

THE WEDDING RING

KHASHRUZZAMAN CHOUDHURY

Translated from the Bengali: Ziauddin M Choudhury



(Concluding part)

It was the turbulent days of 1971. Munir and I were deeply involved in the struggle against the Pakistani aggressors. Despite being government officers we had joined the Liberation War and had gone over to India crossing the border. We were in charge of organising the freedom fighters and presenting the facts of the war to the international community. We worked from a tin shed house with great enthusiasm leaving behind the pomp and splendour of our official positions back home.

We used to live in a house along with other government officials in a house in a small town in India across Satkhira of Bangladesh. One family lived in one room. Munir stayed in one room with three other bachelors. We could not sleep well at night as guns pounded away across the border. Everyday thousands of refugees streamed into the Indian side escaping attacks of the Pakistani army. We struggled to provide for the refugees. At the same time we were also worried because we heard that there might be Pakistani spies among the refugees. The spies could kill us if they found an opportunity. We did not sleep out of anxiety.

I had seen the wedding ring in those days of crisis in Munir's hands. It was a diamond ring that Munir would often look at. I asked Munir once what the ring was about. He told me the ring was for his would be bride, a third year honours student of Dhaka University to whom he was engaged. He would have been married to her by now had

the war of liberation not started.

I was married. I was here with my wife and child even though the living was hard. But we were together. I sadly reflected on the plight of Munir. Poor guy! Perhaps his would-be father-in-law would not wait too long and marry his daughter off to someone else. There was no telling when this war would end. I wondered if Munir thought the same way when he looked at the ring now and then.

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A few days later we heard that Munir's fiancée was married to a doctor in the meanwhile. Munir did not know where they lived, but it was somewhere in Dhaka.

As I reminisced in my bed that night I looked at my wife sleeping soundly by my side. She was weary from handling our rambunctious kid. She would not know that

I was wide awake in the bed. I was thinking. Munir must have been remembering about the old ring when he was putting the ring on his bride. Why would his hand shake otherwise? Perhaps he was thinking when he could not keep with a ring, what are the chances that he could keep his new bride by his side with another ring? Should I blame Munir if his mind was racked by such thoughts? I wondered if this was the only reason why hand shook. Was there any other reason, I wondered.

Next day Munir called. It was exactly as I thought. Munir thought of the old ring when he was putting on the ring in bride's finger. A mystery of life is that people think of things at a time when these should not occur to them.

"You know my old fiancée also came to the wedding last night", Munir said. "She may be a friend of the family; she came as a member of the bride's party. I was pretty shaken when I saw her among the women in the party. My head was spinning."

I was completely taken aback. It took me some time to digest this information. "Are you sure you saw her?" I asked in a faltering tone. "It was no mistake", Munir replied. "I did not tell you before, but after our engagement I had taken her to a boat ride in Nayarhat."

As a well-wisher I advised Munir to forget the past and start his new life. Munir laughed over the phone and said, "Don't worry, I have forgotten the past. Two days ago I went to Nayarhat and threw the old ring into the river."

TWO POEMS BY AHSAN HABIB

Translated from the Bengali by Sofiul Azam

THIS MIND – THIS EARTH UNHAPPINESS

At last, I built a home on the ash-stacks of fallen leaves, yet dreams of green ones enclose it too often in sheaves. Yet frequently in the green forest the sun's last ray brings colours' deceit deep into my mind every single day.

