



short story

# The Skeleton

by Rabindranath Tagore, Translated by Shawkat Hussain

**O**N the wall of the room adjacent to the one where the three of us slept, there used to hang a full-size human skeleton. At night the bones would rattle in the wind; during daytime we had to touch and examine those bones. During those days, our guru taught us the epic *Meghnadbadh* and a student from Campbell School gave us lessons in Anatomy. Our guardian wanted us to quickly become competent in all subjects. It is unnecessary to tell those who know us the extent to which the hopes of our guardian have been fulfilled, and it is best to keep it a secret from those who do not know us.

A lot of time has passed since then. Meanwhile, much search had not revealed where the skeleton — or the knowledge of anatomy from our heads — had disappeared.

Recently, for some reason, I had to sleep in that room. The unfamiliar surroundings made it difficult for me to fall asleep. I tossed and turned in bed and heard the bells of the church clock chime all the big hours. An oil lamp burning in the corner sputtered for a few minutes and went out completely. A couple of unfortunate incidents had happened in our house in recent times, so when the lamp died, the thought of death came easy to my mind. It occurred to me that in the scheme of Nature, the dying flame of a lamp as it merges with everlasting darkness was not much different from the many small flickers of human lives that are suddenly extinguished day and night, everyday.

I began to think of that skeleton. I began to imagine a time when the skeleton was a living body. Suddenly I became aware of somebody groping along the walls, in the darkness of the room, and going round and round my mosquito net; I could hear the sound of short, heavy breathing. It seemed as though someone was searching for something, and not finding it, was furiously pacing around the room. I was certain that it was nothing but the product of my own fervid, sleepless imagination and the sound of rapid footsteps was only the sound of my blood rushing through my brain. But still my skin cringed in terror. I forced myself to dispel this needless fear by shouting aloud, "Who is it?" The footsteps stopped just outside the mosquito net and a voice uttered, "It's me. I have come to look for my skeleton."

I thought it was pointless to show fear in front of the product of my own imagination; I gripped my bolster firmly and in a voice of easy familiarity, I said, "What a thing to do at this dead of night! Do you really need that skeleton?"

An answer came from the dark, very close to the mosquito net: "What do you mean? My ribs were in that skeleton. My youth of twenty-six years had blossomed on all its sides — how I long to see it."

I immediately replied, "Yes, that makes sense. Well, you go ahead and look for it. I will try to catch a bit of sleep."

The voice replied, "Are you alone? Do you mind if I sit down and talk a bit? Thirty-five years back I too used to sit beside other human beings and chat with them. For the last thirty years I merely whooshed through the air in fu-

neral ghats. I want to sit beside you today and talk like a human being."

I could feel someone sitting close to the net. Feeling helpless, I replied with feigned eagerness, "That's fine. Why don't you talk about something that will make us cheerful?"

The voice replied, "There is nothing more interesting than the story of my life."

The church bell rang twice and announced that it was 2 A.M.

"When I was young and still alive, there was one person whom I feared more than death itself. He was my husband. I used to feel like a fish caught in a fish-hook. I felt as if some completely unfamiliar creature had caught me in a hook and was pulling me away from my deep, still underwater life — there was absolutely no escape from it. Two months after I was married, my husband died and my relatives expressed much sorrow on my behalf. My father-in-law checked my horoscope and declared to my mother-in-law, 'According to the horoscope, that woman will bring misfortune upon our heads.' I distinctly remember this. Are you listening to me. How are you enjoying my story?"

I replied: "Pretty good. The story has a good beginning."

"Then listen. I joyfully returned home to my father's house. I was becoming older. People used to hide from me the fact that there were few women as beautiful as me, but I knew that very well — what do you think?"

"That is quite possible, but I have never seen you."

"You haven't? Why not? You have seen my skeleton? Hee, hee, hee, hee. I was just joking. How can I convince you that those dark, empty sockets once contained lovely, big, black eyes? And there is no comparison between the macabre grin of my ugly, gaping teeth and the soft smiles that used to play on my full, crimson lips. It now makes me laugh — it makes me angry too — to talk to you about how my youth and beauty bloomed on those long-dessicated bones, about how my soft, firm and smooth body ripened to fullness everyday. Even the most famous doctors in those days would not have believed that my body could be used for the study of Anatomy. I know one doctor who told his friend that I was like a flower, like *kanakchampa*. In other words, all other human beings could be studied for anatomical purposes, but I alone was like a beautiful flower. Does a *kanakchampa* have a skeleton inside it?"

"When I moved, every single movement of my body, every beautiful gesture, would break up in myriad natural ripples around me, like flashes of light sparkling from a diamond in motion. Sometimes I would gaze on my arms for hours, such magnificent arms that could silence an entire universe of arrogant men and hold them in sweet bondage. When Shuvadra carried away Arjun in her victorious chariot across the three worlds, I suppose her two arms were equally graceful and smooth, her palms rosy-pink and her fingers like tapering flames.

"But that shameless, bare, eternally old skeleton of mine has given false testimony against me. I was then helpless and silent. That is why I am so angry with you. I wish I could present before you just once my sixteen-year-old warm, lively, youthful beauty, and dispel sleep from your eyes for a long time.

