



fiction

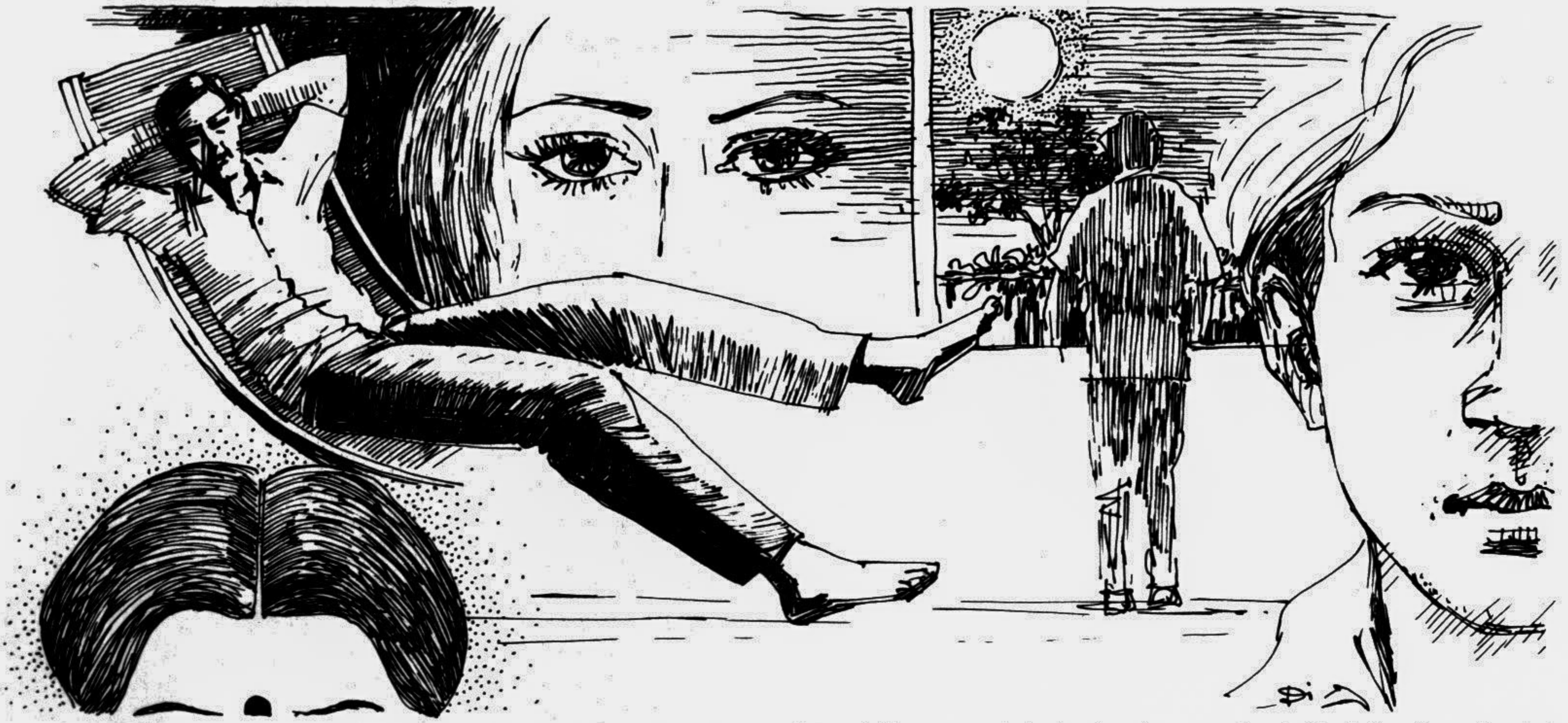
# The Desertion

by Mohit Ul Alam

HE ALWAYS CRAVED TO SEE THE full moon above the wavy lines of the hills. The veranda was open on the east, where now a thin smell came floating from the beanstalks whose leaves now looked darker in the moonlight. His mother had grown the beanstalks in the patch of land in front of the veranda. The green beans hung like earrings, and the moon, round and thick and yellow like pudding, pasted a glow on them. His brother-in-law reclined in an easy chair, his thighs straddled like a pair of cannon barrels. Babar glanced at the strong man wearing a black trouser upon a white shirt, but he looked at the moon, at the dark shadow of the old lady leaning over her spinning wheel. His brother-in-law took no notice of the moon, while he rested his head upon his hands. He looked unusually young for a man to marry. He was fair skinned and had grown a thin moustache under an aquiline nose. And, his chest showing under his shirt had no hair, which reminded Babar of the saying that cruel people did not have it. His body was half in moonlight, the other half being shadowed by the tin roof. He was not fragile, not skinny, but rather bony, and his arms now folder under his head produced two triangles with the elbows jutting out strongly. There was an empty wicker seater on which until a while ago his sister had been sitting. But, he could not guess the reason why the husband and wife suddenly heated up over something, and without so much as spending a word she left. Somewhere inside the house a door slammed shut, a voice of an elderly woman, his mother's rose in caution and died down instantly.

