

SHORT STORY

Almost

LUNA RUSHDIE

Oh please God, no more! I groan inwardly while trying to maintain an air of cool composure paying particular attention to posture. Back straight, hands clasped on my lap, lips slightly curled with a suggestion of a smile and eye contact. Focus, Focus! I think to myself while trying to ignore the itching on my back that started without warning. It takes all my effort to keep the hands clasped together firmly instead of a frantic back scratch. Yeah, that's it, girl, keep that smile in place, exude non-timid and non-arrogant confidence.

The interview I had just over a week back was really just a formality. The job is in the same department and we all know each other. It is very similar to my current role but comes with a bigger customer portfolio and higher pay.

Yet I have been holding my breath for more than a week now while Mr Would Be Boss Richard Castle hung out on a different corner of the same open floor plan with a stern approach-me-not look on his face. So I refrained from it and tried to appear nonchalant to the many enquiries of workmates. Finally today I have been summoned in this meeting room just ten minutes before I am about to shoot off to a three-hour training course. Now he is leafing through a file and I am, well... still holding my breath.

"Reena, first of all..."

He clears his throat and fixes an official-looking half smile on me. I smile up hopefully and notice his bottle green tie on a whiter than white shirt. Green goes very well with white. How do people keep their shirts so white? I bought numerous white shirts for Asif but they take on this reddish white colour after one wash and look kind of dirty no matter how clean they are. Asif is a bit of a slob on top of that, sooner or later he will have food splatters on his shirts and...

"Thanks very much for your interest in the role and I really appreciate the time you have taken to prepare for the interview..."

He resumes and keeps going. "You have interviewed very well." "Thanks Richard." I smile gracefully. Uh oh, do I have

food bits stuck to my teeth? Perhaps a closed lipped smile is the best option. He continues -- "Really sorry it took us so long to reach a decision." "No problem at all. I understand there was a lot of interest in the position." "Yes, well, a number of high quality applications too. We had many discussions about the five people interviewed for the role and it was a very tough decision to make. Unfortunately we won't be able to offer you the role in this instance."

Huh? Come again? If I were a balloon I would surely pop right now. No, pop isn't the right word, popping requires energy and demands attention, it surprises. But I feel dumbfounded. As if all the air, life and other stuff is leaking out of me, fast. I feel two dimensional, flat.

But I continue to smile -- "Thanks for letting me know, Richard. Is there anything in particular you felt I lack?" "As I have told you, you interviewed well. However, we felt you were not passionate enough about the role." "Passionate?"

"Yes, we did not get that feeling from you." "Well, thanks for the opportunity Richard; I am sorry I will have to run for the training course now, maybe we can catch up later?" "Sure..."

I leave him at half sentence as I dash towards my desk to pick up the

trailed folder. The internal phone rings, I ignore it and walk away. Tears gather in my eyes as I press the lift button. How can you show passion in a job interview? Write "I am passionate" on my forehead? Stupid cheesy bullshit airheads!

Oh come on, lift! I see myself in an old black and white movie type setting, casually dressed in jeans and a jacket, a woollen scarf around my neck and my short hair unruly in the wind. I am walking down a footpath in some European country (Greece? With the lovely old buildings, France maybe, or Italy?), it is drizzling and everything around me has a darker mysterious shade. It's all in black and white except for the yellow autumn leaves silently falling from the trees. I am walking with my head bent down to the tunes of bitter-sweet symphony playing in the background...

The lift arrives. Contrary to everything I hoped for it is almost full of people, so I squeeze in and smile at them weakly, though no faces register in my mind.

I wish I could talk to Asif for a few minutes. This makes me wish we did not have that stupid fight last night. Now I can't call him even if I have the opportunity. It was a fight that started with a silly thing but got serious. Maybe we will end up with a divorce. It started with his socks.

"Asif, how many times have I told you not to leave your smelly socks under

the duvet?" "Huh?" He was browsing the Net as usual. "Asif!" "What?" He looked up briefly, a bit annoyed. "Don't leave your socks on the bed, they stink." "Heh heh." "It's not funny." "Want to smell my feet?" "Want to smell my bum?" He laughed, I laughed. Then we got into this play fight and he held the socks under my nose which almost made me choke. Of course I got really angry and slapped him. But he was still playing and he started tickling me. So I pulled his hair and he tickled me more.

"Get off me!" I screamed. This got his attention. He looked at me, a bit puzzled.

"Look Asif, I can't do this anymore. You never help with the housework. You don't talk to me. It's like we don't live in the same house anymore."

