

ALI IDRIS

It was dusty twilight at the end of a hot summer day. I was walking into Raja's homestead, which was full of shadowy fruit-trees. I saw a coiled human being resembling a 'G' sitting on the ground, leaning against the bamboo fence. In the indistinct light it was hard to see, and to find out who it was I drew near and asked 'Who's that?' She was mute. Her forehead was resting on her knees bundled together by both arms. Her face and eyes were hidden under the black hair. I raised my voice: 'Who are you?' She lifted her face. Zannat's cheeks were wet with tears.

While in Class Ten Raja and I one night had sneaked out to watch a *jatra* play. It commenced at 10 p.m and ended at dawn. I was allowed to study with Raja and even to stay over at night in his house. We relished the *jatra* so much that we couldn't control ourselves and slunk out on three alternate nights to enjoy the plays. Those three nights we miraculously escaped the watchful eyes of our parents but were caught on the fourth night by Zannat. Raja's twelve-year-old sister had peeped into our reading room that night at the time of our departure. Raja promised her a doll and I pledged her sweets so that she wouldn't tell on us. The allurements worked. We were saved. But after two days Zannat too wanted to go with us. She became adamant, and threatened to tell on us if we went again without her. This episode stopped us from stealing away any longer, which however, also proved to be a blessing in disguise, because examinations were knocking at our door and had we kept up the secret nightly trips we would have performed very poorly in them.

Raja's father led the prayers in mosques and performed rituals in our village and in neighbouring ones. My father was a well-off farmer. His hope was that I would be a physician, educated first in Dhaka and then in London. He got this idea from a relative who was a civil servant in the government posted in Dhaka. I always heard my father narrate this fond hope of his to every visitor who came to see him. I used to digest it silently. On the other hand although Raja was a good student, his father wanted him to be a preacher and teacher of Islamic subjects. While Raja



had no objection to the idea, Zannat did. She expressed animosity against her father's wish to groom Raja as an Islamic preacher as well as not allow her an education beyond Class Eight. Zannat's father had strictly ordered her and her younger sister Munnat to wear the veil whenever going out of the house. Munnat used to carry out the order faithfully but Zannat didn't. She used to set out from home wearing the veil but would take it off as soon as she reached the main road. One day Munnat was teased by a boy on the way to school. Zannat snatched his books away and threw them in a road-side ditch. Another time a class-mate of Munnat had pulled her by the hair during an altercation. Munnat did not protest and arrived home in tears. Zannat, however, avenged it by pulling that girl by her hair.

After Zannat caught us sneaking out, she started talking with me. She sought my help in her studies. I couldn't refuse her, and astonished, soon saw that she was a sharper student than me in some subjects. One day after I told her about my father's aspiration that I should be a doctor, she became excited and said that she would also study medicine and become a doctor. Both Raja and I laughed at her remark. At this she became furious and threw all her books at our faces and went away.

When the examination results came out we found that I had topped the list, Raja stood third in the Board, and amazingly, Zannat secured the top place in the Junior Scholarship examinations in the entire country. Despite this marvelous performance her father abruptly ordered Zannat to cease further studies. A marriage broker then came calling with a proposal for her wedding. The groom was a teacher in a *Madrasa* who earned as much as her father did. 'Not a bad sum, enough for leading a humble, pious conjugal life' was the contented comment of Zannat's father. Though I was stunned at the news, I couldn't help her in any way except by telling my father about it. He too expressed annoyance at this action on the part of Zannat's father. But Raja was unmoved by his sister's plight. It was only Zannat who couldn't accept her father's decision, and had been shedding tears in solitude when I came upon her that evening. 'In the eyes of Islam children must obey their parents or else shall burn in hell. A girl's master is her

father until her marriage, and then the husband after marriage' was what her father used to counsel.

Zannat didn't appear consecutively for ten nights in our study session which bothered me. I kept asking Raja about her. At last he revealed that Zannat had been beaten by her father because she had gone to meet with her school teachers without his permission. Then the next day she disappeared. The matter had been hidden from their neighbours lest the girl should be black-listed in society. In a rural community boys may abscond, but once girls are known to have done the same, their reputations are compromised forever. Hence Zannat's family had suppressed the matter from everybody.

After a three-day search Zannat was traced in one of her class-mate's house in a distant village. She had gone there after a long twelve-hour bus ride. As soon as she was brought back home two of her teachers urged Zannat's father to continue with her education. 'Mr. Mustafa, you are very lucky to have such a meritorious girl. She has secured scholarship which will enable her to meet all expenses, even to save a portion for the family. Won't it be sheer injustice to deprive her of the privilege?' Both the counseling by teachers and protest by Zannat eventually worked, for Mr. Mustafa allowed her to continue with her studies in high school.

