

MUSINGS

Love rises in melody

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA

If it ever happens, while you are strolling back from work at midnight, you hear a voice crooning, 'Such a feeling's coming over me/there is wonder in most of everything I see/the reason is clear/it's because you are near/you are the nearest thing to heaven that I see', your footsteps slow down and suddenly, you realize that indisputably the heart that belonged to you now belongs to someone else! Go home, check the calendar and you will find, that the following day surely is Valentine's Day!

Love has always been the pivot upon which the world has moved. Someone has rightly said, "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 listen to each other; he bore into her eyes and she imagined the song in his pulsating heart. That was their togetherness.

When poetry accompanies cards, romance becomes magical. When you bring in nature symbols to express your admiration, it turns out to be extremely sublime. "Ami jamin/tumi shoshi hae/bhaticho gogono majhe". Then again, when you happen to open the box of bangles your paramour has sent you, a voice whispers... "Tar churite je rekhechi mon shona korey/churitoh Jane na, shey nije bajen na/shey je amar hridoye baje/rini jhini churiroh shurey".

Shifting years back when one was not brave enough to express his/her love, one had to resign to fate, and then sit back against the hard rocks in the twilight of life and reflect... "Prem ekbar eshe chhilo niroba/amaro duyar prante". There is in these lines the story of ages-ago romance. But why rake up the past? Destiny is part of our life and does not always cater to our desires, so cheer up and sing, "Jo behkudi hai aankh mein tere/wo behkudi sharaab mein kahaan?/jo taazgi hai husn mein tere/wo taazgi gulaab mein kahaan?/jo shayari hae jism mein tere/wo shayari kitab mein kahaan?"

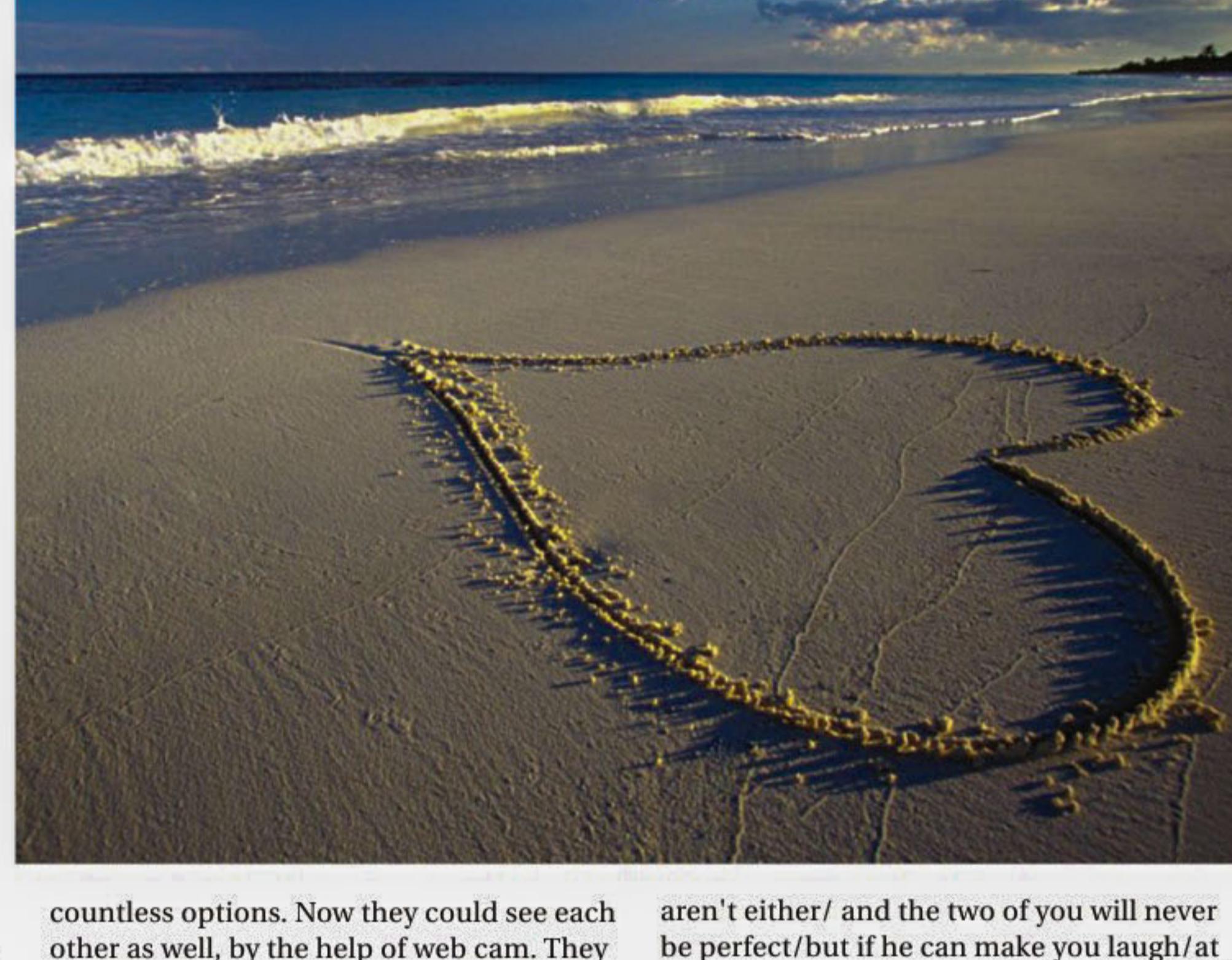
Cupid has always been hovering around young men and women. In olden days, an exchange of glances from one balcony to the other was the only achievement! This said it all, "Chokh je moner kotha boley". The man would sometimes sing out a few lines to express his deep feelings, "Sau saal pehle mujhe tumse pyaar tha/aaj bhi hae aur kal bhi rahega". The girl would respond... "Sau saal janam lenge/saw saal fanah honge/ae jaane wafa phir bhi hum tum na judaa honge". If caught, the golden cage was her destiny! If on any occasion they were to meet again, he would softly tell her "yoon toh kharosh hae dil par/lekin hus deta hoon tujhe dekh kar". Decades ago there were exchanges of letters which the pigeons carried. Later, the postman or 'Runner' was the only hope! "Runner

