SHORT STORY

Non-fiction

The olive green jeep

RASHID ASKARI

The rusty old bus skids to a halt with a screech of brakes. The diesel engine stops with a harsh sound. Exhaust fumes are winding into dark clouds. It is a routine picture with this bus. There is plenty of room for controversy as to whether it can be called a bus. It is little bigger than a minibus and much smaller than an ordinary one. It has a turtle neck. This grotesque shape is made by a local carpenterDilu Mistry. His name is so strikingly inscribed on its body that it must tickle your fancy on sight. But this optical attraction flees through the window when you get on it through the narrow door in huddles. Jampacked with passengers, it moves at a snail's pace and takes the whole day to cover the distance of about fifty miles between Rangpur and Gaibandha, suffering at least a couple of mechanical failures. People call it a buffalo cart, but they are left with no better means.

Haripada makes a toing and froing between Rangpur and Mithapukur once a week. Every Thursday he comes home in the evening, stays one day and two nights and the next Saturday goes back to his workplace. He is a lecturer at a non-government college on the outskirts of Rangpur town. He joined the college immediately after he completed his Master's from Dhaka University. He was capable of getting a much better job in Dhaka. But he did not get it for no fault of his own. Dhaka on and after 25 March is blazing. Operation Searchlight is stalking through the city. Mujib declares the independence of Bangladesh and is taken prisoner. The marauding Pakistani armed forces have overrun the capital and unleashed a reign of terror on the defenceless people. A mighty eagle swoops on innocent chicks.

When the buffalo cart driver with a stubble brakes hard, the passengers dozing fitfully wake up with a start. But Haripada is not one of them. Nor is he wide awake. Seated by a window he is deep in thought. How things have been out of joint over a few days! The son of Kalipada Master and grandson of Bishnupada Master had to be Haripada Master. People call him professor. Lecturers of non-government colleges are professors in the eyes of the common people. But Haripada is not happy with this position. He was not willing to take up his ancestral profession. He had a mind to serve in the civil service. He had the ability too. But a violent storm from the western sky has dashed all his dreams. When one's very existence is threatened with

extinction, a career of one's own choice loses meaning.
"Get off the bus. You bloody Bengalis. Get cracking."

A throaty voice booms like a rumble of thunder. Haripada is flabbergasted. But instantly he realizes that it is not a routine stop. His apprehension comes true when he sees a hefty man in military attire standing at the bus door. The driver first follows the command like a docile cat without a mew. Then the passengers start getting off the bus, jumping the queue. By then about fifteen military men surround the bus. All have bowler hats and bristling moustaches. One of them approaches Haripada and pokes him in the ribs with the muzzle of his rifle: 'You bloody bugger, why don't you come down? Do you need kicks on the ass?'

Haripada lets out a distinct groan. The soldier gives vent to a loud toothy laugh and attempts another poke at him. Haripada feels like nothing on earth. He rises from his seat and takes slow paces towards the doorway. A shiver runs down his spine. The sacred thread worn around his body and neck seems a real albatross. He wishes he were a Muslim or at least a low caste Hindu devoid of the sacred thread. He has to get rid of it. His hand slips into his shirt and gives the piece of string a yank. It tears easily but he cannot drop it before the army men at the door. He coils it up and holds it tight in his hand. While jumping down from the bus he pretends to stumble and secretly puts the string in his mouth and swallows. He heaves a sigh of relief

All passengers are lined up. A tall husky soldier with a hooked nose starts running a check on them.

'What's your name?' He asks the first man in the queue in Urdu. A lanky man wearing a long coat, drainpipe trousers and a Jinnah cap is translating

it into Bengali.
'A-A-Abdur Rahman.' The man stammers in his faltering Urdu.

'Are you a Muslim?' The army man observes him from head to toe.
'Yes sir, yes, I'm a Muslim. I swear I am a true Muslim.' Abdur Rahman tries to draw the soldier's attention to the black patch on his forehead which he has developed over the years through constant prostration in

'Hmm'. The military man seems reassured. He lets him go and moves to the next man in the queue.

