

NON-FICTION

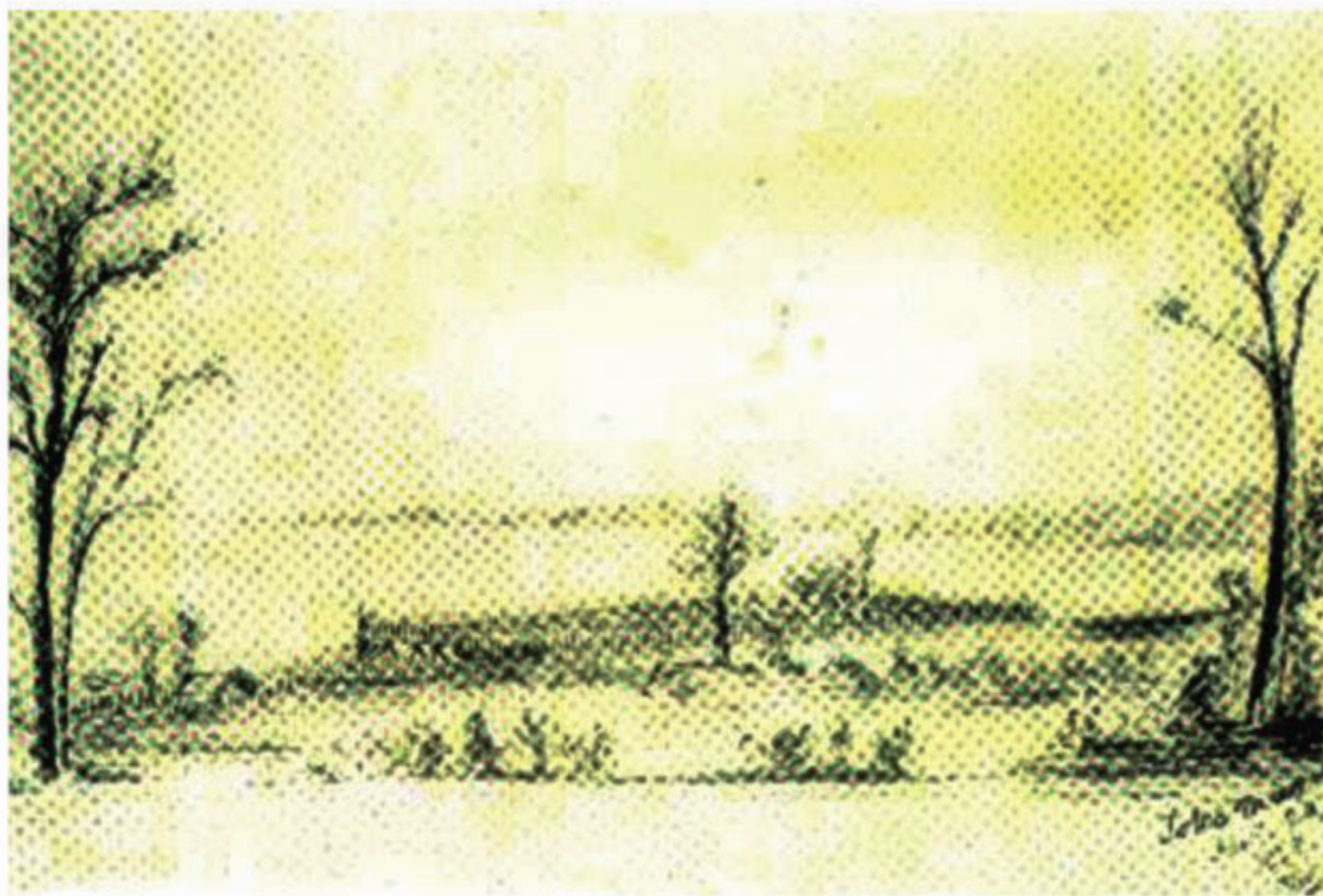
# Do they know it's Eid?

