

SHORT STORY

Beginning of the End

HAROONUZZAMAN

Against the bank of the meandering Shitalakhya river nestles Charsindur, a village where most people are sharecroppers. Each year the river renders quite a good number of people landless, making them dependent on the well-heeled for a square meal. About six to ten families are moderately rich out there; land is the sole source of their riches. In fact, these people own eighty percent of the total land of the village while the rest is either *Khas* or fallow lands. Of those so-called wealthy families, Zobedullah, a Moulana from Deoband, was the one who settled out here quite a long time back. Unlike his compatriots, he was modern in outlook, especially when it came to the question of planned parenthood. Compared to the usual family size of the other moneyed people in the village, his family size was by far the smallest: two sons and a daughter who had been married off to an educated and well-to-do farmer in Shibpur, a few miles further up in the south.

Zobedullah spent a lot of money to send Asaduzzaman, the elder of the two, to Calcutta to make him a graduate. In fact, he had to sell two big has of low-lying land in the *char* areas to support his son's educational expenses out there. But he didn't mind doing it as he thought it worth spending on.

At Charsindur High School Asaduzzaman was working as a teacher: he considered this job to be a stopgap one, and he was on the lookout for a government job that was socially considered lucrative and prestigious. The younger one, Lutfar Rahman alias Manik Mia, who had a B.A. degree from Rajshahi University, preferred idling away his time at the bazaar with his friends and disciples.

With the passing of days, Zobedullah was contemplating handing over all the family sundries to Asaduzzaman, whom he lovingly called Suruj. Keeping this end in view, near septuagenarian Zobedullah, white-haired and white-bearded, had embarked on a project: building a detached house to get his son settled. Simultaneously, he was on the lookout for a bride for him.

Work on a new tin-roof and tin-walled house on the southern corner of the backyard had been stalled for about three days because of incessant rain. Even on the fourth day, the rain was simply pouring down as if there was a leakage in the sky. With an umbrella over his head, Zobedullah went out in the rain to inspect the newly-laid seedbeds of cauliflower and cabbage in the western plots, close to the front yard, and much to his dismay, he found them submerged. Accompanying him was Sobhan, a domestic help who had assumed some sort of importance in the running of the day-to-day affairs related to the management of Zobedullah's land and property. Besides, he was the person whom the farmer would look up to for assistance when he was down with bouts of 'stomach pain', a disease he refused to believe 'had eaten into his vitals, and probably would be the cause of his end.'

"Rain now. Everything will be damaged." Sobhan exuded his genuine anxiety. "Hmm." Zobedullah tilted his umbrella backward and inspected the sky once again, and walked glumly on his way back to the *Katchari Ghari*.

Sitting on a forlorn easy chair, he felt he was fagged out. His mind also became clouded like the cloudbank, hovering across the sky. These days he felt that life was an extra burden, and that he was dragging it instead of enjoying it. He had never been like that. Unlike his compatriots who believed in the transience of human existence, he had always been an epicurean and down to earth. Even at seventy, he had never thought of resigning or delegating to anyone the family duties and responsibilities. Seemingly, now he would welcome it if someone relieved him. But unfortunately, none emerged as a rescuer. And he had to keep going as a lone fighter. Not destroyed though, certainly a lot of wear and tear had been caused.

Zobedullah cast a blank look at the vast expanse of green paddy fields across the front yard and reminisced on his halcyon days: Coming to Charsindur, getting employed at this house as a "lodging master". He was teaching the Quran to Rahima, the daughter of Elahi Baksh, and in exchange, he had free boarding and three meals a day in that house, and then eventually getting settled there after marrying Rahima who, after the death of her father, inherited all his land and property. Thereafter, Zobedullah kept himself busy shuttling between Dhaka Land Settlement office and home to get these lands transferred in his name. As Rahima wanted things to happen that way, he just ensured that it got done as per her wishes.

Being unburdened, she became happier. Giving birth to babies, rearing them up, cooking and looking after the health of the family had been her prime concerns, and she had been enjoying doing those. Zobedullah wondered how time had gone by so quickly! Being in the twilight zone, he wanted his wishes to come true.

Things happen when you don't want them to happen, and when you crave for a particular thing, it becomes so elusive.

In the rain, as Jotindra Ukil waded his way through the mud and stagnant water, Zobedullah imagined that a weird apparition was trudging towards his house. He then quickly cleared his glasses and stared into the distance and then gradually saw the phantom turning into a human shape.

