

Roses for Radhika

DO you know how it feels like to be damned, cursed and loathed by everyone wherever you go? Right from childhood, I was considered to be the 'second' child of the family who was destined to be a failure. It was my brother who was always at the centre of all the attention, excelling in school and taking interest in current affairs and science. I guess I was expected to be like him but it turned out that I had different interests. I was more into art, music and literature than science. Whenever I won any literary contest, I would come home ecstatic to show my parents the prize but they never appreciated it and rather scoffed at me for taking part in filthy competitions.

Nevertheless I did not give up and continued my pursuit of enhancing knowledge in the arts whereas due to these reasons my grades at school suffered. I was enrolled in a science class forcibly by my parents. Whenever I tried to study for school exams my mind would wander off to the times of the Renaissance period while at other times I would think about Shakespeare and his brilliant plays and sonnets. Eventually I got expelled and so thinking how my parents would react to this ignominy of having a high-school drop-out in their family, I ran away from home.

I was on the streets alone with only a few bucks in my pocket but I did not mind. At least my books were with me. They would support me out in this ordeal. I managed to rent a studio apartment in the shabby part of town and was given a job in the neighbourhood medicine shop which provided enough to earn me twice a meal everyday. I was content with working five hours a day and reading the whole evening. But this bliss was not to last for long.

One day law enforcers arrived at the pharmacy where I worked and found out that the shop sold illegal drugs. I was shocked when I got to know this; the owner, my boss had seemed such an honourable man despite the fact that he wasn't well-off. Well, the pharmacy had to be shut down and my boss got arrested. I lost my source of income and was resorted to being back on the streets again. Now I had no roof over me and no bed to sleep on. I wandered for almost two weeks and spent sleepless nights in bus stops and pavements, all along being watchful of police who dragged off street urchins and put them in jail. It wasn't easy, those days, and for the first time I understood the value of money. The meager amount which I was left with was spent on buying food. My books, my knowledge were useless in providing me a job or a home or more importantly food.

One night, I screamed aloud desperately hungry and in need of a proper bed. Out of frustration, I lunged at my books and tore them apart. A few minutes later when I came out of my frenzy, I saw some policemen striding towards me. Deprived of all coherent thoughts, I simply ran until I saw a cottage in front of me. I pounded the doors of the cottage until a girl, most probably in her mid-teens opened the door. I tried to explain to her my situation and asked her to hide me for some time. She was shocked and hesitant at first. I do not know what finally made her to move back to let me in. Maybe she could see the innocence in my eyes? Nevertheless, I discovered that the girl's widowed mother lived with her and when I told her my story, she did not seem to be perturbed at all by a stranger invading her home. She even forced me to stay at her home until I found a place of my own. I was reluctant to do that at first but sensing no harm in two women I kind of agreed. After all, a roof over my head and a regular meal were what I yearned for the most.

The girl's name, I figured was Radhika. As I took a close look at her, I realized how strikingly attractive she was. Especially her eyes, I had never seen such beauties in my life. The months which I spent at Radhika's home were probably the happiest moments of my life. Soon Radhika fixed a job for me at a local library where I could read to my heart's content. Radhika herself seemed to be interested in poetry and many evenings we sat together reciting our favourites. It was not long before love blossomed between the two of us. But we were both too shy to confess.

Finally I decided to talk about my feelings to Radhika.

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Home

I'm going home

To the place where I belong

Where your love has always been enough for me

-Chris Daughtry

THE trees and the fields and the cows chewing cud fled by in a whirlwind of colors. Far off you could see the rail tracks winding away into nothingness. Endless, endless stretch of steel...

Well, she was going home. And on any other journey home, she'd have her sister sitting with her. They'd both be complaining about how late the train was, or how swamped with work they'd been all week, and how it was just like their mother to call them back home in the middle of the week. They'd share lunch on the train, comment on each other's clothes, discuss their relationships and their bosses, and have a good laugh.

Well, at least she'd get to see her sister. Her parents hadn't buried her yet.

How it happened, she had no idea. Her sister had gone to the hospital, complaining of a fever. Ten minutes later, they were wheeling her into the morgue. Dead.

It was her mother who got the call. She'd refused to believe the doctor outright, opting instead to laugh in his face and hang up on him. The doctor then tried her father, who drove straight down to the morgue to 'prove the damn guy wrong'.

