

BLUE AFTERNOON

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

The call to prayer wakes Sarah up every morning. There are at least three mosques surrounding her apartment and each of them take turns in letting the neighbourhood know that it is time to wake up and join the faithful to offer Fazr prayers. Sarah sometimes wonders if she will ever be able to join the masses in going to a mosque for the morning prayers. She remembers the time when her late husband, Iqbal, would rush to the mosque every morning as soon as the Azan was over.

Sarah lies in bed as the call for prayer shifts from the South to the West. This mosque has a muezzin with a melodious voice who likes to linger on the endings. She likes to hear him pronounce "As Salatu

youngest is going to Iraq in a few days to work in the oil fields. He will leave his family in Dhaka while he finds out about living conditions at his work station near Basra.

Sarah likes to keep herself busy but travelling by rickshaw is getting increasingly difficult. Her second son, Imran, sometimes offers his car and driver for doctor's appointments but she does not like the arrangement since Imran has two school-going children. His wife works too but she rides the office staff bus.

Sarah looks at the window to see any signs of the morning light before she wakes up and heads for the kitchen area. She has become an early riser after moving to this apartment but she remembers the days when

read books but poor eyesight has restricted that. In her younger days books were her constant companion. She remembers when the youngest one Salek was born in Barisal she would spend days in bed reading novels while recovering from delivery. Like the other two, she had labour and delivery at home.

Sakina is her constant companion now, who, temperamental at times, is very reliable and trustworthy. She worked with Sarah's niece Swapna for many years. When her son Salek went to work in Kuwait, Swapna asked, "Boro Khala, how will you live by yourself? You need to ask Imran Bhai to come and stay with you for a few months."

"I don't know if I can do that. I have never

years, Sarah and Azim's wife, Naeema, started to have regular disagreements. At the beginning it was over little things like the colour of a saree that Naeema bought or about coming back late after a party. Naeema was surprised that Sarah was voicing her opinion or enforcing her will on Naeema. She did not resist at the beginning but began to push back soon. First she would simply ignore but once when Sarah followed up by asking why Naeema did not wear the blue saree as she had instructed her to do, Naeema could not hold back her anger and replied, "Amma, that colour is very old fashioned and does not go with my jewellery." Sarah was taken aback since the reference to jewellery brought up old

well. When Sarah asked what was wrong with her mother, Naeema was not forthcoming. After repeated questioning, she simply said, "It is something private", which Sarah believed was not true.

A few weeks after this, Sarah was getting ready to visit her brother and Iqbal decided to stay home. He foot pained, and he wanted to rest. Sarah went to Naeema's room and knocked on the closed door. Naeema came out, and but did not invite her in. Sarah stood there for a minute to see if Naeema would call her to come in. Sarah had not set foot in this room for a few months, and was feeling left out of her son's space. Finally, she said, "Naeema, why do you keep the door locked all the time? You can leave it unlocked when you are home."

"Amma, I find the servants go into my room when I am sleeping or taking a shower if I leave the door unlocked."

"But, you did not do that when you first came to our house. It seems like you are moving apart from us."

Naeema could not stand the scrutiny and the tone. She replied in a high pitched voice, "Amma, I can't please everybody in this house. I need to have a little time for myself and some privacy."

Sarah was a little taken aback at the stridency in Naeema's voice. She always saw her own mother and sister-in-law have an open door policy in her brother's house. She shot back, "Well, when you have your own house you can have your own policy and enjoy unlimited privacy as you wish. In this house, you need to sacrifice for the common good."

"Amma, May be we'll move out then." Sarah could not take the insinuation and left without telling her to keep an eye on Iqbal. She felt a sharp pain in her chest that afternoon and did not enjoy the visit to her brother at all and came back early. When she told Azim at the end of the day, he went into a rant about her interference in his family life. Sarah kept quiet but felt let down and betrayed.

A few days later he let her know that he was applying for a job overseas. A recruiting firm was hiring for jobs in Botswana in southern Africa. Sarah felt like telling him that going to Africa would be a mistake. But she held back since she knew they would interpret that as another example of her meddling. Also, she assumed that Naeema probably had told him about her comments on seeking privacy if they were to get their own place. But she also knew that Azim would have found it difficult to rent a place on his salary since it would have squeezed his budget further. Azim applied for the job in Botswana and flew out within a month. Naeema stayed back but moved out in a week and spent three weeks with her mother before she joined him in Gaborone.

