

SHORT STORY

Mystery Mail

JULIE REZA

Things never seemed to go well for Afra. Sometimes she wondered if she was always going to be doomed to bad luck. Maybe it was her star sign that didn't bode well for her. Taurus, the bull! What good was a bullish nature to an attractive teenager? Why couldn't she have been born a Virgo - a beautiful, svelte creature? Or Libra, nice and perfectly balanced? Or even Leo, the audacious and courageous Lion?

Then again, she thought, her misfortune could all be to do with her name: 'Afra'. She'd once looked it up. Apparently it meant 'dust-coloured'. How dull, how mundane, she'd thought, with a tinge of disappointment. Why couldn't she have been blessed with a name like 'Misha', meaning 'pretty', 'Faiza', meaning 'leader', or even 'Farhine', meaning 'joyful'? How had she become burdened with a name that shed no light on any of her inner qualities? So often people told her she had so many merits: honesty, charm, beauty, wisdom, warmth, style, elegance, wit and even humour. Oh, what misfortune not to have these echoed in her name!

She'd frequently wondered if someone had once cursed her. Was someone jealous of her looks, of her numerous talents (music, art, cookery, flower arranging), or even envious of her brains? Since childhood she'd been told she was a mathematical genius, and she'd won many prizes throughout her school and college life. Maybe she was a victim of someone's noz? Her friends had grace, sophistication, magnetism, allure. She had none of those attributes. Everyone else was so lucky, but for Afra, luck just never seemed to be on the cards.

Take today, for instance. She'd been walking away from the private college that she attended with her friends, holding some freshly made chanaachoor in her hands. Just as they'd turned a corner a crow had flown so close it had scared her into dropping her chanaachoor onto the floor. Her friends had laughed as the crow pecked at the jhaal, pieces scattered around her and yes, OK, it was only a minor incident, but it just proved her point. Life was not fair.

Didn't her favourite doll get lost when she was a child? And what about the time she'd fallen off the swing and scarred her elbow (a scar she still bore today)? More recently things were going badly too. She'd hoped to come top in her music exam last week, but despite studying so hard and practicing so much, she'd only come second. Mirza had come top, and he'd never before done as well as her; he was just a precocious, chubby little mite!

The recent traumas didn't end there. The car had been in a minor mishap on the way back from picking her up from college the other day, and needed to go to the garage as a result; she'd need to get a friend to pick her up for college for the next few days. And to top it all, the maid had burnt a hole in one of her new, most trendy tops! It never rains, it pours, she mused.

That evening Afra sat gloomily at her dressing table, brushing her thick, dark bob-cut hair and contemplating life's unfairness. Her mother silently walked up behind Afra and, putting her arms around her young daughter's shoulders while looking at their reflection, she said: 'Ki Ma, ki hoiyeche? Mon Karaap?'

Afra looked up at her mother. 'Nothing Ma, just tired I guess'. Her mother gave Afra's chin a loving wiggle. Gently pinching Afra's cheek she whispered: 'Go to sleep now. You'll find everything's fine in the morning.'

And with a kiss placed tenderly on Afra's head, her mother waited out of the room.

But Afra didn't really feel tired in a sleepy way... just tired of not being a success, of not being popular, of being such a bore. She couldn't empathise with her mother's joyous optimism.

Eager to try and shift her disconsolate mood, Afra got out her little laptop and, sitting cross-legged on her silky blue bedspread, she connected the laptop to the internet. She'd check out 'Facebook', the social networking site that all her friends used.

On first logging in, Afra got a newsfeed. 'So-and-so' had sent someone else a kiss, a heart, a cake, a flower. Nothing for her. She looked closely at the random, spontaneous snapshots of her friends, taken at college or



artwork by amina

at parties, with their comments to each other. 'Shaiza, you are soooo gorgeous, I'm dead jealous' or 'Manika, you look sizzlin' HOT in this pic'. Hmmp! No-one made comments like that about her.

Afra clicked on 'profile' and mused over her own profile picture. It was an old black and white passport photo; she didn't really have any recent digital pictures that were good enough for all to see. Maybe the profile picture didn't really do her justice. She couldn't show her dazzling white smile, and her luscious hair had been scraped back into a severe ponytail, making her seem older than her tender years. She'd worn no makeup and looked pale, dust-coloured even! 'I'll have to change that picture', she thought.

