

SHORT STORY

POETRY

The Serenity Room

AINON N

I see the well manicured green rolling hills through tall windows. The crimson of twilight caresses the green creating a glorious ambience. I look around the room and see it distinctly divided into small spaces by open walls, yet there is this perception of continuity. It is an empty room, no chairs, no furniture. I sit cross-legged by the window with most view. No sound, so serene. The silent voice question me, what matters most? Layers and layers of thoughts, of dreams, of calibrated expectations, of give and takes some calculated, some uncalculated overwhelm my mind. Now and here is the time of gentle meditation, of reflections, yet I am not in unity with peace. I delve in my living, I cannot rewind life, cannot fast forward, I can simply take a pause, now...this present...I can retrieve bits and pieces of moments, few words, few smiles, few feelings, silence and embrace these glimpses to relive. Sensing the tingling numbness I open my palm, and then the tears flow, uninhibited, as if there is no answer to the question that forms by what I see.

Flashback: "You want to hear a story?" Ma'a, my four year old, asks. Yes, yes, of course! I turn on my side facing her and she curls up close to my heart. She takes me to her land of golden sky, purple rivers, and green forests where the red dragon and yellow birds live. Together we roam her sunny wonderland of imagination. Together we share the unrestrained laugh, carefree and beautiful. Then as always,

the inevitable question, how much do you love me mommy? As much as the sky, I reply. Sky! How? And I say, because no matter where you go, where you are, you can always look up and there it will be...forever! Tell me more, she insists. Well, even if we are not together, we still will look at the same sky, the same stars, the same moon. You see, the stars dance around the moon because she gives love which is infinite. As she travels sharing love around the world she ebbs, and then she becomes full moon again so she can keep giving...forever. Omnipresent, they are, they never go away! Thus, to her it made sense. Wrapped in this security blanket of love, finally content and tired, she falls asleep! A fairytale, yet I do love her with that much conviction. I see her peaceful face. Her large brown eyes always have this inquisitorial shine what's this life about! To me, her long curled lashes are the miracle of God. Please, please keep her safe, I quietly murmur as I kiss her forehead.

I look at the little box I am holding in my palm. I open the cover and look inside. And thus I read the words written on a small piece of paper that I take out from the oval shaped box, "They end your worries! These tiny people, dressed like the descendants of Mayan Indians in Guatemala, are here to help you. They are called worry people. According to the legend, you tell them your problems and put them under your pillow at night. They will do your worrying for you, so you sleep soundly and wake-up worry-free!" The



box has five red and five green circles engraved on it and contains four half inch figurines, two men and two women. The Worry People with power to heal! The price is still on the box. I have carried this box some nine thousand miles. Several years ago I retrieved it while rummaging through my child's throw-away odds and ends and kept it with me ever since. I saw the box once before, under her pillow, when Ma'a was seven. I was helping her to make-up the bed. Her eyes trusting and with full conviction she informed me it will take her worries away. Well then, I had said, we should leave it under the pillow!"

Today I look at it, sideways up and down, and close my palm once again, as if to keep it secure. If only I had asked what was worrying her then. Today, my belief blends with years-ago belief of hers and I wish with all my heart, if the legend be true then do take her worries away!

As I take a fearless account of forgotten yesterdays I have to admit my life is caught off-balance. Admission, they say is the first step towards healing. And I asked for whom? The answer I was given, 'self.' Healing from what? Loving my child? I also heard a tangle of words: let go, codependency, guilt, accountability, environment induced, be kind to self, get on with life, et cetera et cetera. Where in this equation of healing do the hopes of a being I have given birth fit in? She heals, I heal. How does this simple assertion lend itself to such detailed rendition? She needs to see her dreams for future come to fruition. In process I thus relocate me.

Flashback: "There we were, among friends, laughing and exchanging repartee, brought on by the spirits of good people, or perhaps it was the good spirits that led to enthralling conversations. The discourse grows louder, topics vary, celebrating achievements, the would-be could-be good life and what not! On such occasions Ma'a, by self-reasoning, relegates herself to her room. Such gatherings are not hers. She creates her own entertainment, reading and drawing. She is gifted that way.

With passage of time, she came to being, exceptionally intelligent. Much

travelled. With it friends and challenging peers multiplied. Dreams and hopes were added. Along the way, came the 'system' to lend a hand for correcting her wrong alcohol-binging ways, and from there voiceless crisis became a part of life. Today her tired eyes look into my soul. Please do not leave me, they say, I am not a 'bad' person! You all have given me the crutch called labeling and forced me to lean on it. Little by little you have taken my free spirit away in the name of confession and lessons to learn. I am simply left with one day at a time and no more. I am afraid to feel alive. Your system has broken my dreams, crushed my future, and converted me into something that I am not. I wish to be free, to run along the endless beach, live through many moons..."