"This is what I don't like about your sister," his brother-in-law said in a suppressed voice. "Women's wrath is not good. Your other sister, I've heard, is much cooler."

Babar kept calm. He knew his other sister was the gentlest of women, so much so that she could not stay a night extra for the marriage as she had to go back to nurse her ailing mother-in-law. Though his parents needed her presence badly at the time. He was afraid of this man, whom he still considered as a stranger. Only three months ago he married his sister, and the festive mood of the wedding had not passed yet, the coloured paper-ribbons still stuck to the upper wooden frame of the front door. Babar shook in fear, his blood raced, and the thoughts of the preparation of the marriage, the long hard time his parents had had in extracting the consent from his sister came to his mind afresh. Both his father and mother had exhausted themselves in the marriage, and they were left with no stamina to deal with if, God forbid, there had arisen any further crisis. He anticipated the complaints, but knowing his sister as he did, he saw chances of a family feud looming large. At day time, while he showed his brother-in-law around, they



stood under the Karui tree on whose branches brooded night and day a dozen vultures. He stared at the tree now. The moonbeams had shafted through the tree, and there was a hazy glow for which he could not see the birds. As the tree looked ghostly, Babar's eyes wandered back to the moon, while his brother-in-law went on with his vituperation in a charged voice. It was all very cowering for him and, he felt restless. His brother-in-law now sounded almost mean.

"I'll not allow it, I'll just leave tomorrow never to return. I don't care."

Babar watched the house-cat silently leaping onto the veranda, and brushing past his legs stealthily. Inside the house, somebody opened a door, but nobody came out to the veranda. He perceived it was his father getting worried as they were not yet going to bed. His brother-in-law insinuated something about his father's income — a question his classmates bothered him with.

That night Babar tossed about in his bed, his brother-in-law's words cutting through his tender mind like a blade, while many strands of thoughts crowded into his head. At first he considered the words of his brother-in-law, what would happen if he really left and never came back! The prickly touch of a mosquito on his right cheek spurred him to kill it with a slap, but failing to accomplish it he ruminated why the mosquito net had torn at places. The mosquito came back on a second attempt, and he again went for it in the dark, but it escaped breaking his line of thought. He thought about the

long-necked ominous birds, what he read about them in the book, but then his mind picked up an incident cleanly from his memory. Suddenly their private tutor rose up from his chair, and drew his sister close without anybody having the time to realise what was happening. His sister not only surrendered without complaints, though she looked completely unprepared for it, but she sort of melted in his deep embrace. Babar, sitting a chair away, could feel the heat released by the embrace. It was then, in the same week, or the next week, that Babar was sent as a messenger to the tutor who lived in a tin-roofed house with his brother, a lawyer without brief, across a little field, an unkempt area grown with hibiscus. Babar was sent in a time chosen carefully when his father was away to work and his mother was taking her afternoon nap, and when the tutor was alone in the house preparing for his graduation examination. That he somehow anticipated the arrival of such a messenger all became obvious the moment he saw Babar. He was lying sprawled on bed with his heavy waist turned to the door, a big fat book indifferently lying under his side. Hearing his footsteps he jerked himself up a once, his legs momentarily balanced in the air and then landing on the floor displaying an amazing fitness.

"What have you brought for me here, let me see."

A few anxious moments passed as the tutor slipped through the first few pages of the album with no apparent show of interest. He was wearing a lungi and a vest under which his body looked unusually loosened, and he yawned, which Babar detested as much as the tutor seemed unconcerned that he was hurt by his casualness. He did not know himself what the album contained, but he had a fair idea of the zeal and warmth his two young sisters poured in making the album. Photographs of superstars from Hindi filmdom clipped from glossy film magazines were pasted in it, while the more interesting thing was the comments his sisters put under each photograph.

They were racy and humorous, the comments, catching the undisciplined fascination of youthful minds for the film. The tutor still wore his sombre look, though he was ogling at some of the pictures, and as he lowered his head close to the album held in his lap, Babar felt as if his dense eyebrows and moustache had detached from his face and swooped on to the page. The tutor then changed his position, and holding the album in one hand he started lying prostrate keeping it flat open under his chest. As he thrust forward a hand to reach the table to find out a pen his legs, in the effort, doubled, and his lungi travelled down to his knees exposing his hairy legs under the full gaze of Babar. The tutor then scribbled something in one of the last pages, sighing quite audibly. Babar suddenly felt lonely and vulnerable, a strange fear crept through his spine, and he would not stay a moment. He was already racing home while the

