

SHORT STORY

MUNIZ M. KHASRU

The phone rings shrilly in the pre-dawn air. Although Komal is awake, it still gives her a jolt to hear the unexpected sound.

"Who on earth could be calling at this ungodly hour!" she wonders. Or rather, 'Godly' hour. It is, after all, Sehri time.

"Hello?" she says tentatively.

"Apu!" comes back a thrilled answer, echoing down the long-distance line. "I knew you would be awake."

"Hi, Apu," Komal replies to her twin sister Usha.

It has long been their 'twin sister thing' to call each other 'Apu' as a gesture of love. When they were younger, they would persistently ask their parents who was born first. And, just as persistently, their parents would laugh and give alternate answers. So calling each other 'Apu' brought a natural closure to the issue.

"Are you digging into your omelette and toast?" Usha asks Komal.

"Not yet. I was about to make it. How are things with you? How's the fasting going in the grand U.S. of A?" Komal asks.

"I'm fine all day. It's *Iftar* time that bothers me. Snapple IcedTea and sandwiches just don't cut it for me. I miss all of you," Usha sighs. "Wish I was in Dhaka."

"Don't be silly," Komal laughs. "Which part of Dhaka could you possibly miss? The gridlock traffic with everyone trying to get home by *Iftar*? The *yaaak-thoo* of spit hitting your shoes as you walk on the pavement? Or the mystery meat halim sold at road sides?"

"Apu, why do you have to be so cynical?"

"Okay, fine. I'll stop being cynical if you stop being so naive. The grass is always greener..." Komal pauses.

"...on the other side," Usha finishes.

Both sisters laugh into the phone together.

Komal talks for a few more minutes, then hangs up and returns to making her *sehri*. As she whisks the egg with chopped onions and green chillies, it strikes her that Usha has no idea how insular her *Apu*'s life has become.

It's been four years since the sisters' lives took different paths. That was when Komal married Reza. He had been her long-time boyfriend so it was inevitable. Usha knew and adored her 'dulabhai'. But she was unprepared for the loneliness of being without her twin. She had then thrown her heart and soul into her job.

One evening, at a colleague's dinner, she found herself talking to a visiting consultant named Joshua. It was instant chemistry. When it had taken Komal eight years to finally decide on marrying Reza, it took Usha less than six months to fix on Joshua.

Komal stands by the kitchen counter, eating her toast and egg, remembering it all. 'So typical of us,' she smiles to herself. They may look like peas in a pod, but when it comes to life's defining moments Usha and Komal are more like chalk and cheese.

Halfway across the world, Usha is also putting around the kitchen. Try as she might, the intensity with which she misses her sister refuses to dissipate. Which is quite silly, she knows, given today's world of mobile phones, text

Waxing and Waning



messages and Internet chatting. But how do you put into words what it feels like to be a minority in everything you do and everything you are?

You do fifty dollars worth of grocery shopping at the neighbourhood supermarket but still make a pit stop at the distant Indian shop for *kacha morich* and *dhoneypata*. There you see the fat oily *shingaras* - food you wouldn't normally touch back home. But you just have to get it - even at two ninety-nine dollars a piece. You generously offer it to your Bideshi Beloved. He takes the obligatory bite, coughs, gives you a watery smile and says "Lovely, honey. But you have it."

And you are left standing: holding a half-eaten, overpriced *shingara*, loving the man who will bite into spices he hates but also slightly resenting him for bringing you so far away from everything you loved.

There it is. Usha's irksome feeling. It's not that she has any doubt in her mind about Joshua. He is her soul mate. The big picture is clear. It's only when she stares into the details of everyday life that the rosy colours start getting blurry.

Little incidents pop into mind... The forty-minute drive to attend a school friend's dinner. To sit cross-legged on the carpet and eat forbidden amounts of *bhata*, *daal* and *bhuna gosht*. Babble happily in Bangla. Late into the evening, someone had brought out a portable harmonium and everyone started singing '*Purano shay dinar kotha...*' From the corner of her eye, Usha saw Joshua propped against the door, with a pained smile on his face. Kind of ruined her mood. She felt sorry for him. She wanted him to appreciate it the way she did, but she knew it could not be. And so, a few polite moments later, they left - a little sooner than she would have liked...

Usha doesn't address that, doesn't go there.

Because really, if she started down this path, she could not be sure where she would end up. Perhaps not solidly on her feet. 'My exotic *Bangali* feet' Usha mocks herself. She has always worn her dusky ethnic looks well. Even after coming to America, she continued wearing her oxidized bangles, rimming her almond shaped eyes with *kajol*. But over the years her colourful dressing has diluted down to a beige-ness in an attempt to... to what? Dilute the colour of her skin? At least her name isn't explicitly Muslim. That is one thing less to be paranoid about. The aftershock of 9/11 still reverberates in American suburbia. And not just in non-Muslim homes.

