



FICTION

Letter Box

TANNI SAHA

When I came here, to our new abode, I was quite surprised to see the letter box outside our flat. "Who writes letter these days?" I was wondering. After the death of my mother, my father decided to shift to this new flat. He wanted me to overcome the grief caused by the death of my mother as soon as possible. He was terribly worried about my well-being.

My mother was a patient of acute depression. She had been taking treatment since I was born. But things deteriorated as days passed. My father sometimes held himself responsible for my mother's untimely demise. He was quite introvert; usually he could not express himself through words. So, after the death of my mother, he became very anxious about his 15-year-old daughter. I had always seen my mother being sick and unhappy. Her death did not hurt me the way my father thought it would.

It was my childhood which matured me ahead of time. Therefore, when my worried father decided to keep memories of my mother away from me, I wondered if it was really necessary. But I did not oppose as I thought it would not be bad at least to explore a new place without any past strings attached.

It was the time when I was preparing for my SSC exam. At that time, I was a not-so-good-not-so-bad-type student. Moreover, there was no pressure from my father for A+ or anything. We led our usual life in the new flat. We did not talk much, but it did not create any distance between us. Because we had been in that way since my early childhood. I was used to the silence.

Apart from my regular syllabus, one other thing that interested me was reading. We had a small library where I found everything from the great Bengali classics to Masud Rana. One day, I found a letter in



one of the books. It was written by my mother to my father in their university days. Obviously, it was a love letter. Until that day I did not know that my parents had an affair before their marriage! I got literally shocked to discover the truth in the midst of silence. But I did not ask anything to my father.

After my SSC exam, I had nothing to do. Life seemed to be really boring. I asked my father to

bring me some books. He brought loads of them. So, I sank into the black and white world of pages.

One day, I opened the door after hearing the bell ringing. There was no one, so I thought somebody might drop some bills into the letter box. I opened the box and found a blue envelope on which my name had been typed. In a rush, I opened the envelope and found someone writing to me so

adorably that I fell in love with the person at first sight of that letter. The handwriting was so beautiful as well as familiar as if I had seen it before. The first letter was three pages long, and it was all about how the person came to know about me, how long he had to wait before writing this letter, and how beautiful I look in my blue school dress, etcetera and etcetera.

After that the letter began to come along with the bell every day. By this time, I also took the habit of writing to him. I usually kept my letters in my letter box as well, and he used to collect it from there. I was happy because at least I found a person to talk, to share, to hold. But for him, I was like a child he wanted to nurture. He used to motivate me to know my passion. He was actually helping me to have a view on life and the surroundings. I was used to ask him: how can he be so emotionally mature in this early stage of life, though he was used to be silent on his age, education or family background.

The person behind those letters became the most influential person in my life. His philosophy became my philosophy, his views became mine, I started to think and think apart from reading, I started to stand by the window more often and see an overcrowded world with all its diversity waiting for me to join the crowd. One day the result of my SSC exam came out. That day I received the last letter from him. He wrote me to drape the red sari of my mother which was kept in the closet.

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On that evening, I was out for a dinner with my father.

Tanni Saha completed her Masters from the Department of English, Chittagong University. Currently, she works at a private bank and writes at leisure.



POETRY

In Memoriam

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

A part of my life over.

No more a daughter
No more a home
Where I have memories stored —

Of an old cane chair
A cat that suns itself
And sits on the rooftop of the car

Of honeysuckle wines
Drooping overladen with young blooms
Held up by aged yellow walls

Of my mother's roses,
Large and small
Vying in colours and shades

Of a plum blossom smiling
At honeybirds drinking from its depths

Of a father
Bent and old —
Grey haired and gnarled
But still there for me

As the house folds itself into papers
And exchanges hands,
I feel the sense, the smell fade
Into distant hills
That like stalwarts oversee
The now vacant lot...

Eventually,

To be inhabited by new bodies and new minds.
— New souls housed among the old brick walls—

Mitali Chakravarty's poetry has been published online and as part of anthologies. Her poetry has been translated into German and also been part of a recent PEN symposium.



NON-FICTION

Mirzaad

TOHON

Prologue

My father was in the Pakistani army, so we moved frequently, every few years. Soon after I finished Grade 10 in 1966, we made a big move: from Chittagong to Rawalpindi. A few years later our family moved again: this time from Rawalpindi to Abbottabad, then from Abbottabad to Lahore and finally to Quetta. During my engineering studies I stayed mostly at Lahore but travelled often, visiting my family wherever they moved.

By late 1971 the India-Pakistan war over the liberation of Bangladesh had worsened. Indian fighter planes were now routinely flying over Lahore and the city was no longer safe. I, along with my two close friends, Masud and Baset, made an overnight train journey to Quetta where my family then lived.

Quetta was (and still is) the provincial capital of Balochistan province. Located in northern Balochistan near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, the city (some 240 km from the Afghan city of Kandahar) remains a trade and communications centre between the two countries.

Although the Balochi's and Afghan's native language is Pashto, most of them speak Urdu as a second language.

The Inner Man

In those lazy, cold days in Quetta our favourite pastime was to take a leisurely stroll through the old bazaar and drink tea in the roadside cafes where they played old, evergreen songs from *Anarkali*, *Pakeeza*, *Baiju Baura* and the like. Now looking back, those peaceful hours in a distant, exotic corner of the Earth, spent warming up in the sun, sipping hot chai and enjoying melodious songs in the company of friends, were priceless. I long to return there someday, but it would be lonesome in the absence of my buddies. It might still be worth the trip if I could find Mirzaad.

