

SHORT STORY

Telapoka!

ZAIN ALI

Twinkle extended a long, delicate manicured index finger towards the floor and shrieked: "Telapoka! Telapoka!"

Belal got down on one knee and closely inspected the rather large cockroach on the mosaic floor of Twinkle's apartment. Shiny golden markings in the shape of eyes on big, thick black wings. Its mouth and forelegs worked feverishly on a neon-orange nugget, crumb of a dropped Cheeto. Antennae twitching in spasms. Spasms of pleasure? thought Belal to himself, I wonder do telapokas like cheese flavouring?

Belal crushed it under the heel of his right shoe in a single movement.

He thought briefly about how people always said that cockroaches could survive a nuclear holocaust and after the last human cities were naught but dust and ashes they would still crawl the earth. "Survive that," he said aloud.

Twinkle swooned and rested her head against Belal's neck, saying breathlessly, "Oh! Belal you're so brave! I don't know what I'd do without you!"

Belal smiled. I am the man. Most beautiful woman in all of Dhaka city, television star, former Miss Bangladesh and all entirely belonging to me and no one else for three months now. I am the man. Her perfect face, her softpink lips nuzzled against his neck. "Why don't we go to your bedroom?" he suggested.

Twinkle looked up at him with big innocent eyes and said demurely, "We can do that."

Belal's body stretched out on Twinkle's luxurious silk double bed. He kissed her and reached with his hand into his back pocket but failed to find what he was looking for. Oh hell! Can't believe I left that at home. Oh well, he thought resignedly, can't make the beast with two backs without my trusty latex membrane.

"I forgot to bring a condom," he said sheepishly. Twinkle sighed and said, "Why don't you go down to the store next door and get one? I'll wait for you."

Belal put on his shoes and sprinted

down the stairs of her apartment block.

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Dr. Big Gyan deftly put on bifocal lenses and felt the smooth baldness of his head with the tips of his fingers. He heard the ceiling thump as Belal brought his foot down on a cockroach. Blasted TV actress, he thought, always these big, noisy parties, always all these men coming in late at night.

Before him, in the centre of his Secret Lab, stood his greatest creation. The Fusion Machine, the Hybr-a-tron 5000, the BioUltraUnifier. He couldn't decide on a name, but he knew it worked. Oh yes! Take any two--and this was important only two, never one or more than two otherwise it wouldn't work--animals, place in the blue chamber of the machine, seal the door and pull a switch and Zap! the two would be one, a hybrid of both. The possibilities were endless--dogmen, whale-fleas, monkey-tigers, armies of Royal Bengal Tiger-men, catwomen sex slaves, aerial chariots pulled through the air by sturdy moth-horses.

Better yet, you didn't need whole, live animals. A corpse or even the smallest fragment of one was enough as long as the other was whole and alive. Dr. Big's mind was dizzy with the possibilities--resurrection of dead tissue, mix dinosaur DNA preserved in amber with a Komodo dragon, an army of hybrid clones of himself using his own toenail clippings . . .

The results of his first test-run of the machine stood caged in one corner of the lab--a mosquito mouse, a dogroach (particularly hideous, Dr. Big Gyan shuddered to think of what a manroach would look like and silently vowed never to put man and cockroach together in the machine) and a goldfish-crow swimming in a glassbowl. The goldfish had until recently belonged to his 7-year old niece.

The machine was out of power now. Not enough juice, he thought. Where's that useless boy? Tell him to get batteries. Ha, ha--he won't be useless after I'm through with him tonight. Ha, ha, ha, ha!

"Sumon!" he shouted, "Where are my Plutonium Power Paks? I need juice, energy for the engines of my genius!"



Dr. Big Gyan's docile assistant Sumon entered, stumbling under the weight of two heavy metal canisters. "Here, Doctor shaheb--just like you asked."

"Took you long enough--have you seen the most recent fruit of my brilliance, my greatest creation?"

"The Fusion Machine? No, Doctor shaheb, please show me."