Still feeling wide awake, Afra decided to browse her friend's profiles. She knew she had 72 friends. But Lamia had 112, and Naila had 133. And Naila even had a friend who had 284 friends! 284? How lucky was that girl. There really was no justice in the world!

Afra frowned, producing fine lines on her smooth, blemish-less skin. Why oh why was life so cruel to her? Why did no-one love, admire, or even deify her? Brimming with self pity (or was it with a need to torture and torment herself further? After all, misery loves company) she decided to check her e-mails.

Well, no surprise there; just e-mails about course work, timetables, lecture schedules. No party invites, no messages of affection.

No one was thinking of her. No one cared.

Afra was just about to shut down her computer when she decided to clear out her junk box. Forty unread messages were glaring angrily back at her. A quick scan of senders' names revealed they were from the usual suspects; she ignored them, she knew they were full of rubbish. Dejected, she sighed. Just as she was about to tick each one and select 'delete', she noticed an e-mail from 'tagore'. Her curiosity was aroused. This wasn't one of the usual junk e-mail names, yet she also knew no-one called Tagore (well, no-one personally, of course!). She hesitated. Should she open it? Would it be trash, the catalyst for hundreds of other junk e-mails to be sent to her address? She really should delete it. Her hand hovered over the delete button. But just as her finger touched the edge of the 'delete' key, her curiosity got the better of her. She drew back, stroked her chin, took in a deep breath and quickly double-clicked the message.

The message was just one line, in a plain font, with no indication of who the sender was:

'If you shed tears when you miss the sun, you also miss the stars.'

What a curious thing, Afra reflected! Who could have sent her that message? And what did it mean? She shut down her laptop, mulling over the message. She would need to sleep on this. Although she had always got top marks in all her English classes, she knew that poetry wasn't her forte. And she also knew that her brain worked well in her sleep; all would soon be clear.

Afra reclined back on her pillow. She closed her eyes, gently murmuring to herself: 'If you shed tears when you miss the sun, you also miss the stars.'

She lay there with her eyes shut, hearing the faint hum of the air conditioner and feeling its soft, cool breeze on her face. Various thoughts entered her head. Tears. Sadness. Grief. Misery. Melancholy. Gloom. Everything seemed so dark. Shadowy colours rose up around her: Brown, burgundy, amber, myrtle. There was an eerie vision of the sun being split into two behind a razor-shaped, surrealist-inspired

cloud. Her heart felt heavy, full of sorrow. She was perched on the edge of a precipice. Something was calling her, pulling her down. She could feel she was sinking. She wanted to cry. Tears would bring relief, she felt. She tried to release those tears, but felt frustrated as they just would not flow.

Something was now pulling at her, but this time from behind. She felt her mother's arms around her shoulders. She looked to her side and saw her friends, dressed in silver and gold, laughingly putting their arms through hers. Her tutors arose from behind the darkness, which she realized now was just a curtain, and beckoned with outstretched fingers. He father's mild but sturdy voice was calling out her name. She saw her reflection in a shimmering lake. It wasn't clear at first, and then she saw a bull looking back at her, with huge, kind eyes. Liling music played in the distance.

Afra felt light. Her shoulders, which had felt tight, began to ease. The fragrance of boshonto filled the air, yet she saw soft snow fall in sombre silence around her. Afra put out her hand to catch the flakes, something she had never experienced for real. She looked at her hands and was amazed to see the letters of her name, made of the most fine muslin and lace filigree. Afra stretched out her arms and let the flaked letters delicately float to the floor, each making a tinkling sound as it touched the soft surface. And in the distance she heard a chorus of choral paaki sing: 'If you shed tears when you miss the sun, you also miss the stars'.

The following morning Afra woke with the sun in her eyes. Everything seemed different, cleaner, fresher, more fragrant. Her mother's sing-song voice filled the air. Her sheets felt cool and glossy. Her skin tingled. The world was so wonderful; she was so fortunate! What had she felt so morose about last night? She was young, pretty, talented, bright, admired and loved. She felt full of excitement. The world had so much in store for her! She couldn't wait to get to college and tell all her friends about her mysterious message and amazing dream.

