

SHORT STORY

Mrs Dutta of Jackson Heights

MUNJULIKA RAHMAN

The smell of food being cooked for the wedding was all over the apartment building. As Mrs Dutta entered with her shopping cart, she thought, "Polao with ghee, chicken korma to be sure...that's a staple, a vegetable dish? At one time I could cook all that in one afternoon."

She had overheard the women of third floor discussing the wedding of Tarek, the eldest son of the Islam family. It was to be tomorrow evening.

And they had forgotten to invite Mrs Dutta.

Mrs Dutta lived alone in a two-room apartment on the first floor of this building in Jackson Heights, New York and she had been living here longer than any of the other residents. Even till a few years back she owned one of the two telephones in the building where the residents were all immigrants from South Asia. Whenever someone came to make a call, Mrs Dutta would tell them about how she came to the United States from Bangladesh, with only one suitcase and a husband she had known for two days. As they talked into the phone, Mrs Dutta would continue, "They said my groom is a journalist, works for a good newspaper in America. You know what he used to do? He used to sell newspapers on the pavement. My father was a land-owner in Khulna. We had rice fields and sugar cane crops and vegetables in our garden. We never had to buy our food."

Sometimes during the religious festivals like Eid or Diwali, *desi* acquaintances would invite Mrs Dutta to their houses. She would sit in a corner, munching sweets, in the crowded kitchen where the women gathered. She would pour the tea in her saucer to cool it and slurp it up, going on about her past, "My husband got lucky and got the DV visa. It was easier thirty years back, you know. He gradually became a 'senior regional supervisor' of the newspaper distribution department."

"We did put our son through college," she'd say, but the women were usually busy helping the host. Even though Mrs Dutta knew nobody was paying attention to her, she liked to sit there among the women, their voices, and their clanging utensils. It was better than being in her quiet apartment.

It was twelve o'clock on a

Sunday morning. Time for the news and NY Lotto's winning numbers. For years Mrs Dutta has been buying these lottery tickets. They helped her to look forward to the next day. She turned on the TV in the drawing room and sat on the old sofa.

NY Lotto came on and as usual, began with a short clip about yesterday's winner. When the box began to roll, Mrs Dutta matched the numbers one by one. The farthest she had ever gone with matching numbers was half way through the eight digits. But today she continued calling the numbers aloud with the anchor and her heart beat faster as she came to the last number.

"And a five! Congratulations to the winner," the anchor said in a smooth voice.

Mrs Dutta was sweating. She sat still, clutching the ticket to her chest. Forty-two million dollars. She couldn't even remember how many zeros went to a million.

Mrs Dutta sat in the same spot for a long time as the TV went on babbling. So what do I do now, she thought. Call them? Oh yes, forty-five days to take the ticket to a...to a, yes...Lottery Claim Center, she recalled. Forty-two million, forty-two million...the words jumped around in her mind. What will I do with all that money? Mrs Dutta's heart began to beat faster again.

She closed her eyes and saw green paddy fields stretching into the horizon. She saw herself as a young girl running to school through yellow mustard plants as the sunshine warmed her shoulders. Mrs Dutta took a deep breath and calmed down. When her husband was alive, he used to talk about going back Bangladesh one day, but he never saved up enough money. Now she was free to go anywhere she liked.

It was almost two in the afternoon when Mrs Dutta got up from the sofa and called the 1-800 number on the back of the ticket. They told her that the nearest claim center was in downtown Manhattan. She got her overcoat, put the ticket in a crisp yellow envelope, and put it inside her blouse.

She called the Islam family to see if they could give her a ride. "We are actually very busy with our son's wedding. Why don't you call a cab?" Mrs. Islam suggested.

Mrs Dutta called Mexicana Cabs and checked the cash in her purse. Twenty-nine dollars.

That was for next week's grocery. Well, she should have more money by next week, she reasoned. The cab arrived in ten minutes and she was on her way.

The apartment building on 76th street had lines of little white bulbs hung from the roof for the wedding. Tarek's friends had suspended them that night, making passers-by wonder what was happening since it was February, and Christmas had long gone. The children of the building came out to see the lighting even though it was windy, and felt an unusual sense of celebration and belonging. They ran about on the lawn, chasing one another, as the men fixed the length of the wires, some of them shouting from below at those on the roof.

When Mrs Dutta returned she hardly noticed the lights. Forty-two million dollars was all that was in her head. At the claim center, a golden haired lady in a green suit had explained to her that the forty-two million would be paid over a period of twenty-five years. They would put the yearly amount in her bank account and she was entitled to any interest that might accrue. She didn't understand a lot of the legal things she had said. She had stared at the lady's green eye-shadow and had asked "How much per year did you say?"

