

NON-FICTION

# It happens only in Dhaka

SARA MEHERANGIS CHOWDHURY

Dhaka is a city buzzing with hordes of people busy amidst their daily lives. Whether it is the pressure of household, study, work or kids people seem to be as 'busy as a bee'. But if you were to look deep into any interesting happenings you need not look far. I went on the bus the other day, my car being unavailable, and had the most mind boggling experience. Firstly it started to rain and I got wetter than a drenched crow and I had no umbrella with me. Who expects rain in the middle of winter? Then of course the bus was running late. After what seemed like an eternity the bus finally came. I showed the bus conductor my drenched ticket after which I got on the bus. There was one empty

seat in the bus and it was next to a sleazy looking man dressed in a sleeveless t-shirt and shorts. Somebody ought to have told the man that it was winter and not summer, blazing fiercely with its golden sun. The man started to talk to me although at my drenched state with the bus splashing away among puddles of water, I wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone, let alone a man who didn't know how to dress according to the weather. But appearances can be deceiving indeed and Dhaka was a city where a man could dress anyway he wished to without being stared at or frowned upon, whereas women have to dress a certain way or risk being stared at. "Do you have a husband or a boyfriend?" the man asked bluntly. I blushed deeply. What kind of a man starts



with being inquisitive whether a woman is single or not in a bus, with a complete stranger yet. However, I knew I had to answer the man otherwise he'd keep staring at me with those beady eyes of his. "I'm married". I lied on impulse. In Dhaka a woman travelling alone has to be careful, especially when talking to strange men. You would think once you tell a man you're married he'd back off. No such luck. "Can I have your phone number?" he asked so confidently that I almost believed he could manipulate me into giving him my number. I chose to ignore him and all through the ride. The two-hour ride from Banani to Dhanmondi, due to a traffic jam, was long. The man kept boasting about having a huge garments industry and I remained quiet the whole way

ignoring him. But somehow he didn't get the hint. The thought that came to my mind was that for a man with a clothes' factory he sure didn't know how to dress. As I reached my destination, which is Dhanmondi, I was so relieved to get rid of the man that I didn't care that it was still raining and I didn't have an umbrella with me. I got off the bus thinking what an interesting experience one can have with a complete stranger on the bus in Dhaka. I laughed to myself, upon which heads turned, but I didn't care. I walked in the rain and went to my aunt's house in Dhanmondi where I dried off and told my aunt about what happened upon which she laughed and said, "This can only happen in Dhaka city."

SARA MEHERANGIS CHOWDHURY IS WITH THE DAILY STAR

SHORT STORY

## Saying goodbye ...

FARIHA NAAZ SHAFI

The wind chime was a melancholy window from which a choir of sadness filled my heart to the extent of non-existence. It was a beautiful day. An old, familiar breeze, in a tremulous fountain of colour hissed and whispered silently on my mulberry red ears. Droplets of rain danced on the window silt like bricks on a lane. I remembered Auro.

Auro and Auro. He was my son- the pride in my nose that I could not just wash off labelling it as 'dirt'. Born and diagnosed with AIDs at the tender age of three, I saw my toddler grow up more bold, courageous and passionate than any other human being on the bivouac of this world. Yet his father, untouched by a love so sanctified left us for isolation and social acceptance.

While Auro's physical health was climbing up the stairs of frailty, his indecisive and inquisitive mind became attracted to every petite and fundamental thing happening to him. With electrifying despondency the other day, he asked me about death.

I said he was going to die soon. Impressively, he was continuing school with zeal and fervour every new dawn. Any other word that his brain adhered to, was the tunnel of discovery and enormous human emotion that he bravely skipped through. Some nights, with the warm of black coffee on my wrists, an eerie fear of the curtains being drawn and my Auro withering away with the wind, enveloped my heart.

Chicken wings with soya sauce- the delicacy whose smell not only blocked his nostrils but also his haywire and relentless mind. On witty Fridays, when a foam of crimson sunrise had drenched the seven skies, we would go out wild for the chicken wings. Those were times when we walked, really walked. I took my two, calculated step with him taking his zigzag, unstable ones.

He again asked me about death. Auro: "Momma, what is it to die?" A hoarse voice of mine proclaimed that when you die tomorrow starts without you and you float with angels on the azure sky. Then I could see the depth of his dimple, making lunatics as he fused into a shaky, I-use-cologne-toothpaste-smile.

The next day, he stealthily brought in his fists, now enclosed an A-4 size paper. He held it down the bottom of my nose. I grinned.

It was a mesmerizing poem of David Romano. "If tomorrow starts without me and I am not there to see If the sun should rise and find your eyes all filled with tears for me..." A tormenting tear shrivelled off my cheek. He hugged me in an extreme force.

The midnight stars had slumbered off on their comfort zones. Sitting crossed-legged on the highly-raised bed adorned with satin bedcover, my index finger etching parabolas on Auro's stretched forehead, I repeated the number of an old relative on my subconscious mind. I flung opened the curtains in the room that till now supported suffocation. Smooching Auro's veiny, injection-plugged hand I left the hospital room with a stride on my pace.

I ringed Auro's father. The hospital rang me back. Auro, with a chill on the bones and a deep etch in the heart, breathed his last on the warmth of my body. The human sentiment that grasped me on that instant was one that fragmented and defragmented me at once. Tear is an understatement of a mother's love for her son.