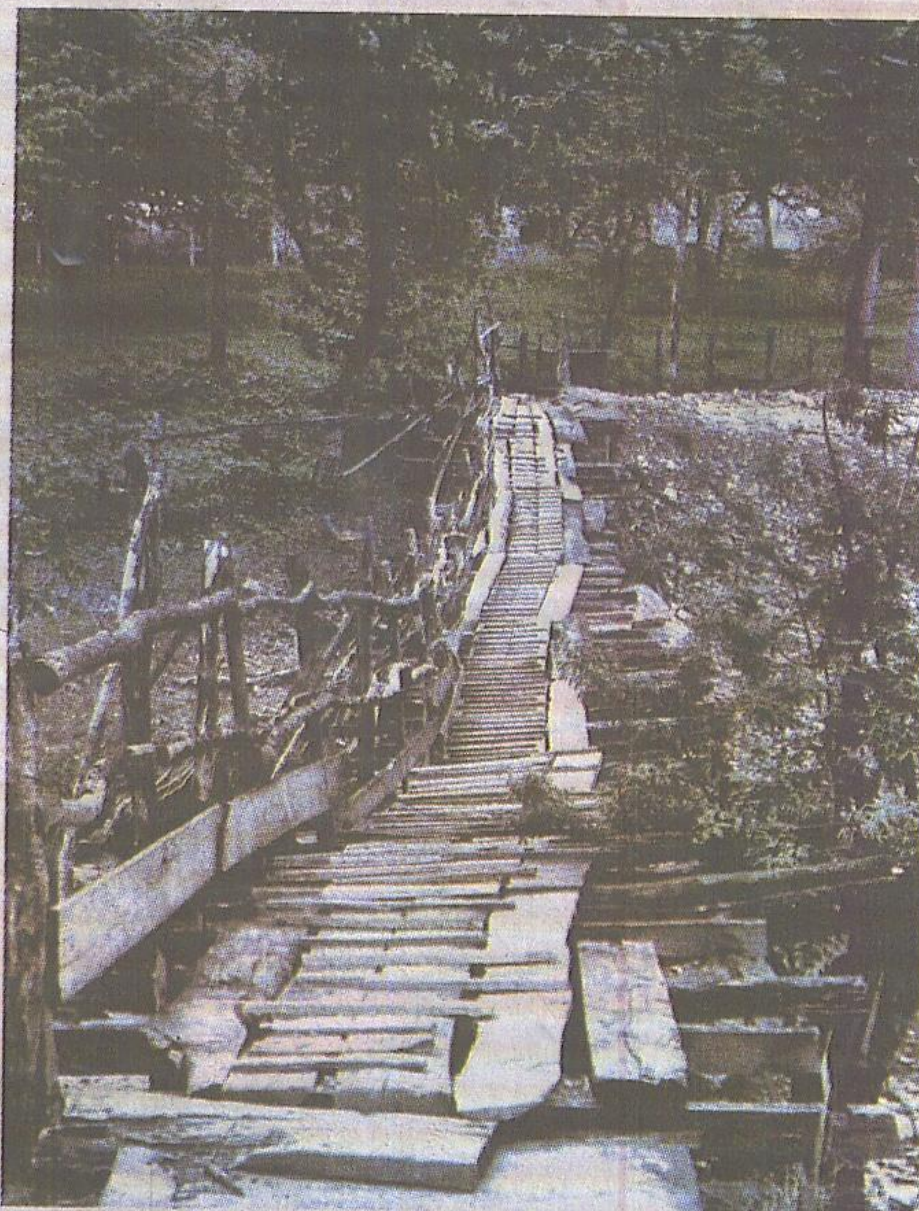
When he came back, he was on his cell phone, making funeral arrangements.

They were keeping things small, inviting only a handful of people. Her sister's friends, a few of her colleagues, and the extended family. Most of them had dropped everything to fly back to the quaint little town where her sister was going to be buried. They were going to bury her, her father had told her over the phone, in the family graveyard. Next to her grandfather. Under a tree, too.

She dabbed at her tear-rimmed eyes. She was cold, so cold. She half-rose to her feet, then changed her mind, and sat back down. Now wasn't the time for coffee.

The train screeched to a halt ten minutes later. She was the only person off. She shouldered her hastily put together luggage, and heaved her aching body across the platform. A man in a shabby overcoat ambled by, swatting at imaginary flies with a rolled up newspaper. For a fleeting moment she was envious of him. There he was, lost in his insanity, removed from reality. While here she was, standing alone at the train station, carrying the grief of her sister's death, and the guilt of not being there when she died.

