

## HUMAN SHIELD

REZAUR RAHMAN

Translated from the Bengali: MUNJULIKA RAHMAN

(Continued from the last issue)

IV  
Rashna set out to meet Abedin on the Saturday after the incident at the procession, and on the way to the hospital in a rickshaw, she debated whether she was doing the right thing. It wasn't her responsibility to keep in touch with Abedin, but they had shared a perilous experience together, which seemed to make them more than strangers. They were both supposed to have been cut into pieces by Taleb and his men, but had miraculously survived. It still seemed unreal to Rashna because this sort of thing only happens in Bollywood movies.

Rashna had to get off the rickshaw at the intersection of Ghaznavi road and Mirpur road, and walked on the footpath towards the hospital, amongst the clamor of people and bustling traffic, which overflowed into the sidewalk. Rashna noticed that the sun was already setting and from between the numerous high-rise buildings that loomed on each side of the road, rays of the setting sun were dancing on the ground, beams of light and shadow shifting on top of people and vehicles. Rashna took a left turn to a smaller side road, and observed that on every block there seemed to be a signboard advertising a medical institute of some sort, from heart issues to mental health. She kept on walking, and at the next intersection came across Shishu Park, then the Children's Hospital, and finally Pongu Hospital, the National Rehabilitation Center.

When Rashna reached the floor where Abedin's room was located, a policeman accosted her, "Where are you going?"  
"Bed no. 17, Abedin"  
"What for?"  
"To see him"  
"How are you related to him?"  
"Class friend."  
"What type of friend?"  
"Look, this is visiting hour."  
"It might be visiting hour, but Abedin is a criminal."

"Criminal? What non-sense! What is his crime? He's our class-mate."  
The policeman retorted, "Just because you study together doesn't mean you know everything about him. He's a top terrorist, involved in a murder case. He's an inmate at our branch."

Rashna stared at the policeman, who leisurely sat down on a chair, took out a rolled-up betel leaf from his pocket, and put it in his mouth. "Keep it short," he said, as he gestured towards Abedin's room.

Confused and disturbed, Rashna went into Abedin's ward, and found him sitting on the hospital bed, sobbing. A young man sitting on a chair beside his bed stood up and offered Rashna his chair. Abedin hid his face in his hands and continued crying. Rashna stood near the door for a while longer and slowly walked to the chair and sat down. When his sobs subsided Abedin said, "I asked Mushfiqur to tell you to come here because I felt I had to acknowledge my debt to you...it would be a sin to die or commit suicide before I did that."

Rashna tried to be sympathetic towards him. "Abedin, try to be strong. Bad times like these are a part of life..."

"Perhaps it would've been better if you didn't save me that day," Abedin said as he wiped his eyes. "Now I am a convict, murderer, criminal. My uncle, he's a college teacher and my guardian, he said he would rather see me dead than in this situation."

Abedin began to sob again and Rashna didn't know what to say. She felt pity towards him and felt uncomfortable at her helplessness in the face of his profound sorrow.

"I guess I should be grateful that I am still alive, that I am under police protection. Otherwise Taleb would've walked in and slaughtered me in broad daylight...but then, Taleb can still do that at any point."

Rashna suddenly remembered her encounter with Taleb, but decided against telling Abedin about their conversation. She sat there in silence for a little while, till the police officer came and declared, "It's time for visitors to leave."  
Rashna looked at Abedin, whose eyes began to tear up again. "I have to go, Abedin."

V  
When Rashna reached home from the hospital, she headed straight for bed. Her mother noticed the disquietude in her face, and followed her to her room.

"What's wrong, Rashna?" she asked.  
"Where did you go?"

Rashna lay there staring at the ceiling.  
"Are you feeling sick?" her mother asked.  
Rashna debated whether to tell her mother about the recent happenings in her life. Her mother would surely be distressed and concerned about Rashna's safety. But who else could Rashna turn to? After her father left them when she young, Rashna and her mother had struggled by themselves to make ends meet without the support of many well-wishers. The two of them only had each other, and it would be unfair to not let her mother know. Rashna sat up, asked her mother to sit beside her, and gradually narrated the events. Upon hearing it, Rashna's mother seemed to be going through a sequence of emotions. At first she was stunned that Rashna would throw herself under a machete to save a stranger, then she was downright angry. "What in the world were you thinking!" she exclaimed. "Police, court cases, party politics...you can't be involved in that! On top of that, you are a girl!"

