

SHORT STORY

Encounter in the twilight zone

GULNAR RAHMAN

I started with few verses, that I Alif, wrote while in the West, which reached the desk of Mr. Z. In the East, the decision maker of whether to print or not to print. Such is the amazing work of e-mails! Meanwhile, the instructions that accompanied the write-up in case it was to be acknowledged, was to use a pen name reflecting my desire to be anonymous. Then one day, to my utter dismay, so to speak, while thumbing through the pages of the newspaper on the net, there it was...my verses and my name staring right back at me! My first venture in creative writing and I had no clue it was accepted. So, I decided to deal directly with Mr. Z, and hence the discourse began. My first e-note to Mr. Z with introduction, thanks and another poem attachment:

"May I address you by your first name? I am submitting another poem for your consideration to print. Let me know if this is what your readers are interested in."

Z: "Thanks. Will surely read it. I am sure it's good. I will get back to you on it. You back in the West? Cheers."

Well, at least the note ended with a question. Perhaps an answer was anticipated? I like resolution, completion and closures. So, I wrote back:

"Yes, I am back and plan to be in town sometime in November. Appreciate your response. If you don't mind, what made you join the newspaper? Besides work, of course! Cheers."

Meaning, I wanted to know a bit more about the person who weighed my words for readership. To be on the same wave length I decided to end my sentence on the same note - Cheers. Then the wait began, at which I am no good. The following arrived after a few more days.

Z: "Sorry to be answering this mail so late. What made me join the newspaper? Etc. etc....the experience has been good so far. You take care."

To my disappointment no reference was made to what I had sent Mr. Z. Perhaps, to be brutally candid was not his style or perhaps the etiquette of the East dictated his style. I was adamant to find out.

"Greetings Z. About the above referenced item (the poem)...any comments? Hesitant to forward more writings without feedback from you."

Z: "Dear Alif. Sure, will use the item. Meanwhile, keep sending more writings."

The message was clear to me; he was not going to comment on my verses. So, he politely addressed me as 'dear' and wanted to further assess my expertise. So I wrote back:

"Hello again, Z. Your writing style is unique. Were you in the West?"

And so I find out, we had something in common; we both graduated high school from the same country. Small world, indeed! This prompted me to write back with an ending "until next time." And then...

Z: "It's a beautiful rain-filled morning here. And I am savoring every moment of it. You take care. Cheers."

I begin to notice he replies to the tune of my writings. Someone sensitive? Ok, so I think, let us continue on this road.

"My kind of day! Same here. The amazing transformation of rust colored leaves into a verdant blanket is really refreshing. I wish it could wash away the distress faced by the general people when the roads are water clogged...will it ever end?"

Z: "Our state of distress? I am not sure it will end

any time soon, if it at all does. The kind of inspirational, intellectually-powered political leadership you expect in modern times is tragically missing in this country. But, yes, I would give anything to be in the West now and walk under the soft-falling autumn leaves. As a Frenchman once said, everything pales, everything palls, everything falls. That's life, isn't it? Transient yet meaningful...Cheers."

Mr. Z. presented a harshly debatable topic, at the same time was benevolent towards something pleasing. all in the same note. I responded.

"Z, are you this generous to all your contributors? Nevertheless, I do look forward to the words you send my way. Understandably, we do not have the rational political apparatus in place, but not to hope? More on the subject later. Keep well."

This, of course, never happened. I was afraid the discourse on political reality could not be entertained in two sentences, nor did I know if it was a welcome subject. So I let go. Instead, commented on his generosity, a word open to interpretation. And sure enough...

Z: "Where did you see generosity here? Would you explain? It's Saturday morning here and I just arrived at work. It should be a fairly easy day and in the evening I plan on going to a solo musical show. You must be asleep now. Look forward to your waking up and then hearing from you. Cheers and enjoy the week-end."

I was puzzled. A reference to an act of his liking along with an invitation to write back! Again, I noticed the reference to something I had written in one of my poems. I wanted to hold back but got drawn in...

"Z, I was actually referring to the professional courtesy that you have extended by acknowledging my notes. There is another reason. I entrust my writings to you for appraisal of readership. But then, I do not like unknowns! By sharing bits of information about yourself you are bridging my apprehension. That, I believe, is generosity."

