

SHORT STORY

POETRY

The invitation

HUSNE ARA SHAHED

Translation: MASRUFA AYESHA NUSRAT

Hillool jumped over the railway track. The train was approaching and the gate had been shut. The gateman could not keep up with the little rogue. Merely telling him off was not enough. Like a dragon-fly he flung himself all over the place and feared no one's scolding. One who was so carefree outside would definitely fear no one at home! In spite of everyone's spanking, he remained cheery twenty-four hours a day. No, not exactly twenty-four hours, he laughed away till he went to sleep.

His mother was busy all the time. She worked as a domestic help, to be specific in a highrise apartment building. Skyscrapers had been rapidly going up in Dhaka of late. The huge concrete structures looked so ugly. These buildings consisted of several flats which were rented out or were owned by individual families. The ground floor had a car park packed with vehicles. Many people were in charge of the security of the building. They were labeled differently the gate-keeper, the security guard, the caretaker, the supervisor and the like. Hillool's mother, Kusum bibi, worked in one of these. She swept and mopped the entire stairway, the veranda and the open space of one such highrise building.

Everyone knew Hillool. And why would they not? His mother had been working there since before his birth. Hillool's name had been given by one begum sahib from the southern flat on the third floor. She was young, wore shalwar-kamiz, had short hair and dyed it red. She was a restless woman and ran up and down the stairs whistling and spinning the key ring on her finger. She drove the car mostly on her own and often sweetly greeted Hillool with a "hello", which came with a smile.

Hillool did not consider himself a kid but a complete grown-up. He was almost nine now and was that too young? He could do everything by himself. He did not need his mother at his side all the time. Rather he did favours for others. He spent most of the time in the building compound. The guards did not chase him away. He was given tokens for things he did for them, no matter how small the favour and he was happy with whatever he received. Sometimes he bought things to eat with the money he got and shared it with his younger brothers but never with his little sister! She had just learnt to crawl and gulped up everything she could get hold of. Oree baaps, she was such a rakkhosh!

Hillool studied the people around him. He realized they only called him to do them favours. He got things from people in exchange for what he did for them. Sometimes they gave him things without reason. He got eidie during Eid, on the day of the crescent moon. His mother said that they gave fetra, alms in the name of Allah to be rewarded after death. Hillool also got clothes for zakaat. These donated clothes were usually new. However, they never fit him. They were either too tight or too loose-fitting. It was no good complaining to his mother, "Maa, I don't like this

colour." His mother consoled him, "The poor shouldn't be choosing, baba." Hillool was deeply hurt and his eyes became moist thinking of the double standard which existed only in respect of the poor.

Hillool played with the other slum children of his age. In the evening he returned home and prattled long with his mother. She brought food for home covered with her anchal, the end of her sari. He divided the food equally for every one, his father and for himself. His father worked in a large shopping complex. One day he came home early. Hillool enquired surprisingly, "Bap jaan, why are you home early today?"

Folding his umbrella aside, his father replied, "I had some work at Rayer Bazaar so I just thought of stopping by."

Hillool offered, "Would you like to eat, baba? Lemme give you a plate."

His father agreed and ate rice with the daal and red spinach torkari his mother had cooked.

Eating happily he came out with the news, "You know what? We've all been invited for an occasion! It's my owner's eldest son's marriage reception ceremony."

"When baap jaan?!" Hillool asked excitedly.

"Next Wednesday evening," assured Mansur miya.

"Baba, but no one invites us! We always go to dawats uninvited! We go and ask for food like begging for alms," Hillool snapped sorrowfully.

"Dur baba, name anyone who could invite us. Why would anyone? Do we have any relatives?" His father mocked and shooed off the flies on his plate with the gamchha from his shoulder.

Hillool did not think too much. Getting an invitation was indeed a matter of surprise and happiness. He felt like rushing to update his mother. He wanted to ask her what clothes he would wear. He wanted to iron his clothes too. After all it was a real invitation! He wondered if she would give him money for the laundry.

Wednesday finally arrived and so did Wednesday evening!

His father told his mother, "Bou, wear a nice sari. It's an invitation and a matter of great honour!" Kusum smiled. After a careful selection she chose a sari in floral patterns against a green background. The newly married tenant of the first floor apartment had given it to her. She wore her sari in neat pleats like the bibi sahibs wore theirs. She smeared lipstick on her lips, the one given by the mem sahib of the fourth floor occupant. She arranged her hair in a bun and put on her Bata sandals. Hillool's father was ecstatic to see her, "Kusumi, you look so beautiful with just a tad of grooming up!" Kusum smiled coyly tidying her sari. Hillool's father was dressed in launderette pajama-panjabi and pump shoes. He wiped his face with the gamchha and slightly daubed Kusum's powder on it. Then he took out a new thermos from a box which he had hag-

gled hard for that morning. He wrapped it in colourful gift paper and attached a little white card on it. He requested Tarun, the shopkeeper in front of their house, to write "a token for my Mamun baba- from Mansur miya". Hillool and his mother appreciated the gift very much. It was all right to spend a bit for an invitation. Should anyone attend a wedding without presentation? Hillool was animated with excitement and so was Kusum bibi. And Mansur miya was gloating with pride and happiness too!

The wedding venue was lavishly decorated by lights. It was an expensive community centre with bustling guests. More guests were arriving in dazzling clothes. Everyone looked so happy and pleasant. The ceremonies were recorded on video. Kusum's foot got entangled in its wires and it caused her to trip. Mansur miya helped her up. Hillool called them impatiently, "Baba-maa, come to this table. See how beautiful these flowers look in the vase!"

After sometime Kusum asked her husband, "Why do they have spoons, forks and knives next to every plate? Can't I eat with fingers?" "Eat the way you like. No problem!" said Mansur miya encouragingly.

At that moment someone important approached their table- the owner, the father of the bridegroom. "Aree, Masur miya, it's you! I'm so happy you made it." Masur miya handed over the wedding gift to him. The owner looked very surprised. "What's this? Why did you spend so much money? I'm the one who owes you some money. Saying this he dashed a new one thousand Taka note at him. Mansur miya could not utter a word out of bafflement. "No, no, don't be shy. I'm the one who is supposed to give you. Good that you brought your wife and son along. Eat to your heart's content and take home as much as you like."

Before leaving he patted Masur miya on the shoulder and said, "Since you're here, lend a hand to the waiters. I know you're good at supervision and management. It would be great if your wife helped with the dish washing too." Then he called his second son, "Baba, Madhu, come and see. Here's Mansur miya, my most trusted and oldest employee from the store. He took a lot of pains to come. Don't forget to give him food after work and also give him some extra food in a polythene bag. He has children at home".

Mansur miya looked around in bewilderment. It was not clear whether he was looking for his wife or son.

Hillool slowly approached the gate. He was not restless anymore. The smile on his face had disappeared and he looked calm and composed. He pulled his father by one hand and his mother by the other, "Let's go home and eat. The smell of the food is nauseating to me."

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From

Translation: Dulal Al Monsur

... SHAMIM REZA

In the light of the parasite moon

When the support of ground under feet dissolves away, darkness devoid of love comes closer from all around.

Playing restless hide and seek, unbridled memory cannot hide the mind for long.

Once overpowered with the heatless light of the parasite moon, the one, that took rest in the eyes, took it for his rebirth, the yard of autumn.

The sculptor of earthen myths has understood, but the one who has passed his only life being a parasite has not.

Skeleton of a doe

Then god, sleeping as if a mummy, seeing all, flies to other planets like the crush of bones, and we, on this earth, keep on moving scared, in the eyes of a chased doe.

We go on counting the beats of breath of tranquil water;

then no more imaginary grasshoppers fly in the heart.

We feel the air of the forge of a smithy all the ribs do so.

The scrambling of some blue eyed robbers they all get smeared with our fertile musk;

we keep on floating on drought sunlight in paddy fields devoid of breeding.

We ponder and wonder how long we're lying left away, a skeleton of some boneless, lifeless doe.

Shamim Reza is a poet and literary editor of Kaler Kantho.

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REFLECTIONS

NON-FICTION

In the glow of a sleepy sun

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

There are great loves that make the world go round. And if you think of the relationships that have impacted on history, or made some dents in the way the world carries itself, you need to go back to how Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de



ANASIS NIN

Beauvoir longed for each other's company. They loved greatly, and they contributed hugely to the shaping of literary and philosophical perceptions among their contemporaries and in the young who flocked to listen to their discourses.

