



FICTION

Patriot Acts

NADEEM ZAMAN

Early the next morning, after Rafi finally turned off the TV and closed his eyes on the couch, a text message startled him out of sleep: "Get a big American flag, hang outside your door, Dad." His father always signed off, even though his name would appear with his texts and calls. Rafi set down the phone and tried to sleep again. A second text intruded on it: "Take down Black Lives Matter sign. Please. For now. Dad."

Rafi heard Caroline in the bedroom, sniffing, and fighting through sobs to speak in complete sentences with her mother. She'd started crying around the same time that millions around the country like her began taking their fears seriously that something was afoot in Florida that did not bode well. Florida, again. And of course, the Rust Belt of Ohio and Pennsylvania, and the misunderstood, ignored white working classes of Michigan and Wisconsin. Entire swathes of the country that had lost its head over the Non-Establishment candidate.

"Dad?" Rafi said into his phone when his father answered after the first ring. "Did you do what I said?" his father asked.

"No, Dad. And I'm not going to." "At least take down the -"

"Dad. I'm not taking anything down. I'm tired. We were up all night. I have to teach later."

"Call your mother when you can. She's worried."

"Mom, we aren't the only people in the country; our worry is nothing, it's not even worry," Caroline said into her phone in the bedroom.

"Okay, Dad." Rafi gripped the phone. "Mom, I couldn't care less about Thanksgiving," said Caroline.

Rafi walked to the bedroom and stood at the door. Caroline saw him. Her eyes were red and puffy. Her hair hung stringy down the sides of her face. Her chin was pinned to her chest, her eyes blinking through tears.

By end of the first hour of the World Trade Center attacks in 2001 Rafi's father, Haider Samad, had amassed a collection of American flags. "I want them to see the flag first, before they see my brown face," he'd said, clipping on a miniature one to the door of his car, and offering one to Rafi. "Take it, son. I'm telling you, these Americans will see nothing else for a long time to come."

The other ones included one for the front yard draped on a plastic flagpole that kept tipping over no matter how much deeper into the soil it was pushed each time; one was hung from the roof of the garage in the back, a bumper sticker for Rafi's mother's car, and a lapel pin flag for his father's shirts and coats. When the war started in Afghanistan and Iraq was invaded less than two years later, yellow "Support Our Troop" stickers covered Rafi's father's car so profusely that he was pulled over by the police and told to remove the one obstructing his license plate.

Caroline ended the call and dropped the phone on the bed like a wasted part of her body she'd finally let go. The weight of her sobbing kept her head down. For a moment, Rafi wondered if there was other bad news she'd received

from her mother.

"I don't want to move to Canada," she said, bringing her face up. It was a pulp of tears and soggy skin. Two red patches stamped her cheeks. Matted strands of hair stuck to her forehead.

"Neither do I," said Rafi. He told her what his father had been up to. "I'm not putting up flags and I'm not taking down any signs."

"I can't believe my father voted for that man," Caroline crumpled into herself again, one last burst of tears racking her body.

"Are you going to work?" Rafi's mother asked when he called.

"Of course I am," Rafi answered.

"Just be careful," said Naima Samad. "This morning there was graffiti on the school across the street. 'Build the wall.' Many of my co-workers didn't come to work. Are these people serious? Letting that nincompoop be president? And why are so many people also being so

Haider Samad's self-protective patriotism lasted until the first whistles began blowing over the false claims of Saddam's WMDs. He'd dismissed Rafi when he told him that that story was developing. "That maniac should have been killed in the First Gulf War. Give me the gun, I'll do it myself." A Bangladeshi being so passionate about the removal of Iraq's dictator was confounding, but Haider Samad had fought the army of Pakistan to liberate Bangladesh, so it was believable that murderous dictators in uniform anywhere in the world could hold a special place of hate for him. "They're doing it again," he said, as the first reports of no WMDs started making the country uncomfortable. "For oil. Again. God knows what this will start now and for how long."

Rafi snapped awake at the buzzing of his phone.

"Dad? It's five-thirty in the morning."

Caroline mumbled thickly, turned to the other side, and resumed snoring.

properly.

"Everyone has the right to say what they want, Dad."

"No! Unless you participate you don't have a voice. You made your decision, you live with it. I'm going to. Voting for Trump isn't the worst decision a man can make."

"Dad, there's no logic or reason on earth that'll convince me that voting for Trump was a good thing. My friends, my colleagues, everyone knows how I feel and I make no bones about it."

Haider Samad rattled a clot of mucus in his throat. "There was no way I was going to vote for another Clinton. And Sanders. If he can't say one-hundred percent what he means every time, then he should have stayed out of presidential politics."

