

THE drone of Tarabibi's uninterrupted monologue from within the house penetrated Golzar Ali's ears, created a turmoil in his head, and shattered the calm of his evening.

Today everything had gone so well — all microphones from his shop had been rented for a college function. He had been free to enjoy a long afternoon nap — something he could not do too often and felt fresh and restful. In the evening, he went to Fakir Chand's 'Azad Restaurant.' He was leisurely relishing two well-done barbecued kababs when Asadullah entered the restaurant. Pouring his tea into the saucer and taking it to his lips, Asadullah spoke to Golzar. 'Come on, hurry. I'm tired looking for you all over the place. Let's make a dash to the Moon Theatre.'

Golzar stepped out of 'Moon Theatre' in full contentment. He had not enjoyed something like this for a long time. It was an English film. He had not understood the dialogue, but who cares? The blows and the wrestling spoke for everything. Some blows were worth a million taka each. Golzar was not a skilled fighter; but most of his close associates had talents along that line. Nowadays in times of firearms, however, their days were over. Probably their skills had blunted too. But Golzar was fascinated by the power of human hands shown in this film.

As they came on to the main street, Asadullah said, 'Come, let's make a round to 'Gangajali' — let me initiate you today.'

'No, Ustad.'

'Come on, man, you'll just sit and watch, maybe drink a bottle. I'll finish and come back.'

'No, Ustad.'

'What! Go, then, suck your wife's teats.' Asadullah was irritated. 'I couldn't make a man out of you, Golzar.'

Whether Golzar really wanted to become a man or not was doubtful. When Asadullah left, he kept walking straight. He could not help recalling the wrestling scenes — he had seen numerous films about violence and fighting, but this pageantry of blows falling one against another, the repeated confrontations, and just the constant 'thud, thud' of blows surpassed anything he had ever witnessed before. Golzar imagined how he would re-enact those scenes of wrestling in front of Sakina when he went home. Whenever he looked up, he felt as if the sky was covered with a large screen filled with vivid displays of movements by paired hands. Almost overwhelmed by this dance of fists and the 'tack-tack-tack' sound of blows, Golzar reached his house.

The front of the house had a large wooden door framed by a now crumpling thin layer of bricks. The door itself was very old, inordinately heavy, and crammed with cracks. Golzar was about to peer through the usual big crack and call his wife, when Tarabibi's complaining voice reached him.

'You're as good as dead!' she shouted to Ramzan Ali. 'All your life you've just lain in bed, never knowing what worries I face in running this house. What a son have I borne, O, Allah! How will I face Allah on the Day of Judgment? It's one at night and he isn't back home! I know where he goes and who he fools around with.'

Hearing these words, Golzar felt his misery evening, the dance of blows in the street neons — all dissolving into a haze. He no longer wished to control his life; he yearned to abandon all discretion and conscience to the yelowish black drain under the dark lamp-post by the street.

'Ali Hussain's wife — that shameless hussy — don't I know what all that whispering, murmuring to her is about?' Sitting on the high, narrow veranda, the mother who had borne him wove new sentences, each sharper than the former, each revealing a suspicious mind.

If there's a maid-servant, he must fool around with her all the time: 'Surj's mother, bring me water; Surj's mother where's my vest? Surj's mother, bring my breakfast — Why? Doesn't he have a wife?'

How much more? Putting a hand on his chest, Golzar peered through a crack in the door and called his wife, 'Sakina.' Saying 'who?' but without waiting for a reply, Sakina came, opened the door but did not linger. Beyond the door were a few yards of grass-patched, muddy, concrete land, and then a high veranda. There was absolute silence in the veranda as Golzar Ali shut the door with his back turned to the veranda. The longer he could spend locking the door, the better. He kept bolting and unbolting the door. The bolting of the door was the only sound in the house right now. When Golzar turned around, he saw that the veranda was empty. Good, the moment of facing his mother had been delayed a little. But the five steps leading up to the veranda were climbed in no time. Then he must enter through a high door and pass Tarabibi before reaching his own room. Tarabibi's room was long. From the dark veranda, her lighted room seemed a hazy yellow. The first thing which struck one on entering it was that far below the high ceiling the area which seemed like an empty hole was actually occupied by Ramzan Ali who tossed and turned his twisted, wooden post-like body on a bed. Often as he turned his eighty-two year old debilitated figure, a gush of unseemly cough burst forth. But nothing like that happened now. Ramzan could not endure light, that is why one side of the lighted bulb was covered with paper. In the opposite corner of the room, Tarabibi sat on a low stool preparing betel-leaf. Golzar almost brushed by

her side before he went to his room. From the bed on the other side, Ramzan Ali's hoarse voice filled the room:

'Did you shut the back door? Do you have to remind me?' Before Tarabibi had finished her reply, Golzar reached his own room. 'Did you look under the bed? Before he heard the reply to Ramzan Ali's second question, Golzar quietly closed the door.

In Golzar's room, on a red-bordered mat was a bowl of rice, a bowl of curry, mashed potatoes, and some jalapin peppers and salt in a saucer. Sitting on the mat and eating rice and curry, Golzar said, 'Amma went on and on, didn't she?' Without replying, Sakina put up the mosquito net, arranged the pillows, and straightened the bed-sheet over and again. Sakina's almost fair and round face was overcast. Hoping to spread a little sunshine over that face, Golzar said, 'Why don't you eat a little with me?' Without expecting a reply, he started picking out the bones of the 'khalsi' fish. While doing that he asked, 'Had the fish gone stale?' But the staleness of the fish apparently did not affect his appetite. He went on eating for a long time. His bowed head almost reached his chest. Sakina, who stood by holding the bed-post, looked out of the corner of

Golzar, 'Golzar Bhai, show how your friend snores in his sleep.' Then she herself displayed not only how her husband snored in his sleep, but also how he ate a banana. For the first time in her life, Sakina laughed continuously for a long time. Amidst this laughter, evening fell, and Rabeya put on her burkha and, left with Ali Hussain to go home. Golzar also went outside with them. As soon as they had gone, Tarabibi called Sakina, 'O, Bou! What is all this laughter about?' Remembering Ali Hussain and Rabeya's strange antics, Sakina covered her mouth with the end of her sari and laughed again. 'Amma, that wife is so funny, you cannot help laughing!'