On a different note, why not hope for the country? I sense the pride in reviving the culture to be already alive and thriving...it is the physical infrastructure and the political system that is so badly wanting. And yes, cheers!"

Z: "It has been a pleasure reading your poetry. I do hope you and I keep that intellectual contact from here on. Isn't it a great feeling to talk and think of matters that have to do with the purely literary? I really value these contacts, this friendship with you."

Well, Mr. Z, you cannot possibly fathom my camaraderie with 'words!' I need to feel the intensity of words, visualize the expressions, be silly, laugh, cry, and understand its meaning, all on my own terms. There is no judgment call between the two of us. It is a safe haven and I feel secure in this friendship. No one has been able to replace it. And so I inquire, "Friendship?"

Z: "Yes, friendship... exploration of the world of intellect, of creative literature. Our shared interest in poetry, fiction and literary criticism. You sound surprised? Are you really?"

Yes, I am surprised, even if Mr. Z used the word 'friendship' in the passing of a simple expression, for me it is a very definitive word. I have never felt the urge to make friends as I never found a person who could play by my rules, and with whom I could share my whims in any form or sense. Don't

get me wrong. Friendly, that I am. But friendship, no matter on what foundation, is something unreachable for me. Nonetheless, Mr. Z caught my attention. In the meanwhile, I read a brief written by Mr. Z in the newspaper. I was pleasantly surprised by his authority over prosodical expressions. I felt compelled to express my feelings.

"Some 7,800 miles plus away, yet you can introduce yourself to a reader...such is the power of words! Linguistic exuberance" (terms he had used in this writing) - that is what sets the keen mind apart; I enjoyed the blend of sarcasm, humor, reality and the tasteful infusion of literature; and more..."

Z: "First, my apologies for not being able to get back to you yesterday. It was a packed day... And thanks for your comments. Yes, the 'Sun God' piece is mine (I had inquired about one of his writings). Where did you get to read that?"

I forwarded him another poem of mine and along with it a piece of my mind. I have the habit of tuning in to not only the written words but direct dialogues as well.

"It was a toss-up between two poems. I decided to go with the one that I have attached. Besides your feedback, I like to know the chance of this poem being selected for print. Of course based on the assessment of your readers! What I wrote in my last note is: Sun God is the only piece to which I had no access! I want to read it."

I was still at it, not ready to let go. I needed to know how good my reflections were in words. Unfortunately, the two versions of technology, or rather conversions interfered!

Z: "I am afraid you will need to send me the attachment again since it has come to me in garbled form. Let me see if I can retrieve the Sun God (review) and as soon as I do it, I'll pass it on to you. I wrote it more than a year ago. Stay well, my friend."

My predicament was how to let someone you do not know hear you from afar? Flustered, that I was! So I wrote:

"For one, I have noticed your attention span to read a note is not very long, you give it a quick scan! Am I right? And hence the attachments..."

When do you take off? Will you write from there? Moments seized; the season; the comfort - family and friends; and what not...your thoughts only, no references to the already established. By asking this am I trespassing? Please read the attachment and comment."

I was still in the mode of 'peer reviewed' works for publication. A total misunderstanding in this case!

Z: "I am sorry about giving you such an impression. As a matter of fact, I do have a good attention span and I do love listening to other people. As for you, I wouldn't dream of not hearing you out fully before making a response. There are times when I am in a hurry. But, here's a promise: I'll try not to be disappointing again."

It's a rather listless Saturday and my mind is in London. Yes, I always do my work from there when I am not here. It's not leave that I take; I simply relocate myself. How is your weekend to be? Take care."

Frankly, I do not know what I was expecting when I wrote the note. I had definitely crossed his turf and felt a bit embarrassed. After all, I do not know the gentleman. So, I added a bit of genuine appreciation and a question about which I was intrigued!

"First, my sincerest apologies. I had no right to

comment on your attention span...as I honestly do not know you! I have totally embarrassed myself.

You said, 'Cheers is what I use when I am quite sure I can relate to someone with ease.' Can you relate...really? How so?"

And then a pleasant surprise, or perhaps a polite way of getting the message across to me. Either way I accepted it.

Z: "There is absolutely no need to apologize. I took your question in a simple, friendly way and I thought it deserved an answer. Besides, I consider you my very good friend, which means you have all the right in the world to ask me anything."