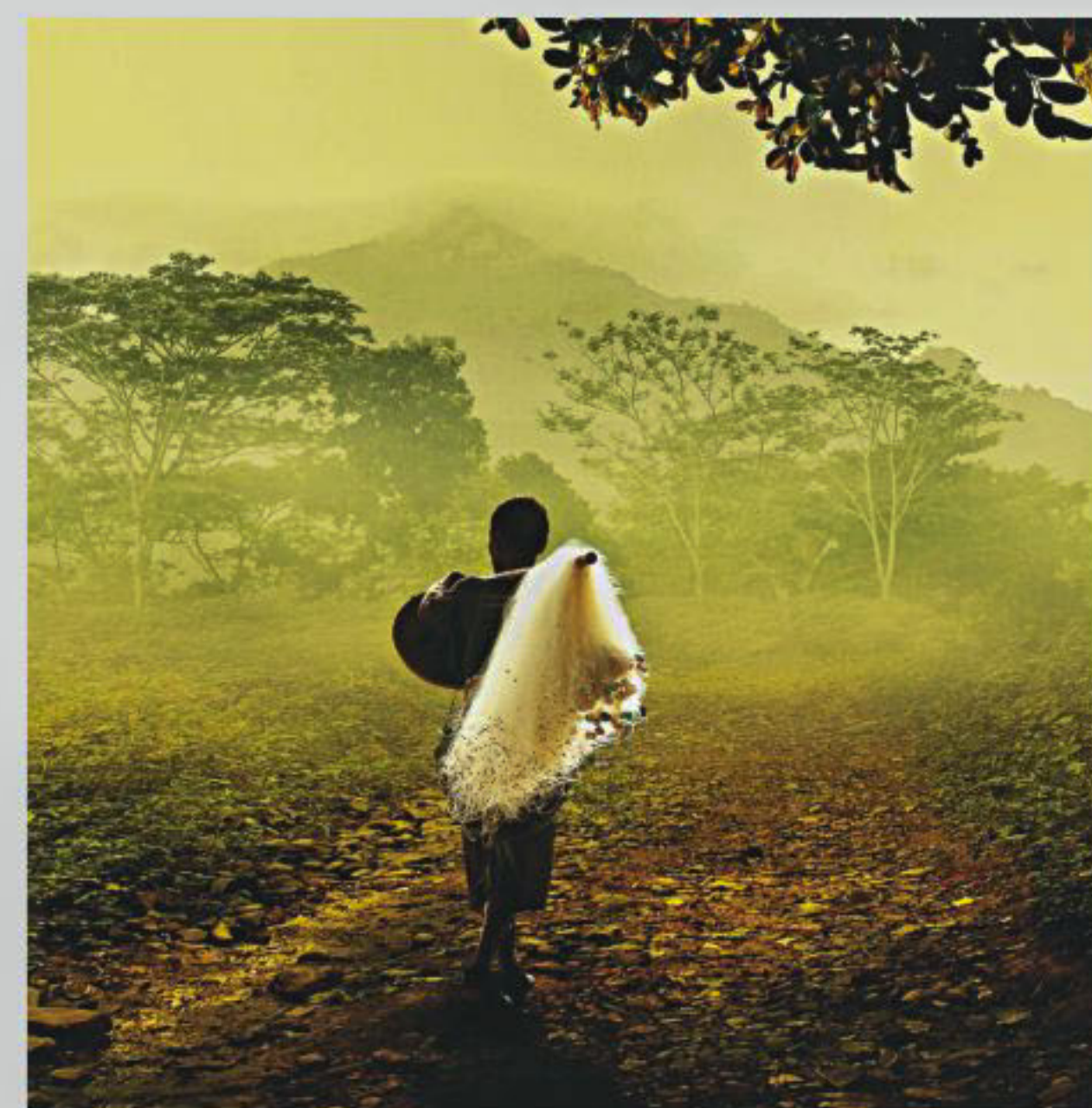
Days of endless hopes have fled, their shadows still lingering, still dreamily on the horizon, their shapes so astonishing aslant the banks of memories tremble on my tired eyes, still now in hope of good days, this heart intolerably dies. That day the sky was cloudless, on paths of the world somewhere the first love I chanced upon was as if a virgin there were, playing aroma from her unruly hair on paths in that dawn's flames going from house to house incessantly calling intimate names of her friends; there she left her song blossoms, I forgot when unmindfully from there I took up a bit of their pollen. I fell in love with the known world with a little understanding, I didn't know there was a huge lie in that sort of acquainting. I didn't know that countless wings burn too repeatedly in the flames of the lamp I ended up loving unknowingly. I didn't know that seizing eye gleams from a sunflower millions of insects grow up under its shade quite regular. To win the heart of one who burns all for her thirst's sake is at stake, yet the one with whom we fall in love by mistake. Smells of earth are so deep, and its horde of illusions as such, crowd our body and soul with boundless feelings too much. That's why I spread myself atom by atom on paths far and wide; the delicacy of touching this softened earth – its slightest pride I probably wanted, in intervals of my tiredness most likely, in my favoured mud house I craved the tiniest moon lovingly. Along the most-known of their paths, days came and went, many clouds rained down on the paths and many a sun bent, on countless nights many moons played on the pond's water, in that clamour, like snow this love of mine did in a quiver end up fallen and dead, yet that death of a sort too often I thought of as a gift of tenderness, so in that lost tuneful strain trembled once more neglected days and favoured words of desire, though light's placidity dropped no shadow on my eyes ever. All the tunes of what I sang, an awful lot of my worshipping, this heart's all its fragrances and melody of its longing in earnest and fully charged on doors and windows somewhere did strikes, stretched these two hands too often in despair. Nothing in return. That day I knew man is so unlucky with no cure, we owe this earth an endless debt of gratitude for sure. Bonds and wretchedness from time immemorial together in a bind are eternally yoked to human minds like shackles of a kind. So flames of agony, too, calm down in lively graceful beliefs, at last, I built a home on the ash-stacks of fallen leaves. I ended up loving the ones who keep sharp nails to utilize; still today, I worship the name of who has fierce fire in eyes. Under a cover painted thick by deep tranquil colours ugly souls of this world blaze in shamefully lusty clamours, yet I built a home on that land roughened by some dearth, there's no rupture between this mind and this earth.

