

FICTION

LETTER FROM BOSTON

Game over . . .

JYOTIPROKASH DUTTA
Translation Hasan Ferdous

They rush in roaring, marching past the pond, over the playground, across the jungle. Their faces painted black and white look grotesque, and they hold blood-drenched swords drawn high above their heads. These are the dreaded gang of robbers. Turn over everything that you have, they demand. Hapless homeowners are seized with fear. But wait, here come the fearless defenders. Oh, what a fight they put up! Bullets fly, smoke gushes. Once the firefight is over, the vanquished robbers surrender unconditionally.

At war's end, they all trot back home, those that were killed and those that were wounded. Of course, they do so reluctantly. Regrettably, night has fallen and parents are waiting. Besides, there is still tomorrow's homework to be taken care of.

Right before returning home, the robber gang leader takes the shiny new handgun from the police chief. His eyes glisten. If only he could have one like this!

After his friends have all gone home, the police chief roams around the war field a while longer. He is excited not only for the victory scored, but also for the next day's game. Who knew acting out cops and robbers would be this fun? True, it was not the case in the past. Only a few days ago they had acquired the second gun that buoyed them up, adding new strengths to their ranks. A family member upon his return from a trip abroad had given him a toy gun. In appreciation, his heart brims with gratitude.

Before, all they had was a single gun. Its sound was not all that deafening. Yet it was enough to force some robbers to surrender. Each time the gun is fired with a booming sound, a robber must fall down, that's the rule. Once they have fallen, the robbers are not allowed to raise the bamboo swords, not even once. This rule is not particularly liked by those in the gang of robbers. Also under the rules of the game, one must be a robber first, so that the next day he can be a policeman. Until then, he is not allowed to caress the barrel of the shiny gun. Robber tonight, policeman the next day!

Everyone jokes about the way the robbers go down at the sound of the gunshot. They say, "What, are you doves or pigeons, that you fall down every time you hear a noise?"

Their living quarters are a little farther from Main Street. At the end of the neighborhood, there is a big empty field. A narrow, alley-like pathway runs through the neighborhood to Main Street. Snaking further down the pool and bypassing the twin palm trees, the pathway is finally connected with the highway to Kamarkhali. If one stands facing Kamarkhali, on his right will be the river. Next to the river is a bus station; buses stop there for those arriving from the sub-district towns.

He watches the buses while sitting on the paved steps of the pool in near darkness. He sees nearby homes light up, and the last bus leave the road along Gabtoli. A handful of people will soon get off the bus and head towards home. Do birds make nests up on the twin palm trees that stand next to the pool? He wonders. How do babui birds look?

A gentle breeze blows from Dhupkhola ground, signaling the arrival of spring. Yellow mustard flowers have not yet turned black. Soon, dewdrops will form atop green pea plants. When the dull moonlight will gleam on the banana trees in Mohiuddin's garden, fairies and witches will begin swaying their heads to and fro.

A motor launch steams ahead in the river. In the daytime, one would not have been able to hear this sound. But at night, the high-speed launches cruising towards Barisal are heard loud and clear.

He stands up, thinking of returning home. After all, it's getting late. He knows Father has not returned yet. Mother is not a problem either; she never lifts a finger against him. His sisters, having made beds and set the clothe racks in perfect order, will be doing homework. If he entered their room now, they would scream at him in unison, "You rascal." None of this, of course, is of any serious concern.

Gojmat, Poncha's mother, finds him near the pool and begins cursing. He is not sure if that's really her name. Mockingly, his sisters often call him "Gojomoti's hubby." Since Poncha's death, his mother is famous for starting up a conversation with anyone available.

He enters home with thoughts of launching a two-pronged war, from the side of the field, and from the river, with the two guns now in his possession. He finds Father sitting on a stool, his face darkened in the weak light of the lantern, and Mother sitting in front of the stove in the kitchen. His sisters are sitting in the reading room, with their college books still unopened.

He is not sure what is so terrible that he has done. Yes, he is a little late today, but that should not be the reason for looking so irate and somber. After all, no one can accuse him of being a spoiled brat.

As he washes up and gets ready for homework, an uneasy feeling creeps in. This is the first time no one in the household has felt it necessary to declare their deep concern about his doomed future.

A little later Manubhai enters and calls Father, who steps out of the room to meet him. With a sidelong glance he can see his father conferring with Manubhai in a hushed voice. Manubhai is well regarded here by everyone. He is always at the head of a procession; at public meetings, he is also the first speaker.