tutor handed back the album. Running, he cast a quick glance back at the tin-roofed house which he felt he had abandoned forever. As he neared their house, he spotted his two sisters standing by the window waiting for him. They watched him coming in, their breath held, hopes and expectations mixed up on their faces. Before Babar leapt on to the front veranda, he shot up a look at the tree. The birds were not there as they flew down to the bog on their predatory adventures, while his sisters moved away from the window to welcome him home. The night grew warmer, the heavy wool-sacked wrapper slid down from his waist, and he became aware of all kinds of night sounds. He could distinctly hear the birds hooting, and one of the servants unlatching the door of the back latrine on nature's call. Then he grew conscious of more familiar sounds, like his mother and father talking in a low voice in the middle of their broken sleep, and his father's attempt at swatting a mosquito. Since his sister's marriage his father had shifted to the big bedroom abandoning his own room to the newly married couple, a thatched bamboo partition separating the two rooms. Some hours passed intolerably, he tossing and turning and gradually getting to realise that some big noise was coming in from the other room. He jumped from his bed and outside the mosquito net only to realise that his father and mother were not in their bed either. Somebody had left the door ajar, and he sneaked out, and at once was taken in by the whitish

glow of the dawn. The hills looked sedate, the lane in front of their house which disappeared into the hills was also sleepy but for a night weary dog that strolled on it. The public water supply pipe had not yet collected the crowd coming to fetch water, it would soon. A cock suddenly emerging from under a neighbour's fence darted past the hydrant like an arrow attacking something that Babar did not see, its cackling startling the dog and the morning air. And, Babar trudged toward the other room. His mother was blocking the way, or she might be playing the guard, Babar had to stand outside.

His father's angry voice boomed followed by the moaning of his sister. Then the beating started. It was a real hard beating. His father was a retired military havilder, a strict-nosed person having a thorough attitude to moral norms. "Why did he go, why did you let him go?" "I don't know anything father, he just left without telling me anything." But the beating continued. Babar was beginning to have a hunch that perhaps it was a punishment his sister was receiving for all her misdeeds in the past. The album when brought back met with a rueful fate. No sooner had she read through the comment by the tutor than she flew into a rage, and, as if possessed, she first tried to crumple up the album into a ball, but failing she began to pull out bunches of pages at a time and then, tore them up all into shreds in no time spurred up by a wild energy. His other sister tried to desist her, but to no avail. The beautiful film stars had their pictures lying disembodied on the floor. The episode of the album, that of the sudden embrace all came to his mind, and all on a sudden his eyes became tearful. He thought he understood everything. He got down from the veranda, chose his way toward the back latrine, the house cat again stealthily passing before him, and he looked at the Karui tree, the vultures were in a stirring mood, perhaps, taking preparation for the day. He continued to walk behind the house now, a small sewage drain was recently dug beside which his father had erected a wall just before his sister's marriage, thus cutting off the field, across which stood the house of the tutor and his brother. The place stank, and his presence stirred up a swarm of mosquitoes. He put his hands over the top of the wall which felt mossy, and strained himself as he stood on his toes to peep over the wall. In the grey light of the dawn, he could see the door of the tutor's house, its once yellow paint much faded, hung with a big lock.

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About the writer: Mohit Ul Alam is Associate Professor and Chairman of English at Chittagong University.

## poem

### Stand Guard

by Z A Khan

Mausoleum at Savar stand high and erect  
To keep undaunting Bengalees abreast  
With the sacrifice made by millions  
That demanded on the sound of a clarion  
Our independence from the military savage  
That ordered tanks and aircraft to release  
Deadly ordnance on tens of innocents  
Of all ages that raised voice to resent  
The arrogant junta's acts of violence  
To banish our just demands into silence.  
Merrily their guns ravaged our quiet habitats  
But failed to extinguish the fire within our hearts.  
Resolved to carry the fight to victory  
Over those that ruled us through conspiracy,  
To kill our fathers, mothers and all  
And thus they wanted to maul  
Our past glory and the future of promise  
To desist us from protesting the demise  
Of our history, heritage and harmony  
That they attempted to crush in acrimony.  
Hand in hand the brave Bengalees  
Unleashed an endless killin frenzy  
Which annihilated the cowardly armed monsters  
Or made them flee battlefield to bolster  
Our resolution to snatch the independence  
And to free our nation from the intransigence  
Of the enemy that had sinister designs  
By lynching their mortal remains.  
Enemies, stand guard against our resolution  
And don't pave a way for your annihilation.

## tributes

# A tribute to Shamsuddin Abul Kalam

by Waliur Rahman

ALL ROME TREMBLED — a classic on the eternal city was presented to me by Shamsuddin Abul Kalam in one of our meetings in early 1987. This was a book he lent me as a gesture of his affection, and may be confidence. It was a book that was indeed rare and out of print for over two decades. He recalled how he earned his friendships with so many celebrities, men and women of letters, actors and actresses, including Alberto Moravia, Peter Fierch and a host of others by exchanging rare books.

