

SHORT STORY

The Rush Hour

RAM LALL (translated from Urdu by Jai Ratan)

A jungle swarming with people. Strangers all, whom only chance had thrown together. Jostling and pushing one another, they travelled together for a short while on buses, trams, trucks, trains and along the city footpaths and then separated. They were a part of the great metropolitan city and contributed to its rough and tumble.

That day, just by chance, Atam happened to spot out Kassi in the surging crowd during the evening rush hour. Plodding their way through the crowd along the Howrah Bridge, they were going in the same direction. A stream of vehicles sped past them in the middle of the bridge.

Atam had recognized Kassi from the back--a straight and firm youthful back over which her hair fell in rich profusion. It could be none other than Kassi.

'Kassi!'

Kassi gave a start on hearing her name. The voice had a familiar ring though she was hearing it after many years. She turned round to look and there was sudden glint of recognition in her eyes.

'Arre, Atam, are you still living in Calcutta?'

'Yes, I'm here for the last five years. And you?'

'Why ask? Where else do you think I could go?'

This silenced Atam and he wordlessly gaped at Kassi's face. She had no *sindoor* in the parting of her hair and her face was innocent of any make-up--not even a hint of lipstick. And yet how red her lips were.

Kassi provided the answer to her own question. 'I've stuck out to Calcutta,' she said. 'I was born here, I grew up here and now I've landed a job here.'

'In which office?'

'Let me pass, brother!' Before Kassi could reply, a passer-by wedged himself between them and rushed away.

'I'm working at the Kidderpore docks,' Kassi said, catching up with Atam. 'As a stenographer in the Calcutta Port Trust. And you?'

An eddying mass of people momentarily threw them apart. 'I look after the air-conditioning plant of the main block of the Calcutta Stock Exchange building,' Atam replied. 'Remember, when you visited our house for the first time I was doing my apprenticeship at IIT.'

'Yes, I do remember, Atam. Your father and mine had fallen out over some property matter. Please, not so fast. I get left behind.'

'And then we had stopped meeting. They had kicked up a big row over nothing.'

'Atam, I can't hear you in this crowd. Do you mind catching my hand? What did you say just now?'

'That it was really not necessary to quarrel over such a small matter. A pity, that they did not make up again. When my father died, never mind visiting us, your father didn't even care to write us a letter of condolence.'

'Atam, I'm really sorry for it. But you know I was very young at that time.'

'Don't take me amiss, Kassi. I'm not blaming anybody. I was only casually mentioning it to you.'

'Oh, how these people come swarming from behind! I just couldn't catch your words in this deafening noise.'

'Look, we have almost reached the station. Let's sit down somewhere and chat peacefully over a cup of tea.'

'I would love it.'

Firmly grasping Kassi's hand, Atam tore through the crowd, Kassi in tow, till they reached a point of safety. Raising her hands to her head Kassi fixed up her hair into a bun while Atam looked on fascinated. She had blossomed into a fine woman, indeed. *Bap re bap*, how beautiful she looked! Finding him looking at her, Kassi felt embarrassed and her face turned red. They stood silent for a while, looking around for a quiet place. But all the restaurants were full and a little farther down even the coffee stall was crowded where people were talking noisily while drinking their coffee in quick gulps. Then they



artwork by amina

saw the local train coming in. Putting down their cups and money on the counter they hurried away to get into the train. Atam, who was standing there surveying the scene, saw the dining car at the end of the train. There was enough time before the train started. They got into the dining car. Sitting across from each other they had a good look at each other. The bearer brought them cups of tea.

'You were telling me something!' Kassi said.

'When?' Atam said as if coming out of a dream.

'When you grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the crowd.'

'I'm sorry, I can't recall it now. Let it be. Tell me, who's living with you? I mean, besides your father and mother?'

'There's no one else. Both my elder brothers are married. One of them is living in Bombay and the other in Madras. Shyama didi lives with her in-laws. Sometimes she comes to stay with us. For a week or a fortnight.'

'What about you? You've not been to your in-laws?' Atam suddenly felt that it would pain him to hear her reply. Then he saw a smile flickering around her lips.

'Is it necessary to go to one's in-laws?' she said. 'Must every girl visit her in-laws?'

Though very sentimental, Atam was slow on the uptake. He sat there as if tongue-tied. But Kassi had sensed what was passing in his mind and gave him a bemused look. 'How's your mother?' she asked.

'She's just the same. Only her eyesight has worsened. She had to change her glasses several times. And how's your mother now? Imagine, as a child I used to play in her lap and now I've even forgotten her face.'

