



# fiction Loneliness

by Junaidul Haque

WHEN he reached Mazharul's house, he found the gate wide open. He was going to call his friend aloud when he noticed his elder sister. She was sitting on the verandah. Yes, on the floor, as a little girl would, with her legs swinging to and fro. He felt uneasy and tried to smile. She, too, was smiling. He had seen her before but had never talked to her. He had seen her husband, too. A tall, handsome young man with a moustache. 'Look', he said to himself, 'how beautiful she looks! And she is always smiling! She has the best smile in the world.'

She smiled in an elder sisterly manner. 'Come in!' He hesitated. He felt nervous. His cheeks went red. But when she beckoned again, he walked to her. She made him sit by her side. She turned his face towards her and said, 'You are Babul's best pal, aren't you? I have heard of you a lot. He is upstairs. He will come down soon. Meanwhile, let us gossip.' He nodded to show his approval.

He was no longer bashful. He found much pleasure in answering her questions. 'How old are you? Ten? Nine?' He smiled, 'I am eight. Babul is six months older than me.' 'Oh, I see. But you are taller. You almost look like a young man.' She sweetly teased him. 'And you are very shy.'

They went on talking. Mazharul appeared after a while. 'Come again.' She gave her marvellous smile again, holding his chin with her hand. Before going out of sight he looked back to see her. Her winsome smile was yet to disappear. 'Oh, if only I could stay with her for a few more minutes', he thought. He envied Mazharul.

Together they rode a rickshaw to their school, which was nearby. The rickshaw puller was known to them. He often brought them to school. The fat, matronly ayah was very fond of them. She helped them get down and took their bags. On the way, Mazharul had asked him, 'Grandson of Lord Buddha, won't you speak? What are you thinking of?' 'Nothing,' he had answered with an uncomfortable smile. He had been thinking of his friend's sister. 'I don't have a brother. How lucky is this Mazharul!'

They were about to enter the classroom when Sufia and Fahmida intercepted him. 'Do you know who stood first? You must feed us today.' He felt happy and relieved. The news was, however, not unexpected. He would always come first but would always feel very nervous before the results. He gave a modest smile. 'Who stood second?' 'I, said Sufia. She was senior to him in age and always behaved affectionately.

His seat was on the second bench. The first bench was for the girls. Humaera was there right in front of him. She always sat there. 'Why isn't she congratulating me?' She was not like the other girls. Extremely charming,

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her spectacles gave her the grace of a miniature grown up person. Very fair, very sweet with lovely hair and marvellous eyes. Very sober and affectionate. She never talked too much like her friends, never quarreled and was very amiable. He liked her very much. He simply adored her. 'She is not even looking behind..... talking with that hopeless Meherun.' he thought a little angrily.

Madam came in. She announced that the report cards would be given the next day. She exchanged a smiling look with him. He knew what she meant-congratulations! She started writing on the blackboard.

He could not find his ruler. He thought of asking for Humaera's but she was busy doing her sums. He touched her shoulder and said, 'Lend me your ruler.' Humaera looked back. And there it was, what he longed for... her characteristic cute smile. He smiled back and repeated, 'Your ruler. Why were you absent yesterday?'

During the tiffin period he went to the field but did not play. He never did. His role was that of a spectator. He had his light lunch. Mazharul and Wasek were busy playing cricket. After a while he returned upstairs. Suddenly he noticed Madam Elsie. She was calling him. He entered the teachers' room. She was always very affectionate to him. She talked about his result and many other things. As one of her friends entered, she smilingly said, 'Achcha aeshol! He dashed towards the classroom. Madam Elsie was perhaps older than his own mother but was a spinster. He liked her a lot.

Humaera was there. Alone. She smiled as usual 'Come here!' But he hesitated. She was eating her lunch. 'Come!' she said, with an air of seriousness.

She was standing with her right elbow on a bench. He sat on a high bench opposite her. He felt uneasy. He looked at her nicely cut hair. 'Humm.... help yourself. He reddened to his ears. 'You see I don't feel like eating now.' She gave a surprised look and then laughed. She understood everything. 'Take it, boy. It's only a slice of bread.'

They went on talking. She said, 'You know, I was hoping to come first

this time. Mother had promised me a trip to Darjeeling.' She stopped and looking into his eyes, smiled. 'You have robbed me of my trip. You are really merciless'. She smiled again but he could only look at her in bewilderment. 'Didn't her eyes look sad when she said that? Why didn't she tell me before? I could do anything for her!' It made him feel sad.

'What are you thinking of? Let's go and drink water.' She took his hand. 'Are you angry with me? I didn't wish to hurt you', she said in an explanatory tone. 'No, no. I was thinking of something else.' They went out of the room.