choleyche khobor er bojha haatein". Some of the 'khobors' or news read something like, "phuler kaaney bhrromor eshe/chupi chupi boley jai/tomaye amay shara ti jibon/nirobey joratey chaye".

Then came the most potent promoter of love affairs the telephone. Hours passed without interval or even fatigue in conversation. It was as if they were 'possessed', giving them energy beyond comprehension! Bills piled up for the frustrated parents but of no avail! Then with the advent of mobile phones they found the "Aladdin's lamp"! Love stories began to shoot up. Relations were made, relations broke. Tears of joy, tears of bitterness began to well up. Mobile phones became a bombshell for concerned quarters as there was no way to monitor their ward's heart! But this was only a small shock, the bigger coming, with the use of computers, with its

are not sure any more, whether it is a crush or love or whether an extramarital affair. One might feel, "I just want to spend my life with you/suddenly everything has turned me inside out/suddenly love is a thing that I cannot live without". We sing along with Jennifer Lopez, "You've got me hooked with your love controller, I feel lucky like a four leaf clover".

Like every year, I cajole this generation to look back on Shirin-Farhad; Laili-Majnu; Mumtaaz-Shahjahan, who left their footprints on the sands of time with their immortal tales of love. We still reflect and express our emotions in words like, "Ek taj mohol goro hridoye tomar ami hariye gele". Sometimes I wonder what happens to the vows you make and how deep and strong are they, that it does not take seconds to break them. At this juncture of life do not forget Bob Marley, "He is not perfect/ you



countless options. Now they could see each other as well, by the help of web cam. They made Facebook, a popular medium of selecting friends. The style of conversation was beginning to alter. Instead of saying, "Anondo dhara bohiche bhubone", they would rather say, "Man, am I feeling lucky today!" Or a more romantic person would tell, "Sing a song, make it simple/to last your whole life long/sing of love that could be a song for you and for me". Since young people are too straightforward, there is always a lack of intellectual material and artistic sophistication. If late, one would blame the traffic jam. But, in the long lost days, one would come up to say, "humari toh har pal zikr huya fasaney mein/kya huya jo der huiyai anemein?"

Too many choices have nowadays adulterated genuine relationships. People

aren't either/ and the two of you will never be perfect/but if he can make you laugh/at least once, causes you to think twice/ and if he admits to being human and making mistakes/hold onto him and give him the most you can".

You yourselves feel special when your words carry expressions like "You are my timeless love, you are my Dido, and I your Aeneas". These give your love a new face, like old wine in a new bottle. Let us today celebrate with happy notes coming from Chris Brown...

