



FICTION

Decision Pending

ARIFA GHANI RAHMAN

He was hell-bent on getting out of Purgatory. There was no good reason for him to be in this position but here he was. It really wasn't his fault though. A simple, small-time businessman, Nawab Ali had never cheated anyone; nor had he tried to take shortcuts to prosperity, though the opportunities had constantly presented themselves. He had been happy with the little he had managed to scrape together. It had been enough to acquire a tiny piece of land on the outskirts of Dhaka where he had built a small tin shed for his family of four. He had been afraid that his mother, on seeing the new place, would decide to move in with his family. Thankfully though, his older brother had pouted and protested. Neither Nawab Ali nor his wife got along well with her and the small quarters would certainly have created a chaos he was not ready to handle. In fact, her presence would have wreaked havoc on his marriage. The children were fond of their grandmother, but even they couldn't tolerate her for too long. She tended to interfere in everything, for she thought such interference as dispensing good, wholesome advice. But children these days, she would say, shaking her head in disappointment as she did so, didn't know a good thing when they had it.

Thinking of his mother brought back memories of his early days. His father had been quite well-off, but miserly. Anyone who saw the family would think they were always in dire need: the children, though named handsomely, wore ragged clothes and looked malnourished; the mother's hair had turned grey before her time; the house was dilapidated. And yet, the grave in which Nawab Ali's father finally lay was elaborate to a fault. He had almost literally taken his money to his grave with him. No one knew how much the old man had accumulated and no one benefitted from his death. The family had struggled to make ends meet until Nawab Ali decided to come to Dhaka to try his luck. He had been in his early twenties then and full of hope. Hard work had not deterred him and soon, he began to do well. His older brother was jealous at not having the same success even though he had started earlier, but Nawab Ali did not really care. Though he was willing to lend

a hand when necessary, Nawab Ali refused to indulge his brother's frequent self-pitying laments. Once, just once, he had allowed himself to listen, and that had been enough – he had never made that mistake again.

Such thoughts distracted him for a while from his present predicament but were not enough to overcome his feelings of anxiety, worry, fear – fear, above all. Nawab Ali was not normally afraid of much. Once, as a child, he had nearly drowned when his older brother had held him under water for just a little longer than he should have. He had let go when their mother screamed on realizing what was happening. Later, his brother had said he was trying to teach his brother to swim underwater.



Everyone believed him then, except Nawab Ali, who had seen the wild look in his brother's eyes just before he had pushed him in. This experience had taken all fear out of Nawab Ali. Afterwards, no matter what his brother did, he could not cow the boy anymore. Nawab Ali, the man, was not to be intimidated either. But, in this situation, where he saw no chance of rescue or escape, he was scared.

Nawab Ali tried to look around but his head seemed to be immobilized by some heavy objects. It was pitch dark and his eyes should have become accustomed to the situation by now. Surprisingly, though, he hadn't. He suddenly realized he was blindfolded. Why would anyone take so much trouble with a man like him? He tried to think of a reason that may have led to this situation but he couldn't.

What had he ever done to anyone to deserve this? He knew he was a good man. Once or twice, he had veered – indulged in a little drink and flirted with a woman or two. But this was nothing serious – at least he told himself it wasn't. He had, in fact, fantasized about one of those women for days on end. Every time he went to his wife – and he went to her quite frequently for a few days – he imagined she was her. His wife was shocked by his vigor. He had seemed a changed man for some time. When she finally commented on his behavior, he stopped in his tracks. He was normally very controlled but this revelation caused him much grief. He then prayed continuously for forgiveness for several days. His wife's comments put an end to his prayers as well and

trying to do better, even at the cost of a weekly payment to undeserving causes. His wife warned him to be careful. She knew of his fearlessness and that scared her even more. When Nawab Ali began to prosper, though, her fears were allayed and she grew complacent, believing that the few takas he lost to the goons served as insurance against bigger troubles.

Nawab Ali laughed to himself. If only his wife could see him now! Blindfolded, hands and legs trussed up like a chicken about to be slaughtered, Nawab Ali thought of the picture he made. He tried to make his mind think logically now. Perhaps this was a case of mistaken identity! Whoever had kidnapped him would soon realize the error and let him go. He was not well-off enough to pay a ransom; besides, he was not an important political figure whose disappearance would affect many. Why him, then? Apart from his wife and children, he didn't think he mattered to anyone. His mother might shed a tear or two, but she would bounce back in no time at all. She was quite resilient that way. So why did someone go to all this trouble?

