REMINISCENCES

Gora Bhai

M. FOUZUL KABIR KHAN

Gora, ahis nickname suggested, was as fair complexioned as a Bangladeshi male could be. His full name was Shaikh Iftekhar Hossain. Hereceived his Master's degree in conomics from Dhaka University, in which he was placed in the First Class after which he went on to obtain his PhD in Economics from the University of Pennsylvania. He was an Economist at the World Bank in Washington D.C. and published academic articles in top journals, including Economic Development and Cultural Change, published by the University of Chicago. Gora died in 1997, prematurely at a very young age of 44 years.

I met Gora in 1969 when we both were students at Chittagong Government College. We both were in the same section and became friends in no time where we visited each other's home. His father, Shaikh Lokman Hossain, an officer of Pakistan Police Service, had his residence at Sarson Road in Chittagong. The most important aspect of Gora's character was his simplicity. Once we were having lunch in his house on a holiday. Among the dishes, there were shrimps. Gora suddenly asked his father why instead of shrimps they didn't have big lobsters like they had in Khulna. His father jokingly asked him, when was the last time you had it? Gora said, about four or five years ago. His father replied, you need to have a gap of ten years to have lobsters like that again!

Gora used to enjoy good food (however, he was not a big eater), but perhaps he enjoyed sharing good food with his friends even more. That's why even after we moved to Dhaka University, for our mid-morning snacks Syed Nizamuddin (late), Jamil Osman, Zahid Hossain, Abdullah Shibli, me and a few others would search for Gora Bhai to treat us with Shingara or Dalpuri at Sharif Mia's or the nearby Fine Arts College Canteen. Although he was of the same age, and even slightly younger than some of us, we used to call him Gora Bhai. Because of Gora, the generosity of his parents and his welcoming sisters Dora Apa and Rita, his family's government accommodation "Nasheman" at Paribagh became our favorite escapade from the dull food of Mohsin or Surja Sen Hall dining rooms.

In 1984, I went to Boston for higher studies with my wife and two children. Before I could inform Gora about our arrival, he collected my telephone number from our common friend Abdullah Shibli and called me. After enquiring how we were settling down, he gave me some tips about living in Boston. He also lived in the same area while pursuing his postgraduate course-work at Boston University. Before hanging up, he reminded me that my scholarship may not be enough for a family of four. In case I needed money, I should call him without hesitation. Adding further that whenever I would call him, I should call collect (meaning the receiver pays for the call). In the early eighties, even calling within the US was not cheap. Such reassurances are much needed (whether you avail of them or not) when you are in a distant land, separated from your parents and close relatives.

We met again in 1989, at our commencement in Boston: when my wife Dilruba and I received our Ed.M (Masters in Education) and Ph.D degrees, respectively. Gora said, "We all are coming for your commencement" Munni Bhabi and their son Nasif. In our small University housing, I heard my 8 year old daughter Rikhi arguing with Gora, "No, you are not my uncle." I know all my unclesmeaning my brothers and cousins. Gora explained to her that all of her father's close friends are her uncles. Later that afternoon, my daughter asked me, "Is Gora uncle your best friend?" I gave her an evasive reply- because the concept of best friend was alien to me at that time. The next day, we went to visit Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Soon we found that our daughter Rikhi, son Fahmid and their son Nasif were taking turns to riding on Gora's back on the green in front of one of the MIT buildings. While we were having dinner, my daughter Rikhi gave us the reply to her own question that I evaded earlier: Daddy, I found out that Gora uncle is your best friend. Now I realize that it is, indeed, hard to impress an eight year old child!

A few years later, I met Gora at the World Bank in Washington D.C. where he used to work and I used to go for Credit negotiations on behalf of the Government of Bangladesh. His instructions were very clear- carry on with

your meetings but your lunch and weekends are with me. Together, we used to visit all the World Bank and IMF cafeterias in turn. He used to know exactly on which days which cafeteria would be serving Spanish, Japanese, or even Hungarian special cuisine. We would spend weekends together at his Reston, Virginia house. Now it was his Architect wife, Munni Bhabi, who was more than welcoming.

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.

On May 3rd, 1997, Khalamma (Gora's mother) called to inform me that "Baba, amar Gora ar nai." His sister Rita told me that Gora had suffered a stroke while moving his residence from Reston to Herndon He was trying to lift a flower vase or something and collapsed. An ambulance was called, but he'd passed over the course of the ride and the doctors at Reston Hospital pronounced him dead. I called Munni Bhabi at Gora's new residence feeling numb myself. I still tried to console Bhabi, but she was, as expected, unconsolable.

