

SHORT STORY

The Other Man

SAYEEMA TORI HASAN-SADEGHI

Baby Monkey was my most favorite stuffed animal, a palm-sized beige fur ball with a pacifier in his mouth. He was picked up by a scared 7-year old girl from the gift shop at Cromwell Hospital. Ahh...Cromwell Hospital. The chilled air of this place could follow a little girl, chasing her through its hollow-sounding halls, forming her most terrifying nightmares. Outside, the overcast city of London waited with its outstretched arms. The gong of the clock tower that loomed over the hospital struck a pounding heart with even more dread. It was here that I waited huddled with my mother, waiting for Papa to recover. It was also here that the other man entered my mother's life, and consequently mine.

The day we first met Shaheen was not remarkable on its own. After having been there over a week, it became almost routine. Every morning we would take the subway from the North End of London into town, passing through many stations. Edgeware. Burnt Oak. Colindale. Brent Cross. Golders Green. Hampstead. Belsize Park. Mornington Crescent. Lecester Square. King's Cross. A short walk to switch lines at King's Cross. Then to Kensington.

"I love those names," my Mom would say. Brent Cross was my favorite. You could take a bus from there that dropped you off at Toys R Us. But that was before I got a taste of the grand toy store of Hamleys downtown.

Cromwell Hospital, though, sapped out all pleasant thoughts from my mind. I looked forward to spending the couple of hours with Papa before they wheeled him away to get EKGs, blood tests, EKGs and more EKGs. EKG was easy enough to say for

me. But I was also afraid to see him every morning. I could not look at his face and see the loving yet sunken eyes. A knot would form in my throat as the nurse would come in to take my Papa away. And then, the clock tower struck the hour again. Gong. Gong. Gong.

What if I never saw him again?

So that morning, once again I settled with a heavy heart next to my Mom in the waiting lounge. My Mom usually packed her sweater-knitting rolls. I flipped through my ladybird books. More often than not, my eyes were transfixed on her long, dexterous fingers weaving in and out as she created the perfect puppy on the sweater. My eyes flitted back to my book. Then over the edge of my book, I caught a pair of piercing dark eyes looking at me. It was a thin, lean man in a cream half sleeve shirt with a hawk-like face. He had a sallow olive-skin tone and dark wispy hair swept backwards. Like the rest of the hospital, he made me shiver. My eyes would not move from him and neither would his. But it was not an uncomfortable eye-lock that you might be imagining. He was most intently looking at my mother. I did not know how I could possibly get any closer to my mother without sitting on her lap. I started fidgeting, holding my book up to cover my eyes. I desperately wished for something to break the spell of this man's evil stare. And then, my mother stood up and stretched. At 5 ft 6, in a simple sari draped around her slender body, she was a breath of fresh air in that stagnant hospital atmosphere. I have always been proud of how beautiful she was. But at that moment I dearly wished she was not pretty at all. I wished she did not stand out so. But she did and caught his eye. He stared at her shamelessly. By then, I had stopped fidgeting and mine were



artwork by amna

fixed on him again. He must have noticed for he turned his beady eyes on me.

"Sweetheart, here you go. We wouldn't want to lose him now, would we?"

In my agitation, poor Baby Monkey had fallen unnoticed from my lap. I squirmed as the devil who spoke handed Baby Monkey back to me.

"Thank you! Say thank you! Wasn't that nice of this gentleman?"

My mom was standing next to me, and the man had crept up on my other side when he came to rescue Baby Monkey. So now I was wedged between the two.

"She's really shy at first, but once she gets going she's quite talkative," continued my Mom.

His face lit up. "Oh no, M'am! It is quite alright, she is so adorable! I love children."

"Sure. Sure. Sigh. The angel

on his left shoulder surely noted that lie. He will surely go to hell.

As I was calling upon this man's personal angel on duty he extended his wiry hand to my mother:

"I am Shaheen. Pleasure to meet you."

"Oh, nice to meet you, Mr. Shaheen. This is my daughter."

"How cute is she now!" The wiry fingers patted the curls in my ponytail.

"Mmm...my poor baby, it's been so hard for her. For all of us...my husband has been here for over a week and I can't wait to take him back home."

At the sound of my dad's name, color had started coming back to my expressionless face and for the first time since we came across this other man, I felt warm. Instinctively I looked to see how this affected Shaheen.

His nostrils had flared for a quick

second; he must have been sucking in his breath. After a long pause, he resumed patting my curls: "Oh I am sure...but have patience, all will be well."

The truth is, he became a part of my daily nightmares. The days were long. Shaheen was in every one of them, threatening to come between my vulnerable mother and helpless father. Waiting, waiting like a hawk, for the smallest lapse on my part to guard my lovely mother. But the sweetheart of a little girl proved to be a tough cookie. She latched on the object of his affections like a moth on a terrace lamp. He followed my mom begging her to let him buy us lunch as we walked towards the hospital café. I was always there by her side, literally hopping from one side of her to another in case Shaheen turned up at her unguarded side. In my mind, I brandished a sword and stabbed him with daggers from my eyes. He wooed her with words.

