

SHORT STORY

The Flyover*

REZAUR RAHMAN
Translated by Sabreena Ahmed

There is a two- to three-hour long traffic jam right before and after the grand inauguration of the Mohakhali flyover. The traffic jam is because many high government officials plus security and law enforcement agency representatives are present at the grand event. Undoubtedly for the common run of people the whole thing appears to be a blockade or a battle of sorts taking place. Some of the people stuck in traffic are annoyed. There are also some who are waiting patiently; they think that afterwards the flyover will be a boon to all those who use this road often.

Shamim Chowdhury is one of those patient people sitting silently in their cars. His driver seems a bit annoyed, but Shamim calms him down.

Only a few days have passed since Shamim has retired from government service. Being a mid-level employee, he always had to face pressures from both his superior and subordinates. He used to wake up early in the morning to shower and have breakfast within a set time. Then he would wait for the official transport. Though it was a 9 to 5 job, he usually was the last to leave.

The slanting rays of the sun pierce through the cold morning and warm the inside of the car. While stuck in the traffic jam Shamim thinks of his retirement and pension money. He has planned to go to the Tongi bazaar today, where good fish could be found at reasonable prices.

Shamim is not sure how long the traffic jam near Cantonment-Shahinbag-Mohakhali area may last. Suddenly horns from various cars, tempos and *mishuks* start honking and jolt him from his contemplative mood. His driver Jahangir speaks up, "Now we can cross. There goes the Prime Minister!"

The car goes up on the flyover at a steady pace. Shamim feels lighter as he goes upward slowly. He looks on the left side of the rise—various signboards, the RAOWA club building, the DOHS, a train passing under the flyover with its whistle blowing. The experience of getting a bird's-eye view of the busy city is delightful. Shamim's childhood flashes in front of his eyes. In the empty blue sky of the village, a lonely *Bhubon cheel* floats on its wings. It turns its head to observe the ponds, trees and houses below. From the flyover, Shamim is also watching everything like a *cheel*. Right at that moment, he thought of Bilkis. She must see this! Rabeya will also like this place a lot.



Bilkis arrived late in their lives, after fifteen years of their marriage when all hopes of a child had died. They used to sigh, "Who knows what Allah has in store for us?" Now Bilkis was never out of the sight of her parents from the moment she woke up till going to sleep at night.

Their daughter is almost thirteen, but no one can guess that from the parents' attitude. The moment Shamim came back home from office, Bilkis would jump on to her father's lap and shower countless kisses on his cheeks and forehead. Initially, Rabeya used to feel embarrassed and move her eyes away from Bilkis' growing adolescent body. But now-a-days she has become used to it.

The parents have to eat ice-cream cones or chobars whenever they go out with Bilkis. Rabeya's teeth tingle from the ice-cream but there is no way out from eating *chotpoti-fuchka*, *halim* and other oily stuff on the street. Bilkis would sulk if Rabeya refuses to eat those. Shamim always handles the situation differently. Whenever he notices Rabeya is angry, he tries to make her laugh, "You see, we are from the village. Did we even see or taste such stuff? Though we are eating these late in our lives there is no harm in tasting some of what youngsters eat..."

Rabeya would say, "Why? Isn't our daughter growing up...?" To which Shamim would reply, "Has she grown up that much yet? Everything will be alright in time."

It is noon when Shamim returns from Tongi bazaar, excitedly going over the newly inaugurated flyover again on his way back.

At home Bilkis returns a little late today. She has been to one of her friend's house. Shamim is lying down resting after lunch. Bilkis enters the room and lies down beside him.

"You know, Abba, Dina's family eats too much hot spices. They say that it's a special chili of Rangpur..."

Shamim sits up. "I'll take both of you out to a place in the afternoon. We'll rise towards the sky and see the whole city from there..."

"What kind of place is that?"

"That is what you are going to find out."

"Where?"

"Mohakhali flyover."

"Oh, that place. Last night I saw in the TV that the Prime Minister will be inaugurating it."

"Yes, you're right."

"Then we can go across the flyover to Ashulia... it's so open and refreshing... river on both the sides."

