

NON FICTION

One Cold Winter Night

SHAHID ALAM

Even after all these years, I am perplexed by the story. I related it to me in 1981, when we were both at Fletcher School in Boston. His story was so startling that I have kept his name secret even now. Like yours truly, he was from a foreign country, a blithe spirit who much preferred sampling life to the drudgery of heavy-duty studies. He expended the minimum effort required to get by with decent grades. For him, that was adequate academic achievement.

On a bitterly cold night, relaxing in the warmth of my dorm room, staccato knocks on my door made me open it to a visibly agitated L.

"What I'm about to tell you," he confided, "can't get out of this room. Actually, I didn't want to tell it to anybody, but I had to talk to someone."

"Go ahead." And I have kept my end of the bargain, until now, after more than a quarter of a century.

"I went out last night with P?"

"Must have been fun."

P was a Vietnam vet, who did a two-year stint there straight out of high school, was demobilized, finished college, and enrolled at Fletcher. He was a fun character, given to drinking, and driving around in a beat-up, sky-blue Chevrolet convertible all over his native Massachusetts.

L was a good friend of mine, and he and I would occasionally hang out together. "More like a nightmare," therefore, confounded me.

"Sounds serious."

"Then listen." He stared at me for a while before beginning. "You know of General O?"

"The American army commander in the Second World War? Of course. What's he got to do with it?"

"Nothing directly, but indulge me. P asked me to accompany him on a long spin away from Boston. Said he knew of a great seafood restaurant...seafood, a long drive, and great company. I didn't have to be asked a second time."

The two went in the car. A couple of happy-go-lucky men in their mid-twenties. Driving without any fixed destination in mind, shielded from the biting cold outside, listening to rock on the car's FM radio. L's stomach began to emit growls of hunger when P veered off onto a road heading to a small town. He pulled up in front of a jeweler's store. He obviously had planned on going there.

"Sorry buddy, I'm also starving. Have to take care of some business. Why don't you come along?"

"OK, what do you have in mind?"

"I'm running a little short of cash. I'm going to sell a couple of Krugerrands."

L knew what the South-African issue Krugerrand was, although he had never seen one before. His curiosity aroused, he was going to ask further questions, but they were already inside the shop, and the owner had come out from behind the counter to greet P. The two obviously knew each other. L was not introduced, and he was a



mute, but very interested, spectator. His friend brought out two fairly large, round pieces of metal from pocket. He knew the colour of gold, and was certain that he was looking, for the very first time, at a pair of Krugerrands. L wondered. P he knew to be tolerant of all races, but apartheid was in full swing in South Africa, and here he was in possession of the system's blood money.

"How much for one?"

"350."

"OK. I'll sell both."

The buyer handed over seven crisp one-hundred dollar bills to P.

"Come again."

"Will do."

As the two got in the car, P chortled: "OK buddy, now let's go get some dinner."

At this point I interrupted L's narration: "Didn't you ask him how he got those Krugerrands?"

"No. Of course, I wondered. But the only bit of information that he volunteered was that he had more of those at home, but said nothing more on the matter."

P drove on, and then stopped in the parking lot of a restaurant nestled in the woods. L wished he could have come during the daytime. He was certain that the view would have been marvelous. The food was first-rate. While they were eating, P said, "I'm going to visit an old friend and her husband. They live close by. Want to come along? It'll be fun."

"As if I had a choice," L told me. "I didn't know the place, and P had the transport. I was pretty sure the visit was pre-arranged, and I was selected to go along for God

knows what purpose."

As they were finishing dinner, P told L about them. "She's General O's niece - his brother's daughter. Her marriage is under severe strain."

"Why?"

"Her husband blames her for it, and they've asked me to come help them if I could. Sorry I didn't tell you all this before, but thanks for coming along."

"Well it's too late to be thinking of doing anything else. Anyway, what's wrong with their marriage?"

"Her younger brother was raped and murdered by a former college football star."

"What?"

"Like I said. It has broken her down, and her husband can't take the strain anymore, especially now that the jury acquitted him of the crime."

