Village Flute

STARTING WITH DESSERT

ANDREW EAGLE

Fire. In the long struggle for advancement, since the dawning of the first fireball sun, it is difficult to overestimate its value. For warmth, protection, cooking and light – fire has proved humankind's ally.

The ability to harness fire is one of those attributes which seperate us from the rest of the animal kingdom. By way of comparison – and a word of warning from Ulipur, Kurigram – cows don't understand fire much.

But I'm telling it wrong. Let's start again. You'll know the bus journey from Dhaka to Kurigram is a long one; you'll understand if I say those city passengers of haste, hassle, scrambling for attention at the bus counter and trying to squeeze through a traffic jam got down somewhere long before the destination. These are not the sort of passengers to reach Kurigram.

As you know, in Kurigram you'll find that old Bengal: life runs slower and there's not only time to stop to chat to friends met on the street but also an expectation. Kurigram is the quiet courtyard of a mossy, high-ceiling government building. It's winter badminton, impromptu, time-passing. In Kurigram traditional Bangladeshi hospitality reigns undisputed king – kindling homemade philosophy about fire and words of warning concerning cows are not the way Kurigram begins. Certainly not on an empty stomach...

In small-town Ulipur, for her part – and there's fame in it – when it comes to stomach filling it's as well to start with dessert. The best dessert, my friend, starts in the area behind the bazaar that's dedicated to laneway and pond. Please bear with me – we'll get there soon.

The area isn't large, but to take the correct turns and find the exact gate of the Kumar residence isn't easy. One would just about need assistance from a search and rescue expert to find it – so it was a good thing I had one with me.

Md Makbul Hossein is my friend Mostafiz's younger brother. He's been working as a fire fighter for the Fire Service and Civil Defence for six years, stationed in Ulipur. We met in that most Bangladeshi way – randomly. I'd forgotten, let's be honest, that Mostafiz was a Kurigramer, and it just so happened he called me at the very moment I sat in an electric JSA auto on the final leg from Kurigram town to Ulipur. "Where are you?" Mostafiz asked.

Of course it had to be that before the remaining kilometres were covered everything was organised – one of the officers was on leave so it wouldn't be a problem to stay at the fire station! The choice of hotels in Ulipur is limited but to stay at a fire station was a first for me.

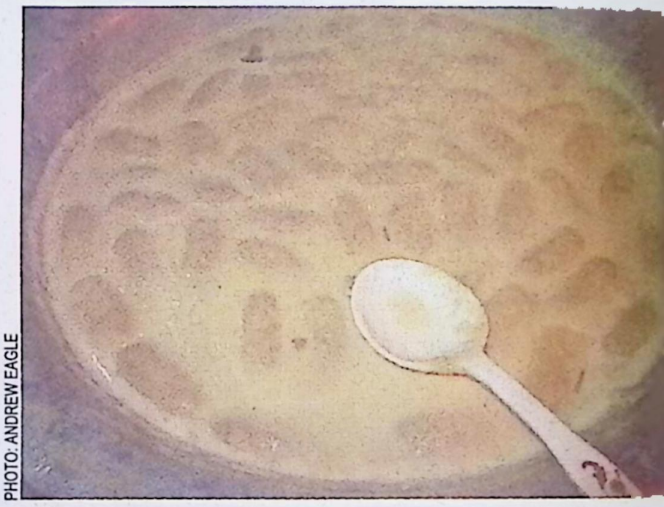


PHOTO: ANDREW EAGLE

Pabna Sweets is the shop name most likely to be recommended in Ulipur, for *kheer mahan*.

Unlike at a hotel, just outside the room was a large rusty bell which tolls for shift changes – there's always someone on duty. It tolls for morning roll call, but I'd let you know visitors don't need to attend. It can toll at any moment, repeatedly, in case of emergency.

There's a fire emergency almost every day and the officers are trained to ready themselves and be on the fire truck within approximately thirty seconds. I bravely suggested I could be at the fire truck first: brave only in words – they would've been returning home again before I got my act together. My claim was never tested – fortunately those days were quiet.

And one afternoon, I confess, on returning to the fire station to find nobody in the yard for adda, I was tempted to ring the bell – a chatting emergency, conversation within thirty seconds! But of course considerate guests don't do such things.

Anyway, with his fire fighting training and rescue knowledge locating the Kumar residence wasn't challenging for Makbul.

Makbul makes his living from fire; so do the Kumars. Inside their yard an enormous pot of milk slowly boiled over a pit flame – into it are added bay leaves and cardamom, and other ingredients which Sunil Kumar, head-of-household and the