea-stall I did not notice when I fell asleep sitting on the same orange-coloured chair. I rise and enter into the ward to see my mother. I see that my sister and father have come and are talking to my mother with smiling faces. Mother is also smiling and seeing me her smile broadens. I smile back.

My father asks me to go home and get some sleep. Telling my mother that I will be back by evening, I come out of the hospital and watch as the city wakes up. ■