Rashna felt guilty that she had unnecessarily made herself a target, creating more worries for her mother. She should've been more responsible towards their predicament in life, she shouldn't have been so impulsive...but wasn't her efforts to try to stop Abedin from being killed an evidence of the responsibility she felt towards another human being?

Rashna sat still for a few minutes, conflicting thoughts crowding her mind. Her mother also sat still staring off into the distance. Rashna felt the need to be alone with her thoughts, so she asked her mother whether she would like a cup of tea. "I'll go make some," she said.

When Rashna came back with two cups of tea, her mother was sitting in the same position, with a shadow of anxiety on her face. She took the cup from Rashna and sipped the tea absent-mindedly.

"Ma, I think I can save my class-mate Abedin. He is a merit scholar, grew up in the village...if I can do something to save his life..."

Rashna's mother turned and looked at her. Could it be that Rashna and Abedin were in a relationship?

"How will you save him? I don't understand."

"So the terrorist who wants to kill Abedin, he said he considers me to be his sister. He said I could call him if I needed help. See, he saved his mobile number on my phone."

"These terrorists, thugs don't have friends and siblings, Rashna. "Killer!" What is this?"

"That's how he saved his number on my phone, so that I don't forget. There's a tragic event in his life concerning his cousin that motivated him to consider me his sister."

"Rashna, you are a girl! You have to take care of yourself, your education, you have to stand on your own feet...these friendships with murderers and terrorists..."

think you can help him? Do you trust Taleb?"

"I do trust Taleb," Rashna said and shook her head with conviction. "I think I should try to save Abedin. I can at least talk to Taleb."

Rashna's mother stood up and looked at her for a moment, before walking towards the door. "Do what you think best, but be careful," she said.

VI

The next morning, after her mother had left for work, Rashna sat at the table having breakfast, and came to the conclusion that if she was going to do anything about Abedin, she needed to act fast. She thought about meeting Taleb on campus in between classes, but the next moment she realized that might not be wise. People at the university will talk about the two of them meeting, and Taleb's opposing party members might use this as a way to get back at him. It would be better to speak to him over the phone, so she called him.



Rashna understood that her mother was cautioning her because she loved her and was her only support. In light of the struggles of her difficult life, her mother's reaction was expected, but Rashna felt she had to help another person when she had the ability to do so.

"Ma, when I went to see Abedin at the hospital, he was crying so helplessly. He was saying that there was no reason for him to stay alive any longer. I felt awful watching a sturdy young man crying like that. Even if Taleb doesn't kill him, he will probably commit suicide..."

"Suicide!" Rashna's mother exclaimed.

"Yes, that's what he said. He won't be able to finish his education, you know! These are campus violence cases, so he will have to maintain his party affiliation for protection. Abedin won't get off easily. He will surely go to jail."

"Hmm...he is in deep trouble. Do you

"Yes, Rashna. How can I help you?" Taleb said.

Rashna was slightly taken aback by his direct tone, but she continued hesitantly, emphasizing the word bhai, brother, to remind him of his promise. "Yes, Taleb bhai. I wanted to talk to you about Abedin."

"He's in the hospital. There is a case against him."

"Yes, but he won't live through this very long. He grew up in the village and his father is a poor farmer. After what happened, he won't be able to continue his education. He has no other direction in his life. If you take mercy on him..."

"Listen Rashna, I can't talk right now. I am preparing for a procession and a counter-attack. Will you be coming to campus today?"

"No Taleb bhai, I don't have class today," lied Rashna even though she had an important class that she would be missing.

"Okay. I have to go now, but let me think

about what you said and I will call you back."

Rashna waited anxiously for Taleb's call, trying to study in the mean time. But she ended up pacing in her room for the hour till Taleb called her back.

"Hello Rashna? About Abedin, he can come back to campus for his classes. I've found out that he has to be at the hospital for two months for his recovery. After that the police will let him go, and he will have to lay low for a bit. He needs to vacate his room at the residence hall and commute to the university. He will attend his classes and leave immediately. He can't linger on campus and get involved."

"But...but won't his party members try to get him back to work with them?"

"No, I'll take care of all that."

"Taleb bhai, can I tell Abedin that you have given me assurance about all this?"

