

SHORT STORY

POETRY

The Tree-Man

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TRANSLATION: MOHAMMAD SIMON RAHMAN

THE stretched grilled veranda along the bedroom was so narrow that one would only use it for dry clothes or mature pickles. Yet the young bride from the second floor would come to the veranda whenever she could. There would be only buildings to stare at though some covering the mighty sky; others reducing their distance with the sky with every opportunity, enforcing a chaotic surrounding. The only saving grace was the plot next to theirs, where no building was yet to be built. It had a long tin-shed house where several families lived. The place also contained three trees within its boundary - a date-palm tree, a guava tree and a boroi tree.

Three delightful trees and a piece of the sky that was all that would bring the girl to the veranda. Holding on to the grill, she would look like a bird inside a cage, or the way a prisoner in jail would look like. She had a bit more liking for the date-palm tree, just high enough to surpass the second floor - maybe because it was closer to her. The tree had grown quite a bit in the past one year. She had never seen a date-palm tree so closely before she came to Dhaka. She would feel very close to the tree with so many thorns. How beautiful its greenish leaves were! People avoided the tree because of the thorns, but the birds never cared! They would just dance around its boughs all day long. At times she would turn off the bedroom lights and come to stand on the veranda holding the grill. Sometimes she used to lean against the wall and stare at the beauty of the sky, the stars and of the darkness beyond the tree. She would keep thinking keep talking her only listener being the date-palm tree. It would make her feel like the tree was listening to every word she said with endless interest; it also stirred its leaves in consent to whatever she had to say. It even would get agitated as tears rolled down her cheeks. The tree stirred its leaves as if to silently calm her, soothe her. She loved all these, because no one else used to talk to her that way.

There was not a single person in the city with whom she could talk her heart out. She often wondered if there was anyone left in the whole world maybe not. But once there was. He had beautiful eyes just as Jasimuddin had pictured Saju. Yet, she had named her 'tree-man'! She had failed to hold on to that 'tree-man' of hers because she did not know how to hold on to someone much loved. Later she had come to know that he was lost forever as they could not be together. She also came to know where he had gone. But as time went along, she realized that someone's absence does not stop life from rolling on despite minor tumbles - it has its own pace. Nothing changed since the departure of the tree-man. Only the girl never again touched mangoes, her favorite fruit. Everyone would say that they had never seen a person, except her, who did not like mangoes. But they barely knew - it was not about dislike, it was the pangs, grumble and guilt that hurt her deep within. Since then she has loved the trees like her close ones. Of course the fact that she did not have many to call her own in the packed city did not give her much of an option.

There was no one close to her. There were some relatives living here and there; but none of them she could call her very own. Her husband was no blood relation to her either. Often she wondered why no chemistry worked out between them. She brainstormed a lot of probable answers to that question as well, but she never ticked any of those to get to a conclusion. Once there was a grave probability of her being thrown out of her home when news of the tree-man's departure --- he had hanged himself by a mango tree --- had reached this city. But then it took a lot of convincing from her father to reassure her husband, which also included vows, such as none of her relatives would ever visit her again. That might have been one of the correct answers, but she could not be sure whether it was the right one or not.

From then on, those trees had been everything to her friends, relatives and companions. She would speak to them throughout day. But her chatting days were about to end. One morning she found some people working with some long iron pipes in front of that tin-shed house which, she later came to know, was a soil test. That meant there would be yet another building. She feared the worst for the trees. Since that day she used to wake up and sleep with suffocating pain. She would talk even more with the trees. She used to observe them more closely. She would

especially talk to the date-palm tree just as she used to with her tree-man years ago. The date-palm tree had become the epitome of the tree-man, a silent but attentive listener, stirring its leaves at times as if to calm her down - but no one ever knew that that used to be the most soothing time for the girl.

A month passed. One day she found the dwellers of the tin-shed house leaving with all their possessions. The next day the labourers came and started bringing the house down. They cut down some boughs of the guava and boroi trees to make their job easier. The girl was clearly agitated. Terrible noise, dust, obscene jokes from the young labourers, nothing could stop her from coming to the veranda time and again. She could feel the date-palm tree trying to tell her, "Why are you so stressed? I'm fine, I'm still here, calm down, go inside." One day the girl asked the labour contractor, "Will you cut down the date-palm tree as well? Can't you spare this one?" The contractor had replied, "Might not be possible, but I'll try." The gentleman had tried. Though the tin-shed had vanished, the date-palm tree was still standing. Perhaps the tree could understand



how relieved the girl had felt thinking she had been able to save it. It was as if she had saved her tree-man, never to lose him again.