'Name?'

'Shamsul Alam.
'Religion?'

RAANA HAIDER

'Religion?' 'Islam.'

'Recite the first *kalema*.' The army man roars out an order.

'It's very easy sir. I know all the five *kalemas* with their meanings and explanations.' Shamsul Alam tries to force a smile and makes a humble attempt to recite by clearing his throat.

'All right, all right.' The army man gives him the full benefit of doubt. He

runs his eyes through the queue like a camera panned across the faces of the lined up suspects.

Haripada is in terror. His yacht is foundering in heavy seas. He has a horrible sinking feeling. He tries to catch at a straw. He murmurs the words of *kalema* he has recently learnt from his Muslim friends. He had a premonition of this kind of bizarre situation. If he can recite the *kalema*s properly, he may be mistaken for a Muslim and may stay safe from the mindless Pakistani butchers. They have an ostentatious concern for religion. But freedom fighters are their pet aversion. They are more hostile to them than to unbelievers even if the freedom fighters are devout Muslims.

Haripada is not a freedom fighter. But he wishes he could be one. He wants the freedom fighters to kick the last member of the occupation army out of Bangladesh. He believes the days of occupation will come to an end. Vietnam is a shining example. He wants to see the Pakistani oppression fast crumbling and from the ruins an independent Bangladesh emerging. A free Bangladesh. No more chains, no more shackles! Haripada will join the civil service in the newly independent country. He feels called on to serve his country. He will help protect the good people and punish the bad ones. This is precisely the way to carry out his father's ideal and to pass it on to posterity through his baby boy. Krishnapada is still in swaddling clothes. His toothless smile floats through Haripada's mind. Life is so beautiful, so meaningful! But the point is to stay alive, to survive at the present moment. Haripada must survive. Is it the lure of life? Maybe. He is desperate.

Haripada tries to recall the *kalemas*. Wonderful! Perfectly all right! Even with the accents and intonations! Now they cannot catch him out with *kalema*. Haripada feels a little guilty at the bottom of his heart for his Brahmin father but soon he comes down to earth with a bump.

'No matter, it's a part of life. Self-defense is the first law of nature.'
Haripada justifies his defence mechanism and resolves not to give up. He tries to hang on there although he has a lurking fear in the back of his mind.

The Jinnah cap is keeping his eyes peeled for Haripada. There is no mistaking. He can bet his bottom dollar that Haripada is a Hindu. He whispers something in the ear of the hooked nose. The hooked nose gets electrified and pounces on Haripada like a hungry wolf on a sitting duck.

'What's your name?' The wolf howls.
'Jainul Abedin.' Haripada has butterflies in his stomach.

'Father?' The wolf tries to play with his prey.

'Shamsul Abedin.' Haripada improvises the family name so easily that he cannot believe his ears.

The wolf looks a little astonished. But in a second he picks up the thread of questioning.

'Grandfather?' He is climbing the family tree.
'Fazlul Abedin.' Haripada breaks out in a cold sweat. He knows he is dicing with death. But he cannot help it. The moment he fails to move l

dicing with death. But he cannot help it. The moment he fails to move his pieces, he would be finished off.

The wolf is getting impatient. He looks at the Jinnah cap, raising his

eyebrows questioningly. Jinnah cap gives him a meaningful wink.
'Recite the first *kalema*.' The wolf resumes with renewed interest.

Haripada is skating on very thin ice. He screws up all courage and recites the *kalema* quite uninterrupted.

The wolf does not want the game to end in a stalemate. He wants to shoot his last bolt.

'Take off your pants.' He plays a sure card.

Haripada cannot quite catch the meaning. All of a sudden, he feels a twitch at his belt and finds himself with his pants down. In the twinkling of an eye, Haripada can make out what they want. This is for the first time that he smells real danger. His sixth sense is telling him that something terrible is going to happen. He is about to meet his Waterloo. He sees shadow of death in the dusky blue sky over his head. There are no earthly means to prove he is circumcised. This makes his blood run cold. He can no longer stay the course. He feels utterly helpless.

