

SHORT STORY

Goodnight, Mr. Kissinger Part-I

KAZI ANIS AHMED

The first time I met Henry Kissinger, I was shocked at how frail he appeared. Of course, "met" is a strong word when you are a waiter. But waiters in restaurants of a certain elevation, like butlers or barbers of another era, enjoy a strange though controlled intimacy with the men they serve.

At a place like The Solstice, it is almost expected for a good waiter to get past the menu with repeat visitors. Once in the middle of a conversation with a silver-haired lawyer, Kissinger was groping for the name of the capital of Tajikistan. It was a delicate call; I took a chance: Dushanbe.

"What is your name?" Mr. Kissinger asked me with slight bemusement.

"James, sir. James D' Costa.

"Where are you from?"

"Bangladesh, sir."

"A James from Bangladesh? An unlikely name for a Bangladeshi, isn't it?"

"It's an unlikely country, sir," I replied as I swept away the crumbs from the thick white table-cloth.

Encounters with the famous and the mighty was one of the great perks of my otherwise often tiring job: politicians, movie stars, authors, sports heroes, socialites. Just the week before meeting Kissinger, I had witnessed the daughter of a real-estate tycoon storm out in tears over a break-up. A month before that I had to find a spare pair of trousers for a druggie star who had soiled himself in the men's room. I was moved by the graciousness of Gregory Peck, and charmed by the sweetness of the Queen of Jordan. Once I pulled Harvey Weinstein away I am an exceptionally big man for a Bangladeshi - when he struck a young director who had crossed him. Yet, somehow the little repartee with Kissinger felt like the highlight.

When I brought the check to Kissinger, he asked me, "So how is your unlikely country doing these days?"

"Quite well, sir," I replied, trying to stay neutral.

"It can't be doing that well if you are here, can it? How long have you been in America?"

"Just two years, sir."

"I hope your country isn't still a basket-case for the sake of those who are stuck there," said Mr. Kissinger, as he wrote in a fat sum for the tip.

Clearly, I had not been forgiven for Dushanbe. But the insult was excessive. The dessert knife, still on the table, flashed before my eyes. Kissinger's neck was soft and crumpled enough that I could have pierced it with a blunt instrument. I have always been given to sudden and extreme bursts of rage, though I try not to act on them. The last time I did, I had to leave the country. I removed myself from the scene with a brusque "thank you," leaving the farewell ritual to a smooth-faced actor amenable to my bullying.

II.

As far as the American immigration service is concerned, I am a political refugee. The real circumstances of my departure are of course more complicated. I used to be an English teacher at a private college in Dhaka. One would not expect a character like me to become a teacher. I harked back to British times when tough guys became teachers, and ran gymnasiums to train young anti-colonial radicals. I doubled up as the games teacher for my college. Not the pot-bellied, whistle-blowing kind. I taught the boys how to dodge and tackle, taking hard falls with them in the rain-sodden field on summer afternoons.

I felt free to egress into unnecessary territories. Anytime the faculty had a new need - not something as grubby as a salary-increase but a new line of acquisitions for the library or an expansion of the common room, I would lead the negotiations. I chided the peons when they slacked off on keeping the bathrooms and corridors clean. I bullied the bullies among the students. I could have asserted myself in a bigger arena, but felt content with the little theater of my college. I enjoyed scolding socially well-placed but negligent parents. In addition to temperament, I was helped in my subtle transgress-



artwork by mustafa zaman

sions by sheer physical size. I was big not just for a Bengali, but for almost any nationality. I could crack open a hard coconut shell with the back of my fist. I used this trick to awe the newcomers, and to intimidate any challengers. I should have known that my predilections destined me for trouble. A student, whom I had failed, begged first for re-grading, then re-examination. Then he grew bolder, offering veiled threats. Violence has become so common in Dhaka that everyone knows a two-bit goon, and feels free to lean on that assumed advantage. I slapped the boy hard and told him to focus on his studies. A few days later, I found a trio of gold-chain-wearing clowns outside the college gate, leaning against their 100cc Japanese bike as if it were a Harley.

I found their posture comic, and paid no heed to their hard stares. But a few weeks later when I was returning home, they fell upon me without any warning or preamble, just as I turned the corner onto the dark alley leading to my house. I took a cut to my chin, but managed to wrestle away a bicycle chain from one of their hands. The student was the slowest to escape. I chased him down and with one metallic swish from behind caught him across the face. I should have stopped right there; but I could not forgive a student who would dare raise a hand against a teacher.