"I'll do more than show you, my boy, I'll let you try it out. I'm putting you in there with my peregrine falcon DarkHawk! With an eagle's wings, vision and strength you'll no longer be a scrawny, useless yes-boy."

"Sir, you want me to go in there?"

"Of course."

"No, sir, I won't do it . . ."

"What? Why not? Think of all the benefits, boy, you'll be a real life birdman! The power of flight, a sharp, hefty beak, eyes that can see a mouse crawling in the grass from a mile. Look you don't really have much going for you right now. It's only going to make your life better."

"No, sir, I don't want to be a . . . a freak."

"Look, I've had enough of this. Don't make me do things I don't want to do boy, don't make me bring out Old Molly . . ."

"N-O-O!!! Anything but that sir . . ."

"Then you're going to have to go in there, Sumon."

Sumon gulped and said a mental prayer as Dr. Big Gyan pushed him into the blue chamber of the machine. Darkhawk was already in there, flapping his wings madly against the steel bars of a birdcage. The door was sealed and for Sumon all was darkness and the mad screeching of a caged peregrine falcon. After a substantial pause, Sumon heard the flick of a switch and . . .

And blinding white light flooded the chamber of the machine, and in that light Sumon saw the most beautiful vision of unification. Everything in the universe gradually is coalescing into a single unbroken mass. One . . .

Then the light went off suddenly and everything was darkness and the voice of Dr. Big Gyan shouting "Bloody Iranian plutonium!" Sumon felt his own body with his hands--no feathers, no beak, no wings. I'm saved! The door swung out and Dr. Big entered with a smoking metal canister in his hand. "Next time we buy plutonium, remember Kazakhstan, not Iran! Not Iran!"

Sumon's whole body heaved a silent sigh of relief.

"Whole thing's ruined now," continued Dr. Big Gyan. "Just going to have to throw it out."

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Belal ran back into Twinkle's apartment block and patted the condom in his left pant pocket affectionately. As he went through the door, he noticed the heel of his shoe. Ewww! that's really quite disgusting--all that white fat oozing out, oh well, can't do shit about it now, just take them off at the door and clean it tomorrow.

He began to climb hastily up the stairs, eagerly anticipating Twinkle's warm, sweet embrace. Oh you really are the man, he thought giddy with joy. I can smell her hair, I swear.

Unable to restrain himself, Belal broke into a joyful skip up the stairs. He stopped at the third floor, the floor just below Twinkle's, when he noticed a strange contraption outside the door of Dr. Big Gyan.

What the hell is that? he thought. Looks kind of cool. Let me ask this bald guy--it looks like it belongs to him.

"Excuse me, bhai, what the hell kind of machine is this?"

"Doesn't work," said Dr. Big Gyan said resignedly, "Throwing it out."

Belal noticed the blue chamber inside the contraption, big enough to fit a man. Oh, it's one of those 3D things! I've been in one of those!

"Is it one of those 3D things? I've been in one of those!" said Belal, eagerly climbing inside the blue chamber and sealing the door behind him. "Hey it's dark in here!" he shouted, "Come on, bhai, put it on! Put it on!"

It should be noted here that Dr. Big Gyan had no way of knowing about the crushed cockroach on Belal's heel and believing the machine to be destroyed, had no way of foreseeing the consequences of what he then said.

"It doesn't work," repeated Dr. Big Gyan. "Look, Sumon show him. Flip the switch."

Which Sumon subsequently did! The chamber flashed with blinding, white light

and the machine emitted a Zap! What then emerged from the door made their veins tingle. "That was quite a trip," said Belal. "You should take it to Fantasy Kingdom or something. Make a fortune."

As he turned around and skipped up the stairs to Twinkle's apartment, Sumon suddenly fainted on the spot. Later he told Dr. Big Gyan that it was because he had seen the giant markings on Belal's massive, man-size wings.

"That's how I've always imagined *Shaitan's* eyes."