Manubhai spends some time with Father. They sit pondering there for a while. Soon Manubhai is gone, knocking on the neighbor's door, he hears.

A few days later he is sitting under a tree at Dhupkhola ground. No one has come to the playground today. They are not likely to come either. Since their last play day, many of the policemen and thieves have begun leaving home, but he does not know where they are going. At every home, parents seem to be in a grim mood. They listen to radio broadcasts that are barely audible. Some are also collecting their essentials and packing. It appears they are ready to leave at a moment's notice.

How quickly everything has changed. Only a few days ago, everyone was in a joyful mood. They conversed loudly on neighborhood roads, screamed at will, roamed around with unfurled banners. None of this is happening any more. The banners are hidden. Voices are muted. Those who appeared most voluble in street processions can be seen no more. He has heard that Manubhai has been meeting with others on Main Street and along the river bank.

Many are still left in their neighborhoods. At night, lights do go up and voices are also heard in many homes. All kinds of news float in the air, some discernible, others not so. When some well dressed people pass by Main Street in a rickshaw, many people curse, calling them "collaborators2."

His afternoons are spent sitting under a tree in Dhupkhola ground, or on the steps of the pool. He barely feels the touch of the once coveted gun now tucked under his belt.

He stands up and walks to the side of the pool near his home. It is getting dark. Lamps are lit in some homes, but no one seems to be hurrying to do his homework. No one seems to be practising with his music teacher. Everything appears so uncomfortable, so perplexing. Nobody is in a mood for a chat; no one goes out for a walk either.

Suddenly he feels the gun at his waistband. Well, what would happen if he fired his gun! Would everyone scramble out the door? Before he can weigh all possibilities, he presses the trigger.

Instantly the booming sound reverberates and a little smoke floats and curls up. Noises are heard and doors are opened. On the other side of the pool, someone begins sobbing at Palan's house. Palan's parents, holding his hand and carrying a little packet, hurry out of their home and onto Main Street. Mr. Muhuri, a neighbor, also runs out and rushes to Dhupkhola ground with only his loin-clothes on. Kalipad, who teaches at a college, scurries to the mustard field with his wife and daughters. He can hear people sobbing at some other homes. All lights go out.

Manubhai and others, who were sitting at the roadside curb with their gaze fixed on the river, hurry to the neighborhood homes. They move from door to door, inquiring about people's safety. Some hurry to the playground, some to the mustard field. No, nothing to worry about. They have not arrived, at least not this time.

Soon they all return: Professor Kalipad, Mr. Muhuri and Palan with his parents. Some lights go up again. A few step out to identify the source of the gun fire. He is still standing at the same spot with his gun in his hand.

He keeps silent as people close in and listens with his head bowed the angry rebukes of his father. He drags him inside their home. His mother, who has never ever hit him, slaps him hard across his face and throws his dearly loved gun into the courtyard.

He does not weep. That this is how things would turn out was beyond his imagination. Only the other day, when paper bullets flew out of his gun, many had jeered, saying, "What, are you doves or pigeons? War is not something you can handle."

He sits silently in the porch. The playground is not visible in the darkness, neither is the pool. The river is so far away.

Soon a sliver of moon begins rising above the twin palm trees. A dim light gradually envelopes the surroundings, almost like what one finds at day-break. When he gazes intently, many things become visible. There lies the pathway to the pool. And there is the gathering darkness floating above the palm trees. The fairies and witches are swaying to and fro up there on the banana leaves. Nothing seems to have changed. So what happened?

Wrapped in silence, he sits alone in the darkness.

JYOTIPROKASH DUTTA WRITES FICTION; HASAN FERDOUS IS A COMMENTATOR ON SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES.

Waiting For Snow

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

This year winter has not been very generous to us living in Boston. I, a grown up, look forward to snow, just as children do, because snow days are often declared as holidays: no school, no work, no classes and no appointments. You stay at home, drink tea or coffee, watch TV or go on the Internet, listen to music, or do whatever you please. Snow days are unscheduled holidays, and are always welcome, at least to me.

