

SHORT STORY

Pillow talk...

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

It was 4:30 in the morning, and David cracked open an eye to get a feel of the surroundings and get his bearing. He turned left to check if Mindy was awake or had gone off to work which was when he realized that he had a slight headache, probably from the sleep deprivation, but he also could not rule out the possibility of being overwhelmed from all the thoughts swirling around in his head. Mindy, who was lying next to him and was fast asleep until then, felt some movement on the other side of the bed and now slipped into a mode between sleep and awake. In this semiconscious state, she realized that the source of the rustle was David's habitual restlessness as he emerges from sleep, and she made a soft nondescript purr to acknowledge that they were both awake and wanted to know if David was planning to sleep some more.

David, in response to Mindy's question, lay still for a few more seconds, and then let out a little grunt that did not reveal his full intentions, but which both of them considered acceptable in lieu of a full answer in these early morning, casual settings. A few minutes passed before David broke the silence. He whispered, almost as if speaking to himself,

"Can I ask you a question? Do you really love me as much as you say you do?"

"I am not sure what you mean, Dave," is all Mindy managed to say. It was too early in the day and she was not ready to tackle a question which could have so many different shades of meanings.

"Well, you know, how you always say after we fight or sometimes even during an argument, 'I wish you knew how much I love you'. Last night I woke up with a funny feeling. I am not sure if I had a bad dream or not, but I was awake for at least an hour and all kinds of thoughts were going through my mind."

"Yeah? What kind of thoughts were they? Were you thinking about your brother again?"

"No, I do miss him, though. He was my best friend until I met you," David paused long enough to gather his thoughts and to retrieve his original train of reasoning.

"OK, last night I was thinking about my plan to start a business of my own. You know about it, right? I was thinking if I start my own business, I wouldn't then have to deal with Kevin on an everyday basis. He's just become a pain in my ass. Once I have my own business, I can make it grow, and one day, may be one day, have him work for me. That bastard! I am sure he'll get fired from his job one of these days. We'll all light a candle every day until that happens".

"So are you having trouble with Kevin again? Remember, I told you he's a maniac and you should just try to give him what he wants and stay away from him! So, what was his beef this time?"

"Well he wanted me to finish a report that he had earlier said was due next month, but now he wants it by next week. His reasoning is that the company is speeding up its tax filing date this year to get some tax breaks. Boy, these guys really behave like slave drivers... Anyway, that's not the only thing I was really thinking about last night, since you ask. I was thinking more about us and our relationship. Where are we with our relationship and where is it heading? I am kind of mulling over our future and so on. I can't sort of forget how I met you, and then you know... how we broke up after a year?"

"Oh, David, David, David... Why bring up something that we both don't want to go over again. And, I will be the first person to admit that the breakup was a mistake on my part."

Mindy knew that their erstwhile breakup is still fresh on David's mind, and the thought of it unnerves him often. She was willing to take most of the responsibility since she did not want to create another issue by taking only partial blame for it, even though she is not sure if assigning responsibilities for any breakup, particularly theirs, is as easy as she tries to make it sound. She now tries to get him to focus on something else, and to flesh out the real source of his anxiety.

"I don't know why you bring it up whenever you are in this reflective mood, Dave. And also, you know obsessing about bygone days only makes you feel anxious and brings up your childhood memories."

"OK, may be you have a point there... I hate being miserable, and want to be in a happier place. So, coming back to what I was

asking before, you always say that your feelings for me has grown since we split up and that you are ready to take our relationship to the next level. Do you really love me that much to be able to do so? More than before?"

The last question caught her attention and Mindy felt that the questions probably needed to be taken by the bull's horn. Assuming that something about their relationship is on his mind, it's best to address it heads on. Not sure how to tackle this thorny issue, she tries the reconciliation gambit which has often worked in the past.

"Well, it's a good question... let me think! I love you a lot. Do I love you as much as in the past or do I love you more ..."