Dr. Big Gyan regarded Belal's retreating figure carefully. Doesn't realize, does he? Well, no point telling him now, it would only ruin the poor boy's night. Most horrifying thing I've seen in my life. Iranian plutonium--should have never trusted it, should have gone straight to Kazakhstan.

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Belal entered Twinkle's apartment triumphantly, remembered to take off his shoes and walked gracefully into her bedroom, saying: "It's okay, baby, I'm back."

Twinkle's scream was heard all the way to Baridhara. Belal was momentarily stunned and confused. He began to babble, "Baby, what's wrong? What's happening? Tell me, baby, please."

He heard the door open. It was the loyal and quick night guard Nurul, who walked in with a hefty rifle in his hand and asked: "Madam, is something wrong?"

Twinkle just screamed and pointed at Belal. Belal, at a loss as to what was happening and what to do, reached into his pant packet, pulled out the condom and shouted, "Baby, it's me!" Twinkle suddenly paused. "Belal?"

Nurul turned his head to look where Twinkle was pointing. Being a practical and straightforward man, he did not pause to consider the greater philosophical implications of the sight that now lay before his eyes. He decided instead to empty a rifle round into his head.

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The Arnolds and Empire (Part I of II)

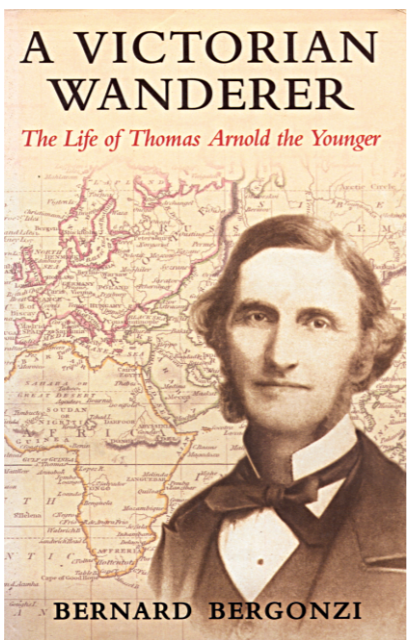
BERNARD BERGONZI

The Reverend Dr Thomas Arnold, the reforming headmaster of Rugby School, transformed ideas about education in nineteenth-century England. His influence was felt well beyond the public schools where young men from the upper and upper middle classes were trained to administer the country and, if necessary, the world. Arnold aimed to produce Christians, gentlemen and scholars, in that order of precedence. If his name is still familiar today, it is partly because it is preserved in two very different books that remain in print and are still read. Arnold, who died in 1842, was a Victorian for the last five years of his life, and he was given a sharp, dismissive chapter in Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, first published in 1918, a forceful, mocking expression of the early twentieth century revolt against the Victorians and their order of things. For Strachey, the admired Dr Arnold was a posturing hypocrite who had no sense of the true values that sustain civilization.

The other work in which he appears is Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857). This enduringly popular book launched the genre of the school story which has been so influential in English literary culture. Hughes was writing out of his own experiences at Rugby, and in the latter part of his novel he presents a schoolboy's eye-view of 'The Doctor', who appears as remote and firm but benign, a mildly god-like figure. Some passages reflect the way in which Rugby was regarded as providing an ideal preparation for running the Empire. At the end of the novel Tom Brown's chum Harry East has left school and gone out to India as an officer. The civilizing influence of Mrs Arnold in her drawing room is fondly recalled: "Aye, many is the brave heart now doing its work and bearing its load in country curacies, London chambers, under the Indian sun, and in Australian towns and clearings, which looks back with fond and grateful memory to that School-house drawing room, and dates much of its highest and best training to the lessons learnt there." In the final pages of *Tom Brown's School Days* Dr Arnold is perceived as an emperor, wisely ruling the school: "What a sight it is," broke in the master, "the Doctor as a ruler. Perhaps ours is the only little corner of the British Empire which is thoroughly wisely and strongly ruled just now. I'm more and more thankful every day of my life that I came here to be under him."