It's the end of the day here. Another day ends; twilight takes hold of life --- and mortality inches forward by a few more steps. Remember that line from Thomas Gray... 'the paths of glory lead but to the grave...? Stay well, my friend."

No acknowledgement but I see an indirect reference to the poem that I had sent Mr. Z recently! Nevertheless, I was beginning to get comfortable enough to ask my unknown contact to define 'a moment captured.' In reciprocation he said, 'a point in time arrested in space because of the light it gives the heart and the colors it brushes the twilight with.' His response was a welcome change. We live in a world of borrowed thoughts, borrowed poems, borrowed literature, borrowed concepts, borrowed theories-all in the name of socialization, grooming, history, knowledge based on evidence etc. etc. Can we not think in present, now and here? Thus I liked Mr. Z's observation more than 'on the continuum of time, the concept of moment becomes redundant as time does not stop, and as such it cannot be captured!' a rejoinder provided by an economist, original though it was. I ventured into my own concept.

It rained while the sun was shining on the field of golden crops

Infinitely beautiful for one to see, millions of droplets of dewdrops

A life breathed gently while laying on my heart

A child connected by the umbilical cord from start

Soon to diverge

I had never known this warmth of love

The peace so complete

Drawn by the wonder of contentment

I hold this day rejoicing the earth, life, existence

Feeling the rain on my face, feeling the sun, I spread my arms and I danced

It is a moment captured, isn't it?

And I often ask myself, what is all this conversation about? My supposedly one-time encounter has become quite lengthy. Friendship, it was not meant to be. Is it simply exchange of words for words' sake among two faceless existences? Whatever it was and is, we continue to exchange notes on books, music, poems, and I have the pleasure to look up, once again, such words as coruscating, lit, cerebral and so forth! Somewhere in between we discovered the pleasure of having mutual interests. And then, once I noted, "I do want to visit the art galleries, see krisnochura in bloom, see the winter mist on green, spin around the city at night...ah, the innocent pleasures; I want to be home." To which, very poignantly, Mr. Z replied, "Come home, Alif."

Some encounters leave imprint without purpose. It is one of those that get gently tucked away with utmost care!

Gulnar Rahman is an academic in Dhaka



The Waiting

JUNAN NASHIT

Let him forget, in a million fannies
I shall not forget, I shall not forget ever

I forgot how to forget
How can I forget?

You said, 'Will you forget? On a distant journey?'

I said, even pain fails at times
And the white cloud is aware of that.

When blue clouds lets out steam
Evening spreads its hair all around.

Someone contemplates-
Where did time vanish?
In this tear-filled emptiness
Have you forgotten
Two paths were filled with shadows
And light

So many dawn, so many noons
Have dissolved in the night
The lips pressing the light of waiting
Now pours out in a rhythm!

After a long while I notice
I am walking on a wrong track.

Translated by Shahnoor Wahid

Let's burn

SUNANDA KABIR

When suddenly the doors of the
closed room are wide open
The maddening wind blows
The gloomy sky fills with bride-seeking
golden light

Or when sends calls to the forests
The first shower of monsoon
And the suddenly raised fragrance
of maiden Shambar comes from the
grass roots
And the village of the Shabars in the
dale
Becomes hazy on the cloudy days

Whenever you come, oh my love
It happens exactly like that
Shivered as the pollen of 'Kadam'
I turn into an abode, a sky,
an earth within a moment

Just like the naked child at birth
I'm now facing the cruel you
Please don't retreat
The moon is yet to set

Allow me to touch the hellish lone
existence of yours
And then burn your effigy forever

NON-FICTION

REMEMBRANCE

The call will not come any more

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

KHADAJA Shahjahan should have lived long, for there was a poetic soul in her. The heart breaks when poets die. When I first met her at the offices of the Morning Sun sometime in the later part of 1990, she spoke to me about her daughter Mithun's poetry she wanted published in the newspaper. Khadija was smart, beautiful with that charming smile lighting up her features and spoke well. I suggested that she go into writing too, for it was obvious she had ideas she could disseminate to people. She said she had arrived from Britain and would be staying with her children, a son and a daughter, in Bangladesh for sometime. She said she would like to keep in touch with me. I gave her my telephone number and was pleasantly surprised when she called a few days later to let me know she had indeed written a small article for the Morning Sun. I asked her to have it sent to me. She brought it over herself.