My first meeting with the writer was in September '72 when I visited Rome on the directives of the Foreign Ministry to service the Inter-Parliamentary Union meeting in Rome. Bangladesh became a member, while Pakistan withdrew in protest. Shamsuddin Abul Kalam graciously accepted my invitation to Hotel Rafaelo, a family-run affair, to meet our delegation and the Secretary General of the IPU Sgr Taranzio. I had heard a lot about him during the War of Liberation when I spent 9 months as a refugee in Geneva and Shamsuddin Abul Kalam along with Dr

Mujibur Rahman Khan were in Italy bearing the torch of Bangladesh. He was visibly excited to meet such disciples of Bangabandhu as Suranjit Sen Gupta, Fazlul Huq Mia, Mrs Badrunnessa Begum, Rezia Banu. I had a sense of fulfilment in that in those heady days of our independent nationhood, meeting another patriot in Rome with whom I only had telephone contacts during the war, was something of an achievement.

'All Rome Trembled' — the book with which he prided himself was given to me in my second meeting in January '87 in the Embassy. He was a raconteur of history, the history of Bengal. He would talk to me as a proud Bengalee because he was proud to have made important contribution to our cause with a sense of great expectation. I started talking to him with the respect he deserved. I mentioned to him names of his friends as Mujibul Huq, or Showkat Osman. He was moved. We seemed to have discovered a fraternity with each other. During one of his visits to the Embassy in 1987 his eyes fell on a photo of Bangabandhu, almost a taboo subject at that time.

He paused for a while, then he revealed to me that since the death of the Father of the Nation he lives in a sort of self-imposed exile. Once or twice he talked about Camelia, his daughter and his wife. I would only listen to him dispassionately. He liked to reminisce the days he knew he would never get back. The King died and the Queen died of grief — E M Forster thus described the creation of a plot — a three dimensional situation. Shamsuddin Abul Kalam said it all. He would quietly visit me in my home and we would spend hours exchanging ideas in shared idealism. How we could do better; what went wrong. How Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury sensitised the whole of Europe etc. One day, one of the coldest in Rome, he arrived with a new idea. He was in a picnic mood. He took us to a castle bordered by a rivulet where according to Roman gossips some advance soldiers of Hannibal had arrived. He told us about the Punic wars and regaled us with war stories of those days. He certainly was a man who knew history.

He was a moody person. He phoned us one morning and invited us to a Trattoria

off Piazza Spagna. I did not have the heart to say no though I had a previous luncheon appointment. I could not hurt him. I am glad I went there. This was the haunt of such people as Peter Ustinov, Sophia Loren and other glittering personalities of the film and art world of Rome.

Shamsuddin Abul Kalam worked off and on in the FAO and he made a name for himself. He was creative and innovative but he would never tell me under what circumstances he cut off his link with the FAO. Of course, he left us in no doubt that he had to leave for reasons of his idealism. But his leaving the FAO gave him an opportunity to devote himself to a more creative world both in celluloid and in writing. He was a very familiar face in the Italian Spaghetti films — in CINECITTA, the equivalent of Hollywood in Rome.

This brought him close to the famous and the glittering stars who inhabited the world of Dolce Vita — including Fellini and Bertolucci. But he was essentially also very secretive. He wouldn't talk much about it. He would often ask me to send his manuscripts to

Bangladesh. I once made the mistake by showing some curiosity about one of his writings. He felt offended at my question — I quickly clamped up. I never asked him again.

His last remains are resting in Prima Porta, the cemetery not far from the mosque in Rome that we had built. Contrary to his nature he would make occasional queries about the progress in building of the mosque. He used to joke about the height of the minaret of the mosque — which had to be smaller than the height of the dome of St Peters Basilica. What an irony that one of the reasons of building of this mosque was to make available facilities of Islamic rites to the Muslims and the faithfuls. He is buried in the proximity of the mosque but alas the circumstances in which he left this mortal world didn't allow him that last honour.

In the other end of the eternal city, in the peaceful English cemetery, lie the bodies of Keats and Shelley. I believe they received last rites from their Church.

He would occasionally muse about the faultless painter Andrea Del Sarto, who because of his consum-



Shamsuddin Abul Kalam ing passion for his beautiful and unscrupulous wife Lucrezia, could not reach the stature of masters like Raphaelo and Michaelangelo. Was he talking about himself? Shamsuddin Abul Kalam fits in well into what William Cowper (1731-1800) wrote in his epistle 'An honest man, close buttoned to the chin-broad cloth without and a warm heart within.' May God rest his soul in peace.