"After tax and all, around a million dollars will be deposited every year. If you want, we can help you set up an appropriate account in a good bank that is affiliated with us, since you said you only have one account where your husband's social security money comes in, right?"

Mrs Dutta thanked the lady and said, "Let me think about it. But for now, just put the money in my present account."

Next morning Mrs Dutta was awakened by loud knocks. She looked around for her glasses and walked to the door with a hand on her hip that was sore from yesterday's walking. When she opened the door, there were flash lights going off from all directions, and before she knew what was going on, she was almost carried to her sitting room by the crowd. Reporters were asking her "How long have you been in the US? Do you have children? How old are you? How do you plan to use the money?"

Mrs Dutta was on the mid-day news and the local tabloids proclaimed, "Mrs Dutta, from Jackson Heights, Queens wins



artwork by amina

NY Lotto." Immediately she began to get phone calls from real estate agents, banks, insurance companies, car dealers and all sorts of businesses. She couldn't figure out how everyone had gotten to know so quickly. She sat in front of the TV sipping tea, wondering what she should do with the money. She knew she'll visit Bangladesh soon. But what about the rest of it? She was going to be seventy in a few years. Occasionally she had heart problems. She had to be realistic...how many years did she have left?

Her thoughts went to her son Shojol, who she had not heard from for more than ten years. He grew up in the US, and Mrs Dutta felt she understood him less and less as he grew older. He was short-tempered and would often get into fights with his father. Shojol had left home for college and used to keep in touch. But he transferred to a college in another state, and slowly stopped calling. Would it have been different if he grew up in Bangladesh?

The doorbell rang interrupting Mrs Dutta's thoughts. Mr and Mrs Islam had come to pay her a visit.

"Just came to see how you're doing. Today is my son's wedding in the evening. We are having it right here in the house, you know, what with all the financial constraints we can't book a restaurant," Mrs Islam explained. "You must come and bless the newly-weds, Mrs Dutta, being our elder. No no, we won't hear a no from you. You'll be able to take the few steps up to the third floor. Mr Islam will help you. And we heard you won the lottery! We are so happy for you." Mrs Dutta smiled and said, "Ok, I'll come."

Mr Islam came in the evening and took Mrs Dutta up to their apartment. They introduced her as "our neighbor who was on TV today." People sat down and listened to her for a change, as she recounted her childhood and her journey to America. Mostly people asked her about the lottery. "Millions of dollars!" they gasped. "What will you do with it, Mrs Dutta?" One woman

introduced her husband, "He's a lawyer. He'll help you manage your money." Mrs Dutta was rather enjoying herself as they sat around and talked to her.

Mrs Dutta had just put the rice on the stove for the afternoon meal when someone knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" "Ma, this is Shojol."

Mrs Dutta went numb with surprise. Shojol? Who had not even called her in so many years? She opened the door, adjusted her glasses and took a good look. Yes, it was her son all right. He had grown a beard, but she knew him right away.

"How are you, mother?" he said as he strode into the drawing room and sat on the sofa.

Mrs Dutta didn't know what to think. She just said "I am ok, Shojol."

"Ma, I haven't had lunch. What are you cooking?" he asked

"Yes, I was starting to cook. It won't take long."

Shojol lay down on the sofa and watched TV as Mrs Dutta finished cooking. In the dining table as she put rice on his plate he said, "I was planning for a few months to come down here, but you know how it is, right? Work, work, work. I have a construction business in Texas, and it's doing quite well. I am thinking of expanding."

"Accha, that's all good. Have you married yet?"

"Oh ho, no Ma. You're still on that same track. So how have you been?"

"Choltese. It's been going somehow."

"Why do you say that? I heard you won the lottery. Now you can do whatever you like!" He smiled broadly and seemed happy for her.

She wondered if it was only the lottery that had brought him back here.

"I'll be here for a few days Ma, if that's ok with you? I have to meet some business people."

Mrs Dutta nodded.

That evening Mr and Mrs Islam and few of the other people from the apartment building came to meet Shojol. They sat in the drawing room drinking tea and Mrs Islam felt it her duty to keep the conversation flowing.

"Shojol, we have heard so much about you from Mrs Dutta. It's good to know your business is doing well."