Julie Reza is a writer/doctor in the UK.

TORONTO Journal

SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

The city of Toronto appears to undergo a subtle change about a week before the Victoria Day long weekend (May 19). There is a murmur that begins in the early spring breeze and lingers on the white sails of the boats in Lake Ontario, bobbing up and down on the gentle aqua blue waves. The murmur swells into a whisper and then into a voice that can be heard on every lips, every heart in the city: 'It's the first long weekend of the summer - we must get away from the city!'

And so we did. We packed cheese sandwiches, juice boxes, fruits, samosas and masala chicken into a huge icebox, acknowledging in our hearts that we would have to stop at Tim Hortons and MacDonalds, anyway. We also loaded bikes, skateboards, dolls, Cranola markers, drawing paper, a weekend worth of clothes and of course, the excited children into the SUV and we were off at last! Our destination? The celebrated Canadian Tulip Festival in Ottawa, the capital of Canada.

The Canadian Tulip festival has grown to become one of the largest Tulip Festivals in the world from a gift of International Friendship. In the fall of 1945, Princess Juliana of the Netherlands presented Ottawa with 100,000 tulip bulbs. This was in appreciation for the safe haven that Holland's exiled royal family received during the Second World War in Ottawa. The tulips have now become a celebration and a symbol of friendship and of the beauty of spring. As we walked through the rows of flowers, nodding their yellow and red heads in the slightly cool scented breeze, I could not help but take a snapshot of the sight with the camera and the eye of the mind, so that I could, like William Wordsworth revel in the after glow.

On our way back to Toronto, the drive was spectacular with the purple clouds following us in the distance and the surrounding vast open spaces, the undulating green country side, the solitary brown cow, the cherry picking farms, all rushing by so fast and the cries of the children; 'Oh Mummy, look!' and the inevitable 'Are we there yet?'. This sense of space and the open road is a Canadian prerogative that envelopes each immigrant as they land on this soil. One is immersed in the history of this continent as one senses the excited pulse of the early pioneers who landed here, experienced the sharp taste of freedom and cut through wilderness, rivers and mountains to set up their lives and homes.

Freedom is a right and how better to express that right than in thought, words and deed?

Luminato the Festival of Arts and Creativity opened to great fanfare in Toronto in June. We heard readings from British poet Daljit Nagra book of poems *Look We Have Coming to Dover*, which won the 2007 UK Forward Poetry Prize for best poetry debut. Daljit is a 40-year-old English teacher whose parents came to Britain from India in the sixties. His poetry is written in Punjabi (Punjabi English), which The Guardian poetry critic Rachael Cooke couldn't praise enough: 'It is accomplished and dextrous, complex but not complicated. It pays proper attention to the traditions of poetic form. But best of all is its voice, the way it pins the experiences of British-born Indians so vividly to the page. Racism, arranged marriages, corner shops, the mosque; all these things are here, but so, too, are Ms Dynamite, Hilda Ogden, KFC and Torvill and Dean. It is a book that tells the story of what it is to be an in-between, to be caught between two cultures, both of which you love and, on occasion, fear. I think it is wonderful.' Also present were Canadian author Jaspreet Singh, whose new book *Chef* explores the complexity of Kashmir; and Padma Viswanathan, author of *The Toss of a Lemon*

Of Tulips, Open Spaces and Freedom

(Random House).

There was also a Shakespearean play at the Luminato which was unique in its rendering and exploding with 'colour, light and fabric'. It was *The Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Tim Supple and is a hit of The Royal Shakespeare Company's Complete Works Festival. This comedy featured a multicultural cast of 23 dancers, musicians and actors and blended the British and the desi traditions of music, dance, dialogue and stage artistry. The dialogue was performed in English, Tamil, Malayalam, Sinhalese, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Sanskrit! The diverse Torontonian audience sat there, their senses savouring the sound and the fury, completely captivated at this inconceivable interpretation of Shakespeare's genius.

The Toronto Star, the city's leading newspaper commented: 'Toronto, this Dream was meant for you!!!'

Sayeeda Jaigirdar's novel-in-progress is *The Song of the Jamdaneer Sari*.



Daljit Nagra

Look we have coming to Dover!

So various,
so beautiful, so new
- Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach'

Stowed in the sea to invade
the lash alfresco of a diesel-breeze
ratcheting speed into the tide with the brunt
gobfils of surf phlegmed by cushy,
come-and-go tourists prow'd on the cruisers, lording the waves.

Seagull and shoal life bleaching
vexed blamies at our camouflage past
the vast crumble of scummed cliffs -
Thunder in its bluster unbladderling yobbish
rain and wind on our escape, hunched in a Bedford can.

Seasons or years we reap
inland, unlocked by the national eye
or a stab in the back, teemed for breathing
sweeps of grass through the whistling asthma
of parks, burdened, hushed, poling sparks across pylon and pylon.

Swarms of us, grafting
in the black within shot of the moon's spotlight,
banking on the miracle of sun to span
its rainbow, passport us to life. Only then
can it be human to bare-faced, hock ourselves for the clear.

Imagine my love and I,
and our sundry others, blared in the cash
of our beeswax'd cars, our crash clothes,
free, as we sip from an unparasol'd table
babbling our lingoes, flecked by the chalk of Britannia.

In Memorium

KAISER HAQ

Angus (Lindsay Ritchie) Calder, b. 5 Feb. 1942, d. 5 June 2008

Angus Calder -- historian, poet and critic - who has died in an Edinburgh nursing home, was a memorably vibrant personality in the Scottish cultural arena. His worldview was shaped by international socialism as well as Scottish nationalism (to be precise, he called himself, in his marvelous essay collection, *Revolving Cultures* (1994), a "socialist home ruler"). It is an ideological mix that characterizes many in Scotland: for instance, the region's greatest modern poet Hugh MacDiarmid, whose prose works Calder edited, or the latter's illustrious father, the late Lord Ritchie-Calder, son of a Dundee jute worker who became a hot-shot journalist, science writer, UN emissary, and co-founder of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Calder pere had been a gadfly to Churchill's war cabinet, taking it to task for their handling of the blitz, and was then put in charge of a propaganda unit at the BBC. Later, Calder fils would mine the war for three celebrated and provocative historical analyses. *The People's War*, written soon after completing his university studies (Cambridge BA in English; Sussex D. Phil in Social Studies), won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1970. *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991) deconstructs the wartime propaganda about the grit of solidly united Brits. *Disasters and Heroes: On War, Memory and Representation* (2004) is replete with dark humour.

Calder married Jenni, daughter of David Daiches, and after a stint in African universities and some years on the London literary scene, reviewing books for the *New Statesman*, moved to Scotland. He taught for many years in the Open University in Scotland, while remaining active as a writer and promoter of various literary and cultural ventures; the new literatures in English in particular were close to his heart. In 1981 he published a massive historical work, *Revolutionary Empire: The Rise of the English-Speaking Empires from the Fifteenth Century to the 1780s*, which Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* described as a "gripping narrative". He co-founded the Scottish poetry library, and for some years co-edited the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*.

It was an essay placed in this journal that inaugurated my friendship with Angus. We met a number of times in Scotland, and many in Dhaka will fondly remember his appearance at a couple of conferences here. In his heyday his home in Edinburgh would frequently be a centre of memorable gatherings.

Like his first marriage, his second too -- to Kate Kyle -- broke down, so that when he took early retirement from the Open University he was thrown on his own resources. A drink problem that had long bedeviled him rapidly worsened, but not before a fresh burst of creativity. A winner of the Eric Gregory Award in youth, he now began publishing collections of poems, totting up five volumes in seven years. Some time after the appearance of *Gods, Mongrels and Demons: 101 Brief But Essential Lives* (2004), a delightful and zany pot-pourri that both Bernard Crick and Terry Eagleton listed among the best books of the year, he developed Korsakov's syndrome, a form of dementia. It was, however, lung cancer that finally brought about his death. He is survived by four children.

Kaiser Haq is a poet and professor of English at Dhaka University.

