

HOURI

SHAHED ZAHIDI

Translated from the Bengali:
AHMEDE HUSSAIN

"You are an ass and the rest of your life you will remain one," Rocky Mirza said, condescendingly blowing a ring of smoke at him, "We live only once, mate, my philosophy is live like there is no tomorrow, have fun. Think of our old chum Hafiz; our sad and dejected friend kicked the bucket within two years after his intended dumped him. And here I am drinking bucketsful of pleasure. If it's Samina today, tomorrow it will be Bilkis or Rosina, or Tamanna..."

"Stop it, mate. You're a man of many talents, I agree," Shafiq interrupted.

"Not really, I just want to have some fun. The world centres on pleasure. But what is the point of telling you these things? You and Hafiz are birds of a feather. What has your celibacy given you? You still have time, mate, get married, don't make the mistake Hafiz has made."

Strange thoughts jostled Shafiq's mind: Rocky was right. What hopes Hafiz had of building a life of purity, honesty and sincerity! What dreams his dead friend had had! Into his second year at the varsity, he fell in love with Nipa, a classmate, but as soon as they graduated, she left the country for London to get married to a Bangladeshi chartered accountant. Hafiz remained punch-drunk for a year or two; then he joined a college in Dhaka. A year later he suffered a stroke and bid farewell to the world.

"He was such a nice soul," Shafiq said. "That's why I am warning you; you have all

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the symptoms of this nice-soul disease. Get rid of them," he said and poured some whiskey into Shafiq's glass. Shafiq only drank occasionally: boozing, on the other hand, was like breathing and sleeping for Rocky. He recalled stories that he had heard from his friends about Rocky, how he started this business, and within years how he had earned millions. He was a billionaire now with two wives, who lived in two different houses in two different parts of the city. And this bungalow in Gazipur was for him to have pleasure, to have some fun as he put it. Shafiq had not been in touch with him; they had parted their ways as the gulf between their wealth grew wider. Today their paths had suddenly crossed in Motijheel, and as Rocky would not let go of him, he had to get into his car; then quite suddenly Rocky told the driver to go to Gazipur. Shafiq protested, but his friend paid no heed to it. Deep down in his mind Shafiq wanted to have a look at this bungalow of his friend; he had heard stories

from the others, stories in which girls as beautiful as houris melted at the touch of his rich friend.

"Hello... Why are you still holding that burned-out cigarette?" Rocky shook Shafiq by the shoulder. Startled, he stubbed out the butt and said, "Excuse me?"

"Listen then. Chuck these nice-soul things out of your system; you will make a real, honest-to-good mess of your life otherwise. It has been seven years since you graduated and what have you achieved since then, tell me?"

Stray thoughts, thoughts of failure, clogged his mind again: Rocky was right, what had he got from life? Weeks ago he had been made an officer in the bank he worked in, the probationary period being just over, and still he, his retired civil-servant father, his mother and two sisters, lived in a rented house. He needed to marry his sisters off; he would not be able to get married before that, he knew, that was the custom. His younger sister was a paragon of beauty; the family was getting

proposals for her hand in marriage. Of late, she had been taken up by modelling; from her behaviour to choice of clothes, Tumpa was different from her brother and sister. Her choice of profession had caused quite a furore in the family. This morning she asked for five thousand takas from Ma, and being turned down by her, she came to his room, "Brother, can you lend me five thousand bucks?" The word 'lend' reminded him of failure, his own life's failure and along with it came a train of other words: sorrow, shame...

He had been thinking a lot of her, especially after people in their locality started whispering about her: that she was keeping bad company—some of it was idle gossip—he would be happy if it were mere gossip—had traveled to his ears. She finished her honours in social welfare and without consulting anyone, all of a sudden, became a ramp model. How much she earned to be able to afford to buy such glitzy, upmarket clothes, and expensive cosmetics he never understood.

"Why have you become silent, mate? The whiskey is of a good brand—Teachers. Will you call its taste bad? But even though Hafiz was a teacher he left the world. Only *shaitans* like me survive in this world, there is no room for goodness in it," he said and started laughing hysterically.

"Why should you be a *shaitan*? The really bad people are those who, like me, have failed to earn money."

"Let's not talk about money. You could have at least got married. If you can't get married why can't you go to a whore, mate? Your conscience does not allow you to do that, right?"

Shafiq half-smiled in reply. He said, "When is your houri coming? You said that a surprise was awaiting me."

"She will come on time, mate, don't worry," he said, "There is one thing I must tell you, I have never shared my houris with anyone, but today I am going to make an exception. You can have her, mate!"

"Really? Is it because you have boozed too much?"

Rocky shouted in reply, "Rocky does what he says he is going to do."