'Eureka, eureka, I have got it.' The wolf bellows as if he has discovered the eighth wonder of the ancient world. All the army men rush to Haripada. He is a weird creature who has foreskin. The wolf is overwhelmingly pointing to it with a nasty grin on his face. The Jinnah cap gives the panicky passengers a signal to leave. The turtle head hares down the street at the double with all but one.

Haripada is left behind, rooted to the spot completely numbed. The single thread which he was hanging by has been torn. He knows his hours, minutes and even seconds are numbered. But he has no sense of fear. He was in fear and trembling when he had his chances to live. He keeps staring vacantly at the back of the bus until it becomes a speck on the horizon.

A military jeep emerges as it were from the ground and screeches to a stop by Haripada. The door opens. Two soldiers dismount. They hold Haripada by the hands and take him away in the jeep. The olive green jeep fades into the dark of night. The sun rises tomorrow in the fresh green of the country.

Dr.Rashid Askari is a writer, columnist and professor of English, Islamic University, Kushtia. E-mail: rashidaskari65@yahoo.com.



Letter to a grandfather

DEAR DADA JAN,

I miss you very much, but as you said in the past, dying is not the end at all. It is in fact a new beginning as I know that you are now on your way to being re-united with Allah and your loved ones who have passed away, and life is simply a very *small* fraction of the eternity that our souls must endure.

I will always remember you because you were the most inspirational man ever and you cared for me very much as I did for you. You lived your life to the fullest in a way that not many others would. Whereas many people would have their ambitions set on having a successful job and a loving family, you made sure that the lives of those around you were of quality. You did this by donating endless charity to the needy and you spread your knowledge of religion, morality and ethics to others through your books and through speaking.

You passed on this knowledge to my dad, and to me as well as we used to discuss these topics very frequently; and even when I was little, you told me stories of your childhood which also co-related these topics. You recently wrote letters to your grandchildren to publish in your book and gave me one of my letters to me to read. I have started to read it and it is fascinating as it goes into life's philosophy and ethics very deeply in a way I have never quite seen before and causes me to ponder things I would not have thought about before. But you have not only shared your knowledge of life with me, you have also shared some pretty interesting and sometimes funny stories that didn't necessarily have morals to them. For example, you once told me that you ate fourteen eggs for breakfast and didn't fall sick afterwards. You were a very fun-loving person who laughed and joked around with your friends and acquaintances in addition to being a man who helped others and had very interesting intellectual debates with people.

You were always very open-minded and objective. You never judged others and would let others have their say even if you disagreed with their views. You were a very learnéd man. You were also a learnéd Muslim and understood Islam inside out which in turn strengthened your own beliefs. Whereas many Muslims would be offended when people asked questions about Islam, you

were happy to answer my questions. I once asked you: "I know I am a Muslim and have been brought up as one, and I believe in God, but how do we know that Islam is the right religion and not for example, Christianity?" You then explained to me why, using science and knowledge to support your points. You told me how the Qur'an is the most recent holy book and is therefore more likely to be more authentic, and that the Qur'an itself has many similarities to the Bible but the Qur'an states that it is written in the exact words of Allah, whereas the Bible is written in the words of certain individuals and is based on what they saw. And you told me that the Qur'an has no contradictions with science, and many many other things. This certainly strengthened my beliefs further.

The way you died and the way you took your suffering also taught me many things and strengthened my beliefs in Allah even more. For example, when you were suffering in hospital, you saw my mother visibly upset and told her that you did not mind the pain because it was Allah's wish and you had to endure it. The day before you died, when you were severely ill, you could not move your fingers properly, you had hardly any energy, and you could not see properly because of your cataract but you still took the time to write a thank you letter to the nurse who had looked after you and you even apologised for your handwriting not being neat. You also said that you did not fear death (only the pain of your soul being separated from your body and we pray to ease this pain). This was because you had such strong belief in Allah and you knew that there is life after death. Luckily, you did not suffer at the time of when you died and you passed away painlessly in your sleep, surrounded by your loved ones. I am still young, but because of the way

you embraced life and death with such bravery and faith, I am now not afraid of death. The loss of your life is irreparable but I will try my best to carry on your legacy and lead a purposeful life in which I will affect the lives of others positively as well as lead a good life for myself, just like you did.