While her husband talked to

Shojol, she turned to Mrs Dutta, "Now that your son is settled, Mrs Dutta, why not consider helping my son start his business? He has a Bachelor's degree from Queens College...has a lot of potential and is very hard-working...and don't think I say this only because I am his mother. He's talented and only needs a little help. If we don't help each other in this foreign country, who will help us!"

Mrs Dutta merely nodded. That night Mrs Dutta lay in bed, listening to the boiling sounds of the heater and the police sirens outside. After spending more than half of her life in this place, the sirens and the car alarms that went off at all times, still made her uncomfortable. They reminded her of the Liberation War, when Bengalis were being killed, and it was even more dangerous for Hindus. Mrs Dutta drifted to sleep and dreamt that she was back in her village in Khulna.

Shojol had made a cup of tea for himself.

"Do you want a cup, Ma? The water's still hot."

"Shojol, I've decided that I want to visit Bangladesh. Haven't been back ever since I came here with a bag and your father. We were married for only two days when we set off for America. Those days it used to take so long...nowadays it is easier with these fast planes. We traveled from Khulna to Dhaka and ..."

"Mother, you can go anywhere you like. But you must make sure that your money is safe."

"They'll put it in my account. I have to go to the bank soon."

"No, but in the bank the money will not increase very much. See, if you invest it in a business like mine, the money will double."

"Well, the lady at the claim center was talking about some interests accruing or something."

"But see Ma, forty-two million in a business is much better than in the bank. Accha, maybe you can keep half and put the other half in my business. You should be careful. That's a whole lot of money to be in one account. And yeah, I'll take you to the bank today."

Mrs Dutta decided not to tell him that the money was going to be paid over a period of twenty-five years. She liked the idea of it being divided, but Shojol wanted a big sum to be invested in his business.

"Yes, I'll go to the bank and they'll let me know how much I have. Then you can book a plane ticket to Bangladesh for me. I will call my brother in Dhaka and see if I can stay with them."

Shojol went with Mrs Dutta to the bank that evening, but when they went to talk to the bank manager, he was not allowed to enter the glass cubicle since it was not his account. When she came out, Shojol asked her questions about how much money there was, but Mrs Dutta talked about her preparations to go to Bangladesh.

"The bank manager said I can write a cheque at the travel agency," she told Shojol excitedly while they crossed the street.

"You'll need some cash too. You can give me a cheque later on and I can pick up some cash for you."

"Yes, I will need cash too. I want to buy some gifts for my relatives back home," she said and started planning on what to get.

The ticket was bought and Mrs Dutta was ready to leave for Dhaka in a week. In the cab, on the way to the airport Shojol told her repeatedly, "Your return date is in two months, ok Ma? And call me when you get to Dhaka. The transit is at Heathrow, London, so that is where you'll have to change planes. You have all your papers and cheque book in your hand bag, right?"

At the airport Mrs Dutta walked slowly on the polished floor and her new shoes made squeaky rubbery sounds. She had decided earlier that before leaving for Bangladesh, she was going to tell Shojol that her will would show that after her death, he would get whatever was left of her money. She looked over at Shojol who was talking to an airline official.

It was time to go through the security gates and board the plane. Shojol came to her and said, "Take care, Ma. The air hostesses will look out for you, I talked to them. Call me when you get there."

Mrs Dutta decided not to tell him anything about the money now. Maybe later, when she came back. She gave him a hug, clutched her handbag tightly, and went in through the gates.

Munjulika Rahman studies at Randolph-Macon Women's College in Virginia.



MENKA SHIVDASANI

Two very special visitors, the Hutch Crossword Book Award, several literary evenings at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival ... 2005 has got off to an eventful and memorable start.

Kala Ghoda, which spans less than one sq. km in South Mumbai, is the city's cultural center, home to several art galleries, gourmet restaurants and heritage buildings. The area derives its name from a statue of King Edward VII astride a black horse; the statue has long since been removed, but the name 'Kala Ghoda' ('Black Horse') has stuck.

When the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival was introduced in 1999, it brought a whole new energy into the area. The annual event has grown bigger with time, and as Srila Chatterjee of the Kala Ghoda Association said in a letter to participants after it ended on January 23: "Our mission was to make this year's Festival a prototype for a model that would serve to eventually become the finest and biggest Arts Festival in India". She also pointed out that they were "very excited about having a whole Literature section for the first time".

The Literature section, co-ordinated by R Sriram, Managing Director & CEO, Crossword Bookstores Ltd, was packed with a variety of events - multilingual poetry readings as well as one by poets writing in English; a creative writing workshop, and even, for the first time, an SMS poetry competition.

