

SHORT STORY

Torn Wire

MAHMUDUL HAQUE
(Translated by Mahmud Rahman)

Since I took to walking, I now come across quite a few people around town. I bump into people I haven't stayed in touch with or seen in twenty or thirty years.

Upon developing a serious heart ailment, I was ordered by the doctor to walk four miles each day. I walk twice, first at dawn and then again on the way home from the office.

It was while returning from work that I ran into Nazrul. Creating a ruckus, a crew was cutting teak trees next to Ramna Park, and Nazrul stood in one spot watching open-mouthed. Thick branches were roped together, tugged, and brought down on one side of the road. Nazrul stood across from them. Speaking to himself, he said, "Very good," and walked off.

His face looked familiar. Then when I saw how he walked, I realized, why, it's our very own Nazrul.

I said, "Isn't that you, Nazrul?"

"But who might you be?"

"See if you can recognize me."

"Aren't you Moqbul?"

"Amazing. We meet after such a long time!"

"That's right!" Nazrul said, "But it's really hard to recognize you. Seeing your chubby face, it's hard to tell you're the same person the boys nicknamed Skinny Jinnah. And back then you had a short fuse, just like Jinnah."

"I see you remember everything."

"Why not? Throughout the year you suffered from dysentery, and you ate a regular diet of catfish broth with stinky thankuni leaves. Your mother told me often, 'Nazrul you are in such fine shape, while my Moqbul is just skin and bones. Will you boys make sure to run him around some?' Mister Lazybones here sleeps with a shawl wrapped tightly around himself." By the way, is your mother still alive?"

"She died a long time ago."

"She loved me a lot. Even now I can distinctly recall her face."

The conversation stilled for a while. Side by side we walked in silence. Just like the

old days, Nazrul moved with a dreadful limp. I said, "I guess your leg never recovered."

"How's that to be?"

"What a lifelong burden for such a small mistake."

Nazrul interrupted me. "What do you mean, for a mistake?"

Feeling embarrassed, I said, "I mean, you had to pay a huge price for just a little carelessness."

"Well, someone or the other in the world has to pay."

"That's true!"

"Is it bothering you to walk with me?"

I laughed. "I see you're just as arrogant as you used to be."

He laughed back. "And you, bastard, you're such an excellent actor. You change your tune without skipping a beat. So how many children do you have?"

"Three. Two sons and a daughter."

"What names have you given them?"

"The boys are called Adil and Gaus. The girl's name is Ismat."

Nazrul cackled. "You could have chosen Habil and Kabil. That's terrific, though, two leaves and a bud."

Without letting him get under my skin, I said, "And your children?"

"There isn't even a wife, where will I get children?"

"So you still haven't married?"

"Did once. But even before a month passed, the poor woman moved on."

"Why?"

"How can I say? It wasn't like she said anything when she left."

"And I imagine you never tried again."

"What's the use!"

"True."

"Life's slipping away, though."

"Where are you now? I mean, what are you doing these days?"

"I teach at Srinagar College."

"Isn't it difficult being all on your own?"

"You mean, how do I take care of my physical needs?"

"For instance."

"It's no longer much of a problem. The woman who cooks for me her body was scarred from being burned she takes care of me as best as she can. I helped her out with some cash for her daughter's marriage, perhaps that's why she makes the effort.



After all, she is human and there's some feeling of gratitude. More or less."

"You aren't bothered by how she looks?"

"I've never thought much about beauty or appearance. Still, it's true that when I got married, I myself went to see the girl. And if I remember right, I even asked one or two pointed questions."

The late afternoon light was turning a bit dreary. We stopped talking for a long time, walking on in silence.

I spoke up. "Nazrul, do you still remember those days?"

"Which days?"

"Today's Dhanmondi had not yet been built up. Remember the garden belonging to the *kobiraj*? In the shadow of the guava tree, you and I used to lie around on the crumbly soil below and read poetry all day. We chewed *amlaki* fruit like goats. Once or twice you acted the part of Surja Sen. With your hands clasped behind your back and wearing a grave look, you paced and said,

'Motherland....'

"I suppose something like that did take place."

"Once in a while you knelt on the ground and said, 'Motherland, give me strength.' One day I burst into tears. Do you remember that?"

"I do."

"I broke down like that one other day. It was 1971, the 26th of March. When I heard on the radio, '*Amar shonar Bangla, tomai bhalobashi*', I thought that your poor Motherland was so sad, so wretched, that her heart must be breaking in anguish. That day too I thought of you."

With a smile, Nazrul said, "One day everything becomes a story. It seems to me that some people are born just to suffer."

