

THE thought of the other child would come at odd times. Like when she was picking the rice, or sweeping the floor, or grinding the red chillies that made her hands smart. At the beginning she had thought of it — her, really, but the child had been taken so early that she rarely thought of it as her — when the little one who remained strained at her thin breasts. There had been so little milk for even this one that she had had none to spare for the other. This one was a boy. Everyone said, boys were better. They would look after you in your old age, they said. That is, if the daughters-in-law let them. Also this one had been bigger. More chance of surviving.

Every year for the last five years, she had been married one year before the first one was born, she had given birth. Not one had lived beyond a day or two. And she had thought that she too, like Fatema, was cursed. And then, she had had the two together. Together, they were only a little bigger than the little ones who had died. How long would these two live, she had wondered. Would they too die after two days as the other little ones had? But three days passed and they were still there. Only one had seemed smaller and weaker than the other. More like a wrinkled old woman. Then the two white men had come to see her with Abdul. And almost before she realized it, there was only one child left.

She did not pause as she ground the chillies. *Ghater ghata, ghater-ghata*. The heavy stone roller smoothed the dry, red pods into paste. One did not have to think when one ground chillies, so one could think about the things one had no time for. A few dabs of water, and then off again, *ghater ghata, ghater ghata*, as the soft, red, paper-thin skins melted into the flat, yellow sees and merged to form red paste. A pause to stretch her back, and then another dab of water, and the roller started going back and forth on the smooth grindstone. She must tell them to have the stone pricked once more. The pockmarks all over had disappeared. The auspicious fish design on top had also completely faded out. It was really too smooth to grind the chillies. Most people had started buying powdered chillies, but there were some who liked their spices ground fresh every day, so there was still some work for daily women like her who could not work *bandha*.

She washed the grindstone. Put it back in its place under the sink. What was it like to work *bandha*, she wondered. Leave husband and children and remain in other people's houses? At least for people who worked *bandha* there was a dry place to sleep in at night. In the hut, during the rainy months of *Ashar* and *Sraban*, everything got wet. One's clothes, one's floors — everything. The smooth, hard floor that she smeared with a mixture of cowdung and mud so that it was almost as nice as Khalamma's floor, turned to muddy paste. But people who worked *bandha*, slept inside. There were some even luckier. Like Ali, who got a room all to himself, next to the kitchen. It was small just big enough for a narrow *chowki*, and when there were guests, the drivers would be given food in his room, so he was expected to keep it clean and just as Khalamma wanted it. But Ali could stretch out there after his fourteen or sixteen hour duty — not like some others who could not go to sleep until everyone had gone to sleep, because one never knew when the guests would leave or who would want to come into the kitchen for a glass of water or a cup of tea.

The bundle, on the ground stirred. Even before the tiny eyes opened and the mouth started its fine wall, she had scooped it up and uncovered her breast — all the time covering it modestly with her sari *anchal*, so that the head of the baby was inside the *anchal* and only the ragged *kantha* she covered its frail limbs with was visible. She had promised Khalamma that the baby would not disturb anyone. Khalamma would never hear it cry. The nursing soothed the baby, and it was hardly a moment or two before it went back to sleep, its hunger satisfied for the moment. She let it hang on a moment longer to make sure it would not wake up and fuss the moment she put it back on the ground. Satisfied that it was asleep, she put it back, smoothening the soft *kantha* round the frail body so that it would think it was still being held to her breast. She was fortunate that she could bring the child to work with her. Not like Fatema who had had to leave her baby at home. Fatema had not been able to give up her job with a paralyzed husband who couldn't work. And she hadn't been able to bring the baby with her to work. The baby had had to be given a bottle because Fatema could not come back always to feed it. And when the baby died, the health worker had said the milk had killed the baby. And now, Fatema's husband too was dead. It was true that in a way Fatema was better off without a paralyzed husband, but what woman would rather work than have a family? And who would marry Fatema now? A woman who had killed her husband and child? A black foreheaded woman? But weren't all women black foreheaded? Well, not all. Not her Khalamma. Every day a fresh sari and shoes the same colour as her sari. And she smelled nice all the time. Sometimes like roses. What Paradise must smell like.

