

## SHORT STORY

# One Two Three

ABEER HOQUE

\*-\*-\* Cool dark air, 63°F \*-\*-\*  
green white green  
an old Nigerian dream

"Six, ron!" Mishook yells from our veranda. He and my little sister have waited impatiently for me to walk back from Secondary School. They are in the morning session of the Primary School and were done hours before me. I'm even later today because of French class.

"I'm tayad, Mishook! Mr. Ijere punished us again," I call to him. "Wot did you do dis time?" "Notting. I sweah."

We never do anything really to rouse Mr. Ijere's ire. It's more a question of how long it will take before he loses his temper and it hadn't taken that long today. Mrs. Okonkwo hadn't even finished her lesson on the human skeleton when she noticed something odd. Stopping chalking labels on various bones, she turned and saw every worn wooden desk with a French book neatly placed on the right corner.

"It iz not yet twelve thahty, bot science class iz ovah?" she asked.

Onyeabo accidentally let the lid of the desk slam shut. "Mistah Ijere's class iz next, Madam," he said nervously.

She sighed. "Oh, I see. Mistah Ijere." She put down the chalk, clapped the white dust off her hands, and ended her lesson. After she walked out, a silence slowly moved over the classroom.

The bell ringer, Emeka, was in Form Three, one year above us. At 12:30, I saw his thin form emerge from the opposite side of the school courtyard. He started ringing the bell evenly.

Mr. Ijere entered our room noisily. At once, the class monitor, Patrick, rapped on his desk three times. We rose in unison and chanted, "Good aftanoon, Mistah Ijere!"

He laughed jovially and said, "Bonjour, mes élèves!" He paused to put his books down on the teacher's desk and without further ado commanded the

student at the front of the first row:

"From yestaday, wot iz de French word fo lazy?" Judging from the look on Kelechi's face, Mr. Ijere had probably forgotten to teach her the French word for lazy. He told Kelechi to kneel by her desk and moved to the student behind her. Chuma didn't know the word either and knelt quickly unbidden.

I racked my brains and couldn't come up with the word. But there were thirty three students before me. Someone had to know this word before he got to me! None of us was worried about the kneeling. That was only the scarlet letter. The real punishment came afterwards, when Mr. Ijere had had a few minutes to think about what he would like to do this time.

He started on the fourth row, and still no one had come up with the word. More than half of Form 2B was kneeling. I had the sense that the sun's position changing in the sky, and the light obligingly tilting, pouring into the concrete cool room.

And then a miracle: Obaladike, who was three desks in front of me, said the word. I was saved! An audible wave of relief swept over the part of class still sitting comfortably. Mr. Ijere had turned away from us, contemplating his punishment for the students still kneeling. Hearing the murmur, he turned swiftly. This time, the silence descended as fast as the crack of his stick on Onyeabo's desk. He shouted, "Get out! All of you!"

We jolted and tilted the wooden desks and chairs as we struggled to get out of the room. "Paresseux. Paresseux," he muttered, standing by the door and wielding his thin whip without mercy, "Mes élèves sont paresseux..."

I managed to escape with only a few weals on my legs. Patrick was not so lucky. I noticed with private satisfaction, prone to the jealous admiration and animosity everyone helplessly accorded our monitor. We stood outside,



surreptitiously nursing welts and scratches. Mr. Ijere said authoritatively, "Go and dig a big garbage ditch, six feet by six feet by six feet, behind the principal's office."

We all looked at each other. Patrick spoke up, "Bot sah, we dog dat ditch last week." Mr. Ijere was not pleased. He paused and then said, "You know de tall grass in the field by de carpentah's shed. I want it no moh than 2 inches high. And no one can go home until it iz done! Now go!"

The problem was that we had no tools. The carpenter's shed was locked. None of us had machetes or any cutting implements. Chinyere borrowed an old pen knife from a sympathetic upperclassman. Uzuomaka scavenged a broken machete without a handle from the primary school next door.

The rest of us made do with pulling out or tearing the grass with our hands. It took us a long time.

I tell this story to Mishook while getting a drink of water from the filter in the kitchen. He is still wearing his uniform, a blue and white checkered shirt no longer as crisp as it must have been this morning. Alia has changed into a sleeveless yellow sundress my mother sewed last weekend.

Mishook shrugs his shoulders. "At least, theya weya all 50 of you. If it was just half de class, it would haf taken you twice as long, neh? Let's go!" He jumps down the dark red steps outside our front door.

"Faster!"  
"One!"  
"Two!"  
"Three!"  
We're running as fast as we

can. Mishook is "One," I'm "Two," and Alia is "Three." Our game is to keep moving, in order. "One" in front, "Two" second, and "Three" third. And we shout our titles every so often. There's no other goal. We have to keep running until we can't run any more. We start in the huge cement gutter outside our house. Its bottom is caked with mud and leaves and narrows in the distance, disappearing into the bush. The path has smooth and deep rivulets gouged into it. They look as if they have been there for years, but they were probably just carved out by the last rainy season. I notice a smoke-cloud hanging to the right, moving infinitesimally away from the bush. There's something burning ahead.

"Mishook!" I shout. "Stop!" An Ibo family is probably

setting fire to a section of the fields. After the fire dies out, it will be easy to pace through the burned grass and pick out the roasted lizards and grasshoppers. And the space will have been cleared for planting.

"We can come back this way and see if we can find something to eat," Mishook grins. He has run back to us. His straight black hair is tousled, catching the late afternoon sunlight in loose waves.

"Ugh!" Alia and I exclaim simultaneously. Now I am "One," Mishook is "Two," and Alia is "Three." We race down a smaller path, away from the fire, holding back the prickly weeds, jumping over stumps and roots. Red dust hovers in the still air, dulling our skin and clothes. So much for trying to keep my uniform clean.

We emerge into the north side of a small clearing with three mud huts in the centre. This is farther than we've ever ventured before. Usually we play in the wild grass and weeds, away from the trees, closer to home.

A man wearing a faded multicoloured *agbada* is sitting on a small woven seat outside the largest hut. The ground in the clearing has been recently swept, the broom marks still sharp. There are two small metal bowls on the ground. We have interrupted dinner. The man stops eating and looks up at us. He will know instantly that we are foreign, our brown skin pale against his, our hair weak in the wind.

He stands up silently, and I notice a machete at his feet. Is he the chief of a small village? How is there even a village here if the University owns all the land in the town? Are we outside the town borders? The stories I have heard about juju men, the witch doctors, and their spells crystallize in my head. I turn and run back towards the fading light.

The next few calls are whispered, "One..."  
"Shhhh..."  
"Two..."  
"Threeee..."  
The sun is about to set and the crickets are deafening. We

have paused for a moment, the path uncertain in the encroaching darkness. There are multiple courses to choose from, and though it seems infinite when we're inside, it's usually not difficult to find the way back. But our scare with the machete man has distracted us.

Alia is tired and crouches on the trail. Her dress flares out around her, a puddle of old gold in the looming shadows. Within seconds, an explosion of furious activity commences beneath her dress. She has unfortunately settled above a soldier anthill.

Soldier ants are bigger than regular ants. They are warriors and their bites are swift and extremely painful. Alia screams and flails while Mishook pulls her off the path into the grass, hoping to lose the gleaming black trail streaming out of the anthill. Now, I have to find our way home fast.

We start running again, Alia faltering behind me, and Mishook bringing up the rear. I keep the sun at my back and follow the tips of the shadows. Zig-zagging, we finally emerge into the gorge. Alia's ankles and legs are already badly swollen, and she scrambles out, still crying, and runs into the house. Mishook gets on his bike and rides away.

I climb out more slowly, kick off my sandals, and stand in my favourite part of our compound, the southwest corner, barren of flowers or trees. I'm not worried about Alia. It's true I've never had so many soldier ant bites at once before, but I don't think you can die from them. And both my parents must be home from teaching by now.

The horizon is as wide as I can see, and the sky violent with the efforts of the sun. Every colour imaginable fills my eyes. The ground is still hot from the afternoon and I burrow my feet under the rough red sand to escape the heat. Next year, our family will be leaving Nigeria after more than a decade, the only place I've ever known. We don't know where we'll end up, maybe Bangladesh where our extended family lives, or

America, or perhaps somewhere even more remote. But wherever my father decides to accept a teaching position won't be this close to the sky. So I have to memorise this place, this time.