The fact that I had acted in self-defense, even if excessively, was completely overlooked in the ensuing uproar. A few students began a boycott of my classes, and a few parents pressed for an investigation. My defense grew weaker as the boy, now the victim, languished in a hospital. Within a week, no students attended my classes. The authorities asked me to take leave pending an investigation. Old stories about my prowess and vigilance circulated with sinister exaggerations. The boy's parents pressed criminal charges. I did not have the appetite for the legal fight, nor for the humiliations needed to resolve the issue out of court. I managed to secure an American visa, and upon landing filed for asylum. It helped that I was a Christian with a record of secular activism from a country growing ever more (religiously) radical.

III.

When I say I am given to sudden rage, it is not entirely accurate. I have always lived in a state of seething rage. The epicenters of my rage shifted over the years. Targets receded while new obsessions bloomed. As a child, if the cooking was not to my liking, I would hurl the bowl of curry at the wall and watch the yellow sauce dribble down our much-stained wall. In a developed country they might have submitted me to some form of treatment or counseling. Back home I received vigorous thrashings from my father, but I lost him too early

in life to know if his admonishments might have made a difference.

During the war of liberation I was only nine. My father, pastor of a small church on the outskirts of Dhaka, was shot dead by the Pakistanis. The soldiers invaded our house early one morning. Somehow the army skipped our town in the first days of war, when Dhaka was massacred. But a couple of months later, they entered our town blaring the message that anyone who lived peacefully and cooperated would be unharmed. The next morning they came for my father, the first operation in our town.

I remember that ten or twelve soldiers had entered our little compound. I imagine more surrounded the house, and guarded the arched gateway of our very old house. My father came out to the verandah, already bent in submission, appeasement dripping from his voice. That's what I remember most vividly. The

image of my father on his knees, shirt open, pleading for his family. My mother and I watched from behind a door. My mother held my one-year old brother to her breast. The child, sensing disorder, began to bawl. Luckily, the soldiers were not interested in us. They had come specifically for my father, who they believed was aiding insurgents. Having ensured that there were none hiding in our house, they left us alone.

One soldier stood by the gate, under the old Arjun tree, with a leering smile on his broad square face. In a moment like that your comprehension can transcend your age and become universal. I knew even at that age, and in that moment, that the soldier was not smiling with malice, but out of idiocy. He fired suddenly at a goat that leapt out of the vegetable patch at one end of our compound. The major leading the operation blasted a series of expletives at the idiot soldier and ordered him out. Then he turned and barked another order, and my father was shot ten or twenty times, I can't remember, even after his body had gone still on the ground.

Many details of that morning are no longer vivid in my mind. I don't remember if it was a cloudy morning, or which neighbor was the first to rush over once the soldiers left. What I remember vividly is the shaking, kneeling figure of my father, and the smiling face of the idiot soldier. Where is he now? I wondered as I grew older. What if I went to Karachi or Lahore some day, and found him behind the counter of a store?

My unstable moods, in the absence of my father, grew more volatile for a period. Especially in my teenage years, I got into scrapes constantly. I spent almost as much time in suspension as in class. I daydreamed, not of girls, or football, or cars, or anything teenagers commonly fantasize about, but of revenge. I drafted elaborate plans to execute the killers of 1971. It would not be necessary to kill all the culprits; I required only symbolic justice.

Yet, justice was the only thing that my country failed to deliver. I became involved in secularist politics after democracy was restored in the early '90s. I organized awareness-raising events in small towns. But, to my dismay, once in power, even the liberals succumbed to compromise. Eventually the killers and collaborators became ministers. I gave up on wider political work, and became increasingly concerned with upholding vestiges of order and dignity in the immediate and small arena of my college, until, of course, things went too far.

IV.

The move to America seemed to calm my spirits. Or, my shaky legal status in an alien land had a restraining effect on my temper.



Hello Montreal, Goodbye Toronto

REBECCA SULTANA

As I pack my things, again, I find many still in their original packings as brought from Bangladesh. Actually some of my things have still remained in their original packings in which I had brought them to Dhaka from Texas. Not that I am a very stingy person afraid of using up things, it's actually the opposite. I can go about with the least amount of things. Why do I buy these things then? Vanity? Peer pressure? More because of wishful thinking of doing the home front like the ones I enviously gaze at in the *Ladies Home Journal* or in *Better Homes and Gardens*. Time, alas, is the constraint. As for peer pressure, I am not one to be easily swayed by anything like that as my older one is regretful to see, especially where outward appearances are concerned. But I digress.