Kassi laughed. 'One can't forget one's childhood so easily,' she said. 'Those were glorious days. We still seemed to be clinging to our childhood when we met seven years ago. Wasn't it seven years ago? You were in the IIT and I was preparing for my school finals. Do you remember one day you had taken me to Shantiniketan on your bike?'

'Yes, I do remember. And you had liked the place so much that you said you would come back one day to study for your degree.'

'But I couldn't go, as you know. Father was hard up at that time. He

had to sell his share of the ancestral property to provide for his sons' education and Shyama's marriage.'

'Kassi, I'm sorry. I was not aware of these things. I had unknowingly said some hard things about your father.'

'Did you, really? But I didn't ever hear you say anything against him.'

'How good-natured you are! You never take offence.'

'I marvel at how quickly you have learnt about my nature. But at home they think I'm the cantankerous type,' Kassi started laughing.

Suddenly the train started moving. They rushed towards the door, but it was too late. The train had gathered speed. They could not get down.

'Where will the train stop next?' Kassi asked, alarmed.

'Kharagpur,' a bearer told her. 'It's more than an hour's run.'

Kassi gave Atam a helpless look.

'I'm with you,' Atam consoled her. 'We'll immediately catch the down train from Kharagpur. Why worry? Haven't you ever reached home late?'

'I'm home by eight-thirty, the latest. That is if the local runs late. Otherwise, I'm home by seven.'

'It's all right. I'll come with you to your house and explain everything. Such things happen almost every day. There's nothing to worry. What about another cup of tea? And something to eat? I'm feeling hungry. What'll you have?'

'Whatever you eat.'

'And I'll eat whatever you eat.'

'Arre baba, you're making things difficult for me. All right, it's mutton chop for me. Are you game?' Kassi was her usual self again--vivacious and sprightly. 'Atam, you used to be very stubborn as a child,' she sighed. 'You've not changed a bit.'

'No, it's not that. Life has taught me a lot. I had to make many compromises with life, but not at the cost of my principles.'

'You were interested in plays.'

'I'm interested even now. We have a drama club. Only last month we stage *The Tired God*.'

'*The Tired God*, A nice title, that.'

'I know you had your interests too. You had a great liking for history and sociology--your pet subjects, if I may say so.'

'For there to here I've cultivated many more interests. Music and sitar and all that. And now it's a job at the speed of two hundred words per minute.'

They started laughing.

And before they knew it, time passed and the train was entering Kharagpur yard. Atam suddenly sat up. They were traveling without tickets. He told Kassi, 'Oh baba, we're in trouble. They will impose a heavy penalty on us and I don't have more than twenty rupees on me. Maybe even less.' She looked at him in alarm.

Kassi spilled the contents of her purse on the table. Atam also added the contents of his wallet to the lot on the table.

'Just enough to pay for the food and the tickets,' Atam declared after making some quick calculations. 'We won't have any money left for the return journey.'

'Then how shall we get back?'

Atam smiled as he gazed at Kassi's troubled face. 'That's no problem,' he said. 'I've a sister living at Kharagpur. We shall go to her house, have our dinner there, and get some money from her.'

'No, baba, I won't go to your sister's house. What will she think?'

'Then you may wait outside her house while I go in and ask her for the money. Then we can get back to the station in time for the train to Calcutta.'

'That's not a bad idea.'

Like giggling children they put their heads together, getting into the fun of it, quite proud that they had hit upon an ingenious way of getting out of their predicament.

They took a taxi to Atam's sister house. Kassi stayed back in the taxi. Atam returned after a few minutes and waved five ten-rupee notes before Kassi's face. Overjoyed, Kassi pressed his hand. They returned to the station, laughing and chatting. It was a rare experience, like suddenly discovering a treasure by the wayside.

At the station they learnt that the train to Calcutta was running late by three hours. Kassi's face fell. She had lost her appetite for the excellent food Atam had specially ordered for her at the railway restaurant they had seated themselves in. She wouldn't even touch the food. Atam helplessly watched the tears lurking in her eyes.

The train came at last and they got in silently. They wouldn't reach Calcutta before five the next morning.

'Kassi, it's my fault,' Atam said apologetically. 'I dragged you here and then everything kept going wrong like a bad adventure.'