Rocky's phone, as though in rackets competition with its owner, suddenly started to shriek.

"Is everything okay, Hassan?"

"Yes, boss. I have picked her up from Kalabagan."

"Where are you now?"

"Getting nearer, boss."

From the conversation it became evident that a girl was really coming, Shafiq thought. The rumour had it that Rocky had never had a girl for more than once.

"All right, mate! I want to go to heaven with you," Shafiq said.

"That's like my friend," Rocky sprang up from the sofa and hugged his friend whom he had met after such a long time. The doorbell, meanwhile, was frantically ringing. "Go, mate! You are going to receive today's houri, he said. With a shivering hand Shafiq opened the door.

"Brother! What are you doing here?" Tumpa, after spending a few hours in the beauty parlour, was looking like a houri, a real one. The screechy glass that fell from Shafiq's hand answered his sister's question.

FREEDOM?

SM SHAHRUKH

The gates opened with a screech and I was out of the clinic, it's been over a month, the bright sun hit my eyes, I cringed. It was a month of hum of fluorescent light from rod like fixtures, and a detox mansion with hundreds of men, young and very young, who had derailed from the prescribed path of life, also humming. Heroin, phensidyl 'cough linctus', pethidine injection, mandrax, uppers, downers, snake venom, horse tranquilizers (I didn't know if they caused 'horse laitudes'), industrial glues –

the drugs of choice of the times, alcoholism was deemed with a scoff of laughter, everyone was planning on drinking once out of the 'cage'. The doctors gave meds to soothe the shakes: the mind warpers preached the word of God. I floated in my misery of life, in thought, in an environment of forced alienation. Life is a 'four letter word'; the kids didn't know, the older kids were too messed up to realise. Brains boiled by hard drugs, most were unable realise the relief of booze,

of course, till you cross the line. I clenched my teeth and swallowed all the rosy bullshit scenarios of life and made it out of the gates.

The sounds of traffic, the vendor selling peanuts from a wicker basket, the chatter of men with betel leaf chewing read lips at tea and cigarette joints, the cring cring of the rickshaws, the monster horn from a monster car with a diminutive driver venting anger, the siren from an ambulance, the thudding of piling work in progress – I wondered how

easily one forgets the sounds of everyday life. Alcoholism or not, I felt happy to be out. Reminded me of Warren Zevon, he was still alive in 2000.

What is the big deal about sobriety? You are wide awake all the time, receptive to all emotions, whether you like them or not. The pain is more intense, failures are amplified, frustrations gnaw the flesh, unfulfilled desires eat the heart away.

What does one see in the clear light of

sobriety? The ugliness in people? Hordes living and walking the streets like zombies, the death of conscience, and the hydra-headed greed of some? Oppression, nepotism, stark poverty? Over half the food of the world thrown away?

I am better of blinded by the fire-water flowing in the veins; love does not reign over us, it brings misery and does not soothe. Maybe someday it will and heaven will descend on earth.

TWO POEMS BY BIMAL GUHA

Translated from the Bengali:
KABIR CHOWDHURY

HISTORY

Time is running out fast.
In the distant bamboo-grove
An evening-owl hoots.
A patch of dark clouds
cautiously advances.
It seems that they are all ready
to swallow this earth
any moment now.
I look at my fingers and
see black splotches there.
One-third of our earth is filled with
water. Will all that water
be enough to wipe out
our disgrace?
The Himalayan mountains
break out in laughter,
the sunlight appears dull and pale.

Time is running out fast.
Standing alone on the street
I watch a flock of wild ducks
flying away in the distance,
I watch them as long as I can.
Will they take the same route
when they return? Will they give us
the warmth of their white feathers
as they flutter their wings
behind those gathering clouds?

How many ages have gone by
as I stood at the corner
of the main street.



Love and Pain (1895) by Edvard Munch.

A number of poets also
used to gather there.
Some had walked away
without a single backward glance,
some had taken a different path,
some looked for a different route.
Those of you who are new,
lift your eyes and
look at them who are
sitting in a circle.

Remember them, they are
our poets. They are the persons
who write the history
of the Bangalees
on the bosom of the sky.

FLIES

On waking up from my sleep
I saw some large fat flies
lying on my reading table.

The buzzing sound of memories
Continuously moved away
further and further.
I saw on my table
my penholder, the case
of my glasses, unused
sheets of paper and my pen.
All on a sudden
a shaft of sunlight
landed on my old reading desk
while large fat flies
went on flying making
a buzzing sound that badly hurt
my ears.

And greedy flies of memory
sought the remembrance
of an ancient memory
in the pages of my diary.

On waking up from my sleep
I saw some large fat flies
lying on my reading table.
The morning sun was busy
picking out the dust of weariness
from their inert wings.

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