Montreal beckons me. I can't say I am sorry to leave Toronto. The last one year has been such a whirlwind of commuting, teaching, reading and writing that socializing or sight seeing was not at all in my "to do list." I have not been to the Niagara Falls, or to the CN Tower or to any of the many museums that Toronto can rightfully boast of. I don't have regrets either. There comes a time when other things take priority.

Everybody I talk to, to tell the news of my imminent move, gushes about Montreal. Montreal is supposed to be The Most Fun City, although I have doubts whether I will be partaking in all those fun. Montreal is also less of many things that Toronto is--less crowded, less noisy, less traffic, less of the fast paced life-style--which suit me just fine. At least this time around I am moving to another city with good tidings from friends and colleagues.

from Dallas to Fort Worth, we only received pitying glances. Fort Worth was supposed to be a ramshackle of a city, every body who went to Fort Worth apparently got mugged, cars got stolen, gun fights erupted every now and then, and similar such statistics went on and on from friends. We moved with trepidation. In reality, Fort Worth was one of the best places that we had lived in. An older city than Dallas, it is full of historical significance. Founded by an army major with his troops in 1849, the city later became a frequent stop for cattlemen herding through the area. Reputed as a major "cow town" Fort Worth still has a large Stock-yard visited by tourists everyday. The Botanic and Japanese gardens, the Science museum, and the IMAX Omni Theater became our frequent haunting spots. The Fort Worth zoo was right next door to us. The best of all, Kimbell Art Museum is one that any city could boast of. In 1995, when we were moving to Fort Worth, it was one of only eight cities selected in the entire U.S. to exhibit European masterpieces loaned out for display. Since then there have been displays of Monet, Renoir, Matisse, Picasso and other European greats as well as of Japanese paintings, Mughal art, Ancient Chinese art and many more. Sponsored and supported by old money in this old cowboy city, the museum undoubtedly does a lot to uphold refined culture.

But what really make me still think fondly of the place are the friends that we made during the four years. The Bangladeshi community was small compared to that of Dallas and we became tight-knit especially with two families. These are now life long friends tested through the worst of adversities as well as by happier times. What is the saying about friends in need...? My university friends too, now

scattered all over the world, stay in touch. Roger and his wife are expecting their first child, a boy, in June. Laura, his wife, is in remission from cancer. We all wait, fingers crossed, that everything goes alright. Joanna, my friend and counselor rolled into one and the big sister I never had, continues to give me words of wisdom whenever I seem to lack some. Zoltan, having lost his first wife to the rigors of graduate studies in Texas, seems happy now with his second wife, a lawyer, and their two kids in Hungary. Every time there is a hurricane in Taiwan I wonder if Cherry is doing ok. Mary, at Georgia Tech, just had her second child, a daughter. My dear friend Earnest and I used to commiserate with each other when things got too frantic--on how much life sucked. He is doing well now, having got tenure last year--except on the social front. He sends me pictures of his latest lady friends, a lawyer or a fellow professor, but nothing develops. Perhaps his extreme shyness could have something to do with his not getting a life partner yet. He was the most liked among us. Enormously popular, he was a good friend giving selflessly whenever anyone needed some help. There were many times when I would leave my daughter at the T.A office and ask Earnest to keep an eye on her while I went to class. Carla had tried to set him up with her friends but nothing came out of it. It was Earnest who forwarded me the news that Carla had passed away this April 15 while battling cancer. For days I could think of nothing else--the rides she would give me, tales we swapped of graduate school stress, of kids and babysitting and just about everything. I still have a birthday card that Carla had signed.

Fort Worth may not have had the glitter of a big city but it sure did have people with big hearts. I

just hope Montreal promises to be the same. For me, the second time has been the charm.

As I prepare to change provinces, I have been following with interest the petty wrangling between Ontario and Quebec, courtesy of partisan politics. Even though Ontario, with Alberta, is the richest province of Canada, it is not necessarily the favorite of the Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Ontario has a liberal Premier, Dalton McGuinty, who doesn't seem to share the best of vibes these days with the P.M. Quebec Premier Jean Charest, also a liberal, formerly a federal Progressive Conservative, is more in the good books of the prime Minister. There seems to be a reason too.

Since becoming Prime Minister, Harper has gone out of his way to build his government's popularity in Quebec. Political observers have said the whole focus of the Harper minority government is to win a majority whenever the next federal election occurs. Quebec seems a viable option. However, this approach -- which some strategists consider key to a possible majority government for the Conservatives in the next federal election -- appears to be coming at the cost of Ottawa's relationship with McGuinty. In the last meeting with McGuinty, Harper jettied off to Quebec City to sign a deal with Charest giving Quebec a role at UNESCO meetings. There the two men smiled for the cameras.