L was incredulous. A few weeks ago he had read in *The Boston Globe* of the acquittal of a former star running back of the exact crime that P had just talked about. The running back was an African-American, and L recalled the name of General O in the report. He asked P if it was the same case.

"Yep. The very same."

The two pulled up in front of a bungalow, and were met by a rather disheveled-looking woman and her bearded husband. They greeted L, and made him welcome in their living room. They offered him a beer, and hoped that he wouldn't mind if they took P to the kitchen and talked over some urgent matters with him. L distractedly watched TV in the living room as snatches of loud conversation came from the kitchen. It seemed as if they were planning a hit on the alleged rapist-murderer, and the husband-and-wife team was commissioning P to carry it out. L now concentrated all his attention on the voices from the kitchen in order to hear every word. Caught up in their planning, they had forgotten him in the living room, and were clearly audible in the living room. The words were chilling. L was in a state of panic. He was a foreigner who could be implicated as an accessory to murder. The consequences could be severe.

"You got to do this, P. I want that bastard dead for what he did to my brother," the woman's voice reached L. "Don't worry. I'll take care of him."

L heard some more on the theme, and then the husband's voice came over: "P, your friend must have overheard everything."

"Let's go talk to him. Don't worry about him, he won't talk."

And then they filed back into the room. The husband began: "You must have heard some of what we said. We were pretty loud."

"Yes, some of it," L said, thinking it would be futile to deny, and would only arouse their hostility towards him. "I'm sorry you had to hear all that," said the wife. "But I've got to avenge my brother."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"You know, my husband and I were in the courthouse when the jury let him off. He walked past us, looked at me with his yellow eyes and smiled. The bastard was gloating over what he had gotten away with. That's when I decided I would have him killed."

"Our marriage was falling apart," the husband volunteered.

"We've saved to pay for his death. P's a trusted friend, and I can't tell you how happy I am that he's agreed to do the job."

"You're going to keep quiet, now, aren't you?" the husband eventually voiced the most important words.

"You can be sure of that."

"Don't worry," P jumped in. "L's my buddy. He won't talk."

The party broke up soon after, and they said their goodbyes. The husband and wife were particularly nice to L as they bade him farewell. L was mostly quiet during the long drive back to the dorm.

P was ecstatic. "Hey buddy, my very first contract!" And, after a while, "You're going to keep quiet about it. Otherwise, I'll have to take you out too."

"Don't worry about me. I've nothing to do with it." L settled back in his seat to ponder all the ramifications of the past hour or so, breaking out in a cold sweat underneath his ski jacket. That feeling of dread followed him to his room, and his dream when finally, mercifully, sleep overcame him. He woke up late, and finally decided to talk to someone. And so he knocked on my door. He was in obvious turmoil, and did not know what to do.

"Just don't think about it. And act normally with P," I counseled.

"What?"

"Look, don't worry yourself to insanity. You had nothing to do with it. So don't act like you did."

"You're right. I'll try. But it won't be easy."

After he had left, I went over what he had told me. The whole thing seemed incredible, but L could not have been letting his imagination run wild. At the very least, his demeanour told me he was not.

In the evening, as I was about to go out for a lonely dinner, I heard knocks on my door. P was standing outside. "Want to go to Charlestown?"

"Thought you told me I wouldn't last five minutes in that Irish-American town."

"Neither would I. But Fitz will come with us. We'll be OK." Fitz - Fitzpatrick - was the Irish-American dorm janitor. The legend was that Charlestown did not welcome non-whites. Or even the 'wrong' kind of whites! I thought that it hid IRA fugitives and operatives, and could not trust anyone but Irish-Americans. But I had always longed to sample its delights. Here was my chance.

"Fitz will be with us. We'll be OK. Let's go."

I put on my ski jacket, winter gloves, and walked out with P to the parking lot.

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Letter From Boston: Tidal Basin Raptures

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

Every year, in March, my heart aches to visit Washington, DC, to see the blossoming cherry trees and join the National Cherry Blossom Festival. The trees that surround the huge Washington Mall located in the center of the city start to show the first signs of spring in mid-March and by the end of the month, the cherry trees are in full bloom. For me, the month of March augurs not only spring and rejuvenation; it brings back sweet memories, and not just of the March Madness of past NCAA College Basketball Round of Eight, but also of times we spent in DC - initiated by our friends Raja and Shahinshah - since Jimmy Carter was in the White House.