"Say you care for me/you know that I care for you/you know that I'll be true/you know that I would try to be your everything/I will never try to deny that you are my whole life/cause if you ever let me go/I would die".

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA IS A SOCIAL ACTIVIST AND WRITES POETRY.

FICTION

The river girl

TANZIN SULTANA

She sat looking forlornly at the river. Its murky grey water spreading out in ripples beckoned her to unburden herself. The water's ugly appearance reflected the dark sins of mankind. What was one more added to the infinite stretch of the water?

A breeze seemed to mock her hesitation. She brushed her hair back and looked at her reflection on the water. The ripples made her look older than her fifty years spent among men. Every wrinkle on her face hid a story within. So much she would carry with herself to the grave. So much she could have given to the world.

The river saw it all. Knew it all. From her first tiny steps upon the village ground to the night her innocence was taken to the days when she hid herself from the sun and till now on this winter morning. Her story could be found on this once beautiful river, which cruelly gradually destroyed along with her smile.

She could hear voices carried by the wind. Perhaps they were calling for her? She could not be sure. All she knew was that she would not go back. The once clear river was her lifelong companion and now in its murky depths she would breathe her last.

It began five years after her actual birth, her life that is. With large smooth pebbles clutched in her tiny hands, she followed her nana down the muddy rough track that led to the riverbank. Her nana walked a couple of steps ahead of her, the beauty of the world already lost in her aged eyes. But to the young five-year-old, who had never been away from the village, every leaf and stone captivated her mind.

The road was narrow with thick shrubs fencing it from the fields and gardens on

either side. It was a rocky path and the young barefooted girl already suffered the wrath of the hard solid ground beneath her. But she paid no heed. Small cuts and bruises were of little consequence when the rush of the river could be heard in the near distance.

There was the river in all its glory. In her meagre five years of life it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. The river was calm; its water seemed a canopy of jewels glittering in the midmorning sun. She looked up at her nana, who nodded with a smile on her face and the little girl was off to throw pebbles in the river.

The days were no longer dreary for her in the secluded village where privacy was a precious rock that was rare and inconceivable. She would spend hours by the fire late at night carving and building boats and even longer playing with them in her haven. Years passed by and she still felt like a stranger in her birthplace. But she escaped through the flow of the water.

She felt the eyes of the village girls. She could sense their mutters and giggles that were directed at her. River Girl they called her. They thought her abnormal with her unnatural obsession with the village river. But they did not understand. Nobody did. People were bound by their own selfishness and they could never be enough for her. But the river, the river soothed her always giving but never asking for anything in return. The river did not expect anything from her. She never felt caged when gazing upon its water. It never taunted her for her different ways. Never looked at her with disdain for her disfigured face. Never pitied her for being her father's daughter. Never counted when a new mark appeared on her face. Never feigned ignorance when her screams pierced

the silent night. Never refused to help when her battered legs could not support her any more.

Soon she would be away from her pain. She heard whispers late in the night. She would be given away to the village guard, they said. She smiled. It was strained but there was a smidgen of hope there if you looked closely enough. She rushed to the river the day she would leave her cage. There was a slight smile fighting to stay on her face as if she felt that if she were happier it would turn out to be another dream. But the river that day was fierce. It was angry and violent.

It was a silent night. Her eyes were hollow. She cried but no tears came out. There was a storm brewing and far in the distance the river moaned as if feeling her pain. Her captor rose above her with a malevolent smile. She did not scream that night.

They say if you are subjected to torture long enough it becomes bearable. She felt free. She had nothing left that they could take from her anymore. They had taken it all, her dreams, her reasoning, her body, and her soul. But her river still flowed even though man had tried his best to destroy it.

After fifty years, she felt she had lived beyond her age. What did she leave behind? Children were akin to strangers. Grandchildren she never laid eyes on. And the village, that gave her life and took it from her. She gently waded through the water. The breeze was stronger now, her hair whipping around her face. She felt calm and the river was silent. Slowly she felt herself sink beneath its merciful water. The sun seemed farther away, but there was no need for it anymore. She smiled and became one with her river.

TANZIN SULTANA IS WITH THE DAILY STAR.

Relief . . .

ABU RUSHD

Translation: Haroonuzzaman

Born on December 25, 1919 in Calcutta, Abu Rushd earned his under-graduate and graduate degrees in English from St Xavier's College, Calcutta and Calcutta University in 1940 and 1942 respectively. He did his Masters from Oxford University. He was supernumerary professor at Jhangirnagar University.