TANVEERUL HAQUE

Do you recall the famous hit song "Do They Know it's Christmas?" by Band Aid a British and Irish charity supergroup, founded in 1984 by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure. The record was released for the Christmas market that year. It was sung to raise funds for the impoverished of Ethiopia who were dying in the thousands due to famine while the rest of the world turned a blind eye upon their plight. It became the biggest-selling single of all time in the UK. The song struck a poignant chord in the hearts and minds of the affluent and aid and aid workers poured in to rescue their fellow man. You should listen to the song and ponder upon the lyrics.

Parallels cannot actually be drawn - but a poor country like Bangladesh where tens of millions make do on less than a dollar a day, somehow does not quite attract the attention of the world. Actually it doesn't attract our own attention we that live, breathe and enjoy in this bustling megalopolis, sparing nary a thought of the direction we are headed. The chasm between the rich and the poor widens and the better off amongst us cannot even visualize - far less empathize with the abject poverty that surrounds us. We live cocooned in our own comfortable worlds, pursuing our own dreams and asking for more and more not sparing a thought for the less fortunate nor thinking of changing their circumstances. We cannot live in our ivory towers and forget about the city, about the vast majority that populate the slums and the countryside that barely keep body and soul

together in life's daily grind. Dhaka is choking under the pressure of a burgeoning population, lack of infrastructure, power, gas and water, the traffic chaos, the waste in man hours and fuel just going from place to place. The loss in productivity some estimates put it at Taka 12,000 crores a year in Dhaka alone! And then there is the hartal. How can



we repeatedly shoot ourselves in the foot? How can politicians hold the country to ransom for their personal vendettas and how and why can we the populace keep on accepting this madness?

Had an interesting rickshaw ride from my home at Gulshan 2 to my office at Bijoy Nagar due to the hartal. The roads

were as good as empty - very few motorized vehicles. Gave me time to reflect. Cost me Taka 60. Money well spent. Only that I was reading about China in "The Economist" the other day. Wondering - what a contrast in my country. Just loving the motherland and being optimistic will lead us nowhere. Patriotic songs and bombastic rhetoric have had their day -



or have they. Forty years as an independent nation and we still dwell in the past!

Once in the office I'm drowned in my work. The bonus that we are giving to our 500 employees is being distributed at head office and all the branch offices. We are a retail service business and our sales have taken a hit yesterday after the hartal

was declared and we are fearing for the worst for today the hartal day. Robust sales of the past days due to the ensuing Eid season will take a nosedive today and we will have cash flow problems in the next two days as remaining bonuses are handed out.

We hold meetings to plan for the holiday closure of five days the leave roster, the duty roster, the staff deployment in the various offices for the holidays but on top of everything how do we pay out the bonuses to those remaining employees that are still unpaid. We pray. Somehow we will manage as we have been doing over the past so many years. Running a business is a management nightmare. We are always busy in firefighting, when will we sit down and draw up strategies for growth and expansion and the myriad other things to run a company successfully?

Even in this madness I take time out for a hurried lunch with a treasured friend to restore a semblance of sanity in my earthly existence. For a brief hour the joys of friendship puts the day's pressures on hold. Then I'm back to the grind. Good news some creditors' cheques have been honoured and more funds are available. A quick meeting with the accountants for planning of disbursements tomorrow. Then a sitting with the operations staff to monitor vehicle movements and suddenly it's dusk. Time to go home!

Out on the street, after three tries, I find a rickshawallah who agrees to go all the way to Gulshan 2. I offer 60 takas telling him that's what I paid in the morning he demands 80 we settle for 70 and

we are off riding into the sunset via Rampura and Badda to Gulshan 2. Mercifully there are almost no vehicles but the road is teeming with rickshaws. The going is good but the potholes on the roads make for an uncomfortable and bumpy ride. I enjoy my ride, chatting with the rickshawallah he is a pretty optimistic guy cheerfully pedaling away and replying to my queries. Yes, he has a family a wife and two kids living in Malibagh Chowdhurypara in a rented hovel in a basti (slum). The older kid goes to a school for underprivileged children set up by an NGO where he can afford the discounted tuition. Yes, he now owns the rickshaw and he's been living in Dhaka for 12 years. My curiosity is piqued shamelessly I enquire "How much do you make?" He twists his torso, looks me in the eye for a brief moment and nonchalantly says, "Sir, in Dhaka city can you live on less than Taka 10,000 per month?" I am surprised and ask him whether he makes that much. He nods vigorously in the affirmative and then rattles off his list of expenses. His wife doesn't work she looks after the household and the kids. I am impressed and happy for him but in the dim light I also notice his shirt is faded and has holes in it, he doesn't have a vest under the shirt and he is thin and scrawny. He makes 5 dollars a day, manages a family and feeds four mouths. Somehow my own problems seem to diminish I take solace in his cheerful disposition and take a lesson in forbearance.