My tears simply won't stop! How ironic that we give up our inherent right to the superficial monolith called legitimized power, the system, to empower ourselves! Thus becoming powerless, being able to say nothing, become removed. How does this contradiction work? What circumstances push one into oblivion? Where is the compassion? I look outside the window and realize it has been a while since the moon-lit night gently folded twilight into its embrace. As for me, today I am in a bubble. Perhaps tomorrow, again my hopes will multiply. Right now, my heart beats and life has to go on...

Ainon N writes short stories and poetry. She lives in the US.

Vultures in flight

SHIHAB SARKAR

Our day is breaking below
AT LONG LAST!
Hail the greying, pale sun
Keep pussyfooting, blur the view
of the morons, the sages and the
seers

Let stench lull all of them into
weird fantasies and dreams.
Kill the elves and fairies gliding
in the morning breeze

Look at the dawn below,
Wraiths jostle for space
beside fresh corpses littered in the
open
I am HUNGRY. An old vulture's
hunger deciphers the times' night-
mares
My kin elsewhere feel it right.

They're flying in from the nests of
death

But, look, how the birds drop mid-
way,
weary wings giving in to sandstorms
Yet a few can make it.
As we now fly in a dishevelled band
dying to feast on the rot down there
Our beaks are pressed so tight that
We can't even groan in pain.

Dogs fight over cadavers and carcass
My folks and I fly in
the eerie sun, drooling and swearing,
Nothing more yet an apocalypse
for sure, or a tinkering with the Bomb
Foods bake in the sun, flesh turning
fossils

The fetid smell leaps into the city sky
making our empty stomachs ache,
Pageants of rot march below, our
hoary eyes lick the death-in-life.

Shihab Sarkar is a poet, novelist and journalist.

REMEMBRANCE

Kobiguru's Kanika

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

Little did Onima know how her life was about to be changed forever the day she ventured out after the *boishakhi* storm in search of the luscious green mangoes. The setting was none other than Shantiniketan; and that day, by a stroke of fate, she caught the eye of Kobiguru Rabindranath Thakur.

Since her childhood, Onima, nicknamed Mohor, was brought up and educated in the serene atmosphere of Rabindranath's ashram, at Shantiniketan. Even at her tender age, no one failed to realise that she was gifted with an inimitable voice.

Later on, the world would know her by a different name, a name lovingly christened by Rabindranath after one of his book of poetry, *Kanika*.

Kanika Bandyopadhyay, the legendary singer of Rabindra Sangeet, was born in Bankura in 1924. From that day at the orchard, a special bond started to develop between Rabindranath and her. For well over the next fifty years, she immersed herself completely in music and in the rich artistic surroundings of the ashram. Among her teachers were stalwarts such as Dinendranath Tagore, Indira Devi Chowdhurani, Sailajaranjan Majumdar and Santidev Ghosh. But most importantly, she was one of the rare few proteges to come under the tutelage of the Gurudev himself; she blossomed under his training and guidance.

Many of the leading artistes of Bangladesh, such as Papiya Sarwar, Rezwana Chowdhury Bonny, Sadi Mohammad, Nijhu and Lilly Islam recall the rare experience of training under



more accurate," says Lilly.

In the world of music she was royalty. "We would watch in awe as she would enter the campus. Her personality, her bearing all bore an unmistakable regality. On the other hand, she was modest to a fault. When we requested her to teach us a particular song, she would unhesitatingly suggest Bachchu di (Nilima Sen) who in her words sang the song 'better'.

There was so much more to learn from these stalwarts besides music," adds Lilly.

The most fascinating thing about her was that no one had ever heard her practice songs. "Mohor di would always be humming a tune. That was her unique style of *reuzaz*. That way she could be one with her music at all time," asserts Lilly. Little wonder that Rabindranath especially wrote songs for Kanika to perform including *Keno Noyon Apni Bheshey Jai*, for the play *Tasher Desh*.

Kanika had come to Dhaka for the first time in 1956. Later when she came in 1972 she was quite unwell and was not able to



Kanika in performance

Kanika at Shantiniketan around mid-1970s.

"Shantiniketan had many great artistes as tutors who had been the direct disciples of Tagore, such as Arati Basu, Subinoy Ray, Nimai Chand Boral, Nilima Sen, Alok Chattopadhyay and of course Kanika Bandyopadhyay.

The guru-parampara method of teaching was followed exactly as they were taught by Tagore himself," says Bonny.

"It was like a dream come true," says a wide-eyed Lilly. In 1981, when Lilly joined the diploma course she didn't initially get the opportunity to train under Kanika. Fortunately in her second year, she was chosen in a group of ten, to perform at *Doordarshan* TV of Kolkata; it was then that she trained under Kanika.