I sensed that our mood had turned wistful. On Nazrul's eyes and face there was an imprint of a curious peace, as if he was carrying himself with effort. He looked as if his hands and feet were bound yet every

moment he had to shoo away life's unbearable disgraces that buzzed around him like flies.

I said, "I can vividly remember that dawn of the 20th of February. The two of us had sneaked around the city putting up posters all night long, and just behind the Azad office, the Lalbagh hoodlums caught you. I ran but for some reason you just stood there. What a beating they gave you. They cracked open your head, twisted and broke your leg, and hiding behind a wall in the distance, I heard your screams."

Nazrul said, "They didn't show a bit of mercy. Think about it. I was barely of age and every one of them was grown-up and enormous."

I said, "But why did you behave that way? If you had wanted, you too could have fled. I still can't figure out why you stood there like that, so stubborn."

Nazrul said, "That's right. It would have been best to flee. It was sheer bullheadedness on my part that the notion of escaping did not occur to me. I thought, why should I run, I haven't done anything wrong. Besides, I was only afraid of the police. I couldn't even imagine that ordinary people would give me such a beating. They could have killed me."

I looked at Nazrul's face. His voice had become harsh and rasping, as if he had been suffering from bronchitis for many years.

He said, "Let it be. I don't like to think about it. It all tastes bitter. Jebu, the woman I had married? Every day she wanted to hear the story of how I broke my leg. I had to repeat the same story by twisting it this way and that. It's quite possible she didn't believe me no matter how I tried to explain things. One day she teased me, are you sure you didn't get caught trying to steal chickens? Even though I knew she meant it as a joke, blood rushed to my head. The stunned look on her face made me realize that I must have looked a scary sight."

"And then?"

"What else? I pulled myself together. Can one really blame the poor woman? My fellow students had long nicknamed me Gimpy Nazrul, and behind her back many people would call her Gimpy Nazrul's Wife."

I said, "That day when I left you and ran, surely you must have...."

"Are you crazy? You did the right thing. Unlike me, you were always shaking with fear. Of course you were going to run. If I had been able to run, I too would have saved myself. My attempt to show courage was downright idiocy. Like a chump, I stood my ground and got flattened. Fear saved your life, while courage has silenced me for good."

"Whenever I remember that day I feel very bad."

"The wrong was entirely mine. I should have run and saved my life. When I realized they had done me in, it was too late."

Even before the daylight faded, the neon signs lit up one by one.

To them, I said, "You decorate the city quite well. It looks like it's wearing jewelry. I like it."

Nazrul said, "It's not a bad scheme. The city gets decorated, and the door is opened to some moneymaking."

Suddenly he stopped walking, and with his pointed finger, he drew my attention to one sign.

"Read the words there. They misspelled Ministry of Education. You know what it makes me want to tell them?"

I looked, and sure enough, the word Ministry was spelled wrong. Nazrul was right.

"Such glamour! And there in the middle of it, a worm! Wait, you bastards, let me show you glamour." With those words, he picked up half a brick from the side of the road, and with all his strength, he hurled it at the lighted sign. It shattered into a thousand pieces.

I said, "What's this, Nazrul, what have you done?"

Panting heavily, he said, "When I see a wrong, blood rushes to my head. It makes me want to get bombs and, just like this, blow up each and every wrong."

Mahmudul Haque is a noted Bengali short story writer and novelist. The original story, "Chera Tar", appears in Mahmudul Haque's collection Protdin Ekti Rumal, February 1994, Shahityo Prokash, Dhaka. Mahmud Rahman is a U.S.-based writer currently on an extended visit to Dhaka.

Ah, Nanabari !

FAKRUL ALAM

Every year, twice a year, during winter and summer vacations, my family would travel to Feni, Noakhali, where we would spend our holidays in our Nana Bari, the home of my Nana, or maternal grandfather.

For days before the journey, our excitement would keep mounting. For one thing, Amma would make frequent trips to Nawabpur, or what was then called Jinnah Avenue, to buy fabrics or wool which she would then sew/darn/weave into clothes or woolens to gift her family members when in Feni. She would also spend more time in the kitchen than usual, cooking as many dishes as she could for my father, the only one of us who would be staying

have to thread our way through a platform overflowing with passengers and hangers-on, coolies and vendors, beggars and con-artists, as well as railway police and ticket checkers. Intrepid and inspired, Amma would lead us through the milling and tense crowd. It was as if the whole world was heading for the same interclass compartment; indeed, it seemed that we always managed to reach it just when the train was ready to leave the station.