"I help, I do the vacuuming." "Once a month? Who does the cooking? Shopping? Ironing?" "Those are just minor things." "Minor things? Then why don't you do them?"

"If I have to do them, what did I marry you for? Women are only good for a few things. Don't you know what WIFE stands for? Washing, Ironing, Food and Entertainment." He smiled. Even though I knew he was still joking I got furious nonetheless. Eventually I blurted out -- "You asshole! Never forget that I married you as a favour. Don't forget my sacrifices. Would you ever get an Australian passport if I didn't sponsor you? Mind your language when you speak to me."

He laughed in that hurt yet helpless way that made me want to take my words back and hug him with all my strength. But it was too late. His expression was changing; the hurt look was being replaced by an angry one. He said -- "Look at yourself in the mirror first! Don't talk to me about favours. You complained I don't talk to you, that's because we have nothing to talk about! I don't enjoy talking to you. Why should I waste my time with something I don't like?"

"Yes, why of course? Now that you have your visa and passport you don't

need me anymore, that's it, right?" "I never needed you and you are free to leave any time you want."

"Why should I leave? This is my house!" "Because half of it is mine!"

"See you in court then." "Fine!" "Fine!"

So that was that, my marriage down the toilet. I slept in the spare bedroom--well, tossed and turned with very little sleep. Then I came to work to receive the rejection letter in person. A fine day I am having!

In the training room Matt from the corporate section is sitting next to me. He is really good looking and normally immaculately dressed. He is so perfect that he feels very distant even though he is always nice and says hello. Today he looks tired and his suit is a bit worn from up close. I also spot a flake of dandruff in his hair. This comforts me somewhat --

"You look tired." "Yeah, the children kept me up." "The training is a bit boring, eh?" "Tell me about it."

We smile and pretend to concentrate on the notes. I suddenly realise that I have always been an almost person. I never quite got anywhere. From the time I was young, I was chubby. People told me what a beautiful face I had, if only I could lose weight! I always wanted to be an author; my father told me I had potential, if only I worked hard. I feel a paragraph coming on right now. I quickly take out a pen and start writing...

The distance between two footsteps may be infinite. The door that did not open was not firmly shut either but slightly ajar. The breeze escaping through the gaps brought in fragrances of wild roses, dust and an anticipation of rain. Only a hard enough push would have made all the difference. But I hesitated... Sounds a bit too flowery. Nevertheless, I ponder over this all day.

On the bus home I fall asleep. I am tired.

I wake up, I have missed my stop. Everything seems blurry to me. It's almost dark. I get off.

Where am I? It feels like the middle of no where. It's cold and it rained earlier. The streets smell like rain.

There are hardly any street lights on the road. I see a window with lace curtains. There is a light in the living room. A woman is reading something. A man is talking to a child. The TV is turned on. Some windows make me ache. I feel alone.

It is a moonlit night. Streaks of light from the headlights of the passing cars keep intercepting the moonlight on the black pitch of the road. The air carries a misty and dusty fragrance from a previous life and the moon seems to move along with me.

A long time ago when we were children, we lived in Dhaka. We were coming home. My parents, my sisters and me. All five of us in one rickshaw. It was a cool night, but we were huddled together. The moon moved with us and we were surprised. We watched in awe as the moon floated along with our rickshaw. The surroundings were bathed in moonlight on that night of the full moon. The road, the old streetlights that normally spread darkness rather than light, the lone krishnachura tree on the corner, the footpath and the pedestrians, one or two lost cows that walked about on the road, all the other rickshaws and those rare glimpses of cars that sped past were all enveloped by the moonlight and moulded together to breathe as a single being. The air smelt of dust, mist and of shefali flowers that were in full bloom at some unseen corner...

I can smell flowers now. I just missed the next bus back as I was crossing the road. My phone is dead. I would have called Asif otherwise. I wait. A group of young boys in a rusty car yells abuse at me. I feel like crying. A bus arrives eventually. I get off at the right stop this time. The moon still follows me. As I step on my front deck, I notice a silhouette approach me. I hear his footsteps, tired. He steps on the deck from the other side. I see his face now. Asif. The light is on in our living room. Our cat is sleeping on the chaise.

Asif comes closer; the moonlight shines on his hair. His eyelashes seem moist. "I looked for you everywhere," he says.

Luna Rushdie lives and works in Auckland New Zealand.



artwork by amina

Gentle yet passionate nature

FAKRUL ALAM

Looking at Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan, it would have been difficult to imagine the depths of passion in him. He appeared, almost always, a gentle soul, courteous and amiable. Although excitable, he was the type who seemed incapable of offending anyone. A good friend and a popular teacher, he was well liked by all those who came to know him everywhere.

