

SHORT STORY

Garbage

NIGHAT GANDHI

Sunday morning. The houses in the lane are in sleep, lulled by the final days of fasting and feasting and last night's rain. It's the end of Ramzan and the householders are asleep, after sehri and fajr prayers. Shabnam and her little sister stirred when their parents got up for sehri but went back to sleep. Now the girls awaken, cold and hungry in the still, dark morning. They lie next to each other, their scant, warm bodies shivering under the quilt. They know they'll be no *rotis* left for them. Shabnam knows there'll be no food until later, until her Baba, who has to look for work every day, finds work, and returns with something her mother can cook for iftar. A whole day's guesswork stretches between hunger and the possibility of a full meal.

Shabnam nudges her little sister and together they creep out of the room. They squint at the tandoor in the just-breaking day, the tandoor that lies cold after it was lit to cook last night's *rotis*. Their uncles and their wives and children are asleep in the other two rooms. The girls rub their hands on their bare arms and slip on their slippers. There's no water in the bucket, so they can't wash. Shabnam picks up the plastic jar with the eggs from her hens on the roof. Unwashed, they stroll down towards the large houses.

It's luxuriously quiet, the kind of quiet only possible on a Sunday morning, when people don't have work or school, and can sleep in. Shabnam thinks of coziness and warmth under a thick quilt. She thinks of the heavy quilts of children who don't have to get up and look for food. On the way to the *bajis'* house, she sees a man trying to start his car and scurries past him. Would he stare, would he scold, would he curse at her and her sister? A rooster crows from the garbage dump. A curled up street dog growls. A child coughs and starts to cry. The swish of a servant's broom from one of the houses blends with the metallic clanging of a bucket. Suddenly two boys on bicycles appear and whoosh past them, laughing and teasing. 'Rascals!' Shabnam curses them silently. 'If they come again, I'll pick up a stone and smash their faces.'

She makes and unmakes a fist with her free hand as the boys go snickering past. She yanks her little sister's arm. The boys almost rammed their bicycles into her and almost toppled her eggs.

'Salaam Baji,' Shabnam greets a woman who hurriedly walks past her. Two little girls are following the woman. They are begging her for something they want for Eid in a whiny voice that Shabnam can never use with her mother. The girls and the woman live in one of the houses in the lane. The woman keeps on walking, not paying heed to her whining daughters.

Shabnam and her sister reach the closed gate of a white house. Shabnam knocks, calling softly. 'Baji, baji, gand hai?'

There's no answer. She knocks again. The large white house remains mute. She bangs its high green gate and calls out urgently. 'Baji, Baji?'

Shabnam and her sister flop down in the middle of the lane. The shy winter sun is casting its slanting rays on the cold ground. They gather pebbles and stones and start playing, prepared to wait.

Two hens cluck fussy and sift and scratch in the dirt. Shabnam flings little pebbles to scare them. Her sister grins and says, 'hoosh, hoosh.'

Shabnam can feel her empty stomach twist and heave. She hugs the jar of eggs and looks fondly at the pale, tea-coloured eggs. Agitated, she walks over to the gate of the large, white house. 'Baji, baji, gand hai?' she shouts in her hunger-sharpened voice and reaches up for the doorknob.

A young woman, some years older than Shabnam, finally emerges from the house. Her pretty face is tousled by sleep and uncombed hair.

'Don't you know you shouldn't ring the bell so early? It's Sunday. And it's Ramzan! People are trying to sleep,' she says irritably.

'We were waiting a long time, baji,' Shabnam says warily. 'Don't you need eggs? My hens laid them yesterday. And we can take out your gand.'

The girl disappears into the house. She returns, holding two plastic dustbins. One is large and green and laden with vegetable and fruit peelings. The other is stuffed with paper and plastic wrappings.

'I'll take three eggs. Mother will pay you later. She's asleep now.'

'No! Take all six,' Shabnam pleads. 'They're fresh. You can pay later,' she says, forcefully thrusting the jar with the fresh, frail eggs into the baji's hands.

Shabnam carries out the heavier dustbin and gives the lighter one to her sister. The thought of food makes them skittish. They scamper down the lane to the garbage dump at the corner. Her sister tries to keep up with her, but her feet keep slipping out of her too-small slippers. Shabnam empties out her dustbin, and doesn't mind the smells that meet her nostrils. Two goats are looking for scraps to eat. Shabnam calls out to them playfully. 'Here, here, bhai jaan, your breakfast is here!' and darts back to the house.

The baji opens the gate just a crack and says, 'They have to be rinsed,' puckering her nose.

'Give us some water then,' Shabnam says in disappointment.

'Get it from the bucket!'

Shabnam enters the courtyard and walks to the toilet in the corner. The cold water in the bucket stings her hands and turns them red.

'Take them outside. Don't pour out the dirty water into the toilet like you did the last time,' Baji's voice crackles.