Love and respect from

Zora

(your eldest granddaughter) P.S. As I feel Allah's presence

P.S. As I feel Allah's presence around me, I also know that you are not truly gone for I also feel your presence around me.

SIGHTS & SOUNDS

"Shanghae is by far the most important station for foreign trade on the coast of China...No other town with which I am acquainted possesses such advantages; it is the great gate the principal entrance, in fact, to the Chinese Empire... there can be no doubt that in a few years it will not only rival Canton, but become a place of far greater importance."

--- Robert Fortune in *Three Years' Wonderings in the*Northern Provinces of China. A British botanist, he visited
Shanghai late in 1843, a few days after the city was declared
open to foreign trade on November 17, 1843.

How prophetic were Fortune's words. Shanghai continues to be the Phoenix rising over the Huangpo, Shanghai's 'Mother River.' With money as its raison'etre, China's most cosmopolitan and dynamic metropolis has resurged as a global centre of commerce and culture. The biggest city (19 million) in the biggest country in the world (1.4 billion) is the twenty-first century face of the 'Oriental Dragon' and its 'Window to the World.' China's financial hub's neon-lit skyline rivals Manhattan. The city's other epithet is 'New York of the East.' Just in case anyone has missed the message an Italian-American artist Arturo Di Madica has been commissioned to sculpt a bull, similar to the iconic one that struts New York City's Wall Street. The singular point of difference: while the American bull looks down, the Shanghai counterpart rears its head so we are told.

Hugh Lindsay of the East India Company chanced upon the coastal mudflats of Shanghai, a village with fishing as its principal economic activity in 1832. Spotting its potential as a lucrative emporium in the Far East, the British opened its first trade concession under the Nanjing Treaty in 1843. China's defeat in the First Opium War led to Hong Kong based British taipans (trading house representatives) to commence commerce in the treaty port another trading link in its vast mercantile network across seven seas. It was a fulcrum of trade and profit for all commerce between Calcutta and Canton. France and the USA also acquired trading concessions. Shanghai developed into a thriving river port city with warehouses, wharves and factories attracting tankers from afar.

Into the early years of the twentieth century, a number of events shaped Shanghai's spirit and structure. History's tumultuous throes impacted China. Its long imperial rule came to a close in 1911 with the abdication of the last Qing emperor Pu Yi. Shanghai now eclipsed the former imperial capital Beijing. White Russians fleeing the 1917 Russian Communist Revolution arrived in Shanghai. Jews from Europe arrived in Shanghai seeking refuge from an increasing anti-Semitic environment. Foreign investments multiplied. Today's global banker The Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) was established in this city in 1842 to handle British financial interests. Traditionally, the gateway to China, the city acquired a cosmopolitan face and a free and frivolous spirit as 'Swinging Shanghai.' Other epithets followed: 'Paris of the East.' In All About Shanghai: A Standard Guidebook (first

Shanghai never sleeps

published in 1934), we have a graphic description: "Vital, vibrant, vivacious; strident, turbulent, glowing Shanghai is the Big Parade of Life of every colour, race, tempo; the bitter end of the long trail for many wastrel souls: the dawn after the dark for others."

