

Midnight Marathon

REBECCA HAQUE

FAZR azaan, and dawn, will see Ritu rise to greet "Shadhinota Dibosh" on March 26. It being a Saturday this year, her son Anu (short for Anwar) has booked the swank restaurant at Baridhara to celebrate her grandson's tenth birthday, even though the actual birthday was three days ago. But a mid-week working day is so very inconvenient for a dinner party in Dhaka, with the traffic hazards fouling up everyone's mood and schedule. Anu was home again after a decade, but for only three weeks during Easter break, with an extra week finagled from his holiday hoard to mingle with friends and relatives, and introduce them to his lovely Hispanic wife Sienna, and his no less handsome son, Juan Ismail. "What a beautiful family! And oh, so very Bengali-looking, too!", the women exclaim, as they drop by in groups and pairs for tea and impromptu meals and hugs and kisses. Ritu smiles with pleasure, quietly, gracefully accepting their praise. Her son had indeed chosen well, and he had done so well in graduate school, where he had met and fallen in love with Sienna. Ritu had been to their wedding in California twenty years ago, taking her own few precious heirloom gold and silver pieces to gift to the bride of her only child. Always law-abiding, befitting her position as a University professor, she had meticulously taken permission from the Bangladesh Bank, and had declared every item to fulfill the United States Customs regulations.

Recently, strangely, somewhat quirkily, as her close friend and confidante Gulrukh would say, Ritu has started measuring life's timeline in swatches of decades. It is possible, Ritu thinks, that all 'baby-boomers', born in the fifties, are conditioned to evaluate each decade according to its degree of achievement in arts, culture, and politics. We were taught to critique in terms of historical movements, epochal events, schools and -isms and schisms. McLuhan and Kenneth Clark and Desmond Morris of 'The Naked Ape' fame were our gods. Ritu looks at the rows and rows of books in the bedroom and beyond in her large well-organised study, and raises a hand in salute. This year she herself has



MURTAJA BASEER

become a person who in social parlance is called a senior citizen, and is revered in the family group as an 'elder' having crossed the threshold of her sixtieth decade and stepping into the seventieth.

She now sits alone, softly braiding her long gray hair into a thin plait. She looks at the bedside table clock. It is nearly midnight, Friday night, and her home and heart are warm with joy. She turns to look at her face in the mirror, glowing in the reflected pool of light from the tall antique brass floor lamp. Yes, her lips mime the words, Anu has my eyes and high cheekbones, but he definitely has Ismail's strong jaw and broad forehead. Ritu's eyes sparkle in the half-light. Ismail was long gone, instant death at a midnight road crash forty years ago. Too young, too bright, too soon snatched from her arms. Anu was eight and confused and clingy.

Ritu stares into the flashing eyes of the face in the mirror and remembers the silent grieving, the long sleepless nights of flowing secret tears. She remembers the suitors and the stalkers at work, at conferences at home and abroad. She remembers too with pride how the flame of each proposal was snuffed, the overt and covert courtships petering out by her tactful, firm refusals. She was strong, she was determined. How could she be otherwise when Ismail was with her always? Was he not alive in Anu's every feature, every gait and gesture?

Ritu looks away and her pupils dilate as she meditates on past decades. Her mind's synergy streams into free-flowing association of life's turning points with Grecian symbols of struggle and sacrifice and victory. Her heartbeat begins a classic song in choric sympathy with the three-

hundred at Thermopylae, 'the Hot Gates', with Phidippides' palpitating heart at the 26-mile victory run to Athens after the Battle of Marathon. Integrity, Commitment, Faith, Freedom, Independence, National pride! Ritu's heart echoes the words in systolic, diastolic rhythm. Run, Ritu, run. The race is not to the swift...

Suddenly, with a gut-wrenching twist of sliding, rupturing screen memory, Ritu throws her head back and moans low and long. She clutches her womb with her left hand and cradles her cracking heart with the right. Oh, in delight, Ismail had named their first baby Purnima, his very own beautiful moon-princess, born one moonlit Monday midnight. Ritu shakes her body from side to side to rid the mind of the pictures from so long ago, the pictures she has buried decades deep in the dark tunnels of the hippocampus. Ritu drops softly to the floor and crouches on her knees, smothering the wretched moaning sounds on the rough fabric of the bright handloom bedcover. The warm tears and hot breath create a bower for her face, and Ritu slowly subsides into a serene reverie of the actual moment of loss.

Ritu is a dazed mermaid, swimming in the current of the river of life. She gulps a mouthful of air and sprouts legs and is back spontaneously, decades back, to March 1971. She is running, running with hundreds and hundreds of people, with soldiers running after them with guns and bayonets. Hundreds of legs running helter-skelter, some falling, some dying, some trampling over bodies to save their own. She is running, holding infant Anu tightly to her waist in the crook of her right arm. Running and pulling five year-old Purnima with her left hand tightly holding the little girl's right hand. Ismail is somewhere near or far in the crowd, running with his aged parents. Ritu cannot think, she cannot stop. She runs and spits out spittle and dust. The little girl cannot keep up with her mother's frenzied pace. Purnima yells. Purnima stumbles.

Ritu's left fist is forced out of its grip on her daughter's right hand. She stops for a millisecond and hoists Anu more securely with both hands, and looks sideways to see another runner, a woman, swoop down to clutch Purnima. They instantly disappear among the miles and miles of nameless, faceless runners.

The melody of the muezzin's call rouses Ritu from a blessed, restorative dream of Purnima's face. She lifts her stiff, aching neck from the bed, and walks to the window on the east. A glimmer of an orange-reddish glow is on the horizon. Ritu sees the faint outline of the crescent moon, and offers a prayer for Purnima. She looks at the disappearing moon, and asks her Maker, "how can one find closure, if not through blind faith in the belief that the other woman and my child are survivors too? Not victims of predators, but valiantly victorious."

Rebecca Haque is Professor and former Chairperson (2009-12), Dept. of English, University of Dhaka. Also a poet, writer, translator, and literary critic, her published books are Commencement Poems And Occasional Essays (2003, 2nd Ed. 2009), Women, Gender, And Literature (2003), And Hemingway: A Centenary Tribute (co-edited, 2007).

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