As Jerry Pinto, poet and one of the judges of the SMS competition pointed out, with mobile phones having become very common and the Short Messaging Service so popular, writers needed to look at language in new ways and adapt to the times. The purists might have been horrified -- after all, when you are sending out an SMS, grammar and spelling are not priorities. The entries that came in, however, were quite remarkable -- sometimes, even haiku-like, as one of the other judges, the poet Marilyn Noronha commented. Peter Griffin, for instance, came up with this one, and ended up with first prize:

cellular creature
now part of my D.N.A.
gladden my heart: beep.

Manisha Lakhe and Annie Zaidi, first and second runners-up respectively, used SMS techniques to perfection -- though these were 'poems' you certainly would not be able to read aloud! Check them out...

Cud v b like that *ship
Boldly c-king cvlizashuns
So v don't disturb
Old ways of life?
Let's just love and leave

- Manisha Lakhe

tis d wkend;wot plans?
nt sayn d nyt's alpyrn
& wintr rustls twixt d sheets.
nt sayn d windO stares insomnac,@ d hiway.
nt sayin i w8,dd u 4get?

only askn-
tis d wkend;wot plans?

- Annie Zaidi

All three winners, as it turned out, were Net-savvy members of the literary site www.caferrati.com.

While R Sriram was coordinating the literary calendar of the Kala Ghoda Festival, he was also in the thick of another huge event -- the Hutch Crossword Book Award 2004, touted as the 'Indian Booker'. The Award entitles the winner to a trophy, certificate and a cash prize of Rs. 3 lakh for each category, with the author and translator sharing the cash in the translation category. The first Crossword award in 1998 went to I Allan Sealy for his novel *Everest Hotel* and Sealy was on this year's shortlist too for *The Brainfever Bird*.

Crossword had kept the momentum going much before the awards were finally announced on January 27, with panel discussions on Indian writing. There were a lively one, for instance, featuring Tarun Tejpal of Tehelka, the novelist and playwright Kiran Nagarkar and poet Dilip Chitre, in which both Chitre and Tejpal pointed out that while the book culture might seem to be growing, people were simply unwilling to pay for books. (Sriram's own view was slightly more optimistic; according to him, six million customers had walked into Crossword bookstores in this last year.)

There was some discussion on a topic that just never seems to go away. Is writing in English a legitimate activity for Indian writers, or should you write in your mother tongue instead? Kiran Nagarkar had something to add on that one: his first Marathi book, he said, took a full 20 years to sell a grand total of 1,500 copies. When he decided to write in English -- a decision accompanied by a state of extreme depression -- he felt he was "stabbing" his mother tongue. Fortunately for us readers, he stuck to his decision to write in English; his *Ravan* and *Eddie* may not have been on the Crossword list but it is one of the funniest novels to have appeared in a long while.

With 38 books in the Best Original Fiction longlist whittled down to four, and 19 in the translations category (brought down to six for the shortlist), the competition was intense. Of the six books on the shortlist for translations, four were in Bengali (Bani Basu's *The Birth of the Maitreya*; Mahasweta Devi's *In the Name of the Mother and Bait*; and Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay's *Waiting for Rain*.)

In the category of Best Original Fiction, it was a contest between Shashi Deshpande (*Moving On*); Raj Kamal Jha (*If you are Afraid of Heights*); Allan Sealy (*The Brainfever Bird*) and Amitav Ghosh (*The Hungry Tide*).

The awards went to Amitav Ghosh for his book *The Hungry Tide* in the category of Indian Writing in English and author Chandrasekhar Rath and translator Jatindra Kumar Nayak for the book 'Yantrarudha' *Astride The Wheel* in the category of Indian Writing in Indian Languages. The judges were Nilanjana Roy, Dilip Kumar, Subashree Krishnaswamy, Kai Friese, Sukanta Chaudhari and Urvasi Butalia.

Sriram did say at some point that they would extend the awards and make them even bigger and better. Hopefully, one of the ways they will do this is to introduce a new category -- poetry -- which

somehow never seems to get the attention it should!

The city also had two eminent visitors - Bruce King, author of *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (Oxford University Press), which saw a revised edition in 2001, and Ottawa-based Christopher Levenson, who is, among other things, co-founder of the literary magazine *Arc* and author of 10 books of poetry (the most recent being *The Bridge* in 2000.)

