Fatal Attraction

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Self help guide books and advice gurus keep telling us that we must always confront our fears and not run away from them or be controlled by them. This is easily said than done, as most well-intentioned advice tends to be. Some fears are legitimate and you should definitely try to run from them as fast as you can like a giant cobra who may not buy your 'playing dead' act or the knife-wielding drug addict mugger who may pierce your liver just for the heck of it, even after stripping you of your valuables. That is just plain common sense.

But there are other fears that go beyond logic and thus are rather hard to confront or ignore. If one is pathologically fearful of spiders and cockroaches it is all very easy for the brave ones to say *they cannot harm you, you are so much bigger than them*. So what are we supposed to do, pick up the spider and kiss it goodnight? Let the flying cockroach land on one's head so it can nibble on one's scalp? It's all about looks, say we the shallow, chickenhearted. Spiders have eight legs, we have only two; they creep up walls and sprint across rooms while we scram for cover. As for roaches, there are no words to describe their vileness - their oily, brown bodies and disgusting, hairy legs, not to mention their squishy, creamy insides - enough to induce continuous retching. Worst of all, these diabolic creatures can fly and instinctively know those who fear them, making vicious advances when the victim is least prepared (when there is no aerosol, heavy shoe or knight in shining armour, in sight). Logic tells us that they cannot really hurt us physically but what they do is psychologically reduce us to a pathetic, powerless pulp that results usually in hysterical screeching and jumping up and down like a just-slaughtered chicken.

Yet there are other categories of fear that must be endured with gnashing teeth on account of social norms and propriety. Take the coughing stalker who will appear out of nowhere, gather up all his plegmatic production and throw it out on the ground right in front of you, You know it's coming, from the deafening, German-sounding intro - ***aach*** but it's too late to stop the ***thoo***. You don't want to look but some perverse force compels you to see the results of the dreaded sounds, creating yet another nauseating memory in your brain.

It may have something to do with the 'laws of attraction' only, instead of having all the things you desire come breezing into your lap - a few crore taka, free tickets to Disneyland, your personal genie -you get all the things you hate and fear most come hopping and skipping towards you.

It's strange actually, that apart from abhorrent insects even obnoxious humans find their victims so easily. Recently on a rare visit to the National Theatre at Shilpakala Academy, to watch a riveting performance of *Dhaboman* by Dhaka Theatre, I was faced with a terrible dilemma. To go on watching the play that demanded total attention because of its fast-paced drama or stand up and hit the two bipeds behind me with my bag. It started when I was completely immersed in the play that depicted the endearing relationship between a man and the calf he rears and treats like his own child but then has to sacrifice it for the sake of his crippled, human son. It was a performance where not a second could be missed as an array of themes were being played out through dialogue, narration and physical movements.

It was not even fifteen minutes into the play that my ears picked up a distinct snapping and crunching sound behind me. The two uncouth characters were cracking peanuts and happily munching away.

I tried my best not to let the incessant crunching and munching distract me but then one of their mobiles started ringing loudly. I tried giving dirty looks but it's hard to get the desired effect in a darkened auditorium. Just as I was about to go back to the play another mobile rang (despite the repeated requests from the theatre group's director at the beginning of the show, to *please switch off the cells or keep them in silent mode*). This time it was the Second Obnoxious Man who kept up a conversation for about a half a minute during which he asked how the caller was, telling him/her where he himself was, asking whether Deepu and Shila had come back from Khulna... Finally, very reluctantly he hung up. Maybe because I was glaring at him like a frothing bull.

Fuming and cursing I turned back to the stage and managed to calm down. But good things rarely last. Just when the play was reaching its tragic climax, there it was again - snap, crunch, munch. ■