"Honey, I'm home!" Joshua calls out from the hallway. Usha is relieved. When he is around she doesn't have such morbid self-doubts. "Sorry, I'm late. Did you have your *Iftar* already?" he asks her.

"Yes," she answers, thinking that her cheese sandwich does not an *Iftar* make.

"So one more day and then it's *Eid* for you. Are you excited?"

"Oh, it's no big deal..." she trails off. She gets flashbacks of festive Dhaka streets, Elephant Road hustling and bustling, sari shops serving hot, sweet coffee till 1:00 a.m. and the harassed ladies' tailors. Usha returns to the kitchen, nothing left to say.

In Dhaka, Komal is unable to fall back asleep after her *Fajr* prayers. She goes through her To-Do list. It is the second last day of Ramzan so everything has to be meticulously planned out for *Eid*. She has finished the *Eid* shopping for her *shoshur bari* and own family. But there's still a lot left to do. Finish making the *shemai* and *kebabs* tomorrow. Clean the rooms thoroughly. Help her mother-in-law make *Eid* dinner. Reza and she must visit their *murubbi* relatives within the three-day-holiday. It's important to visit everyone so no one feels marginalized.

In an ideal world, Komal would love to spend *Eid* day quietly with her husband. No dressing up, no hordes of relatives. Just Reza and her - chatting, eating, watching the television *Eid* specials, listening to music. They had done that last year, had gone off to Cox's Bazaar for three gloriously anonymous days. But after they returned, her mother-in-law's cold demeanour told her it was not something to be repeated. 'Lucky Usha!' she thinks, before drifting off to sleep.

Eid morning. Komal savours her morning cup of tea, and with it the calm before the storm. The rest of the day passes in a haze. After breakfast, the table is laid out with various snacks in anticipation of guests. Retired colleagues of her father-in-law who absolutely adore regaling her with stories of their hey-days; the neighbours down the street, opposite the house, two roads away and down the street on the other side; Reza's colleagues; some uncle's daughter's husband's... The whole world and his wife will come visiting. Except the one person Komal wants to see. Usha.

Usha - who is opening her eyes to *Eid* Day just as her sister is fighting to keep hers from closing. The noises from the kitchen tell her that Joshua is up and helping himself to breakfast. She can smell the strong aroma of coffee. It

makes her heart lurch down to her stomach since it cruelly reminds her of the fluffy *porotas* and *jhali-mishti alur* chops that her mother would be frying on *Eid* day. She gets up from bed and walks to the kitchen.

"Hi, honey. Happy *Eid*," Joshua envelops her in a big bear hug.

Usha holds on to him a smidgen longer than usual. She needs this, needs to feel human contact today more than ever. When she looks up at him, Joshua is quick to notice the glint of tears. "You okay?" he asks, concerned.

"Yes, yes. I'm fine. Still sleepy," she says, giving him a reassuring smile.

"What are your plans for the day? Meeting anyone for *Eid*?"

"No...although the Bangladeshi community has an *Eid* get-together at the Springdale School auditorium at 4:00."

"Well, why don't you go? I can't get out of work that early but I could meet you later for dessert."

Usha doesn't reply. She doesn't want to spend *Eid* day with a bunch of strangers - acquaintances at best. People with whom she has nothing in common, except for the fact that they currently live in the same city. She doesn't want to pay ten dollars at the entrance for an *Eid* dinner, for Heaven's sake! But all she says to her husband is that she has 'other plans'. Joshua promises to take her out for a special dinner and they leave it at that.

As it turns out, Usha's 'other plans' were cleaning the apartment, taking a shower, packing a light lunch and eating it at her customary spot in the nearby park. She watches the young children playing on the grass. Coatless, loosened-tie office executives chomping down their burgers and reading newspapers. Some are enjoying her lunch-break cigarette. Old men playing chess in the shade. She doesn't know any of them personally, but the lunchtime ritual has made familiar faces out of these strangers. And there is some comfort in the companionship of it all. She returns home with a lighter step.

Early evening, as she is about to get ready for dinner out with Joshua, Usha stops and peers out of her bedroom window. The sky hasn't turned completely dark but she still tries to find the moon. She sees it - the delicate silver crescent. It seems so vulnerable, trying to show itself despite the glittering skyscrapers of the city. And with each day Usha knows it will wax until it is full. When it will surely stop at least one hurried, harassed urbanite in his step and take his breath away. Sure, it will wane again. But for each time the moon wanes, it must wax again. Usha smiles at the hope of it.

The phone *ringing* brings her back to the present.

"Hello?" Usha says.

"Hi," Komal greets her. "What are you doing? Staring at the new moon from your eighteenth-floor apartment?" she teases her twin.

