

Snapshots of a dream

ABU TAHER MOJUMDER

The steering guides well
Those ripples bordered with
Endless greenery
Thick, gloomy, sloping skyward
Sudden horns and window above
Beckoning the clouds
Seagulls breaking the solitude
A face illusive across the sills
or not at all or glimpses of Rose
No no Ruth gentle ripples
Flowing eternally across the
borders.

Concoction of chemical weapons
Trampling of civilizations
Blood flows ripples soaked by
Sand and earth and Hawks
Seas churned with patriots
The glamour of tears children shot
Children away don't matter
Lauras and Cherrys and charities
Mocking debris of skeletons

But gentle ripples flow on
bordered with greeneries
Footsteps and horns disturb
The solitude
Discovery of relics
Flight to other habitations
Across the void
Menai Strait, hanging bridge pier
and beaumaris those voices
the ups and downs
And a heart breaking

Our final meeting as living beings was in 1992, when he visited us at our government accommodation in the National Parliament complex. He was returning from a World Bank Mission in Cairo and brought us a copper plated Nefertiti and a painting on Papyrus that still adorn our living room, constantly reminding us of his absence.

A few days later, his dead body arrived at the Airport. I, along with his sister Rita, other relatives and a few close friends went to the Airport to receive his body. We were waiting in the VIP room at the passenger terminal, the plane arrived and we all rushed towards the plane. Suddenly, a Customs officer accompanying us informed us about the harsh reality that his body would come through the Airfreight, since the coffin carrying our very dear Gora Bhai was now merely cargo! We all left the passenger terminal to receive the body at the cargo unit. Before lowering his body at the Banani graveyard, I had the last glimpse at the mortal remains of Gora Bhai- the cleanest (Gora) of souls that I have ever known.

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REFLECTIONS

Tales of two marathons: Paris and Peru

TAPAN CHAKRABARTY

Soon after starting the marathon at six o'clock in the morning, I was struggling because of the thin air. I would know a few hours later why Forbes magazine had ranked the Inca Trail as one of the ten toughest races (among all endurance sports) in the world in 2005. The morning sun rose and painted the trail yellow with strokes of low-angled light rays finding their ways through small trees and shrubs. Little did I know at that time that on that day the morning would not show the day. I was surprised to see how clean and quiet the trail was throughout. The breath-taking beauty and the variety of vegetation in the first half of the trail made me stop to take photos of the flowers, the river, the locals, and the animals alone or with someone riding on them.

The black bugs were an annoyance, as they got bulkier sucking my Brahmin blood and getting stuck where they had first landed. It was disheartening to lose forty minutes or so in the trail during the run, for not taking the right turn at an unmarked intersection (signs in the trail are forbidden), where the hired person had left his post.

Seeing a lama posing for my camera in the cloud forest leading to the first pass, walking quietly under the canopy of the cloud forest, and listening to the sounds of the trees and the streams, were no indications of what lay in store. Gasping for air while climbing to the Dead Woman's Pass at 14000 ft and having to stop frequently to catch my breath, made me realize that the degree of difficulty at the Inca Trail was more than what I had imagined. There near the summit, I met a Calgary Edgemont girl, who was trekking the trail. We exchanged taking photos. I learnt a lesson of tough living from the Peruvian porters who were carrying loads of almost neck-to-knee lengths, but still managing a smile when our eyes met.

The majority of the steps and the stones were in the second half of the trail and it was also where the rain storm hit with fury with intermittent thunder and small hails, creating treacherous conditions both above my head and below my feet. At one point, I imagined a headline in the Calgary Herald: "Calgary Runner Struck by Lightning at INCA Trail." The outer soles of my shoes did not grip well the slippery stones on the Inca-made stairs. I took a full-body fall, absorbing the full impact on my buttocks, arresting another fall with my right hand slamming on a wall and suffering a small cut in my little finger. Running with a rain-soaked backpack and clothes, I started shivering from hypothermia anytime I stopped. Fatigued and wet, I still kept on running, trying to be in the gate before its closure for the day, with the hope of staying in the only hotel (the Sanctuary Lodge) by the entrance gate on the other side of Machu Picchu. That did not happen, however, as it was getting darker, the battered body becoming weaker, and the steps getting