Now she paused and tries to buy some time, since she was a little nervous about trying to come up with a response that David might memorize by heart and which might end up being a constant source of irritation in future conversations. A wrong choice of words could only make him more anxious at this hour. How does one try to be honest, but at the same time be supportive? Mindy remembers that before they broke up, she and David would spend hours going over aspects of their relationship, which often led to pledges of allegiance to each other that would seem to make their commitment stronger. But



soon thereafter they broke up, and in its aftermath all these words seemed to be empty and a thorn on their side. David was the one who had taken the breakup the hardest, and the old promises and words only provided grist to the mill. Mindy just wants to be faithful and realistic now.

Before the breakup, David was always willing, even eager, to declare his commitment to Mindy in very dramatic terms. One of his favorite expressions was "Mindy, I love you so much that I can jump off a cliff for you", which he would announce with a little touch of oratory flair. When he said it the first time, she was caught a little off-guard since she was not expecting any such proof of his love. Moreover, jumping off of a cliff to prove your commitment was too drastic a measure, she reasoned. If, on the other hand, one was training in the army and had to jump off a cliff as part of a fitness exercise, or to strengthen the body muscles, she could understand. She had several other questions relating to this "ultimate test of love" paradox, but she never articulated these to David. Has anybody really jumped off a cliff in recent history? To her, the act was too violent to be considered an evidence of love. Bringing a bouquet of roses she would have considered more appropriate, and romantic. Also, what does the act of jumping to almost certain death really achieve? To her,

such pronouncements, while they sounded very comforting, albeit a little amusing, during their first time together, appeared to be somewhat provocative now. Since David and Mindy got back together, she has been careful in choosing her words. She does not definitely want to echo David's declaration and just parrot, "Me too", since she is not sure what such verbal assurances would accomplish. Also, she needs to be sure before making any promise to fly off of a cliff that she is serious about following it through. After they broke up, David had repeated his vow to jump off the cliff, but Mindy was very nervous about such statements from him, given his fragile mental state of mind which she had not factored in when she decided to go out with Arty, David's older brother. What if David had actually done something so rash, then the world would be pointing a finger at her. Also, that would have probably triggered an immediate end to her relationship with Arty. And then, how do you live knowing that a man gave his life for you. The rest of the universe would probably assume that she had also promised to jump off the cliff with him, but had reneged on her part of the pledge. On a more realistic level, Mindy was aware that people frequently give their kidney or other organs to help their beloved ones, and to Mindy, that is proof enough of love.

with his brother, and eased his pain somewhat as he could understand why Mindy was treating him like a stranger as a Capgras victim would.

As all these thoughts were going through his mind, everything was quiet for almost two minutes, before he slowly and softly started again.

"But, I hope you really mean it when you say you love me more than before... I'd really like to believe it. You know Mindy, when you left me I was in so much misery that I thought that I'd die from the pain and my bleeding heart. I was mortally wounded, you know, but I couldn't tell anyone that my brother stole my girl. You knew, one person I could trust during my darkest moments was my boss, this fucking Kevin. I didn't tell you this before, but I had to confide in him otherwise he would have fired me a long time ago. I was constantly late for work, and was not getting anything done on time. Boy, was I in deep shit, but what hurt me more is that I couldn't tell anybody what happened. Kevin was much nicer then, and I felt I could trust him. One day I was at the water cooler, and he stopped by and tapped on my shoulder, and had the look of someone who would understand my situation. He got me during my most vulnerable time, and I let my guard down. I told him about you and my brother, and he genuinely seemed to understand. I think he might have been going through a similar event in his own life. I never found out though, but as soon as he heard my story he said he understood and even suggested that I should take a few days off. In the end, I decided not to, 'cause I was afraid I would be even more miserable at home all alone with the TV on and drinking as my only companion. Luckily for me, Kevin, the bastard, got off my case right away, and cut me a lot of slack. Even when he heard that my brother died he came to me and asked if it was the same brother who had caused me so much grief... I can't tell you, Mindy, how much you hurt me. I was really surprised when you grabbed my hand at Arty's funeral. For a moment, I was so confused, not knowing what's causing more pain the loss of my brother, the sight of you in mourning, or the feeling that I might have contributed to his death. I was not sure when you came to my apartment a week after his death and told me that you and Arty had broken up, whether it was because you really wanted to get back with me or you just wanted to comfort me. I couldn't be sure, and still I am not fully sure deep down inside whether you felt pity or wanted to come back to me to get over the pain of losing him. I guess in the final analysis it doesn't matter since ..."