For the rest of the journey I lapse into silence while he furiously pedals away he has to make further trips till late in

the night to achieve his target of takas 350 for the day. I remind myself he is amongst the fortunate to be able to make that much! What about the tens of millions of Bangladesh who make a third of that! A fifth!

Are we the children of a lesser God? Forever destined to grinding poverty? To never be allotted leaders with vision, courage and honesty to lead the nation to a brighter future. Will the fortunate ones, the rich, the educated, those in positions of power and responsibility, you and me - never, ever think of the masses. The millions of farmers, the day labourers those that toil from dawn to dusk be condemned to wallow in endless night?

I am awakened from my reverie as I give directions and arrive at the gate of my apartment. I pay the rickshawallah the taka 70 fare and on a whim tell him to wait, while I get a shirt for him. I rush up the lift, rifle through my wardrobe and take out a shirt that once was a favourite of mine. I go down to the gate, ask him to take off his old shirt and put on the one that I've brought for him. He obliges, feeling shy at exposing his emaciated chest to me, the caretaker and watchmen of the apartment who gather around in amusement. Everybody says he's looking great. On an impulse he takes the shirt off, puts on his old one and says he'll wear the one I've given to him on Eid day. He then gave us all a grin that was a mile wide and pedaled away.

Tanveerul Haque is a businessman who loves movies, reading, traveling, music and good food. He is also a member of the TRC.

SHORT STORY

# Utsav --- The Party

AKHTERUZAMAN ILYAS

Translation: MIR WALIUZZAMAN

(This is the concluding part of the story, of which the first part appeared last week.)

'Your bhabi, you know, Anwar, inspires me a lot in my creative pursuits. My mother-in-law comes from a highly aristocratic family of West Bengal, ...quite a cultured family too, and do you know.... They are actually related to Syed Badruddozza Sahib! You should be knowing my second (born second in order of seniority) brother-in-law Shahriar, Syed Shahriar Hossain, appeared in the CSS exams this year, came out successful in the CSP cadre, you know, now undergoing training in Lahore, another devotee of music....you may have enjoyed a recent popular number....my composition, you know....was recorded on his initiative, practically. Khondker Rafique Ahmed, the reputed vocalist lent his voice, you know, and it was an instant hit.... "O my friend, you chose to give me the thorns of screwpine, but who did you adorn its flowers with?" now this particular song, you know! Hafeez's autobiography recital was suddenly interrupted as Qayyum approached us accompanying an immaculately dressed handsome man. While conducting the introduction, Qayyum mentioned Hafeez's literary success and Anwar's heart ached mildly. The dashing blade was Iqbal Hossain Chowdhury, posted in a west European capital as the First Secretary of the Pakistan Embassy there. More than a decade back, about 13-14 years ago, the guy used to write poems dedicated to socialism, sing both Tagore songs and ganosangnet and deliver fiery speeches, evoking the spirit of communism. At that time, one of his poems titled 'We shall certainly fetch you the sun someday' had kept Anwar Ali enchanted and inspired for at least three continuous days and nights. The former poet now exuberantly encouraged the lyric writer-professor to continue with his pen-pushing. Hence the tongue of Hafeezur Rahman, so far used solely for recounting the tales of his own success and contentment, metamorphoses into a tail, ....a hairless tail and tracing wonderful movements inside his oral cavity, brings forth the following utterances: 'I have been familiar with your name since long you have certainly wronged all of us by quitting writing for pleasure, if you don't mind. We have been gifted with an A-class diplomat all right, but at the cost of an ace poet.'