"Yep. New moon. Full of promise," Usha asserts.

"Promise, indeed," Komal agrees.

The twins are silent for a while. Then, one says, "Eid Mubarak Apu."

"Eid Mubarak," replies the other.

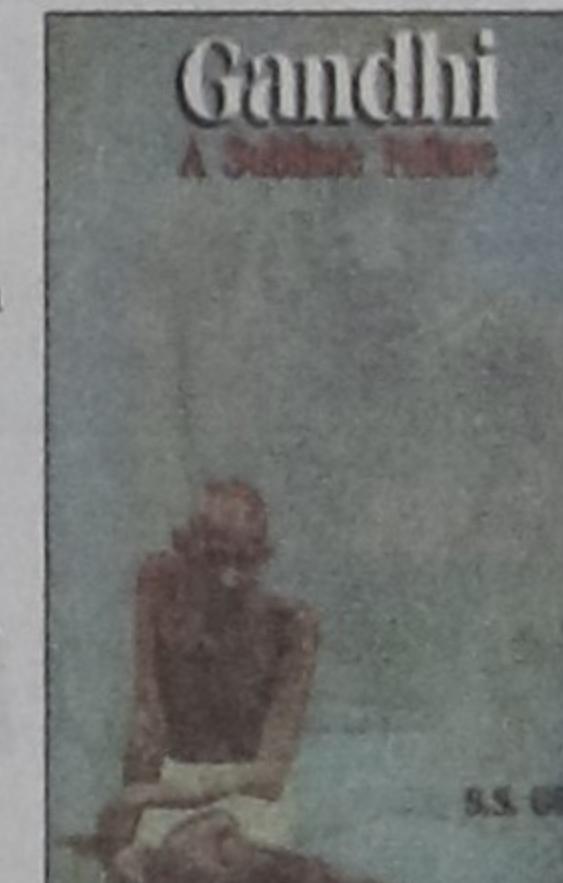
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Literary Roundup

KAHMUL ISLAM

A hot political story currently making the headlines in Indian newspapers is the expulsion of veteran BJP leader Jaswant Singh (who had been minister for foreign affairs, finance and defence at various times when the BJP was in power) from the party for his book on Jinnah. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the militant Hindu fundamentalist organization and the BJP's ideological gatekeeper, is reportedly furious over Singh's assertions in the book that Jinnah has been 'demonised' in official Indian historiography as the sole architect of the Partition, and that Nehru should be held accountable for the tragedy as well. Additional anger was reserved for Singh's denigration of Sardar Patel, the political strongman of Bombay during the pre- and post-independence era and a Congressman whom the RSS has appropriated into its iconic line-up. Jinnah is turning out to be the nemesis of rightwing politicians of India - BJP's 'Jinnah Jinx' they're calling it. In 2005, I.K. Advani faced a similar situation, when on a visit to Pakistan he let loose a hornet's nest around his head by saying that Jinnah was a 'great man' and a 'secular person.' Though that also had not been music to the RSS's saffron ears, Advani's remarks had not invited the kind of harsh retribution it did on Jaswant - Advani, after all, had worked hand in glove with the RSS for a long time and had led the *rath jatra* that down the line led to destruction of the Babri Masjid. Therefore, three days after handing in his resignation from the BJP president's post, Advani was allowed to limp back into the fold.

Revisionist history is the basis of national recidivist and revivalist movements. The RSS is based on a certain reading of Indian history - itself the product of imperial historiography and the Calcutta Asiatic Society's unearthing of a golden, classical era of ancient India. In the RSS's version of the Independence narrative - the one point it is in complete agreement with the Congress - Jinnah's villainous role as Partition begetter is central. And yet, Jaswant and Advani are not entirely alone in their claims to the contrary - there are Indian writers and historians who do not automatically subscribe to the Jinnah as the villain-of-the-Partition view of the subcontinent's history. One such view is in SS Gill's well-researched and well-regarded biography of Gandhi (*Gandhi, A Sublime Failure*; New Delhi: Rupa, 2001). In the chapters titled 'Hindu-Muslim Amity' and 'Gandhi and Partition' Gill lays bare the dislike the two Gujratis - Gandhi and Jinnah - had for each other, and its impact on independence politics. Gandhi comes out the worse for wear, with the Mahatma not quite 'mahat' in his treatment of Jinnah. Jinnah was secular, and deeply Westernized. Had it not been for his bitter experience at the hands of Congress, Nehru and Gandhi, he perhaps would have remained irreversibly so. Until 1937, and afterwards, when he resolved otherwise for political gains, he never quoted publicly from the Quran, nor was



