

SUNDOWN

Jafar Talukder

(Translated from the Bengali: Ahmede Hussain)

As had been happening to him a lot lately, especially during a long wait, he dozed off. It occurred to him that he could not keep his eyes open even while talking to people; this had become a habit, like the sudden, menacing hunger that frequently stung him somewhere in his stomach, which would churn till he shoved something down his throat. My body, he thought, has become a ganging, all-bone truck stuck in the middle of a mud road.

Though he felt his heart get stuck somewhere in his throat when he sent his business card inside the saheb's chamber, in the air-conditioned comfort of the waiting room he felt a little dreamy. It had taken a great deal of effort to get a referral from Mr Afzal, whose nincompoop son he was tutoring for a despicable fee. Besides this, he had a job, a strange job, for which he had to run to the office every morning clean-shaven, clothes creased, shoes shining. On days he was late for meetings he would scamper to the last row, head down, waiting for the manager's rebuke. Maruf Khalil, the manager, had quickly gone up the ladder through discipline and hard work. He would look at him through the corners of his narrowed eyes and say, "So, what made you late today?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I said why are you late again."

"Got up late, sir."

"What do you do at night?

Burgle? How long have you been working here?"

"For two months, sir."

"And how many assignments have you completed?"

"None, sir."

"In two months you could not get a single client, and Kabir saheb has been working here for only a month and he has finished three assignments. Listen, I'm giving you one more week, okay? If things do not get better, you will have to quit. Have I made myself clear?"

He had once so desperately looked forward to this, to having a proper job. Things that he had done when he finally got one were no less than astonishing - plodding over footpaths of the city to get a decent set of clothes, and, he remembered, how the money he spent on them cost him days' worth of meals.

Maruf saheb himself was quite a dandy, all crisp and starched.

The slightly accented Bangla that he had, he made up with his clothes, the shine in his shoes and the cut of his shirt. He

remembered Maruf saheb

advising him, "Those who are beginning a career in insurance must remember that you need to be smart. This is a cutthroat world where you produce or perish. Do or die. If it is too much for you, you should not think of a future in insurance."

The do-or-die thing he understood well, only if that meant getting a client. That Kabir had created quite a stir in the office, getting one client after another, as though he had secretly found Aladdin's lamp. He, on the other hand, went door to door, begging...

"Sir, dear sir, imagine once, imagine only once things that will happen to your family when you die. How will your young wife feed herself and the kids? Whom will she turn to for help? Make a policy, sir, when the time is yet ripe." No-one had listened to him, the people whom he went to sell a policy. Their attitude surprised him; as if through their refusal they were surrendering themselves to their fate, as though they were subtly telling him who the hell was he to take their responsibility. God would take care of everything when they left the world. Let it be, he would tell himself, may you live happily a

hundred years, and here I am getting screwed. This saheb, whose office he was in now, was his last resort. The man was rich; he would be able to fill an island with all his wealth.

And it took him a while to gather himself when the call came from the saheb's room. A soft sheet of icy-cold air enveloped him as he looked at the flabby bald man inside, who, sunk deep in his chair, was intently scrutinizing sheaves of paper on his table. Without looking up he said, "What do you want?"

"Mr. Afzal of Shetu Limited has sent me..." "All right. But what do you want?"

"Sir, the thing is, you are a business tycoon. I do not have the boldness to take the liberty and give suggestions to you on matters of money." (Here his heart sank.) "But, the thing is, money-matters are entwined with the question of future security. For this reason, sir, we need to be careful about it. No-one can rule out the possibility of a sudden death. Our company has a fantastic policy; I can elaborate on it to you if you allow me, sir."

"Oh, you are talking about life insurance! I do not need this; I am doing something important now. You can leave."

waiting for your sons and daughters to come from abroad to see your dead, blackened face. You will understand everything then. Making him wait an hour and a half and then... Tut-tut.

He thought of sitting somewhere to read the letter his father had written to him after hearing about his job. The two-page thing very subtly but unmistakeably hinted at the need for money to buy medicines for his mother, for Minu's marriage, which had been delayed for so long - now that he had a job, they could start looking for a husband for his sister all over again. He only skimmed through the rest of the letter. An unknown anger clutched at his heart: Why do they expect so much from me? What do they think I am? An incarnation of *Kamdhenu*? Do they think I am that mythical cow *Kamdhenu*, who, like magic, will flood the world with an ocean of milk? Father, don't you know your son is useless? This is not a job that I have. I am holding a glassful of hemlock, let your son drink from it, he wants to die peacefully.