trickier. There I experienced genuine Peruvian hospitality from the porters at the last aid station, where I was visibly shaking. They changed my wet socks and clothes, forced me to drink hot coca-leaves tea and lent me a much-needed dry jackettaking one off from one of themto put on to finish the run. Forced to overnight in a tent a few kilometres away from the Machu Picchu, I felt dejected and fell on the floor by misjudging the position of a small stool in a poorly-lit dining tent. Back into a tent shared with Greg, this germ-freak runner got inside a sleeping bag that was used by someone else the night before in the campsite, from where we had started the marathon. As I was thinking about the duvet-covered bed in the Sanctuary Lodge, which I had already paid for, I had to go outside to attend to nature's call. There my legs took a sudden slide as the ground on the edge of a ditch caved in, forcing me to climb out of its crumbling wall in darkness.

When I thought what else could go wrong on that trip, the unimaginable happened. After climbing out of the ditch and not being sure about the location of my own tent, I was looking for any tent whose doors were unzipped. Then I saw one looking like mine and went in. I started feeling the bottom of the sleeping bag on what was supposed to be my side of the tent. I felt some stiffness there. To be sure, I felt again. A chill flashed through my spine. Sensing the dire consequences, my instinct was to play offense and so I said rather annoyingly, "How could you leave your gates unzipped?" A soft and tired response came back: "Please zip the gates on your way out." It was a female voice! I got out fast. I still get a chill fearing what could have been had she screamed!

Time, no matter how tough, rolls on. Morning dawned. We walked through the gate that I had missed the night before and climbed a near-vertical set of hundred or so steps to reach the Sun Gate, from where our eyes feasted on the majestic sight of Machu Picchu. We then walked to the end of the Inca Trail inside the Machu Picchu ruins. The sun was up by then. I strolled through the roofless ruins, saw the grazing llamas in the ground, and took pictures of the flowers and the mosses on the Inca-laid stones.

Outside the gate, we got our finisher's medals. The Sanctuary Lodge let me stay that night at no extra cost. My wife's repeated enquiries about her lost husband on the night before and in the following morning might have softened the naturally-kind Peruvian hearts at the hotel.

There was sunshine after rain and gain after pain, after all.

On my way back to Cuzco, I saw the trees, the flowers, the light-snow-covered mountain tops through the transparent roof and the window of the Peru Rail train from Aguas Calientes to Ollanta. In the train, I touched a ray of sunlight finding its way to my lap. From inside the train, I gave some roles (Peruvian

At the San Pedro Market in Cuzco, I bought fruits from an elderly lady, who ended each Spanish sentence with "Pa", while telling me the price of each fresh fruit. My Spanish was such that 'Pa', not the price, was the only word I understood. But it was spoken with so much affection that to me she became a universal mother at that moment. When I got out of the market, I could not help but remember my long-deceased mother. I had to turn back to take her picture.