The National Cherry Blossom Festival commemorates the 1912 gift to the city of Washington of 3,000 cherry trees from Mayor Yukio Ozaki of Tokyo in recognition of the growing friendship between the United States



and Japan. On March 27, 1912, First Lady Helen Herron Taft wife of the then President Taft, planted the first two trees from Japan on the north bank of the Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park. The first Festival was held in 1935, sponsored by civic groups in the Nation's Capital, and was expanded to two weeks in 1994 to accommodate a diverse activity schedule during the trees' blooming. Today, more than a million people visit Washington, DC each year to admire the blossoming cherry trees and attend events that herald the beginning of spring in the US capital.

That brings me to the reason why I pine to visit the Festival every year. Once you've seen cherry blossom one season, you've seen them all, say some. Not for me. Washington, DC, and the early springtime in the Potomac area is part of the annual cleansing we undergo as we are just shaking off the winter blues and wake up from hibernation during winter. Early April in DC is for me and my wife a time to reconnect with nature, and family and friends. It is like what you experience every time you go back to your familiar places in India or Bangladesh. Kipling, put it best, when writing about Lahore, wrote: "I'm in love with this place. I find heat and smells of oil and spices, and puffs of temple incense, and sweat and darkness, and dirt, and lust and cruelty, and above all, things wonderful and fascinatingly innumerable."

I have not been to DC for well over six months. The last time I was planning to go there was in January around Barack Obama's Inauguration Day. But then I gave up the idea after making a few calls to friends living in the DC area. In January, we were not only coping with a severe winter, but also trying to stay afloat as waves upon waves kept on hitting us, almost like a tsunami: the housing crisis, financial meltdown, layoffs, you name it. Since hotel accommodations were all taken, Rumi, my wife had started calling up a few of our friends in DC to find out what their plans were for Inauguration Day. One, who lives on the Metro Line, but about 20 miles away said, "Hey, come on down, the more the merrier!" It turned out that six other guests have signed up before us, and all the bedrooms are already spoken for. "But my living room is very spacious, and has thick carpeting", she proudly announced, hinting not-too-subtly that we will be flooring with six other strangers.

My good friend Shakil coyly told me that he is leaving town because his two-bedroom apartment has been booked by four of his "close" friends and relatives. "I have a few days of vacation time, so I'm going to be in Florida watching all this on TV. But, please feel free to crash, and I have left enough toilet paper and bottled water in the apartment to last a few days." Great, I said to myself! What are friends for, after all.

This time we found out that hotel rooms are still available. However, there are a few cons to the whole trip. In Washington, there will be close to a million people for the Festival. I've also read online and heard on the National Public Radio that roads will be closed to traffic, and the Metro will be overwhelmed. Walking would be the only alternative. If one is willing to walk about 5 to 10 miles from the outskirts, say Arlington or Bethesda, depending on where you stay, then the Tidal Basin area might be accessible on foot. A daunting task, but doable, I assure myself. Moreover, I've done that in my lifetime. I remember once we had to walk from Sheldahl to Kushita town after a whole day of partying to celebrate Tagore's birthday. "But you were much younger then," a voice within cautioned me.

In preparation for the trip, I started to go online to find out what President Obama's plans were for early April. We wanted to visit the White House if the President was in town, and might even be able to catch a glimpse of the First Lady. We have not seen the White House since the barricades went up under George Bush, but with a friendlier President in residence, the 3-4 hours waiting in line to get in might be worth the trouble. At least, I will be able to brag to my grand children, "I visited the White House when Obama was the President."

Dr. Abdullah Shibli is an economist based in Boston, USA.

Kali O Kolom Chaitra 1415 - March 2009

KHOKON IMAM

Contrary to what is bandied about by editors of literary magazines and journals, sometimes Lady Luck does smile on them. Sometimes an issue comes out where intelligence, readability and balance are present in equal, harmonious measure. One such issue is the present volume of *Kali O Kolom*, where my, or any other critic's for that matter, job has been simplified, to merely commending it to regular and potential readers.