Oh, it seems the rain would never end. Everything here was a little too much. Inaudibly Jotindra chides, though he was not sure as to who or what his irritation had been directed at. The word "here" bore the connotation of his disgust with the current state of affairs. Putting the wet moccasin aside, he pulled up a wooden chair to sit beside Zobedullah. Simultaneously Rahima stepped into the room, and pulling the saree a little longer over her head, she broke in on Jatin's faint utterance.

"Jatin babu, are you doing anything for my son?" Though it was a question, functionally it suggested her eagerness to know as to what sort of progress Jatin Babu had made about the marriage proposal he had brought for Asaduzzaman.

"Yes, Jatin. Tell me the latest about it?" Zobedullah butted in on the intervening silence as Jatin groped for the right expression to come to him.

How would he break the unfortunate news? Jatin babu wondered. But he had to. So

hesitatingly he said: "The girl is ill...seriously ill."

"Oh no. It can't happen!" Zobedullah was shockingly surprised.

"Ya Allah, do we have to have all the bad luck?" Rahima seemed to be at the fag end of her endurance. She had weathered many a storm in life so patiently, deriving the strength from her strong belief in religion. *Whatever God does is always good.* She mustered her strength from that belief. There were occasions also when she had become a skeptic; they had been short-lived, though. As her life had been more or less smooth, she seemed to get shaken by the events that sometimes went beyond her control. So was her attitude towards life, and she was taken over by a certain degree of moroseness. Today's news yet again made her despondent. "What will happen now?" She vented her worries.

"What to do, Jatin?" Almost identical was Zobedullah's concern. Demystifying his earlier delusive expression, Jatin babu said: "She has been attacked by small pox." Jatin babu seemed to have contorted in pain while saying these words. These three words sent a spasm of pain shooting through Zobedullah and Rahima. Jatin didn't have any answer for it, for his situation had been identical when the parents of the girl expressed their concern as well. He was caught between a rock and a hard place. "I think we should leave the matter to time." He, however, tried to hammer out a solution. "No. How many days to wait?" Rahima cried out as if someone had stabbed her in the back. Zobedullah sank into silence as Rahima took up the thread of the conversation.

"Bhabhi, tell me now what you want to do." Jatin was being evasive, trying to come out of the situation he was trapped in.

"I don't know. Don't want to know. Do whatever you think is good. We want that girl." Point blank she said that and walked off into her room through the rain-induced pool of water in the courtyard. She didn't wait for any answer. In fact, she seemed unflinching in her resolve. But certainly this sad news from Jatin disturbed Zobedullah's train of thoughts. Unlike his wife, he became a bit skeptical and registered a second thought at the back of his mind: whether or not they should stick to the same girl. This was exactly what was crossing Jatin's mind, too. He could predict what would be Rahima's reactions but not Zobedullah's. His words mattered most as his reactions. Jatin's heart went out to the sufferer, and he felt that this was the time he should stand by them.

"I think we should take some more time before we decide on any other thing." Jatin mustered enough strength to put these words together, expecting some sort of a response from Zobedullah. Amazingly, what happened was just the opposite. With head bent, he contemplatively walked his way through the mud and straw built *Katachari Ghar* to his detached tin and mud walled hut. Some paces past, he, however, looked back and said: "Jatin, have *dal-bhaat* with us and then go."

"Another day." Simultaneously, Jatin packed up and hurried into the rain through the *Shegun* and *Mehogini*-filled compound. On way to the bazaar, he saw Suraj frog-leaping and snaking

his way through the muddy district board road. He had something up his sleeve.

News to break at home. However, he was not as elated as he was supposed to be. He had been longing for this, though.

People crave for things, but when they come their way, they lose all their interest. Is traveling better than reaching the destination?

Reaching home, Suruj went straight into Zobedullah's room and in an emotion-charged voice said: "*Baba*, I got a government job." He was a bit surprised to see his heart ruling his head.

"I knew this would happen. Didn't I tell you before?"

Zobedullah took pride in his creation and predictions, but it was quite difficult for Asaduzzaman to make out anything from his father's expressionless countenance. Although a lot of queries were jostling to make their way out into the open, Zobedullah asphyxiated them as he thought that this was the time his son's career should be given priority over his marriage. With the preparedness programmes being lulled, the rain that seemed to be unrelenting started to show signs of giving in. While reciting some verses from the Quran, Rahima overheard everything, but she didn't react, as she had been benignly submissive throughout.

