

## A WELL-WISHER

KHASRUZZAMAN CHOUDHURY

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI: ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

An unexpected visitor suddenly entered into my office. I stood up from my chair as soon as I saw him. He was an important political heavy weight who I had known since the war of liberation.

"Mr. Abedin, what a pleasant surprise!" I said to the visitor while shaking his hand and asked him to sit down. Mr. Abedin was not alone; he had seven other companions who all squeezed into my tiny office. There only two chairs, so the other companions left the room.

"I am seeing you after more than two months," I said to Mr. Abedin while he sat down. I asked the office bearer to bring us some tea.

This was March 1972. I was a Section Chief in the government of newly independent Bangladesh. I belonged to the then East Pakistan Civil Service. I had gone over to India and worked for the government of Bangladesh in exile (Mujibnagar). I had heard that the government would be rewarding officials like me who had crossed with two years of ante dated seniority. I was not very excited about it as I was happy being a Section Chief, an office I could not have acquired under normal circumstances in such a short time.

I came to know Mr. Abedin while working with the freedom fighters in the border area of Sylhet. Although not a Member of the Parliament, Mr. Abedin carried a lot of political clout among other political leaders. He had a large band of followers in the party. I had a good relationship with him.

Mr. Abedin looked around my small office and said, "I see you have not had a promotion yet. But why, everyone in the Army has been promoted," he asked rhetorically.

"They are lucky in the Army unlike us," I said.

Mr. Abedin seemed to reflect on something and said in a casual manner, "I have always supported promotion of civil servants who took part in the war of liberation. Why, even the other day I told so and so (mentioning an influential Minister by name) that it was unfair not to promote people like you". He then gave me a litany of things that he had asked the Minister to do to impress upon me his closeness with the Minister.

Mr. Abedin continued with his speech while sipping tea. "I just returned from Pabna. You cannot imagine what devastation the Pakistan Army had



caused there. On top, our liberating force from across the border also plundered whatever was left. All roads, all bridges, everything has been destroyed. People rose up in arms to defend the country, now they will rise to build the country," Mr. Abedin declared emphatically.

I asked Mr. Abedin if he would like another cup, and he nodded his head. In such conversations it is customary to ply an important visitor with tea. A visitor will always judge how well he has been received by the quantity of tea served to him. I was aware of that.

A fresh cup of tea arrived. Mr. Abedin took it eagerly, and asked me in a low tone,

"Why don't you come to Pabna as Deputy Commissioner? I can request the Minister to send you there, if you want to."

"Deputy Commissioner of Pabna?" I was taken by complete surprise. "I cannot become a Deputy Commissioner just like that? This is several steps beyond my grade," I said to him.

Mr. Abedin dismissed my protests. "Leave aside the grade rules. These bureaucratic rules are not for a revolutionary government" he said. "We have brought about independence not to follow these archaic colonial rules. Promotions should not be based on seniority in service any more," Mr.

Abedin declared in a huff. I kept quiet.

In a few minutes, however, with a dramatic drop of voice Mr. Abedin softly asked me, "Then come as Sub Divisional Officer of Serajganj."

Now this was my turn to be shocked. In less than an hour Mr. Abedin's offer had dropped from the lofty position of Deputy Commissioner to a mere Sub Divisional Officer! But all these were mere talk, and therefore I was not really bothered.

Suddenly Mr. Abedin looked at his wrist watch and said rather excitedly, "Oh God, this is already eleven thirty! I have an appointment with the Communications Minister. I have to arrange a trip for him to Serajganj."

He then added, "You know how things are. It is so difficult to see a Minister these days. I had gone to see him this morning. But he is always surrounded by people, all hangers on seeking favor. I came to your office as I was unable to see him."

"Why don't you ask the Home Minister to restrict visitors to the Secretariat? That should free up the Ministers' time," I suggested rather sardonically.

"But will that be fair?" Mr. Abedin asked. "That would also create a problem. People do need to come to the Secretariat to lobby the Ministers and Secretaries for their work. How would they do it if they cannot come?"

Mr. Abedin left his chair and moved to the door. But in a sudden gesture he turned back as though he had suddenly remembered something.