However, we haven't seen a single snow day this winter season, and winter is almost over! Last winter, we had seen many snow cancellations, and on an average we get 12 inches of snow in January and February. So far, it has snowed only once in the last two months, and that too only a dusting. It has been 5 to 6 degrees warmer than normal every month since October of last year, and November, December, and January have been the least snowy since recording began in 1938. The media, and the Internet are full of stories about the dry winter and lack of business for the ski areas and snow plough operators. I

clouds, pitter patter on the roof, stuff falling down from the sky, and staying home, even if defeated by nature. In fact, my perception of the seasons has become sharper, and my appreciation of the turn of seasons so passionate as to border on love-fest, since I started to look at the seasons through Tagore's eyes. And, I bet, I am not the only one who opens up "Geeto Bitan" searching for the maestro's suitable rendition in the "prokritee" category whenever there are clouds in the horizon.

As I wait for winter's clouds, I am constantly reminded of the poem "Abirbhab" by Tagore. The poet writes that he has been waiting since spring for the rains to come. I like to tell the snow clouds that I have been waiting since autumn (or 'fall' as they call it here) for the rains and snowy days to arrive. Alas in vain!

The yearning for snow started just around Christmas. Most citizens, Christian or not, pine for a "White Christmas" with snow on the ground, and even better, covering the trees and roofs, giving the appearance of a white blanket. This year, that did not happen. And then



am not much of a skier, but I like going downhill on a snow-tube or a sleigh. But this winter, I have been completely idle! No cleaning the cars, shoveling snow from the driveway, or clearing snow from the eaves and decks! Of course, one could argue that the lack of snow has spared my weary bones from hard, "back-breaking" labor. But, I would liketo remind my interlocutor that I am putting on weight this winter since snow-shoveling is my regular, and most convenient, mode of exercise during this season!

My reader might ask, "So you are experiencing a mild winter, isn't that good? What are you complaining about?" I would admit that my readers have a valid point. A lack of snow, or "white stuff" as the locals refer to it, and milder weather, is welcome for many. Some of my South Asian friends have teased me to go to Europe if I was eager to experience some cold air on my face or try on my new snow boots. Europe, as some of my readers might be aware, has had one of the worst winters in recent memory, with hundreds of deaths, and has witnessed snowfalls at unprecedented levels. In the USA, these types of bone-chilling winters only happen in Alaska, and New Englanders are fortunately spared such assaults by Mother Nature.

But coming back to my main theme, I like the ups and downs of seasons, whether in New England or in Bangladesh. Although we have only four seasons here, unlike the six I was used to in Bangladesh, I like winter in Boston because that is the only time when it rains regularly unlike Bangladesh. On a rainy, or snowy, day, do I get the feel of monsoon, which I miss, and I can pretend that I am in Bangladesh. And, it hasn't rained much either this season. While I don't think I liked a rainy day much while I was growing up in Bangladesh, nowadays I love rainy days, real or imaginary, thanks to songs of Tagore that opened my eyes to the beauty of

came January, and with no snow in sight, some started to speculate whether it was the effect of global warming. But as soon as news media started flashing images from Europe, other theories started to emerge. Since my column is meant for a literary page, I do not wish to get into a detailed scientific discussion of this phenomenon. The latest explanation for the contrasting weather conditions in North America and Europe is the "jet stream" theory. It appears that most of this winter, an unusual jet stream pattern has kept the coldest air locked up in Alaska and also in much of Canada. A southbound dip in the jet stream brought record low temperatures in the USA and very heavy snowfall to parts of eastern and central Europe. So, disappointed New Englanders might have to usher in spring without much snow this time!

On a literary note, "Waiting for snow" reminds me of Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot", in which two characters wait for a mysterious character Godot to make its appearance. In Boston, we appear to be waiting for Godot, and we have observed Ekushey, Valentine's Day, Groundhog Day, and Presidents Day, all winter holidays, and will probably observe 26th March, without any snow in sight. For my readers, a footnote on Groundhog Day. People living in Northeast states observe Groundhog Day on February 2nd. According to folklore, Punxsutawney Phil, a groundhog, comes out of its hibernation on this day, and if it is a cloudy day, it cannot see its shadow indicating a short winter. This year, Phil did not see its shadow, and we are expecting winter to be over soon.

As for me, I say "enjoy winter while it lasts."

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI LIVES AND WORKS IN BOSTON, USA.