Nawab Ali heard a sound and then voices. He stiffened and waited—not that he had any other alternative. A heated but whispered debate was going on. Nawab Ali strained his ears – could he recognize the voices? Could he perhaps decipher the reason for his current condition? But it was hopeless. Whoever was talking was determined to keep him in the dark, literally. Suddenly, Nawab Ali was hauled up. There was complete silence now, except for the sharp intake of breaths and a grunt or two around him. Nawab Ali felt a rush of air and realized he was outside now. He tried to resist, but it was no use. He was being swung in mid-air, back and forth, back and forth. Once, twice, thrice. Then he was hurtling through the air. At that moment, he wished he knew the reason why such things were happening to him, but there was no one to explain. In limbo, resignedly, he waited for the final decision.

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POETRY

The Nature of the Linguistic Sign

NAUSHEEN EUSUF

"In language there are only differences without positive terms."

—Saussure

Signifier: Alas, that I am only what I am not.
There is no me, but many nots of you.
And is it not the same that holds for you?
Is that our lot? To be not and not and not?
If only I knew what I was before I became
what I am not. Am I the figure or the ground?
In what well of being is my truth to be found?
How should I presume to know or name?

Signified: What good is being in the nameless prison
in which I find myself, not knowing why?
How to speak of that infantile despair?
How to say one's truth? How to cry
one's quivering being to the abstracted air,
to the indifferent, uncomprehending sun?

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The Principle of Resonance

HASAN MARUF



The Architect of designated Life
Calculates the gravitational pull
Against the leverage of resonance
To a precise second of entrance.
Our plotted trajectory course
Is determined by our final blueprint;
The diaphanous mystery of choice
Is balanced between past and present:
We remember who we were before
Time allotted this experience
And recognize who we are
Despite our current existence.
After all
"A bond between souls is ancient –
Older than the planet."

Hasan Maruf teaches language and literature in Baridhara Scholars Institute and writes poems and fiction.

Rice

BIBHUTIBHUSHAN BANDOPADHYAY
TRANSLATED BY SOHANA MANZOOR

In the wooded marshland of Manbhoom, the mountain peaks stretched beyond the horizon. Spring was almost gone; palash trees in full bloom had set the forest afire. From the highlands of Naaktitar, one could look in any direction and see only boundless red palash rows stretching into the blue ridges of the mountains.

I had come for a walk in the woods as I lived in a guest house near the palash forest. My job was to look after the trees and estimate the profit the forest department would garner. When I was returning from Naaktitar forest one evening I saw a man sitting under a tree with a little girl. They were busy eating. It was a forlorn-seeming dusk and the deep forests of Baghmundi still lay ahead of me. I was curious to learn where the two were from. There were streaks of white in the man's black hair; I couldn't guess his age. He had a bundle with him containing a couple of rags, a thin quilt, some pulses and an empty tin can of biscuits or tea. The tin can probably served as both plate and pot. The girl was about four or five years old. She wore a piece of rag and had a copper bell tied around her waist with a black cord.

I stopped and said to them, "Where are you from? And where are you off to?"

The man spoke in the local Manbhoom dialect "Todang. I'm going to Todang... do you have a light, by any chance?"

You mean matches? Yes... but Todang? Is that a long way off?"

About ten miles, I would say.

"So where are you coming from? It's getting dark."

"From Purulia. . . . Can you give me the light, sir? I'm so tired. The child's mother died when she was two years old. I dared not go into the jungle to collect firewood leaving her alone at home. So I went to Purulia where I begged for a living for two years."

He spoke with such rustic charm that I decided to have a chat with him. At this time, there was nothing much to do for me at the guest-house. Why not talk to this traveler instead? There was a large boulder nearby. I sat

on it, offered him a bidi and took one myself. Apparently, he lived in a small village in the Baghmundi and Jhaldia forest range, surrounded by palash, mohua and banyan trees. His wife had died when his daughter was about two years old. He was a woodcutter, but after the death of his wife he couldn't leave his small child alone in the hut. Nor could he take her along with him to the hills because of the rain and sun. So he had decided to leave home and find work in Purulia.

"So, how much did you earn as a woodcutter?" I asked.

The man took a long puff and said, "Three to four annas per bundle, sir. I had to pay two paisa to the forest office as tax. But rice was cheap; my wife and I were just fine. Then this baby was born and her mother died. I didn't feel like leaving her home by herself. So I thought I would go to Purulia and earn some money for us."

"Is Purulia a big town?"

"Oh, yes. I couldn't figure out even in two years how to go from one side of town to the other. It certainly is big..."

I gave him another bidi. The plot was getting intriguing and I said, "What happened then?"

He then narrated how he had gone to Purulia to find a man from a neighboring village. At a rich man's door he had got a few coins, bought some chick-peas for dinner and spent the night under a tree. In the middle of the night, however, they were chased away by the police. Next day, he had found the man he was looking for. But he was not what he claimed to be in the country. He boasted in the village that he was a peon of some eminent person but was really a hawker. He sold tobacco at times and water pitchers on some occasions. This self-proclaimed important neighbor and his wife apparently lived in a small house with two rooms.