"Yes, you can. I've to go now Rashna. It's a busy day for me."

"Thank you Taleb bhai," Rashna said and hung up. She was bewildered at the turn of events. The brutal, machete-wielding terrorist who can hack people into pieces, that same Taleb seemed to have gone through a sudden transformation. His promise of protection is going to be a beacon of hope for a poor student from the village. Rashna couldn't think of any reason for him to lie or be deceptive towards her, so she was convinced that he meant what he said. She decided that she will go to the hospital to give Abedin the good news. This will surely be a reason for him to feel better!

Rashna was feeling relieved and was in a more cheerful mood than she had been in the past few days. She studied for a while, then turned on the television. While surfing channels, she came across the local news, which was about a procession at Dhaka University that had turned into a violent fight between opposing student groups. The journalist on site reported that the cadres were not only using machetes, iron rods, and hockey sticks, but guns too. People were hurrying away from the area and police were using tear gas to disperse the student party activists who were clashing on the street.

The camera panned away from the journalist to zoom in on the action, and focused on a group of men beating someone, who was lying on the ground almost motionless, except for his body jolting from kicks and strikes of hockey sticks. He was wearing jeans and a red and white striped t-shirt. Rashna immediately recognized Taleb on the television screen.

Rashna grabbed her purse and ran outside. She continued running till she found an autorickshaw and requested the driver to go to the university area. The driver stopped near Nilkhet, a few blocks from the university entrance, and refused to go any further. "I can't go any closer. There's a major clash going on there, students are leaving the campus and their residence halls..."

Rashna got out and started running towards the university campus.

Munjulika Rahman is a Senior Lecturer in the Cultural Centre at University of Malaya in Malaysia, where she teaches academic writing, research methodology in performance studies, and performance theory.

## INCONGRUITY

BIMAL GUHA

Translated from the Bengali:  
KABIR CHOWDHURY

I see a black darkness  
falling from all direction.  
Won't we go and take part  
in the fireworks?  
Who are they spoiling our  
happiness and joy?  
Why do they paint the bright  
blue sky with black splotches?

What message does the 21st century  
bring? I feel a hairy paw  
scratching my brains.  
The dream-filled days  
are now drenched in blood.  
And the wind shouts, Bravo! Bravo!

Dear friends who gathered  
to chalk out plans for tomorrow  
stood silent and still.  
They saw dark clouds gathering  
at the distant horizon.

The constant bleeding  
from the cells of my brain  
has blurred my memories.  
They look with amazed eyes  
at the destruction of all tenets  
of democracy.

Where do we stand now?  
The top leaders of society  
are busy enjoying the festival  
of blood. Overhead vultures  
fly gleefully.  
Now there is a huge incongruity  
between one's words and one's deeds!



## THE SOUND OF RAIN

MAHMUDUR RAHMAN

The fluffy white puffs turned to a discordant grey  
From resplendent blue the azure gave way  
To the depressing dimness of dark nimbus  
The wind whipped up gear  
A frenzy of tousled tree tops

'Did you do what I asked you to do?'  
Went the enigmatic unknown bird  
perched on high  
'I did, I did and you know it too'  
Came the response from its partner nearby  
And the wind breathed heavy, the clouds  
descended nigh

They fluttered their wings as if to embrace  
At first the flip and then a flop  
The first drip and then the drop  
The green turned lush, the yellow brilliant  
And the winds made play in time and  
space

A soft, smooth sigh, then a clatter

A gentle spray, a smatter  
A patter on the foliage  
That held sway  
And the winds now blew the dead leaves  
away

From a tangent to a vertical, a mist to a  
torrent  
The heavens opened up in abandon so gay  
The skies dark, brooding as if in discon-  
tent  
The waters flowed through gutters in a  
gurgling essay  
And the winds blew harder, the birds wet,  
silent

Water on nature, a fragrance sublime  
The flow slowed down, just a matter of  
time  
The parched earth's thirst quenched for a  
while  
Mind and soul at peace with the world  
And the winds blew soft

“বিবেকের তীক্ষ্ণ দংশন সহ্য করতে না পেরেই  
তারাক্ষরের ১৯৭১ বইটি লেখা, পড়তে শুরু  
করলে শেষ না করে থামা যাবে না।”

-হাসান আজিজুল হক

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