Dr Arnold never travelled in the Empire, but he was very interested in it, particularly in the Australasian colonies. He bought some land in New Zealand, and in 1839 he wrote to Sir Thomas Pausley, "I have often thought of New Zealand, and if they would make you Governor and me Bishop, I would go out, I think tomorrow, not to return after so many years, but to live and die there, if there was any prospect of rearing any hopeful form of society." Arnold made no such move, but two of his sons did. His eldest and most famous son, Matthew, poet, critic, school inspector, and social commentator, showed no particular interest in the British Empire, and his travels were restricted to what was later to be called the First World: professional visits to schools in France and Germany, vacations in Switzerland, lecture tours in North America. But his second son, Thomas the Younger, always known as Tom, travelled further. Tom finished a brilliant undergraduate career at Oxford by taking a First in Classics, which was a better degree than his brother had achieved. He went to work as a précis-writer in the Colonial Office in London, and was commended for making sense of a complicated set of land claims in New Zealand. But his interest in that remote territory went further than shuffling papers; he had a passionate desire to visit it and perhaps settle there, continuing his father's interest in the Antipodean colonies. His concept of New Zealand was vague and intensely romantic, and he saw it as a potentially ideal world, a congenial territory where a community could be established that would be finer and purer than anything in contemporary England. In fact the country was chaotic and lawless, where traders and settlers and missionaries had conflicting interests, and the Maoris were resisting white rule. Crooks and opportunists abounded, but everyone was theoretically a 'free settler.' Unlike the Australian colonies, New Zealand was never a penal settlement. In 1840 the British government reluctantly made it a colony and took it over from the New Zealand Company.

Tom Arnold's close friend Arthur Hugh Clough drew on him for aspects of the idealistic radical Philip Hewson in his long narrative poem 'The Bothie of Tober Na Vuolich.' At the end of the poem Philip has married a Highland girl and set off for New Zealand. Tom had not yet married when he left England in 1847 but his departure for New Zealand is much as Clough describes it; the list of objects and impedimenta that Philip takes with him is



BERNARD BERGONZI

drawn from Tom's experience. Clough had been with him in London just before his departure and seen his cabin in the ship where he would make the several-month voyage. Tom's reasons for emigrating were idealistic and utopian, but he had a plausible reason for going: to farm the 200 acres of land that Dr Arnold had bought near present-day Wellington. When he got there he found the land was unpromising, heavily overgrown and difficult of access, and Tom found he had neither the temperament nor the skills to make a farmer. But he made a start on clearing it, with the help of a local settler from England and his sons, together with a Maori and a Tahitian. He described in a letter the Maoris' dwellings, but he does not seem to have had much contact with the indigenous population. It did not take him long to realize that, like his father, his real vocation was for teaching. He set up a school at Nelson in South Island and was struggling to make it succeed when he received a welcome invitation from the governor of the neighbouring colony of Van Diemen's Land, as Tasmania was still known at that time.

The news that a son of Dr Arnold with a first-class Oxford degree was in that part of the world and trying to run a school was inevitably of interest to people concerned with education. There was a local Rugby network available to help him; the governor, Sir William Denison, had as ADC Charles Stanley, the younger brother of Arthur Stanley, Dr Arnold's pupil and biographer and Tom's tutor at Oxford. Charles Stanley had known Tom in earlier years and he recommended him to the governor as a suitable person to fill the vacant position of director of education and inspector of schools in the colony. The governor was duly impressed and invited Tom to come to Van Diemen's Land and, in effect, see if he wanted the post. This was deliverance for Tom, who was finding little future for himself in New Zealand, even though he liked the country. In a letter to his mother he proclaimed God's goodness and the power of the Arnold name. At the beginning of 1850 Tom arrived in Van Diemen's Land, over a thousand miles to the west, to take up his new position. It was a colony with a more developed social structure than New Zealand, and it was to provide him with a wife and family, and a career that he found, for the most, interesting and rewarding. But unlike New Zealand, Van Diemen's Land had originated as a convict settlement, and the practice of transportation was still going on when Tom arrived. It was increasingly opposed both in Britain and in Australia, but Van Diemen's Land was the last colony to abolish it, to some extent because the governor was strongly in favour of it. One of the most notorious and colourful of the transported convicts was the artist, poisoner and forger, Thomas Wainewright. There had not been enough evidence to convict him of murder, but he was condemned to transportation for forgery. Once in Van Diemen's Land he was free to live as he chose, but not to return to the United Kingdom. He opened a studio and painted Julia Sorell, a local beauty whom Tom Arnold met soon after his arrival and after a whirlwind courtship married in June 1850.