Eventually, the train would leave Phulbaria and we would relax and feel exhilarated again. Because we did the trip so often, we looked forward to the highlights on the way. Bhairab Bridge, huge and unending, had views of the riverscape that were breath-taking at all seasons and for as long as the train clanged

rickshaws and bullock carts; the buildings seemed rickety or run-down, as if someone had forbidden them all to look good or finished or told them not to stand up straight. Although the trip to our Nana Bari from the station was no more than a few minutes by rickshaw, to us it seemed to take forever; we just couldn't wait for the journey to end by this time.

But all our fatigue evaporated as soon as our rickshaw took a bend and Nana Bari swung into view, revealing our uncles and aunts waiting eagerly to take us in. Nana, intensely religious at this stage of his life, would often be waiting to greet us with the warmest of smiles before hurrying off to prayer. My Nani would first embrace Amma and the two of them would sniff a little, both overcome by the

courtyard or retreat to the shaded grove in the backyard. Sooner or later, though, we would head for the pond, the centre of our daily rituals, and once we went in the water we stayed in till Nani and Amma would drag us out for lunch. It was in this pond that we all learned to swim in successive trips; here we floated on banana-trunk rafts for hours and were thrilled at the way my uncles caught fish either with a net or a fishing rod. Sometimes a tiger-skinned snake would slither past us shushing us instantly until it disappeared. Then we would resume our water games once again. If it was winter, on the other hand, we would stay in bed as long as possible, until the sun was completely up; afterwards, we would head for the courtyard where we would play hopscotch or cricket or go to the farthest reach of our Nana Bari in the plot of land adjacent to the pond, pretending to be picnicking. And then after we had psyched and warmed ourselves adequately we would go to the pond for a quick dip and rush out shivering to dry ourselves and have lunch in the sun.

Some evenings Amma would take us out to visit her relatives. Other evenings we would go out for strolls. At least one evening we would spend promenading all around the *dighi* (large tank) around which colonial Feni had grown and where the dak bungalows and the offices of this sub-divisional town were. On one of these evenings, our uncle would take us to the edge of the town to show the old bridge and the massive and ancient *bot* tree on the Grand Trunk Road, narrating to us as we went the story of how Sher Shah had built it and the bridge hundreds of years ago as part of his plan to administer efficiently the territories he had wrested from the Mughals. On another evening our uncle would take us to see the ruins of Feni airport, for the town was once one of the key forward bases of the Royal Air Force, even though it would be abandoned at the bend of our history when India was partitioned. At least once on every visit to Feni we would sneak out to go to see a film, for our now-puritan Nana was known to frown even at the mention of the cinema and would get mad at my uncles and aunts if he came to know where they had taken us.

At night, we would go occasionally go to *dawats*; once

every trip Nana would reciprocate by inviting relatives, friends, and even acquaintances he considered important to Nana Bari so that they could also meet us over dinner. On nights when we stayed home all by ourselves Nana would join us after evening prayers, relaxing and joking with us for at least an hour, and thus remind the other elders of how he had been full of life and a *swadeshi* (self-rule) campaigner once, an activist in the cause of one Bengal, but how he had become other-worldly now. Sometimes his stepbrother would visit us, tooting his odd-sounding bicycle horn entirely for our benefit as he came and went, and filling Nana Bari with his booming voice and loud laughter. Nani, too, would join us for a while, finally relaxing after another day of hard work, and would tease us as grandmothers are supposed to do, making us grandchildren feel silly and important at the same time.

Reluctantly, we would go to sleep after dinner; some on beds and some on the mats spread out on the floor. But sleep would take a long time to come, for we would first review the events of the day or plan for the one that was coming up, exchange secrets in the dark, or whisper stories about the ghosts and robbers that were supposed to be all around Nana Bari.

But we felt totally secure in Nana Bari, wrapped up in the love of my grandparents and uncles and aunts. Every part of the Bari was full of family history. "There" an aunt would say, "was where you were born!" "Those rooms are where all of us used to live before your Nana decided to extend the house for all you grandchildren" my Nani would tell us proudly. In time, I began to fill parts of Nana Bari with my own memories too, although I was still a boy. Wasn't that the room, for instance, where I was painfully initiated into the faith, though the occasion led to a feast in my honor afterwards? Occasionally, we all became part of family history in the making, as an uncle or an aunt got married, or one of us or a cousin had his *akika* or birthday celebrated, and Nana Bari would then take on a festive air for days.

