

FICTION

# Backbone of a Nation

TANVIR MALIK

ZAHID hesitated a moment before finally opening the envelope. It had been in his hand for sometime but he just could not bring himself to see what was inside. He felt, as if, the printed papers would conspire together to betray everything he had been promised a few days back; days of anticipation and planning had preceded their actual falling into his hands and that could vanish in a moment's notice! Is it fear? he asked himself. Well, not exactly but it was nothing totally divorced from it either.

The envelope had become a bit moist in his palm. He turned it over and tore one corner it was stapled. There, the two-page appointment letter greeted him with lines arranged into paragraphs: serried bunches of academic gobbledygook. He turned the first page and tried to read but could not. Only the phrase “the university is glad to have you among its faculty...” met his glance. He folded it in two hurriedly and inserted where it had come from, exhaling. He would read it later.

The very thought that someone would hire him for a salary and that too in a university like UAST was too much for him to take in. He remembered how it had all begun. He had dropped in to see one of his former teachers Dr Mashrur Zakaria and the current Vice Chancellor of UAST Dr Shawkat Elahi and they had asked him to drop his CV. A month or so later they called him for a presentation. It went very well he could see it in the eyes of the people sitting in a half-circle. The interview was a breeze too. Everybody from the Vice Chancellor to the Registrar looked impressed and a lady with a heavily painted face and manicured nails said smiling: “We'll contact you”. And contacted he was. A meeting with the Vice Chancellor himself later cemented his appointment. He was lucky.

He had always idealized Dr Zakaria. In his student days, he used to be charmed by his personality. His delivery of lectures punctuated by his signature wit was a guarantee to attract every student's attention. He was the role model for scores of aspiring young men and women who wanted to serve the country by teaching.

“Never forget your countrymen...”, he would say, “the poor masses who can't even eat two meals a day. You have to serve them, educate them and thus contribute to society. Money's important but it never comes anywhere near profes-

sional integrity...be honest because it pays to be so...”

Zahid had taken these words to heart like thousands more.

The University of Advanced Science and Technology (UAST) campus sprawled over an acre on the outskirts of the city. The name appeared in big letters over the roof and under it ran the university's motto: “The Best Education Money Can Buy”. The university had just moved into these vast grounds abandoning the earlier rented campus in Bananidhara. The main building boasted eight floors and the annexe, five. The canteen was an architectural feat the huge metal-wrapped pillars held the glass-roof which had been made in the shape of a geodesic dome. It was always abuzz with students' chatter and cutlery's clatter. The enormous underground car park could accommodate two hundred cars. At 16, the university had come of age.

Getting out of the lift, Zahid headed towards the Faculty of Business Studies. Housed on the fifth, sixth and seventh floors, it was the biggest faculty and, head and shoulders above others as far as reputation went. Mercury-coated glass walls occupied its one side, making everything outside visible through a tint. The neatly-trimmed hostas on the terrace appeared rather gloomy but the slums in the distance had taken on a rich hue Zahid wondered why. Artificial ferns in corners could not supply oxygen to the humans but were subjected to vast amounts of emitted carbon dioxide; perhaps that was why their fronds looked a tad blighted.

“Z-a-h-i-d! Come on in.” Dr Zakaria said cheerfully. “Pull up a chair and make yourself comfortable.”

Zahid did his bidding. “Have you got your cubicle...oh....excuse me...” He received a phone call.

Two students were standing at the back of the room.

“Sorry”, the Department Chair apologized, finishing his talk.

“No, Sir. it's ok. I understand.” Zahid answered.

“Sir!” one of the students called.

Dr Zakaria looked up over his gold-rimmed glasses. His expression betokened an unspoken distaste.

“Sir, it's about the waiver. My course advisor's saying it's not possible because of one course only. I have to do this one first and only then...” He handed him some papers.

“Oh yes, you two are a credit transfer case...” He rifled through the papers. “Let's see...er...the

course you did at UITB is called Business Ethics in the Workplace but ours is called Business Ethics and the Workplace. They're not the same.” He threw them a questioning look.