"Look I have said many things to you because I consider you as a close friend, and because I am well-wisher. What I said is only for your consumption." Then in a conspiratorial gesture he looked around and thrust a little paper in my hand. "This is the file number of an abandoned property case that I am interested in. The file is about to come to you. I have already spoken with the Joint Secretary and the Secretary. They will support my case. All you have to do is agree with the proposal and send it up."

"You will do it, no? After all I am your well-wisher." He left the office smiling and I held on to the note he gave me with the file number. Can I say no to the proposal? He said he was my well-wisher, but more importantly he was also a political heavy weight who knew my bosses well!

## THE RUNAWAY STORIES

ASFA HUSSAIN

ALICE MUNRO



Runaway

"The living writer most likely to be read in a hundred years." - Atlantic Monthly

'Runaway' is the latest of Alice Munro's collection of short stories about women of all ages and circumstances, their lives and happenings. 'Silence' is the last part of the trilogy about Juliet, the active protagonist and her daughter Penelope, the voiceless yet dominant character. All of Munro's stories are set in small towns in Ontario, Canada. She writes about ordinary people and their everyday life, her characters vivid and real like our own. So real, almost similar to our next door neighbours, waiting to be analysed--about betrayals, surprises of love, between men and women, between friends, between parents and children.

In 'Silence', Juliet suddenly finds herself estranged from her twenty-one-year-old daughter Penelope who decides to go uncommunicado. It offers one of Munro's most complex explorations of reverberation of silence. Penelope uses silence as a weapon to sever relationship with her mother, wounding and punishing her. Munro portrays what the power of silence can do in domestic relationships. Juliet fails to apprehend the need of her daughter as well as the lack of certain practices at home, the religious teachings absent in recognising the fundamental principle of spirituality, something supreme and superior than ourselves, the very code to moral values which constitutes and binds societies and communities. When not recognised, it rejects virtues of rectitude, uprightness and morality. Munro in silence reminds us of the virtue of respecting tradition.

Juliet's success as an interviewer on Television, addressing and discussing other peoples' controversies and complexities contrasts her failure to recognise the needs of ethical spirituality in bringing up her daughter. It is as though Juliet took Penelope's presence being with her for granted. She put Penelope in a private school instead of a public one, allowed her to outings with her friends and went out to places by themselves as mother and daughters do.

They were always together. But at times when things weren't right between Eric and Juliet she wanted Penelope out of the way. This had a profound impact on Penelope's psyche, she was not considered a part of the complete family. Penelope was a love child and she resented the non-committal attitude of her mother towards her father. She was fond of her father, went sailing and fishing with him. Her father's death and cremation, without Penelope's consent distanced her further from her mother. Juliet had some men friends visiting her, Penelope resentful of the few affairs Juliet had. Juliet in her conversation with Christa, her friend and former mistress of Eric, tried to rationalise the reason why her twenty year old daughter suddenly no longer was in contact with her.

It is sad and pitiable as Juliet's suffered through so much from her daughter. Juliet later examines her own life through the disappearance of her daughter caught in a religious cult so as Juliet presumed. Silence, was Penelope's victory to conformism and tradition, and Juliet's defeat was the failure to provide Penelope with the desired religious studies and holiness in family relationships.

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## QUIET BY THE NAF

MOHAMMAD SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

Schools are burnt, houses torched  
Properties are looted, children killed  
Abduction and migration are settled  
When there's nothing left in the land  
The UN warns, the UN, so kind

They do not know the meaning of  
ethnic cleansing, they do not know  
how a human can open fire at other  
humans, hit children, torture women

They have lived here, in their own  
land, for years, since their forefathers  
built homes for them. They do not  
have skyscrapers, only humble houses

They do not want to go anywhere  
because they belong to this land and  
the land belongs to them. The trees  
here do not want to let them leave

Seeing the armed people involved in  
killing spree, reddened the green grass  
and walk on the dead bodies, the birds  
stopped singing and wish to die along

With a hope of living and seeing  
their children live, they attempt to  
cross the Naf, the river they have an  
eternal seam with, but in vain

Starving for days and weeks, they  
look like skeletons. Emaciated, their  
children cannot cry anymore - their  
eyes have enlarged, bones are visible

The Naf, the quiet Naf that still flows  
and still allows boats to carry the  
humans is helpless and sad, but it  
no more wants to see its water red.

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