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.

DR. M. FOUZUL KABIR KHAN, A FORMER CIVIL SERVANT, TEACHES AT THE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, NORTH SOUTH UNIVERSITY. EMAIL: FOUZUL@NORTHSOUTH.EDU

Tales of two marathons:

POETRY

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

PROF. ABU TAHER MOJUMDER TEACHES **ENGLISH LITERATURE AND IS A WELL-**KNOWN WRITER.

REFLECTIONS

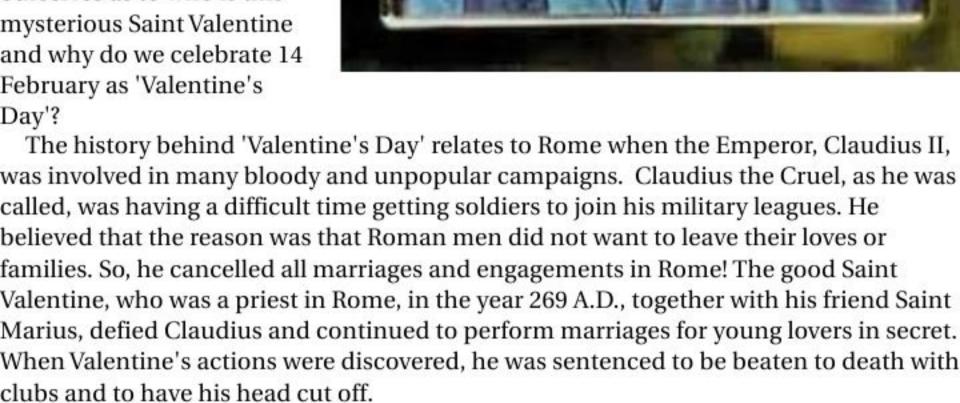
OPINION

Of love and Valentine's Day

Wasequzzaman

"Happy Valentine's Day!" Probably all of us are familiar with this small statement which is exchanged between lovers when 14 February comes every year. By pronouncing the terms 'Valentine's Day' we simply mean a day when lovers share their romantic feelings for each other. Now the question arises: does the word 'Valentine' mean 'Love'? The real mystery is hidden behind the question. Every 14 February flowers, gifts and candies are

exchanged between those who love, all in the name of Saint Valentine. But have we ever put the question to ourselves as to who is this mysterious Saint Valentine and why do we celebrate 14 February as 'Valentine's



This is the true history behind Valentine's Day. But without realizing the inherent purport of the day the young generation indulges in an illusion. This day should not be given over to enjoyment and exchange of gifts if we want to show real respect for Saint Valentine and for the sacrifice which he made. What happened to Saint Valentine is really a matter of regret and it does not have any scope for merriment. So, it is necessary for us to realize the significance of the day and to remove the

misunderstandings which have influenced our thoughts in this particular area. Every society based on good morals wishes to achieve those things which bring prosperity to that society and wants to keep itself aloof from all kinds of deeds that militate against good. When a culture opposed to these principles begins to acquire greater influence in a society, two major steps become necessary to roll it back. The first is public policy and the other is a strong sense of morality.

In many countries around the world a culture of people choosing only Valentine's Day to show sympathy and love for their parents when they grow old has developed. For the rest of the year those aged parents are kept in homes for old people. It must be borne in mind that love is not for a single day. It is universal and sacred in nature. It must exist between parents and children, teachers and students and between husband and wife forever. It is only true love which can guarantee a peaceful society. It must be remembered that strong relations must be maintained with our loved ones

throughout the whole year. If we love people only on 14 February, then what will we do on other days? Will we not love our dearest ones the rest of the year? It becomes our sacred duty to find the true emotional sense of the term 'love' and to

have a meaningful application of it in our life.

WASEQUZZAMAN IS A STUDENT OF EASTERN UNIVERSITY.

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 animalsalone or with someone riding on them

Paris and Peru

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

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 conditionsboth 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 Pichhu. 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 Pichhu, 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 duvetcovered 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 or 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." I 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 lamas 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 Calienties to Ollanta. In the train, I touched a ray of sunlight finding its way to my lap. From inside the train, I gave some soles (Peruvian

bills) to an old local lady with a visible hump, selling flowers from outside when the train had stopped to hold a fashion show to sell Alpaca garments to the passengers inside. I did not take the flowers for which I had no need. Soon others followed suit. When we made eye contact in-between coin collection, the gratitude in her eyes was worth much more than what I gave her.

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 Amour (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 manhonest 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 marathonson 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.)

TAPAN CHAKRABARTY WRITES FROM CALGARY, CANADA