"I had no companion. My brother had promised never to marry. Inside the house I was alone. Sitting under the shade of a tree in the garden, I used to think that the entire universe was in love with me, all the stars gazed down upon me, the wind sighed deeply and brushed against me again and again, and the grass on which I sat would faint away if only it had consciousness. I would imagine all the men of the world paying homage to me in the form of the grass at my feet; and I would feel a strange pain in my heart.

"When Shashishekhar, my brother's friend, passed out from the medical college, he became our family doctor. I had seen him many times before from behind the door. My brother was an odd person — he never really looked at the world around him with open eyes. It was as though the world was not big enough for him and he retreated from it till he found refuge at the very edge.

"Shashishekhar was his only friend. And Shashishekhar was the only young man from the world outside whom I used to see all the time. In the evening I would sit under a flowering tree like an empress and all the men of the world



and force you to abandon your anatomical studies in desperation and leave the country."

I said, "If you had a body, I would touch it and swear that I remember nothing of my studies. Even now, the full beauty of your youth dazzles from the depths of this dark night. You have to say no more."

"I brought out a tired, rounded arm from under the sheet. I cast an eye on my arm and thought that blue, glass bangles would be perfect for it. I have never seen a doctor looking so flustered while checking the pulse of a patient. With nervous, trembling fingers he held my wrist and felt my fever; and I had an idea of how his own inner pulse was beating. What! Do you find this story incredible?"

I said, "I have no reason to disbelieve you. Our pulses don't beat at the same rate at all times."

"I fell sick and recovered a few more

times, and discovered that the million men with whom I used to hold court in the evenings had all disappeared, and now there was only one. My world had become almost empty; there remained only one doctor and one man in the universe.

"In the evenings I would secretly wear a saffron-coloured sari, tie up my hair in a neat bun and wrap a garland of jasmine flowers around it. With a mirror in my hand I would go and sit in the garden. Why? Didn't I see enough of myself? In reality, I did not, because it was not I alone who looked at myself. Sitting alone, I would become two persons. I would become the doctor and gaze at myself in enchantment; I would love and caress myself and from the centre of my being a sigh would well up like the wind.

"And I was never alone again. When I walked, I would watch how my toes touched the earth and wonder how the doctor admired my footsteps. In the afternoon, the heat shimmered outside the window and there would be silence all around broken only by the occasional sound of a kite in flight in the distant sky. And from beyond the walls of our compound, a vendor of toys would cry out, 'Toys, toys, who wants to buy toys?' I would spread a sparkling white bedsheet and lie down. And, as though, in utter indifference, I would throw down a bare arm and imagine someone gazing at it, lifting it with his two hands, leaving a kiss on the rosy palm and quietly, quietly retreating. How would it be if the story stopped here?"

I said, "It wouldn't be bad. A little incomplete perhaps, but I could spend the rest of the night finishing it."

"But that would make the story too grave. You would miss the irony completely. The skeleton inside with all its teeth is nowhere to be seen. Listen to what comes next. Soon afterwards, the doctor opened a chamber in the ground floor of our house. I would sometimes ask him about various medicines, about poisons and about different ways in which one could die without much pain. The doctor was not at all shy when it came to talking about medical matters. And, as I listened to him, death seemed to become a familiar person. The universe became suffused with only the two things: Love and Death.

"I have almost come to the end of my story — there is not much more left."

I said softly, "There is not much left of the night either."

"I noticed that for sometime the doctor seemed extremely absent-minded and appeared very embarrassed in my presence. One day I saw him borrowing my brother's horse to go out somewhere at night; he was dressed up in very fine clothes.

"I could not control myself any more. I went up to my brother and after talking about various other things, I said, 'And where is the doctor going tonight with your horse?'"

"He replied simply, 'To his death.' 'And I said, 'No, tell me the truth.' 'My brother added a few more words. He said, 'He is going to get married.' 'And I said, 'Really' and burst out in laughter.

"Eventually I found out that the doctor was going to get a dowry of Rupees 12,000 from this marriage. But why did he insult me by keeping it a secret from me? Did I throw myself at his feet and tell him that such an act would break

my heart? Men cannot be trusted. In one single moment I have gained complete knowledge from my experience of only one man.

"When the doctor returned before sundown after visiting a patient, I asked him, laughing unstopably all the time, 'I hear you are getting married tonight.'

"Not only did he become very embarrassed by my excessive gaiety, he also looked very sad. I asked him, 'Where is all the music and all the merriment?'"

"He sighed a little and then replied, 'Is marriage such a joyous occasion?'"

"I became almost delirious with laughter. I had never before heard anything like this. I said, 'That won't do. We want music, we want lights.'

"I goaded my brother so that he immediately set about making preparations for the festivities. And I chattered incessantly about the new bride. What would I do when she came home? I asked the doctor, 'Will you still go around feeling the pulse of patients?'"

"Hee, hee, hee, hee. I can swear — although one cannot see the hearts of people, particularly of men — that my words pierced the heart of the doctor like arrows.