The sand is almost too hot to bear now, and the mosquitos are starting to attack. I slap at my arms and legs and keep watching. Don't forget, I tell myself. Don't forget this vision.

My mother comes out of the house and calls to me, "Where did you go that your sister was bitten like that?" "Nowheyah, Amma, just inside de boosh. She did not look fo wheyah she woz sitting..." I protest, forgetting to speak properly in front of her. The pidgin dialect we sometimes use at school belies our Queen's English command of the language, but my parents cannot stand it. They don't understand that it's just another one of our attempts to blend in with the Nigerians.

She straightens one of the leaves of our new orange rose graft. The thorns on the stem are sparse but long and sharp, curved and tapered like claws. I press my finger on the tip of one. It gives, just a little.

"Six!" she hisses suddenly at me. I see a fuzzy green caterpillar sitting heavily on the rose plant, inches from the precious bud. I know why she is telling me instead of taking care of it herself. She has an absurd fear of caterpillars, though no other insect gives her pause. This one is probably poisonous too, as pretty as it is. I pull a broomstick out of the broom on the veranda and flick the caterpillar off with it, careful not to injure the rose stem. The caterpillar lands on the ground and curls up. My mother watches from behind the netted door as I poke the center of its brightly striped body gently with the stick. It half wraps around the tip, and I carry it back into the bush.

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## Book Review The Sufi Spy

YASMIN HAIDER-SMITH

Growing up in London in the sixties, I remember my English uncle and his friends, all of whom had served in the British Indian Army in various capacities, occasionally toasting the real-life protagonist of this novel, Noor-un-nisa Inayat Khan. Legends had grown up around the striking beauty, who had been shot in the line of duty as a British Special Operations Executive (SOE) agent in German-occupied France during the Second World War. The first, and still the definitive, biography of Noor was published in 1952 (*Madeleine*, by the Theosophist Jean Overton Fuller).

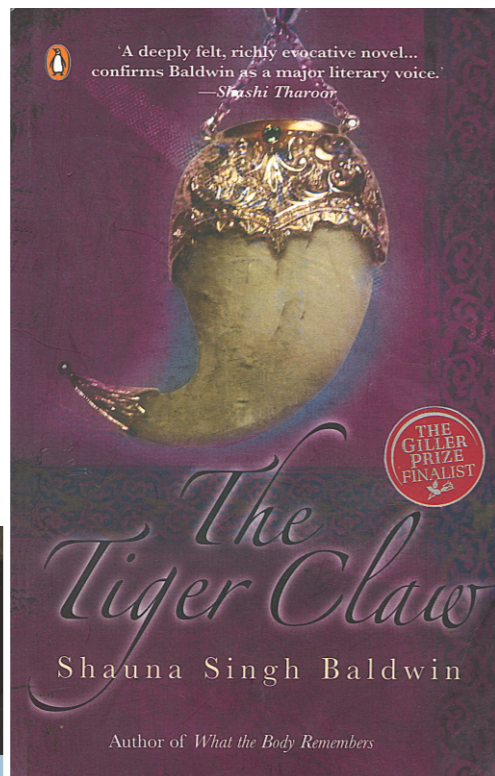
It certainly helps to know Noor's life story in reading Singh's novel. Noor Inayat Khan was a great-great-granddaughter of Tipu Sultan of Mysore. Her mother was an American while her father, Inayat Khan, was a Sufi mystic who went to Moscow to teach Sufism to the Czar's court. Noor was born in Russia in 1914, but the family left shortly afterwards for London. From there Inayat Khan again shifted his family to Paris, where he also preached Sufism's message of tolerance and love for humanity. He died when Noor was 13, and subsequently she studied modern languages, graduated from Sorbonne and began writing for various magazines. Noor also wrote children's fairy tales for radio broadcasting. When war broke out, she escaped with her family to London. Her brother joined the Royal Air Force, and Noor was recruited (as was my uncle, though for entirely different purposes) by the SOE, and subsequently trained as a wireless operator. Given the code-name 'Madeleine' (the title of the last children's story written by her) Noor was flown to German-occupied France in June 1943. In Paris, constantly shifting addresses, with her agent network under constant pursuit by the Gestapo, she transmitted radio messages on German troop movements, etc., till her capture in October 1943. On September 11, 1944, along with three other captured British female agents, Noor was taken