Shabnam and her sister carry out the bins and pour out the cloudy water into the open drain running alongside the lane. The Baji takes the bins and disappears into the house.

Shabnam waits vacantly. She swallows to moisten the dryness in her mouth.

The Baji returns with two *rotis* and a few pakoras, leftovers from iftar, and hands her the empty

egg jar.

Shabnam dries her raw hands on her kameez, and receives the food. The gate shuts and Shabnam and her little sister are left standing in the narrow lane.

'Do you want the pakoras or the roti?' Shabnam asks, tucking the empty egg jar in the nook of her arm, and staring contemplatively at the roti and pakoras.

'Both.'

'No! You have to choose!'

'You keep the roti. Give me the pakoras,' her sister says greedily.

Shabnam wanted the pakoras, but she doesn't know why she slides the pakoras into her sister's outstretched hand. Her fingers close over the dryness and roughness of the rotis and she imagines she's dipping them in a glass of hot, sweet tea.

One pakora falls into the dirt. Her sister bends down to grab it, and wiping it on her kameez, swallows it. Shabnam scolds her. 'You can't eat in the street! It's Ramzaan. They'll say bad things about us. Can't you wait?'

She's not sure if she's ten or twelve but she knows the sorts of things people say about them. They used to call them *those Afghans* and they still call them that. She knows it's not proper to eat in the street during Ramzan. Even if you're very hungry and thinking of nothing but food.

Whenever she tries to ask how old she is, her mother waves her hands impatiently from the dough she's kneading, and says 'Maybe you're ten or maybe twelve, Allah knows.' All Shabnam knows about her birth is she was born in a tent. Just like her little sister and twin brothers were. She had watched her mother writhe and moan. She kept peeping in from the gaps in the tent's flap. They lived in a camp near Peshawar then. She knew she shouldn't have watched but all she did see was the bent-over, broad back of the midwife.

'Allah has sent you two brothers,' her mother whispered in soft moans when she went in later. 'Allah is most kind,' her mother said, pointing to the two new red faces, swaddled in bits of old sheets. That was the only time she heard her mother speak so weakly.

The peeping in had made her much wiser, and quieter, and even fiercer than her mother. After the brothers came, whenever she went up to the roof to collect eggs from her hens, she knew she shouldn't ask her mother to fry them. She would sell them down the lane instead, and bring home the money. She puzzled over the frequent absence of food in her home; she watched the tandoor that remained unlit on days Baba didn't find work. On days when he didn't bring flour and vegetables, she wanted to run away to some faraway place. She felt sure the devil was responsible for their hunger. She had seen him grin evilly, sitting atop their cold tandoor.

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--- FROM MALEKA PARVEEN

A welcome call...

Amid this stuffy, suffocating silence
A baby's comforting cry: speechless
sense ---
Making me feel the murmur mellow
Of a stream serene, secret source
unseen.

That unshakable aura

This curious coincidence makes me
Coil into my inner self with an
ecstasy
Unfathomable; tormented, shedding
Silent tears of joy, feel some
euphoria.

A bitter truth

Face to face the taunting tough
truth---
You feel, then, baffled, acutely at a
loss;
Knowing, though, a poor protest
would
Make yourself merely more pathetic.

An equilateral triangle

An outstanding outline of that
Geometric figure in the form of
A relation humane and concrete,
Three of you, a pyramid of love.

A knock at the door

A voice, full of frenzied fervour,
A tone, tuning itself to a tortured
Twist, threw impatiently into the
Ether--- a long sigh, a soft whisper!

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Bread and jam

NAHID KHAN

Doe, a deer, a female deer/ Ray, a drop of golden sun... / Tea, a drink with jam and bread very old time favourite song of our childhood from the most popular Julie Andrews movie *The Sound of Music*. As old a time as when we used to play on the street in quiet afternoons where the only sound was the chirping of children which would soon be followed by birds and finally by the tranquillity of the end of any ordinary day. Ti (tea) is the seventh note of an octave which is used as a drink in the song for the children to make them familiar with the most common form of breakfast food around the world. But truly bread and jam have different meanings. For most people in the world jam is a spread to have on toasted or not-toasted bread, rolls, cakes, etc. To cater for every craving tongue it is made of all exotic fruits like strawberry, cherry, plum, even from carrots. Jam can also mean congestion or blockages of substances. Similarly, bread is a phrase that is very widely used in English to mean earning for living, not just a mere food item. Even in Bengali we refer to the same idea as 'rooti-rooji' to mean bread winning or bread earning, that is, means of subsistence. Like breakfast mix 'bread and jam' for the world it is an inseparable mix for lives in Dhaka.

Though most people around the world enjoy the start of the day with jam made from all exotic fruits, Dhaka dwellers struggle all day of every day with jams made from cars, buses, trucks, rickshaws, carbon monoxides, dust, heat, noise and many more ingredients to make life miserable enough. Jam is an everyday word people would use in every

conversation either for caution or for causes, to the critique more appropriately, excuses. And this is the most convincing, readily accepted excuse any one can use in any situation. It probably is a more accepted excuse for being late these days than grandmother's death syndrome which is commonly used by students for not doing their home work.

