

SHORT STORY

The Sketch

SHAKIL RABBI

The painter sat in front of the empty canvas. He knew exactly what he was going to put on it. It was to be a portrait of a woman: of women.

It had come to him inexplicably earlier that day. He was bored at his job at Seven-Eleven and started writing on a pad he found lying on the counter. He started out with nothing to say but then his eyes turned to a magazine standing on the rack on the corner. The cover was a picture of a supermodel giving her trademark pout face, her blue steel. He thought it was amusing and he started to write about it. But then the writing started to take on a life of its own; the words began to drop out of him in spasms as if he were coughing them out. Soon what the essay described read nothing like the picture of the woman - more so, the girl - on the magazine cover. It talked about a vision half blurred in shadows and hazes. It was the image drawn from a memory: one he knew he must have had and had completely forgotten.

He rushed out from behind the booth and started walking briskly towards his apartment four blocks away. He knew it was not cool to leave his post like that, especially since he was only one working. But he did not care. He knew he would get a lot of shit for it from the manager and might even get fired. But he just did not care; it was not important. Anyway his shift would end soon and, Colleen, his replacement, would be there then. She took her job seriously. To her, it was her career. She was cool like that. He hoped that it would all work out and the store would not be robbed or burn down.

But now, he knew he did not want to focus on what might happen. He hoped that it would work out and that was all he could do. To him, what was more important - what was sacrosanct - was the vision he had of the picture. As he walked, he focused more and more on it. He tried like a man holding on with his entire mind to the memory of a dream before it slipped out of waking life.

When he reached his house, he dropped himself right down in front of the easel. He did not even notice that he still had his work uniform on and was covered in sweat. He took up a pencil and started to draw the lines and then rub them out again. He knew what the woman-women looked like. It was an image he clearly understood but could not articulate onto the canvas. No matter how much he tried he felt that it was wrong. That even a single line, drawn by the pencil - without reason or cognition - was wrong.

The frustration began to show on his face and his exuberance began to wane, to be replaced by irritation and a red face of anger. He felt himself become more and more conscious again of his surroundings: the 4-B pencil in his hand, the grime of his ill-kept apartment. He knew that he was losing the picture and that soon it was going to disappear. But then he looked at his hand, and became aware that he was holding a 4-B pencil. And he understood.

He felt that this was going to have to be a charcoal sketch, that it was only coal that could smear the rippling lines over the white canvas. They had to be dirty and they had to be stains. That was what the picture demanded: that was the only way it would be honest. It was what he saw in his memory.

He grabbed a piece of coal and began to run it over the paper. He



was satisfied now. He knew that was it: everything felt right again. The lines, the dirt, the black turning to ash: it all fit. That was the way it was supposed to be.

He felt free in the moment. His hand had a life of its own and he did not even pay attention to the page: the luxury of muscle memory took over, he let his mind drift. He wondered how strange it was that writing gave him the picture. He had begun writing as a way of relaxing over the toils of painting and drawing. It gave him a release that was unimportant and a hobby. He wondered whether it would have all been different if he had taken up the pen before he had taken up the brush, whether he would be a writer rather than a painter. But it was too late for him to switch his voice from the canvas to the page now. Painting was all he really understood: it was all. In those hours when he spent torturing himself over what was wrong and what was asked on his drawings, he knew that was what made it matter. For him writing was instantly gratifying, he found no faults in what he wrote, he did not bother to dwell on it more than that. From the easy pleasure it gave him, it was clear that writing was just a casual thing and it did not really matter. What was important was what generated fear and concern.

As his mind drifted on and on, his eyes suddenly caught sight of the image on the canvas, and he remembered it all. It was the

picture of a woman. Looking at it he could not tell whether she was European, African, Asian or what. It was all a mix. The blank white of the page and the black smudged lines conveyed no color at all: she could have been white or black or brown or yellow. She was more than a woman. To him, she was all of them.

The face of the woman covered the entire canvas, but it was slightly tilted to the right. It gave the picture an angle and the pose a lack of affectation. It was a picture that said that the woman was not conscious of any watching eyes, not conscious of even herself. She had long eyelashes that curled up to meet the lines of her eyebrows. Her eyes were large and deep, but not enough to be like those of Hindu goddesses. Her nose was long and sharp, but it was not the European nose: it could have been anything at all. The soft lines of her jaw made it seem as if the face might have been oval if looked from straight on, but that was merely a hint. There

was nothing solid in her face. The thick messy lines of charcoal obliterated all sense of singularity.

