



FICTION

# Sand and Water

TANVIR MALIK

Shutters clicked away. Flashes dazzled eyes. News reporters jostled with each other to hold out their mikes as far as their arms allowed. Busy fingers gripped their ballpoints tighter.

A group of borkha-clad women filed out of the baggage reclaim area, hiding their faces.

The reporters ringed in the women. Rokeya dodged the crowd. Followed by Shamsun Nahar, she walked far past the railing and sighed.

"Where will you go now?" Shamsun Nahar asked.

Rokeya didn't reply.

"Come with me. You can stay with us a couple of days. I'm with an NGO. We provide legal aid for women. Here's my card."

Rokeya turned around. "I don't need it." "Keep it, just in case," the woman smiled and left.

Three coffins were brought out on trolleys with people wailing behind. An old woman had passed out. A young boy looked perplexed, clutching the corner of his father's shirt. A little girl cried for her mother.

"Take me away from here," Rokeya whispered.

She looked out the windows of the rental. The flyovers reminded her of the ones between Jeddah and Riyadh; she'd been on them not very long ago. Water was scarce there. Vast deserts dominated the landscape; there was just sand – lots of it.

The run-up to her first plane trip passed in a flurry. Leaving her children behind tore her heart out; her only consolation had been that she was setting foot in a holy land.

The Prophet's country! A Flower bloomed amid its arid, sandy expanses fourteen hundred years back. She had cherished its fragrance in her heart all her life.

"You're lucky; not every Muslim gets a chance to visit the country," the imam of the local mosque beamed.

Jalal was unwilling at first. Nobody from his family had ever worked as a domestic worker. But he came around when Rokeya listed the paybacks; it seemed too good to pass on.

A hairy hand was feeling Rokeya up in the dark. She resisted with all her strength, but the hand possessed superhuman powers. Her mouth was already clamped with his other hand. Pinned to the bed, she writhed in pain. "A-ah!" Rokeya started up. The shaggy darkness bristled against her skin. She squirmed. The nightmare kept coming back to her night after night.

It started on the 31st of March, she clearly remembered. She'd gone to bed, finishing all her chores. The sheikh's wife was out of town. A furry hand gagged her with a ball of cloth in the middle of the night. "I own you, and I can do anything I want," a raspy voice she recognized whispered in her ear.

She woke up in the morning with pain all over her body. She had passed out from the beating and torture. She felt dirty. Even after taking showers, the feeling wouldn't just wash off. She stopped saying her prayers for two days.

Jumping off the high-rise seemed the easiest way out; but once on the balcony, she saw two innocent faces pleading with her. She couldn't even die. She cried a full hour.

"Hello, it's me – Rokeya. I'm in Bangladesh now."

"Did you bring any money?" Jalil asked. "Yes, how's my children?"

"Good."

"Can you come to Dhaka to pick me up?"

"Ok."

Rokeya flopped down on the bed. She could go back home! She could return to her children! Tears of joy filled her eyes.

The bus Rokeya and Jalil got on was parked in the rutted mud. It had "Shatkira Deluxe Express" painted in red cursive letters on the sides. From the driver's rear-view mirror dangled a hanging that had "Allahu" written in Arabic.

The bus started right at 7 am. She could see expanses of green paddy fields passing by through the windows. The occasional villages were concealed in a smoky, deeper green. There was just green—lots of it, so unlike the desert land she had left behind.

The back of the dollar bill she had got from the son was also green. "My father must never know," he said. She flung down the hairy bill straightaway. He gave a fiendish smile, "Oh, the *mishkin* wants more." Tossing another greenback, he left. It was to be her *price*. She cried another full hour.

It was then she set on fleeing. An Egyptian doctor, who lived next door, called the police, who in turn handed her over to the Bangladesh Consulate in Jeddah; then came the safe house, and then...

Jalil was sitting next to her. What was he thinking? Did he have a clue? They were to share their bed tonight. He had hairy hands too. She froze.

Rokeya smothered Shamim and Sumona with kisses upon reaching home. Everything was the same as when she left a year ago. The chicken coop was still missing half of its top. The cement platform at the base of the tube well had been the playground of marauding algae. The rose plant was dead, however.