Kassi was sitting with her head resting between her knees. 'Atam, I don't blame you,' she said in a tearful voice. 'Even I forgot myself on meeting you. I kept remembering the happy days we spent together as children. Now when I reach home what explanation will I give for shutting between Kharagpur and Calcutta? And Atam, I told you a lie. I had said that my father and mother would be waiting for me at home. They died a long time back. It's my husband who will lie awake all night, waiting for me.'

Atam heard her in stunned silence. Then he lowered his head and mumbled, 'Kassi, I had also told you a small lie. It was unbecoming of me to tell you that my mother is alive. It's my wife and our small son who would be waiting for my return. She must be having a harrowing time and not a wink of sleep. She must be perking up her ears at the slightest hint of sound. Anyway, now we must make the best of it. We can trot out some excuse. For instance, that we were caught in a traffic jam. It's an everyday occurrence.'

'But no such thing has happened on the rail service between my office and home. There won't be any mention of it in the newspapers.'

'Kassi, newspapers don't carry all the news. They skip a lot of things. Traffic jams have become so commonplace that they have lost their news value.'

They were silent for a long time. It would soon be morning. Their faces had wilted and their clothes had become dirty and crumpled. Whenever Atam closed his eyes he felt he was hearing the city noises somewhere inside him--as if a whole city was lodged within his head.

Suddenly the train ground to a halt. A big crowd had gathered near the engine and had blocked the rail track. Atam climbed down from the train to investigate. He learnt that a local was late and the commuters were expressing their anger over it by stopping other trains.

Atam ran back to Kassi. 'They are the very commuters with whom we rub shoulders every day,' he said excitedly. 'Last evening we were anxious to get away from them. But today our liberation lies in joining hands with them. Then if we are missing from home for a couple of days nobody is going to suspect us. I think the police will be here any moment.'

A smile played across Atam's face. Suddenly Kassi's face lost its grimace. She tightly wound the *paillau* of her sari around her waist and plunged into the demonstrating crowd. Then following the example of others she picked up some rocks from the track and hurled them at a carriage.

Ram Lall has published 12 collections of short stories and two novels in Urdu. Raj Jatan is a well-known translator of Urdu and Hindi fiction.

BookReviews

On 420s, 16th Divisioners and crooked oak branches...

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Paradise and Other Stories, Khushwant Singh, Penguin Books India, 2004, New Delhi, pp+239 pp.

A Face In The Dark and Other Hauntings, Ruskin Bond, Penguin Books India, 2004, x+197 pp.

I first got acquainted with Khushwant Singh in a most unlikely setting. It was November 1972, and my family was on the lam. We were one of nine or ten Bengali refugee families who had escaped from Pakistan through Afghanistan and now were at Delhi's Palam airport. Though at Kabul we had been issued Indian visas on our Pakistani passports and assured of entry, yet we were nervous about it. Would the Indians really let us in? Would we be hassled by uncomprehending officials, be stranded in a no-man's land at the airport? It had been a tiring flight, we had already blown much of our cash reserve, we were still a long way from Bangladesh and God only knew what lay ahead. The tension in our elders spread to the children and we too fidgeted when it was our turn to go through customs. The Indian customs officer was an older man, a senior officer in starched white, who, however, surveyed us kindly.

'Aha,' he said in English, 'in transit, eh?'

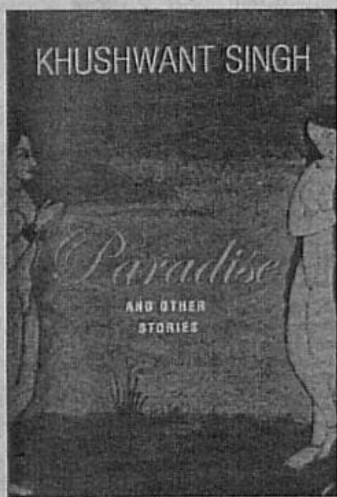
'Yes, my father, I and my brother chanted out in unison. 'Glad to be in India?' he asked pleasantly while flipping through my parents' passports.

'Y-e-e-s-s-s!'

'Tell me, boys,' he said, sweeping including my sister in that gendered term, 'this has been quite a holiday, right?'

'Yes.'

Our nervousness abated, the mercury dipped low. We realized that the customs people had been told to 'look after' Bengali refugees passing through Delhi. He barely glanced inside our crammed suitcases, which was



the pitiful sum of our earthly possessions then, and chalked them for freedom, all the while bantering with us. But just as we were about to walk away from him, towards a sunny Delhi beckoning to us through glass panes and doors, he seemed to think of something and called out to my father, 'Just a minute, please.'

'What now? The mercury rose.'

'Could I take a look at your passport again?'

