

STRANGER

KHASHRUZZAMAN CHOUDHURY

Translated from the Bengali:
ZIAUDDIN M CHOUDHURY

It was pretty late in the evening when my colleague Sayeed Mahdi and I came out of Lahore Gymkhana. Mahdi saw her as we joined the fast traffic of Upper Mall. With the eyes of a sharp preying bird he saw both the girl and the car she was in. I also saw her when he pointed her to me.

We were in Lahore Gymkhana to play Housie that evening. Located in the Upper Mall of Lahore the Gymkhana is the playground of Lahore upper crust—business tycoons, landlords, and top civil and military brass. I had won only seventy five rupees when one Housie line matched, but that caused uproar and joyful victory sounds from my friends at the table. I ended up spending two hundred rupees to pay for food and drinks of my raucous friends before I could extricate myself from the club.

We were to take a right turn on the Mall, but Mahdi wanted to follow that car like a spy. "Did you see her? What is this Princess doing this late in the evening riding alone in a car?" he asked quizzically. "I bet this beauty is a real Princess. Have you noticed she is smoking?" he further added. Indeed she was a very pretty woman when I saw her again while passing by the car. But the car overtook us in greater speed. And Mahdi followed it.

After about half an hour of drive the car in the front stopped at a building and the woman entered the house. Mahdi also stopped and asked me if I knew the area. I shook my head. "You idiot, this place is Heera Mandi," Mahdi said. I was shocked because Heera Mandi was like a forbidden place—it was an abode of professional dancers known as Baijees. I never had the good or misfortune of going to the place.

Seeing me hesitate, Mahdi landed a big slap on my back and said jokingly, "you chicken, why are you afraid? Let us see who this Princess is." I was not very pleased that Mahdi considered me to be timid, so I replied bravely, "Why will I be afraid? Let us go inside and find out."

Dance entertainment in Heera Mandi was spread in quite a few buildings, all two or three storied. There were several rooms in one building, and performances were going on in several of them same time.

Music from Indian and Pakistani films was floating the air as we walked in. But Mahdi was obsessed with only the woman we had seen, and we were looking for her in all rooms. It was like a search operation. After a long search we located the woman, Mahdi's Princess in one room. She was singing a popular movie song. What a melodious voice; it seemed as though Suraya Begum, the original singer of the melody, was herself singing. We sat on the carpet along with several others in the audience. The "Princess" was surrounded by players of musical instruments who

accompanied the singer.

This time I had a good look at the woman. She was exquisitely beautiful, full of vibrant youth. She was dressed in colourful clothes that showed her ample bosom, and a superb body. She had a sharp nose, blue eyes, and plump lips. No words could really describe her beauty! I was almost gaping at her. Can a person be so beautiful?

Song was accompanied by dance. The "Princess" came toward us while dancing. As was the custom the admirers in the audience stuffed few currency notes in her purse attached to her hip. One admirer stuffed a hundred rupees note in her hip purse. We put ten-rupee notes. The Princess started a new song, "I am following a stranger; neither do not I know the road nor the destination."

She smiled sweetly at me at the end of the song and asked, "Stranger, have you found your destination?" I was embarrassed, but Mahdi leapt and answered, "We found both destination and treasure". She patted my cheek, and said, "Don't lose it." My face flushed, while the audience burst into laughter.

I went a few times more to the Mujra (dance performance) of our Princess with Mahdi. Her real name was Gul Afroz Banu. She lived with her uncle and aunt in Gulberg—a posh residential area of Lahore. I was shocked to hear that she was also a student at a Lahore College. But Mahdi informed me that there were many girls like her who lived in good localities, led a normal day to day life, but they worked as professional dancers in the evening because they were children of such women. Mahdi advised me not to worry about this, but I could not. I would often wonder why girls like Gul Afroz had to work like this, please other men. I did not know at my young age that some women had to earn a living like this.

Eight year had gone by after that. Pakistan was broken, and Bangladesh was born. I had married Afia by then. Afia and I had left Bangladesh for the US with her little daughter. I was living at Atlanta working as a Financial Analyst, and my wife worked for an insurance company.