Seeing Iqbal show-casing his cultured European smile, Anwar's lips twitched in anguish. Meanwhile, hosts of guests continued to arrive....Qayyum went up to the gate to receive a silk sherwani-clad eminent politico and his entourage. From under the krishnachurha, inappropriately overflowing the measured laugh of the culture-fed group and disturbed Anwar Ali's already perplexed existence. Qayyum came again to attend to his old pals' needs, if any, landing in the midst of Hafeez's tireless sycophancy. 'I say, without paying heed to what others might say, I have been saying it all along without any reservations whatsoever, that it's because of the handful of the enlightened Covenanted officers that our arts and culture are still surviving. The governmental attitudes towards the Bangla arts and cultural practices are not quite....I mean' Not very agreeable. Iqbal volunteered to complete Hafeez's sentence, when Qayyum introduced Anwar to the Punjabi spouse of the diplomat, 'We happen to be friends since our early youth days.'

Ms Irshaat Hossain Chowdhury easily pinned Anwar Ali's pupils of the eyes and also his delicate heart with flashes of her crimson and snowy smiles alternately. 'I see! Did you study in the same school?' Her Bangla pronunciation sounded sweet but fell short of evoking any libidinous desire in him. Qayyum interjected, 'No, no, we went to college together. We subscribed to the same political views and you know, we were serious activists too.' 'Is it?' Tremors were heard and visible in her voice, lips and eye-corners. 'My God, politicians scare me. Politics terrifies me like anything.'

While still asleep, Koli, the son of Anwar Ali and Saleha Begum lifted his leg sideways and draped it around his sister Polly. Saleha tries to correct the children's lying positions by readjusting their sleeping forms and finally pushes them aside. Outside, from the alleyway came drifting the lilt of a live duet, .... But the popular Urdu number from the film 'Armaan' ceased abruptly as it had started. Saleha said something in her husky voice, ....with her words mingled the murmuring tone of Ms Irshaat Hossain Chowdhury ....Being able to articulate his anti-Government stance in the presence of a high-calibre diplomat, Hafeez was apparently pleased with himself. While Anwar was inwardly mobilizing his wits to make a befitting response to Ms Chowdhury's comment, the elegant lady's attention hovered onto some other trifle, somewhere else....The famous mouth of Hafeez almost touched Anwar's as he whispered, 'Do I care a fig for anyone? Did you see how I served the Government that sugar-coated pill?' He couldn't remember the face of Ms Chowdhury anymore, her voice and words were all he could remember, but not her gradually dimming and fading features....But Anwar had observed her for quite sometime from every available angle, and now he's lost her in only a couple of hours. His memory has been failing, but how could one afford such expedited ageing? Anwar Ali heaved a long, disturbed sigh, which billowed through the rest of the merry-making images of the evening. Saleha arranges the pillows. 'It's so humid tonight, it's

rotting me absolutely,' she comments, being thoroughly disgusted, and powders her throat, neck and armpits. Looking at her, Anwar Ali feels embarrassed. Saleha is gradually shedding her sleepiness, ....and lust, sheer lustiness is taking possession of her fast. The huskiness in her voice changes to a purr, he is able to discern her words now: 'How come you returned so late, dear? Gorged yourself, eh? Your friend....loaded....uh huh? That Dhanmandi place, .... he owns it? What's the bride like? She brought your friend large dowries? Oh, no, you are useless....if I were there, I would have surveyed the whole place, d'ye understand? The gathering was good, I bet....Oh, tell me about the dinner menu!'

Lowering his head to rest on the pillow, Anwar Ali answered his wife's barrage of queries briefly and satisfactorily. Now comes the regular sedative session of fornication. He has to make love to this girl for at least twenty good minutes. He is a bit apprehensive now ....Saleha might mess up with his carefully cached reminiscences of the evening. Yet the orgasm he is looking forward to .... beefs him up, involving the women reconnoitred in the evening party .... Saleha would be a mere prop!