In the days and weeks following those initial meetings, Khadija and I became very good friends especially since we found we had this enormous desire to talk about books and reflect on poetry. Her poems, which she began to show me, were a strong hint of the intellectual that resided in her. A sudden fury appeared to have come over her. She began to spend what seemed to me her waking hours composing poetry and reading them out to me on the phone. And there was diversity in her poetry, for she covered a wide range of themes. I wondered, as I sipped tea with her at her home, if she would publish her poems in the form of a book. She laughed loudly. When the laughter stopped, I told her I was serious. My happiness certainly knew no bounds when one day Khadija Shahjahan informed me, excitedly and passionately, that her collection of poems was finally out. As she gave me a copy, I looked into her big, sparkling eyes and told her softly that poetry was the path she ought to traverse thenceforth. And she did.

Khadija's was a beautiful soul. She spoke lovingly of her husband, a doctor in the United Kingdom; and it was clear her children were her world. She was proud of her brother, then serving as defence attaché at the Bangladesh embassy in Moscow. The brother, the future Air Vice Marshal Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, would eventually rise to the position of a minister in Begum Khaleda Zia's government. Khadija often would ask me to go to London (and this was when she was planning to go back there after her stint in Dhaka) and work there. I appreciated her sentiment, but since at that point there was hardly any way for me to travel to London, I told her it could not be done. I can still see the disappointment that quickly spread over her bright features. Do a doctorate there, she suggested.

My silence made her go morose. A few days later, Khadija flew off to London. But then, she did come back, to arrange the launch of her new poetry. We spoke on the phone. It was warming, this feeling that she was into writing with a passion.

In early 1997, in one of those fortuitous moments that sometimes light up life, I found myself in a diplomatic position at our high commission in London. A few days after I had taken charge as minister press, my assistant came into my room to let me know that a Bengali lady wished to speak to me on the phone. I jumped for joy when I discovered it was Khadija at the other end of the line. She said she had called just like that and had wanted to know from the people in the press wing if a new minister press had arrived from Dhaka. When she was informed about me, she was so happy she could not believe her ears. We both laughed. I knew that for the next three years (that was my contract with the government) I would once more be in touch with my friend, Khadija Shahjahan the poet. She was calling from Doncaster, where she lived. In a couple of weeks, I was there to see her and her family. She took me around the town and outside it. She drove marvelously. We talked of poetry. It rained. A whole world of aesthetics shone in brilliance in that shower mist.

My friend Khadija Shahjahan, my friend Beauty, lies buried in her village here in Bangladesh. I did not see her as she lay in death, for news of her death had already taken away something from me. I will not hear her speak again, recite poetry again. When I am in London once more, I shall expect the phone to ring, to hear Khadija welcome me back to the city, wanting to know when I would see her. Come to Southgate station, she will say in that state of good cheer, and we will pick you up from there and bring you to our home in Chesham.

That call will not come any more. She belongs to time. The cosmic configurations of space have claimed her being. And the heavens are today the landscape where she sings of her poetry.

(Khadija Shahjahan, poet, writer and social activist, passed away in London on 9 May 2009).



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

On a lazy fall evening last week, the song 'Bhalobashi, bhalobashi, ey shurey kachey durey,' came floating down while I was fiddling with my TV clicker and switched to a Bengali channel. A very familiar Tagore song for me, rendered over the ages by various artistes, Indrani, Bonnya, Sadi, you name it. What captured my attention this time were the last four lines of the lyrics:

They shurey shagor kooley badhon khuley
Atol rodon uthey duley,
They shurey baajey money okaroney
Bhuley-jawa gaaner bani, bhola diner kardon hashi.

A literal translation of these lines would be, "tears swell up as I hear that tune, and my heart resonates with words of long-lost songs and memories of days full of laughter and sorrow."

Unconsciously, my mind drifted away from the song, and I went into a trance-like state. The tune, but mostly the words, had carried me away in time and space, and for a few moments transported me into a magical realm where everything is almost real, from one's past. Memories, ah, those beautiful memories... As Tagore so beautifully articulated it, a tune or favorite lyrics bring up memories. For me, bitter-sweet feelings were stirred up by the verse "bhola diner kardon hashi" happy moments and heartaches from days gone by, days buried in long-lost chapters from the past!