And yet if one takes his poems as evidence, he was a passionate man and occasionally an intemperate one too. The *Collected Poems of Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan*, published by Kolkata's Writers Workshop, assembled from five books of verse published in Dhaka and Kolkata, testify to someone continually disturbed by recent history, by a record of a world falling apart. 'Between Barbed Wires', the titular poem from his first volume of verse puts it thus: "The days are terrible and parlous/And the nights awful and fearful". The nightmares of subcontinental history bothered him a lot, as is evident in the poem 'Dhaka 1971', where he vented his disgust at the atrocities committed that year: "Filthy joints full of hogs/Khaki serpents, querulous apes/crying vultures and barking dogs/All in arson, loot and rape". The second volume of verse, *Inner Edge* (1987), continues to reflect the fissures created by history in his psyche in emotion-soaked verse.

Consequently, Hassan's early poems can at times sound like outbursts; there was too much powerful feelings in them, and obviously not enough tranquility had gone into transforming his raw emotions into poetry. His third volume of verse, *Ashes and Sparks* (1990) record his indignation at America's first invasion of Iraq: "America your Armada is in the wrong Gulf/America come home your house is on fire/There is a lot of smoke in the basement/Where your children spend the night opening coffins/like crates".

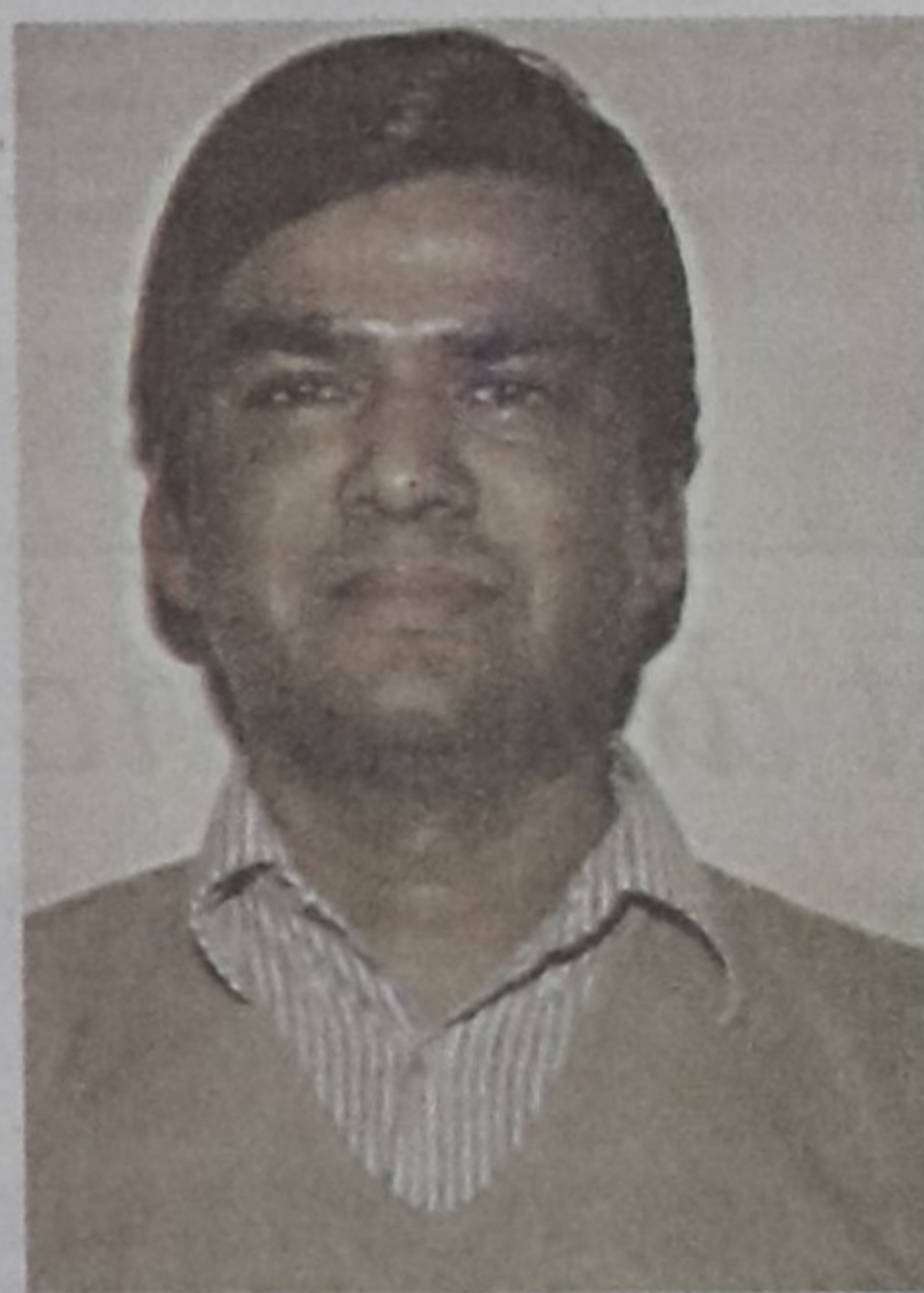
There were many reasons why Hassan was so moved by