"Then you are going away, leaving us," Rahima gaped at his son as if she had already read the mind of her son.

"Ma. How could you think like this? Don't you want your son to grow big, do a good job? I've got a government job. It's the prestige of our family." Asaduzzaman alias Suruj tried to placate his embittered mother.

"Are you doing bad here? We are all together here. We'll be able to stay together in good or bad days."

"Don't worry, Ma. I'm not leaving the country. It's in Dacca. Whenever I'll want, I'll be able to come to you."

"Your father is building a new house for you. You'll get married. We are looking for a bride."

"Bhalo. But let me stand on my feet. Then I can take responsibility of someone."

Rest is silence. Rahima walked back to the mud-walled, tin-roofed detached *ghar* in the western corner of the inner compound, now being enveloped by the lengthening shadow. Opposite to Rahima's, there was another similar *ghar* Asaduzzaman trudged back to; he looked fagged out as if he had fought a long-drawn struggle. It was very late at night when Rahima put herself to sleep with an effort: she spent a couple of hours turning from left to right in bed and then an hour sitting near the window and gazing at the starry sky and then gazing at the endless darkness engulfing the courtyard and beyond. With her eyes getting heavy and the night getting ripier, she retired to bed somnolent. And then within minutes she was overpowered by sleep.

On the other hand, a sense of fear coupled with excitement gripped Asaduzzaman who almost sat out the night counting every hour till the *Fazr* prayer call from the nearby *Qoumi madrasa* resonated in the pre-dawn air. As the darkness gave way to a soft and silky dawn, he came out into the open space in between the detached houses to find his father sitting on a stool in the middle of the courtyard and looking intently at Rahima, who was frying

some homemade and handmade cakes on a makeshift *chula*.

"Your mother could not sleep well last night. She worries so much!" By alluding to Rahima's anxiety, Zobedullah, however, subjugated his own concern for his son.

Male chauvinism perhaps. Deconstructing the interface of his father's words, Asaduzzaman preferred playing naïve as the situation demanded. He let his resolve stay firm. He was withdrawn, mentally and physically. With *lungi* and *gamcha* on his left shoulder, speechless he crisscrossed the compound into the *koltola*, a typical village-bathing place, to have an early morning shower to rid himself of last night's exhaustion, caused by sleeplessness.

Meanwhile, the sun emerged from behind the cloudbank, spreading its glistening glow across the bendy branches of the coconut trees to hit the compound where Rahima was on the verge of finishing her job: baking cakes. Through with other sundries like checking and rechecking his suitcase, Asaduzzaman slung a handbag across his broad and hairy chest and entered Rahima's *ghar* only to find her saying two *rakats* of *nafal namaj* on a *shitol pati*, spread over her bed. *Namaj* over, she beckoned her son to come closer, and then she blew at her son a '*fu*', a religio-traditional custom practised to shower blessings.

Meanwhile, Zobedullah, leaning against some pillows, opened the wooden *shinduk*, a large box containing land documents, Rahima's jewelry and some cash, amounting to around ten thousand rupees. He took out two thousand rupees from there to give them to Asaduzzaman who, after taking the money, bent to touch his father's feet, a traditional way to show respect to the parents and elders, and then he hopped into the compound leading to the winding isles that connected the dusty district board road. Before reaching the road, Asaduzzaman couldn't but look back at his home, a blissful abode that nurtured him for so long. Also, his eyes got fixed on his mother who was intently following his departure trail, sitting behind the iron window grills. He felt that a pulse of pain was surging from his heart and then engulfing him gradually, but he disallowed his heart from overruling his head and kept walking briskly. With a suitcase on his head, Sobhan, the domestic help, followed Asaduzzaman, who slowly melted into the hazy distance to catch the first motor launch that would leave Charsindur *ghat* at 8 a.m. for Ghorashal. Then he would have to take a train to Dhaka, a sprawling city that either awaited to accord him a hearty welcome or give him a cold shoulder.

Who knows what will happen? But he was hell-bent on chasing his dream to be someone and not anyone-shattering the dreams of Zobedullah and Rahima who thought that one day their home would become a centrifugal force that would keep everyone in their family tied to the center. But the center started breaking into pieces as Asaduzzaman embarked on his journey, a beginning of the end, into the spectacle and sparkle of the city that beckoned him from afar.