Arnold disliked the practice of transportation, as much as anything because the convicts tended to resume their criminal careers once they arrived and were at large in the colony. It was abolished after a few more years. Arnold did a good job in reorganizing the school system in the colony, and was prepared to stand his ground against the reactionary governor, who had ideas of his own about education. Despite their differences, he admired Sir William Denison as a man of action and a forceful character, in contrast to his own gentle and rather vacillating temperament. In his letters he refers unfavourably to transportation, but does not mention the greater scandal that marked the settlement of Van Diemen's Land, the genocidal extermination of the aboriginal population, though that process was complete by the time Arnold arrived; it features prominently in Matthew Kneale's novel, *English Passengers* (2000). In Arnold's autobiography, *Passages in a Wandering Life*, published not long before he died in 1900, he writes with feeling about the destruction of the native people, though he blames the atrocity entirely on the convicts, whereas the free settlers were as much to blame. He describes seeing two aboriginal children in a school he inspected, who had been placed there by the authorities in a late attempt at rehabilitation.

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Book Review

Evoking Everything

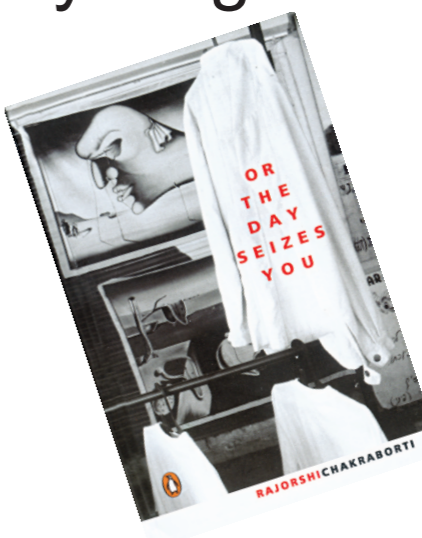
NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

*Or the Day Seizes You* by Rajorshi Chakraborti; Delhi: Penguin India; 2006; Rs.250; pp.212.

I dread writing reviews. For the fear that I could be landing with a book that I will like but won't be able to rationalize why I liked it. Or worse, I might not like it and I hate writing baleful reviews. Sometimes I just wish there could be a simple funny book for me to review. Rajorshi Chakraborti's book *Or the Day Seizes You* was as unfunny as it gets!

Here is a Bengali writer, who steers clear off the Bengali staple: the silently suffering and stoically-calm middle class. This could have been a reason for celebration had not Chakraborti ruined everything by creating a bedlam of a city where the grubby is substituted by the sinister, the humdrum gives way to paranoia and the stifled middle class is re-invented as a dysfunctional set of groupies. Chakraborti is indubitably Bengali at heart, he gratefully dedicates his book to his parents, even though they might have mentally squirmed reading parts of the novel. There are occasional attempts to transmit the Bengali daily speech but these won't affect anyone. If one does not know the language they won't even notice it is there. What might cause a stumble, is if people can't keep a track of how Kaka and Kaku and Jethu are developing. They all come into the story in fits and starts via the protagonist Dasgupta or his father's narration. There is a character first called Uncle from America who is the quintessential legend-maker; all families have one of those--but this one is way too weird. He banquets with dictators who tell him of massacres, he goes on a mission to rescue the ousted President after a coup in Mogadishu: "Your uncle rode a cycle-rickshaw till he was beyond the city limits. The President crossed the border amid cylinders in the back of a gas delivery van." He finds himself in La Paz or Peru, in Turkmenistan. On one mission they escape from elephants, on another "the van ran amok and piled into the carts through a mud wall. The backdoor was opened by a baker whose upper body was covered in a grid of bread meshed all over him like a coat of armour." Interesting but you wonder where all of this is coming from!! Or what they contribute to Dasgupta's story. Perhaps Chakraborti's book was not entirely unfunny after all. Perhaps all that was wrong was that I didn't get the humour.