As Anwar Ali gets busy with the everyday rituals of unbuttoning her blouse, unhooking her brassiere, .... Saleha purrs, 'Uh-huh dear, let's do without it tonight,' while physically she drags herself nearer. By then, blood circulation in Anwar's body has almost ceased, thin layers of cold films drying up at the root of his enthusiasm. A faint voice is heard rising from his corpse-like being: 'What happened? Not willing at all tonight?' Sometimes he browses through pornographies in his office during the lunch-break; and those nights feel different that is, this same girl then happens to excite him a lot more, simply by evoking the lunch recess experience within Anwar.... However sex-charged these Salehas maybe, he resents it inwardly.... somehow they fail to stir you up in times of need, you know.... But look at Parwez's wifeshe has studied up to HSC level at best....but how she carries herself! How she looks at you....unfortunately Anwar met that girl almost at the end of the party....they were about to leave when Parwez laid his hand on his shoulder.

'I have been noticing you from a distance for sometime. You have fattened a lot, my friend. It's difficult recognizing you.' Then he introduced Anwar to his wife, 'Meet my boyhood pal. We studied in the same school, same college afterwards, ....then Anwar went to university and I studied engineering.'

Anwar had never studied in any university. Actually he had failed once in his college exams and then did his BCom from another institution. Realizing that Parwez had somehow forgotten or missed that debacle, he set about ogling the charming girl insouciantly. Her face indicated that she was an incessant talker. But at that moment, she was absorbing the exquisite gestures, postures and styles of oral delivery of the krishnachurha group most intently, Anwar noticed. Hence her voice gave off the stench of rickety civility and her accent seemed slurred with the onslaught of libido. 'School pal! And you never visited us so far....really strange!'

Anwar tries to paint the girl permanently, ....etch her really, on his memory platetaking in the details of her physical expressions....her attire, the embroidered jamdani, the red tinsel bit worn on her forehead, delicate bangles, alabaster fingers, painted nails....everything.

'You married long time back, isn't it? How many kids, eh? Do visit us some day.' Anwar takes his friend's address, satisfies his curiosity and weaves an intricate rejoinder meant for his wife, 'Yes, you're very right there. Our friendship has aged and matured....and we haven't met for ages again....But now I've decided that I must visit your place very soon....and disturb you thoroughly.' But he could only utter those words, and Parwez's wife insisted, 'You are most welcome to our place ....with your wife....any Sunday....please do come....I'll be really cross with you if you don't.'

Parwez fished out the car keys from his trousers pocket and left with his wife, toying with the keys in the palm of his hand. Anwar looked on and felt so dejected, ....having missed the chance of saying the carefully crafted sentence aimed at seducing his friend's gullible wife ....Does an opportune moment repeat itself?

A very faint fragrance exuded from her body, ....extremely mild, almost non-existent, ve....ry soothing. Only minutes ago, she was here, they had spoken to each other....yet now she appeared to be rare character resurrected from the ancient times....and now he is holding Saleha's live, warm breasts, but why can't he feel them? Do thick insensible rubber gloves cover those hands holding the pair of balloonlike boobs?

'Please do come....or I'll be really cross with you' the telltale invitation stays in your memory, the thin, almost ethereal waft of fragrance drifts into his nostrils, and yet the festivities, the graceful women float far and farther away. And here, salty smoke emitting from the mouth, the breasts, the hands of Saleha slowly, cloudily fill the room. Her breasts are boiling, sending out bubbling noises....but who will pull the shock-proof gloves off Anwar Ali's hands?

The restaurant mirrors are still bellowing, 'Awara hun.' Happy hordes are returning from the cinema, ....each one of

them feeling like the protagonist of the movie they have just watched....some are heard voicing the hit number of the movie. A loud and shrill whistle suddenly pierced the night....no second teal! One can surmise that the number of cine-going Eves tonight has fallen despairingly. After a brief pause, the yelling of the crowd tends to rise gradually to a crescendo....has there been some confusion and uproar at the gamblers' joint? But the tone of clamours suggests that the assembly is cheering over some obviously happy event.

It was noisy over there as well. So many invitees, ....countless cute girls....thronged the party venue. But the quality of that noise was different....how tranquil, how serene it all was. Western classics were being so naturally interspersed with the inevitable Tagore songs. 'Esho, esho amaar gharey esho, amaar gharey' (come, come to my house, come, to my house) ....listening to this number with rapt attention, a female guest was heard commenting: 'Isn't that song most appropriate for this boubhat occasion?' Who was that woman?