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POETRY

Poetry isn't, doesn't

RAFIQUL ISLAM RIME

Poetry doesn't get stirred at your calls.
Poetry isn't what you think it to be
Poetry isn't the end product of your thoughts
Poetry isn't the shots of the formulated phrases
Poetry isn't the ejaculation of the clustered interludes.

Poetry doesn't get stirred at your calls.

Poetry is the chirping of the birds on the trees
It is the heat of the summer;

Efforts to soothe our body and soul with the water melon,
Coconuts, sugar cane, mango and other summer fruits' juice!

Poetry is the farmers' sweat, and the loud songs

That gush forth from their hope-bound souls!

Poetry is the pangs wrought in the solemn soul
Of Urboshi who lost her husband and loving son

In the year 1971.
Poetry doesn't get stirred at your calls.

Poetry is the mad dance of the floating thoughts
That go swirling around to meet the
Eruptive orgasms of those corrugated dots;

Poetry is the cry of the soul, and
Release of that tsunami in a calm desperation
Of joy and happiness wrapped in rainbow coloured

Clothes.

Poetry, however, doesn't get stirred at your calls.

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FICTION

The Golden Deer

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Translation MOHIT UL ALAM
(FOURTH AND FINAL PART)

Chanting Goddess Durga's name he removed the bed from the top of the hole. The water beneath squabbled and the metallic sounds of something could be clearly heard.

Slowly in great trepidation he brought down his face to the mouth of the hole, and saw the water of the river flowing in the low-height room. He couldn't see anything much more because of the dark.

He probed with a long stick that the depth of water in the room was only knee-deep. Taking a match and a lamp with him, he dared to jump into the room. Lest all his hopes should blow off in a moment, his hands trembled as he tried to light the lamp. He destroyed many a match-stick before one could ignite the flame to the lamp.

What he sighted inside the room was a big narrow-necked jar made of thick brass tied to a fat iron chain, and when the flow of the water rose up, the impact forced the chain to hit the body of the jar, and thereby the metallic sound was produced.

Baidyanath waded into the water to go near the jar. He found the jar empty.

Still, not believing his eyes, he held the jar up and shook it vigorously. Nothing was inside. He held it upside down. Nothing dropped out. He discovered that the neck of the jar was broken, as if once upon a time in the past its mouth was closed, and somebody had broken it.

Then Baidyanath, as if he went mad, started searching into the water with his two hands. Something hit his hands into the

muddy water. Picking it up he saw it was a human skull. That too he took close to his ears and shook it. No nothing was inside it either. He threw it away. Searching more into the mud he found out nothing but the bones of the skeleton.

One part of the wall to the side of the river was broken and water entered through that crack. And he guessed as much that the person who had tried to enter the room before him probably had come in by that crack.

Then, reaching the nadir of his frustration, Baidyanath uttered the word 'mother' releasing a heart-rending sigh and the echo of the sound resounded in the hollowness of the room as if the past failures of the previous attempters were mixed up in his grave sigh.

With his body all rubbed in muddy-water, Baidyanath came out of the hole.

The crowded noisy world outside looked to him to be as empty as that broken empty chained jar.

That he would have to pack up his things again, buy the ticket, get into the train, return home, and argue with his wife, and carry the burden of life again everyday all these seemed too intolerable to him. He wished, instead, that he had fallen into the river like the loosening muddy banks.

Nevertheless, he packed his things, bought the ticket, and boarded a train.

And one day in a wintry evening he arrived back home. But this kind of return

on this evening was not anything like he had ever thought of in his dream, when in the month of Ashwin, with the onset of winter in the Sarat morning, he kept sitting at his verandah and eagerly watched people coming home from distant lands on Puja holidays, and he secretly desired so much to be like one of them.

Returning home he sat on the wooden bench in the yard and didn't go inside the house. It was the housemaid, who happened to see him first, and in joy she raised a great hue and cry the boys came rushing too, and his wife called him inside the house.

As if a spell had gone off from him, Baidyanath felt being restored into his old family life again.

With a dry smile on his face he carried one son in his lap, and led the other by the hand inside the house.

In the house the lamp was lighted, and though it was not yet night, the wintry evening became silent like the night.

Baidyanath remained silent for a few moments, and then in a soft voice asked, "How are you?"

The wife, making no reply to that question, asked, "What happened?"

Saying nothing, Baidyanath slapped on his forehead. Mokshada's face hardened very much.

Sensing some ominous shadow spreading up, the boys slowly deserted the place. They went to the housemaid and urged her to tell the story about the barber. Then they went to bed.

(CONCLUDED)

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