'Oh shit!'

My father handed over his passport. The customs officer took it and opened it, then said, 'Right, you were in the information ministry?'

'Yes.'

'Journalist?'

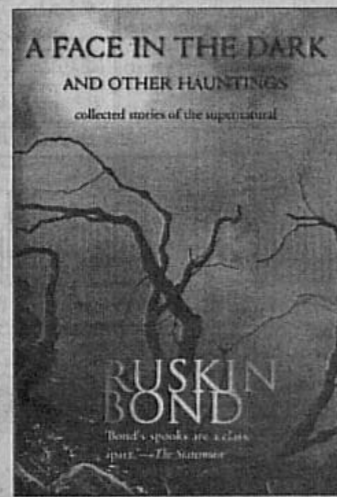
'Well, yes, sort of.'

With a broad smile creasing his face, the customs officer put the thumbs and forefingers of both hands on the waistband of his trousers, hitched them up, rocked back slightly on his heels, and asked, 'Then you have heard of Khushwant Singh? He writes in our newspapers.'

My father was slightly startled, but said 'Yes, yes, I have.'

The rocking stopped, the smile stretched further, the fingers came out of the waistband. 'He,' he announced with lavish pride, 'is an in-law of mine.'

'Oh, I see... Now it was my father's turn to grin.



'I thought you'd have heard about him.'

'Of course.'

They smiled at each other for a few more seconds. Then the customs officer leaned forward and shook my father's hand. He then looked at the rest of us, raised his other hand, waved it and sang out, 'Good luck!'

We waved back, then literally skipped out of the gates of Palam airport.

Over the decades since then Khushwant Singh has become an icon, and so it was not startling to note that Indian newspapers had given his latest work, *Paradise and Other Stories*, quite a few column inches when it came out a couple of months back. Of course, coverage of the book launching had not been hurt by the fact that big names showed up: the elusive Vikram Seth, the historian Romila Thapar, the Indian prime minister's wife and daughter. But as usual it had been Khushwant Singh who had taken center stage. He declared that he had to get this book of short stories (a return to the form after many years) off his chest, had to write it in order to give vent to his anger at uniquely Indian charlatans and poseurs: mystics, astrologers, fake holy men, venal sadhus, lusty pirs and like. You may or may not like

it, he said, 'but that's me. I have got the venom out of me.'

Khushwant has always hated cant, hypocrisy and chauvinism. And he has always written, and said, pretty much what he pleases. When the BJP was in power, and he was out promoting his autobiography *Truth, Love and A Little Malice* a few years back he loudly told an interviewer, without turning a hair (or turban to be more specific) that when the RSS spoke of restoring India's lost honour, their 'targets are really the Muslims. They are the Jews, what the Jews were to the Nazis.'

'Bang! You could hear that shot ricochet through Delhi and beyond.'

In his autobiography he almost offhandedly threw out that 'A common prostitute renders more service to society than a lawyer. If anything the comparison is unfair to the whore.'

'Bang, bang!'

And there's plenty more of these fusillades, scattered throughout his innumerable articles, columns and books.

But at 90, you would think the Grand Old Man would sheath his khanda and not care about keeping his powder dry. Not so. In *Paradise and Other Stories* he goes after Sanskrit texts, saffron-coloured bunkum, horoscope-readers, gurus, ashrams and pirs and *charso beesas* and soothsayers, after every shibboleth and false idol he can think of, all with his trademark relish. The best story among the lot is undoubtedly 'Life's Horoscope', where the brand-new wife of amateur astrologer and scholar of ancient Hindu texts Madan Mohan Pandey upsets his calculations by demanding the real thing, not the dead formulas of *Kama Sutra*.

Which leads me to forewarn Bangladeshi readers who have not read much of Khushwant to be prepared for his raciness--the Grand Old Man has also been called the Dirty Old Man by some

Indian commentators. More than most writers, he has never cared for the middle-class taboos and guilt that can make so much English writing in South Asia excessively mannered and fusty. In appropriate doses, it can be refreshing. It can also make you wince, as when in the autobiography he noted in unnecessary detail his late wife's toilet habits. But the language, the free-for-all engagement with risqué topics, is an integral part of the package. As more than one reviewer has noted, Khushwant is Khushwant, take him or leave him.