Before David's soliloquy went on any longer, Mindy wanted to get a word to him, and weighing the cost and benefit of interrupting him, took the plunge in favor of speaking.

"David, it's all water under the bridge now. You are the most resilient person I know, and look at the brighter side of your current situation. You have your job, got your girl friend back, and have her unqualified love, and believe me that's truer than the cliff I could jump off of or the kidney that I could give you that you don't need."

She paused for a second, and started singing a song, one they've heard on the Top 40's radio,

"So baby don't worry, you are my only,
You won't be lonely, even if the sky is falling down,
You'll be my only, no need to worry,
Baby are you down down down down down,
Down, Down,
Baby are you down down down down down,
Down, Down,
Even if the sky is falling down...."

She started humming the rest of the song, and stopped. Another few seconds went by, before she resumed in a soft and low tone, "And you know very well that I always loved you even when I was away from you. I was never out of love with you. The next time you have a bad dream or lie awake and have bad thoughts ..."

Before Mindy could finish her sentence, she realized that David was fast asleep and all she could hear was the deep whoosh of his breathing. She paused and listened to the sound of his breath, which felt like a whiff of breeze that had come and was gone.

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ESSAY

POETRY

Who is afraid of Taslima Nasrin?

RASHID ASKARI

Taslma Nasrin, the Bangladeshi-born writer, has become a legend in her own lifetime. She is hailed outside of Bangladesh as the most important writer in Bangladesh not only by laymen, but also by connoisseurs of literature. All over India, Europe and America, she is recognized as a literary icon. If you travel to Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay or London, New York, Paris or Hamburg, you cannot help being asked about this fallen literary goddess. While traveling by train in India, I heard with my own ears some fellow passengers fulminating against the ban on one of her books in Bangladesh. As a Bangladeshi, I was pelted with question after question as to why the Nasrin was not being allowed to get back to her motherland. The questioners, however, belonged to a particular religion different from that of the writer. They seem to nourish a very lofty idea about Taslima Nasrin as an incarnation of truth. Nasrin has become a living myth after the recurrent proscriptions of her books and her move into self-exile.

Be that as it may, the main point is that Taslima Nasrin's fame has gradually been rising to dizzy heights of eminence. What have some people discovered in her which we failed to do? How has she managed to earn for herself such a big reputation? It is time to delve deep into these questions. If we carefully analyze the whole lot of writings she has by now produced, we cannot but see that except for *Select Columns* and a few poems, the remainder is a hotchpotch of half-baked ideas and stray thoughts in the guise of pompous claptrap. The mystery behind her fame lies in the fact that however shoddy her writings may be in the original, they have been highly gauged in their translations done by expert hands.

Most of her novels bear testimony to her nodding acquaintance with the genre. The best she has done is try to give a pretty materialistic interpretation of our society, culture and religion in her magnum opus *Select Columns*. But the motif she has tried to establish in them has been illustrated much more cogently by many of her compatriot authors.

The bulk of her writing can be bogged down to atheism or secularism or extra-religious humanism. It is okay. None should smell a rat in this effort. Bangladeshi writers like Ahmad Sharif, Aroj Ali Matubbar and Humayun Azad have done the same thing in a more effective way. They have arguably been critical of religion as a whole, regardless of any particular religious community, and upheld the doctrine of secular humanism. But Taslima Nasrin is seen fighting only against one religious community and its culture. She likes to pick holes only in Islam and overlooks others. This is surely a sign of incompetence in one who aspires to be a good writer. And for this reason she cannot be on an equal footing with other nonconformist writers of Bangladesh.

This is the reason why people opposed to the Muslim community are taking advantage of Taslima Nasrin's authorship. Personally, I do not know if she at all realizes that she is playing a cat's paw, and working against her own people and



culture on the pretext of truth seeking. If she had been an inveterate atheist, she would have abandoned all religions equally, and employed her talent only in unbiased secular pursuits. She could have then found faults with all of them. We wouldn't have worried because, this too is a well-accepted approach to critical investigation into men, matters and morals and many a writer has earned global recognition trying their hand at it. But Nasrin's views are anything but atheistic. They rather seem to be slanted towards a means which is either a fool's rush or a highly clever scheme.

The Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul is more or less possessed of the same skill. He is also prone to undermining the religious feelings of Muslims. His *Beyond Belief* is a scathing criticism of Islamic people and their culture. If he had been an atheist, or a dialectical materialist, or even a dispassionate secularist, he would have made an equal treatment of all religious communities and their cultures. We would have had very little to object to it. But Naipaul seems to make a deliberate attempt to tarnish the image of a particular community and join hands with those who tend to mistake Islam for terrorism and confuse Laden and the Taliban with general Muslims. He can be easily charged with being a tool under their thumb. We will certainly not forget Naipaul, the author of *A House for Mr. Biswaas*, but, at the same time, we must not hesitate to say that his genius fades into insignificance when he deliberately turns provocative.

Salman Rushdie too belongs to the same cult (careerist cult) and his writing is targeted on Islam to a great extent. He

treats Islam as a 'paranoid' religion and keeps mysteriously silent on other faiths. A true atheist is equally critical of all religions irrespective of whether it is Hinduism, Christianity or Islam. By attacking Islam he has drawn the attention of people of other faiths and could headed for the Nobel Prize. His move to the United States is certainly indicative of his move towards the Nobel Prize.

The continuation of this legacy may one day come down to our Taslima Nasrin, who is a feminine version of Naipaul or of Rushdie to a lesser degree. Although her writing is not as cerebral as those of Naipaul and Rushdie, she can serve the purposes of others. Her virulent criticism of Islam is hugely titillating for many.

But what real thing can she gain by all this incitement? In fact, she is cherishing an illusion. A spectre of an aspiration for something which she does not deserve is behind it all. There is no denying the fact that she has a real flair and a critical eye for writing. If she brushes up her talent, she can master her creative and intellectual acumen at least to the point of being one of the most distinguished writers in Bangladesh. She should not mortgage her conscience to climb to the peaks of success.

As there is no reason as to why Taslima Nasrin should be acclaimed so strongly throughout the world, there should equally be no reason why her books should be banned or she should be banished from her country. We may disapprove of what she says, but we should have the mind to protect her right to say what she feels, to practise her freedom of speech. This is the hallmark of a secular democratic country which we dearly achieved in 1971 at the cost of the lives of three million people. Taslima Nasrin was born and bred in the same motherland as we were. In addition, she has not committed any offence subversive of the state. So she preserves every right to come back to her country for the asking. The government should take all possible measures to ensure her safe return. It should not bother about the chorus of indignation against her raised by religious fanatics inside and outside the country. The self-proclaimed guardians of Islam should not be allowed to go too far in dealing with the Taslima Nasrin issue. As a matter of fact, it is they who have made her a hot subject of debate, and thus pushed her into a prominence she does not in reality deserve. If you do not like her writings, you may jolly well shut your eyes to them; or give a flat 'No' to them; or write her off as an eccentric old bore. But you can never be in pursuit of her to put her to the sword.

We do not raise Taslima Nasrin to a zenith she does not deserve. Nor do we exclude her from a position she is worthy of. We are not afraid of her thoughts, ideas and speculations. Nor are we tempted to claim her as the only one of her kind.

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Untitled

ATIKA CHERRY

Like a speeding car on a highway
Craving rush through my vein
To prove, nothing is a big deal
Go wild, Cherry, anytime!

My savage wish
To drink my own blood
Cutting by my finger
Because nothing makes any sense
Again! Nothing is a big deal.

Your tight fingers
Tightly hold my breasts
With love-
And my neck too the other day
And with "what?"
Nothing is a big deal.

Beneath the stars
A different man
Legitimate sex
Crashing promises
Ah! You sweet promise!

I bite off my heart
I cut me into pieces
I shut me down
Staring again is a big deal.

My skin will be framed
and hanging
On the museum wall after
the damnation of me
Your acid kisses on my skin ---
The masterpiece
Explaining the friendly betrayal.

Down.
Crying.

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