Love has always been the pivot upon which the world has moved. And it has gathered steam and substance when intellectual material or artistic sophistication has been injected into it. The thespian Dilip Kumar felt a deep attraction for Madhubala, and she for him; and everyone



HENRY MILLER

around them knew that they were made for each other. But then Madhubala's father came in the way and spoiled it all. All too often in the history of man-woman relationships, parental interference, or call it adult insolence, has spoiled the chances of what could have been two charming lives lived in proximity to each other. Dilip and Madhubala went their separate ways. Madhubala died young, obviously with a broken heart. And that heart had a hole in it.

There was always a fullness in the heart which beat in Richard Burton. And passion always throbbed in Elizabeth Taylor. They met on the sets of *Cleopatra*, fell in love, went through fiery passion, divorced and married again. It was love that was as tempestuous as the explosions in Pompeii. And yet the most profound form of love comes in silence, in moments when the man and the woman share twilight moments in swiftly gathering winter. Anna Akhmatova and Isaiah Berlin listened to each other; he bore into her eyes and she imagined the song in his pulsating heart. That was their togetherness. Anais Nin and Henry Miller would be uncomfortable with such tranquility in love, for theirs was always a stormy relationship. They wrote, they argued. But, more than that, they craved sex and had a rambunctious time of it.

In the history of love, little comes close to the bonding that eventually united Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett in marriage. They met in poetry, he reading hers and appreciating the imagination rising out of it, she surprised by his quick attraction to her intellect. Barrett remains a less than famous poet, but her ties with Browning led to the latter composing some of the classic instances of poetic thought. Take, for instance, the universally recited 'Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp / Or what's a heaven for?' The Brownings were a fortunate pair, for happiness defined their lives. But you cannot say the same about William Butler Yeats, whose endless longing for Maud Gonne was to no avail. He wrote for her, suffered on her account and in the end was compelled to lose all hope of a consummation of love with her. He then did a most bizarre thing: he proposed to Gonne's daughter, which idea was of course roundly dismissed.

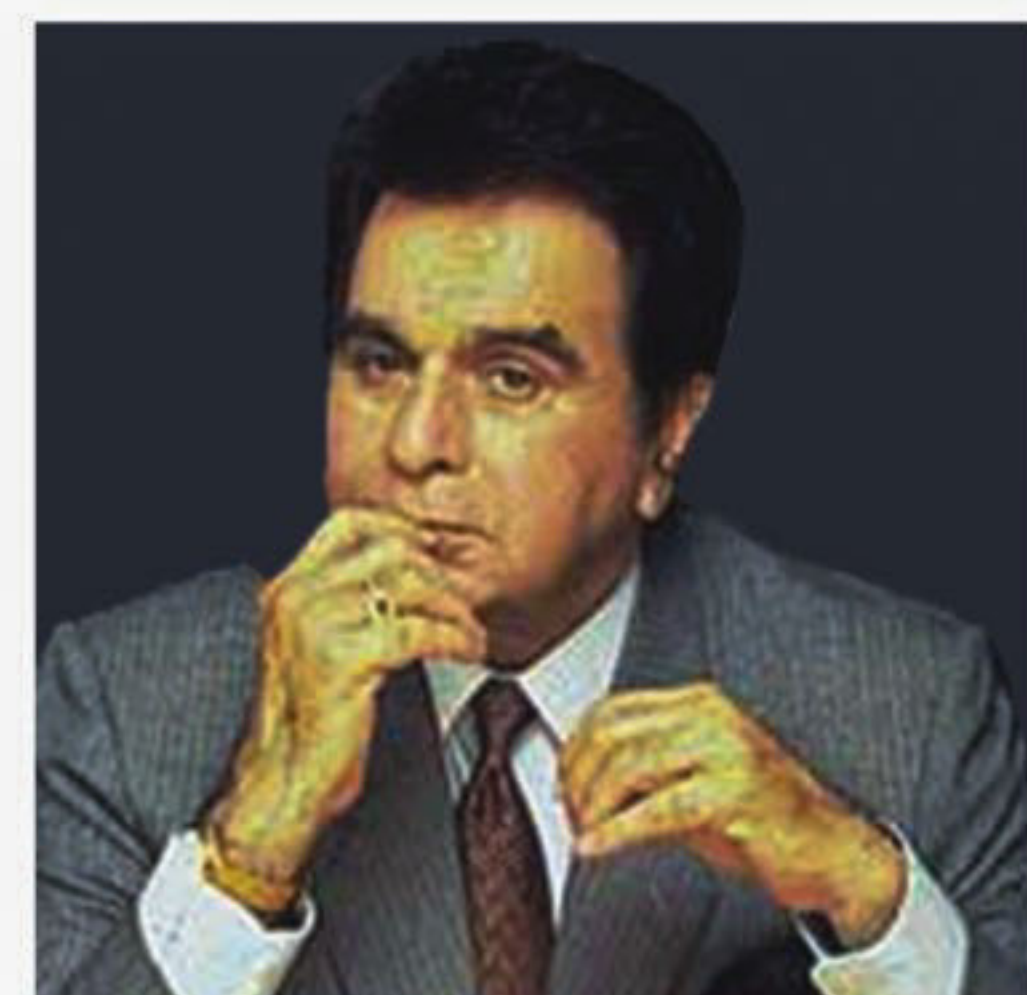
When these days you come by scenes from old Waheeda Rehman-Guru Dutt movies, it is much more than the songs that strike your sensibilities. You think of their doomed love, you think of the suffering Geeta Dutt went through. And then you wonder about the intensity of pain that pushed Guru Dutt into taking his own life. The paths of true love never did run smooth, said Shakespeare. You mull over that thought, and you realise that it could be true, indeed is true. Woman has been