FICTION

A meal at a Chinese restaurant

LATIFUL QUADER

Nirmal-babu has been a problem ever since he has retired from the college and came to live in Dhaka. He lived in Boro-digha quite contently. The few occasions Krishna visited him were of dire necessity when she stayed in her paternal house nearby. Avita and Ovi stayed with him once and were looked after well by other residents of his quarter. They were students of the college who lived there free of board and lodging and had the common characteristics of being poor and meritorious distant relations. Kobita, Avita and Ovi saw more of him in the earlier part of their lives when he would come to Dhaka during the vacations. Then the visits became less frequent, Krishna got promoted and moved to a larger quarter. Ovi's hair and dress styles took turns that were increasingly and startlingly bizarre in Nirmal-babu's eyes and Avita permanently became Avita Chatterjee through registration in her Secondary School Certificate form. Only close few kept the secret that she was previously known as Sobita Chattopadhyay. Only Nirmal-babu had no reason to believe otherwise that she was Sobita Chattopadhyay.

Nirmal-babu senses that he is being perceived as a problem. He reckons that, 'the problem' that is personified in him has a historical perspective. Since the early part of the previous century, British rule in India gave rise to a kind of inanity that manifested in caste superciliousness, national pride and religious chauvinism among three major groups of people, distinguishable by religion or race. One took up the responsibility and executed, in unneeded flurry the curving of the map which the other two gratuitously accepted, because by then the hatred and intolerance between them were giving rise to mass violence and rioting.

Krishna's father, uncles and relatives who were multifariously positioned in the society until then, set aside all their objectives of life and made their utmost priority, a gracious exodus from the land that was transforming into something unfamiliar to them, too nippily. Properties got sold or exchanged, as one by one the daughters were married off and the males found something to do on the other side. When Krishna made to marriageable age, her elder brother and the 8 bedroom house with pond and garden and Krishna herself were all there to be transferred to safety.

The house and the brother in combination would make sense; but not with an un-bequathed sister. The house was getting occupied by distant relations, and the portion that remained in family's occupation was being used to stock heirlooms, pictures and books; and as transit accommodation for family members, majority of who were illegal entrants when they came to their family home for unfinished business.

Nirmal Kumar by then got his master's with honours placing near the top of the second class, and joined a college in Narail. He was the first among the posterities of Bhubotosh and Ashutosh Chatujjes of *Senhati* to come up this far. He had not much to show for, to qualify as a worthy suitor, claimant of the damsel, not in any apparent distress, in question. There were his certificates, and an abstract notion that is incongruently called brain or merit, that promises of worldly profit that it would bestow to the person in whose cranium it is located, as well as to his spouse, offspring and in-laws And, of the residue, if any, to his paternities, if alive.

But there were not many earnest pretenders around for the exquisite hands, and the time was of simmering turmoil.

Nirmal's elder brother and only living guardian Amal had come to Senhati to divide up the inheritance, and couldn't wait to rejoin the glamorous job he found at *Shwami Sree Sree Bromhonnada's* Trans-continental Yoga and Meditation Centre in the coast of Kerala, where lessons of spirituality and meditation were being taught in the frill of three star hotel, for *Shamiji's* piety centred not around the spirit but also on the sensory joys of the body. The future of spirituality lay in the USA and Europe and Amal was catching up with his spoken English as much as he could, for a future posting in a branch somewhere there. Nirmal could also be helped to find a position if he ever wished to work in the US. This fact was also mentioned in the groom's credential, omitting Amal's position as Assistant Cook at the Ashram.

Krishna's family considered his education and pliability. Amal considered the connection and the time pressure he was under. He must be present at the next public *darshan* of *Shamiji* which took place on a full moon. Krishna considered his potential to live up to her standard and again, malleability. She also had measured up - the body she saw was firm and fair-

complexioned the lower chamber of the fleshed skull where that invaluable brain was positioned. His hair was naturally unruly but his eyelids, lips and the moustache all had hints of droopiness which gave the impression that the man was hardened by the world. Even his thick glasses always slipped down on his nose, and one way of determining if he found something interesting was to observe him if he adjusted his glasses or gave someone full stare through the glasses and not above the upper sticks of the frame. A ruffle of the smile was never in short supply when he talked, but only something extra-ordinarily interesting would turn it into full-fledged beam. Generally, he would wander around, like a child whose toys had been unjustly taken away from him and whose plea for restoration has been turned down or were not heard. As if, the shock had turned into grief. And the grief was then permanently pasted on the face. Broodiness, rancorousness or sarcasm was, however not known to have been his style or attitude contrary to his appearance which would have suggested.

Since nobody asked Nirmal's view, he quietly complied. (*To be continued*).