Nevertheless, the man agreed to let them stay in the verandah of his house. But the woodcutter had to fend for himself. That is where he had been staying for the past two

years. Afterwards there was this price-hike. The price of rice became eighteen taka per maund. People didn't want to give alms any more. But he and his child would have stayed on regardless if the people at the place where they were staying hadn't caused problems for them. Apparently, these people had relatives coming and wanted the duo to leave. Three days ago the ex-woodcutter had thus decided to leave the town and return to Todang village.

All this while, his little girl was drumming on the biscuit tin. He looked at her tenderly and said to me, "I call her Thupi."

I smiled and complimented him, "Nice name."

The proud father smiled and said, "Yes, Thupi." He then said, "Could you spare a few coins to buy some tobacco?"

I didn't have cash as I had just gone to the woods for a stroll. I gave him the two paisas I had. Thupi said something to her father and he took her on his shoulders. I stared at the two of them as they resumed their journey. The pathway steeped upward and I couldn't see what lay ahead except the strange, sad silhouette of a man and his little child walking toward the sunset.

I couldn't help wondering about the pair. He had taken up his daughter with so much love and now the two were heading back to their village! But what prospect did they have of finding food if they couldn't get any in town? They soon disappeared from my sight.

The food situation worsened. The price of rice first shot up to sixteen to eighteen taka per maund and then to thirty-two taka, and then to forty. At this point I had to leave Bihar and go to Comilla, East Bengal. The scene I encountered there was unbelievable. Not even in my worst nightmares had I imagined coming across such suffering.

I stayed with a relative and saw them coming from dusk to late night—lines of emaciated children and elderly men and women bent with age. They came with blackened utensils in hand and begged for starch from boiled rice. All the way from Comilla to the station I heard countless tales

of people dying of hunger. I heard such stories on the train and in the boat.

When I came back to Bihar, I found that the famine had spread to this state too. Little children waited with pans at the narrow drain of Boheragoda boarding school to collect the starch that fell through the narrow drain of the kitchen. Even rice starch was precious at this point!

The headmaster of the school observed that all these poor children would fight with street dogs for the starch and wait for it all day long and at night.

One day when I was going from Purulia to Adra, I saw people throwing leaves on the platform after having eaten food off them. I saw too naked, skeletal children licking the scattered leaves after having wiped them clean.

Around this time I came to a new place where a number of people were working in the forest under the supervision of a contractor. They were blasting rocks and boulders with dynamite.

One day, I saw a crowd gathered outside the doctor's place. On the narrow verandah in front of the doctor's chamber lay a coolie with a blood-soaked bandage on his back. Blood was dripping from the bandage and I could see blood even on the bricks.

I asked the people there, "What happened to him?"

The doctor replied, "Accidents like this happen all the time now. Pieces of rocks from dynamite explosions often cause serious injuries. Such a rock crushed this man's spinal cord. I have stitched him up, but he has to be taken to the Tatanagar hospital. An ambulance is on its way."

I made my way through the crowd to take a look at the man. A girl of about five or six was sitting near him. She wasn't crying, but was chewing a piece of straw intently.

I recognized her as Thupi, the little girl I had met some eight months ago.

I looked carefully at the wounded coolie lying on the verandah. Yes, he was indeed Thupi's father who had boasted proudly to me, "I have named her Thupi."

I asked those standing around if they knew anything more about him.

Someone said, "He is from Manbhoom, sir."

"Where in Manbhoom?"

"A village called Todang."

"Doesn't he have any relatives?"

"What relatives, sir? There's only that girl-child. He had come a long way from home because the company would give rice on a weekly basis, sir."

"How much rice do they give?"

"Five and a half kg, sir."

I could clearly read the history of Thupi and her father. He returned home and saw that the thatched hut was gone. There was no rice was to be had, or even if there was rice, it was priced beyond his means. He stayed there as long as he could and lived on whatever he could afford: grains, and then yam, wild pumpkins and berries. I have heard many such stories from different coolies about what they would do to survive, until they would come here. The wages and rice enticed them all. Even if they could earn money elsewhere, rice they couldn't get. I had already found that out about the people of Boheragoda.

The ambulance came. Thupi's father was carried into the wagon and he made a single sound of pain only. He didn't look at his prized possession Thupi even once. Nor did he call for her.

The doctor whispered, "Tata is twenty-seven miles from here. I doubt he will last that long. The ride is hard and his bleeding hasn't stopped."

Through the red earthen road that ran between the shal forests the ambulance sped with Thupi's father, taking him to some unknown destination, to some western sky, from birth to death. He had no time to think with who he would be leaving his darling, about to be orphaned Thupi!

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