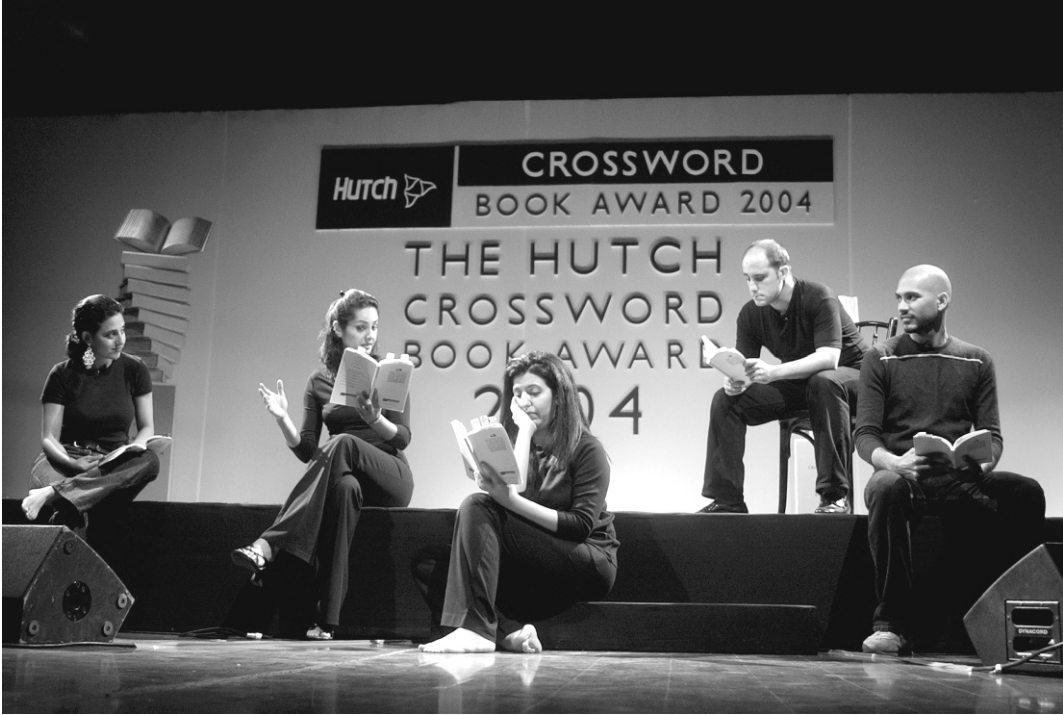
Levenson first visited India in 1986, and this is his fourth trip here. Accompanying him this time is his wife Onagh Berry, who has had short stories and poems published in Ireland and Canada; she is also co-author of a book of letters which will be published in the autumn of 2005.

This visit was primarily devoted to teaching English to students at the Kohinoor Business School in the nearby hill station of Khandala, but as he said in an article for the Kohinoor newsletter: "I'm hoping some of my literary enthusiasm will rub off on them since, for me at least, business should also involve the kind of imagination and vision that literature promotes." The picturesque setting inspired some poems as well, like the one on the newly constructed Mumbai-Pune Expressway:

The Bombay-Poona Expressway
uncoils like a python through
the denseness of gorge and forest.
All night as I lie awake
the trucks keep coming, the hills
exhale in silence,
prepare for tomorrow's heat.

Christopher also has plans for an updated anthology of mainly younger South Asian and diaspora poets, published either in Canada or the UK "This is an intention rather than a sure thing," he says, adding that a publisher in the UK (Carcenet) has "expressed interest but no commitment".

Meanwhile, Bruce King has also updated his *Three Indian Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A K Ramanujan and Dom Moraes* (OUP, 1991), and the book is expected to be out later this year. His updated version of *Modern Indian Poetry in English* had included five new chapters covering the 1990s -- new poets, and a survey of developments in publishing, for instance. On this visit to India, he renewed his association with old friends in literary circles here, and met several other poets as well.



With both Bruce and Christopher in town at the same time, there were some rare and special moments, such as a very pleasant get-together organized by the poet Anand Thakore, where poets like Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Gieve Patel, Arundhati Subramaniam and Jane Bhandari shared their work.

Before I sign off, here is a poem by Jane Bhandari, who has made Mumbai her home for more than two decades...

Bombay, My Mumbai

I posted a parcel from England.
Said the clerk at the post office,
Where is Mumbai?
What is the nearest big city?
It's my home, I said, it's Bombay.
Mumbai is Bombay.
Sounds fatter to me, he said,
Laughing, and I thought,
Well, second marriage,
They usually are fatter,
Shapely young Bombay
Became matronly Mumbai,
Sprawling on the beach
With her feet in the sea.

Menka Shivdasani is a Mumbai-based poet. Her two books of poems are *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* (1990) and *Stet* (2003).