"But what brings you here, Mr. Shaheen?" My mom asks politely.

"Ah...I came here to take care of my dear friend. It is a long way off from home, he did not have the strength to make the journey alone. And we in Baghdad never let a friend down. And what have I to lose anyway?"

"Your family lives in Baghdad with you?"

"I have no family, Mrs. Hasan. I am a simple schoolteacher. The kids are my family. And I give myself, my time and love to my friends when they need it, like Hafiz does now."

"A friend like that is hard to find these days. I'm sure it means so much to him."

"Yes, it does. What else can we do, Mrs. Hasan? Look at you...here day and night with your dear child hoping and praying for your husband. That's what gives him the strength to

believe that he will get well. That's all you can do, really...isn't it?"

My mom shrugged and a cloud passed her eyes for a brief second. Maybe she needed to convince herself all over again that coming to Cromwell had been a wise choice. Shaheen was not too convinced. He expressed his disappointment in how his friend was only receiving treatment, not care. They were only after money, he said. He continued to spout on the topic of our loved ones lying helpless and us desperately trying to save them. He started talking about my father. I could not take it anymore.

"But my Papa's fine!" I hissed at him like a cornered snake, tears rolling down my cheeks.

And that wasn't even the first or last time that Shaheen had made me cry. I cried and hiccupped "I hate him" the whole way back on the train one day. Shaheen seemed to have got bolder. That particular day, my Mom had caught a quick nap on the couch in the waiting area and when she woke up, rubbing her eyes sleepily, she asked me to gather up my stuff. There came Shaheen acting surprised to run into us again for the third time that day and dared to make the most outrageous proposition!

"Like I wasn't even there! He asked my mom what if we spent the night at his place, which is much closer than where we lived. I was laying curled up near his feet. Now I crawled up to my father and gently laid my head near his chest. I forgot all about my nightmare. Shaheen exited shortly. It was just my Papa, Mom and I. Again.

My Mom told me later that day what I had missed. My Mom had turned frantic when Papa complained of feeling faint in the room. She ran out to find his nurse without luck. It was Shaheen who had done the running around demanding that someone attend to my father

right away. His blood pressure

had dropped considerably.

Human service can only be

bought for a price now, as he would say.

I don't remember much of Shaheen after that day. Papa was discharged in the next couple of days and we were all going home. Papa recovered fully, our family was reunited. And, alas, there was no place to go to like home. I never said a formal farewell to Shaheen. I saw him last in one of Cromwell's elevators. I ran out shrugging off his hand from my arm. As I looked back, I saw his face disappear behind the closing doors. His arm was stretched out, he called out my name. But that too drowned like a voice in a forgotten dream.

It took me 25 more years to wake up from this nightmare of the other man. 25 years of learning to feel secure that nothing could come between my Mom and Papa—not even death. And 25 years later, I entered an elevator at a shopping mall with my four-year-old. It was here that I made my daughter say hello to a complete stranger. A lean, wiry man was smiling at her with warm eyes. I turned to my daughter who was peeping from behind me, "Say hello, please."

Sayemra Tori Hasan-Sadeghi is a Bangladeshi writer who has published two collections of short stories, *Ava* and *The Stage Is Yours*.



Letter from LONDON

On Brick Lane and Brick Lane

DAVID SANDERSON

ondon's East End has always given me an uneasy feeling. Whether it's driving past the plaque commemorating the vanquishing of Oswald Mosley's fascist Blackshirts in the 1930s, or strolling through its gourmet burger quarter past the City workers seeking some edginess, my blood chills a little. Drenched in historical incident the area's past, with all the elements of a suspense-sodden novel, seeps out of the tenement pores enveloping passers-by like the fog of Dickens' London. The bubbling atmosphere of Brick Lane should be loved, I think, Tower Hamlets' social dynamics should be appreciated. Yet there's something indefinitely sad about the East End, like eating cucumber sandwiches in winter.

I

was reminded of my reservations while attending a recent literary discussion entitled 'Old East End, New East End' which centred on the impact of immigration, and featured some of the area's most eloquent champions.

Bordered by the City of London, Europe's financial behemoth, the East End - which includes the administrative districts of Tower Hamlets and Hackney - revolves around Brick Lane and the Port where for centuries successive waves of immigrants have landed.

At the discussion Sanchita Islam, a young writer and artist, painted vivid prose pictures of Brick Lane, a street laden with curry restaurants and fashionable drinking bars with the "fluttering of a flute, a tink tinkle, followed by a high-pitched voice and a table beat floating from a shop."