It was during just such a normal day relaxing in Quetta that I encountered Mirzaad. Sometimes in life the most important events happen out of the blue. As I remember it, we three friends were on our day's walk in the bazaar. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a tall, bearded Pathan wearing salwar, a long kurta, and

with a turban on his head, greeted me, "Assalamo alaikum, Brother" and then gave me a big bear hug. I freaked out — who was this stranger and what was he up to? After releasing me from his tight grip, the Balochi stood facing me with a big, joyous smile, as if he had just found his long-lost brother.

I was really struggling to place him, but after a few more moments I finally managed to recognise him. We had done our second year survey course together in a group where I was the team leader. We were a group of six: me, a Bangladeshi, four Punjabis and the Balochi Pathan. From what little I did remember, my impression of Mirzaad had not been favourable. He spoke poor English and was not good academically. I had thought of him as a country (if not cave) man from a remote place on the Earth and had treated him as insignificant. Now, meeting him again, unexpectedly, I instinctively thought that there must be a

"Brother, you are all lions. We have not been able to do anything as yet." He was referring to the ongoing freedom fighting in Bangladesh — they had not yet been able to do anything towards fulfilling their dream of seeing Balochistan as a free nation.

reason why God had brought us together again.

Next, Mirzaad greeted Masud and Baset and then asked, out of all places, what were we doing in Quetta. I explained to him our circumstances. He was delighted to see us in his home town and, as is the custom, invited us to his home for a meal. Speaking in Urdu he said, "Chalo yaar hamaare sath roti khao."

I politely declined, saying, "Shukria, we are kind of tied up today." But he would not budge.



"OK then, what day suits you?" I felt that there was no escape, so I said, "Please, suggest a day."

He said, "OK, Brother, this Friday after Jumma. We can meet here at the same spot." He remembered my name but addressed me as "Brother" as a customary mark of respect.

Friday was two days away and we did not have any better things to do, so we all agreed. But I still couldn't remember his name. Hesitantly, I asked him: "How do I address you, Brother?"

He replied, "Mirzaad." It definitely rang a bell.

We arrived on Friday afternoon after the Jumma prayer and found Mirzaad waiting. He greeted us with a warm welcome as if meeting friends after many years. We followed him. It was about half an hour's walk, partly through the bazaar and then along a narrow, winding alley.

He stopped at a wide gate with double doors and a tall wall along the boundary. This was a typical house design to maintain privacy for the women who could work in the front yard and the kids could play indoors safely. There was a wide veranda where elderly people would relax on a chowki or charpoy, smoking hookah.

Mirzaad led us inside the gate. To my surprise, I noticed about a dozen men on the veranda sitting on a carpet. It appeared that something like a tribal majlish was taking place. The men all stood up as we approached. They were waiting for us. Mirzaad introduced us to his clan both from his mother's and father's sides — cousins, uncles, grandpas and also several neighbours. We exchanged salaams, greetings and hugs with one another. Their excitement knew no bounds in meeting Mirzaad's fellow talibans (meaning students) from a distant land. They seemed to feel that a common ancestral blood ran in our veins.

We sat among them. Language was a barrier with the elders but Mirzaad was there to help. One of his cousins sat next to me and spoke in Urdu: "*Bhai, tom toh sher ho. Hamlog abhitaq kuch na kaar saka*" — meaning, "Brother, you are all lions. We have not been able to do anything as yet." He was referring to the ongoing freedom fighting in Bangladesh — they had not yet been able to do anything towards fulfilling their dream of seeing Balochistan as a free nation.

First, they served tea in small cups, which they kept refilling. At some point

they passed around a bowl half filled with water for us to rinse our hands. Then it was the meal time.

The younger men went inside the house and brought out several large plates containing fried rice with whole roast chickens. Then they served plates of Arabian breads and salad — tomato, cucumbers and olives.

Just when I thought that there was enough food to feed two dozen men, I realised that the main meal was yet to be served — a whole roast lamb.

As is the custom, four or five guests would sit around a large plate and share food with their bare hands. The plates were still half full when we all finished. Once they had cleared the leftovers, I could only hope that it would not get thrown away.

Next they brought several plates of fruits, nuts and dates. And the final phase was tea and hookah (for the elderly men).

We three Bangladeshi youths, with our small bodies and intestines, were exhausted! But as a courtesy we ploughed on for almost an hour and a half. Altogether we spent at least three hours relishing their hospitality, friendship and courtesy. Their warmth was such that I felt that if we had sworn enemies trying to kill us, these men, every one of them, would not hesitate to protect us, even if it meant spilling their own blood.

It was getting late. Mirzaad walked us back to the bazaar. He hugged us all goodbye. He was very pleased with himself for he has accomplished something big. I held him close to my chest for a while in return for what he had offered us that day.

Epilogue

Masud, Baset and I walked back home without words. Dusk fell upon us. It was getting dark and, luckily, the darkness hid my face. I was not sure what was in my friends' minds, but I felt deeply ashamed for the way I had judged Mirzaad when I met him two years ago.

Tohon is a short story writer for The Daily Star Saturday Literature page.