On the lapse of seconds, a drop of smelly rain rustled on my palms. His funeral had started. It was the soothing voice of Auro's father echoing on my ears, from a distance,

"It seems to me you lived your life Like a candle in the wind Never fading with the sunset When the rain set in..." "Goodbye, Auro". Saying goodbye was never this hard.

FARIHA NAAZ SHAFI WRITES FICTION

LETTER FROM BOSTON

# Sunshine on my shoulders makes me happy

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

The last few days it has been overcast and cloudy in Boston, with the sun playing a game of "hide and seek" with massive patches of clouds, trying to break out of the cover of clouds, but losing the battle more often than not. Cloudy days are not my favorite ones, and during fall and winter, when days are short and nights are long, I am not eager to jump out of bed and start my daily routine if it's cloudy and dark outside. On any given morning, before I get out of bed, I make sure that the sun has made its appearance on the eastern

from the east to the west, the light it gives us, and the millions of other images it creates everyday on its journey 24x7x365 in today's parlance. When the sun shines brightly, every hour the space around me takes on a different and new look. In the morning, when the sun emerges from its long sleep and its rays break through the tall trees that border the eastern side of my house, it warms up my heart and gives me hope that the day is going to be good. When the rays fall on my eyes, or the light reaches the foot of the bed and tickles my feet, I am sometimes reminded of an old Manna Dey song "Ek

playing a game of tag with the trees, the lamp posts, the moving cars and rickshaws, or the rooflines. As the sun moves in its orbit past the meridian, and gently makes it way down the western horizon, my mood also changes, becoming mellower and more reflective, since I know the light is not going to last long and give way to sunset, and, darkness will take over.

But the last few hours when the sun is receding are also often my sweetest. One reason, the fading sun and the golden color it splashes all around often brings up some of my best memories. Many of them involve my grandmother,

with 'jhal muri' and 'ruti panir', snacks prepared by Chan Mia, my uncle's trusted cook. The sun would still be shining, but the shadows from the surrounding buildings would paint the yard with dark patches of rectangular and other shapes. The sight of sun, its golden light on the grass, the little guava tree in one corner, the shed in another corner, the small flower and kitchen garden, and the boundary walls would always lift my spirits. I felt glad that I came to join Nanoo for tea, even if hesitantly. My reservations would soon melt away as I warmed up to the world awash in gold, staring at the still life panorama painted in the yard. Tagore captured that mood aptly when he said, "Emni korey jaey jodi din jaak na."

It didn't hurt that Nanoo was a gifted story teller and an endless source of literary jewels. She would tell me stories about Shanti Niketan heard from her brother, Syed Mujtaba Ali, the eminent writer, and recite long poems from Tagore which she had memorized by heart. Her favorite was Kacha o Devjani, but she also inspired me to explore Tagore and his music, a passion I still have as one of my life's greatest gifts.

Well, how I digress! Let me come back to the theme I started with, the sun. One of the tunes I have hummed along since my youth is John Denver's "Sunshine on My Shoulders Makes Me Happy". Denver sings, "Sunshine on my shoulders makes me happy| Sunshine in my eyes can make me cry| Sunshine on the water looks so lovely| Sunshine almost always makes me high". Yes, sunshine does always make me high. And, it does so even if it is the setting sun! The western sun is actually a witness to some of the most memorable moments in my life, and inspire the most romantic feelings in me. I am not a poet, but I feel like one when the sun unleashes its store of red, orange, pink, magenta, and others on the western sky. Only yesterday, I snuck out of my office in downtown Boston to get a glimpse of the montage that the sun painted on the western sky. When we were in high school my friends and I would sit on the banks of Dhanmandi Lake for hours watching the sun go down, and paint the water in orange and then flood it with deep shades of red. While sunset often marked "curfew time" in my house, soon we learned how to stretch that out a little longer. Our addas never ended even when the sun disappeared, and we kept jabbering in the dark until we could not see each other's face any longer! Oh, I curse, why couldn't the sun just stay a little longer?



horizon. Why? Because if the sun is not up yet, I feel very little urge to get up myself. During the winter months, when it is dark by 5 PM, and the night sometimes lasts almost 14 hours, I feel the sun gets more rest than we do. I hardly ever get more than seven hours of sleep, whereas the sun has at least twelvetherefore, I don't see why the sun can't be up in the morning before I do. Also, I need the sun to get me started. Nothing wakes me up and energizes me as much as the sight of the rising sun in the morning.

I love the sun, its daily routine, the untiring regularity with which it travels

jhak pakhider moto kichu rodder, badha bhengey janalar saat she shomuddur" (Like a flock of birds they came, the glow of the sun from across the seven seas).

Then, around mid-morning, as the sun gathers more energy and rises above the tree line, painting my little yard with green and other colors and waking up the grass and plants, I follow the shadows cast by the trees and try to tell the time of the day by the length and angles of the shadows. The sun at mid-day, when it is at its full-strength and showering us with the most light and warmth, is not my favorite, though. I like it more when the sun is a little coy,

my Nanoo. When I was younger, and staying with her, we'd have our evening tea together on a regular basis. From the dining room, where we had our afternoon tea, I could see the sunlit backyard. Little did I anticipate then the treasure that the illuminated backyard holds in its midst. I might be hiding under the blanket taking an afternoon nap, or deeply immersed in some mystery novel by Nihar Ranjan, in the guest room of the house, when my Nanoo would softly walk towards my bed calling my name. I might have been content to be left alone but could not resist the invitation to join her for tea

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