Ali handed her the fish and explained that it had only to be scaled and its insides cleaned out. Not cut. Khalamma wanted it to be made into a *bideshi* dish, so

she must be careful with it. And leave the tail whole. Be sure not to nick the tail the slightest bit. After it was cooked it would look like a fish — only its scales would be golden because of the carrots. Occasionally, when she had cleaned the fish, she had slipped a piece of fish or two into her waist knot, but she wouldn't be able to today, she thought. But the insides she could keep. They never had any use for it. Even Ali scoffed at her for eating what she was sure he ate with relish back home. The oil was particularly good to cook with *sag*, made it special. Perhaps Ali would let her have some of the cauliflower leaves which they threw away. These rich people did not know how to cook. They threw away chicken skins as well. One hardly needed anything more than a pinch of salt, a dab of oil and two pinches of *haldi* and chillies to make a tasty meal out of chicken skins. They never ate the feet either. The first day she had come to work, she had cleaned the feet and put them in with the cut and cleaned chicken. Ali had scolded her. Since that day she had kept the feet aside with the skins to take home with her. After removing the feathers carefully, she had enough skin to make into a dish for two meals.

Fridays were bad days, because that was when the weekly bazaar came and everything had to be cut and cleaned and put away in the cold box. Khalamma would be rushing in and out of the kitchen because that was the day Khalu would have lunch, and no matter how late the bazaar came he had to have it by one o'clock. In most houses the men went to the mosque for Friday prayers, but Khalu didn't. On Friday's her back hurt

grimaced at the thought of the sugarless tea that Khalamma drank.

Ali explained to her that Khalamma was afraid of getting fat. All *baralok* were afraid of getting fat. That's why she did not have sugar with her tea. Nor rice nor potatoes. Sometimes she would go on what Ali called diet. Then she would have nothing but tea and *tosht* in the morning and cucumber in the afternoon. At night, however, she would eat with Khalu — a spoon of rice only, however, or one *chapati*, the small *chapati* she had Ali make for the table not the big, fat ones that Ali made for the kitchen help and himself. They were allowed three of the *chapatis* with their tea. One she ate, sitting in the kitchen, but the other two she took home with the leftover *bhaji* or *jhol*, in that way she only needed to cook a pot of rice for him.

Sometimes she wondered whether, if she had had this job when the babies were born, she would have given the little one away. But she could not have brought both with her to work. Of that she was sure. And then it was only after the babies were born that she had met Abdul when he came with the *bideshis* and afterwards got her the job at Khalamma's place. Ali was from the same village as Abdul. That is how Abdul had known that Khalamma was looking for a daily woman to help in the kitchen. He had come with her and told Khalamma that he knew her — though he really didn't. But he had to say it otherwise Khalamma would not have given her the job. And after that day she had never seen him again. Rahima had told her that Abdul must have got a lot of money from the

everyone had come to see her and the babies. The white men had also come with Abdul to see her. The man with the red beard had explained to her — sometimes himself, but when she could not understand the way he spoke, Abdul had explained that the other white man wanted to take her child, if she would give it up seeing she had two. The man wanted to take a Bangladeshi child because he had stayed many years in Bangladesh as a child. Now that he was grown up, and his wife and he could not have children, they wanted to adopt a Bangladeshi child. Abdul explained to her that the white man would look after the child well. Then too she must realize that she had nothing to eat herself. How could she feed one child, let alone two? So she had said yes. God who gave her two children who lived would give again some other day. The white man who wanted the child said he would bring his wife the next day. He wanted the child to be a surprise to her. That is why he had not brought her. He wanted to see the child first himself. They had been disappointed earlier.

She had looked at the girl child for a long time the next morning. But she had felt nothing in her heart for the child. She did not even feel a sense of relief that the child would have a future. *Amrika* was too far away for her to know anything about it. All that she knew about it was that these tall, pinkish-white people came from there. She didn't believe it when Rahima told her that black people also came from there. She had seen no black *Amrikun*. Only these pinkish white people in their big cars, driven by smart drivers like Abdul. Rahima told her that she was doing a bad thing, and God would be angry with her. In *Amrika* they would make her child pray to Jishu. She would surely go to hell because she let her child go with *kristans*. But *Amrika* and *kristan* did not make much sense to her. All she could remember was how hungry she had been all the time, and if it had not been for the scraps of food that Rahima gave her at that time surely she herself would have starved and the babies too.

The two men had come the next day, and the white woman with them. She looked old enough to be the man's mother. White hair and wrinkles near her eyes. And thin. No breasts. Or behind. Flat as a dried fish. Her arms were like jute stalks, and the big round bangles made them look even thinner. Everyone gathered round their *chhapra* to look at the *bideshini* who had come to take her little one away. The man with the red beard explained that there were some papers to be signed — a *tip shoi* would also be all right, if she could not sign her name. Just to show that the baby had been voluntarily given up by the parents, not stolen or kidnapped. Some papers were in English, some in Bengali. The same thing in both. One for the authorities in Bangladesh, one for the *Amrikun*.