If there is any criticism to be made of the issue it is that there are some articles which perhaps could have benefited from greater length, by being given sufficient space to properly explore their intended themes. One such piece is the beginning article by Swapna Majumdar on Rabindranath, where he argues that we Bengalis should go beyond the clichéd ideas that have developed around 'Gurudev' (the title itself an imprisonment of sorts!), and that by indulging and propagating such conventions we lose sight of the true greatness of the man and artist. It is a theme that could have profited from more explication. There is also a fine piece, and a deserving one, on Hasan Hafizur Rahman's poetic technique by Rahman Habib, and a rather difficult, though rewarding, contribution on the role of sound in poetry by Sarkar Abdul Mannan.

Among the short stories an outstanding one is *Nirhorer Chand-Surjo* by Balram Basak, and *Harak, Raan'k Edaypay* by Majul Hasan, with the latter's effort being a luminous experiment with language. In this connection again, one must mention that it would be good if *Kali O Kolom* provided bios of its contributors, since one then could satisfy one's curiosity about the identity of writers such as Majul Hasan. Kalyan Majumdar's story *Shikhor'er Khojay* demonstrates his fluent handling of dialogue - often a failing with writers, where even otherwise accomplished writers display a tin ear for spoken registers and diction. In this regard Selina Hossain too is a writer who also has a finely-tuned ear for dialogue, for the registers and rhythms of rural Bengal, especially fishermen. Gulam Murshid has written, with his usual impeccable scholarship, on Rabindrakumar Dasgupta in the context of the Bengali Renaissance. Coincidentally enough, he reappears again, in a different guise, in a lovely piece by Dipa Bandhupadhyay on letters written by Shyamol Gangapadhyay, and which also evokes, tangentially but movingly, the hardships encountered by Bengali refugees to Calcutta during 1971. How we have forgotten those days of despair and struggle! An in-memoriam on Nareh Guha, who died on 4 January, 2009, gives a rounded picture of the multi-faceted poet, critic (he wrote a memorable essay on Nature in Jibanananda Das's poems), translator and teacher. Among the first-rate art show reviews that are now a hallmark of *Kali O Kolom*, the one by Mounita Basak titled, aptly, *Shetubondhu*, on the 'Kolkata-Dhaka' art show at Kolkata's Birla Hall, where works by artists from both cities were displayed side by side, is informative and heart-warming. No doubt the coming to power of a more 'Bengali', secular party to power in Bangladesh is helping to re-build stronger 'shetus' between the two Bengals. Reproductions of Rafiqunnabi's woodcut '*Shongram*' and Qayyum Chowdhury's *Maach O Pakhir Nodi Paar Howa* are superb, illustrative of the native genius at work in our art world. The recently concluded Chobi Mela has been competently documented by Zahid Mustafa.

Special mention must be made of Mainul Sultan's piece on Chiang Dao, with the writer consistently taking travel writing in Bengali to newer heights, plus a little gem of a poem, '*Ausposhtota*' by the delightful Asad Chowdhury. There are also good book reviews of Shahid Quaderi's new volume of poetry '*Amar Chumbon Gulo Pouchay Dao*', Simon Zakaria's '*Prachin Bangla'r Buddha Natok*' and Bangladesh'er Lokenatok Bisoy ar Angik Boichitra, and Mahmudul Haque's '*Patalpuri*' (re-issued by Sahitya Prakashoni, Dhaka).

As for inside artwork perhaps Ranjit Das Gupta's marvelously fluid illustrations could be utilized more. The cover art in acrylic is by Mansurul Karim, who teaches at the Fine Arts department at Chittagong University, and whose series of paintings in the 1990s titled '*Maath'er Golpo*' deservedly won him critical acclaim.

This is a volume that gives a lot of bang for the buck!

Khokon Imam works for an NGO in Dhaka. His interests are old Bengali movies and Rabindra Sangeet.