Exactly six months after Azim had left, Salek came one night to tell her something that Sarah never imagined she would have to face. Azim was killed in a road accident when the driver veered off the road and hit a tree. Two days later his coffin arrived and was brought to the house. Naeema came back with the coffin, and had apparently told some of his cousins that Amma's *baad dua* or curse had killed him.

To be concluded in the next issue.



Khairum Minam Naum." She likes the high falsetto that this muezzin uses to let the word "naum" float through the morning ether. Iqbal, when he was alive, would join the muezzin and recite this line at home with the muezzin. As Salatu Khairum Minam Naum. Prayer is better than sleep. And then he'd jump out of bed. Although, towards the end of his life he had trouble getting up for the morning prayers and later would say that he was feeling too weak to go to the mosque.

Sarah lives now alone in this small apartment in Shukrabad. After Iqbal died, she was thinking of moving in with her second son but after debating it at length, decided to live independently. Her two surviving sons both live in Dhaka, but the

she would just roll in bed until 9 o'clock and wake up after the children have left for school. She never worked outside the house and while she attended her club meetings once or twice a week, she had a relatively leisurely routine in the morning hours. Iqbal would leave for work at 10 o'clock when they were posted in the district towns, and after he had left, she would have her breakfast and call the cook to give him the instructions for the day: the grocery list, the menu for lunch and dinner, and the reminder to send lunch for Iqbal to be taken by the office orderly in a tiffin carrier.

Nowadays she spends time reading the newspaper and sometimes listening to music on the old two-in-one radio. She wants to

asked any of them to come and live with me. The last time they did, you remember what happened."

"Boro Khala. Don't think too much about that. What happened must have been Allah's wishes. You now need someone to be with you. I can give a maid who has been with my in-law's family for ten years, and is very caring."

That was the beginning of Sakina's term in this flat. Swapna tries to steer Sarah from any discussion of the incident that is still fresh on her mind and is a constant source of anxiety for her.

Her son Azim was an accountant and worked with a Chartered Accounting firm. He and his wife lived with them. After a few

wounds. Naeema had received some gaudy gold jewellery set on her wedding from her parents and it weighed twenty grams of gold. Sarah was not sure why Naeema would decide to wear such "gorgeous" jewellery at night when incidents of mugging were happening frequently in Dhaka. She took that as a personal affront since the jewellery they gave Naeema at the wedding was not so ornate.

Soon the altercation became more frequent and Naeema started avoiding her mother-in-law. She spent the evening at her mother's house in Dhanmandi and would come back with Azim. If asked, Naeema would indicate that she was just giving her mother a little time since she was not feeling

TWO POEMS

KAY

Grief

This emptiness does not fill not with entertainment films or songs not with success work or fame The emptiness is the color of a white coffin the shape of a vacant bed It is a scream without sound it is the slam of a door shut The emptiness is my life without you how do I fill it? with memories in perpetual grief Or with a life anew to be enriched in experience and ready to drink again the joys of life from my untouched glass

On Meeting a Friend

We sat across the table we ate the delicacies and drank the wine looking at your misty eyes I knew there was much to tell I talked and laughed at something or nothing looking at my wrinkled face You knew the years had gone by in the passage of time In grief and loss we are helpless spectators of the inner torment Wounds dressed in silence Thus we met and left knowing we had no need to tell.



I Have Built Home In The Air

MUZIBUL HAQUE KABIR

Translated from the Bengali by SAIDUR RAHMAN

I have built home in the air sheer activities, commotion dominate all around, agitation, so many arrangements are confined to new page--- I have no respite though I need it, sunshine reigns supreme even under long shadows, there is no peace anywhere.

I have built home in the air new beckoning comes through breeze I hear only the voice of poetry--- I need undivided leisure.

Intoxicating fragrance of Kodom flowers comes through the wings of rain--- sense-organ responds, wherever I go or don't go I feel a queer hurriedness within me. Seeds of sound fly in the air, I decorate the unknown distant wide sky with the rainbow of thoughts, my respirations get mixed with words and sound.

"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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