"We often used to have classes at her house. As she sat on a stool, we would gather all around her on the ground. She always started by explaining the background of the song, and even in her simple dialogue one could sense how passionately she felt about music. Even when we failed to sing the proper notes, she had always a word of praise for us. She would say, that our voice was similar to the *sarengi* notes and that we should try to be

continue for long. With only the snow-white *Rojonigondha* on her hair, she was an image from the Golden Age of music, as the packed hall listened enthralled.

We listened to her renditions of *Durey kothaye durey durey*, *Rup Shagore Duub Diyechi*, *Aami Rupey Tomay Bholabo Na*, *Anondo Dhara Bohichey Bhuboney* and many more. To her, songs were nothing short of "offerings". "I have learnt so much from nature all around us, and I always try to be completely attuned with it", she would often say.

From that fateful day in the mango grove to the day she breathed her last, she maintained this philosophy. She simply not only performed Rabindra Sangeet, she surrounded herself in its lyrical beauty. And in doing so, she presented the world a glimpse of her majestic art, her priceless 'offering' to posterity.

Kanika passed away in the year 2000. She has created a trend in Tagore songs and millions of followers with her musical depth and has over shadowed many others of her times and beyond.

Sadya Afreen Mallick, a leading Nazrul Sangeet exponent, is Editor, Arts & Entertainment, The Daily Star.

NEELIMA ISLAM

Music and travelling are my passions. Music rejuvenates my spirit to sail smooth against all odds in life and travelling adds to the treasure of experience that strengthens my being. I love going around places, meeting people, making new friends, learning about different cultures and faith and enjoy the wonders that the Creator has so generously blessed this earth with. One has to realise that such pleasures are 'sans' borders and that is when the universal facet comes in.

The latest 'priceless' gem that I have collected for my treasure trove was from my trip to London last month. I was fortunate to conclude my work-related tour through the amazing musical performance by Ustad Rahat Fateh Ali Khan at the Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre.

The organisers, Saregama, very rightly named the concert "Simply Rahat" because this humble, talented and brilliant performer mesmerised the audience with his magical voice and left no space to even think for a moment how time just flew past and the musical journey ended with a yearning for more 'Ye dil mange more!'

Rahat was born in 1974 in Faisalabad of Punjab in Pakistan into the renowned Fateh Ali Khan family of traditional musicians that has been carrying the legacy of Qawwalis for nearly 600 years. The son of Farrukh Fateh Ali Khan, Rahat was trained by his uncle [late] Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan in the art of classical music and Qawwali a devotional music of the Sufis (mystical tradition with Islam). And, hence, music lovers were privileged to see Rahat perform from the age of three years. Who knew then that this prodigy would lead the Fateh Ali Khan group after the passing away of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan?

Rahat's musical foundation was laid with traditional Qawwali but his popularity grew stronger in South Asia with a string of hit geets and ghazals from Bollywood movies starting from 'Jiya dharak dhara' from the movie Kalyut to the latest hit 'Main rahoon na rahoon' from My Name is Khan. And, of course, many more in the pipeline.

Like his uncle Nusrat, Rahat has also expanded the horizon of his appeal to an international audience through collaborating with an eclectic range of talents from the musical world like Eddie Vedder of the American rock band Pearl Jam and also contributing to the soundtrack of some major Hollywood productions Dead Man Walking and Four Feathers in collaboration with the American composer of orchestral and film music James Horner. Also, in 2002, Rahat teamed up with The Derek Truck Bands on the song "Maki Madni" for Truck's album Joyful Noise. More recently, Rahat's vocals were featured on the soundtrack of Mel Gibson's Apocalypto.

Coming back to my breathtaking experience..... I still enjoy revisiting those moments of magic, Rahat in his enchanting role. It was a cold, rainy evening of 20 March in London and my friend Roshni came to pick me up from the hotel at 6 pm a bit early, because the last sentence of the ticket highlighted 'entry for late comers cannot be guaranteed'. No way, we just could not afford taking the risk!! Roshni was the 'golden heart' that went out of the way to gift me this unforgettable experience, giving due regards to my craze for Rahat's musical fervour. While Roshni was enjoying my excitement, I was feeling deep down my heart a sense of gratitude for being blessed with such unique love of a dear friend.

We reached the Royal Festival Hall at 6:40 pm and the show was to begin at 7:30 pm. Gosh, how will the 50 minutes pass? I was thrilled to bits unable to fathom the reality of seeing my favourite singer performing live. I love all of Rahat's recitals whether Qawwali or Bollywood hits but the one - 'O re piya' from the movie A Ja Nachle is just out of the world for me. I could listen to this number for days and nights and still not get tired. I kept on asking Roshni, 'Do you think he would sing this?' I really don't know how Roshni was so sure that Rahat would listen to my heart.