In this particular volume, one has to admit that the book's characters, especially the 'phoren' ones, tend to be caricatures, as, say, the American mother whose boyfriends, and conversations with her daughter ('Howya doin', hon?') are straight out of a bad sitcom. This is because in Khushwant's fiction characters are sacrificed on the altar of plotting, which are perhaps best described as a headlong rush--the author is in a hurry to prove a point. However, where he most fails to, ahem, rise to the occasion is in his prose style, which can veer between the 10-rupee bodice-ripper ('Our eyes met; his were as large as a gazelle's. His gaze drew me towards him. It was as though I was hypnotized.') and straight journalese ('They supported one or the other of the Hindu fundamentalist parties.')

If you can stand yards and yards of this stuff, this book's for you. And Khushwant no doubt would probably retort that he never did aspire to the condition of literature.

There's nobody here in Bangladesh writing in English even remotely like him. More's the pity! Just think of all those fraudster mullahs and poseurs and 420s and 16th Divisioners and trickster politicians standing deliciously unmarked waiting for somebody to take a sledgehammer to them!

And language is what you notice most in Ruskin Bond (another writer who has been around for decades, having written over a hundred short stories, essays, novels, and more than thirty books for children), when you pick up *A Face in the Dark* and *Other Hauntings* straight after Khushwant Singh. He is the superior writer, with a far better ear for English sentences. Here he is at his best describing Indian hill stations during the evening or at night, as in these wistful ghost stories for the younger crowd, tuning the mood and atmosphere appropriate for supernatural goings-on, when men are stalked by the shadows of the trees, by the crooked oak branches reaching out... or, 'I was returning home along a very narrow, precipitous path known as the Eyebrow. A storm had been threatening all evening. A heavy mist had settled on the hillside. It was so thick that the light from my torch simply bounced off it. They sky blossomed with sheet lightning and thunder rolled over the mountains. Where live the barking deer and blue, long-tailed magpies. Which is perhaps natural given the fact that Bond grew up around Dehra Dun, and has made his home in the hill station of Mussoorie, way up in Arunachal Pradesh, not very far from where Jim Corbett lived and hunted. And given the history of hill stations, founded and sustained by the officers of the British Raj, it is therefore not surprising that a genteel, old-fashioned Anglophilia pervades the book's well-contoured tales, where Kipling and Sherlock Holmes and harrumphing ex-army colonels make appearances. And which actually makes this little book haunting in a way perhaps not foreseen by its author.

Note to readers: A Penguin book sale is currently being held at Etcetera bookstore in Gulshan.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

The Artists' Village

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

We spilled into the artists' village
Adjusting our hats, sunglasses -- the artists were finishing lunch
their paint brushes sleeping in turpentine.

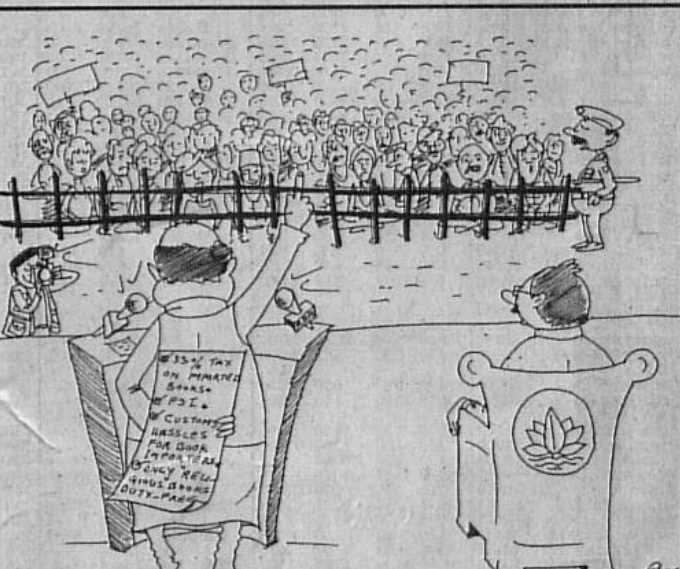
We were in a gigantic barn house complete with
maize, sunflowers, lazy gourds, unfinished dumplings.

We said 'ni-hao' affably and followed the guide
who took us to the living quarters of the artists,
inviting doorway crowded with their Volkswagens, Dachshunds
drowsy Dalmatians, panting bulldogs.

We browsed through the yard--
Tractor wheels had been sculpted into sunflowers
'farm yard metamorphosis' artist Yan explained.

'life cycle of iron scrap'
'rust to rust' -- he added
gingerly with a hint of melancholy.

Nuzhat Amin teaches English at Dhaka University. The poem was written during a stay in China.



"As a nation we should read more... we need more reading rooms... more books... illiteracy is a grave..."