Soaring Shanghai has known a single period of lying low in the past century. The China Communist Party (CCP) was founded in Shanghai in 1921. The city's frenetic pace ebbed in the 1950s to 1970s with the Communist takeover in 1949. There was little room for capitalist and commercial Shanghai in the new political climate. It saw the transfer in 1949 of HSBC from Shanghai to Hong Kong still a British colony. Red Guard vanguards of the Communist Cultural Revolution targeted the city's concentration of cultural and intellectual people. Many were sent to rural areas for rehabilitation. Many fled the country. And Shanghai was effectively closed for the next three decades. It lay dormant. It was with the opening of the economy and market reform in the 1980s that the fortune of Shanghai once again took a winning streak. It has not stopped since. Time magazine reports "365 million tons of cargo handled in 2009 by its port, the world's busiest. Also, the per capita GDP of Shanghai, the wealthiest provincial city in China stands at \$10,529." The city's meteoric comeback is crowned by Shanghai's hosting of World Expo 2010. Shanghai is once again in the nation's limelight and on the global radar.

It is also an architectural playground as modern Shanghai pushes fantasy to its limit. If Chicago invented the skyscraper in 1885, then Shanghai has since the 1990s reinvented it. Daytime sun-kissed skylines contrast with neon-lights that scramble along vertical facades of Shanghai's nocturnal skyline in the futuristic Pudong area marshland in the not too distant past. According to the Time magazine article, "The skyline counts more than 30 buildings over 650ft (200m) tall." The rocket-like Pearl TV Tower's steel needle pierces the sky and is topped by a sparkling ball illumination. This is the metropolis' symbol and the equivalent of the other Paris's iconic monument. A good amount of urban planning is visible. Public transport has much improved. Interlocking multi-lane serpentine flyovers are softened by green landscaping. Central Shanghai has pockets of parks. Nanjing Road, the historic commercial avenue of the city is today a pedestrian precinct with every facet of consumer culture. It was on this commercial street that China's first state-owned retailing enterprise (eight-storey high) was set up. That was in 1949.

Shanghai is also a repository of stunning early twentieth century Western art deco architecture; a simplistic form that emphasizes geometric lines that moved away from the flowery ornamentation of nineteenth century architecture. Thus my sense of awe as our bus halted before a tall building with '1934' written boldly across its façade. Park Hotel was known as 'The Pride of Shanghai.' Opening for business in 1934, this art-deco masterpiece was designed by a Hungarian architect a reflection of the city's cosmopolitan consciousness and the most modern hotel in all Asia. It had the distinction of being the first high rise building (24 floors) in the Far East and it held

that record till 1952. "If you tilted your head to look at the top of the building, your hat would fall off" is one graphic record. Till 1966, it was the tallest in China. A noteworthy point in a city that now boasts scores of sky-scrapers. As recently as 1983 Park Hotel was the tallest building in Shanghai. "...but in today's Shanghai it looks like a refugee from Gotham City (Batman's fictional futuristic city) among the surrounding glass and steel skyscrapers" is one observer's comment.

However, a distinction that Park Hotel still carries is the fact that it remains the city's central marker. In the midst of the period-designed hotel lobby, is a golden plaque that commemorates that honour. The Shanghai Bureau of Land Administration during its comprehensive survey of the city in 1950 noted the central flag pole on the centre top of the Park Hotel as 'Zero Centre Point of Shanghai.' An elderly woman accompanied by her daughter asked to be photographed with us sari-clad women. Celebrating her 80th birthday at the signature hotel, this dignified woman in silk coat and trousers was an image from the past. - a vivid reminder of the many links that time and place have placed together in this historic city.

Shanghai's signature dishes are aplenty. Our sampler included beef, chicken, fish and shrimp braised in soy sauce, steamed or stewed with sweet vinegar sauce all items finely tuned to a light and non-greasy palate. Smoked fish, deep-fried fresh water shrimp, tofu assortments, 'No. 1 seacucumber under the heaven' were novelty delicacies. The round-table banquet room at Park Hotel offers in its location at the head of Nanjing Road (famously named as one of the 'World's Seven Great Roads' in the 1930s) the opportunity to view life in technicolour. This is seeing Shanghai over the top. For the record, Shanghai is ranked as having one of the top ten global night scenarios.