Just as the clock struck 7:20 pm, the anchor appeared on the stage and requested all to take their seats. Then one by one members of Rahat's group were invited on stage and introduced to the audience. At 7:25 pm came the fascinating moment and entered the maestro Ustad Rahat Fateh Ali Khan. I couldn't believe my eyes..... there he stood, my idol of music with his humility and matchless posture. The audience's standing ovation and cheerful applaud made it obvious how popular he was. The show kicked off at 7:30 pm with a Qawwali "Ya Ali mawla..." and then one after the other Rahat swayed our hearts with 17 unforgettables - mix of Qawwalis: "A Ja teno ankhiya umeed diya", "Ranjha aya jogi re", "Tere bajoun mein, tere mun mein", "Tumhe dil

lagi bhool jani paregi" and "Ye jo halka halka sa suroor hai" and Bollywood hits like "Lagi tum se man ki lagan", "Jiya dharak dharak", "Naino ki mat suniyo re", "Mein jahan rahoon", "Tere oar, teri oar" and of course, "O re piya". I felt like my heart would stop beating....he was brilliant!!

After he sang "Dum mast qalander", the anchor came in to announce the closing but he audience chanted "more, more" and the very modest Rahat obliged us with "Afreen Afreen" originally sung by his uncle Nusrat. With this number, Rahat ended the 120-minute show that the spell bound audience would love to re collect again and again. This was the second of his series of show in the UK the first was in Manchester on 19 March and the others were scheduled for 21, 22 and 23 March in Birmingham, Leicester and Scotland. Rahat had toured the UK several times in the past the first time was in July 1985 at the age of eleven, with his uncle Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan at a concert in Birmingham.

Words would never suffice to express how moved I was not only by Rahat's sparkling performance but by the loyalty of this great artist towards the audience, the sincerity with which he had rendered each number giving variation to the delivery of words and the fine fibres of tone with equal skill at high and low scales. Other members of Rahat's group were excellent particularly Amir Ali on tabla and Rashed Ali Khan on saxophone. My friend Roshni and I were not the only ones most of the audience felt that every penny was worth spending



Saregama more popularly known as HMV, UK Master's Voice) in association with Habib Bank US deserves huge plaudits for organising such an outstanding concert with perfection in every aspect - from administrative to technical details. I just cannot let it go unsaid that I was quite impressed by the audience they knew when to applaud, when to inspire, when to sing along with the performer. As Rahat said in his thanks note at the end, "I am honoured to be able to perform for such a lovely audience of London. I have no words to express my gratitude to the audience specifically for singing along with me".

I saw the concert as a unique example of communal/regional harmony. Indian audience lauding a Pakistani singer, Pakistanis, Indians and British music lovers dancing and singing with joy proving again that music has no boundary. In fact it is only human beings that make the boundaries and yet crave for global peace and harmony. How true was the famous Indian lyricist Javed Akhter when he wrote for the movie 'Refugee' "Panchi, nadiya, pawan ke jhonke...koi sarhad na inhe roakey...sarhad insano ke liye hai, bol main ne aur tum ne kiya paya insaan hoake..." (no boundaries can block/obstruct the birds, river and airstream. Boundaries are for human beings; tell me, what did we get as human beings?).

Neelima Islam travels, sings and writes.

SIMPLY RAHAT.....

Birds, rivers, breeze... across frontiers

The man

SUNANDA KABIR

The long night of winter
Freezing cold and dark
The woman standing at the crossway
of Shere Bangla Nagar
A supernatural existence
in misty moonlight!

The car stops
While returning home
The brave journalist enquires:
'Are you looking for a friend
for the evening?
Let's go, it's very cold outside!'

With deep solitude in her eyes
She beholds
Comes nearer the firm sadness
Swinging her saree in the wind:
'The man liked to play with fire
But before realisation of his dream
He went missing
Not known when
Scattering some leaflets here and there
But while leaving he couldn't say:
'See you again!'
Before the sunrise
I came to shower some flowers
here on the road-
Once engraved by his footprints!'

Holding darkness in her heart she left
'Nonsense!' exclaimed the journalist
And got into the car
throwing the butt in the air.

Sunanda Kabir is a poet and novelist.

We end to begin

SYED NAQUIB MUSLIM

When two souls mingle
We spring out.
As we grow,
We see the endless mysteries of
nature.
The cameras of our eyes
Keep on clicking experiences.
The printer of our brain
Keeps on recording feelings.

We learn to live,
We learn to love,
We learn to suffer,
We learn to struggle,
We learn to enjoy,
And lastly we learn to die.

Our ability to face life grows,
Out of our sufferings,
Out of experiences, sweet and bitter.
Death emerges as the deathless fact of
life
Through it we end here
Only to begin there.

Syed Naquib Muslim has been a senior civil servant and writes in literary matters.