The trauma of traffic jam is not so light as mentioned above. There are real unbearable consequences faced by general people every day. More for the expatriates, who may have been to the world's most populous cities and wanted to stay with their loved ones in their beloved Dhaka city for a short time, but have never seen such mayhem that jam really is the middle part of the sandwich which has life and death on either side. The death toll in the last year alone in Dhaka city from road accidents was as high as 324. New York, London, Madrid, Singapore, Hong Kong even Kolkata are severely populous cities and they don't have a separate flagging column in the statistics for death by road accidents. Since I dared to live abroad or being punished to live abroad for *perhaps doing something not so good in my childhood*, the onus is of course on me to go and visit people everyday and more often than not more than once a day and literally had the opportunity to taste a little bit of jam, that middle part of the life and death sandwich. It gave me the true values of a religious person who is supposed to think about death at least once a day, that is to realise this world is not the true world, there are more things in the heaven. Well I certainly did that many times in a day. This may seem

sarcastic just because most people are sheer lucky to be alive and able to read this piece. One would only see the lighter side of traffic jam when at home or somewhere safer, but listening to a sad outcry of an ambulance is not very far in the past or future. It is a common phenomenon that an ambulance would be stuck in the middle of Dhaka street and continue its ineffectual baby cry to its incapable parents of traffic jam.

There isn't much need for describing all the different types of misery people face on the street of Dhaka city, the capital of Bangladesh and pretty respectable name for various reasons. Thinking of capitals like Canberra, Washington DC, Wellington, Beijing, New Delhi where you wouldn't find business centres, mushrooming universities, ready-made garment factories, banks, army barracks. But in Dhaka its a centre for everything and as a result the relatively scarce streets for high demand are sad and silent spectator of the sufferings of daily Dhaka dwellers. This helplessness goes beyond measure that nothing is being done by the authority or our people have become too complacent that they only greet the authority on daily basis, if alive and if not then who cares! It is about time we estimate the (monetary) value of traffic jam starting from being late for everything to feeling helpless, from frustration to sickness, from miserable life to death. Everyday how much valuable time gets lost in the jam, the usual discipline of daily lives are lost, people are opting for after hours communication to avoid jam, this nation seems to become nocturnal and sleeping through the beautiful mornings. How much production losses is faced by every

entrepreneur, how much health and environmental hazard is made in the jam, not to mention the lost lives, surely a proper statistical estimate will signal the most urgent attention for the benevolent authority.

A very innocent question would be why would people then savour jam, well the simple answer is earning their bread. Once I was stuck on airport road for an hour and then found out three RMG workers died under a truck while crossing the road and now the near by RMG factory are almost in a riot with everyone on the street including the people on the truck. There was no indication when this can be resolved which left thousands stranded, kids being hungry, needing to go to the bathroom, fear of fuel run out, we had a heart patient in the car, the list goes on. There was no way someone can go out of the car and walk to the road side to take a fresh breath. After another hour or so police came to the scene and handled the situation when voices raised to say those girls died for being careless. Didn't they have love for their own lives? Well, surely they did, but the fear was greater for loosing the job than loosing lives. People are made that desperate these days to lack the love for their own lives or feel their worth. People go to work for living and to win bread if they have to spread poisonous jam then what it is worth for, people are dead anyway.

It's hard to understand why traffic jam is not given the priority in bills, the only reason any sensible person would say that this jam is not tasted by the authority. For them it is made from exotic fruits, they haven't seen the breads so close to both life and death. Well what can we do? When authority is

not resolving the issue can other bodies do something? The good daily newspaper Prothom Alo raised a voice, 'be the change, make the change' (bodley jao, bodley dao), it should rather be self proclaiming by 'bodley jai, bodley dei' in line with Gandhi's words, 'lets be the change we want to see in the world'. Would any RMG factory start a move saying lets leave Dhaka to save lives for themselves and others? Would all private universities together move to a different location which we would one day proudly call our university city? Would schools only allow the students from neighbouring surroundings so that they can walk to the school? Would the cantonment sacrifice their untold comfort for the society which is crying out for a bit of oxygen? Would general people be more sensible and organised to maintain car pooling or refrain from being susceptible to that poisonous jam, as for an example not going shopping everyday?

Everyone needs to do their bit to resolve the situation when our authority is failing to restore any order in traffic or they don't see it as a big problem since when they go places to places the already lame traffic are totally stopped from moving to make their path smoother and acquired immunity from toxic jams. For the authority to win bread they use power and protocol, for the general people, who are compelled to the vulnerability of jams, earning bread only comes by using sad desperate streets of this cursed city the one I still call home, where my most beloved childhood days are only sweet memories of not so distant past.

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POETRY

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