

LIFE AND PEACE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

The apartment is quiet when Sarah wakes up this morning. She doesn't feel like getting up from bed and wants to just lie there, as though frozen, for a few minutes. There was a little pain in her stomach last evening, which woke her up in the middle of night, but the pain seems to have gone now. She tries to recollect where it was hurting, but does not remember much about the pain except that it started right after she had had her dinner and was walking towards the sink in the dining room to wash her hands. Chander Maa, her live-in caretaker-cum-cook, was watching her from the kitchen door and Sarah did not want to show any signs of pain lest it cause Chander Maa to raise an alarm. After she came back to the dining table and sat down, she motioned to Chander Maa to take away the plates and the leftover food. Chander Maa had suspected something was not right, but learned from all the years that it is better to wait and see, and brings Sarah some warm water to drink.

Sarah misses her children at moments like these but she is almost used to living alone after eight years. When her youngest left for Saudi Arabia, he said to Sarah, "Amma, I will return within four years. I cannot stay there for more than that, and after saving some money for the children, I'll be back."

Sarah knew that while Sujon was sincere when he made the promise, it is hard for anyone to return, and settle back into Dhaka life after living abroad, and once you get used to the comfort, abundance, and carefree lifestyle elsewhere. All her sons, except one, went abroad either to study or to work, and never came back except for sporadic visits for a year or two while they changed jobs, to conduct field research or change domicile. She feels sad for Ramiz, her fourth, who she feels is the only one who genuinely wanted to stay in Dhaka, but was pulled away by the lure of better jobs, and probably also the spirit of adventure that she always had. Jobs are harder to find in his profession, architecture, in Bangladesh!

Sarah walks over to the dining table, sits down on a chair and tries to recall what woke her up this morning. She gives up and tiptoes towards the servant quarter to check if Chander Maa has woken up. She lets Chander Maa sleep since she and her teenage son Aziz who often stays with her mother go to bed very late, after they have cleaned all the plates, dishes, and the pots and pans. Once they retire to their room, mother and son often chat for hours. Sarah feels that she should set aside some money for Aziz should she pass away or just keep it in case he decided to quit school and go into business. She is worried about him, since they are the only family she has now.

She did not realize how much time had passed when she noticed Chander Maa peeking out from behind the curtain in her room.

"Amma, when did you wake up? Are you feeling alright?"

"Yes, yes, no cause for concern. I woke up a few minutes ago and thought I'd read the newspaper. But the paper hasn't arrived. May be the hawkler left it downstairs, and the night guard hasn't been able to bring them up yet."

She misses her sons, five of them are abroad, and the one who lives in the country is in a remote tea garden and can't visit her often. But she misses her eldest the most. Faiz went abroad, got married to an American, and comes home only once every three or four years. Chander Maa notices that Sarah is lost in her thoughts with her face turned towards the window where the morning sun's rays are streaking through.



The Artist's Mother (1628) by Rembrandt van Rijn. Medium: Etching.

"Amma, please have your tea. It's getting cold. You look a little absent-minded today". Sarah bristles at this reference to her mood.

"What are you talking about now, Chander Maa? I have doctor's appointment this morning and my pills are finished. Can you at least find out if the driver is here? And where is the newspaper?"

She does not like Chander Maa to remind her about her forgetfulness or pick on her habits. Her children used to do that when they lived in Dinajpur with her and even after they had their own families. Today, she is feeling again a little nervous about the visit to the doctor. Every time she visits the doctor, she finds out some new symptoms and these keep her worried for days on end. Her diabetes is under control, but the blood cholesterol reading has been fluctuating. The pills keep on multiplying, and Chander Maa helps her keep track of these laid out on a large tray. She wonders what new surprises await her at the dispensary today.

The phone rings, and Chander Maa picks up the phone. She passes Sarah the handset indicating in gestures that it is one of her sons.

"Hello, who is this?"

"Amma, it's me, Faiz. How are you?"

"I am fine. How are you? Is everything all right? How is Cindy?"

"Yes, yes. I am flying in on Sunday. No need to send the car to the airport. My friend Shafiq is going to receive me. You remember him, the Police Chief?"

"Well, how is that going to appear? The driver will be there and Aziz will accompany him."

"No reason to bother Amma. I will be fine. What I need to tell you is that I will be staying for a few months this time. I want to start a business in Bangladesh. I will also be able to spend some time with you."

After she hangs up the phone, Sarah tells Chander Maa and Aziz about Faiz's trip. The guest room has to be cleaned and some of the old trash has to be removed. She gives them a long list of instructions to tidy up the room in anticipation of Faiz's arrival.

At the doctor's chamber, Dr. Badrul Khan, Sujon's classmate, greets her and takes her inside, He informs Sarah that there will be blood works today and an MRI of her liver.

On Saturday, she gets a call from Dr. Badrul. "Khalamma, I hope you are doing well. Well, when is Faiz Bhai coming?"

"You called at the right moment. His flight comes in tomorrow afternoon." She pauses, and has an afterthought it seems. "Why, did you want him to bring something from America?"

"Oh, no, Khalamma. I just wanted to see if he can come with you on your next visit soon."

"Why? He will just have arrived and I did not want him to get involved with my medical issues. I know he will be there once he has settled down."

"Khalamma, I want to make an appointment for you on Monday. The results of MRI and the other tests indicate that we need further follow-up tests. And you need to cut down on meat and acidic food to give the liver a little rest. The pain that you experienced is there for a reason, and I wanted to go over my plans in the presence of Faiz Bhai."

She hangs up with the doctor and comes back to the dining table. She does not like the idea of getting Faiz involved in her medical treatment plans. If the pain gets worse, things will take its proper course, but she decides against informing Faiz or calling the doctor's office again. Allah is the Malik and if he decides that her days are numbered so be it.