It is almost evening when they start for their destination. Shamim's excitement increases when the car turns upwards from Shahinbag. He nudges Bilkis sitting beside him, "Get ready. We'll rise up to the moon!"

Bilkis dashes cold water on his words.

"What are you saying? It's just a small overpass with a little height."

Shamim tries to suppress his annoyance, "What did you say? It's a flyover that goes pretty high."

"So what? It's not the Vesuvius or the Himalayas."

The whole sky seems to be holding hands in a circle around the flyover. Amidst the

chaos of the crowds returning home from office, Shamim's mind seeks solitude. He thinks of the rivers, ponds, marshes, and trees of the village, the *cheel* flying alone in the emptiness of the noon sky. During these moments of contemplation, Shamim's car has moved up to the middle of the flyover. He looks down on streets that look like black streaks. Then, as a jeep passes from the opposite direction with its headlights on, Shamim spots the body of a young girl wrapped in banana-leaf-green coloured dress. He glimpses the girl's lifeless face, her motionless limbs. Her head rests on the railing. The left leg seems to move a little. Shamim's car passes her by.

He resists turning his head back to look at the girl. He looks at Bilkis. It seems that she has not seen anything unusual.

In fact, she claps enthusiastically, "You're right Abba...! It's fantastic to see the Dhaka city from such height."

Shamim responds with monosyllabic "Yes" and "You're right". He is subdued and absentminded. He looks at Rabeya, who is sleepy. The scene flashes clearly in Shamim's mind.

A young girls' body wrapped in a banana-leaf-green coloured dress. Doubt strikes his mind: "Did I see it right?" It might have been an illusion, created by the evening's light and shadow on a street. "No, how can that be?" he thinks. He has seen everything clearly. The girl was lying along the high railing on the left side. Her body was on the narrow sidewalk. Her face was filled with pangs of pain and distress. But the left leg of the body had moved a little! Did it mean that she is still alive?

A kind of warm vapour spreads all over Shamim's face and ears. His eyes become blurry. Sweat gathers underneath his clothes. He thinks, "Can't we turn the car and go back?"

He feels sure that someone has thrown the girl there. Perhaps murdered her. Or has she been pushed from a running car. Shamim thinks if that has happened, it's possible that the girl is not dead yet! But there is no way to turn back now. He asks himself, "Will Bilkis be able to bear this scene?"

He has no option but to forget about going back. But he cannot calm his mind down. Bilkis is still chattering, "I will bring my friends one day..."

Shamim gives a short reply, "Alright."

They reach their destination, Ashulia, in the evening. Visitors to the place feel lucky to have a serene and somewhat rural lake near the capital. But today Shamim feels detached from the scene. Today a young girl's lank body wrapped in a banana-leaf

green-coloured dress is haunting his trip. After strolling for a while Shamim says to Rabeya, "We should start for home now. It's a long way and it's already past 6 o'clock..."

Rabeya answers, "She has just started eating..."

Shamim becomes anxious, "Look! The place is now deserted..."

Rabeya turns to give him an enquiring look.

It takes more than half an hour for them to leave Ashulia. Bilkis speaks for the first time when they reach the Kemal Ataturk area, "Abba, we have come near that flyover again, isn't it? We'll go upwards again!"

Shamim comes to his senses. He is terrified but instantly controls himself: "No, today we can't go towards the flyover. We'll take some other route."

Shamim is sitting beside the driver. He tells the driver in a low voice, "Listen, Jahangir, let's not cross the flyover and enter into the Cantonment... there will be a traffic jam."

Jahangir hesitates, "Bilkis Apa wants to get on the flyover..."

"Listen to what I say."

As the car enters the cantonment, Shamim remembers his close relative Colonel Iqbal Ahmed. Shamim does not keep in touch with him regularly, but today he wants to talk with Iqbal Bhai, at least on the phone. Is it necessary to inform the police? May be the girl lying on the flyover is still alive!

Shamim looks at Bilkis sideways. Confusion shadows her face when the car passes through cantonment main gate.

"What's this, Abba? Where is my flyover?"

"Have we left it behind?"

"Yes we have."

Bilkis becomes stiff and silent. It hurts Shamim a lot but he has no other way.