MADHUBALA

made to suffer through her love for the man in her life, relentlessly. Pat Nixon stood beside, and by, Richard Nixon through all his travails, without complaint. She endured the humiliation of Watergate, the tears welling up in her as her husband bade farewell to his staff. When she died, Nixon wept uncontrollably as her coffin was lowered into the grave.

And yet there is something pacific about love



DILIP KUMAR

when you look into the eyes of the woman you call your mermaid. You watch her throw her head back in liberated laughter and you imagine the sensuousness of her lips. There is something about her nose that stirs the passions in you. You watch her neck, marvelling at the smoothness of the skin and ending up marvelling at such amazing grace in beauty. In the dusky hour, as the glow from a sleepy sun runs riot across her cheeks, you cup her face in your hands. Somewhere in the interplay of light and shadow between her warmth and your ardour, love creates ripples in the pond and makes magic across the meadow.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Star Literature.

Facing the inevitable

QUMRUN NAHER

Mati by name and major general by age fifty five, he had a tough life. At the time of his death he was adjutant general at army headquarters. He had lived hard, and had always been a bit of a loner, spending time regularly in a quiet corner of the room with a cigarette. He was a devout Muslim, a loving husband and a caring father. He had been in the army, fought for the liberation of Bangladesh. A grateful nation conferred the Bir Protik gallantry award on him for his bravery in 1971. But he always told young people, "There's nothing special about me; it is all about determination and it is self-belief that makes you a soldier. There's nothing ever more satisfying than serving your country as a soldier".

It was November 1998 when I noticed the deteriorating state of my father's health. So, I took a few days leave from my studies to attend to him. When I saw his emaciated face and irregular breathing pattern, I knew there was not much we could do. Mati had understood that the end was near; and he didn't want any heroic measures. He was first admitted to CMH, Dhaka and then referred to National Cancer Hospital, Singapore. It was in Singapore that the extent of his illness became known. The hospital changed its approach from resuscitation to palliation, to allow him to die with as much dignity and comfort as possible. He was advised him fly back to Dhaka and be around his family and friends as long as possible.

After reaching Dhaka, it was not how to save a life, but how to manage death. Therefore, Mati was transferred from the Intensive Care Unit into a VIP room of CMH, Dhaka. He didn't appear to be in any distress and didn't appear to have any pain. He was deeply unconscious. It was an hour before he died, but it seemed longer. It was a busy night as lots of people came to see him for the last time. I have never witnessed such a death. While people frequently die alone in their sleep, usually it goes unnoticed. But in his case, it was witnessed by family and friends. In many ways Mati's death was a good one as he was finally relieved of his long suffering.

Death is an inevitable part of life. We learn to accept it with equanimity, to do our best to help the family through arriving at an understanding of inevitability. We try to give the grieving family and friends an explanation of what has happened and why. We hear the stories of some of their loved ones, and we often share a tear. We offer tissues and sympathy.

When everything was over, I stood alone in Mati's room. It was quiet. His eyes were sunken. His skin was pale and cold. His pulse was absent, absent were his respirations. The pupils were fixed and dilated. At 05:15 hours on 28 November 1998, he was dead.

He was an exceptional man who had extraordinary strength and character. He remains my role model in all that I do. With his departure, I have lost the best of all.

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LIT QUMRUN NAHER