"Dad, I have to go." Rafi pulled the phone from his head and looked at it as if it had spit in his ear. "Are you serious?" "I'm very serious," said Haider. "Get



scared? What's going on? We saw worse things in our time back home."

The first time Rafi and Caroline had seen Caroline's father, Bert, with the red Make America Great Again baseball cap was by accident. Bert had attended a rally early in the campaign, just out of curiosity, he'd said. As he pulled into the driveway the hat was on his head. Caroline and Rafi were helping Joy, her mother, in the garage. Bert had forgotten the hat until it hit the roof of the car as he was exiting. He snatched it off his head like contraband and tossed it on the passenger-side floor. He kept laughing off suggestions of actually voting for Trump until the Republican National Convention. That night, he and Caroline had a shouting match over the phone.

"I can't believe my father is such a coward," Rafi said. "He was a freedom fighter!"

Rafi walked out to the living room.

"I'm your father, I don't owe you any explanations," said Haider Samad.

"Dad, what are you talking about?" "I'm talking, you listen."

"Let him sleep," Naima Samad said in the background. Her voice amplified, as she took the phone from her husband.

"You've lost your mind. He drank until three in the morning and watched the news. This is how he'll spend his retirement. Killing himself, and me, and you."

"Your mother didn't vote," Haider Samad shouted over her. He snatched the phone from his wife. "She didn't even cast the vote and she thinks she can talk."

"Dad, if you're calling to make a case for Trump..." Rafi stopped. "Dad, what's going on?"

"I voted." He said it as though it was his first time. "Your mother didn't. She didn't and she talks."

Naima grew exasperated and said something that Rafi could not hear

sent to jail by your own government after you fought for the country you love and then see how you feel about being righteous all the time, son."

Rafi was hunched forward on his elbows looking at the ground while he talked on the phone, and he looked up to find Caroline in the doorway.

"You and Caroline's father can be buddies now."

The two men had never met. If their children ever got married, they would; otherwise neither family had shown initiative to make the acquaintance.

Caroline's eyes widened. She mouthed, Your dad, too?

Rafi gave her a blank stare and lowered his eyes to the ground.

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In fact, I had thought that Howard Carter and Helena Bonham Carter were related, and had continued to do so, until, while composing this piece I found by googling nothing to prove myself right. I found nothing in my search to connect that family to the Bonham Carter house. However, some at RADA had assured me that there was, and I cannot resist telling this story regarding Helena Bonham Carter. During a coffee break between classes, I was at a table with a few people that included a female instructor and leader of one of the groups (whose name escapes me). When the topic turned to the young promising versatile English actress, the instructor stopped that conversation with a dismissive, "But who says Bonham Carter can act?" before going back to her coffee. That was in 1996. In 1997, Helena Bonham Carter was nominated for an Academy Award (Oscar) for Best Actress for her acting in *The Wings of the Dove!* Subsequently, she was nominated for a Best Supporting Actress Academy award, and won a BAFTA award for Best Supporting Role. Wonder what the instructor was making of all this!

Those coffee breaks were very enjoyable. RADA also gave us a healthy breakfast, when the trainees were in a half-asleep mode and only a short time away from the opening class. RADA also provided a

wholesome lunch, when we were engaged more in talking about the classes just taken. The afternoon tea there, however, many avoided. One had to make one's own arrangement for dinner though. Quite frequently, during coffee, trainees would talk about their experiences in Ilan Reichel's classes, which everyone seemed to be enjoying and looking forward to. I benefited immensely from the different exercises he made us do, which improved my posture and stamina and steadied my breathing. That is what the Alexander Technique is supposed to achieve and Ilan was good in its administration. Basically, the Technique, the brainchild of an Australian actor, is aimed at releasing unnecessary tension in the body so that efficiency in movement and good posture may be attained. What also made the classes a blast was that they were often held in the small park a short distance away from RADA. It was also reasonably close to the famed Regent's Park, which I would be visiting during, and following, my RADA stint to watch open-air theater.

The casual visitors to the small pleasant space would invariably stop for a while to watch us as we went through our routines. Because one or two of us would be sporting a RADA T-shirt or sweatshirt, they would sense that we were future thespians (when that would become true of all of us

only the future would determine). At least some of us, including myself, felt an exaggerated sense of importance then. We were thereby galvanized into exerting ourselves throughout the hour-long class as we sprinted around in circles or threw a large rubber ball in the direction of whomever in the group that we pleased. We were constantly alert in receiving it and were all the time on the move. There were other exhilarating exercises too. How soon the hour would pass! Exhausted at the end, we would trudge back to the main building. Ilan, invariably in shorts and a T-shirt, would lead the way, and we, in various attires, would follow.