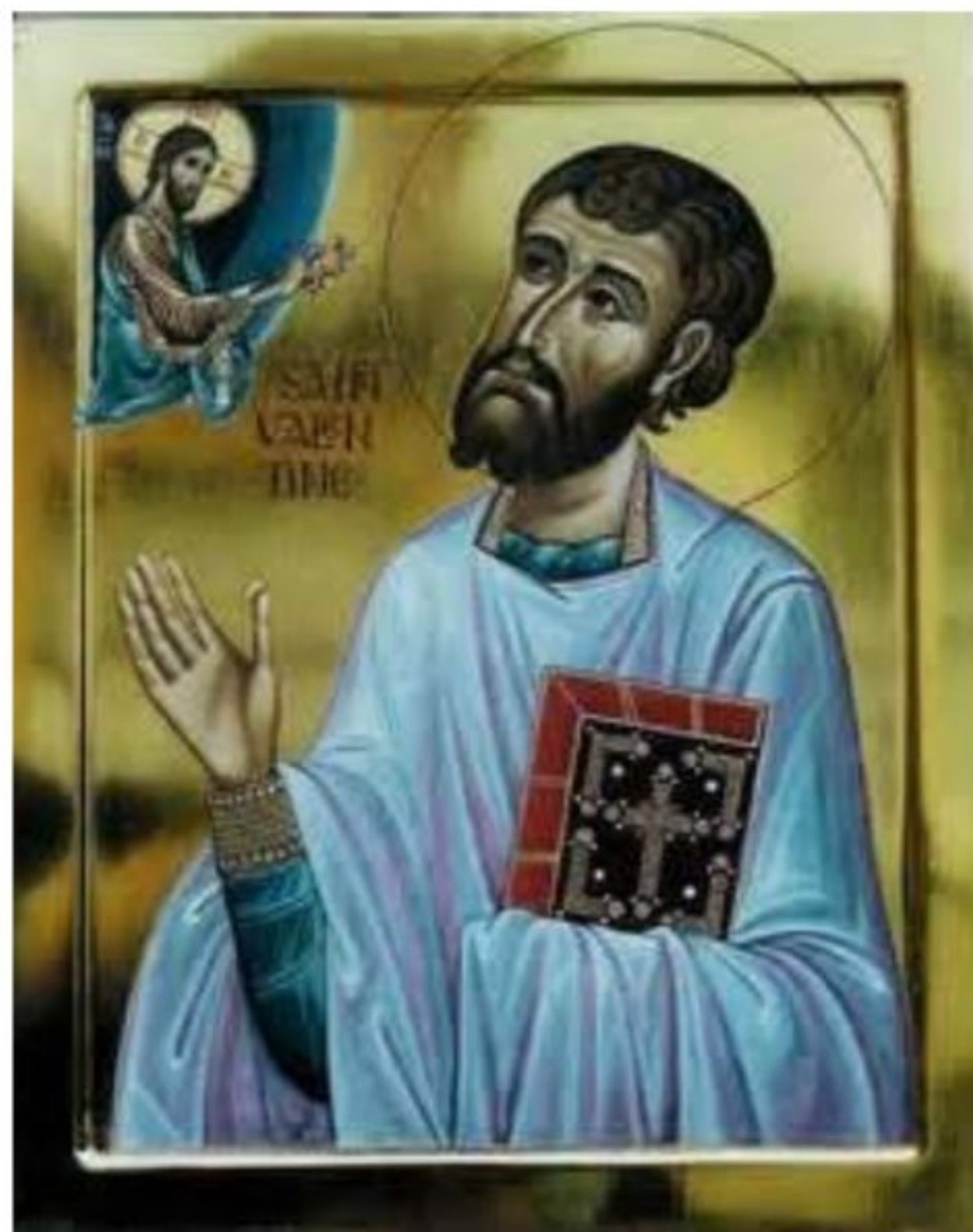
In Paris, I met artist Shahabuddin. In Lima, I met artist Victor Delfin. I also stayed in his B&B, overlooking the Pacific, where I felt like living in an art museum among his sculptures and paintings, displayed all over the ground, the lounge and the hallways. The octogenarian, romantic artist lives inside the B&B complex and still paints with passion. I bought a painting depicting Victor, the creator, putting the final touch on his most famous creation: “The Kiss”, the sculpture that is on permanent display in the Parque de Amor (Park of Love) in the Miroflores area of Lima, which in a tranquil setting is a tourist attraction and which I visited. I also visited the main Plaza in Lima surrounded by yellow buildings and churches. My English-speaking taxi driver in Lima was a young man honest and very proud of his mixed Japanese and Spanish bloods. While on the topic, he started pointing his finger to three Peruvians in the busy pedestrian crossing in Lima and kept on repeating: “Mixed! Mixed! Mixed!”

On my way back from Peru at the Houston International, I noticed a hand-written note on a tag in my checked-in luggage that read: "Keep Running, Peru". The well-wisher was the gentleman, himself a 10-km runner, from the TACA Airlines who had helped me track my luggage six nights earlier and who had also met me again on the day of my departure at the check-in counter in Lima.

Those are the tales of two marathoners on two vastly different courses in two different continents, with very different cultures. One thing both did was to instill onto this engineer runner the appreciation for arts through association with two world-famous artists: one from Peru and the other from Paris, one a new acquaintance, the other a newly-acquainted old friend.

(This is the second of a two-segment article. The first segment was published last week.)

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CANADA



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