Emotional excitement and expressions are strong immediately after marriage. In one of those weak moments I had told Afia about Gul Afroz. I thought Afia would be surprised by hearing Gul Afroz's story, and asked me a lot of questions. Instead she looked at me questioningly and commented, "Oh I see. You had those habits also!" I did not reply. Later, at night she asked me "Was your Gul Afroz very beautiful?" Sensing great danger, I embraced her and said, "Not as beautiful as you".

Years had passed since that, but Afia

never forgot about Gul Afroz. Many times she taunted me about her referring to a film actress once as "my Gul Afroz". I did not make much of this. It is better to stomach such taunts than confront them for domestic peace. I myself would have forgotten all about Gul Afroz had not been for an incident that shook me.

I had gone to the grocery on a Saturday. There I saw in the produce section a woman looking exactly like Gul Afroz. She had a little boy with her. I almost stumbled. Is it possible that Gul Afroz would be here from distant Lahore to Atlanta? Her road or destination could not be to Atlanta!

I thought for a couple of minutes that seemed like two years. I paused for a few moments, and then plucked up courage and called her from behind, "Miss Gul Afroz". Surprised, she looked back, and then asked with great curiosity, "How do you know my name?" I smiled and replied in Urdu, "It is because I know you". She replied back, "Can you please tell me how you know me?"

I told her briefly when and where I had met her. Blood drained from her face. I was alarmed. The boy with her asked, "Mummy, who is this?"

"This is an uncle, my son", Gul Afroz told the boy. The boy cheerfully stood by my side.

"Life is strange. Where is Lahore and where Atlanta is," Gul Afroz was composed by then. "Would you like to hear my story, Mr Stranger?" She asked. She still remembered! She was still very beautiful!

"My husband had dropped me at the grocery," Gul Afroz said drawing her son towards her. "He will be back in ten minutes. Do you live nearby?" She asked.

"Very near, about two miles from here", I said.

She hesitated a little, and then took out a slip of paper and wrote down her phone number. "Please call me; the best time is after ten in the morning," she said while giving me the slip, "I have to tell you everything," she said with timid eyes.

Eyes tell what is in the mind, I thought. I kept the slip carefully in my wallet and said with my hand on her shoulder, "Of course I will call and hear everything. You can trust me. The old memories are in my treasury, and I do not want to lose them."

The Princess smiled for the first time. It seemed blood had come back to her cheeks. I did not know if my words gave her courage back. "Goodbye, Stranger, but please call me."

"This humble Stranger's name is Afzal Hamid," I said in reply while getting into my car. The song in my car radio was playing a popular ghazal by Jagsit Singh, "I met my own life like a stranger meets another stranger."