Back home Shamim sits in a corner of the drawing room with the telephone in his hand. He describes the whole incident to the colonel, ending by saying, "You see, Iqbal Bhai, the girl might still be alive right now. She can survive if someone helps and takes care of her as soon as possible."

Iqbal sounds doubtful, "You see, Shamim Bhai, such matters are complicated. Who knows where the case will take us..."

"It doesn't matter what it takes, Iqbal Bhai... police or court... please look into it." Shamim cannot close his eyes even for a moment when he goes to sleep. He keeps staring at the ceiling with the scene flashing in front of his eyes.

On nights when Bilkis is very happy or way too upset for some reason, she comes with her pillow to sleep with her mother. Bilkis has slept with them tonight also.

The phone rings. "Iqbal speaking. There's

a bad news. Gulshan police station has rescued the girl... dead... Someone murdered and threw her off. They summoned me to the police station. I did not go. They didn't dare to force me as I am an army officer. They were suspicious about us: Why didn't any other city dweller see it?"

Shamim wanted to say something but Iqbal continues, "That's why I told you not to get involved in such trouble. They have taken your address also."

"Anyway, we have done our duty. A girl murdered, left on the street and we overlook it? How can that be?"

Iqbal's deep voice sounded annoyed, "But this can only bring trouble into one's life."

Shamim lies back and stares at the ceiling for a long time. His eyes droop. The sound of heavy boots moving along the side of his house makes him open them. Shamim sits up as the sound of boots jumping off the boundary wall increases. He gets up and stands by the window. By the light of the faraway lamp post, he makes out men dressed fully in black. They have surrounded the whole house. Two or three vehicles are standing at a distance.

Before Shamim fully understands what is going on he hears someone knocking on the front door. No sooner has he opened it that a man questions him sharply, "Does Shamim Chowdhury live here?"

Shamim stammers out an answer, "Yes. I am..."

"Search him." Someone standing by the side barks out the order.

Two men search Shamim. They inform somebody, "No, there is no weapon. No suicide bomb either."

The commanding voice says, "Put handcuffs on him. You will come with us to the police station. Immediately! You are a suspect in a murder."

"What are you saying?" Shamim tries to say something more.

But the men holding him shout, "Shut up. No talking."

In the chaos Shamim has not noticed when Rabeya and Bilkis have come and stood beside him. He looks at the men and asks, "Can I change my clothes?"

"No."

Shamim has no choice but to go down the stairs with those men in black. Bilkis faints even as her scream rends the night, "Abba!"

*Abridged for publication. Rezaur Rahman is a retired scientist who has been writing Bangla short stories since the sixties. Sabreena Ahmed studies English at Dhaka University.

TORONTO Journal

SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

The maple leaves are turning colour. Almost imperceptibly, they spring upon us a myriad spectacle of molten golds, auburn browns, soft yellows and brick reds. The wind blows cold now and both of these changes leave us gasping at the bewildering splendor of seasonal change.

I was talking to a friend the other day who was on his cell phone, driving along the Don Valley Parkway, when suddenly I heard a gasp and then there was complete silence on his part. When I asked him, he said, "The valley! The leaves! The trees - it is too gorgeous to describe." I knew what he meant.

I had been shopping for Halloween. Our neighborhood is transformed into a little goblin and witches haunt on the 31st of October every year. Mikhaela was going as a lady while Amer was going as a Gothic character this year. I bought some candies for the neighborhood kids who would come around for trick and treats. Around 6.30 in the evening we would be prepared to give out the goodies to the invading hordes of children, while our own kids made rounds of the neighborhood to collect their loot. After it was all over, I would check the candy (for made in China!), stash half of it away, break up the little fights and peace would descend after the gorging on sweets. It's a wonderful time for dentists in North America - they are gleefully occupied with their little charges after Halloween!

Surrounded by the beauty of the seasons and the clamor of Halloween, it is difficult to pen a few lines, let alone a couple of pages. It is at times such as this that I long for 'A Room of One's Own.'