The students looked at each other.

“They're not the same thing ours is different in that it situates the ethical perspective vis-à-vis the professional milieu and thereby it induces the incumbent to execute his duties punctiliously in the workplace whereas the UITB course merely muddles through the codes of conduct expected of an individual when pitted against a host of ethical issues in the office gulf of a difference. Excuse me”, his mobile rang again.



It was not clear if the students had a handle on what the teacher was getting at.

“But sir, we've seen the booklists of both the courses. They're very similar”, the other student said.

“Similar, may be, but not the same. No, never! And I don't suppose you want to say the quality of teaching is the same at these two places tch, tch !” Dr Zakaria shook his head vehemently.

The students looked despondent.

“Sir, if I have to do that course again here...the per-credit payment is a problem. My father may not...”, the first one scratched his head.

“I have the same problem too. Sir, if you considered”, the second one appealed.

“Sorry. Rules are rules. Besides,

every semester we reject lots of students. If the tuition is a problem, I suggest...er..I suggest..., you know”, he shrugged his shoulders and looked the students in the eye.

Crestfallen, the students salaamed him and turned round to leave.

“Sorry young man, I have to deal with cases like these all the time. Can you imagine? Ha, ha, ha. By the way, did you see your cubicle?”

Zahid shook his head.

“I'm calling Nazmul right now you know our department secretary, right? Ok, he'll arrange everything for you. Welcome to the department!” he extended his hand.

Zahid got up, thanking his new boss profusely. As he stood up, his look went out again to the terrace.

Aishah entered. She had a quiz paper in hand.

“S-i-rr, I wanted to talk to you about the quiz. Why did I get 3?” she raised her brows.

Zahid looked down in discomfort. Her orna was coiled round her neck and her cleavage was showing from the plunging necklines. Putting the paper down on the desk, she tautened her torso; the latter action accentuated the curvature of her bosom. Her polished nails were at the paper's edge.

“Oh t-that...t-that q-quiz...” he tried to concentrate on the flatness of the paper in question.

Aishah sat erect scrutinizing every contraction on Zahid's face.

“Here, the principles of management aren't written ...and two other questions aren't answered at all.”

“But sir-r, my friend Tasmia got 8”

“She must h-h-have written well t-then....”

“But she and I've always got similar scores on quizzes for other subjects...”

“But your paper's almost blank?” Zahid regained some confidence.

“Can't you do anything about it, please s-i-r-r ?” Aishah clasped her hands resting her elbows on the desk.

“I...I'll check the p-paper again and see if I can do anything.”

“Thanks a load, s-i-r-r...you're an a-n-g-e-ll! I knew it, thanks!” Aishah bowed a little.

Zahid gave a nervous smile and immediately looked away.

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The downpour came out of the blue, although the weather forecast had guaranteed a sunny, cloudless morning. Pedestrians scampered on to pavements to take cover in shop-fronts where hordes were already drying themselves and open-air vendors began saving their wares rather than their own skin. The plant kingdom bowed heads in the wind so they could dodge the cascading waters, though in vain. Roads sucked in the chunky drops hurriedly as if to keep up their dry appearance.

Zahid was sitting in the Department Chair's room. He had been sent for along with another lecturer Tonima Tasnim. Both being new, they wondered what the cause might be. No satisfactory answer could be arrived at and, on their way to the Chair's room, Tonima's smiling face gave Zahid some confidence.

Dr Zakaria entered after finishing his class, deposited his books on the desk and smiled: “It's just a small matter. I'm sure you'll understand. Two students...er...they're complaining they haven't been given

deserving marks in mid-terms.”

The two novices started to see the light.

“The students are let me see...er...yes, Aishah binte Mashreq and Saad ibne Sharif”, Dr Zakaria looked up.

“But sir, I mean...Aishah didn't write much. If I show you her script”, Zahid said.

“Are you sure? She's not a bad student as such”, the muscles on the Chair's right cheek twitched abnormally.

“In the quizzes too she did poorly. She came to see me once but I just couldn't pull her marks up.”