I'm very unhappy. Unhappiness from my birth onwards. No, no, I was born in unhappiness. Leaving nets of all these intoxicating lines, a few of this world's childish but aged and clever fishermen adrift on this human sea lately navigate their boats with untameable hands. We're at a loss. A few of youthful boys with a few of youthful girls woven by a thin thread of this philosophy of unhappiness suddenly have gone to childhood and setting fire to civilization's fake cover out in the open, a fire of bravado, they only scream in a hoarse voice: We're very restless. What do we want, what more do we want, what more!

They say: Terror-struck in this terror-struck world, we only run to and fro. Saying this, they run, breathless.

If you'd like to ask where they're running to, they effortlessly reply: No address, nor any desire for any one anymore. Lighting the fire of fury from the gusts of pessimistic winds, they say: Let them all burn, greenery on both sides, from old houses the old things we'll set fire to and leave at every doorstep an emptiness the only truth known.

And if suddenly ever in this mad festival a saddened old passer-by asks them: The burden of this emptiness, who carries it this way, for what meaning, what use, what profit! They say: There's no meaning. This is what we've learnt in life quite well. We've known there's no use walking in search of meaning. No use wasting time for any profit, whatsoever, nor counting crows of emptiness in this imaginary shadow! It's better off drifting away on wild tides. And since going down after floating is the only truth in this world, we, too, will drown truth's brilliantly dressed, old donkey, navigate our boats with untameable hands for some time, drift away with the surging tides and then drown ourselves!



RISING TO THE SURFACE

A Response to 'The Rising of the Dead'

NEENA AHMED

Readers of this paper may have seen a "short story" entitled "The Rising of the Dead", which appeared on April 23, 2016. Presented as a work of fiction, this piece sought to exploit the most tragic event that ever befell our family: the death of our beloved 19-year old son, Naveed. The characters had their names changed, but with alterations so thinly-veiled that anyone with even a passing familiarity with our family would recognize them. But most shocking of all, this so-called story was written without permission or warning by the author, Zeena Choudhury. She blithely wrote of my pain, though she clearly lacks the capacity to understand the depth of it.

The simple truth is that the pain never fades. Not when it comes to the most unbearable, unimaginable loss there is, the loss of a child. So when people say that "time heals", well that has just not happened to me—nor is it, *probably*, the experience of all the other mothers and fathers who have been forced to bear this pain. That is a wound that cannot heal, does not heal, and will never heal.