TWO POEMS

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Translated by:
SM SHAHRUKH

Dedications

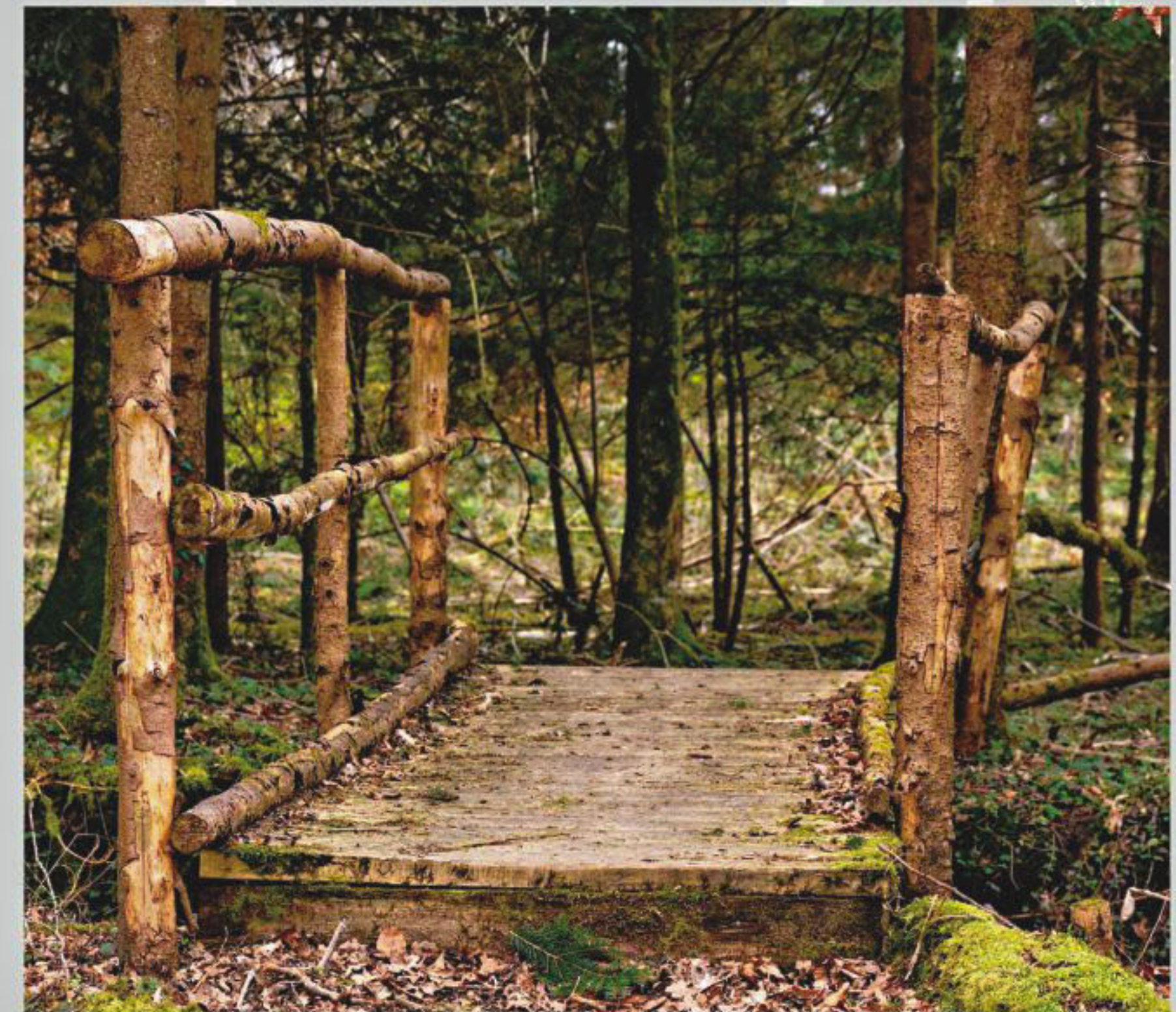
Manic, I run through the woods
like a deer crazed
by the musk it carries.
In the soothing breeze of spring
I cannot find the beacon light.
What I want is in folly
what I get is not what I want.

From my soul,
passion goes in search
the search that brings only a mirage.
I open my arms to embrace, in vain
an emptiness is all I get.
What I want is in folly
what I get is not what I want.

My heartstrings play
in desperate madness
to hold on to our song.
The one I cling to, alas
does not play the raga I seek.
What I want is in folly
what I get is not what I want.

