

When the heavens fell

MADAN SHAHU

I didn't know it was the day the heavens would fall. It was a holiday. Holidays are so rare in our life. I wanted to spend part of it with you, over lunch or even dinner outside. I was delighted within, for you might not make an excuse for not going out which you usually do. Because you were already scheduled to. I conveyed my desire the previous night. You spoke of your preoccupation with a meeting till noon. Well, after that?

I rang you pre-noon on your cell. You were there waiting for the meeting to start. It was noon and I called you again. The meeting was yet to start and you spoke in aversion: it would be better if I didn't come.

A couple of hours later I called again and heard the meeting going on. I kept waiting for your call, as expected, after the meeting.

Hours rolled by. It was four in the afternoon. You didn't call. Or maybe did not care to call. I couldn't help but call you again. No response.

The whole afternoon rolled out and the whole evening. I kept on calling, only to have no response.

Next morning, after ten, I again called. No reply. Again and again I called, hoping against hope that you would pick it up perchance. But that was not to happen! There was nothing. I felt the heavens falling on me. Actually they fell yesterday, cascading and rolling, hitting and pressing, imposing and suffocating.

How on earth could I ever think that of all persons you would turn away from me, me whom you once thought was your most caring brotherly friend? And you I took as a most inspiring friend, a sister, a Godsend.

Must I believe that of all people you suddenly do not want to see me, do not even wish to talk to me?

What wrong have I done, now or earlier, that might have caused this silence in you? Actually none, never! For how can I do it, even a bit of it, to you? Wasn't it you who inspired me, caused my feelings to move out of the gloom of depression, to forget ageing and to live in throbbing form?

It's you who gave me company along the streets, caused my thoughts to feel worthy of you, shared the facts and acts of everyday life, made me a man of measure in your estimation.

I only muttered, "Just can't go away from you, just like that."

Whatever the glory and money, you are above all. For you really mean so much to me. Without you around I just can't turn a stone.

In turn you told me then you would take time out to go and see me, not let me down.

But now, treading on the same territory you tend to be so apart. What a paradox! How can I go to an assignment away from you and yet find you close? How can I discharge my responsibilities leaving my inspiration and strength behind in you, you who have turned from me?

You who wished me to be esteemed and revered so much and so sincerely have now turned your face. Why? I don't know, just don't know, and I am in agony within.

How can I reciprocate others' esteem of me in deed when I can't be in excellence of act without your inspiration and moral support? Your silence is just not helping me, my dear. It's rather ruining it. But do you want it that way?

I just can't believe you want it that way because it's you who took me or accompanied me to places of worship, festivities and celebrations, where feeling revolves to exuberance and tranquillity, revelation and renewal as you take it. It's you who stayed beside me or let me stay beside you, weaving the bonding deeper. It's you who gave me the feeling of life renewed in spirit, told me that 'age is a state of mind.' Act young and win over! My mind got the spirit of motion to creativity back after decades. So much I believed in you,

so much faith instilled in me, so much I found you as support in heart.

And I still do. I cannot accept your turning away. But you do it, under what tremendous compulsions I don't know. I just can't bear it. Believe me, I simply break into pieces along with the tower of aspirations so passionately built in my heart with your inspiring affinity. I can't help whatever zest for life collected because of your association slide away bit by bit, leaving both my heart and head in worthless vacuum.

I can't believe you want me reduced to such a state of the



demeaning. For it's you who painted the colours of life on me, and I reciprocated, which you liked. It's you who shared agony and ecstasy with me and felt reassured. It's you who instilled hope and resilience, strength and determination in me to overcome anything mundane, anything obstructing lively ventures.

I prepared for the immediate future --- to do some work of worth which if and when recognised may please you to an extent as an evaluation I have been deprived of. You are so kind and conscientious, so much caring, I felt. "I can't go anywhere leaving you. I need not go. I can make it happen without taking any given opportunity." I said, "I can do work of worth with you beside me imbibing support within."

I saw a reassuring smile on your lips and in your eyes. How can I bear that it's you who could withdraw? So suddenly, so drastically, without thinking a bit how devastating a blow it could be for me?

I kept calling the next day, through evening and beyond. No reply. I called your home at night. It was your so amiable spouse, "Hello. How do you do." "Fine, how do you do." And before I could ask about you, he on his own said that you were at your aunt's house, and that yesterday you were out for a meeting and returned in the evening. "Oh!" I said. "If there is anything important I will ask her to call you when she returns." He appeared agreeable.

"No, just to know about the meetings," I responded. I suppressed my anxiety. But it was a mistake. Otherwise I could have heard your voice that night, after an agonising spell of more than thirty hours.

Yes, agony. When a person so beloved and affectionate, so trusted in heart, who was at least within verbal reach till noon yesterday, so suddenly stops receiving even phone calls, just out of nothing, it sparks apprehension, multi-pronged and multi-layered.