But her anthology of Bangladeshi diasporic writing, 'From Briarwood to Barishal to Brick Lane' and other works also capture some of the area's misery. She writes about Bangladeshi women trapped in dingy flats at the mercy of violent, repressive husbands, and the youth gangs spitting anger at authority and tradition, as well as the encroachment by London's moneyed classes keen to capture the 'experience': "The looming blocks, the sloping rooftops, the wonky windows and the crumble. Draw it all before the scrap heap is cleared away and the old lady kicked out of her hut. Draw it all

before the dot coms and the men in suits clean up," she writes in 'Onion.'

Streams of immigrant dreamers have made their mark and left their ghosts in Brick Lane: Bengali lascars jumping ship in the early 1800s, Huguenot refugees escaping persecution in France, eastern European Jews fleeing the pogroms, Asians and Caribbeans invited in to solve the country's post-war labour shortage, and now Somalians running from conflict.

Sukhdev Sandhu, who read from his monumental 'London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City' at the discussion, describes it as a "holding area, a temporary interzone for immigrants who have not yet fully settled in England; whose lives are defined by their past, their own or that of their parents but who wish to seize the future; who wish to become consumers rather than hunch-backed toilers." He adds in the 'London Review of Books' (LRB): "It's a slow and incomplete journey as far as many Bangladeshis are concerned."

The feeling that things are not quite right is a point made in a newly published study on the East End which concludes that during the last five decades white, working-class Eastenders have felt betrayed by their leaders' promises of better living standards and are resentful of immigrant families with whom they now have to compete for jobs, public services and housing.

However, Kate Gavron, one of the authors of 'The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict' study, writes in this month's 'Prospect' magazine that although white Eastenders "who had struggled to achieve the welfare state believed themselves to be taking second place to outsiders," Bangladeshis in the East End 200,000 and rising with the 70,000 living in Tower Hamlets accepted as the largest concentration of immigrants in the UK - appears to be a great success. Bangladeshi girls are excelling in the schools, there are curry festivals, street parties where lampposts are painted red and green. Bengali street signs and, perhaps most permanently, there is a flourishing, localised artistic culture.

However, despite the artistic activity, the wider publishing

world seems to have selected Monica Ali's 'Brick Lane' as the community's sole voice. Yet this over-hyped book, shortlisted for prizes even before publication, was dismissed by many Bangladeshis as misrepresentative and unsuitable as the outside world's gateway into their lives.

Sukhdev Sandhu described it as a "patchy but promising first novel, strongly indebted to its Black and Asian literary antecedents, more interested in character than it is in language or even in the area from which it derives its name." The author herself seems to have re-created from fiction and her forthcoming book 'Free Expression Is No Offence', is a political response to the government's controversial Racial and Religious Hatred Bill, which she and other artists fear will outlaw the telling of religious jokes.

So who is being allowed to tell the world about the beauty and pathos of the Bangladeshi experience from within the fronds of fiction? Is the shadow of 'Brick Lane' blotting out other writers?

Sukhdev posits that Bangladeshis are becoming "slowly estranged from the ghetto they call home." He writes: "Walk around and you will notice that the saree stores have become designer furniture stores, the dress factories art galleries. Bangladeshis may be walking by history."

If there has been a failure to set the literary world ablaze then it may be running out on this chapter in the lives of Bangladeshis living in the Britain as groups of Somalians, Kosovans, Russians and the cappuccino-guzzling new media and financial classes move in.

Perhaps, or maybe it is because, as Sukhdev Sandhu puts it: "It's a cruel place today no less than it was two hundred years ago. With the narrowness of the streets, the crowded estates and the thinness of residents' walls, it is hard to insulate yourself from the dramas and catastrophes of the people who live near you."

David Sanderson is a correspondent with The London Times.

So is all of this the source of my uneasiness about the East End? The feeling that a thousand voices, many dislocated and disappointed, are struggling to be heard. The knowledge of the East End's fractious past and anxious present. The fear that time may be running out before a new generation moves in to start its struggle.

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Perhaps this will be a good thing; perhaps it will allow them to escape the suffocating influences of Ali's 'Brick Lane' and the spread of Starbucks.

Sanchita, who is currently exploring the growing tensions between Bangladeshis and newly-arrived Somalian youths in the East End, believes that Bangladeshis will still be there in 30 years time and thinks many are now irretrievably stranded from their parents' homeland. At the 'Old East End,

New East End' discussion one audience member accused Bangladeshis living in the East End of having "one foot in the airport" and no sense of "Britishness." But in 'Gungi Blues', taken from her anthology, Sanchita writes about the problems faced by Bangladeshis returning to their parents' homeland: "Bangladesh was like entering another world.

Alien, beautiful, grotesque, smelly and quite breathtaking all at once.

It wasn't a place I could relax, feel comfortable or warm.

It wasn't a place I could shout or take a walk to the corner shop.

It was just the place where my parents were born.

I was born in Manchester.

Bangladesh was a place to visit, to discover and learn but never to live.

To live there would mean our crumble.

Forced to hide behind white powder, tight lips, strained silence,

Or thin pretence we wouldn't know how."

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