The last bell rang at 4 p.m. He and Mazharul took a rickshaw. Ustad Pedro (the name was given to Tanvir by Madame Elsie), Masood and Nurunnabi resided nearby. Fahmida, Sufia and Humaera had their respective cars. As their rickshaw started moving he heard someone calling him from behind. He looked back. It was Humaera. 'We can give you a lift. Why don't you.....' She didn't finish her sentence but stared at him. He exchanged a quick look with Mazharul and then, turning back, told her in a consolatory tone, 'Another day, okay?' 'She made a motion of her head which he read as 'achcha'. Her elder brother Arif was with her. Arif was in Class III, too.

It was his habit to watch everything on the road. He looked at the busy pedestrians, the cars passing by, the posters and the food shops. He looked at the boys playing in the field. As the rickshaw approached his house, he suddenly remembered that his mother was not there to receive him. His parents had left the day before for their village home. His grandmother had been seriously ill. His uncle and kind-hearted cook Batu Bhai had remained. 'Is uncle back from the university?', he asked himself.

As he got down he suddenly remembered the face of Mazharul's sister.... and everything that had happened in the morning. 'I shall again go to his house tomorrow to pick him up,' he thought.

He had some biscuits and a piece of cake. He then climbed the stairs to the roof. Batu Bhai joined him. Unlike other days they did not start chatting.

He looked at the sky, the highrise flats, the distant trees. Soon he forgot everything that had happened till then. He stared at the northeast, the direction of their village home, 125 kilometres away! If only he could fly like the birds! Why didn't his mother take him with her? He liked the village more than anything else. Twice in the year, during school holidays, he would go to the village and spend a few days. He was very fond of his grandmothers. 'Cities are so boring!', he thought. 'I miss the beauty of the green fields and the shady woods of the country. Ah! The lovely ponds, the innocent village boys and girls, the romance of tramping over the fields on calm middays! He could see so many faces in his mind's eye. He even missed his favourite trees — the round mango tree near the beel, the lichi tree and the guava tree he had himself planted a few years back. And he saw the face of his mother. 'So, I am sleeping alone for the first time in my life.' He missed his mother terribly. In the morning, he had been thinking of writing a letter to her. 'No, I won't write. I can very well stay alone.' But his lips trembled. His hands went to his eyes. Suddenly he became conscious of Batu's presence. Batu Bhai was thirtyish. He was also gazing skywards. May be he also missed his wife and their little daughter.

His uncle did not return even after dusk. He sat at his table and tried to do his homework. Batu was in the kitchen. He sat dejected, thinking of a thousand and one things. Suddenly he remembered Humaera. 'What is she doing now? If only she were here! I wouldn't then be so sad. No one can remain unsmiling in front of her. Arif is quite lucky and so is Mazharul. But here I am sitting alone, with none for company. If I were Arif.... and Humaera was my sister! he started dreaming. A faint smile played about his lips.

Even yesterday he would dream of an elder brother. Or a younger one. But today he longed for sisters. 'Brothers are never kind. Mushfiqur's brothers are always fighting with him. I can't bear such a life!'

Batu Bhai came to sleep in his room after supper. His uncle has directed Batu to do so. After making his own bed, Batu Bhai switched off the light. 'I see you are still awake.' Batu tried to start a conversation. But he was not interested and turned his face towards the wall. A thousand thoughts ran through his mind. For the first time in his life he felt lonely, terribly lonely. 'My mother.... what is she doing now? Is she thinking of me, too? Oh, why didn't she take me along with her?' His eyes filled with tears. He hid his face in the pillow. But he was aware of Batu's presence and swallowed his impulse to cry. And then the whole of his little frame started shaking intermittently.

# poem Poems by Shamim Azad

## Eclipse of moonlight

I had a skill  
When I jumped ship  
When I grabbed  
a fist full of earth,  
took a deep breath and looked  
towards the cold grey valley  
in the distance;  
on this island.

I am one of those women  
who can recognise  
an unknown city  
the map makers  
the nomads.  
I knew where  
the shore was  
in the eclipse of moonlight,  
the seagulls' nests.  
I could smell raw-fish,  
lime and timber  
the ragged people  
and I became one.  
I predicted the possibilities  
of rainfall, the whirling storm,  
and where to sprinkle spices.  
It went everywhere it needed.  
now, I have lost it all.

## Exchange

There in the afternoon  
just before the sun was gone  
people were shopping in White Chapel Rd  
and there was this lovely man  
singing Eric Clapton.

I could hear his enchanting voice  
as I was coming out of underground  
and I could see his shining hair  
with the descending and glistening sun.  
He made me ignore,  
what happened to me in the morning

and I heard him saying, "I looked wonderful!"  
Among all these zazy people  
I thought I had the lustful soul.  
The heartfelt song of the busker  
made me feel alright  
I went to him and dropped some silver  
to be one of them, jubilant part.  
Now, when I started trusting every one  
with what ever I brought and had  
the last few grains of spice and fragrance.  
I found myself crying  
sobbing my heart out  
he couldn't make it alright  
there was none, nobody around. 23.2.99  
Shamim Azad

## My Twofold

No, I wasn't blessed with twins  
I often wonder how it feels  
to be a mother of twice-the-same  
a pair of feel-alike-children.

