

SHORT STORY

The Parting

ZAHRA RAI (translated from Hindi by S. Rai)

The black horse-drawn coach stopped before the back gate of the hospital. That gate was often locked. The doors of the carriage were shut. From the window two anxious eyes looked out. Getting down from the top of the carriage, the driver patted the black horse and looked around carefully. Then he opened the doors of the carriage with deference, and, stepping back a little, softly said, 'Madam may alight; there is no one here.'

A tall woman wearing a black *burqa* stepped out. A thin veil covered her face, through which her translucent fair skin glowed as her eyes took in her surroundings. There was no path from that gate to the main building of the hospital. It was usual for the patients to use the front gate, where there was a cemented road flanked by a lawn and flowers. The back gate, however, opened on to a space with overgrown grass, where insects hovered. The visitor negotiated this undergrowth with rapid strides and went into the office of the head nurse. She lifted her veil; her age was twenty-five, perhaps. Beautiful eyes with just a trace of kohl and palms decorated with orange dots of henna. She asked the nurse softly, 'Is everything ready?'

'Madam, you will have to wait a minute.'  
'Can I see her?'  
'You will have to wait just a little,' the nurse repeated. She took out some cards from the cupboard and began to fill in various columns. She then stood up, and, turning to the lady, said, 'Please wait here.' The lady inclined her head slightly. With one hand on the stiff white triangular cap on her head, the nurse went out with quick steps. Her shoes made no sound. Her eyes showed little emotion. Just the determination to get through the hours assigned for her duty. The rooms of the private patients lined both sides of the corridor. A middle-aged woman had fainted in one of the rooms. Her relatives stood by anxiously. All had tense, pursed lips. Two young lady doctors were looking after her. The patient in the adjoining room was happy. She was to be discharged today. A big car stood outside the hospital building. Children were making a loud racket and there was a general atmosphere of merriment in this room. There were patients in the other rooms as well. Some groaned with pain, others were staring with vacant eyes, and most were irritable. There was a suffocating heaviness in the atmosphere. The smell of medicines, the constricting odour of chloroform and the expressionless, harsh faces of the doctors and nurses -- death seemed to be lurking in every corner.

Holding some cards in one hand, the nurse went into the office on the left. The room was formidablely clean; not a speck of dust. Curtains white as a shroud and a shining floor below.

The doctor was reading the complicated case history of a patient. She lifted her head to look at the nurse and returned to the case. The nurse stood by, silent. Without looking up, the doctor said, 'Yes?' 'Doctor, the patient in bed 26 has completed ten days today. Should she be allowed to go? We are short of beds as it is. There are several patients waiting to be admitted.'

'Has she put any money in the charity box?' the doctor asked. 'Doctor, she is very poor. She has put in only one rupee.'  
'That is all right. She may be discharged.' The nurse placed the card before the doctor. She signed it, after which the nurse took the card and left. Now she came to the free Maternity Ward and walked up to bed 26. Her face wore a meaningful smile. 'You have been discharged today. Where will you go from here?'

'I don't know.' The speaker was a delicate girl of twenty-two or twenty-three. She was lively and beautiful and her figure had the pleasing, fresh fullness of budding youth. Her sari was of fine



artwork by apurba kanti das

material pale blue, with a thin border. The sleeves of her tight blouse hugged her rounded arms. Full cheeks imparted a charming innocence to her young face. Her large expressive eyes were vivacious.

'How many days have you been away from home?' asked the nurse. 'Ten months.'

'Will you remain in Delhi for some time?'  
'No, I will go away tomorrow,' she said in an Urdu accent. 'Are your things in order?'

'Yes.'  
Bending over her, the nurse said something in a low voice. The girl's face mirrored disappointment and defeat. She lowered her eyes. 'There is nothing to worry about, do you understand?' the nurse consoled her. The patient's nostrils were quivering.