But her anxiety was back once the digging started for laying the foundation of the building. A drain was closing in towards the date-palm. The girl did not know what to do just as she could not several years back when she was being married off. She just gazed at the labourers working relentlessly. Once, when the contractor saw her, he said, "Sorry, we couldn't save the date-palm tree." The girl did not say a thing. She just came inside and closed the door.

Next morning as her husband left, she opened the door and came to the veranda again, holding her breath. The date-palm was still standing there, but without half of its roots. The drain had crossed past it. The tree was now looking like a one-footed man trying to keep his balance without crutches. Its leaves were looking very pale. As the girl stood there, maybe the tree tried to soothe her with the same words she had been told a few years back, "Why are you sad? There is not much we can do. Try to be realistic, that will help. Just remember, everyone does not get what he

wants." The girl came inside and shut the door.

For the rest of the day she did her household chores like a flawless machine. In the late afternoon she opened the door again only to find the date-palm tree was not there. The place was full of emptiness. As she looked alongside the wall, there she found him. The tree was lying there, sliced into pieces. The leaves were kept nearby.

From that day on, no one saw the girl opening that door again. Neither did the curtains move ever again. Even though her husband would tell her to open the door, she would answer, "The labourers speak dirty. Also a lot of dust comes in."

2. Afterwards, the girl used to lie on her bed in between her household work every now and then. There was none to judge whether the sight of a grown-up girl's lying on the bed looked good or obscene. Actually there was someone - the ages-old long-worn 56 inches' National fan was there to watch her. They both used to watch each other. Truth is, the girl had fallen in love with the fan itself. Anyone who falls in love once might do so again. And looking at the surroundings, the only live object for the girl was the fan. It often seemed to her that actually the fan was in love with her. Because there was nothing else left in the entire universe that would soothe her with soft breeze or make terrible sounds, perhaps asking her to talk about her grief. That much virtue was good enough to be chosen as her lover.

What else can one ask for in one lifetime? The girl used to feel full of life whenever she looked at the fan. For her the machine was no less than a man. A man has two arms to embrace his beloved, whereas the fan with its three arms spreads love and care incessantly. She knew that her husband and the rest of the things in the house were actually inert. The TV can only tire people talking all day, it has no interest or time to listen to what others have to say. It has no traits of a lover; rather at best it can be compared with a canvasser. She never liked this talkative machine; her three-armed fan was far better as a lover.

She used to have various chats with the fan. As it happens to most lovers, their conversation never carried much of a meaning. For example, one day the girl was telling the fan, "You know, I had a tree-man who never came to me, neither allowed me to go to him. But he hanged himself by a mango tree! How cruel! Wouldn't I go with him if he had asked? But he went away alone! But know what? If you love someone, you must let the person know about it, respond to his call for love. Either you have to be responsive or you have to ask for it yourself. You see, you are not a mango-tree, you're a fan. Yet I love you, I can come to you any time you want. I can surrender myself to you. I have plenty of what is necessary to go to you sarees, ornas; there's a table in this room as well. What do you say, should I come to you?"

Then one warm afternoon while enjoying the gentle breeze, the girl asked the fan, "Now tell me, will you come to me, or should I come to you?" She never knew when she was calmed by the touch of love and had fallen asleep.

The fan perhaps was truly in love with the girl. That is why, unlike her human or tree lovers, it could not keep itself away from her. Announcing its immortal love, it had come down on her with a terrible sound, kept its head on her bosom like a true lover. And for the first time the girl could not deny the love that came her way; she accepted it with love in return.

3. On that evening, when the landlord returned home, none opened the door for him. The neighbours told him of a dreadful sound which some of them had heard in the afternoon. Some of them had gone in, breaking down the door. They described the love scene. According to them, the fan was lying right by her side after thrashing her bosom. Still there was no expression of pain in her face. Though there were tear marks in the eyes, there was the joy of love deep inside her mind for sure. Otherwise how could there be such a divine smile all over her face?

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Four poems from EKRAM KABIR

Missing you

Drizzles escort chill through my window panes that don't have your reflections but the clouds say they've spoken to you on their way to summer from yours; and they sprinkle your words on me.

Love

There she was
Like the dew on petals
Uniting with sunlight
Dazzling my heart.

The return

I knew you'd come back
You don't know that way
You can't leave
The air filled with
the smell of date juice,
Not at all.
You'd return to see
the waves on our paddy field
dancing through snaky coun-
tryside path
with your saree lifted
up to your knees
at me, towards me.
Something you left here
not pearls, not riches,
You left me, me
the one who has nestled
in your core, your heart
who'll never leave you.

Rejection

Who am I?
A little more than a rejected
one
A little less than a loved one
I pant for breath of passion
When I am deposed from it
She unseats me every morning
I struggle restoring myself to
my throne
Every night
But there's always a morning
Also waiting to see me over-
thrown
I feel like a cork in the wine
bottle
Every night.

Ekrum Kabir is a journalist and writes poetry and fiction

LONDON NOTES

Like a candle melting down

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THERE is something about bleakness, about snowfall, that causes some of the saddest thoughts to well up in you. The sight of an old book, the death of a celebrated playwright, remembrance of a year, images of graves far away... these and similar workings of the mind are what you encounter as the winds howl and daybreak does not show much of a difference with twilight. You watch the flakes fall to the ground, wondering all the while what could be happening to the birds that on sunlit days flit across your window many times over. And then you hear television dwelling on the danger that birds are confronted with if the snow refuses to melt. These tiny emblems of Creation, always foraging for morsels in the grass, do not have it in their beaks to probe through the snow and into the soil.

Bird life is in a parlous state. You worry as you



move away from the window, to the shelves where you last left your books close to two years ago. Suddenly, it is Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan who comes back from his grave, here in your London flat, to tell you all over again that it would be unwise forgetting him. He died months ago, from illness and heartbreak, and lies buried in some cold cemetery in New York. But here you are, staring right into the book of poems he left you ages ago. Yes, he was every inch a poet, a romantic in the mould of the English Romantics. That passion for poetry, for literature he epitomised in his days as a student and then as a teacher at Dhaka University, a trait he carried over to distant South Carolina, is what you spot again as you turn the pages of *Collected Poems of Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan*. Out of the snow, through the gale and the rain, Khwaja's voice enters your little domain, chanting its own inimitable song:
Like a candle each second melting down / I am dying at the top / This night, it's my night / It's my

time in history / Tomorrow brings the light of another day...

Khwaja did die at the top. We know it now, for in the mountain fastnesses of our souls, he lives on the peaks. He is history, just as he has become part of our history. In the bleak afternoons you plough through in London, you yearn to see him again, to hear his laughter, to know that he will call from Clafin College and speak of his love affair with the country he left long ago to carve a niche in alien clime. He was our Romeo and Antony and Petruccio rolled into one. He was Keats and Jibanananda, in his sensibilities.

Ah, but that is life. That is literature. Or that is how literature injects meaning into life and keeps doing so even when the literary icon you revered, even loved, has passed into the Great Beyond. That is the old message rolling down to us in new packaging from Lady Antonia Fraser. The celebrated historian has emerged, a year into the death of

Harold Pinter, with a work of love on her affair with and subsequent marriage to the playwright. Long ago, in the mid-1970s, as Fraser, then married to Conservative MP Hugh Fraser, said goodbye to Pinter at a social dinner, the future Nobel laureate popped a simple question at her: "Must you go?" And Must You Go? is what she calls her book, or essentially the diary she kept of her growing closeness to Pinter in the old days, before both decided to break the news to their spouses.

Must You Go? is an old-fashioned tale of love woven with ardour in these post-modern times. You recall your own ancient stirrings of the heart, the feeling of desolation that you lived through as you turned the pages of Tolstoy's *Resurrection* in your listless youth. Yes, as Pinter lay in hospital, Lady Antonia Fraser was at his bedside reading *Resurrection*. It was an interaction of souls at its most intense. They were an intellectual power couple who knew the sun was about to set, for one of them, and yet were not willing to let impediments come in the way of their passion.

You walk back to your window. Huddled figures of the young and the old pass gingerly by on the blustery street. You turn the music on. A voice breaks through the gloom with *nodir achhe shagor / phooler achhe bhromor / aar amar achho tumi*. Melody is all. And passion renews itself as Ferdousi Rahman sings *ke amar ondho moner / bondho duaar fello khule / tumi jaante cheyo na*.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is with The Daily Star.

SIKANDAR RANA

Marriage, its pains and its pleasures

A psychologist has cautioned certain categories of men and women against marrying. He seems at least generous enough not to generalize as Thales, an ancient Greek philosopher, did long ago --- "for a young man not yet and for an elder man not at all." I would like to ask readers not to heed the philosopher in order to be spared the confusion and frustration, which such marriage-related views may lead to.

But the psychologist's recipe is well worth consideration. Among those forbidden to marry are careerist boys or girls, men or women. It seems plausible that too much attention to one's career and prospects of getting on with it will mean emotional deprivation for one's spouse. And none can survive long a state of continued deprivation. In the case of a man, he gains his job, but loses his wife.

Another class of hopefuls in marriage, doomed to frustration, is, according to the psychologist, the young man who is still a child at his mother's knee. Too much attachment for your blood relations must also reduce the share in your affection for the newcomer who is going to be more than anyone else in the world for you. And unless you outgrow the toddling whining child in you, you are not going to make a success of your marriage.

But the most important condition for making a married life happy is the generous attitude of the boy, particularly in respect of spending for the comfort and prestige of the girl. And a girl values nothing so much in the world as the tangible chivalrous gestures from one who would love or marry her.

The question is delicate, both to ask and answer: what kind of man attracts a woman? According to Novena, a Roman Catholic publication (London), it is the rake that wins. A woman will feign admiration for virtuous men and will shower her loud-mouthed praise on the goody-goodies around her. But when it comes to making a choice, she will make a dash for the rake. And the woman falls for him in order that she may reform him. But wherever the reformative zeal works too ardently, the consequences may be more deforming than reforming.

Who is a model husband? Opinions will differ on such a vital question. The manliest of men will, however, not be a model husband to a woman who will want to henpeck her spouse. To a shrew, a model husband will be a cringing and obedient husband. A woman of a domineering kind will prefer a husband who is not going to challenge her supremacy in the household and will be glad to play second fiddle to her

in all matters. To a woman who abhors doing household chores the ideal husband is one who can do all these chores, from cooking to babysitting.

Such a husband is emerging in the West. While the wife will be out attending some party or shopping, the husband remains at home, prepares the dinner, feeds the baby and gets the house in shape before the wife returns. Such a husband is a prized possession for any woman. On the husband's part it may just be chivalry. But it is chivalry of a different kind, which has nothing to do with the chivalry of the gallant knights of old.

Years ago a newspaper in Poland organized a contest on what constituted model husbands. Interestingly enough, the prize-winning hus-



bands were those who helped in housework, looked after the children and made small repairs at home. One of the contestants knew how to knit socks and gloves and he was, moreover, a colonel. It seems that to be a husband in the West one has to combine in oneself all the wifely qualities.

Jealousy in married life is very common. In fact, there is in the world no husband or wife who has not felt the anguish of jealousy at some point in life. Jealousy, the green-eyed monster, has been the most constant companion of every married couple since time immemorial. Shakespeare has immortalized the jealous lover in Othello. Jealousy's depredations are manifest in the vast number of divorces that take place every day. The figures for divorce in recent times may, in fact, lead to the conclusion that husbands and wives are more jealous today

than they were in the past.

The emancipation of women has brought them greater freedom of speech and movement. Economic pressure has brought a large number of women out of the home and into the workplace. Today there is much more mixing of the sexes than ever before. It means there are more chances of husbands and wives falling prey to jealousy. The husband may object to his wife's getting too intimate with the boss of the company in which she may be working. The wife is always out to find the faintest sign of intimacy between her husband and his lady secretary. A late return from office, the slightest indifference on either side, long and frequent telephonic conversations by either, can always bring jealousy into play. Conjugal jealousy was furiously demonstrated when in the US Lauren Bobbit severed the genitals of her husband a few years ago, when she discovered the unfortunate man locked in intimacy with another woman. In yet another instance of jealousy a man, in public, drowned his wife in a river after finding her in a car with another man.

Under the thick coat of civilization and sophistication, man's primitive nature has not changed much. In today's world of reason the strict moral codes of the past are much relaxed. There is much more sexual freedom today. But in married life emotion still gets the better of reason.

There is a universal complaint from wives that to a husband his newspaper and cards are more important than his wife and her hundred chores. On an evening when she would like her husband to go shopping with her, he will run away to his club on the pretext of attending an important meeting.

The most frequently heard complaint from wives all over the world, however, is that husbands never remember (some say they deliberately forget) their marriage date. Yet another complaint against husbands is also that they never notice when their wives change their hairstyle or wear a new dress. It is only after a week or two that they will suddenly exclaim, "Oh, when did you change your hairstyle?" Or "When did you buy this new dress?"

Men change after marriage; women do not. Women think it is to their credit that they do not change. Men pride themselves on being realistic and rational. They say they change because the situation after marriage changes. Was it not a man who said: "A marriage begins with a handsome prince dotting over a beautiful princess and ends with a fat, pot-bellied, bald-headed man and a stout, overweight woman growling at each other across the table?"

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