The next year Raja and I had completed the first year classes in the college. Both of us topped the list in our respective classes. The month of December is the harvesting season of paddy. Hired workers carried home bundles of paddy plants and arranged them in tall heaps all over our yard. The paddy needed to be separated from the plants by incessantly walking cattle on it. It was usually done at night by all the whole family. The activities are chasing cattle, constantly shuffling the plants, then finally separating and collecting the grains from the straw. A spontaneous excitement used to prevail and I used to enjoy the task. So much so that I wouldn't feel weary even at midnight and my mother would force me to go to bed. This resulted in my failure to visit Raja's house for three nights in a row. On the fourth night Zannat came to our house to convey her parents' worries about my absence. Then, though she was supposed to return home, she suddenly she began assisting us in grain-collection. She was very good at it. It amazed all of us. At last my mother had to force her to return home lest her parents should worry. On her way out Zannat hissed at me, 'I need your coaching, please resume.'

The match-maker who had come up with the marriage proposal was persistent and kept on trying to persuade Mr. Mustafa to accede to the marriage. He would narrate the virtues, fame and wealth of the prospective grooms. He would recite verses from the Holy *Quran* and *Hadith* about parents' responsibility of getting daughters wedded at a marriageable age. He assured Mr. Mustafa that the groom wouldn't demand any dowry. All these added fuel to burning fire. Zannat's father was virtually convinced. So he resolved again to stop her education at secondary school level. Raja and I were not aware of this ill-fated decision till the results of her examination were out. This time she didn't weep, she didn't go to see the teachers nor did she

Chacha's Journeys

MS. SAMIHA ZAMAN

It breaks my heart every time when I see the face of a person who has become a refugee, specially that of a child; for it becomes a faceless face. Can you imagine, to be evicted from your own home, which is the most secure place for any individual? Just think about it; one fine morning with a stroke of a pen you become rootless, homeless, without an identity. We see such faces on television when they flash images of Rawanda, Afghanistan, Palestine or Iraq.

Where should I begin my story as told to me by my Chacha before his last trip abroad to see his sons and daughters in Dubai, Sweden and USA? It is the real life story of a man who, over nearly sixty years, had to change his nationality three times, through no fault of his.

Chacha's recollections begin at Shahranpur, a small town in Uttar Pradesh, which was the ancestral home of his grandparents. In early 1900 they moved to Darbhanga in Bihar and finally settled down in Calcutta by 1905 for better education of their children. Calcutta was then the capital of India, and the second largest city in the empire after London.

Chacha was born in 1922 at 14 Waliullah Lane, Calcutta where the family had taken roots. Chacha's mother (my dadi) was widowed at the age of thirty in 1936 when Chacha was only 14; with four children, two boys and two girls of whom the eldest was my Chacha! His uncle Abu Sayeed Ayub became the guardian of his brother's family, and with rare foresight changed Chacha's vernacular education from Urdu to Bangla since he thought Bangla would be more useful for him. Abu Sayed Ayub, himself an MA in Persian and Urdu, and subsequently in Bangla literature with a doctorate in Philosophy, was an authority on Rabindranath Tagore. He taught at Melbourne University, Australia and afterwards in Shantinikaten in West Bengal. He died in Calcutta well after 1971 and was a recognized intellectual in West Bengal society.

In 1942, during World War II, Chacha sat for preliminary examination for army officers in Fort William, Calcutta. He wished to join the army and see the world. He was the eldest child of the family, and thought it to be the best option for him at that time. He passed the examination and the medical test that followed, and was called for final ISSB interview in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Bidding everyone goodbye, Chacha confidently

That is how my future Chachi

first communicated with my grandmother! Dadi became very worried, and wanted to go, but was dissuaded by other family members from traveling to an area so remote and often raided by tribal outlaws. By this time Chacha was also gradually recovering and had also become very close to my future Chachi. Both of them applied for voluntary discharge, which was accepted. During their period of notice, Chachi was posted to Agra and Chacha to Dehra Dun. On 15th November 1945 my Chacha and Chachi were married in Dehra Dun at the District Commissioner's Office, who afterwards said, 'Young man, you cannot leave the office like that. I must offer you tea or coffee and cakes to celebrate the occasion.' The newlyweds accepted the offer with thanks. From there they went to Mussourie and then Agra for their honeymoon. Thus began Chacha's next journey of married life.