When Virginia Woolf wrote the term "a room of one's own", she meant that for a woman to be noteworthy in the literary world, a woman must have both financial freedom and the spatial ability (a room) in order to write fiction, in order to have some measure of success. She describes the social condition of women in those days as inferior to that of men in terms of the ability to create lasting literature. In those days "the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parent's choice was liable to be beaten up, flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted upon public opinion." Her lot was often the care of children and being in the good graces of her husband and father. Writers who were predominantly men created the fictional women of that time. The fictional women were infinitely beautiful and virtuous but in practicality she was completely insignificant.

A Room of One's Own

South Asian Literature written in English had until very recently been dominated by writers who are men. Fictional women characters were thus seen through the eyes of men, as mothers, wives, sisters, etc. These women were like rarefied, fossilized relics of an unknown era. Only in recent fiction such as that of Jhumpa Lahiri and Shani Mootoo do women characters take on a life of their own. Jhumpa Lahiri's women characters such as Ruma in 'Unaccustomed Earth' straddle dual identities as she is pulled by the desire to ask her widowed father to stay with her after the death of her mother, only to be confounded by the fact that her father does not want to stay with her due to his love for a new-found independence. Her short stories are also longer, more detailed in nuances and description that don't seem to add to the necessary tension of a short story. She tells a story more like a woman, spinning a tale with elaborate descriptions of character and space. Shani Mootoo, a Canadian writer of Trinidad origin (nominated for several awards) in the short story 'A Garden Of Her Own' writes of a protagonist who faces a life without love from her spouse. So she creates a passion (in the form of a garden) to give her life meaning and to provide a creative outlet. Vijai expresses her need for creativity and personal growth in her little garden in the balcony. This search for a better life, for a more meaningful existence in the often hostile world faced by women is often a theme with Shani Mootoo.

As a writer I am often tempted to follow path of my male predecessors. It seems safer, easier to do so. At a fiction-writing workshop that I conducted recently for members of the Desi-Lit chapter in Toronto, we read through several character sketches of South Asian women. I even read a bit about my main woman character. A member of my audience, an aspiring writer called Bruce, asked me "Why is your protagonist so goody-two shoes?" While the mostly South Asian audience identified with her, Bruce the Canadian was not convinced. So I looked at my protagonist again and made some changes that satisfied him. So as I progress with my writing, I am slowly casting off the *pardah* that my protagonist likes to don from time to time (so much like our women), and is finally beginning to take a life of her own.

I will certainly not confine her to the need for "a room of one's own."

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Letter from BOSTON

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I moved to Boston many years ago, and have been living on and off in this city for almost 30 years now. Before my wife Rumi and I came to Boston, and even after that, I used to take pride in my association with Dhaka, where I was born and spent my formative years. I would frequently brag to family and friends about my knowledge of its nooks and crannies, its *oli-golies*, whether in the old town or in its newer parts. But now, after having lived and worked in the city of Boston, I am starting to feel the same way about Boston and its twin city, Cambridge.

Not that I am switching my allegiance to Boston; let truth be told—Boston can't hold a candle to Dhaka. Really? Readers might ask with suspicion in their eyes. To which, my response is an emphatic and resounding "yes". Boston does not offer the variety, color, flavor, and charm that a diehard Dacca-ite like me longs for; nor does it have the same emotional tug. There are no *fuchka* shops around the corner, nor anything resembling the din and bustle of Farmgate or Gawsia market. How much I miss the smell and 'controlled chaos' of Dhaka and its bazaars. I once had, in a flight of hyperbole, described the footpath market in Gulistan the "largest open air department store this side of the Suez". I still recall that after reading this passage, Shahid Bhai, my old editor and mentor at *The Bangladesh Times*, stared at me in bemused disbelief, but then had let it go untouched. So I miss all of that. However, after you have lived in, another city for more than half of your adult life, you develop roots, associations and memories, whether they are your most favorite ones or not.

In Boston there are things one misses. For example, there are no Bengali radio stations that you can turn on to get the latest cricket news or sing along with Bengali jingles. However, it does have one Hindi radio station with two hours of live programming on weekends. The radio program, *Thankar*, has been with us for more than 20 years, and has become a source of family entertainment, even for my kids who do not like the music but enjoy the commentaries in English. Likewise, when we go to Harvard Square, it brings up memories of movies Rumi and I saw and times we spent window-shopping when I was a student. The 'Square', as it is known as to the regulars, always reminds me of my friend Dr. Iftekhar Hossain Gora, who passed away a few years ago. Gora, when we first came to

Boston, introduced us to the Bangladeshi community, to the coffee houses, cheap movies at the Harvard Square Theatre, and best buys at downtown Filenes' Basement. Incidentally, when we were at Dhaka University, it was Gora who had introduced his countless friends to Sakura snacks and Shabbagh markets, and relentlessly explored new eateries on behalf of us.