But Tarabibi's face was grim. She was dark, tall and heavy. She had no blouse on, only the sari was wrapped around the chest. She panted in the heat. After a while, Sakina noticed that this panting was not entirely due to the heat — Tarabibi was actually very angry. 'Bou, don't dig a canal and invite the alligator, understand? Huh?'

'Don't you know what a canal is?' Tarabibi could not tolerate any more, 'A village bumpkin ... and you don't know what a canal is? You who grew up pissing and sitting beside ditches and canals, and now you don't know a canal.

## Tarabibi's Virile Son

A Short Story by Akhteruzzaman Elias

Translated from the Bengali by Parveen K Elias



her eyes. Had Golzar fallen asleep or what? Tarabibi had started her incessant monotone while folding her prayers mat after Maghrib the prayers, and it had stopped only now. Oh, Allah! What a long speech it had been! When the rumbling noise of the buses plying on the main street had decreased, the microphone playing popular melodies in the restaurant around the corner blared even louder. The loud music together with the continued shrieks of madman Khadem in No.11 and above all the hubbub of the noisy, bustling, busy area — all had mingled in muddled confusion.

Golzar said, 'Amma made quite a scene, huh?'

'Did Amma say anything to you too? he asked again.

'Take me away to Mir Khadem. Or, else call Mia-Bhai to come and get me.'

Even though he had finished eating, Golzar fiddled with a few grains of rice. Sakina said, 'I don't like this at all. How much more can I take of this?'

Sakina's words aroused a faint resentment in Golzar's heart: he was the one most victimised by his mother's behavior, but even his wife refused to share his suffering. This reaction helped him recover from his passivity. He pulled out the basin from under the bed, washed his hands and mouth, gargled and cleaned his throat, then sat on the bed dangling his feet and took the betel leaf from Sakina's hand. Sakina gathered and piled the dirty dishes in a corner. While doing this she muttered in a low and bitter voice: 'We're mere village girls, coming from low class families. How is it possible for me to hold on to a husband from a noble family like yours?'

Through Golzar Ali had no regrets that Sakina was a peasant girl, he could not find any fault in his mother's accusation either. But he did not want to displease his wife. Maybe, he could still salvage his evening with some effort.

'Why must you hold on to me? Have I left you? You couldn't say that?'

'What could I say? How could Sakina say anything to her mother-in-law? Golzar Ali had told Sakina a long time ago that being suspicious was part of his mother's nature. Sakina's first experience had occurred three months after marriage. One day, in this very room, Golzar, Sakina, Golzar's friend Ali Hussain and his wife Rabeya had spent the whole afternoon gossiping and merry making. Ali Hussain and his wife were both lively company. Ali Hussain was a master of mimicry — he could imitate a stammering man, an infant crying, the sounds of cats and dogs, even the sound of a cork being extracted from a bottle, or the sound of water being poured from an earthen jar — he could imitate everything. Rabeya was also a very jolly person. Once she interrupted Ali Hussain and told

After humiliating her with these irrelevant remarks, Tarabibi came to the actual point, 'Do you know that shameless hussy? Ali Hussain Bhai's wife?'

'You don't have to tell me who she is. Don't I know madman Khadem's daughter? Khadem madman tried so hard to trap my Golzar for her! Golzar's eyes were in that direction too. Look, Bou, don't ruin yourself. Didn't you see how she laughed with another man, didn't you see?'

That night was very bad one for Golzar. Sakina kept silent and did not respond at all. When Golzar pulled her down on the bed and kissed her for a long time. Sakina started crying. In between sobs, in snatched phrases, Sakina related her first sorrowful experience in married life.

'Is this how you will take care of my future? My father had given me in marriage with a lot of hopes, what is all this you're doing?'

In between Sakina's lamentations, Golzar asked her, 'Did Amma tell you all this?'

'Who knows what Amma said and what you made up understood!'

But this had no effect. Late at night, Golzar woke up and saw that Sakina was sobbing, sometimes hiding her face in the pillow and sometimes sitting up and putting her face between her knees. When she saw him awaken, she turned and lay facing the other side. Her back was heaving — the sari did not cover her back and her blouse was sticky with sweat. As he lay looking, suddenly a continuous sound entered his ears and flung his body out of bed in a single leap. The sound of Tarabibi weeping had crept through the wall and door into this room. When Golzar tiptoed to the other end of the room and quietly opened the door, that sound burst in. Tarabibi was fast asleep — the rhythmic fluctuations of her snores were transformed into a continuous wail by the time they reached this room. Golzar closed the door and lay down again. The sound of Tarabibi's imposed upon the emptiness of the room. Golzar's late childhood, boyhood, and even early youth had been interspersed with Tarabibi's crying. By that time the sobbing of Sakina lying beside him had calmed down a little. Golzar was afraid whether the rest of his life would also be marked by somebody weeping.

Putting his hand on Sakina's wet back, Golzar's fear somewhat subsided. There was a woman of flesh and blood, full of joys and sorrows lying beside him. Before there had been

only a dirty green sheet on a thin mattress. Above was a high ceiling beneath which was this awkward, cave-like room. There were rooms above that ceiling before. At a very young age, Golzar Ali had seen them and recalled

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