Politicians, quibbling like children in the guise of grown ups, never cease to amaze me whether it be in Canada or in Bangladesh or elsewhere. Some can go away with it and actually be very good at it with their ready wits and repartee. Others, unfortunately, make goofs of

themselves with their gaffes. And we have seen enough of those of the South Asian variety. Of the witty kind, one of my favorites is the story attributed to Winston Churchill, although some have dismissed it as a mere myth. Forgive me if I am repeating, but the story goes that in a usual acrimonious exchange in the parliament, Lady Nancy Astor, in a fit of exasperated rage, snapped at Churchill, "If I were your wife, I would poison your tea." Churchill is said to have replied, "If you were my wife, I would drink it."

Politics aside, I am more concerned about the changes that I and my family would have to endure once in Montreal. For one, French has to be included in our vocabulary if we mean to survive well. Schools and colleges, even the English medium ones, have French as a mandatory component. In the long run though, it promises to bear good fruit. All well-paid prestigious government jobs require that candidates be bilingual. Even the school system is different. Whereas the rest of Canada's high schools finishes at 12th grade, Quebec has a two year college after high school, comprising of 12th and 13th grade, before a student can go to a University. I was complaining about these differences of Quebec to a colleague at McMaster. He commented, "Now, Quebec, that's different." Not that I am apprehensive of changes. I am rather looking forward to experience the differences, even if it means resurrecting my very rusty language acquisition skills.

Rebecca Sultana will be teaching postcolonial literature at the English department, Concordia, Montreal, Canada.

On maintaining standards and catechistic listing

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Kali O Kolom, June 2006, edited by Abul Hasnat, published by Ice Media Ltd., Dhaka.

As we all know, it is hard to maintain standards; it can be doubly hard to do so in the case of literary journals, which eventually can settle for being something rather less than is announced with fanfare in their launching ceremonies. One is happy to see *Kali O Kolom* thus far bucking the odds.

The June issue opens with articles on Kazi Nazrul Islam by Hayat Mahmud and Ahmed Mowla respectively. Hayat Mahmud seductively pleads for research into the unexplored areas of the poet's life in the context of the connection between an artist's work and his/her life--even though this principle, as Martin Amis has written, "surely is a long-exploded one." Mahmud does suggest intriguing possible lines of enquiry with regard to Nazrul's life. Ahmed Mowla trenchantly discusses Nazrul's short stories, pointing out that the poet "first entered Bengali literature as a short story writer." In the battlefield scene in an extract published from "Hena," one of the short stories discussed by Mowla, one notes that the young Nazrul was not free of clichés: "Oh! Rain of fire! And that fearful sound--gurum--droom--droom! The tiniest patch of blue sky could not be seen, it was as if the whole sky was consumed by fire!" (translation mine).

Learning there is plenty in Rashid Askari's essay on writers, texts and readers, but it is in the main plowing over old ground, burdened with wearisome lit speak. Speaking generally here, there seems to be an anxiety in such pieces to name-drop, for a catechistic listing of A-list, high-octane Western literary theories/theorists.

As is usual in issues of *Kali O Kolom* there are reviews of local artists/art-sculpture exhibitions and Bengali theater/plays, which keep the readers interested in this scene up-to-date and current. Especially valuable it seems to me in this regard is the coverage of drama/theater, since, as far as I know, there is no independent forum where there can be found critical discourse regarding drama/playwrights. In this vein, I found Sajedul Awal's assessment of Bangladeshi film criticism as attempting to strike forth in a new direction. There

We had sold the old family property to raise the money for my passage. I blew?? much of that fund on a rental deposit for a one bed-room in Sunnyside, Queens. My brother, who didn't mind selling the house for my safety, was irritated when he heard of this move. The few contacts from home I met, and later avoided, advised me against it. But having spent the first few weeks with six young Bengali taxi-drivers in a two-bedroom, I was sure I wanted my own space. I had never lived alone before in thirty-seven years. I couldn't believe how good it felt.

I liked being alone when I woke up, and when I went to sleep. I could see living alone for the rest of my life. I had loved girls, and I had been loved back. But the one girl I might have married, I lost for reasons I still don't understand. I felt no strong need for companionship at this time. I worked one long shift from noon to ten at night. I liked having much of the mornings to myself. To go sit at the diner by the station, with a paper, made for a morning hour more delicious than any I had known before. I liked the smell of coffee, and I liked how in this country they topped it up endlessly.