I suppose  
they have a language of their own,  
a self made dome  
a town full of given life toys  
and a balloon  
that flies up and down,  
on an invisible string held  
in one's hand.

I think, in my case  
when I had my daughter  
I felt as if  
I was a twin of her's  
and there she was  
my double.  
The cloud of loneliness,  
the tremendous urge of going mute,  
simply evaporate.  
Since her birth  
neither of us cried.  
I felt protected as if  
I in our own castle.  
The lovely auburn hair,  
the fringe on the tiny forehead,  
empowered my connections  
like sparkling wares.  
She brought comfort  
and independence.

In her teens  
those crystal clear never-resolving  
debates we had,  
made me her other half  
without her  
I was incomplete.  
Now when she is a woman  
the twin-ship promises so much,  
I am almost brimming  
with arrogance.  
It scares me.  
The thought of being,  
double and then half,  
and half,  
then double  
is killing me  
because I have to be the first  
to go  
leaving her behind.  
19.6.98

## books

# An Iconoclast's War

By Gary Rosen

IN the history of philosophy there is perhaps no more powerful image than the "cave" described by Socrates in Plato's "Republic." This deep, dark hole, we are told, is inhabited by "prisoners" bound in such a way that all they can see is the play of shadows on an interior wall, fleeting shapes that they mistake for reality. Far above these hapless souls, outside their underground dwelling, is the dazzling light of the sun — a sight reached only after an arduous journey upward.

In his latest book, Stanley Fish does not invoke this venerable image of ignorance and enlightenment, but it is a useful starting point for understanding why the very mention of Mr. Fish's name causes eyes to roll among tradition-minded scholars. An English professor by training, Mr. Fish has turned in recent years to law and political thought, becoming a whole-sale purveyor of a fashionable French import called "post-structuralism."

According to this theory, everything we supposedly know is just a reflection of the particular society in which we live — that is, of the "cave" whose political, economic and cultural forces determine the character of our every opinion. Where Mr. Fish gleefully parts company with the Pla-

tonic view is in denying the possibility that we can rise above this limited horizon and discover ultimate truths about the human condition. As he sees it, the search for "knowledge" is never more than a glorified spelunking expedition.

In "The Trouble With Principle," Mr. Fish deploys his bad-boy polemics against those present-day ideologies that most noisily declare their transcendence of our cave-bound existence. He has no patience, for example, with what he calls "boutique" multiculturalism, which claims to welcome other cultures but balks when they assert their most distinctive values — by, say, issuing a death sentence against a "blasphemous" writer like Salman Rushdie. In such circumstances, Mr. Fish observes, those who celebrate ethnic diversity quickly become "unculturalists."

Indeed, his objection to multiculturalism is but a part of his assault on the hypocrisy of contemporary liberalism as a whole, especially as formulated by theorists like Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls. Posing as disinterested philosophers, these liberal eminences insist that their own deepest political and personal ideal — "autonomous decision-making" — is

somehow "neutral" among points of view and ways of life. But this is nonsense, Mr. Fish argues, since liberals invariably work to exclude from the public square anyone who rejects their hyper-individualistic orthodoxy.

The liberal rhetoric of impartiality is at its incoherent worst, Mr. Fish charges, when it comes to the question of religion. Liberalism tolerates believers only insofar as they are willing to play by liberal rules and treat divine revelation like any other contested opinion. But "a person of religious conviction should not want to enter the marketplace of ideas," Mr. Fish writes. "He should want 'to shut it down.'"

Lest he be misunderstood (or lose his reputation for being, in his own words, "characteristically perverse"), Mr. Fish makes clear that he actually likes most liberal policies. He just thinks that it is pointless and self-defeating for liberalism to present itself as the embodiment of abstract truths when in fact it is nothing more than one of the many worldviews that people happen to hold. Liberals should stop their empty philosophizing, he urges, and simply get out there and fight their enemies.

Now, there is no denying the fun to be had in accompanying Mr. Fish on

his scorched-earth campaign against the leading spokesmen of complacent highbrow liberalism. But in the end, he is very much like them. For one thing, his portrait of the religious sensibility is little more than a caricature, with every believer emerging as a fanatical theocrat-in-waiting. Conventional liberal that he is, Mr. Fish cannot digest the notion that certain things might be rendered unto God and others unto Caesar, and that the devout might be content with this arrangement.

At the same time, Mr. Fish too readily equates liberalism with the relatively recent idea that the state's chief purpose is to guarantee an ever-widening sphere of personal autonomy. There is, however, an older, less grandiose form of liberalism. Best seen in the thought of Locke and the American founders, it relies on limited, constitutional government to secure such mundane goods as order and prosperity. What's more, it frankly acknowledges that achieving these ends sometimes requires placing bounds on the pursuits of individuals.

Gary Rosen is associate editor of Commentary and the author of "American Compact: James Madison and the Problem of Founding."