Looking at it he was acutely conscious of the one blank spot on the top right corner of the painting. It was the part where there should have been a tuft of hair. But he knew that he could not have a single strand of hair in that picture - even though a woman is so much her hair. Maybe that was it, if he showed hair she would be drawn back to a singularity again. That the viewer would be able to tell what she was: that from the lines of her hair, she was a one thing.

Here he was suddenly stuck. Looking at it he thought about what his first art teacher in grade school had told him - him and every other one after that: that a white spot on the canvas was death to the painting. There is nothing white anywhere in existence, so there can be nothing white in art either. White was the absence of all things, and therefore it was an anathema to any creation.

He suddenly averted his gaze. He could not stare at those eyes any longer: it was too erotic. He turned away as if the desire he felt for her at that moment was an obscenity, a desecration: it was rape. He looked around for something else to look at and he could not help his urge for a cigarette. But he had quit a week ago: he just

could not take the weight upon his lungs anymore. But he was too weak. If he did not have a smoke he would go back to the picture, which would be unbearable. He got up and ran out. He ran as fast as he could, he ran down the four blocks and back to the Seven Eleven. He ran in and went behind the counter, to where they kept the cigarettes. He fumbled around over the stacks, trying to grab for a pack of Marlboro lights. He dropped several of them on the floor. As he bent over to pick them up he heard the bing of the doors sliding open. He stood straight up to look and saw Colleen.

"Hey, how's it going?" she said.
"Pretty good. Kinda slow night."
"Good. I've got this crossword I want to do today. I hope no one shows up. It'll help me get it done."
"Okay. I think you might be in luck today. There hasn't been anyone in yet."
"Ok then."

He pocketed the pack, walked out from behind the counter and left - completely forgetting to clock out. He was suddenly conscious of how lucky he had been. He had just gotten in on time to catch her coming in. Looking around him, he spied that everything was exactly as he had left it: even the pen next to the pad was exactly where he had left it. So now there was probably no chance of anyone ever finding out he had snuck out. Not unless they checked the surveillance tapes, and they never did that unless someone got shot.

He took his time walking back, smoking the cigarette with gusto. There was no rush, he had no ideas about how to finish the sketch, it was all blank now. The moment was gone. He looked around at the trees and the buildings and the sidewalk; he did not see anything interesting. He meandered for a while and it took him another twenty minutes to get back to his apartment.

Once there he sat back down in front of the face. It did not seem so important now. The face was just another face, although a thoroughly striking one. He looked at it as he palmed a piece of coal.

He rested the flat of the lump on the top right corner, where there was the blank spot and then he pushed in and dragged down, creating a single bar of solid black. The bar covered up the white spot and a part of the face, but that did not seem important. In fact, it was exactly what he was looking for. He was happy again. He drew another bar on the other end, a much thinner one, one that did not block any of the features or even much of the picture at all. That was all that was needed.

He pressed harder till the black was completely solid and not a single absence remained. He worked assiduously on this last part and then with palette and a brush, he started painting black over the coal lines where it was needed. When it was all done, he took some base oil and carefully spread it over the picture, setting it as much as if it were in stone.

Then he was completely spent, tired but now that did not matter. He was satisfied. He looked at the picture. It looked like the face from his dream, an image that he could see from the hollow between the two black lines. He called it *My Window*.

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The Tombs of Murshidabad

SONIA AMIN

It takes five and a half hours to reach Murshidabad from Kolkata. The town was built in 1704 by Murshid Quli Khan, the governor of the province of Bengal. In 1716 he rescinded his allegiance to Delhi and became the first independent Nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. He moved the capital from Dhaka to the township he had founded on the southern bank of the Bhagirathi river, until the British later moved it to Calcutta.

As the train pulled into the station at 4:00 in the morning, my first impression was of a town forgotten by time. After the seminar in Kolkata ended, a surprised colleague had asked: "Why, what's happening in Murshidabad?"

These days 'something' (conferences, workshops) has to happen for academics to venture anywhere, I guess! I replied "Oh, just taking a trip to see some tombs, I guess."

No, I was not hoping to arrive at some startling historical truth. 1757 was the year Siraj ud Daula's and Clive's armies confronted each other at Plassey, 40 kilometres south of Murshidabad. But the motives and actions of the major actors in that drama are shrouded in ambivalence. Historians have torn each other's tomes apart in efforts to 'arrive at the truth' about 1757. Though I had no such high intentions, I was at least sanguine that the one-dimensional historical accounts would come alive somehow. And who knows, in an inspired moment during the tour, perhaps a part of the fog might lift.

Dr. Keka Duttaroy, who accompanied me, might have had other reasons for going though she didn't elaborate. She had taught at Berhampore, the district headquarters of Murshidabad, and was keen to see the place again - where her cherished child, now departed, had grown up. My late father often spoke of Murshidabad during the post dinner conversations we used to have when I was growing up. He would invoke scenes from literature and history. He spoke of Murshidabad's past, its silks and river. Of the play he had seen as a young man in Calcutta; about all that took place at Plassey one summer day hundreds of years ago. It had all blended into one collage - my father's retelling of history, his youth, my childhood, my university days spent studying history...

The guesthouse was clean and comfortable. By 10 a.m. we were up and ready for the day's outing. The driver of the hired Maruti was a young man named Shahid. The first stop was the Jahankosha Cannon. This artillery piece was built by a craftsman from Dacca -- one Janamardan Karmakar. More than the cannon itself, I was struck by the setting. A picture-book bamboo grove swaying in the breeze, a few thatch huts, and a boy playing. Here we caught the first glimpse the Mughal army, of an aggressive, martial race thrashing their way eastward in a bid for land, loot, empire. They had come to colonize the grain-rich, quietly rolling countryside of Subah Bangala and turn it into a wealthy outpost of empire.

As the Maruti drove to Katra Mosque and seminary I tried to talk with Shahid, but conversation with tourists wasn't his strong point. In front of the mosque, a path led through a garden to a flight of stone steps under which Murshid Quli Khan lies buried. The portal was flanked by two tall watch-towers which point to the feudal character of the age - watchful, alert, and belligerent. But this is set by the serenity which the precincts possess. The guide explained that the Nawab interred there, none other than the founder of the city, had wished to be buried alive and trampled on by countless ages! Later we heard a similar tale where the fair Azizunnissa lies buried at another mosque. (Azizunnissa, the guidebook said, was engaged in illicit liaisons and was, to boot, fond of human flesh!) My! Lust and cannibalism, if these stories were to be believed! A logical part in my brain, however, whispered, "Brutal as the age was, who in his/her right mind would wish to be buried alive?" Moreover, self-annihilation went against the scriptures; and the ruling race was careful to observe the niceties of religion.

After lunch we reached Jafraganj - territory of the Mir Jafar clan. The palace, which later served as the Circuit House for notables such as Warren Hastings and John Shore, is now in ruins. Keka informed us that years ago the entire cemetery was overgrown with



Khosh Bagh - the tomb of Siraj ud Daula

brambles and inhabited by snakes. Now the cemetery was well tended and accessible, with a little ticket counter under the archway to the graveyard. The archway was constructed in the manner of a 'nahbalkhana' -- the customary seat atop the gateway for royal musicians. Over a cemetery it makes one think of a musical portal to the mansions of the dead.

We went in where the most famous traitor in Indian history lies buried. By conspiring with the British and refusing to battle that fateful June day at Plassey, Mir Jafar, Siraj ud Daula's treacherous uncle, earned his pitiable place in history.

The fine-boned young man who acted as guide pointed to a set of tombs within an enclosure. These were the Begums -- observing purdah beyond death. One particular tomb stood out. It was that of Mir Jafar's wife Munni Begum, famous for her beauty, intelligence, philanthropy and gracious living. So, I mused, life must have gone on in the nawab's palace after Siraj's brutal murder. It must have been business as usual in this city of intrigue and death. The goras kept the nawab and his family in relative splendour while they slowly strengthened their hold on state power. The Jafars were spared the ignominy meted out to the last Mughal emperor - his widow was laid to rest in style.

"And here we are," the guide was saying, "the grave of Mir Jafar." Simple and unadorned - next to a row of other graves - one could not tell by looking at it that this was the resting place of one of the most despised characters in Indian history. The man whose name would, as the eponymous Siraj proclaims in the play, "become a synonym for the word traitor wherever betrayal takes place."

I don't know if the historical Siraj ud Daula ever said this but playwright Sachin Sengupta's prediction certainly came true.

We know Mir's days on the *masnad* were short lived. His successor Mir Quasem realized that the British motives were sinister and tried, in vain, to undo what his forebear had done. Did Mir Jafar also try to atone towards the end? Like the Pink Floyd song:

*Dark stranger, what drove you to this?
Did you exchange a walk over part in the war
For a lead role in a cage?*

The silent grave threw up no answer. The face that gazes out from the painting of Mir Jafar is that of an experienced man - bearded, obese, composed. A man given to the pursuit of power (or in happier times, food). In his portrait Siraj, a bare youth of 25, is clean shaven and wide-eyed. Both faces are sideways, following painting conventions of the time, looking at some point in the horizon.

And so to Siraj, who reposes quietly on the other bank of the Bhagirathi.

But before that we had to make a choice. If we went to Hazar Duari (Palace of a thousand doors) the residence of the post-Plassey nawabs, we might have to forego Khoshbagh, the cemetery of Siraj and his kin. Years ago Keka had been dissuaded from going there by talk of it being a 'den of riff raff and opium addicts - no place for a lady'. So after walking up to the palace entrance, tempting as it was,

we retraced our steps.

"There would not be much left of the day if we went in," I explained to a surprised Shahid.

"And we'd rather go to Khoshbagh than the palace of collaborators," Keka finished smartly.

We chose a forlorn village ferry to cross over to the other side. The river Bhagirathi has a quality best described by the Sanskrit word 'sreemay' -- possessed of grace. It is a gently flowing river that wound its way through golden mustard fields, its waters the "translucent colour of crows' eyes." From the wharf we got onto a rickshaw. Khoshbagh (Garden of Peace) is nestled amidst slightly undulating ground, sprinkled by winsome trees -- the secluded cemetery reminded me incongruously of a miniature English garden. Nothing could be further from a den of riff raff, not that I would have minded.

A guide named Hari agreed to accompany us. We stepped inside the complex where the last 'independent nawab' lies buried.

Siraj ud Daula (1733-57) is variously made out to be 'a martyr and monster of iniquity'; a lecher and a saint; a patriot and a fortune seeker; a fool and a strategist - one may take one's pick. In all fairness, both Siraj and Mir Jafar were acting out the scripts dictated by their circumstance and time. After the vilification and hype are laid aside, we have a nawab who knew not the people he ruled over. He belonged to the Mughal elite whose pressing need was to fill Delhi's imperial coffers. It is said that when the Battle of Plassey took place, the common folk looked on from a distance, and went about their daily tasks. To them it was nothing more than a contest between the nawab and the goras.

True, Siraj never spoke Bengali, contrary to the image of the nationalist icon; he never donned 'native attire.' Yet he could have gone the way of the others - how much easier that would have been. Instead he chose to resist. So when we needed a hero we found one.

The cemetery is laid out in three sections. In the first were interred Sharifunnisa, Alivardi's wife; Amina Begum, Siraj's mother, and Ghasiti Begum, his aunt. Destiny had brought together in death Siraj and his aunt Ghasiti Begum -- the woman who had plotted her nephew's downfall. The second enclosure contains the grave of Siraj's noble lieutenant, Ghulam Hussain famous for his loyalty along with Mohanlal and Mir Madan. Mohanlal would have been cremated and Mir Madan lies buried elsewhere. Here also lie the faithful body guards -- Abdul Hussain and Sabdul Hussain. Through another twist of fate, Danesh fakir - the man who identified a disguised Siraj to the enemy - lies a few yards away. The hazy pictures gleaned from books were beginning to fall into place.

We stepped into the last enclosure. Here lie Alivardi Khan, Siraj's three-year-old daughter Ummatul Zohra, and wife Lutfunnisa, Aleya (Mohanlal's sister), and in a further twist, Shaukat Jang, whom Siraj himself had slain.

I was trying to sort out the complicated order of relationships, betrayals, and alliances when Hari stopped in front of the only grave with an inscription (in Arabic).

"Here lies the great man himself," he whispered. Something in his tone made me look up. Hari -- quiet in demeanor, not a university graduate - knew his history in a way many of us never will. Whatever interpretations the books offer, Hari must have imbibed the verdict of two eminent scholars (to quote Banglapedia): "He (Siraj) was the only one of the principal actors who did not attempt to deceive."

I too could not think of a better epitaph.

As we rickshaw-ed back down the deserted road the pungent scent of mustard blooms reached our nostrils; a lone bird chirped in a grove nearby. We started humming a timeless melody in a language none of those lying quietly in their tombs would have understood well:

*Dhono dhanyo pushpe bhora
Amader ei basundhara.
Tahar majhe ache deshek shokol desher shera*

Somehow, 250 years later, with all the actors long gone, it seemed a fitting song.

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Mindscape

MENKA SHIVDASANI

Begin with the familiar. There is a reason for the warmth of flesh, the slow parting of lips and ways, and the gyrating thighs that slice the moving air. There is a reason for the thrust of bone on skin; the nervous shiver of the veins, the reddening scar, the slit across the face where the smile should be.

Start with the familiar; the savage grin you try to beat out of your mind; the delirious silence that screams beneath your skin. It will begin to feel like an old friend, leaping out of hidden corners in the dark.

Then, let go. Let go of the cracking twig, get a grip on solid ground, step away from that chasm at your feet. Stay focused on the thought, it may be heavy on your back, but in its warm, deep pockets, there is sustenance, jagged though the can-opener edge might seem. Hear the whisper in the bloodstream; slake your thirst.

The unfamiliar is on the other side, and there is time.

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