

Great love stories and heartbroken lovers have an effortless way of entering the human psyche and eventually writing themselves down in the annals of history. I am not immune to them either.

Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, Cleopatra and Mark Antony, Heathcliff and Catherine, Laila and Majnu—all have been quoted and misquoted in many a love letter penned by yours truly in full blown teenage angst. But it was a while after the tumultuous teen years that I was to meet my unrequited lady love.

She is a friend and a foe. She is all encompassing and she can take away all. The mighty Sundarbans, the enchanted forest, the recipient of my modern-day love letters.

When in my freshman year of university I first visited her, I remained enthralled for days after. An intoxication of sorts, that was hard to shake off. In the years since, I visited the forest of copper sunrises and sunsets many times. Most times as part of a large group (study tours), taking somewhat comfortable ships, eating good food and walking safe trails, always with the promise of a tiger sighting (never happened). Each time, I fell in love more and more. I romanced the forest. In her many changing faces and colors, she felt sometimes human. Alive.

I was a particularly starry-eyed, prone to day-dreaming kind of a child. After my second grade teacher explained the meaning of the word imagination to us, there was no stopping me. I imagined flocks of pink flamingoes (a little improbable in Bangladesh) flying through the blue-skies, I imagined huge elephants grazing in my backyard and I imagined faraway lands full of untold adventures. Like one of my favourite childhood books, I imagined quests in The Enchanted Wood.

The pink flamingoes of childhood gave way to a more realistic, “*shada bok pakhi*” through the wispy white and blue clouds of Bengal. And I continued to romance the wild and thus was born my great unrequited love affair with the “Beautiful Forest”.

In April of 2015, the monsoons came early to Khulna, one of the main southern districts of the country. This was going to be one of my longest trips to the Sundarbans—12 days. Although I had been to the forest and even stayed in a rest-house within the jungle, quite a few times before owing to my undergraduate studies, Environmental Science—this time promised to be different.

I remember each detail of the journey vividly. The bus from Dhaka's Kallyanpur, a Greenline Volvo, was two hours late. The supervisor, a young man, forgot to load the water bottles that were usually given for free during journeys by AC buses. There was a brawl: “*Ei miah apni ki faizlami paisen. Prothom e bus late aar ekhon pani o diben na*”, “*Bhai bujhar cheshta koren, ami notun chakri te*,” the young man answered. And then silence following promises to buy everyone water after we managed to cross the midnight jam of Gabtoli, one of the busiest gateways in and out of Dhaka.

Sleeping sporadically through the journey, the world outside the

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PHOTO: SAKIB AHMED

At the break of dawn, a small country boat makes its way through the still waters of a creek in the largest mangrove forest in the world, The Sundarbans.

THE GREAT BENGAL ROMANCE WITH THE SUNDARBANS

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

windows—small tin-shed stores, advertisements of Chaka Washing Powder, the odd starched yellow sari left to dry on the bamboo fences—jumped from the outside and made their way into my dreams. In a happy, hallucinated state, the bus dropped us off at the city square in Khulna. After a quick morning meal, we made it to the Jail Ghat. Here, our small engine boat, capable of carrying about 10 people, was waiting for us. Freshly painted mint-green, she was tiny compared to the monstrous tourist ships that usually ply the many hundred rivers crisscrossing the heart of the tide country.

Since we were to go to the depths of the forest for the sake of science, we had special permits in hand to take the small research vessel inside the Sundarbans. Our boat, let us call her *Golpata*, had a crew of four apart from the four passengers (our research team of four).

Captain: he did everything—maneuver the ship, engineer quick devices to catch the rainwater, fix up the ice-box and spot wildlife. Cook Shaidul: I believe his true vocation was to cook wedding feasts, but for us he whipped together humble meals of fish curry and



PHOTO: SAYAM U CHOWDHURY

An Oriental Small-Clawed Otter looks on as the movement of a boat rowing through a creek breaks the silence of the forest.

vegetables and sometimes Kewra soup. Kaku: old, withered under the weather, lines etched on his face, he rowed the small country boat that was used to enter the small creeks, inaccessible by *Golpata*. And Belal: well, Belal did everything, get into fights, row boats (when Kaku took a prayer or paan break), tell stories, cook crab dinners, help in surveys, fish in the small creeks of Sundarbans and throw in the occasional joke here and there.

The first day, we spent the whole morning docked at Jail Ghat, waiting for a favourable tide to head into the forest. Around 1:00 am, *Golpata* slowly creaked

out of her resting place, collected fuel and huge blocks of ice, and we moved first towards Mongla, then Chadpai and then further and further into the forest until we reached the opening to the sea. The plan was to go to the end first and then make our way through the forest surveying the creeks slowly, using the country boat, as we moved back up.