the nightmare of contemporary history. He was born in a distinguished family that had moved to Dhaka because of the political impasse that led to the partition of India. He was the son of Pirzada Syed Khajaj Borhanuddin, and the great-grandson of Wazir Ali Naqshbad, Zamindar of Belegghata, Kolkata. In his university years he was witness to the savage scenes of 1971. In the USA he saw that country get stuck in the quagmire of history because of the jingoistic policies of the two Bushes.

An outstanding student, Hassan was placed First Class First in his B A (Hons.) examination and got another first in his MA. Subsequently, he became a lecturer in English at Dhaka University. He left Bangladesh in 1983 and studied at Purdue University, where he was awarded a PhD in 1994. Later, he settled down as Associate Professor in the English department of Claflin University, South Carolina. Since this university has a link program with Dhaka's Stamford University, he came to Dhaka for successive summer sessions of teaching in recent years.

Hassan died of a heart attack in the USA on the 3rd of April 2009. His burial took place in Long Island, New York on the 5th. He will be much missed by his friends, students and dear ones in Bangladesh as well as all those who will remember him for his gentle yet passionate nature, his sincerity as well as intensity, and his abundant love for his people.

Fakrul Alam is professor of English. He is the general editor of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography: South Asian Writers in English* in the well-known Thomson-Gale series.



Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan : In Memoriam

Zindagi ka Safari

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Khwaja Moinul Hassan and I were fellow students - he was a little senior to me - at Dhaka University in the early to mid 1970s.

At that time I used to write for 'Holiday' weekly. When his first book of poems, *Barbed Wires*, came out Khwaja gave me a copy to review. I was not gentle with it. To me it seemed mawkish, 'poetic' stuff, prose lines stitched together with end rhymes.

A couple of weeks later I saw him at Pedro's, a rare appearance, sipping tea and staring at the gurdwara. I said hi. He said hi back. He then added that he had read my review - in an impeccably courteous tone. Pomp may have vanished from his nawab family, but pedigree remained in the bone! On an impulse I sat down beside him and did something I'd never done before or since - I tried to explain why I had written what I did. He may not have agreed with everything I said, but at least he understood where I was coming from.

Then, I don't recollect how, we suddenly went on to Urdu poetry. Perhaps because of a stray remark about my Karachi school days. He was astonished at how many ghazals I had in my memory bank - all gone now! Khwaja too startled me - any amateur can toss off a little Bahadur Shah Zafar or Ghalib, but it took a pro to know Allama Iqbal the way he did; he knew his Ghalib, sure, but what got me was that he knew Daagh

Delhi too:

Zeest say tang ho ai Daagh to jeetay kyon ho  
Jaan pyaree bhee naheen jaan say jaatay bhee nahin  
(If you're bored of life, Daagh, why carry on this long?  
If you aren't enjoying it, why keep on with it?)

I, however, bested him on Akbar Allahabadi and Firaq Gorakhpuri.

Ai Shaikh gar asar hai duan may  
To masjid hila kay dikha  
Gar nahin to do ghoont pee  
Aur masjid to hiltay dekh  
(O Sheikh, if there be force in your prayer  
Make the walls of the mosque shake  
If you can't, down a peg or two  
And see how the mosque shakes.)

We never had a repeat adda. But I felt I knew where his English poetry came from: Urdu poetry, ghazals, couplets, nazms. Perhaps Khwaja couldn't quite (in my eyes solely!) manage the impossibly difficult task of transmuting that noble, profound feeling for and inspiration from it into the English language.

We lost touch when later we both left for the USA. After I came back to Dhaka, in 2005, while on a visit to Dhaka, he called me to touch bases. The conversation was brief; too many years had gone by. We promised to meet, but never did.