Those were great days in a splendid high summer. The trees were lush green and the flowers were blooming profusely in the park. All manners of birds and butterflies flitted about. Mercifully, the rain stayed away for the most part.

Any training program at RADA, of whatever duration, is holistic. I will leave our lead instructor and group leader, Peter Oyston, and his methods and contribution now. Training for acting, after all, is really a composite of several parts. If Ilan's Movement class fine tuned the body to face the multifarious rigors of acting, particularly for the stage, getting to master Speech was vital for diction and taught us to speak clearly and enunciate properly. Attending the Voice classes

helped me in being able to "throw" my voice and in enunciation.

I was soon to experience the combined importance of all these rituals. RADA organized special sessions relating to various relevant topics for the trainees. Attending them was optional. One that almost all of us attended was a talk on "Acting in Shakespeare" by two distinguished RADA alums, Richard Johnson and Sheila Allen. Both had successful stage careers. They spoke for a long time and answered several questions from us without seeming to tire. I was struck by their clarity of speech, and their ability to effortlessly "throw" their voices in every corner of a large room. They were both getting on in years, but completed the session with aplomb and without any visible signs of fatigue. Ah, the hours they must have spent in rehearsing for plays, and then performing them countless times for the major part of a year, for years at the end!

The holistic training of RADA as trainees underwent has stood the test of time for them, and the world of performing arts is surely the better for it. The short intensive summer program had much to give us trainees and spurred our dreams.

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POETRY

In Prison

MAHBUB TALUKDAR

Translated from Bengali by Kazi Fazlur Rahman

The room is locked from outside; It's windowless, I'm all alone. The darkness, a giant serpent, Has me in its coils like a hideous ogre

Where is the beauty of nature To captivate one's eyes? Why doesn't one hear time ticking Tirelessly weaving The endless Sari of eternity Day and night?

In the cold and the dark, I'm a prisoner Sans images, sans touches, sans sound, Seemingly shrouded by death. Fearful and marked on my forehead and cheeks I accept punishment for sins I'd never known.

Who are you going North? Are the songs of the larks Frozen in the cold? Send to them powdered sunbeams. Record their unfrozen songs!

Who are you going West? Do kingfishers there fleet across Limpid waters? Bring back scenes painted in water colors. Bring back pictures of moonlight Of the dainty feet of fairies.

Who one you going South? Mermaids will touch you gently there. Tell them all I'm in a dark dungeon, And heartless forgetfulness is crushing me Day after day, mornings and nights.

Unlike tales in the Arabian Nights I shan't be suddenly unchained. Gone are the feeble rays of hope. In mornings to come I know No one will come to hold my hands anymore!

No one will tell me ever that night has now ended And the creatures of darkness are no more For you there are nature's wonders And a fountain of happiness flowing

Till eternity. And someone saying, "Come let us touch it Though we can't embrace Its boundless expanse."

I know all these will mean nothing As long as the lock outside remains.

So be it. But if only I could Conjure the whole world into this room again!

Mahbub Talukdar is an established poet and at present Member, Election Commission of Bangladesh. Kazi Fazlur Rahman writes fictional and non-fictional prose. He is a retired bureaucrat and was Adviser of the Bangladesh Caretaker Government 1990-91.



MUSINGS

Rada Intensity

SHAHID ALAM

We were out in the park, frolicking—all sixteen of us. Well, sort of! We were gamboling all right, but this was a part of the Alexander Technique exercise, something any casual observer in the park might not have understood. But we were having fun alright, while engaged earnestly in fine tuning our body for the rigorous demands of acting. Ilan Reichel, our instructor, had the responsibility of guiding us through the various exercise routines. The entire batch of 100-plus trainees were required to undergo them, and, trust me, having fun then helped in easing us through the rigors of some of the routines. This truth was brought home to us when we had to go to the roof of the RADA building and had to do slow stretch-ups from a squatting position with the help of a fellow trainee.

Well, Bret had been placed in the second group of trainees since he had some professional acting experience. Since we were in different groups and living in separate hostels, we would

meet each other only occasionally as the course progressed at a fast and furious pace. I was given a room in the John Astor building, which was located a bit farther away from RADA. Bonham Carter house, where Bret was lodged, was on Gower Street, only a very short distance from the Academy. The majority of the trainees were accommodated in Bonham Carter, a few in John Astor, while others had found their own lodgings in different parts of London.

The name Bonham Carter intrigued me. Being something of a history buff, I thought it might have had something to do with Howard Carter, the celebrated English Egyptologist who was a member of Lord Carnarvon's expedition that discovered King Tutankhamen's tomb. Also being an acting aficionado, I thought it could have something to do with English actress Helena Bonham Carter, then a young thespian, but already making a name for herself.