

THE SILHOUETTE OF A TEA-CUP

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It all started with the silhouette of a tea-cup.

I moved into this place some days back. Six months, to be precise. Basically it's a shabby men's hostel. A very big old yellow building from the British times. It's hard these days to find a place like this. There were dorms filled with blokes from all sorts. Some did a job, some were students and some of them did nothing. It was a very inconspicuous kind of place. You didn't have to worry about fitting in, you just did. People kept to themselves most of the time. The guy that I am, it suited me perfectly. I just got blended within the place like little bugs did in the half-broken bed that I returned to after the nightfall.

Something about me that stands out – I'm addicted to tea. Some people would say that it's quite normal, but I guess they don't know the extent that I've taken this addiction to. And I won't go to any numbers – just to keep things sane enough.

So the day I came in here, I looked for a tea-stall immediately; *Tong er Dokan* - as they love to put it. There is a gigantic backyard just behind the grotesque structure, where

huge trees crowd the space. In between them, there were some gaps that you could walk through. A high boundary wall marked the end of the complex. And that's where I found something amusing.

There was a group of three or four people standing next to this side of the boundary wall, smoking and having a good time. Suddenly one of them yelled towards the wall, "*Mama, tin ta cha diyo toh edike!*", and suddenly, like magic, there were three cups of steaming hot tea on top of the wall. One of the guys stood up on a boulder, took the cups and got down. I was awestruck, to say the least.

So the next evening after classes, I got up on the boulder, looked over the wall and found a small tea-stall there! "Whoa! That's clever!" – I thought. So I gave a mellow smile to the *Mama* over there, and politely asked for a cup of tea. He told me to wait for a while. I got down the boulder and looked at the opening in the protective wire-mesh on top of the wall. There was a very bright tungsten light source in the backdrop. It was just the start of a very quiet evening and most of the blokes hadn't returned from work yet. I was musing idly just when

a loud voice broke the silence, "*Mama, cha nen!*" So I looked up and saw something quite amazing.

With harsh white light in the backdrop, there was a cup of hot tea sitting just on top of the wall. It was steaming, and against the bright illumination of tungsten, it stood like a curved young ballerina. The silhouette was prominent and clear, I forgot for a moment that it was a cup of tea. Damn, I was jerked out of all the erratic thoughts, got up and took the cup of tea.

The next morning I went for a little investigation. I wanted to see where the *Tong* really was. So I got out of the hostel compound, turned round the corner and found the little stall on the intersection of an "L-shaped" Road. The *Tong* was just sitting there, unnoticed and left-alone, which I liked very much. Beside the stall, there were two wooden logs and a bench to accommodate the customers. I sat on one of the logs, smiled at the *Mama* again, and asked for a cup of tea.

As I was swallowing down the steaming fluid, I looked around the street. It was very early in the morning and only a few people had got up. There were almost no vehicles in the street; some-

times a night-coach bus or heavy trucks maybe. And there were always some rickshaws. There are everywhere in this city, like little ants on a very ancient wall.

I liked the whole atmosphere, to say the truth. It kind of got embedded in my psyche – the whole experience. So I got used to it in a very short span of time. Several cups of tea on this side of the wall at morning, and several cups of tea on the other side of the wall at evening.

This shabby, torn-up wall, this little tea-stall and the silhouette of a tea-cup at the late of the night were all silent witnesses to whatever things were happening to me, whatever my life was all about, every little agony and every little happiness of mine. It's like these places and experiences started growing up to be an invisible extension of my being, it's like I was planting a small fragment of my existence on these very places.

These were the places that watched me struggle to achieve something intangible, these were the places that pacified me with all the warmth they had after days and days of little or no accomplishment. These wooden logs seated me through some of the most pathetic of times, these torn-apart sidewalks survived the harshness of my feet just after I had crushed a leaf with all the might and spite I had.

But also, this little *Tong* was the first one to know about all the little triumphs of a battling spirit. These little sips of hot steaming drink were the witnesses of every tiny bit of my happiness.

The grim crystal silhouette of a tea-cup overlooked the growing up of a soul, bit by bit.

It was one of the last mornings of early spring that I left the hostel. I was sitting on the wooden log and wondering what made sense and what didn't anymore. The last leaves of the banyan tree above were craving to break free from their long-time shackled dependence, ready to die. A breeze came from the north and stirred their agonies. I sat back holding a cup of steaming tea and looked up to see thousands of yellow-skinned tiny lives swirling madly and coming down on me happily embracing the last few moments of their existence.



Afterword

Our highlight this week is doubtless the 6 Word Stories that have been compiled in collaboration with North South

University English Club. Great thanks go to Kazi Akib Bin Asad, my colleague and also President at NSU EngC, for getting me the stories from the club; and to Tahmid, a SHOUT writer whom I hope you follow, and

someone who apparently hangs around EngC for lack of a better idea – he was the one who got the #6WordStory ball rolling, to his subsequent regret. Write your own stories with the hashtag #6WordStory and tag us so we can have a look and show Tahmid it was all worth it.

And on this very page we have a story by our resident traveler and mountain-botherer Ishtiaq. He's a voracious reader and an occa-

sional writer of stories. I myself think he should write more often, he's clearly onto something – and it's not just the peak of Keokradong. If you too think Ishtiaq should leave the hills alone and write more often send us a mail to that effect and we'll tell Ishtiaq all about it.

See you next week.

– Zoheb Mashiur, Sub-editor, SHOUT