Dr Abdullah Shibli lives and works in Boston, USA.

TWO POEMS

REZAUDDIN STALIN

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI
BY GULSHAN ARA KAZI

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

I learnt the essence of life sacrificing most invaluable treasures
With bitter experiences and losing the memories of the past

Leaving behind my songs and numerous gardens of charred memories
And the diary of abuse documenting everyday frustrations
Of a dumb, unfortunate dwarf and grief of unfulfilled desire
To so many bloody sunny days

Being allured by intense greed
Having fear of losing my dignity and facing the cunning society
I can't even move forward

I had debt and responsibility, but now I am left with deep repentance
That eats up my sense of values and scolds me with unfinished story

Why did Goutom leave his throne and royalty
And oft to win over hunger and misery and attain immortality

Why did the key of 'Karu' sink in water?
And the sound of Moses's stick turn river into land?

Would Abraha return again to break the long arch?
Ababil knows how insignificant is meditation in the context of time

Once again, Jesus will make the blinds see again by his touch
History only distorted truth in a sealed room

Seeing all, how much more insults can I take?
As the sharp sword of Damocles dances over my head
If the words of might are the only significant things on a blank white page
Poets unwritten verses are even more precious than that.



Sword of Damocles
(1812)
By Richard Westall.

INTERVIEWING A DEAD MAN

A man laying in the corner of a foot path, seemed dead
But, surprisingly his body shook up
As the neck of an Ox shakes up
When a fly seats on it

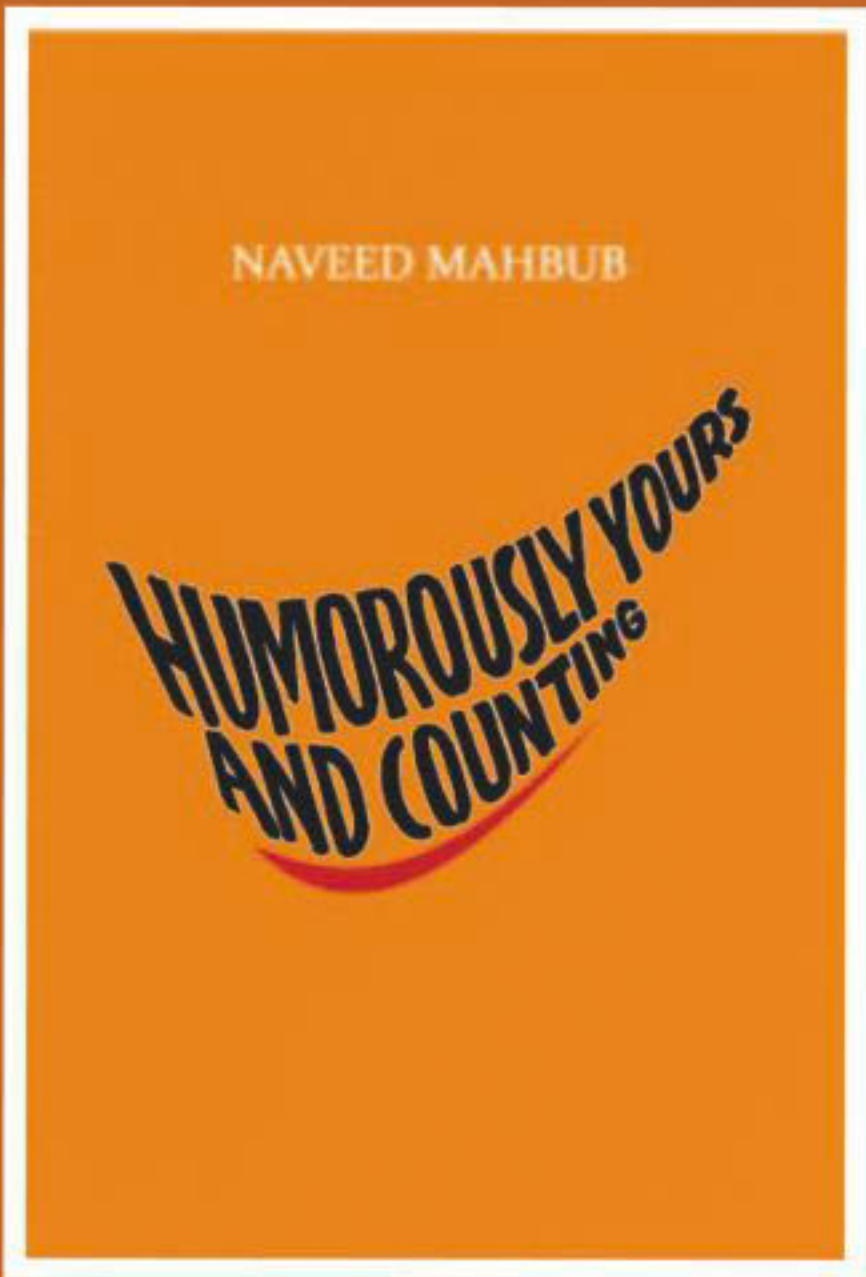
Out of curiosity, a passerby stoops down to see him
Are you dead? He asks
Instantly, the dead man replies with angry scolding voice
"No, not yet, but does that matter to you?"
The passerby asks, why then play dead?
The dead man does not respond to the irrelevant query
And rolls over on the other side
Then he asks with infuriated voice
"Tell me, what is the point of playing alive?"

Requiem for the Youth

BARRISTER MD HARUN AR RASHID

Killing innocent people, killing yourself,
leading boys and girls astray
What is it good for?
What is it that drives you, religion or humanity?

Certainly not! It is the Devil, of course!
Spread love, not hate
for that is divine.



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