It would take a whole day before we made it to Jamtala, from where work was to start. *Golpata* crossed the bustling Mongla port. After a colonial era inspired breakfast of butter, jam, soft

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PHOTO: SAYAM U CHOWDHURY

Fishermen rest and catch up after a long days work with their boats tied together.

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white bread and hard-boiled eggs, we sat on the dock and watched as the barren river side slowly began to get dense. As we edged closer to Chadpai range, the forest was taking shape. The rains were a constant company. And while we waited docked by a broken ghat near Chadpai range at a place called Dangmari, to collect our permission papers from the local forest office, the Gangetic River Dolphins and the Irawaddy Dolphins came out to play. As the tide changed, the dolphins got more and more active. Our team leader, a formidable German lady, who has been coming to the forest for the last 30 years, told us stories of her encounters with the Gangetic River and the Irawaddy Dolphins.

Enchanted I watched as the forest romances us. She was happy that day, in

a chirpy mood. For a while, we forgot the deep politics embroiling the Sundarbans, the worry she felt was forgotten too, only for a little while.

As night fell, we were at Harintana. Here we would spend the rest of the night before the tide was favourable again to make it to Jamtala in a few more hours. I climbed down from *Golpata* into the country boat tied by her. We all sat there, huddled, as the sky cleared for a brilliant view of the milky-way. The orion's belt was clear too. The stories of the night died down, the lights of *Golpata* turned off. And the forest encased us. And yet again I was transported into the stories of my childhood. I heard the forest, an alarm-call of a Barking Deer from far far away, the slow wish-whoosh sounds of the Nipa Palm, as though talking to me. I thought of Joe, Bessie and Franny from *The Magic Faraway Tree* and decided they must have been on to the faraway forest. They must have known, she really is alive. For how

else, did she have so much command over us?

By afternoon the next day, we were at Jamtala. We walked out into the jetty and made our way to the watch-tower. Here, legends say, were the tiger hills where the Bengal Tiger rests after a meal of the Barking Deer. We spent the rest of the afternoon rowing against the tide on the country boat, surveying creeks for an elusive bird of the forest. Monitor Lizards, alarmed by our presence in the height of monsoon, fell thud-thud into the banks and slithered away in the water. They were not expecting people until October (the peak tourist-season in Sundarbans is during winter).

As sunset approached at Jamtala, our work for the day was done and the rains also took a leave, only to return during surveys for the days after. We took the country boat out to the opening of the Jamtala creek to watch the sunset. Somewhere nearby was Katka. The sounds of the crashing waves at times

mimicking the roars of a tiger.

In the forest, during these 12 odd days, our only other human company was the occasional fleet of fishermen we came across from time to time. In the mornings, we would wake up early, grab tea, conduct a quick survey, and then head back for breakfast. After which more surveys, almost all of them soaked in the rains, till evening fell. We traversed many hundreds of creeks, some so small that our six-feet wide boat touched the banks of the creek edge to edge. Some creeks hung low with the old Kewra and flaming red leaves of the Gewa trees. Whilst in some, white-lipped pit vipers slithered close to our heads. Some others were lined with Nipa Palm, towering high.

At nights, I listened to the stories of tiger killings, stories of tigresses' walking with her cubs under the full moon at Katka beach and of dead people set afloat on *bhelas* in an attempt to revive them with the blessing of Monosha Devi. I saw Kaku give prayers to Bonbibbi before each boat journey and I was made aware of how unforgiving the Sundarbans can become.

It was during my nights here, plunged in darkness, beaten by the monsoon winds, and engulfed by the whooshing sounds of dolphins breathing, I grasped all that was at stake for the sake of power. Home to the Gangetic River dolphins and the Irrawaddy Dolphins, the last remaining Bengal Tigers, the brilliant orange-brown Ruddy Kingfisher, the Oriental small-clawed otters and the ill-fated, Masked Finfoot, the Sundarbans stands to lose it all. Thanks to plans for building coal-based power plants- Rampal Power Plant Project and another small power plant right at the edge of the forest.

Despite, media outcry and international pressure, there are no plans to budge and I find myself at a loss trying to cope with the deep sense of despair. Maybe this is the despair felt by Scarlett O'Hara as Rhett Butler leaves her on the stairs.

Parting note: we found a few Masked Finfoots during our surveys (the reason why we were primarily there) through the Sundarbans, but that is a story for another Friday.

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ABOUT TOWN

PERFORMANCE DAY
DIGITAL MUSIC COMPOSITION
Organiser: EMK Centre
October 28, 12.30 - 2.30 pm, EMK Centre, Midas Centre Building, Dhanmondi

CHITRANGADA POETIC DRAMA
Organiser: Swapnadal Production
October 29, 7- 8.15 pm, Studio Theatre Hall, Bangladesh Shilpokola Academy

CURRENT ART EXHIBITION
Organiser: Duaree
October 27 - November 15, 3-8pm, Duaree Art Cafe, Dhanmondi Road 2