The *bideshini* held out her arms for the child. As she put the thin wrinkled old woman into the white woman's arms, she had thought how dark her little one looked next to the white woman's skin. The woman saw her looking at her arms and muttered something to her husband. The man took the child from his wife, and stared at it as if he was seeing a baby for the first time. The woman took off her shiny golden bangles and slipped them onto her wrists. She had not wanted to take the bangles. She was not selling her child for gold. But because she could not feed it. The woman bared her gray teeth in a smile and patted her arms back. After the car drove away, the people continued to crowd around them. She went back inside her *chhapra* where there was only one little figure now, sleeping peacefully, undisturbed by the departure of the sister he would never know. The child stirred and she picked it up, just to feel it was there. One at least. Proof that she was a mother, not like the *bideshini*, who despite all her gold, could not be a mother. The golden bangles glistened against her dark skin. And, despite herself, she wondered how much they were worth. Enough to feed them for ten years, surely. How was she to keep the bangles safe so that no one stole them? After all, the whole *para* had seen the *bideshini* giving her the bangles. She would take the bangles off at night and tie them into her waist knot so that no one could steal them without her waking up.

When Rahima came in late that night after her work, she showed her the bangles, somewhat embarrassed. *Isn't Rahima think she had sold her baby*. But Rahima had laughed. *Those are not gold, she said. They're brass. She drew her arms back from Rahima. No, she had not sold her baby. But she could not believe that a *bideshini* would wear brass, much less give brass to a poor woman whose child she had taken. I have seen gold, said Rahima, if you haven't and I know what is gold and what isn't. Go with me to the goldsmith tomorrow if you don't believe me.*

So the next day she went with Rahima to the goldsmith and tried to sell the bangles to him. But the goldsmith had laughed, yes, laughed. *Not asked her where she had stolen the bangles from. He didn't buy brass. He told her. She could get maybe twenty takas from the *bikriwala* for the bangles, maybe even twenty-five depending on their weight. But not from him.*

She sighed and drank the last of her tea. So that was what a Bangladeshi girl child was worth. Two brass bangles. She picked up the boy. Would he have been worth four brass bangles?

The Daily Woman

A Short Story by Niaz Zaman



with all the cutting and cleaning and she could rarely make it home before *asr* prayers. But Friday was also a good day for her. Because she could carry home all the *bashi* stuff, like the old vegetables that had been kept in the *freez* and gone a little stale and dry. Fridays were also the days after their parties, and there would be *potao* to be scraped up from the *hart*, in addition to the *khabar* that Khalamma always kept for her. Nice things, like chicken *korma*, or beef *kupta*. Once or twice there had been *biryani* and pieces of chicken *musallam* with *badam* and *kishmish*. And of course there were always sweets. Especially *roshgulla* and *shandesh* and *laddoo*. And *halwa*.

The clothes were already soaking in a pail of warm, soapy water. She had learned this new way of washing from Khalamma. When Khalamma had first poured the soap powder into the pail and told her to wash, she had been perplexed. How was she to wash the clothes without rubbing them with soap and then beating them on the *pucca*? Then Khalamma had shown her how the water was full of soap and all she had to do was to rub the clothes against themselves or each other. There was no need to beat the clothes, just go rub, rub, rub, dip once more in the soapy water and keep aside. After the white clothes were all out of the soap water there were a few more clothes — red, yellow, blue — that had to be kept dry and then dipped one by one quickly into the water so that the colours did not run into other clothes. Then she could throw away the discoloured water and fill the bucket with clean water to rinse the clothes. Once, twice, thrice, so that there was no more soap left in the water and the water seemed as clean as fresh water. Then squeeze all dry, all of them, except the *lynol* ones. Those had to be hung until the water had all dripped and then hung out smoothly so that there were no wrinkles on them. And then she could have her *chapatti* and hot tea. It was always a pleasure to have sweet, hot tea. Two spoons of sugar in the tea — though Khalamma herself always had tea without any sugar. How did they drink tea without sugar? She

bideshis. But she could not believe it. Why would they give the money to him and not to her?