Besides, writing short stories and novels in Bangla and English, he translated Nazrul, Rabindranath and Lalon. The central and recurrent themes of his creative works are the hopes and aspirations, despair and frustrations of the urban middle classes. He has shown great skill in portraying the attitudes and feelings of the people, who on the partition of the sub-continent, migrated to Dhaka from Calcutta and its adjoining areas.

He died on February 25, 2010.

This is a translation of the story 'Khalash'.

For quite some time, he didn't have any communication with his family members. The last letter had come three weeks ago. His daughter had been suffering from low fever. Neither the doctor nor medicines had had any impact on her. In addition, Nasima would feel embarrassed about her son's doing mischief with her father. Amid the financial hardship, her son's hunger was an extra burden. His hunger was simply uncontrollable. On top of that, at times, he would break glasses and saucers. She had mailed a letter to Borkot, her husband, asking him to send her some money soon.

Receiving her letter, Borkot sent two hundred taka through telegraphic money order; he was yet to get the acknowledgement, though. It was difficult to know whether the money had reached her. If the money transfer was bungled, it wouldn't be possible to get any clue. Moreover, if efforts were made to track it down, there could be trouble he might get into.

Also, the situation turned unusual: everyone seemed to be busy in maintaining his or her status quo. His friends, though few in number, also had stopped coming to him these days. Uncertainty loomed large: it was difficult to ascertain when the military would come and who they would pick up. Even if someone met someone accidentally, the conversation would generally veer round very ordinary matters. It was as if an unseen but ubiquitous force would descend from nowhere to catch and take to cantonment anyone who dared to converse freely. Then from there some would return; some would go traceless.

Occasionally, in one or two evenings during the week, people still played cards. Instead of taking liquor, Borkot would love playing cards. Black & White or Seagram V, excited the tired nerves, brought about a hallucinatory happiness and emitted sparks in words. Frustrations were stifled by a sense of absorbedness, but that sense of determination was transient. The next moment disillusionment ate into the heart bit by bit.

However, the pleasure of playing cards was entirely different. Oscillating between victory and defeat, the game was filled with the mood swings of the players and was occupied by the purity of absorbedness caused by intense intoxication. Conversed with doses of warmth and affability, even *Shala* or *harami*, the slangs, extensively exchanged during the game, became so pleasantly acceptable, and the players slid into a world of their own, forgetting the world outside.

Temporary, though, the next moment they got awakened by the rude fact that Rob, a card player, had gone missing for three days. His wailing wife, neatly dressed in a sari with some careless crease on it, rushed to Borkot. Discarding her skilled tenderness of self-reliance and being humane with the rheum discharge of her eyes remaining unclear, she fervently appealed in a frail yet heart-wrenching voice: "I heard one colonel is your friend. Possibly you know that my husband doesn't get involved in anything. Whichever way possible for you, please get him out."

When sadness appeared in the form of a known propitious face, her prominently visible navel under the blouse stirred up the mind in some ways. Even the grim scene of two mangled dead bodies forming a confused mass that he had seen couple of days ago at Bakshibazar didn't provoke any emotion. One of them had his leg stuck in the blackish sludge of the gutter, and his left eye popped out from its socket; the hair on the other person's head looked uniquely very lively. Knowing all the details from Rob's wife, Borkot tried to console her deceptively: "Let me find out. Don't be so impatient."

However, he didn't inquire. Rob's wife was right in saying that Borkot knew a colonel. He was a Panjabi, named Shovan Ali. The name sounded more like a Bangali, but he was a fucking asshole, a number one son of a bitch. Borkot earned his friendship by supplying wine and women. It was for his sake, Borkot was still safe. The bastard would want more wine and women from Borkot if he had put pressure on Ali for more favor based on his friendship.

Later it was known that after peeling off the skin from his hand, Rob was put in a huge cooking pot, filled with boiling water. During a conversation a Baluchi captain had said: "If one or two miscreants like this were given such an exemplary punishment, then the Indian agents will soon be streamlined."

A mailman delivered a letter. Was it a demand for money again? Borkot wouldn't be able to send money now as he had lost a lot of money while playing cards over the past few days.

There is an element of intoxication in becoming penniless, and at least for some time you would feel like a hero.