Now I could assume you were all right. But that doesn't altogether assuage the agony. This agony is of forced ignorance. I am kept in the dark as to why you have shut the door to information. Only if I could know what or who forced or inspired(!) you to shut it, it could have given me at least a reason to explain your behaviour.

What could be the reason? The depression within continued through the sleepless night. It was not pressure from your family. I was almost sure of that because of the ease with which your spouse talked to me. On the other hand, the question of doubt, not to speak of pressure, from my family side simply doesn't arise. They all hold you in esteem. Then what could have happened for us to come to this pass?

Is it any new acquaintance, who came to your life that afternoon? Veni vidi vici? And asked you to forsake all others, or perhaps only me, and under his spell of charm you obliged? Ah, it's my wild imagination at work. Surely it didn't happen this way?

Or was it any old amorous connection suddenly compelling you to discontinue any relations with me? But, then, are you so compelled, not to talk on the phone even, content in your enormous privacy?

Or should I go by the ordinary assessment: I have come of age, with few attractions left. Why should a young and pretty woman, which you still are, waste time on such a person when young lovers are vying for your favours?

But this ordinary assumption doesn't match our extraordinary relationship. We have come closer, overcoming much distance, the barriers of age and time. It's not exactly amorous, but a sort of revered love and affection. Your place is very deep, in the core of my heart. And it comes with so much of consolation, inspiration, and support. Taking you out from there would only leave a wound equally deeper, never to be healed in the lifetime left to me. It would only hasten the demise. Do you want it to happen that way?

I understand you leaned towards me not under any impulse of love, but rather from a feeling of compassion, gratitude and respect within you that pushed you to provide me with the comfort that comes of support. From my side of course it was a passionate craving, not made apparent, the better to escape prying eyes. You happened to be an embodiment of the angelic and the human; of many dearest ones lost but so cherished in memory; of many so longed for but never reached; of many an imagination not finding a basis in materialisation; of inspiration, support and life.

You may remain indifferent to all that. But I cannot do without you.

I can only wish you all pleasure, all happiness, always to remain youthful and beautiful and hale and hearty.

But can my decline induced by your obstinate absence from my vicinity of sight and sound let you remain undisturbed? Will it not come to your mind even once that there was a friend, a true friend indeed, ready to stand by you in need, any need?

Whatever indifference you try to show, however much rejection of whatever he upheld for you, can you forget him outright? You just cannot, your conscience wouldn't allow you to. Objects around you will remind you of him. Memories of the occasions and times you had with him will haunt you in your solitude.

Or did you behave the way you have to induce in him an aversion towards you?

He is in agony. How relieved can you feel --- at all?

Madan Shahu, a senior journalist, is with the Daily Star

Two young minds

ROKSANA SHIMUKASHI

In the long echoing life
Two young minds;
Found an element so fine,
Like red wine;
And sharpened their last breath,
Through the long echoing death.

The pair loved many years
Endured life what God gave them,
Asked for them no second best
And celebrated life with no other but the
rest;

In the long, long echoing life,
Through the long echoing death.

Both loved the strange thoughts,
Not so sober for the sober though;
Yet knew how to laugh and weep and go;
And all the living mock
Drank the sweet extremity of their passion
rough;

In the long echoing life
Through the long, long echoing death.

The woman talked to make up solitudes
Sounded almost like the pretty autumn-
time,
Blossoming and falling into a bursting
rhyme;

It seemed the man knew this beautiful
woman-soul
And was pleased to see the murdering look,
And dared enough to think to make it whole;
In their long echoing life,
Through their long echoing death.

Travelled many moons
The two young soul
Through the days of their young and old,
Almost shared all the neighbouring mind,
Emptied the cage and let the cage-bird fly
being so kind;

"Fifty years", the woman counted,
"Fifty sweet years", the man whispered,
Their love broods
Still in the long echoing life,
Still through the long echoing death.

Confession

NAHID KHAN

I loved and didn't think
If it was right or wrong
There was no time,
Just as lightning strikes.

I loved and didn't know
If you loved me or not
It didn't matter,
Just as rivers flow.

I loved and knew well
There was no destiny
I couldn't see that far,
Just as a duped butterfly.

I just loved anyway.

Hamlet in Love

A play for our times

MOHIT UL ALAM

Scene One
Location: Dhanmondi Lakeside.

[Hamlet and Ophelia are talking at a corner near Rabindra Sarobar. Friday afternoon on a hot day in May. The coconut tree beside which they are sitting is leaning over the lake, its long serrated foliage creating a deep image in the water.]