Late on the night I got word he had died, I thought of a tea shack and an animated adda over Urdu poetry and poets. And Ghalib's *Zindagi ka Safari* couplet came to mind, which Khwaja would undoubtedly have known: *Rau may hain raksh-e-umr kahaan dekhniy thamey Nae haath baag par hai na paa hai rakaab main* (Life goes by at a gallop, I don't know where it'll end The reins are not in my hands, nor my feet in stirrups).

Khademul Islam is literary editor, TheDailyStar. The mangled translations in the above piece are solely his doing.

The last laugh

RUBANA HUQ

He taught Romantic poetry at the Dhaka University, got his doctorate degree from Indiana, worked at Claflin University in South Carolina, had three books of poems published by Writers Workshop in Kolkata. That is all I know of him. After all, I had met him only through his poems.

Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan's first Writers Workshop volume of verse, *Inner Edge*, was in 1987. The book is dedicated to an 'Estella', his "Gateway to Xanadu". The book's introduction is by Margaret Moan Rowe, Graduate Studies director in the English department and Hassan's dissertation supervisor. She credits him as a poet having an "active vision" with which he honoured his readers.

Hassan's vision had a clarity that could only breed hurt. No 'Tajmahal': "the myth of a moth-eaten civilization" bound him; no Partition set him free:

"I have always been taken for somebody else  
At Allahabad, right after the War,  
They wouldn't let me in...  
At Multan they wouldn't finalise a deal  
Taking me for somebody else...  
For how long can one afford to lose himself  
Be taken for somebody else,  
Rendered nationless on pretended realities..."

Hassan's second collection of verse, *Ashes and Sparks*, published by Writers Workshop in 1989, has a foreword by Professor Jacob H. Adler at Harvard University - who did mistakenly call Hassan an

Indian and appreciated his poem 'Pakistan':

"My heart bled and I could not see  
By raising walls how a people could be free."  
A second introduction in the book is by Professor Timothy A. Brennan, Columbia University, who compared Hassan to the young Brecht: "Some I am told eat to live, some live to eat/and some I have seen eat the living."

Hassan's third WW book, published in 2003, is a collection of his poems from his two earlier WW books plus selections from *Between Barbed Wires* (Provincial Books, Dhaka, 1977), *Burning the Olive Branch* (Ankur Prakashani, 1995). This book is dedicated to his wife, Labiba, and three children who have just suffered the severest of blows.

While his family and friends will have memories to hold on to, readers like me will accidentally and occasionally read him, cherish him, and know that the poet at the end indeed had The Last Laugh:

"He was a deserter running away  
From a war he could no longer believe  
Into a neutral country  
But there was none,  
Now he could not speak even if he wanted to  
Nails all over his tongue  
Made words heavy,  
Sick of telling the truth  
Afraid of fighting  
He dies in a second crossover."  
(The Last Laugh: *Ashes and Sparks*, 1989)

Rubana Huq is a poet and researcher at Writers Workshop, Kolkata.

With him went soul poetry

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

There was a life-sustaining force in Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan. It had always been an integral part of his character. When we met for the last time - after a gap of many years since he had moved to the United States - here in Dhaka some years ago, he bubbled with the old energy. You and I, he told me, can never stay away from literature, for that is life. And I realized anew the sheer force in those thoughts. He was my teacher in the English Department of Dhaka University. In the classroom, he was a poet, carried away to new shores with every line of verse. To me he was in the tradition of Shelley or Byron or both.

In early 1976, Moinul Sir (and that's how I have always looked upon him, despite the very little difference in age) and I acted in a comedy cobbled together by the English Department and shown on BTV. It was called *When Shakespeare's Gentlemen Get Together*. I was Hamlet and I

believe he was Petruchio. There were four others. It was a rollicking time we had. Moinul Sir kept everyone merry. He had this huge capacity for laughter, a laughter that came from deep within his heart.

Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan led me by the hand one January afternoon in 1979 to the Dhaka YMCA. Thereafter, for many years, I was a teacher there. One rainy evening in April that year, he and I spoke of the tragic end of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who had been executed in the predawn hours of the day. On my yearly visits to London, it was a thrill getting calls from Moinul Sir from distant South Carolina, where he taught at a college. The conversations were long, the subjects all-encompassing. He was an incorrigible romantic.

And with his passing goes the gleam that underlines the poetry in our souls. I still hear that laughter streaming from the waterfall that was Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan's heart.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is current affairs editor, The Daily Star.

Errata

Tired eyes are the bane of editors and proofers alike, skewering attention to detail. The piece published last week should have been under 'Short Story' instead of 'Non-Fiction'. We regret the error.