The nurse picked up the beautiful chubby baby who lay wrapped in a green towel. His head was covered with silky curls, making him look like he wore a small black cap. The expressionless eyes of the nurse momentarily filled with love. She kissed the baby's cheek. He stirred at the nurse's touch and his lips moved, as though he was sucking milk. He was quite red, rather like raw flesh; his lips were slightly blue, as those of a newborn just beginning to suckle are apt to be. The nurse walked ahead and the girl followed behind with slow steps. She did not seem quite steady on her feet. Her face was white, as though all the blood had been drained from it. When the nurse gave her the child, her hands were like ice.

As soon as she saw the nurse, the lady who had been waiting stood up.

'Your carriage is at the back gate, isn't it?' asked the nurse. 'Yes,' replied the lady.

'That is convenient,' said the nurse. 'There is quite a crowd in front.' The woman slipped a fat, sealed envelope into the nurse's hand and said, 'Sister, I hope you realize this is an absolutely confidential matter. You and I have known each other for years. Please keep this to yourself!'

'Thank you, madam. You can trust us completely. You are an old patient of ours. We know you very well.'

'Thank you,' came the lady's reply.

'Goodbye, then. The doctor will be starting out on her rounds soon.

Please see that the gate is closed. Thank you.'  
The nurse quickly went back to her office.

The carriage was standing where it had been left. The horse was sniffing the green grass, oblivious to the world. Seeing the lady approach, the driver patted the horse once more and emitted a strange noise 'Hurrrr!' The horse lifted his neck and flicked off the flies from both his flanks with his short tail. Then he looked at the driver as though to tell him he was ready. The lady helped the girl climb into the coach. She was holding the tiny baby carelessly with one hand. She did not look at the baby even once. The lady was staring at the child unblinkingly. His tiny chest rose and fell with each breath. The driver shut the doors of the coach and climbed on top. Touching the horse lightly with

this whip, he said, 'Come on!' From a slow trot, the horse broke into a gallop. As soon as the carriage entered the driveway, the sentry at the gate stood up stiffly and then locked the gate after the carriage had passed.

The last days of March. Winter was limping to an end, though the nights were still cold. In the long room at the end of the small courtyard, a bed was spread out with simple, rough bedding. There was a pillow without a cover. More trouble had been taken over the baby's bed. A clean white mattress and small pillows; freshly washed white diapers. The lady dressed the baby in a white *kurta* and a small jacket. Then she tied his diaper. The innocent little face began to look even sweeter. The mother still did not look at the child. She was staring fixedly at the wall. Her eyes were a mix of fear, sadness and despair. She turned to the lady and asked, 'When do I have to go?' 'The train leaves at 5:30 in the morning.' The girl was silent. She cast a fleeting glance at the baby and her lips started quivering. She sought support from the wall again. The lady looked at the child too and her heart filled with secret joy, layered in a strange way with pain. She left.

The last rays of the setting sun illuminated the wall in front. The evening was drawing to a close. Soon night covered the myriad mysteries of the world with a black mantle. When the girl was called for dinner, she refused to eat. The lady brought her a cup of hot milk, and, after much coaxing, succeeded in making her drink it. 'What on earth will you be able to do if you're hungry?' was what she said. She went away again. The girl did not unpack her luggage. She curled herself up in a corner of the bed. When her neck began to hurt on the hard edge of the bed, she made a pillow of her arm. Her mind turned to recollections of the past. The recent past: the closed carriage, the serious face of the lady, the forbidding sound of the horse's hooves and the thumping of her own heart. A little before that the ten days spent in the hospital; the doctors and nurses, the smell of medicines, the groaning patients, death, pandemonium, and then the terrifying silence. These past ten months' the never-ending quarrels at home, the unbearable exchanges, discomfort, the sudden decision to leave home, the grand station of Delhi, the lady's magnificent house and then...

Her wandering mind took her back seven years. She was fifteen years old then. She'd had an ostentatious wedding which had sunk her father into debt. Hundreds of people had been invited to dinner. She was on top of the world. The smiling, carefree face of her young husband swam before her eyes.

That carefree face...was it not her marriage to him that made her the most fortunate creature on earth? With a husband she was rich, a veritable Goddess Lakshmi. And then? The desolate grim night that same year, which had snatched away all joy and comfort, leaving her with a long and empty life. She began to sob and her eyes flooded with tears. She did not know when she fell asleep. It was four o'clock. The lady shook her arm gently. She started and her heart began to hammer again. The lady said, 'It is four o'clock.'

'All right.'  
'Will you drink some tea?'  
'No.'  
'Do you need anything?'  
'No.'  
'Is there any message?'  
'No.'  
'Do believe me, I won't be offended. Say anything.'  
'No, not at all.'  
'Should I come to the station with you?'  
'No.'  
'Should I send a servant with you?'  
'No.'

The lady's heart was suddenly gripped with anguish. She went inside. The baby was still in the deep and tranquil sleep of infancy. The girl bent down and kissed the child. She caressed his soft curls. His lips again began to move as though he were sucking milk. The lady returned. 'Will you not feed the baby one last time?' 'What time is it?'

'Five.'  
'It is too late now.'  
She looked at the child again and pressed her palms against her breasts. The milk had begun to flow. There was a painful lump in her throat.

'Don't worry, my dear. Your baby will be dearer to me than my own life. I do not have a child of my own and ... this child could well have blossomed in my own womb, but...' then something seemed to stick in her throat and she could not complete the sentence. She handed the girl a thick wad of notes. 'This is to pay for your travel. All right, then. I bid you farewell.'

The girl was overcome by tenderness and gratitude. There was so much she wanted to say but her tongue failed her. She lifted a hand to her forehead in respectful greeting and climbed into the carriage. The coach rolled forward. Moist eyes were fixed on the gate. The lady's strict hold on her emotions at last broke. She collapsed on the bed and her body shook with sobs. A stream of tears flowed from her eyes.

The crying of the baby roused her. her heart began to beat loudly. Had she done the right thing, she wondered. Would she be able to shoulder this responsibility? The infant's cries gained strength. She went slowly and picked up the baby. For an instant, the features of a very dear one were reflected on the baby's face.

Should she write to Shahid abroad and tell him everything? It is all futile, meaningless, she thought, and a deep despair caught hold of her.

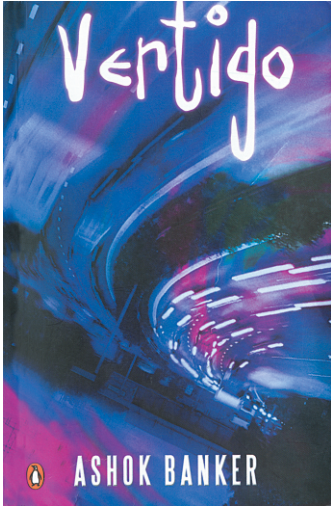
Zahra Rai started writing in the 1950s and has written many novels and short stories. S. Rai has widely translated from Hindi to English.

BookReview

Dizzying depths

S. MANZOORUL ISLAM

Vertigo by Ashok Banker, Penguin India New Delhi, 2005



reprint, 392 pp, Rs. 295

1. The setting of *Vertigo* is Bombay, or rather slices of it: the financial district, a few suburban areas, the Marine Drive, a couple of hotels, the two flats Jayesh or Jay Mehta, the protagonist, lives in. Bombay is not yet Mumbai, since the time is early 1980s, and the milieu the novel describes consists mostly of denizens of a Darwinian corporate underbelly where money and power and glitter rule. Ashok Banker has meticulously kept to his time frame, drawing generous references to the happenings in the Indian and global corporate worlds, politics and culture of the time to authenticate his narrative: Indira Gandhi, Lee Iacocca, *Dirty Harry* movies, Dan Aykroyd and James Belushi, *Grease 2*, *Gigi*, Bruce Springsteen's *Brilliant disguise*, Ayatullah Khomeini, Automatic Teller Machines, 386 liquid crystal display laptop selling for under Rs. 1 lakh . . . Say it again? Yes, ATMs and LCD laptops. But in Bombay circa 1982? Why not? ! However, but the reviewer, who was in Bombay for a week in 1983 doesn't remember seeing even one ATM in the crowded bank *para* of Bombay where he went to cash his US dollars, and had to wait endless hours while lethargic clerks conducted the

whole business absolutely manually, writing down bank note numbers ever so meticulously and counting Indian rupees over and over again. But then the reviewer may have missed the laptop clutching grey suited executives from the world of advertisement zapping past him in a frenzied race to be the number one rat in business.

The ATMs and laptops, whether real and authentic, (the burden of establishing the verisimilitude should be left to more assiduous researchers) are an important part of the elaborate discursive setup of *Vertigo*, which aims to capture every subtle shade of the fiercely competitive canvas of advertising and direct marketing. This is the world where the workday Jay belongs, and willy nilly, is drawn into its vortex. Ashok Banker draws this world as ruthless, cruel and fiercely challenging. It's a world where big fish routinely make a feast of small fish. Jay, a small fish, would have been swallowed whole by fish even slightly bigger than him, had he not been protected by a woman roughly his own age, but one who had bloodied her teeth and claws in corporate warfare early and knows the trick of survival. She also happens to be the woman who feels an emotion akin to love for Jay. The woman, Meera, is liberated in the late 1990s sense, and is guide to Jay while he tries desperately to pick up the fragments of his life, which include his non-fictional love life for, his fiancée, Tuli, a Gujarati girl who believes she does not exist outside a family relationship, is predictably cool on questions of carnality. Now, the rather sombre account of Jay's life should place him in the age range of late 20s, but he is only 19 or 20 when the story opens and is only 24 when it ends.

So why is he seen picking up the fragments of his life that early when, even for most corporate minnows on a salary of Rs. 2000 per month, life should just begin?

Answer: It's because Jay has to look after his mother, an abandoned wife, an incorrigible alcoholic, a temperamental and

pathetic woman. With a Halaku Khan for a father (who once left Jay a ten-rupee note when he had pleaded with fearful eyes for his help in looking after his mother) Jay has absolutely no other choice except to live with her, nurse her, sometimes feed her, wash her, suffer her neurotic outbursts, and earn a living good enough to see them through the month. Balancing the two lives, both equally traumatizing, Jay begins to break down. At the ripe old age of 22!

It is this elementally sad and tragic, gripping and unforgettable tale of Jay's balancing act that rather than the fast-paced narrative of Bombay's competitive, do-or-die corporate world produces the real vertigo. Ashok Banker appears unrivaled, except for the likes of Anita Desai (remember her *Clear Light of Day*?), the very best of the lot, really, in his sensitive description of fractured and tragic lives. A 20-year-old young man, alone and abandoned by an indifferent father, the burden of the love and patience he can muster, tries to salvage some sanity in his and his mother's lives. In this he is not helped by his mother, who rather makes his life more difficult. But the young man persists, driven by no particular passion, but burdened with the memory of a mother's desperate attempt to bring him up, put him through school and generally shelter him from the slings and arrows of fortune. Added to this is the constant neglect of his father and the annoyance he shows wherever mother's name comes up. Driven to desperation, and in search of a life away from mother that he so desperately deserves, Jay moves out to a flat in the suburb, urged on by Tuli who wants a clean break from the past. But before he makes the move, Jay muses on what it would mean to him, staying apart from his mother. What will she do then? And, more important, what will he do?

There can't be an answer to that, except saying that both would be more miserable, in their own, different ways.

2. *Vertigo's* plot line is uncomplicated, and lends itself to easy retelling. Jayesh Mehta,

20, and his sick and alcoholic mother are forced to live on their own, having been driven out by a successful businessman father, who then quickly remarries. Jay, fresh out of school has to find a job, and takes on the task of looking after his mother. His job at a DM company is not easy, given the dog-eat-dog work ethics prevailing there, and he struggles on, forever unhappy, forever feeling deprived. A distant relative, Meera, a woman of great personality and charms, turns up at the same company, occupying a higher post, and takes a fancy on Jay. She quickly becomes his surrogate mother, while expecting to be his lover, guiding him through the jungle of life with patience and poise. But Jay has a fiancée, Tuli, who is divided sharply between her loyalty to her parents and family, and her lukewarm liking of Jay whom she cannot imagine to be approved by her family for marriage. Yet marriage is what she desires and eventually gets . . . but not with Jay. What can Jay do? He can be more drunk, more miserable and more desperate. And to compound matters, Meera is away somewhere in Dubai, doing an overseas stint for the firm. Jay begins to flounder. He had left his mother, if you recall, and begun to live his own life. Only it proves to be a shadow of a life. He changes his job on better prospects, but cannot bring it to himself to go back to mother, or even visit her. He had fixed her up with a caregiver, and he forces himself to forget her. Indeed, the last time he had seen her, she had thrown a glass after him, which shattered and showered splinters all over. When he had closed the door behind him, it was the sound of glass breaking that chased him away.

After months of lunatic loneliness, irreconcilable but inescapable the mother dies.

Back at his mother's flat after the funeral he sits on the floor of his mother's bedroom and muses: so this is what it comes to finally? This is the price? [He had sold the flat to a neighbour at a good price.] And what is he supposed to do with the money . . . ? This woman has suddenly

thrust him up to the top of this paper mountain and here he stands now, alone, looking down at the city, at the puny people toiling mindlessly, at the hordes trudging homewards every evening . . . But wait. He will not be alone for long. Because up comes Meera, who is in town and knocks on the door. Jay doesn't open, but she says she'll wait. All night if I have to. He looks down at the latch and after an eternity debating who he really loved, and what this sleep-around bitch [meaning Meera] really is, he relents. Slowly, as if of its own volition, the latch begins to turn, to open.

Two stories, two lives. They finally merge at this point.

3. The Bombay story of *Vertigo* is about a ferocious, cannibalistic cult which considers money the sole god, and power and pleasures his two outstretched hands. This story is single minded and because of its commercial association, slightly global. It is also strangely Anglo-Indian, as the novel's early eighties ambience doesn't include any Indian or local cultural markers. More Hollywood than Bollywood. No local celebrity is mentioned: Lata, Mohammad Rafi, Gavaskar, Dev Anand -- none. In keeping with the upper-crust Bombayites' craze for a western life, the cultural markers are also imported. The mother-son story, on the other hand, with all its Indian connections and connotations, is a genuinely home-grown one and is the stuff that contributes to the novel's enduring appeal. It is vicious but simple, elemental but enduring. The story has an air of inevitability about it -- it just happens, it doesn't have to be willed into place. Banker knows the power of this archetypal, Indian tale, and weaves his other story around it. Jay's rejection of Bombay at the end is an indication of how the more local and timeless story has the power to pull us into its deep centre. And the force with which we are pulled leaves us with a strong feeling of vertigo.

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Coffee Break

MENKA SHIVDASANI

Last night, as the coffee turned cold, and the buzz in the restaurant too loud, she put the napkin over her head, covered herself with the shroud.

Inside, the stillness turned stagnant, the brew in her veins froze to stone. Outside, the traffic was buzzing, though the chill had entered her bone.

The smiling attendant saw nothing, as he called her name out loud, then he sliced off a bit of chocolate cake, wove his way past the crowd.

She sat on the tray, sweet and bitter, the icing stiel soft on the bone. He pierced the fork into the softness but stopped before hitting the stone.

She waited for the moment he would swallow her, then smashed into his jaw. The attendant stopped smiling a moment, then noticed the broken door.

How come, in that mindless crowd, no one had noticed before?

Menka Shivdasani is a noted Indian English poet. This poem was submitted to The Daily Star for publication.

Brown & Blue

ATIA HAZOOR

Alone I slip on your *kurta*  
Brown and blue, to prove  
I could finally wear you  
Without heartache  
Your skin on mine  
A frictionless glide  
A 100% cotton slide  
An asexual sheath  
To be molted carelessly  
Onto dirty wash heaps

To my dismay I feel  
An electric tingle  
In donning your scent  
Seeking solace  
In the warmth  
Of your empty lair.

Atia Hazoor lives in London.



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