"The auspicious time for the marriage was late at night. In the evening, the doctor and my brother had a few drinks on the roof — the two of them had this habit of drinking. The moon came up in the sky.

"I laughed as I said, 'Have you forgotten, doctor? It is almost time for you to go.'

"I must tell you something here. I had earlier procured some powdery stuff from the dispensary and poured some of it into the doctor's glass. He had taught me earlier about poisons that kill. The doctor finished his drink in one gulp and looking at me with hopeless eyes, he said in a drunken, passionate voice, 'I am going.'

"The music began. I put on a Benarasi sari and covered myself with all the jewelry that I kept locked up in the safe; I smeared my forehead with vermilion and spread a sheet under my favourite flowering bakul tree.

"It was a beautiful, bright, moonlit night; there was a refreshing breeze from the south and the fragrance of jui and jasmine flowers filled the garden with happiness. When the music of the flute faded into the distance, the darkness deepened; when the trees and the sky and the ageless world began to fade away like an illusion, I shut my eyes and smiled.

"It was my desire that when people found me later, they would see, transfixed upon my lips, that smile of intoxication. I had wanted to enter my bridal chamber on that night carrying that smile on my face. Whither my bridal chamber! Whither my bridal dress! I woke up to a rattling sound within me and found three boys studying Anatomy on my skeleton. Inside my chest, where my heart used to beat with joy and sorrow, where one by one, the petals of my youth would blossom everyday, there the teacher of Anatomy was pointing with his cane, and naming the different bones. And where was the trace of the last smile that I raised upon my lips?"

"So, what do think of my story?"

"Quite an entertaining story, I think," I replied.

Then I heard the cawing of the first crow. "Are you still there?" I asked. There was no answer. The first rays of the morning sun lit up the room.

## poems

### Fear is out

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

Whoever said  
be afraid of the dark?  
Fear had to be waking up  
fixing a broken down sort of a day.  
Didn't mind roaches. Rats,  
cats, yes and surgical instruments  
lying on trays, glinting steeliness,  
theatre full of metal scrapers  
opening, cutting, gnawing  
gapes, caves, tunnels, birth canals.

All beginnings are scary  
Like pain waiting to explode when giving birth,  
or slowly secreting inside the head when  
you know dying.

Fear sits down in in-between sort of spaces  
between now and whatever's next.  
Fear bunks in the back too, way out  
in the past. Socks frumped. Pulling up  
hurts, childhood, piddly hours, pubescent  
shames.

Some fears are casual ones:  
brimming joy carnival pink  
sore feelings puffed red  
arrogant white detergent — smelling



weddings, funerals, wafting emotions,  
unions, partings.

Always, failing is frightening —  
To know you can't.  
To not be able to touch dreams  
even in dreams, that's pretty scary.

And touching is scary because it is  
polluting, immodesty, infection, injury, impregnating.  
Nearness, trusting is really scary, some say  
not so much the touching.

### Wooing in a foreign tongue and thoughts fleeing through a person doing simultaneous translation

"He says you are breathtakingly beautiful,  
he says your eyes light up like  
temple lamps, they are like the eternal stars, they  
radiate like the worshipper's devotion".  
(Would it matter to you if some one  
ever said that your beauty did not matter?)

"He says he forgets his woes when you  
lift those tender eyelashes upwards toward him".  
(I have walked in the desert and splashed in the  
monsoon, I've known troubles of every climate and  
of every terrain, I've felt parched,  
drenched, so much more and here I am humbled  
by what I have become following your trail.



"He says your tears are like dew drops,  
your innocence gives them lustre".  
(I have known many pleasures, I have nothing,  
You may have dreamt of some pleasures, you  
know nothing.)

"He says he will be yours if you will have  
him — he will ceaselessly be faithful".  
(Make a vow to him. Break the vow you'll  
make to him, let him like me know you  
by not having.)

### A Labored Mind Tool

by Shuvashish Priya Barua

Deep murmurs, grunts,  
and short chuckles to fill up the space of silence.  
Sitting heavily  
upon wooden boards.  
Tangled hay, stuck to the skin of resting children.  
In the lap  
the instrument feels heavy,  
the restless chords in line,  
wanting to be among the green grass and dance,  
start to get plucked,  
one by one,  
until they are all vibrating in turn,  
And shaped by calming fingers.  
(these old men hate silence.  
They want to pass time,  
but with something that keeps with their pace.)



### Delight of Pain

by Helal Kabir Chowdhury

Pathos has pricked me endlessly  
It pierced my heart and soul  
Transforming me into a state  
of insane mind.

In the beginning I took them  
boldly. But now when I look  
back I regret for shadowing  
my deprived existence with pathos.  
When I was a young man of  
twenty, I endeared everyone with  
Love. Took them to be friends and  
not foes. Although some preferred  
to jilt me.

When my best love departed me,  
I was turned into a lunatic.  
Paid a massive price in the form  
psyche. Majestically, my newly  
wed partner swayed away with  
all the sorrows that ringed me.

Deep at night when the morning  
dew advances, I feel it is  
pleasure to have pathos. Besides  
this one will not enjoy the  
fragrance of joy.