*The Tiger Claw* by Shauna Singh Baldwin; Delhi: Penguin Books India; 2005; pp. 570; Rs. 450.



from prison to the Dachau concentration camp. Next morning in the dawn darkness they were walked up a hill, told to kneel down, and shot from behind by an SS officer. According to legend, Noor died shouting 'Liberty.' She was posthumously awarded the George Cross and the Croix de Guerre for heroism.

This is the real-life framework on which the American-born Indian author, Shauna Singh Baldwin, has hung her fictional narrative. The book covers the years 1943-45 in Noor's life, with a short epilogue set in 1995. In between is interleaved, through other voices, flashbacks and letters, the story of Noor's life. The dominant themes in the book, as stated by the author in recent interviews, are an exploration of what it meant to be a 'culturally and racially hybrid woman' during wartime, as well as the inner turmoil that Noor must have felt as a Muslim Indian woman (reared, on top of everything else, in the Sufi tradition!) risking her life for a British Raj that was suppressing the freedom movement in India. The last led to difficulties for the author in finding publishers in



especially that of German-occupied France: 'A pair of cocky young men with slicked-back long hair, long coats and drainpipe trousers passed carrying a bundle: a cat wrapped in a small straitjacket. The poor animal would soon be passing for rabbit in black market bistro tureens. "Lapin roti au four...au poivre...au fenouil." Where Singh tends to come up short is in the transitions between the characters' inner lives and their outward behaviour, which are not always seamless. The novel lurches at crucial points, as when Kabir, her bombardier brother, searching for Noor among the millions of DPs (Displaced Persons) in the immediate aftermath of the war, moves from a reflection on Churchill's 'rice denial policy' (it led to the deaths by starvation of three million Indians), to an almost surreal conversation with a black G.I. about 'coloured' soldiers in the Allied army. Characters tend to think of Quranic verses, or say In'shallah, at odd moments. The love between the Muslim Noor and Jewish Armand is rendered at times in stilted terms, which is at odds with the fluency achieved elsewhere.

But despite these drawbacks, overall, the novel is a gripping, well-paced, well-structured tale and knowing how the plot ends does not at all detract from the reading.

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UK and the USA, where apparently empire-bashing, even the comparatively mild one in the book, is not 'in' after 9/11. In the book, Noor falls in love with a Jewish man in Paris, and which leads to family tensions, giving the author the opportunity to demonstrate how the real world can stretch Sufi beliefs of tolerance and inclusion very thin indeed!

The author has done her homework very thoroughly. It shows especially in her mastery of European wartime detail,

### 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 this 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

## Weltenschaung

'...the author's style is directly bound up with a conception of the world; the sentence and paragraph structure, the use and position of the substantive, the verb, etc., the arrangement of the paragraphs, and the qualities of the narrative--to refer to only a few specific points--all express hidden presuppositions...'

---Jean-Paul Sartre, The Problem of Method

- Quite true, Maitre, though you've forgotten to mention
- punctuation ---- that too matters just as much:
- an author's favourite mark tells you something crucial about her Weltanschaung
- especially in this new e-mail-mad millennium... Mine, I can tell you
- at once, is neither comma, colon (full or semi), full stop, dash,
- exclamation or interrogation mark, but the hybrid
- interrobang, which needs no text & can stand
- in mocking autonomy, a complete critique of the passing show.



Kaiser-Huq teaches English at Dhaka University.

## Mother Tongue and Official Tongue

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

Mother tongue: 'Sweet chick come hither.'

Official tongue: *Prima facie* no reaction was immediately known.

Mother tongue: The tune you sing under your breath Plucking feathers of a plump freshly-killed goose.

Official tongue: An investigation is on.

Nuzhat A. Mannan teaches English at Dhaka University.

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