Rokeya touched her mother-in-law's feet. "You could've brought a lot more money, had you stayed. I was taking good care of your children; you can ask them if you don't believe me."

"What the hell's the meaning of these marks?" Jalil exploded.

Rokeya was weeping. "Believe me, I'm innocent."

"You w\_\_\_\_\_! Now I understand why you wanted to go abroad."

"You don't understand. I saved myself. I ran away, didn't I? I did that for you – for our family."

Jalil was hysterical. He walked up and down, pulling his hair with both hands. "I'm going to go mad if I stay here any longer."

"Can't you forgive me?"

"Forgive! Bitch, I'm going to divorce you!"

"No, no, don't say that. Kill me, but don't say that."

Jalil stormed out, leaving the door open. It was dark outside. Moonlight cast a pale glow over everything, however. The skeleton of the rose plant was clearly visible. The lack of water that had killed it, might as well have been an excess of sand. Sand and water. The sandstorm in the Arabian deserts had rippled out into a cyclone on the Bay of Bengal.

"You're right – a man has every right to punish his wife if she's unfaithful," the imam said, "the newspapers nowadays are filled with scandalous reports and photos of these women. To defame the Prophet's Land like this, for shame, for shame!"

"I warned Jalil before she went abroad. He didn't listen. When a woman sets foot outside her home, she only brings disgrace to the whole family," Jalil's mother curled her lips.

They were seated under the guava tree in the yard. Rokeya was on the porch behind a bamboo chik. She had sent the kids out under some pretext. The tube well platform had been scraped clean. The chicken coop donned a full roof in months. The rose plant was missing.

"My mind's made up, and she has to leave all the money she's brought; it was I who paid for her plane fare and everything else."

Rokeya began to snivel. "Where will I go?" she asked.

"What do I know? Didn't you think of it when you committed *jena*?"

Rokeya wanted to protest. She wanted to point out one last time what Jalil was refusing to see through. Nevertheless, she knew her husband. "I have a request," she said, "I want to take my children with me."

"Never! I'll not let your shadow fall over my children."

The matter was settled. The imam gave his blessings. The mother hoped she'd get a better daughter-in-law the next time and a generous dowry. The son felt confident he'd not let his mother down.

Cyclones on the Bay of Bengal were notorious for razing everything to the ground. This one – though born of the desert – flooded everything in its path. Water and sand.

That night Rokeya cried for a long time, again. She had packed her bag and she did not forget to place her copy of the Quran on top of everything else, wrapped in a satin scarf. The children had cried themselves to sleep. She would come back for them, she had assured.

She took the NGO worker's card out and stroked it with her fingers. She repeated the phone number to herself.

Putting it back, she went to bed. Lying in the dark, she saw the light; she dared knit herself an invisible shawl – one neither sand nor water could affect.

Tanvir Malik's first book is a collection of short stories called Short Takes: Stories from Bangladesh. A teacher by profession, he enjoys reading, travelling, and painting.



FICTION

# Of Fireflies and Slime

MARJUQUE UL HAQUE

I stood before the door of the house where my grandmother once lived. Age and infirmity had jaded what might have once been a proper door. What had once been a smooth leafy green entrance was now faded and flaking with white speckles and horizontal shafts of indents that the wood lice had eaten into.

I remember my grandmother while she was alive. At her deathbed, she had apparently told my parents that she wanted all of us siblings at her janaza. I had not been able to attend. I remember that two minibuses were hired to take her dead body to the gravesite. I was supposed to go; only I opted out when my father offered to squeeze me into the microbus, it was overloaded and having me inside would make the ride even more uncomfortable for everyone. I came to know later that in the hubbub of the moment my father had forgotten about her request; otherwise he would have squeezed me inside in spite of everyone's discomfort.