'Awara hun' now fades with the rising volume of mass uproar; it's time for disc change, maybe....The wording of the current number is almost buried under the riotous noise outside....what makes them so frivolous?

Without changing his posture a bit, Anwar Ali pricks his ears up and tries to understand the nature of the noise. Inside the steamy mouth of Saleha, words parboil and eventually splutter forth: 'Ishsh....What the hell is going on at this hour of the night? What are those rascals hollering about?'

'Damaddam mast kalandari' a baritone voice sang out boomerily and at that, the crowd burst out laughing in chorus. Anwar's already flaccid hand too slithered like a piece of dry timber, to rest next to his cold chest. He sat up and said, 'Let me go and see what those sister-fuckers are frolicking about at this ungodly hour.'

He opened the door to step onto the narrow verandah; from there, you climb down the short flight of three stairs and you're on the alleyway. A small crowd has gathered at the alleyway-road junction there. People of different age groups have assembled; a few youngsters are also seen. They are not locals, nor are they slum-dwellers. They somehow manage their grub by hauling loads, touting cinema tickets, or pushing up cycle-rickshaws at that bridge slope during daytime and pass their nights sleeping or not sleeping on the footpath or any available verandah. Anwar called one of them, 'Hey, guy, what happened?' The boy looked once in his direction, and then shouted at the top of his young voice, 'Damaddam mast kalandari.'

Then the whole scene came into his view. Around the street corner there, beside Khijir Ali's bakerkhani bakery, and right under the lamp-post, a dog and a bitch were engaged in copulation. The onlookers present were just hilarious over the opportunity of witnessing the dog-fucking bout; the kept on cheering the dogs in all conceivable ways. The gamblers were still active, settled peaceably on the high verandah beside the main road; one of them was heard parodying a popular song, 'In this month of kartik, come, see, the match of a dog-bitch' another from the same joint raised his loud voice, 'Ho, buddy, run and fetch us a pinch of salt, just add a little salt to that, and see how they undo themselves; hey, teeny brat, why don't you bring some salt and sprinkle it on them there!' The remainder of the parody died there....But who would go to bring that pinch of salt? No one seemed willing to budge an inch....everyone stood transfixed. The gamblers continued with their brisk business while watching the show from their vantage point.

On top of a four-wheel push-cart, a huge cauldron of *shahi haleem* (a thick, rich stew of pulses and meat fit for an emperor's palate) boils slowly over a dimly glowing stove; the vendor is a local. He sells his special *haleem* from the evening till midnight, from his cart posted at Rathkhola tri-junction. At about one tonight, the *haleem* vendor is returning home; he slows his burden and joins the crowd....Soon he is seen laddling out cold, thickened, meatless dregs of the 'whole-meal' in earthen *malshas* (small basin) at a throwaway price and the merry-makers sample the treat most agreeably. The young boy who sells cigarettes and betel-leaves from his tray standing in front of Ahmadiya Restaurant and whistles all the time to the tunes of the Hindi songs, is now standing beside the gamblers' array and licking up a malshafal of haleem. An auto-rickshaw driver drops his hand-held cards, looks at the pair of dogs and snubs the cigarette vendor, 'Why don't you hand me the stuff, eh, you faggot?' But the boy is busy eating the tray of merchandises hangs from his neck and his hands are holding the basin and the aluminium spoon, how the hell does he supply the gambler with fags?

'Here you are, Anwar Sa'b', he turned around and saw Nasrullah Sardar looking at him through his bedroom window. Once Nasrullah was the 'sardar' (head) of this mahalla (locality); Sir Salimullah, the Nawab of Dhaka himself had conferred the honour of sardari (headmanship) upon his father in 1907. The mahalla residents now have ceased to treat him as a sardar. As Anwar went near his window, the Sardar started grumbling in anger, 'Just look at those pigs!' They have lost all shame and honour, you see....There also live gentle folks in

this mahalla with their wives and children....and have you noticed what fun they are up to at this nocturnal hour? Imagine!'

Nasrullah then comes out himself and stands beside Anwar. This spot suits both of them very well. From here, they are able to view the whole scene.