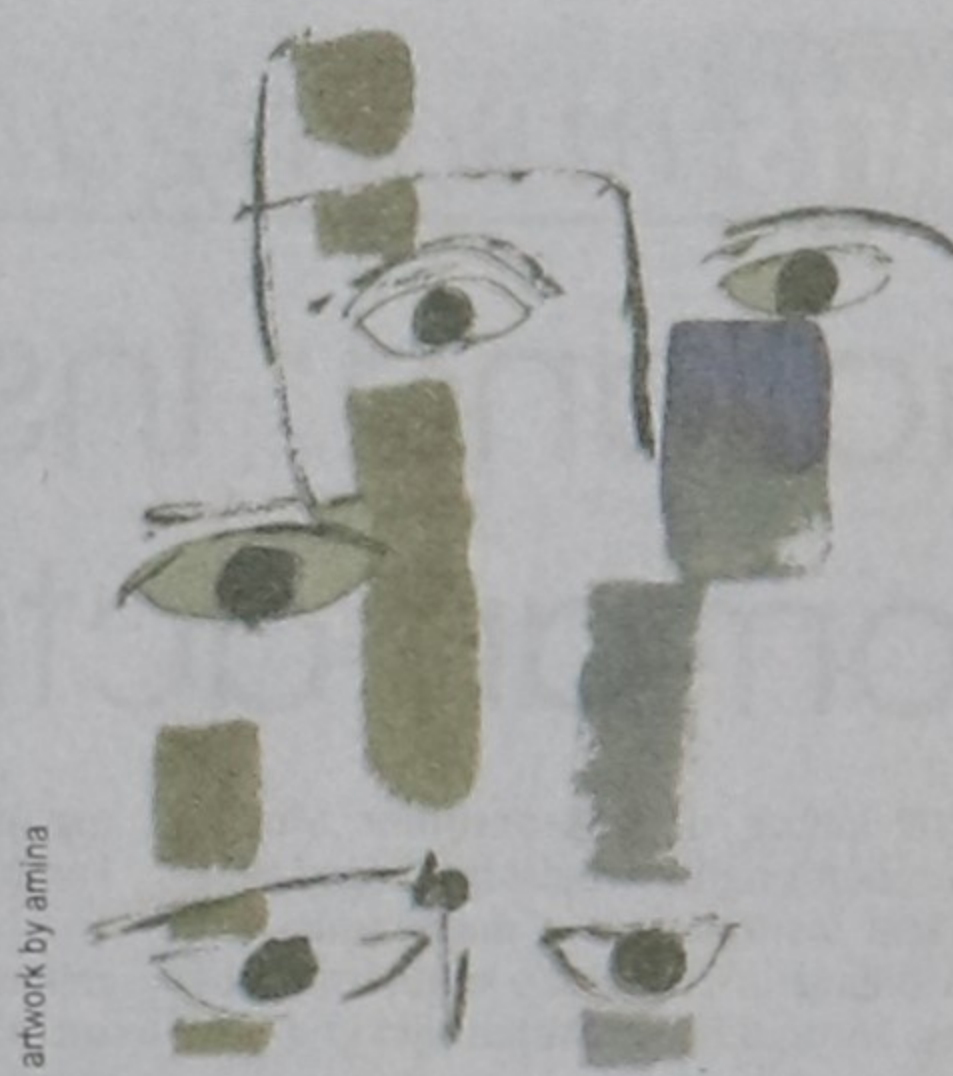


Calcutta, 1971

KAISER HAQ

Puffy with premature age,
The buttons all broken,
Threatened at the seams;
Only the brown belt of the Hooghly
And the stitch of tramlines
Hold back the bursting.

Published in K Haq's *Published In The Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems: 1966-2006*.



Accepting Calamity

MAKID HAIDER
(translated by Simi Rahman)

Traveling from Chittagong to Dhaka, those who were with me at Chittagong station quite a few of them gave me hard, searching looks.

That Srabon evening
Sensing I was trouble
They swiftly descended from the train.

In that compartment, somebody in a black coat
Said in a voice full of scorn
All around is death and destruction
In its midst
Traveling is not safe, just last evening
On this express
Two men vanished at the hands of killers.

Their fault?

Black coat said in tears
Those two were guilty
Of joining the Liberation War Mukts.

(That had been their crime).

Makid Haider is a Bangladeshi poet. Simi Rahman occasionally writes poetry.