He toyed with the idea of peeing at the foot of the bridge, but gave up the idea after seeing lovers sitting in twos, who, it seemed, would leave the place only after dusk. On the other side of the road, another set of people sat with packets of peanuts in their hands; some were sitting on a makeshift scaffold, fishing. In another corner, under the comforting shadow of a tree, young boys were playing soccer. No place was left for him to open his pants zipper and pee. He felt like a pot-bellied frog, he would burst on this open street.

Hunger gnawed at him again, and along with it came an overpowering urge to empty his bowel. The sight of a mall gave him relief. It was newly built; its facade was masked with expensive, imported glass. Inside, there were rows of stylish shops. At each door a keeper was standing, eager to usher him in. He, however, did not notice anything; he scampered to and fro from one corner to the other, and, while going up the stairs, he almost knocked a Barbie-like manikin down. It smiled mechanically and waved at him, as though it, too, had been praying for a safe defecation. He then entered a barbershop, but seeing a woman-barber and the strange looks of her clients, he left it in a hurry and came across a shop that dealt in computer accessories. The man at the counter took him for a client and said, "We have a 25% discount on every product, sir."

"Excuse me, is there any toilet nearby?"

The man turned gloomy as he answered, "It is on the fourth floor, on your right."

He thought he had been given back his life. He jumped the staircase, and once on the fourth floor, it did not take him long to find it. Like Archimedes, he cried out, "I got it, I got it...Eureka! Eureka!"

At the end of this long wait a tear of relief came down his eyes. But the secret chamber was nailed from inside, it was too difficult for him to open up. The more he tried the harder it became. Everything created a perfect setting for blood and gore; like droplets of blood, the tears were now running down his cheeks. He did not have the will or the energy left to move, as though, the city, like the toilet-bowl, was stuck to his bottom, from which came down a clump of twining tendrils which would rope him to this world of brick and concrete. He could not free himself; he would have to remain stuck to the toilet till the last drop of blood left his body. By evening, the city would be stained with blood.

Franz Kafka is an icon of 20th century literature. The Metamorphosis, a novella written in 1912, is considered as his seminal work of fiction. There is an 'outsider' in his origin. Born to German speaking parents in Prague on July 3, 1883, his family was Jewish. The conditions of his family determined his outlook, ideals and thoughts. In sharp contrast to Hermann Kafka his father a heavily built and overbearing shopkeeper Franz was sparingly built with mild disposition and an intellectual bent of mind. In a way he was a rebel in comparison to his father. As he grew up the thoughts developed accordingly. He saw a coercer in institutions that exercise authority.

To begin with he looked on existence or life since its fate is to perish as absurdity. He found the ways of life beeholden to many misfortunes as caprices of tyrannical designs. The veneer of modernity was to his mind something that cloaked alienation and drift. Authority held the right to tyrannize and manifested in cruelty - Kafka was a perennial rebel against it.

The Metamorphosis was Kafka's testament of indictment of modern life. Gregor Samsa a travelling salesman is the protagonist of Kafka's nihilistic thoughts on unjust realities of life and the tyranny of misfortune. One cold morning Samsa got up to find himself metamorphosed into a mind boggling verminous creature of weirdest possible proportion; many limbs a bulbous midsection! His family of father, mother and a sister were befooled by Gregor's transformation into a repulsive creature. They knew not how would they handle him, how would they face the constricting situation and how would he end! Perhaps even Kafka did not know how to bring the metamorphosis to an end! Indeed he described the ending 'unreadable'.

In spite of the weird central thought of Metamorphosis Kafka's narration of Gregor and his family members is lucid and comprehensible. This is engrossing since Kafka finds the ways of the world incomprehensible. The height of surreal imagination is Gregor's metamorphosis. The readers who find rapport with Kafkaesque thought a logical understanding of Samsa's verminous shape follows. It can be a total alienation of Gregor from the rigours of living or withdrawal into a shell-shocked existence.