The letter was not from his wife; the handwriting was someone else's. Therefore, he thought he would read it later. What else could

the news be? Now he would require convincing Reba to spend a night with Shovan Ali. She wasn't that ordinary. She used to teach psychology in a college, but she would often give in to Borkot's strong sexual desires. If she was in good mood, she wouldn't mind having sex with others in exchange of money. If he could manage her, Borkot would earn another contract from Shovan Ali, and then he would say in reprieve: "Shovan allah."

The strategy worked. Borkot felt a little relieved after sending some money back home. As soon as he remembered the low fever of his daughter, that cheerful feeling received a whack. To bring his 35-year-old wife and 16-year-old daughter to Dacca now would be thoroughly unsafe. None could say when the evil eyes of Shovan Ali and his friends would fall on them.

Alas! Wouldn't the peaceful days ever come back? Wouldn't I be able to look worry-free at the dangling china-rose in thin green leaf, smiling in sunshine, at least for some time?

These thoughts keep crossing Borkot's mind. If he had someone around, he would pour some Black & White right now.

Suddenly, his attention was drawn to the envelope. Who could write it? He wondered. Shahana Apa! How come she suddenly wrote a letter after such a long time?

Could it be her whim? She was the daughter of the brother-in-law of Borkot's uncle; she was possibly senior to him by two years. In his teens and youth, Borkot would frequent her place. Sometimes he would give her some paisa to buy some candy sticks; while he was a student of class nine she had lent him Sharatchandra's 'Borodidi' to read. From then on Borkot simply devoured Sharatchandra. On one occasion, Shahana apa recited the poem 'Niruddesh Jatra' for him. In each and every detail that day would always remain alive and special to Borkot. It was an enviably enchanting afternoon; when the wind paused, Shahana apa with her unkempt hair looked like a woman from another world. Attired in a white sari with the red border, her soulful rendering of the poetry amounted to dripping of nectar, and it became poetry itself. That day, she sailed him off to a faraway land, miles and miles away, into a colorful-deserted and lovely-cloudy island.

Although the letter was not a big one, the four-sentence letter bore date and address at the top right had corner. "Even though I haven't had any news from you for a long time, I still hope you are alright. I urgently need one hundred taka. If possible, send the amount soonest. You don't need to come."

Despite a certain degree of mystery shrouding the letter, a particular type of Shahana apa's character also emerged from within the lines: no shocking appeal, no hypocrisy and no hesitation.

A teacher of a junior girls' high school and celibacy herself, she certainly had faced a grave situation; otherwise, why would she remember him after such a long time and want money from him? She could be forty years old now. She had been living alone, away from parents for quite some time. Purely for school's sake, she had been living in the mofussil town for about 20 years, away from her near and dear ones. Her parents would visit her infrequently; also, she would reciprocate their visits during vacations and festivities. Initially, some marriage proposals came to her, but she refused. Borkot knew nothing more than that.

Borkot couldn't smother his curiosity; rather he became more inquisitive. What happened to her parents? Did the military reach there, too? Did they burn their homes and kill people there? Why did Shahana apa remembered him only? Didn't she have her relatives? How did she get his address? She might have gathered it from Borkot's uncle.

Necessity is the mother of invention. 'How far will you take me, my dear?' This poetic line provoked some sort of excitement in him as he remembered it suddenly.

He felt like seeing her. Surely, her body had undergone some changes over such a long time. Amid the present cruel uncertainty, still a particular memory evoked a fresh hope for the future. He decided to meet Shahana apa, and on his way back he thought he would go to his father-in-law's house to enquire about his wife and the kids. The changeover of the scene and characters would refresh his perverted mind.

To go to her, he would need to catch a motor launch from Narayanganj. The number of water transports-boats, steamers, and motor launches-plying in the river Shitalakhya decreased to almost one-fourth. The movement of the military people through Shitalakhya, however, swelled up the current of the river. There was a reflection of self-dependence in the lifestyle and attitude of the military.

All of a sudden, an officer called Borkot: "Come here."

Although Borkot's self-dignity was hurt by the thoughtlessly rude address, he advanced towards the three-star captain whose eyes were deep and unrealistically blue. His body had inherited the blood of the bastards, perhaps. The mole positioned at the left end of the line of his black mustache had added an inexplicable wildness to the manly captain's disposition.

When Borkot stood near him, the captain asked: "Where are you going?"

Without disclosing his destination, he informed the captain that he would go as far as the launch would go.

"Where are you coming from?"

Borkot told him the local address.