“You know, at times you have to consider. I'm not asking you to be --, you understand not at all but it will boost their self-respect a lot he, he, he.”

“Sir, Saad's case is the same. I keep telling him to write relevant answers but he never does!” Tonima sighed.

“I understand your concern and dedication young blood like you. But think of this too: if you just considered them, just be a bit more flexible, it could give them the confidence they need. Recheck the scripts and see if you can do something. After all, er...their parents sent them to us in good faith and they spared no expenses in doing so, he, he, he we should keep that in mind.”

The two young teachers understood well what the Chair was hinting at. Their outer aplomb perfectly camouflaged the inner surprise. Zahid wanted to say more things to bear out his stance but then thought better of it.

“Ok, Sir. I'll see what I can do”, he uttered. They stood up.

The superordinate did his best to galvanize the young ones into action: “That's the spirit! You won't regret this.”

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The traffic had stilled a good half hour earlier and showed no sign of moving. Sitting in the CNG autorickshaw, Zahid was thinking of his brief spell at UAST. Three and a half months was not a long period but he had learnt a good deal. He had learnt that there were indeed differences between his experience as a student and the students' at UAST. Students had the right to go directly to the Vice Chancellor and complain about a teacher if anything was amiss. Accountability had been given priority over everything else something he had never witnessed in anyone during his university days and that remained as the cornerstone of UAST's strong reputation.

“Baba, can you help me?” a voice interrupted his thoughts.

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## Poetry

TWO POEMS BY  
SABRINE BINTE MASUD

### Streets of Tbilisi

She said, “I love to travel in the night in dark streets of Tbilisi”, and I asked - what do you mean by “love”, do you mean to say you wouldn't mind letting your mind travel at the touch of a pebble underneath your toe, sniffing for the Black Sea resting her hip so far away from your finger tips, and exhaling when the wind trots a step away simpering for the echo off the Byzantine dome trapping its voice or do you mean to say you wouldn't deny that “love” that makes you pick up that pebble and throw it to shatter the light into pieces, or does the straight symmetry of the lanes make you whimper for a curve here there or do you mean to say you would allow the autumn wind to brush past your thighs and tug at your skirt or is this “love” not as mundane as being pushed against a brittle wall of a balcony overhead, legs almost parted or would you frame the shadows of one street leading on to the other and the faint scent of T'one' blazed morning bread

that course lips sucked out of your breathe while you were too engrossed in the scent of morning dew and forgot the chokha<sup>2</sup> clad rebel pressing hard against you, because the trinity of samaia<sup>3</sup> inked your inheritance to a woman who once was a King... ...is this the “love” you speak of?

<sup>1</sup>. A Well shaped traditional Georgian oven

<sup>2</sup>. A traditional Georgian attire

<sup>3</sup>. A Georgian folk dance performed by three woman glorifying King Tamar, the first woman king in the 12th-13th cent, representing a young princess, a wise mother and a powerful king.

### Shali

“The monolithic gods of our time Only lack shrines”, said my friend, Her finger-tips tiptoeing over The galaxy tab, a swish of her Nail edge removed the barriers to a new Window The coral band on the middle, Creates balance enough for the Nail to perform greatness from here -to there the netherworlds, somewhere in Singapore, a benchmark Blinked an arrow “Up”

She took a moment to look ahead and - found me, enquired, Maybelline crusted Eye corners shrunk to a line, I moved my head, twice, North to south Cover girl lips flicker no light, this season Requires invisibility...

It took “60” seconds to reach the The bottom, the ground from where

the concrete Rod, starts, that ends in a Prick, of a Blinking antenna, a buzzard's height From its beginning it goes “Up” All around us, jutting Columns, Height and length, Size does matter, vertically

My henna crusted hand reaches out, Involuntarily, My dopatta is tasseled, matching The twinkling stars on my bridal sari; like a will of The pagan god, the one who worked In mysterious ways, I, Give her Valentino back a Shove she stumbles ... clip clop... Jimmy Choo holds her balanced on A seven inch needle point, Always floating, only, this once Her lips part ways and breathe “Shali”!