Of course the nature of the pain changes, as it must. In the initial period, the pain was overwhelming, as it suffocated me, enveloping every inch of my body, permeating every nook of my soul. There is a reason that literature is full of expressions of "drowning in grief"; the metaphor is apt. In those moments, when you're in too deep, it can feel easier to just swim down, but somehow you must find the strength to turn around, to try to rise to the surface. For my husband and me, that strength came bit by bit, supported by our families, who surrounded us with their love; by our friends, who emerged from every corner of the globe; by our faith, which helped us gain a grip on the incomprehensible; by our younger son, for whom we were determined to provide whatever measure of normalcy possible; and by each other.

There came a turning point, when the oppressive weight of absence began to coexist with the vivid memory of the happiness we had experienced. Our son, Naveed, was 19 years old when he died, which means

that we were blessed with 19 years of his beautiful smile, his big laugh, his vivacious presence. Every moment of that is a treasure to be cherished. And in this regard, love would always be greater than loss—for no matter the pain, it pales in comparison to the joy he brought me, and that, that I would not trade away for anything.

Yet the pain persists, and the open wound can be pricked at any moment—by an innocent comment reminding me of a future our son will never enjoy, by a fleeting image on screen that embodies my greatest nightmare, by an unbidden thought into my mind in the middle of the night. So every day, in fact every second, we have to fight to rise to the surface, to learn to live with this new, unforeseen, unimaginable reality. We learnt to welcome new joys into our lives—as when our nephews, nieces, and our younger son got married, and then when we welcomed grandchildren into our family. We learn to honour Naveed's memory by living life as he would have wanted and appreciated, by laughing loudly and often, by enjoying the company of friends and family, by traveling the world.

Loving a child is innate, visceral; it embodies not just a basic social construct, but also the fundamental survival instinct of our species. That is perhaps one reason why so many people have opened their hearts to me over the years, whether friends whom I hadn't seen in ages, or family members both near and distant, or even strangers. A lady once came up to me when I was sitting on the shores of Lake Geneva, drawn by the sorrow etched into my face, and murmured words of support while pressing a prayer into my hands.

So it was all the more shocking for me to find that sorrow played across the pages of the Daily Star this past April, with some mish-mash of fact and fiction that appeared in the literature section. The story used thinly-veiled pseudonyms that would leave virtually everyone with a clear view of me as its main character, Sarah.

As I read the words for the first time, my eyes literally lost

focus—I couldn't get past the opening lines, how could she possibly do this, so blatantly expropriate my darkest pain for no fathomable purpose? Her writing was far beyond simply callous, it was downright cruel. She indulged in fantasy surrounding the days following Naveed's death, not even bothering to personify him, leaving him only as "a boy [who] had died". Did she not remember the hundreds of times he had spoken with her? I kept reading with a growing sense of unease, and realised that it was due to more than simply the horror of the subject matter. The prose was strikingly cold and devoid of emotion—perhaps it counted on readers filling in with emotions of their own. I felt a shuddering convulsion across my entire body.

How could that same person, whom I had known and looked up to, have written such a piece, painting a caricature of the most devastating event to ever befall our family?

How could she possibly have been so heartless as to write so casually about this most profound grief, which she witnessed firsthand?

The answers are, of course, clear to anyone who reads the words she wrote. She may well try to claim a laughable defense of literary merit, saying that this is just a story published in a literature section of a paper; but that claim is belied by the frankly insensitive writing, which takes on tired themes and does not even try to hide the reality that forms the underlying substance of the piece.

As shocked as I was by the cruel and hurting words written, the fiction told about my family, and the mockery made of the unimaginable grief felt by my husband and me, so too have I been buoyed by the outpouring of support that I have received from my family and the many readers of the piece who understood the source of the story. As for me, I just do what I have done every single day since that unending grief first threatened to drown me—I kick hard, and I rise to the surface.