It is obvious that the badly strapped Samsa family depended on Gregor for subsistence. The senior had a job five years ago and had developed into a fat tired old man of indolent habit. Gregor's mother suffers from asthma incapable of going out for a regular job. Their daughter Grete a 17 year old pretty lady is fashionable as any other of her age. And she plays the violin. A typical middle class family in hard times; A room has been let out to three gentlemen. There are two other part time helping hands - a cleaning and a charwoman. It was a closely knit inconspicuous family where the junior Samsa scampered for his salesman's job early in the morning. The senior Samsa is settled in his daily habit of reading the morning and the evening newspaper. Mrs. Samsa Gregor's mother continued in her sedentary habit of sewing. Grete the daughter looked after the apartment helping her folks with breakfast and dinner.

Then one cold morning when Gregor got up to go to office he found that he was unable to move his body and that his

Kafkaesque Thought

Syed Maqsud Jamil

midsection has turned into a hideous shape and that he has so many limbs. The unbelievable has happened; Gregor has been transformed into a repulsive insect! Grete first found him in his metamorphosed shape. She tried to help him but her efforts failed. Gregor finding the hopelessness of his condition dragged himself under the couch. He was hungry and got up on the dinner table but with his unwieldy body he could not help himself, so he dipped his head into the milk bowl! He was dragging himself all around his room climbing up and sliding down walls. Apparently it was an incongruous turn of event but Kafka's message is perhaps the predicament of life's realities. The family was caught in the circumstances of hiding Gregor's ugly condition!

The chief clerk of the office was in the apartment, it was difficult to fend him off. Besides he was fond of beautiful girls. The tragedy of the Samsa family was gripping.



Grete was trying her best to help her brother and to prevent even her parents from seeing her assuring them that he had his dinner. But Gregor was hiding under the couch pulling the sheet down. Grete was trying to clear the room of all furniture. Mother's love for her child is the foremost of all human emotions. Mrs. Samsa was dissuaded by Mr. Samsa and Grete from visiting Gregor. Even Kafka's nihilistic thought becomes deeply touching when Gregor's mother cries out: "Let me go and see Gregor, he is my unfortunate son! The tragedy is so benumbing in its effect when Grete tells her mother, "You can come in, he can't be seen." Metaphorically, misfortune is a pitiless tormentor. The charwoman finds Gregor out taunts him calling him "you old dung-beetle." The tenants leave in contempt finding Gregor.

Life in fact is an everyday trial for who could read destiny. The elder Mr. Samsa, Gregor's father was descending into poor health grieving over his son's horrible condition. He had to be helped by the two women. He exclaims in despair: "What is life! This is what peace I get in old age! "Indeed life is incomprehensible; with every blow of fate transformation (Metamorphosis) becomes facts of weirdest kind!"



Max Ernst, *Ubu Imperator*, (1923), Musee National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.

"Sir, the policy.., sir," he cried out. The baldhead did not reply.

It was late afternoon when he went out. The heat was soft, but the air was a little humid. It had rained in the morning; now a slice of cloud hovered in the western sky, telling him that it might rain again in the evening.

Roads in this part of the city were always a little empty. The guards who stood at the entrances to different houses wore faces of indifference. In a few minutes an irresistible urge to empty his bladder nudged at him. It came to him that he could have done this in the office of the baldhead, but at that time he had felt downcast at not being able to sell the policy. He had been a strange person indeed, that baldhead! That baldhead did not even let him talk! You smartass! You will understand the importance of insurance one day, perhaps when you grow balder, and two or three blocks have been found in your

arteries...then going back and forth from hospital to hospital in Bangkok and Singapore, you will lament not having an insurance policy. One day, like a dried fish, you will lie flat in one of those mortuaries

telling him that it might rain again in the evening. Roads in this part of the city were always a little empty. The guards who stood at the entrances to different houses wore faces of indifference.

In a few minutes an irresistible urge to empty his bladder nudged at him. It came to him that he could have done this in the office of the baldhead, but at that time he had felt downcast at not being able to sell the policy. He had been a strange person indeed, that baldhead! That baldhead did not even let him talk! You smartass! You will understand the importance of insurance one day, perhaps when you grow balder, and two or three blocks have been found in your

arteries...then going back and forth from hospital to hospital in Bangkok and Singapore, you will lament not having an insurance policy. One day, like a dried fish, you will lie flat in one of those mortuaries

FROM
TWO ECONOMIES
TO TWO NATIONS
MY JOURNEY TO
BANGLADESH
by
REHMAN SOBHA



আবুল মনসুর আহমদের

শ্রেষ্ঠ গল্প

সম্পাদনায়

ড. নুরুল আমিন



Our books are available at: