



LADDER ON FIRE

Sharyar Shaams

Every Bohemian fairytale I have read starts off with a man who has too many kids and too little money; money which he impulse buys a rope with to kill himself, only to be interrupted by the devil or a fairy. I tell Emma this as we walk along the narrow streets, intermittently warding off the hawkers and their colorful candy. Candy reminds Emma of her kid and she has stopped acknowledging their existence by now. I tell her she's crazy. It's because I like her that I tell her these things.

She asks me, "Why are you reading Bohemian fairy tales all of a sudden?" I want to tell her I had discovered my aunt's ancient "Fairytales From All Over the World", which I had spent the last

four days reading, ditching my blog, my editing work and all the other things I usually do, but instead I shrug. "Are you OK?" She asks. I smile, say, "I am," and lead the way to Jamal's Café, where we meet every Monday evening, watching the ladders burn and the buildings turn to pink owing to the brightness of the ritual. We can smell a certain salty air of the sea, and sometimes, we hear the cries of a child. Emma closes her eyes when that happens.

When Emma's kid was told to climb a ladder on fire, the brave kid did it with zero objection. Emma was crying, protesting the futility of the ritual, of everything for that matter. With

mascara smudged eyes, she begged Father to let her kid go, that it was "stupid" to have a kid go up and down a levitating, burning ladder to please God. "And what God?" She questioned Father, with an effrontery only a mother whose kid's performing a suicide ritual can possess.

Five hundred years ago, when pictures of my forefathers hanging out in dance clubs would not have seemed otherworldly, when we still WhatsAppped each other about our late night insecurities, when we weren't living by the sea, and the sun wasn't always settling down, Dhaka was a pretty different place. It wasn't even anywhere near the sea then. You could

count all the roses the under-aged girls sold on the streets while stuck in traffic for hours. Now if we sight a car, it's considered a lucky day and we pray to God because we know it is by His grace that we encountered this vehicle, that it was He who wanted the rest of our day to be permeated with laughter, with a temporal "joy" so rare now, as if there was a time it wasn't.

The ritual Emma's kid participated in started sometime then. God made a ladder levitate. He made it burn with fire downloaded from hell. "The fire, it is known, had been washed in Heaven's lake 70 times and still it was pitch black!" Father had said. The day Emma's kid died, the fire was peachy orange.

God and his people formatted us. Well, almost. Some of our forefathers remained, as residue, bearing all our embarrassments and stupidity and eccentricity on their foreheads. Emma once said, "You know, I'm not saying I don't 'believe', it's just that maybe this thing, this magical ladder materializing and burning up only, only when a child is trying to climb it, maybe it's something to do with science." But we are poor people living on welfare; we are in no position to argue with Father. When God has too much children and too little resources, He does not commit the beautiful act of suicide. Father explains this to us, He has His children do it.

Everyday Arthur Rimbaud

SM Shahrukh

"Do you believe in love? That love exists? Between a man and a woman?"

I was typing away on my keyboard at the next cubicle to hers when I saw her neck craning over the dividing low wall and her bespectacled face looking at me. It was a bolt from the blue. I didn't think she wanted an answer from me, just wanted to say the rest of her piece. So I stopped typing and looked at her.

A woman in her early forties, she had quite handsome features, and slim and shapely too. Many in the office thought her pedagogic with her hipster glasses but I thought they suited her. And she had impressive bosoms too. A slim woman with generous sized knockers always attracts me but I usually kept that attraction in check.

"Ever heard of Arthur Rimbaud? The French poet who died in his thirties?"

"Yes", I replied, wondering why I am at the receiving end of a lecture that was coming my way for sure.

"He said that life is a farce we are all forced to endure. And you know what else he said. That, love...no such thing. Whatever it is that binds families and married couples together, that's not love. That's

stupidity or selfishness or fear. Love doesn't exist. Self-interest exists, attachment based on personal gain exists, complacency exists. But not love. Love has to be reinvented, that's certain."

"Didn't know that. That Rimbaud said such things. Being a poet and all", I replied timidly almost.

"He was right you know. People only love one thing. You know what? Money. Money is the only object of our affection. We love money, we crave money, we think of money when we kiss, we think of money walking down the street, we think of money when we see a bum slumped on the pavement, we think of money when we see a sports car, we think of money when we see a man in an expensive suit, we think of money when we see pictures of an exotic place, we think of money all our lives. Will a person love and live with an ordinary looking woman if he had the money to buy the affection of, say, Marilyn Monroe or Scarlett Johansson? No way. Money allows us to fulfill our self-interests and we actually only love ourselves and for that we need money."

"That's rather cynical. No? That can't always be true. There is

something called true love. I love my wife. And love her the way she is."

"Ha! Don't hoodwink yourself. Doesn't her father own that huge shop on what's that street?"

"You are talking a load of crock. I don't love her father's money, I love her.", I was feeling rather miffed.

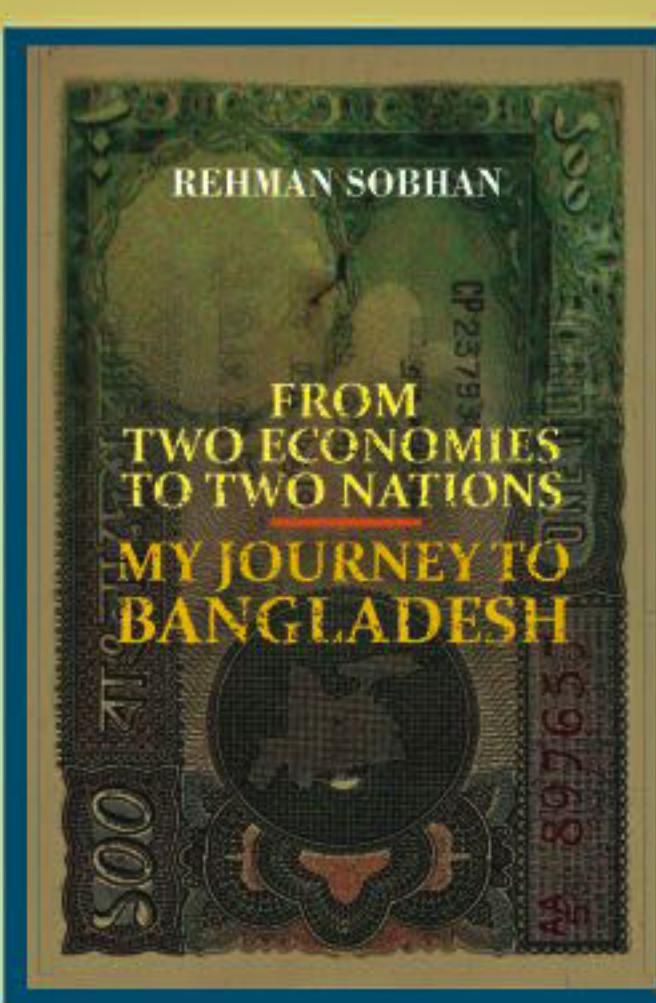
"That's what you would like to believe. But deep inside you think that if you lose this job or if a heart attack renders you unable to work, you would still be on easy street because she has money."

"Your husband is an alcoholic. He drinks away every penny he earns. Actually without your salary your family of four would be really hard up. So, why do you live with him? Why not leave and look for a wealthy bachelor? If you equate love with money? You obviously don't love your husband."

"I love him to death", she declared and walked away to have some coffee from the office cafeteria. I no longer had a clue what I had been typing and what about and thought of the only line I remembered from Rimbaud, "I believe I am in Hell, therefore I am". A thousand dreams within me softly burned. Oops! That was Rimbaud too.



Reginald Gray's portrait (2011) of Arthur Rimbaud.



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