On the Death of George Mackay Brown
Angus Calder

Death was bound to come. The great generation is going.
People don't live for ever, and there were
so many of these, the pizzazz Scottish makers -
no wonder they seem to drop now like flies
in autumn. Timor mortis... But it's spring
as George Mackay Brown
would always have been the first to remind us.
There are new generations, regenerations.
We'll be gone before they are consummated.
There is a bitterness in April
passing, the eternal loss of daffodils
but also the sweetness of young faces
which competence and majesty will fill
as they make new worlds out of remote places.



A Kolkata Book Launch

RUBANA

Book launches are daily affairs in Kolkata. The university bookstore at dusk hosted the launch of Rimi B. Chatterjee's novel, *The City of Love* (Penguin India, 2008). The air filled with Moushumi Bhowmik singing "Ami opar hoye boshey achi." Rimi acknowledged her debt to scholars for the Indian Ocean bits in her novel. Finally, Dr. Amlan Das Gupta, English professor at the Jadavpur University, played Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan on a CD Rom drive. The author termed her book as "a non-verbal record of where the spice trade began." The theme was clear: Trade and love.

Set in the early 1500's against the backdrop of Vasco Da Gama's arrival at Calicut,

Fernando, a Florentine who was fleeing Machiavelli's march up and down the Piazza della Signoria, was approaching the phantom city, which, if forbidden to him would make his rubies look dimmer and his camphor smell stale. In Malacca, Fernando, the "red faced... yowling" animal is soon "Frank", the "Frangi" who is captured by the Sultan of Malacca and rescued by Alamgir, the doctor on board 'Shan-e-Dariya'. It is a ship that rests in Chittagong when the pirates are not sailing. And then begins the quest.

Rimi's (teacher of English at Jadavpur University, Kolkata) third novel is a tale of a journey with the changing backdrops of Chittagong, Calicut, Malacca, Gaur and Delhi. The author almost substitutes Edward Said's epigraph to 'Orientalism' ("The East is a career") as she covers almost 500 years with erudition and pride. The East becomes the Ultimate with opportunities of the spice trade. But alongside a commerce that hates war, Rimi couples history and geography to place India and Africa at the centre of vision in maps that preface the written text.

The story begins with the Portuguese arriving with guns and ships to control the lucrative space trade. It then moves on with Fernando, the Castilian trader equipped with a knowledge of the capital. But parallel to Fernando Almenara's "ambiguous journey to the city" (Nandy), the author sketches yet another plot with Daud Suleiman al-Basri, a Moorish pirate aspiring for wealth; Chandu, a Shaiva-Tantric beginner in quest of deliverance; and Bajja, a tribal girl seeking spiritual freedom. There's also a portrayal of an escapist in a Bhairavdas who looks to flee from the mundane in a Tantric system. But what's most central in the novel is the anti-postcolonial twist. While Fernando, the white man has "lice in his hair", living in "the stifling gloom full of rat-stink" and "throws up a foul green liquid," Chandu is "chubby" and "fair and round as the moon" and "his cheeks stuffed with sugar puffs." The notion of the East being the Rude is countered by the West surfacing as "skeletal." Yet, the East is portrayed with metaphors of food trail in the book while the book calls foreigners "mlecchas."

Nearly all shelved books have signs of lead or ink; nearly all readers underline, highlight their favorite points; all write their names on the books and date them... as a stamp of ownership. But it's difficult to pick places in Rimi's *The City of Love* and it's also difficult to own it. The book belongs to history and the lines bear the footprints of the greedy herd. Rimi's novel reduces Western might to pervasive insecurity while the East at no point forfeits liberty. Rather, at the touch of Chandu's hands Fernando's "chest" changes from "crimson to brown." This stands for the ultimate conversion of color and race. The author however cautions that we are confronting "a bad time for the old ways: too many new things have to challenge the shadows where the truth moves." This is the time that Rimi's novel talks about where most of us wear masks which are best unmasked by love and by the city called Ashiqabad, where lovers look at a mirror that reflects their image of the Self and the Other and finally celebrate the conclusion with verses from Bullah Shah:

"O Bullah, the Lord pervades both the worlds;
None now appears a stranger to me."

Rimi B. Chatterjee's novel is a worthy read, specially for those who have special interests in persecutions, decolonization and its attendant pain and pride.

Rubana is a poet pursuing higher studies at Jadavpur University