For the fortnight or so we were in Nana Bari we were thus completely happy. Little did we know then the financial difficulties my Nana was experiencing due to the religious turn he had taken in old age; the hours he was spending in

prayers and meditation meant that other people were taking advantage of him, encroaching on his land and trying to defraud him in business. Little did we know the strain Nani was going through then running the large family on a reduced budget--- Amma had three brothers and seven sisters;for she was always generous with us. Little did we realize that our uncles and aunts had to make do with much less than they had been once used to, for they seemed to be totally indulgent and giving whenever we asked them for anything.

No wonder that when the time to return to Dhaka came we were all quite unhappy. As we departed, Amma (and Nani) cried a lot, this time because mother and daughter knew that they would not be seeing each other for at least six months, and because every leave-taking now confirmed to them that the first parting was irrevocable. We felt a little sad too. School was something to look forward to, but how could the cramped life we led in the busy city compensate for the freedom and the open spaces and the love swirling all around Nana Bari? The journey back therefore would seem uneventful and unending and we would go back to Dhaka a fatigued and melancholy lot.

* * *

Last year, two of our sisters and I visited Nana Bari for a few hours. My Nana had died in 1970 and my Nani went in 1997; all my uncles and aunts were now in Dhaka or abroad. Nana Bari had shrunk in size, for my uncles had decided to sell parts of it in a strategic move to secure the main house from the machinations of the covetous lot that controls remittance-rich and hooligan-infested Feni. The pond, the shaded groves and all our favorite haunts were gone and we felt totally depressed at the diminished thing that the Bari had become. "Better not to come any more" I told myself; better to keep Nana Bari intact in memory than confront the diminution of the place where more than anywhere else we had once been totally happy. Better to wax nostalgic than be confronted with the ever-increasing intimations of mortality.

Ah, Nana Bari!

Fakrul Alam is professor of English at Dhaka University.

The Oppression of Lips

MULLIKA SENGUPTA
(translated by Selina Ali)

in your lips a soft saltiness
oh, how your lips talk to me!
your lips' tobacco smell
scorches my insides

the tenderness, the numberless kisses
i won't leave means i'm rebel girl
just like the tide devours
so does a kiss my shoreline

a thirsty pitcher is my body
draining juice in a dreamforest
waking up i lift my lips to you
sucking you dry with deep kisses

Mullika Sengupta is a noted Kolkata poet. Selina Ali is a student in Dhaka.

Flying East

M.B. YUNUS

I.
O'Hare, Chicago

I saw Edward Hopper's Nighthawk
in a family in stone --
The father gazing gazeless
at the silver birds fly
The mother looking at the floor
made of fog
The teenage daughter eyeing
the young men
who are not men at all

II.
Heathrow, London

A man with a black cap on the crown
and another with a band-circled
head robe
nod, smile, and then flame into laughter

III.
Dhaka, Bangladesh

I knew it when it was Dacca
Reflexively, I nurtured negativism
but the truth numbed the reflex --
cleaner streets, more tall bricks,
even the asthmatics welcomed the air

IV.
A village, Land of Tagore

This is where I had first cried naked
I cry again
The grass that caressed the ground
is stoned by stone
The birds that made nests
for my eyes
are shot with the sound of saws

M.B. Yunus is a professor of medicine at the University of Illinois, USA.



through it we were awestruck. Kosba, the station on the border where Pakistani and Indian troops skirmished frequently throughout the nineteen-sixties, was always the place where we tensed up a little. The red hills of Mainamati looked incongruous in the green world of Bangladesh. There were junctions like Brahmanbaria and Laxam, where vendors hawked their wares and cries of "*cha gorom*" and "*deem*" filled the air. Although the trip to Feni was supposed to be seven or eight hours long, by the time the train reached Feni Station, it would be late in the evening and we would be exhausted, worn out by a journey that seemed to have gone on and on.

Feni in the nineteen-sixties was a small mofussil town, and to us Dhakaites quaintly interesting. Rickshaws were often veiled! The traffic consisted almost entirely of

emotion of the oldest daughter returning home after some months. Then she would hug the five of us turn by turn and dash for the kitchen where she had been supervising the cooking. We would join her there as soon as we had washed and changed so that she could serve us delicious *pithas* and all sorts of delicacies that Amma could cook in Dhaka only now and then. If it wasn't too late, Amma's relatives and friends would drop in, making us feel very important, for everyone wanted to know what we children were doing in school and the details of our Dhaka life. Eventually, we would drop off to sleep in utter exhaustion, but not before our uncles and aunts revealed the plans they had for us for the next few days.

The next few days, in fact, would go in a whirl. If it was summer and the heat was too intense or the rain too heavy we would play carom or snakes and ladders inside for a while; if there was a cloud cover or only a drizzle outside we would play hopscotch or football in the