'Any recent retrenchment in your office, eh, Anwar Sa'b?' Nasrullah tries to chum up with Anwar. 'Is there anyone in the '303' (refers to the 303 officers accused of indictable charges during during the late '60s) list?' 'Yes, our chairman is there, almost heading that illustrious list,' Anwar blurts out compulsively. 'Well, they all have insulted themselves amply; what's the use of indicting the blackguards now?' Anwar doesn't feel like prolonging the discussion ....as this fellow too has the tendency of self-glorification, the inevitable setting for his autobiographical narration being the comparison of the upright and honest British officers of Nawab Sir Salimullah and Nawab Habibullah's times with the thoroughly corrupt public servants of the Pakistani regime.

The 'hot tea' boy makes good use of this windfall business opportunity; he snakes through the idle crowd, carrying a bucketful of tea-glasses dipped in already turbid water and a kettle of zipsip tea fitted on a coal stove. Nasrullah goes back, muttering something absent-mindedly. From behind his window, he looks at the fornicating dogs for the last time and slams the casement shut at last.

About the same time, a brickbat came flying like a missile from somewhere and hit one of the pair. At that, the couple, maybe out of shame or fear, or shame and fear both, starts shifting sideways, little by little....as they can't possibly break away, tearing their current compaction suddenly....or, maybe they simply don't want to alienate themselves now.

The nocturnal autumn sky above looks like an ever-expanding pasture, whereupon the banks of carded woolly clouds graze wantonly. The large, round platter of a reddish-yellow glowing moon overhangs the filmy canopy of transparent mist. Shafts of moonshine steeped in clear breeze drive under his skull, creating waves of titillations there and he feels like laughing thoroughly. Luck is with him; somebody calls out from the gambling ring, 'Alas! My childhood buddy....' And instantaneously the light-hearted crowd bursts into laughter. Anwar also laughs heartily. This heart-rending invocation has recently been used in a Bangla movie; Anwar has seen the film....and while enjoying the show with Saleha, both of them had laughed a lot.

The rest of the local pariah-dogs have assembled on the other side of the main road; a few of them are relaxing, .... some laugh barkingly. A loner dog, tormented by some exclusive pain incomprehensible to humans and perhaps unknown to other dogs also, lets out a sigh. Another emotional dog stands off the carnival, on a hand-barrow left at the turning of the road, lifts his muzzle up, looks at the sweetish roundel of a moon and wails quite plaintively.

'Jumman Ali, where are you, Jumman Ali?' Everyman and every dog look back, being attracted by the novel calling. 'Tota Miah, the baker looks for his young helping hand, 'You faggot, what kind of fun are you up to? It's one o'clock at night and you, bloody son of a whore, you're enjoying yourself here?' Tell me, which father of yours will be opening the shop in the morning?'

Jumman Ali insists on staying back childishly, 'What's wrong, boss? I've finished my wrapping and packing jobs all right!'

'Come on, you bloody motherfucker, how the hell will you open the bakery in the early morning, if you keep on watching this whole-night show?' Jumman Ali looks unperturbed. He watches the love-play of the dogs for one good time and turns back to accompany Tota Miah.

Again someone amongst the gamblers commented loudly, 'Well, Jumman Ali had to leave half enjoying his doggie movie; now who will watch the next movie you are going to make with Jumman, eh?'

Another brickbat fell beside the pair of dogs. It was aimed at the bulb of the lamp-post. Missing the target, it hit the post with a 'twang'; the bulb continues to glow dimly as before.

Entering into his room, Anwar Ali shut the door behind him and called out in his full and matured voice, 'Saleha! Saleha responded fondly, in her drowsy voice, 'Why did you take so long? What's happening there?'

'Well, I had gone up to that intersection to see why the crowd gathered.' Lying down, he said caressingly, 'My Shelly' and drew his wife closer.

'Why are they making such a non-stop racket? Why don't you tell me?'

'Oh, don't ask me to repeat that, my dear. Well, since you insist....er....you know, people got so bloody ....just seeing two dogs, well, you know what....!'

The thick rubber gloves have suddenly peeled off Anwar Ali's hands. Is the skin peeling off too?

'You know, Shelly, those vulgar commoners....and that too at this unearthly hour, you see....!'

Goody sounds of coital bliss and excitement oozed from Anwar Ali's mellow voice, steamy mouth. #