Even though most people are still looking for a story when they pick up fiction, giving a story just happens to be one of the 'features' an author provides. The 'story' has long since stopped being of paramount importance. Dasgupta's devastation on learning by accident from his young daughter about his wife Meena's



adultery, though convincingly explored, is only a subsidiary interest in the novel. Chaos ensues in Dasgupta's life and wears away the connection he has with his seven year old daughter Shormila. Dasgupta burrows himself away for years in a hotel in London owned by an acquaintance of his father. The best part of the book is the section when he returns and pays a visit to his ex-wife and Shormila in Calcutta. They have been living their lives while he was wasting his. The tone of Dasgupta's grief and acceptance worked for me and one is given a welcome glimpse of what Chakraborti is capable of.

However, if you are looking for a 'story', the novel chokes on vicious sub-plots and patches of side-themes running wild. The cast is frankly scary; there are neighbours-from-hell (young Dasgupta defecates on his neighbour's doorstep, the neighbour after suffering years of other abuse retaliates by sending Dasgupta's uncle to jail). There is Pramatsh Mitra, a Bengali gangster-lord who wields incredible hold from Calcutta to Bombay. Dasgupta's father is himself a minor but not negligible mobster, the eldest son is a closet homosexual; one uncle gets clubbed with a wrench during a taxi ride, Dasgupta and his London friends get attacked and almost mauled by dogs during a trip to France and so on. Accidents and mishaps jostle for space in *Or the Day Seizes You*. The Dasgupta family receives a phone call from Uncle in Bombay and the whole family (except the hermit/allegedly gay man) flees to live incognito in Bombay. The gunning outside the American Embassy in Calcutta and the explosions inside the Parliament are thrown in to enhance the hype: "For a full hour we traded panicked conspiracy hypotheses about whether it could have been Pramatsh Mitra. He was showing us he would strike when we least expected it, and he was insolently demonstrating his reach." Within this apocalyptic fizzle there is a discussion on life and the form our novels should take. "The world will always be

as shamelessly full as ever--apathetic, incongruous, obscenely simultaneous--every element within it contaminating every other, and each moment as rapid and weightless as the last." Dasgupta is just a hoax, the real hero is a scheme: "Infinite relentless simultaneity, infinitely promiscuous cross-contamination, and the only art worth anything is a story that can evoke it all, the total radioactive fullness of being...Everything must be evoked because anything less is just cowardice."

There are you are. That explains the chaos that is Dasgupta's Life. Lest some of us are not convinced about the 'radioactive fullness of being', *Or the Day Seizes You* tells you pointblank that Proust too had "incorporated not just his own experiences from out of his broken and discontinuous memories, but the life and horrors of wartime France." We are informed that Tolstoy did the same. Even Joyce. "He'd included everything that was humanly expressible in his first masterpiece."

*Or the Day Seizes You* (bounces off Saul Bellow's famous title *Seize the Day*) produces a litany of "promiscuous" simultaneity, an eerie catalogue of "contamination." Initially it can seem very affected but once initiated, it is possible to see that Chakraborti does have something to offer!

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Farmgate

S. A. KHAN

mamu, diesel khamu!  
 rakhe Allah  
 mare kee!  
 ma-er dowae  
 shabdhan choli!  
 ami choto  
 amake marben na!  
 tash khela bondo korun!  
 Shohid-er aka.  
 ami ain manina.  
 ami pagol  
 amake maf korben na.  
 ami gas khai.  
 amake marun.  
 Ami apnder moto.  
 Ami ghuta-ghuti kori.  
 I take  
 I pay the Law  
 I slip through the gap.

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