She didn't know whether Abdul had got money, all she remembered was that those had been bad days. The days that they had first come to Dhaka from the village because the river had taken away the last bit of their land. She shivered remembering those days. Everyone had told them how easy it was to get work in the *shahar*, and they had believed what they heard. There were always roads to be broken or built, and houses high as the sky, sprouting like frog umbrellas after the rains. And if one didn't get work as a day labourer, there were always rickshaws to pull in the city. Sometimes people said there were as many rickshaws in Dhaka city as there were people. One could keep all the money one earned after deducting what one had to pay to the *mahajan*. People in town didn't walk. So there was a lot of money in pulling rickshaws. But rickshaw pulling hadn't been easy. His legs and arms had ached and she had had to heat mustard oil and rub him down. And then he had had fever for three days and she had to buy medicine for him. And during the rains no one wanted rickshaws, because everyone stayed home and there was no building either and they starved. Then they had to pay for the *chhapra* — something they had not reckoned with. Two hundred for a place hardly big enough for the two of them to sleep in at night. And always the rain coming down, making everything wet, making the floor into mud. Then the fever had come back, and he had coughed until she thought his eyes would jump out of his head. His body had left like fire, and she had prayed that he wouldn't die. She had promised that if he lived she would fast seven days so she had fasted and the babies had popped out before the ten months and ten days that babies took to be ready, were over.

How hungry she had been, and the two babies crying together were enough to make her go mad. No one she knew had ever had two babies together. No one in the *para* had seen two babies together and

The Poet

"Hey, driver, stop the dammed bus!"

It is nine at night. The rain stopped just a short while ago. A few sodden points of light in the distance pierce the darkness. Past Boilapur the public bus jerks to a halt. Six youths, scarves covering their faces and armed with staves,

One of them brandishing a sten gun in his right hand, clamber up the steps of the bus, "Which one's Mohammad R —?"

As he stands up, "You son of a pig, off the bus!" He exits into the darkness, for there is little else he can do.

"Driver, you, what the hell are you staring at! Get the hell out of here!"

As the bus drives off, the strangers surround him. Darkness on both sides. His feet in sandy soil, and damp.

Lines of clouds across the sky. Still interwoven. A few star-eyes peek out, then duck back in fear.

Sweaty palms, thirst upon his now parched lips. A leaf from a *sal* tree sails about, then falls, landing on his head.

Speechless, witless — well before he thinks to brace himself,

something hard and cold strikes him in the back.

"Bastard, move it!"

With the road now on his right, he stumbles to the left. As he is pushed through the darkness, he understands: they are taking him into the field. The damp fragrance of the dust clings to his nostrils, wet grass beneath his feet.

A gang of nameless youths herd him forward. Have they ever met him before?

with the wet earth. His eyes close on themselves, images of mud-caked mankind's troubled land come drifting by.

"Die, you fucking bastard, your crime is everything you are."

Then the moon appears, cutting through the clouds, overpowering the sky, stepping from the field's far border, straight into his skull.

Moonlight's steady gaze dazzles in seductive jest.

(Translated by Clinton Seely)

bugs go on gnawing, roaches spread their dirt

the sharp tang of childhood sours the rest of life six in the morning, a distant steamer shrieks at Neelganj the empty station clatters

a mother's warm kiss, the rocked cradle's hushed song a stone strikes the center of a hornet's nest jets of venom spurt and the body goes numb

boatmen dip their oars, float their longings on the tide over the threshold two *shandhyamoni* stems quiver wanderers are heartless, they break their promises

Poems of Mohammad Rafiq

Translated by Clinton Seely and Carolyn B Brown

Their eyes burn with hatred — or is it ridicule?

"God-damned son of a pig, so, you've become a poet, have you! Stand up straight, over here!"

Just as he stands erect, a shiver shoots down his spine.

His legs begin to tremble slightly. Beyond the field, a village, huddled human dwellings. The waters in Bangshi flow on.

As the staff's first blow crashes down on him, he falls face forward. The blood oozes, mingling

Kirtinasha

a

day is done, Pranabandhu, and you're still silent cracked voice, moss-shrouded brittle bones spiritless salt-pitted tongue

shuilis drop their petals in the sun's first light the river rises, banging its head bank to bank will its face get stuck in the sand one day?

whatever men have, they always want more an unheard refrain echoes in the decaying storeroom

b

the moon slips into the river — I'm going, it cries in the lilyacanth-drugged fog, a canoe strains at its tether and starts to shudder, awakened from oblivion by surging waves and tumbling tide

the shocked moon shivers in the churning water when shadows creep over the mud on the darkened shore, slowly uncurling their crooked fingers, sleeping berry bushes startle and quake

the moon lingers, flickering, nearly consumed a sleepy boatman tamps tobacco into his *hookah* his hacking startles the stones as he stumbles down to wash — in the water a crocodile waits

the tide crests — it cares for nothing — the moon shatters in its whirling wake — farewell, it cries, farewell

(Translated by Carolyn B Brown)