How could she have known? Her sister was young, certainly too young to die...



She looked around for a taxi. Nothing. Looked like she was going to walk home.

Not a problem. It was a nice day, after all.

She started walking. It was the same road her sister and she had skipped down on their way to school, back when they still wore skirts and let their mother tie their hair in pigtails. The road was still the same, the houses (now a little run-down) still here. The people she'd grown up with were married now, with jobs and kids, but they hadn't left home.

It was good seeing these places. She wished she'd meet a familiar face, maybe someone she'd gone to school with, but the roads were blissfully empty. Farther ahead, she found out why.

The crumbly old bridge (that was as old as the town itself) had snapped clean in the

middle. The river reflected the broken arch.

There were men standing on the banks, gesticulating at the broken bridge. As she came closer, one of the men trotted up and motioned behind him. 'Looks like you're going to have to take the barge, miss,' he said. 'This bridge isn't going to be fixed in a long time.'

She looked at the bridge. At the other side, where her stooping brick house stood, where her parents were waiting for her, where her sister was going to be buried. There was a funeral she had to be at...

She looked at the earnest engineer's face. And smiled. 'Doesn't matter. I'm in no rush.'

And she turned back, and walked away. To where she'd come from. No, she wasn't going home.

By Shehtaz Huq

Quest for glory

THE atmosphere was filled with tension.

Everyone watched the two brothers snarling at each other. They were angry as lions, but no one dared to step in and stop them. After an hour of heated conversation they both gave in to their emotions and started to swing fists at each other. The soldiers quickly separated them. The citizens were demoralized as they saw the late king's sons fighting for the throne. There was no unity that day at this great kingdom. It seemed as if the days of glory had passed away with the passing away of the last king.

Lionel finally left the kingdom, leaving his elder brother Ricardo with all the responsibilities. The entire burden, which the brothers shared with their father, now fell on his young and inexperienced shoulders. The future of the kingdom was in jeopardy, especially with all the dangers that were looming ahead.

Lionel was sitting near the pool when his brother's messenger approached him. It had been two years since their argument, and since then they never contacted each other in any way. Lionel knew it had to be important, but now sitting near the pool, he had no idea about the extent of its importance.

The revelation to Lionel was shocking. The messenger explained to him how Ricardo's most trusted advisor had betrayed him. He revealed that they had gathered a huge army and were now marching towards Normandy. There they would siege Ricardo's fortress. Lionel knew he had to reach Normandy as soon as possible. Ricardo's army was no match to his enemies', and he only hoped that Ricardo could hold out the bombard-

ment till Lionel reached Normandy.

Lionel's army was now an hour away from Normandy, they had been marching for four days. They were ready for battle, they would fight hard, for they all knew that this maybe the last battle they fight.

The sun beat down upon their faces. It was a gorgeous day, but it was dead silent as they entered Ricardo's fortress. Lionel started having flashbacks about his childhood. How he and his brother used to run around within these walls, chasing each other. Those days now felt like a wonderful dream. But he soon got a rude awakening. He suddenly felt as if



he was having a nightmare. He got down from his horse and fell to his knees. It took him a while to get a grip of himself and to swallow the truth. He tried to convince himself that he wasn't seeing right. But he couldn't deny the fact that the corpse that was hanging on the fortress's flag pole where their father and his magnificent kingdom's banner once hung proudly, was of his own brother Ricardo's.

Filled with grief, Lionel picked himself up and asked the remaining citizens what had happened. The citizens explained to him that Ricardo's army was defeated, and he was killed two weeks ago. This surprised Lionel a great deal. He immediately knew that something was wrong, the messenger had arrived at his palace only a few days ago. He had made it clear that Ricardo was still alive when he left Normandy.

As he looked outside the city walls, Lionel saw a grand army waiting for him. An army twice the size of his own. He was foolish enough to fall in their trap and even more so to abandon his beloved brother. Ironically his brother was the bait that drew him out into his enemies' trap. But at least he would die in the same place as his brother and father. He would die protecting the kingdom his father devoted his life to. He had no regrets. Lionel took a deep breath and looked into his loyal soldier's eyes. He knew they would be there right beside him. He looked up to the blue sky one last time, then he took his sword out and charged ahead.

Back at Lionel's fortress the citizens felt as if something was wrong. The heavens suddenly opened and it started to rain. Everyone there knew that the sky was crying, for it had lost one of its favorite sons.

By Eresh Omar Jamal