On 12th June 1946, after being released from the Army, Chacha and Chachi returned to Calcutta. By then a lot of changes had taken place, which Chacha had not directly witnessed, having lived in Army cantonments since 1943. First and foremost was the burning communal tension, of which Calcutta was the focal point. The drums of Partition were also booming backstage, and the cry for Pakistan echoing louder day by day. Against such a backdrop, with the help of his maternal uncle Late Syed Hashain Ali (then Asst. Secretary of Civil Supplies in Writers Building, Calcutta) he met Col. MacDougal (Rtd.) the Controller of Civil Supplies and got a job as Officer-in-Charge, Civil Supply Depot. Chacha felt at that time that moving from Calcutta and leaving his paternal home would be difficult for him. However he opted for Pakistan and on 2nd August 1947 came to Dhaka with an advance party to set up the Civil Supplies Department in the then East Pakistan.

Towards the end of 1947 he was posted to Chittagong as Assistant Director, Movement & Storage, where he was joined by dadi, along with my father and my youngest aunt from Calcutta. My married elder aunt had gone with her family to Barisal after the partition of India. My Dadi initially had been determined about staying back in Calcutta, but subsequently moved to Pakistan after the communal riots started in September 1947. She died in December 1948 and is buried in Chittagong.

When the Civil Supplies Department was abolished, Chacha was sent to Savar

Ms. Samiha Zaman is head of Sea Breeze Intl. School, Dhaka.

Raindrops

TAHSIN HYDER

There I was standing alone, in the street, there I was standing outside the city markets. The clouds looked so united that the sun was afraid of them and hid itself under the noisy clouds. maybe because it was losing its power.

Soon one by one raindrops started to fell, soon second after second the world started to change. Soon the streets became wet from dry, and soon the streets changed from white and black.

There they were, two very young brother and sister, sitting in a car, wondering, from where the raindrops came, there they were, with their smiling faces, wondering why, it looks so beautiful!

It was the city, where nature came today, it was the same city, where noise came out from every corner everyday. Oh God, thank you so much for giving us the gift of a rainy day.

There I was standing alone, wondering how come this part of the world became so beautiful. There I was standing with the wind, wondering how long the rain will stay. I was good, not feeling bad, I was there, watching raindrops falling on the land, to play.

Tahsin Hyder is in Class VIII, Maple Leaf International School, Dhaka.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Date: Sat, 30 Jul 2005
From: Farida Shaikh
Subject: fifteenth anniversary2006
To: starliterature@thedailystar.net

Your announcement on publishing an anthology of fiction,poetry and related articles /pieces by Bangladesh writers and authors is encouraging. You have also invited the readers of your esteemed newspaper for their contribution.My suggestion is for publication of an anthology of short stories, poems, writing on travel, book review and others which appear every Saturday on Star Literature Page.

'The Other Americans' by Manosh Chowdhury was an enjoyable piece of reading on anthropology. I have been collecting the Literature page. I am sure many others do the same so please publish an anthology on Saturday

Literature Page for 15th anniversary

Farida Shaikh. on e-mail New D.O.H.S Dhaka1206

Editor's Reply: Actually, as can be seen in our modified announcement on this page, the anthology will consist of a mix of some of the best from the literature page (including book reviews and travel pieces), plus new contributions. In this way we hope to have not only the best of both worlds, but also to encourage writing in English.

But thank you for your kind words, and we will keep your suggestion in mind for the future.

"Tell Me"

SHAILLA HOQUE BARI

To the acid burn victims, I ask, how can you be so strong? Where do you get the strength? I am a woman like you. I am Bengali like you. Yet, when something so trivial goes wrong, I feel like I can't go on. I think I am suffering.

I am not suffering at all! How can I? We are women. We are Bengali. But you, you, the acid burn victims, you are strong! You go on with your lives, that have been shattered. As your faces have been shattered! Stolen dreams. You go on, with strength and dignity. You are strong. If I have one-tenth the strength you have, well then... Just think what I could do.

Shailla Hoque Bari lives in UK.

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Daily Star literature page, on the occasion of the paper's fifteenth anniversary (in 2006), will publish an anthology of fiction, poetry, and related articles consisting of the best of what has been published in the page plus entirely new pieces. Bangladeshi writers/authors/poets/translators plus our readers are invited to send in their contributions for consideration. Short stories/articles should be limited to 2000-2500 words, though the stricture can be relaxed in the case of outstanding efforts. Translators should send in the original Bangla if they are to be considered. Submissions should be sent electronically to starliterature@thedailystar.net or by snail mail to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka-1215. All submissions must be clearly marked 'For Anthology' (in case of electronic submission on the subject line). Only Bangladeshis need submit. We specially welcome submissions from outside Dhaka, as well as humorous pieces dealing with the lighter side of life. The last date of submission is October 15, 2005.

---The Literary Editor