As happens often to me like many of us, a song, smell, food, or even the setting sun would set in motion flashbacks, and soon I would be deeply immersed in the dream world of memories. Needless to mention, the hard drive of my memories is almost full since I seem to save almost every bits and pieces from my past. I have been trying recently to off-load, or "download" in modern terminology, these memories to my laptop hard drive, in the form of essays and scanned photographs. However, memory happens to be of one my favorite sources when I sit down to write, and I also enjoy reading first-person accounts of politicians and listening to family and friends when they share their own war stories, unless they are exercises in self-glorification.

I often ask myself, why do I feel so nostalgic about my college and university days? Is it because I left the country many years ago? Or, is it because distance makes the heart grow fonder? I guess it is a combination of both, and also partially because as you grow older,

Memory lane

everything from one's past appears so much full of glory. Whatever the reasons, I say to myself, "I like it!" My friends, who have a more literary bent than I do, have confirmed to me that some of the best works in literature are memoirs and auto-biographies, or oeuvres informed by one's personal experiences.

A writer in this genre, Marcel Proust, the French philosopher-novelist, has been one of my favorite writers since my Dhaka University days where I heard of him from Aziz Mallam, my French teacher. Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past" has been on my list of books that I promise to finish reading every year recently. Proust was confined to bed when he wrote it based on his recollections of younger years. But his is hardly a memoir-it is a philosophical reflection on life, and themes often intertwined with events from his past and triggered by memories. The richness of his prose and his personal experience can be seen from the following passage:

"She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called petites madeleines, which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place...at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory..."

While writing from memory has its plus points, it is not without some well-known pitfalls. Apart from questions of authenticity, and the minefield of selective memory (many of my readers will recall Hillary Clinton's infamous "I was there" utterance in relation to Bosnian crisis), many writers have been found to unwittingly laying claim to other peoples' thoughts and stories when their memory betrays them. Loss of memory can sometimes lead to serious trouble. Egregious memory lapse may even be labeled as "plagiarism". Modern political and literary history are full of instances where people have used the excuse "Oh, I forgot".

But, there is another aspect to writing from memory. As one of my favorite teachers once said, "If you read but don't remember, then you might find yourself reinventing the wheel." I hate to spend days elaborating on an idea which I thought was an original, only later to remember or discover that I've bor-

rowed the idea from someone else. In graduate school, my advisor often would say, "I like your ideas, and these might well be your original ideas, but please check if someone has not already written about them already". I am glad I more often than not heeded his advice, and spent some time on mastering the art of "Literature Review", which, even in this post-Google era, is an important asset in a writer's toolbox.

Coming back to memory, my best times are when I get to chat about shared memories with my near and dear ones. Very often, I'll remember an incident from the past, and start recounting it to my wife. Before I can finish the story she might say, "Oh, I remember that one..." and we'd both have a laugh together. I read in one of Syed Mujtaba Ali's essays that when the world's humorists meet for their annual convention, they hardly tell a complete joke to each other. They just mention a number which identifies a particular joke and the whole room bursts into laughter. A typical conversation at these gatherings might go like, "yesterday, I came across an airline hostess who forgot to offer me milk with my tea. So I asked her for some milk and then..." Here the speaker might pause for a second and then continue "Do you remember, Joke Number 24?" and the whole audience would start to laugh.

My friend Mushtaque and I have developed an adapted version of the humorists' method. We have many shared experiences and when we talk on the phone, we hardly ever have a conversation without alluding to some incident from our past. So we have developed our own index card system. For example, a few days ago he called from Arkansas, and said, "dosto, I've been feeling a little down for the last few days. Don't feel like doing much in the afternoon."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Well, I have a recipe to get you out of this slump."

"Oh, really? What is it?"

"Well, do you remember Suriya Sen Hall in March 1974, where...?"

I could not finish my sentence and Mushtaque, amidst fits of laughter said, "Alright, alright, I got it. You don't have to spell it out, my wife is within earshot. But thanks for the tips. I'll consider following your prescription as soon as we are done with this conversation."

I hang up may be I'll call him within a few days to check on him, and find out if my "medication" helped.

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