enamoured with religion. Gandhi, on the other hand, was deeply and flamboyantly religious, somebody who "used Hindu symbols and legends in his public discourse" and relied greatly, with political consequences, "on prayer, *tapas*, fasts, asceticism...practices that were rooted in the Hindu religious tradition." Jinnah was personally fastidious in this regard, and the "wearing of khadi, spinning, fasts, vows, *tapas*, *satyagraha*... all smacked of medievalism and religiosity, and Jinnah felt most ill at ease with these 'fads' of Gandhi." Thus it was no surprise that the two from the beginning, in 1920, were at loggerheads about launching the Khilafat movement in the wake of the humiliations visited on the Ottoman caliphate by the Western powers after the First World War. Gandhi supported it, wanting to 'win' over Indian Muslims, and Jinnah opposed it, saying it would encourage Muslim obscurantists, mullahs and reactionary elements. But Gandhi won the tactical battle, with the Congress endorsing Gandhi, even though Jinnah complained, rightly, that he was the more senior Congress leader - by the time Gandhi had made his appearance in India from South Africa, Jinnah had already established close working and personal ties with the first generation of Congress leaders. Jinnah won the intellectual point, though, when Kemal Ataturk dismantled the Ottoman caliphate and founded the modern Turkish state. However, the pattern of continual snubbing and belittling of Jinnah by Nehru and Gandhi (who was also responsible for forcing out Subhas Bose from the presidency of the Congress), was laid, a pattern that is well outlined in Gill's book. It continued till the 1937 state assembly elections. Frustrated, he even left Congress and India for England in 1930, staying there for four years, and coming back only, as legend has it, when he heard that Nehru had opined that 'Jinnah is finished' in Indian politics. In the 1937 elections, Jinnah, Gill writes, "was still a liberal, and his Party pitched candidates against the Muslim landed gentry," but fared badly, in contrast to the Congress. It was in an Uttar Pradesh by-election in the aftermath of that debacle that Jinnah ditched the nationalist line for an exclusively Muslim line, and quoted from the Quran from the first time publicly in an election campaign. After that there was no holding him back and, according to Gill, it marked the beginning of his "ferociously communal line." And though others had formulated it before him - in 1867 Sir Syed Ahmed had said that Muslims and Hindus could not live as one nation - yet in the 1940 Lahore Resolution, by giving brilliant voice to the 'two-nation' theory, Jinnah single-handedly changed the terms of the political debate. What had been a 'minority-majority' argument was now elevated to a 'separate nations' debate. Seven years later, Jinnah had his own state. Of course, in a supremely ironic twist of history, East Pakistani Bengalis, in reaction to a different set of snubs and humiliations, shortly afterwards began applying their own two-nation theory to Jinnah's Pakistan - 'we Bengalis are a separate nation, with a separate calendar and language...' - ultimately, and triumphantly, carve out their own independent state and history in 1971.

But that is another story. What seems apparent is that at least until the mid-1930s, continually sidelined and ultimately with his back forced to the wall by a Nehru-and-Gandhi-dominated Congress, Advani and Jaswant seem right in proclaiming Jinnah as a secular figure, that he has been demonized by official Indian historians, and that perhaps a re-reading is in order. What Sunil Khilnani

in his best-selling yet intellectually accomplished book *The Idea of India* wrote: "Secular and Hindu nationalisms have invariably assigned primary responsibility for Partition to Muslim 'communalism' and separation. Yet recent historical research has complicated the conventions of this picture." Both Advani and Juswant, as BJP figures, of course have their own agendas in terms in wanting to further 'complicate the picture.' To want to knock Nehru and Congress off their central pedestals in the great narrative of India's Independence movement would work to the political advantage of the BJP. In the process, they may have found in Jinnah a vehicle for their purposes.

Much to the visible discomfiture of the RSS. Which makes one wonder: Is Jinnah, for much of his life sartorially assembled in two-tone shoes and double-breasted suits, with a pronounced taste for fine whiskeys, bacon for breakfast and the English language, having a hearty laugh in his grave?

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It Can Be A Nice Life

FARHANA MAZHAR ALI

As long as I don't think about it
Then it's thumbs up, alright, okay

Humming Artic Monkeys
Blue-cheese salad and car keys
Taffy in New Orleans
Why, it's the bees' knees

Then I go shopping
See the black couple kissing
She lissome he honeyed
The line of their bodies
Joining and separating
Seaming and unzipping
Fluid as water
Streaming in blond light
He sucks on her fingers
She untwines her leg from his
An ease that tells me
They've done it once today
And will, again.
Soon, pretty soon

And flower vases tumble
The sun frowns
The thumbs point down
Nothing's okay, or alright

My kissing days are over
Gone the spritzies tease
My loins are un-fizzed
The bed straw-and-piss
I'm married, love's flown,
I'm flat against the wall
Every day's the same
He looks, he doesn't call

One kiss I think is all
It takes for me to see
How, lacking love,
Life doesn't move.

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