Ophelia: If you love me, Ham, you've to understand my situation. My father will never agree. You're my classmate and a friend, and nothing more than that to him. I can't for the life of me disappoint him. If my mother were alive, it could be a different situation.

Hamlet (straightening his legs over the glide of the lake bank.): But this is always the case in the world. In a personal choice of love, family, culture, society, religion, and politics--this thing or that thing is always the problem.

Ophelia (putting a hand lovingly on Hamlet's knee): Ham, try to understand, can we not remain friends of the heart, rather than go for this marriage-knot?

Hamlet: Ophi, my dear, how many thousand times did I tell you that I don't like this kind of gibberish, all which is mouth-washing. Do you think I won't be able to provide you a shelter?

Ophelia: Your love is my shelter, love, I want nothing else. Look even now, as I'm here with you, I'm feeling so much sheltered.

Hamlet: Then?

Ophelia: You sons are different; you don't feel for your fathers as much as we do. I can't manage myself to face a situation where I'll be imagined as disobeying my father!

Hamlet: You girls really have a fucked-up logic. You'll leave your father's house by obliging his choice, but you won't leave his house by disobliging him. Though, it's all the same, you're leaving his house. What it means at bottom you know, you're not racking your brain over leaving your father, he probably isn't on your mind even, it's whom you're leaving with that is bothering you, I know. That means, you are implicitly making a choice between me Hamlet and that guy from America . . . what is his name? Cassio? Yes, Cassio, who your father is all melting about.

Ophelia: That's like my Prince Hamlet, speaking.

Hamlet: No, listen. You give me word that you tell your father that you're not going to marry this Cassio from America.

Ophelia (at first silent, then, gauging the intensity of Hamlet's feelings, breaks into an innocent laugh and offers her hand): Ok, my Prince Hamlet, I do give you my word that

Hamlet: Wait. [He brings out his mobile phone and opens its camera, and holds it with one hand to take a snap of their oath-bound hands together.]

Ophelia: I do give you word that I'll never marry anybody but my Prince Hamlet.

[Then they go to the "Dinghi" restaurant over the lakeside, choose a corner table, order for



some some samuchas and tea. Through the glass panel they watch people passing their time in many different ways. After eating they decide to leave. Ophelia first rises up and goes towards the door. As Hamlet looks on at her departure, Ophelia comes back as if an important idea has struck her mind.]

Ophelia: But Ham, Cassio has sent me the plane ticket to fly to Boston next week. My khala Desdemona is arranging everything; the marriage will take place there. Father will also fly with me.

Hamlet (excitedly): Bullshit, damn your plane ticket, damn your father, damn Cassio, you're not leaving Bangladesh!

Ophelia: How do you mean?

Hamlet: You'll see.

Ophelia (in deep concern, coming close to the table): I hope you won't do anything violent!

Hamlet (with a grin on his face): I might. You never know, Ophi. You're my meaning of life, you only know that!

[Ophelia leaves the place in a most dejected mood, not sure about anything. After she leaves, Hamlet buys a single stick of cigarette, lights it from the rope-fire of the van owner, orders another cup of tea, drinks it quickly in a few gulps, nudges the book under his armpit, and walks slowly off in the descending darkness of the evening.]

Scene Two
Location: Campus Lobby.

[Hamlet and Macbeth are childhood friends, now studying English at the same private university. In between class break they have met at the lobby. Hamlet deeply engrossed in thoughts.

Macbeth opening his laptop to view some pictures on the Facebook. Both of them are wearing jeans, and T-shirts with Bangla alphabets printed all over. They are 22/23 years old. Hamlet is growing a little beard on his chin. He's looking hungry. Macbeth has a square face, a head deeply set in a pair of broad shoulders, a determined look, and is willing to enjoy time.]

Hamlet (keeping a finger inside the book he's reading): Dost, I can't endure it anymore! She's flying next week. I'm in a do or die situation. To marry Ophelia, or not to marry her . . .

Macbeth: That's the question. I don't understand these fucking thoughts in you, either you marry her, or you don't marry her. That's all. Why this, why that! By the way Horatio told me that you wrote to Mita, what's her advice?

Hamlet: Oh, that old crap. We're still students. Let her go, if she wants to go, all that old crap you know. . . . The nun's priest's tale.

Macbeth: How high is their boundary wall?

Hamlet: What do you mean!

Macbeth: I mean, how high is their boundary wall, eight feet, nine feet, ten feet!

Hamlet: You're joking, my love is flying away, and you're joking. A real friend you're

Macbeth (opening his lap top): Listen, old ways pay, you know. One of my uncles did it thirty years ago, and they're a happily married couple even today. Man, you've to first climb a wall. First, the wall, then other things will fall in place. Girls really like it. Adventures! You know? Let's go to a website to see pictures on how the Romeo in the world elope with the Juliets?