While my work was not easy, I had it easier than many of my countrymen. I could not pass by any Bangladeshi fruit-seller on winter mornings without a shiver of pity for them, and thankfulness for my luck. My move up the restaurant ladder to The Solstice was rapid, thanks mainly to my English, and general quickness. I enjoyed learning about the great wines of the world: the difference between a Petrus Pomerol 1998 and an ordinary \$100 Merlot appealed to some arcane aspect of my temperament. I loved the elaborateness of our accoutrements, the hierarchy, the rituals, and the art of effacing it all into a seamless, effortless performance. Here, finally, was a civilized order.

I was never desperate, like millions of my countrymen, to leave Bangladesh. I had never given serious thought to emigration, never explored any such options. Yet, trading the chaos and violence of Dhaka for the relative calm and order of New York felt like a boon. My new city, like my place of work, offered me a world of rules. In return, I needed to keep my overdeveloped sense of dignity under check. Surprisingly, this task came as a huge relief. No longer did I have to measure every smile, look, or gesture, nor constantly defend myself against the slightest omissions of respect.

I felt no great longing to go back to Dhaka, even for a visit. Of course, I missed aspects of Dhaka. I missed the *kaal boishakhis* that heralded summer with sudden and terrible lash of winds and hale. I missed *dal puris* with hot tea at the stall by my college on foggy winter mornings. But, on the whole, I was happier in my new life. The owner of a Bangladeshi restaurant in Astoria approached me at regular intervals to teach at a public school loaded with Bangladeshis. The man was a busybody who took an interest in community affairs. "The boys and girls need a Bangladeshi teacher, a role model. Someone strong and good in English." Sometimes he came to see me with sidekicks to add weight to his appeal.

"Surely you know why I left home?" I said to dissuade the man. "People there always overreact and exaggerate," said the man gallantly. "I pay no heed to rumors."

Clearly, they were desperate for a good teacher. But I was not moved by their need or flattery. To accept their offer would mean getting drawn into the community, and the politics and issues from home. I did not wish to have any old feelings stirred up. But, I should have known that it is not easy to leave worlds behind. Just when I thought I had fully bulwarked myself against my past, it ambushed me from a completely unexpected direction, in the unlikely figure of Henry Kissinger.

Like all educated Bangladeshis, I held Kissinger culpable to some degree for the genocide that occurred in my country in 1971. I knew that he did not order it, but I also knew that he did nothing to discourage his Pakistani clients, though he wielded enormous influence on them. These were issues I had gladly left behind. Yet, suddenly now the issue was palpably before me, demanding to be fed and humored.

Kazi Anis Ahmed is director of academic affairs, University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh.



is also an enjoyable write-up from Toronto on an evening's get-together with Canadian poets and writers.

There are a couple of graceful *in memoriams*: One of Indian music critic Kumarprasad Mukhopadhyaya, and the other of Bangladeshi poet-folklorist Mustafa Anwar, one of the immortal group responsible for the operation of the radio transmitter at Kalurghat in 1971, from which sprang the later Free Bangla Betar. Among the short stories are the very readable 'Dondokoron' by Razia Khan (who writes both in English and Bengali) and 'Rupchaya' by Kanir Rai. It is interesting to

note the regular pieces by the ever-reliable stand-bys Samaresh Majumdar and Sunil Gangopadhyaya, as well as all the other West Bengali writers and poets featured in past volumes, and who no doubt will continue (and rightly so for in literature we should not be divisive!) to adorn future issues. Here I am forced to wonder: Where are all those righteous voice otherwise so quick on the draw against the presence of 'Indian' writers?

The book reviews are substantial, though the one on Anis Chowdhury's *Uppanash Shomogro* by Shahjahan Hafiz is descriptive, relying entirely on plot summaries and quotations from Syed Shamsul Huq's introduction in the book. The same cannot be said of Nurul K. Nasim's timely review of Niaz Zaman's edited *From the Delta: English Fiction from Bangladesh*, which properly conducts its analysis within the frame of creative writing in English in Bangladesh. But by focusing at flattering length on one writer, however commendable, at the expense of others the review loses its focus on the whole book, and in fact, on the editor's purpose in publishing such a collection in the first place. It also fails to take into account the wholesale, understandably so given the context, 'Bengali-zation' policies pursued during the years following the country's independence, which may have retarded the growth of English language, and creative writing in it, to an extent felt even today.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.