Remember me

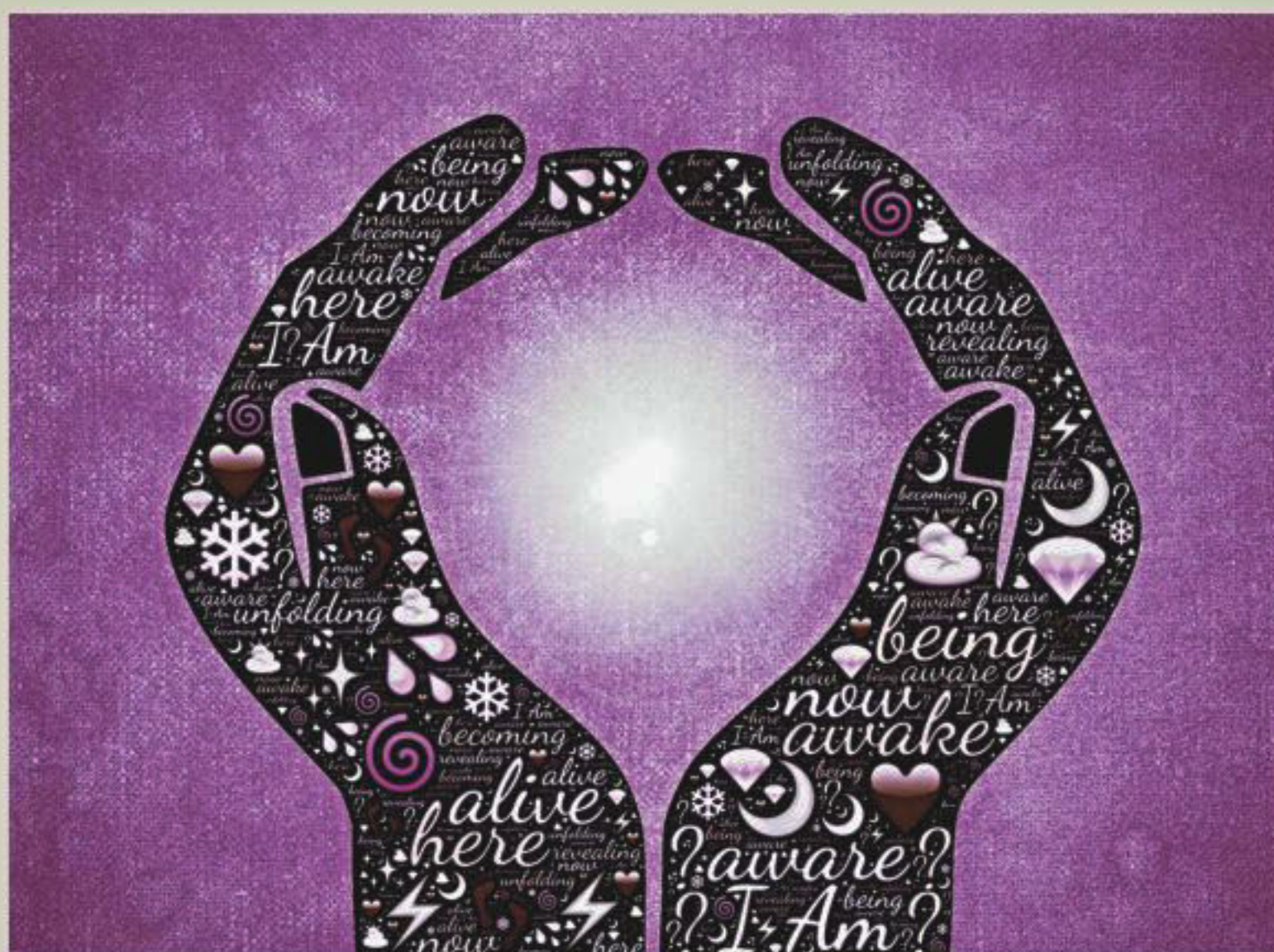
Remember me still even if I go far away.
Even if the old love is screened by the new.
If I am near and
If you can't see me when I'm near
If my presence seems but only a shadow-
Remember me still.
If your eyes well up with tears
If the games of lovemaking cease on starry nights
Remember me still.
If your work grinds to a halt
On an autumn morning-
Remember me.
And if you reminisce without
A teardrop at the corners of your eyes
Remember me still.



Love

RUBAB ABDULLAH

The far more great is
One's sense of love
It endows hue to nature
The green grass looks greener
Crunching sounds of yellow leaves under feet
Play a symphony to anyone's ears
At the crack of dawn the blue sky can be seen
Through small holes
As a hope to continue living
So too it heals a wounded heart
So too it shares the pleasure of life
Living in bliss or in catastrophe
Love deepens the longing for prayers.



“ব্যঙ্গ-সৃষ্টিতে অসাধারণ প্রতিভার প্রয়োজন। ... বন্ধু আবুল মনসুরের হাত-সাফাই দেখে বিস্মিত হলাম। ভাষার কান মলে রস সৃষ্টির ক্ষমতা আবুল মনসুরের অসাধারণ। এ যেন পাকা গুস্তাদী হাত।”

—কাজী নজরুল ইসলাম



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