Hamlet (not being able to laugh at Macbeth's suggestions, but still conceding to him):

Ophelia's father lives in Baridhara, and the wall, I don't recognize a wall made of bricks standing in my path of love, I just don't, so height doesn't matter. I'll scale it to get my love. Who are you looking for in the Facebook?

Macbeth: For Ophelia's pictures. The ones at the Freshers' reception were just marvelous. Ham, you have eyes, Ham.

Hamlet: Why would she fly, when she loves me? [Leaning his cheek on his hand] . . . Frailty, thy name is woman!

Macbeth: You're a kid, Ham, you don't understand a simple thing. You are Ophelia's present, not her future.

Hamlet: But Mac, you said so prominently that all our tomorrows turn disappointingly into the dust of the present.

Macbeth: I said it, all right, but Ophelia is a woman, she believes in a future. They see education as future, marriage as future, jobs as future, children as future, houses as future, and America as future.

Hamlet: Isn't it a very strange situation that I'm in. Say you could be my rival in love, or so could be Horatio, or Antony, or even Iago. But this guy, because he lives in America on God knows what fishy job, is coming over and snatching my love away.

[They didn't see that both Antony and Horatio were standing over behind them overhearing their conversation.]

Horatio: That's the colonizing of the bride.

Macbeth: Hi, philosopher, you're here, give some wisdom to our Ham. He's miserable like a mouse being in love [somewhere from above the false ceiling the squeaking sound of a mouse can be heard], as much as we're miserable being out of love.

Horatio: Wisdom! Wisdom! Ha . . . ha . . . ha, you're in love and asking for wisdom.

Macbeth: Hor is right, you need a ladder, not wisdom in love.

All three of them: Ladder!

Macbeth: Yes, ladder. The moon will shine tonight. We take Antony's father's car out, Antony drives, we three be in the car, may be Iago can join, but I'm not sure you'd like to have him in. Maybe we should, because he eats a lot of vegetable, he is cool, and in the moonlight you need a cool brain around.

All three of them in great excitement: Then

Macbeth: I'll ask Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to stand by there with a ladder and a rope.

Hamlet: Why a rope!

Macbeth: Oh, yes, why a rope! No rope. But the Bard gave Romeo a rope when he climbed over Juliet's boundary wall. Didn't he?

Hamlet: Let's forget the Bard; he's been turned to ashes for more than four hundred years.

Macbeth: Ok, rope is out of sight. The ladder should be in place.

Horatio: Mac, don't forget the geometric balance. On which side of the wall will the ladder

be placed? Don't forget the moonshine also. How can Rose and Guild stand by the wall if the moon shines? They must have security all over, especially when Mr. Polonius knows that his daughter had an affair with Hamlet.

Antony: My father told me that Mr. Polonius is very close to the underworld mafia lord, Shylock. Besides Mr. Brabantio, the Chief in Staff is also a good friend of his. Money and power both they have, what you've Ham, except for your love-stricken heart a poor school teacher as a father . . . no permanent house in Dhaka. You better forget her, let Cordelia or Rosalind or even Portia be in her place, though you may not like her thick voice.

Horatio: Ant, you love substitutes. That's why Enobarbus gave you the example of gods acting like tailors in supplying new wives. The three girls you named, you've ditched them all, I know, who your new choice is now by the way!

Antony: Oh, she's going to be the paragon for whom I won't mind if the Dhaka city melts into the old Buriganga. She's taking a transfer from a neighbourhood university, she has heard that the English Department is very good here, and, also, because [he pulls at his own collar] here's an Antony to find.

Hamlet: Dear Ant, dost, if only I had a heart as changeable as yours! What's her name!

Antony: Cleopatra!

Macbeth: The name sounds familiar. The Lux beauty of this year. Isn't it?

Antony: Yes, that's it.

Macbeth: Friends, let's come back to this ladder business.

Horatio: Wait a minute. If the ladder is inside the wall, then Portia climbs over the wall. Law will say

Hamlet: Why law, Hor?

Horatio: The law of the land is there, mind you. If the ladder is inside the wall, then it's Ophelia fleeing her father's charge, and since she's an adult, it's her choice, and law will defend her. But if the ladder is placed outside the wall, and Hamlet climbs over it and gets into the house, law will call him an intruder, and he will be punished for illegal encroachment, and if the girl accompanies him, they will still call it an elopement. See!

Antony: Meaning, against her consent!

Horatio: Yes, against her consent.

Macbeth and Antony (together): Then, inside, inside, the ladder inside the wall.

Horatio: If Hamlet jumps the wall and goes to Ophelia, that'll be outright kidnapping. If Ophelia jumps the wall and glides onto the street side, it's not kidnapping.

Macbeth, Antony and Hamlet: Inside the wall then, inside the wall.

TO BE CONTINUED

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