My room at the Park Hotel had a killer view a photographer's portrait of a neon metropolis that sparkles like jewels in the night. Park Hotel overlooks People's Park - the cultural and political heart of Shanghai. The site of the colonial era race track and the city's 'green lung' (akin to Hyde Park/London, Maidan/Calcutta and Ramna Park/Dacca) was developed into the People's Park in the 1950s. Daytime viewing of the park presents framed floral beds set amongst green turf adding to a painter's canvas. The People's Park hosts the all-glass façade of the Shanghai Opera House, listed as one of the top ten opera houses in the world. The Shanghai Museum is truly a world-class museum. Every culture vulture will be drawn to China's countless cultural relics from its 5000 year old history.

Shanghai is a city made for walking. The place to see and be seen strolling is the city's Bund riverfront embankment. Entirely revamped for the World Expo 2010, the kilometer long collection of nineteenth century built buildings is an unforgettable sight by day or night. Diffused lighting highlights the many splendours of the architectural gallery along a regal boulevard. This is truly a 'Queen's Necklace' similar to the curved shoreline of another colonial city Bombay. According to Hobson-Jobson: The Anglo-Indian

Dictionary by Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell (first published in 1886), 'Bund' is "any artificial embankment, a dam, dyke or causeway...The word is common in Persia. It is also naturalized in the Anglo-Chinese ports. It is there applied especially to the embanked quay along the shore of the settlements."

The metamorphosis of the old and new is evident in 'Three on the Bund', the Union Assurance Company of Canton Building built in 1915 that was subsequently the headquarters of the Mercantile Bank of India and in 2004 reemerged as a centre of 'contemporary Chinese refined lifestyle.' It houses the luxurious French company Evian spa, Shanghai Gallery of Art, Jean George French cuisine restaurant, Nougatine New York style bistro, Whampoa Club that offers 'gourmet Chinese cuisine reinterpreted in an Art Deco-inspired setting' and other high-flying destinations.

If I still want to be in Shanghai's fast lane, then I would take a ride on the high speed Magnetic Levitation Train that would fast forward me at 430km in 8 minutes from the airport to downtown Shanghai. A routine ride by bus or taxi is likely to take 45 minutes. More likely, I would roam the residences of famous Shanghai personalities and take in tales of old Shanghai - Chairman Mao Zedong, Sun Yat-sen (modern China's founding father), Chiang Kai-shek (leader of Kuomintang/Chinese Nationalist Party) and artists and writers A third visit to China would be set at a more leisurely pace lingering through the leafy lanes that cut across the city's highspeed, high-density, high-rise culture. I would search out China's buzzing contemporary art scene housed in revamped riverside warehouses. Scouring antique curio shops that may yield that one bargain buy item of ancient China or an Art Deco item or Mao memorabilia would be a collector's wish.

The city is the film capital of China with its first screenings dating to the 1920s. The highly acclaimed 'In the Mood for Love' (2001) was shot in Shanghai. 'Lust, Caution' takes place in Shanghai during the World War II era. 'The Longest Night in Shanghai' (2007) commemorates both the city and the industry. 'Shanghai' has featured in a number of Hollywood films. One of the earliest (1932) is 'Shanghai Express' that starred the legendary Marlene Dietrich. 'Shanghai Gesture' originally a New York Broadway play, it was made into a Hollywood film in 1942 starring Gene Tierney. 'The Lady from Shanghai' directed by Orson Welles appeared in 1948. After a lull of fifty years, 'Shanghai Noon' (2000) starring Jackie Chan hit the screens. This was soon followed by 'Shanghai Knights' in 2003, also starring the ever popular Jackie Chan. 'The Painted Veil' (2006) film based on Somerset Maugham's novel is set in Shanghai. It is also the fashion capital of China with 'Shanghai Tang' being the internationally recognized fashion brand name. Shanghai remains China's 'Oriental Beauty' a city with its singular makeup of allure, élan and exuberance.

Raana Haider last visited Shanghai in May 2010 as a member of a delegation from The Bangladesh-China People's Friendship Association, Dhaka. She is the author of China: Contrasting Contours, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2008