What triggered my nostalgia was a recent copy of the Boston University (BU) Alumni Magazine and an email from my childhood friend, Kassim (not his real name). The magazine contained two photos of the BU campus on Commonwealth Avenue, an area I lived in as a graduate student in the 1980s. One of them was from 1983 and the other 2008. As I looked at the pictures, I could not but marvel at the changes that has taken place



Charles River

in the last quarter of a century. Wow, a quarter of a century, I mused. So many images came streaming down the memory lane from my earlier days in Boston: Halloween with my children, apple-picking with my wife and friends, trip to New Hampshire to enjoy leaves in fall colors...

The other collection of pictures came from Kassim in New York City, who works on Wall Street but is also immersed in the world of YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and blogs. His emails come on a steady basis throughout the day, and my morning cup of coffee would not be full without the Kassim update as soon as I log onto my office computer. Even at the cost of going off the topic, here is a sampling of the titles from just one day's emails: 'Football and the blonde woman' (joke about dumb blondes),

'How Palin was really selected' (a humorous video about Sarah Palin),

'Roubini predicts prolonged recession' (a serious article on the US economy), 'Atul Rajani Dijendra Geeti' (a YouTube link).

I have known Kassim since our days together in Eskaton Gardens when we were in middle school. Kassim takes special pride in his strong networking relation with the Bangladeshi community in New York, New Jersey and Washington DC. He is the go-to person when I need any insider intelligence, the latest scoop from the expatriate rumor mill, or raise money for charity. The set of pictures Kassim sent me a week ago were some photographs of nineteenth- and early 20th-century Dhaka. I could not take my eyes off a black-and-white, 1904 picture of my alma mater, Dhaka College. I could barely recognize it, trying to place the college canteen and the North Hostel, where I lived for six months, or the yard where Azad (Nizamuddin Azad) and

Kamal (Sheikh Kamal), my friends but on opposite side of the political spectrum, almost came to blows over rival demonstrations.

To cap this write-up, let me turn from nostalgia back to reality. Last Sunday, Rumi and I started out for Cambridge to attend a concert by Haimonti, a Bangladeshi artiste, in Cambridge. It was a bright, sunny afternoon, with temperature in the mid 60s, which is considered almost warm for a fall day in Boston. We were on Memorial Drive, which runs along the Charles River, the major waterway dividing Boston and Cambridge. The sun, which sets early as winter approaches, cast a beautiful golden light over the river—illuminating the cars and building on both sides of the river. Joggers and pedestrians were out in hordes, and sailboats and canoes completed the picture. I looked at Rumi, and saw that she was feeling the same way that I was: Do we park and take a stroll along the river, or do we go inside and say good-bye to such beautiful nature and outdoors? So we parked the car behind the venue, a school auditorium, and crossed the overbridge to the Charles River side, drawn by the greenery, the reflecting sun, and the flowing water.

Maybe, we thought, we'll come back after the sun sets, or maybe we'll just connect with nature this afternoon and attend the concert on a different day.

Dr Shibli is an economist and IT professional in Boston.

Two poems by Razia Sultana Khan

Photo of Five Year Old Girl in Hijab

Enshrouded in white, bound head and body you sit on a prayer mat. No arms, no legs, invisible a white lily in the Snow Queen's land.

Your eyes trapped like the moon in a well.



Mother and Child

Little cells in a beehive the slum desperately teeters to the slant.

Our train grumbles past a hut, built on the fill.

Shards and shingles anchor the blue plastic sheeting,

a roof. The loose ends shudder as the train runs,

past a young woman her child clinging on her hip's crook.

She flings a soiled katha made of old saris onto the roof for the sun to cleanse.

Another sunny day. She takes a deep breath,

folds herself in half, enters the darkness her back to the passing train.

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