The night was lighted by the moon and noisy with the chirping of crickets and the croaking of frogs at the pond. I took the keys out and opened the door. It was pitch dark and dust laden inside as an abandoned house would be. I shivered a little directing the torch inside and took out candles from the bag, carefully avoiding looking at the dark corners in case I imagined the outline of something ominous hovering by. After a quick look inside the house I unbarred the doors opening into the yard. It was a lovely scene, the weed and tall grass gleamed in the moonlight among the stray

something non-human and the acrid smell that had come to pass. The door was barred and therefore, it was impossible for anyone to enter. The windows, however, were open to let the air in and although no human being could possibly enter through it, a firefly had come in and was present in the room.

Stories as such spread quickly through the village; within a day or two the surrounding villages had learned of the incident. Nobody really understood what was going on; but not long after, another girl was attacked again by the slime. Like the previous case, the girl had been alone in her room and a single firefly was had been present. It did not take long for the villagers to put two plus two together. In desperation they held a council and decided to take measures.

At the imminence of dusk everyone came in and checked to get rid of any fireflies from their homes before shutting down doors and windows and made sure to close the door quickly and watchfully whenever they went out. But these measures were not nearly enough and villagers came up with a plan. From dusk to dawn, a group would be beating pots and pans in places where people lived to disturb the quiet of the night that was taken advantage of by the slime. These were of course joint initiatives, and groups of two and three took turns to continue the noise by inhabited areas. The metallic clang that reverberated through the village from sundown to sunset could be heard from as far away from neighboring villages about a mile away. In the beginning, it was difficult



leaves. A few fireflies twinkled about here and there in the darkness behind the kitchen that stood across the yard. I took the bench to repose by the scene away from the strain of the cloistered indoors. These were the scenery that made the countryside truly beautiful. How long had it been since I had come to my grandmother's village? Absent minded, I watched one the fireflies sauntering in through the door.

I recalled a story my grandmother had told us when she had been alive. In those days, she would sit on the easy chair by the living room door that led to the yard while counting her prayer beads. The electricity at the villages played hide and seek more frequently than you could expect and the whole area would be plunged into darkness. We would often sit quietly by her as she told us stories about Djinnns and the like. On such a dark night, we were discussing fireflies as a few of them happened to have entered the living room. The electricity had been gone for a while and it was about time we had dinner before going to bed. Grandma had asked Jahangir to get a broom to get rid of the insects as the doors would be closed soon. We were all fascinated and happy with their presence in the house and had inquired if we may not have them stay. Our grandmother had smiled and asked Jahangir to explain; only he blinked and looked dumbfoundedly at her. It was then that she began the tale of what a firefly in the house meant.

In her younger years, when there had been no electricity in the villages, a particular kind of Djinn which took the form of fireflies had come to haunt the villages. One night when a woman had been sleeping alone in her home she was awakened by a distinct feeling of being touched all over her body by something disgustingly slimy. Initially, she had been so stunned that she couldn't raise her voice for help. At length, she had shouted for help but had not been heard and inquired after only much later. Unsurprisingly, she had been traumatized to near madness as she recounted being molested by

to sleep in the noise, in fact many were unable to sleep, but they soon learned to adapt.

News of such happenings eventually reached the Imam living a few villages away. He was ingenious; in a span of less than two weeks he had imprisoned these supernatural slime beings in jars, filled them in a sack and threw them into the river. For some time, peace returned to the villages. It would have been great if it were to stay as such indefinitely except that the sack full of jars had surfaced again one day and a bunch of children playing by the river had happened upon them. In their curiosity, they unsealed the jars and were delighted to find coloured smoke bursting out each time they opened one. A man who was passing by was shocked to learn about the jars. His explanation of "djinnns" frightened everyone by the river. The children stood for a moment before fleeing the spot in fear.

The man himself was terrified but he knew that the djinnns would not normally attack humans during daylight. He summoned up courage and collected the empty jars into the sack. He knew that the Imam must be called again for help. A few men were soon dispatched to get the Imam. Thankfully, nobody had been affected by the slimes when the Imam had arrived a few days later. He immediately set about recapturing the wicked slimes. It was lucky that the last slime when he had found him had not gone too far into hiding.

He understood that mere imprisonment would lead to release again one day and hence he gathered them all together by the river and threatened this time to imprison them permanently unless they promised to travel past the distant river that came after this one and never return to this side. The slimes fearful of punishment promised and went past the next river and has not appeared since.

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