

MUSINGS

Reminiscing Comilla

IFAT TANZI

This evening, it's my nose or maybe I've been getting intimations of the sweet odor of burning incense!

We were living the good life in Comilla, a time and place which I'm going to spend a few words here and there in memory. Two chirpy bird adored in nursery class, only four and a half years old. Though now I can't even remember what had happened the day before, I can recollect vividly the most unusual incidents of my early childhood then. It is like returning to an often watched movie!

A white one storey house; tree of different species and colors growing behind the house, entangling each other; and a big field fronting that white colored house. Indeed, we didn't have a yard in front of that house, but what we did have was a really big field filled with all sorts

of joyful games. I would always see the beautiful and finely polished house of the Apu who lived on the other side of the field. In fact, two Apus lived in that house. Little was I ever struck by their beauty; they also had a younger brother nearly four. He used to be afraid of me most of the time without any valid reason. I mustn't forget "bhado aunty" and "bhado uncle" lived there as well! And why did always tag them with that adjective? Well, I can't recall the reason now. But who says a four and half year old child needs a reason for every single thing she says?

The building we lived in had two flats; one for us, the other one for Rupama and her family. The building actually belonged to them as did the mini-jungle behind the house and the big field I mentioned just a few lines ago; everything

still picture my tiny self writing a letter, along with Rupama, to her *boro ammu* that evening. I added this line to what she had already written: "send many packets of small clips for me." "Juijuul," I should explain, was the name I had given to the kind of heart-shaped clips one could find in shops stocking children's good, something beyond my understanding then!

In those days Aunty used to burn incense to make the house free from mosquitoes. My mom would do so too. I had developed an immense love for the odour of burning incense back then. It is a scent still very close to heart.

My dad got his transfer letter even before we had spent a full year in Comilla. We packed our belongings and moved to another place where we would live temporarily, leaving dear Comilla

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there seemed to belong to them.

Rupama was my age. She had pale bright skin and a head full of curly hair. I did not like her much! She used to finish her milk glass before her mom could stare at her more than once! Rupama never wasted time watching useless funny cartoons on TV; she would have rice and veggies from her plate; most importantly, Rupama used to display a lot of love for Mifta. All things sufficient for me to not like Rupama—until my mom! But Rupama and I used to play all day long and her mother used to love me like a second mom.

I remember clearly the time when Rupama's uncle, aunt, and a cousin sister just a couple of years older than I, came to Comilla. They were from America and not Bangladesh! They showered bundles of love on me, too. While leaving, that pretty Apu with gorgeous hair and aunty reminded me to write something whenever Rupama would post a letter to them.

One day my mom bought me clips just for me, and not for my dolls. My memory of the time is so fresh even now that I can

behind forever.

At that time we were so young that the idea of exchanging phone numbers did not strike our little brains. Mail addresses and Facebook accounts weren't something that existed then.

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My first school; my first friend; pretty Meghla Ma'am with her even prettier smile; the large field in-front of white colored house, the fairy like apus from the other side of the field, *bhado aunty* and Rupama -- all these we had left seemingly hundred miles away from us in Comilla!

The odour, the enchanting sound of burning incense, can fill you with immense nostalgia!

Ifat Tanzi is hopelessly in love with literature, children, and dry flowers. She is a doctor by profession, but bibliophile by choice.

POETRY



Stairway to Wonderland

ARYAN SHAFAT

Past giant mountains, which collide with the blue linings of the abyss,
Past jagged mountains of frost which wander over patches of green and blue,
past the sailing ships on a blue bowl, without a destination, like poltergeists in a graveyard,
is an eternal ocean of waves, crowned with froth.

A posture of stillness, filled with inanimate, gliding sheep.
A sun-warm stairway spirals down from the ocean and the pasture.
Faint, translucent rays trickle down ethereal steps of cotton.
A stairway of fissures and cracks: a porous border from light's eternal grasp.
Bright, mustard rays of silk cascade down to the ground—
Rays reflected from the dewdrops on emerald prairies, during a winter morning.

Nearby, rail tracks of hazy mists and vapors are formed,
Pushing out and carrying forth the nuances of life's fire.

The shifting stairway points to a curved precipice rising enough to meet the ocean.
Bending back to its transparent base, aping the coconut trees which line the beaches,
Is a precipice with a bouncy and fluffy exterior, a mountain, composed of woolen bubbles.

Torrents of biting wind push and blow to disfigure and shift the floating water bodies, yet again.

The precipice, its base forgotten behind mists, is distorted into a cosmic turtle, basking with a ruddy hue.
Time and its many heads jut out of the shell like pestering weeds.
The turtle transforms into a perched eagle, blanketed by a celestial blaze, which finally turns into the jester's hat, rich with mirros.

Finally, the stairway stops, is dissolved; the eternal fields, an infinite carpet of mountainous vapor columns, remain.

Nothing remains but blue, a fall, from the carpet of vapors, without slopes. Without a stairway, like the distinct border between the shore and the waves.
The end.

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REINCARNATION

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

We were in Cambridge, Massachusetts, waiting for a table at a popular restaurant. There were only two benches and a chair arranged in an L-shaped pattern in the beautiful back yard which served as a holding area. Most of the adjacent patio was set up as a dining area with tables and umbrellas, either to accommodate the overflow crowd, or to provide an outdoor starlit dining experience for the more adventurous. It was a nice summer night. We had shown up rather late, without reservation, hoping to spend some time together in a nice cozy environment. Our children had decided to give us a treat for our wedding anniversary.

Another group, three young women and an infant, joined us as we were chatting, and it was then that he caught my attention. His eyes were twinkling mischievously and he looked at me as he rested comfortably on one of the woman's lap. I couldn't take my eyes off him, as she kept on adjusting him on her lap, sometimes putting him in an upright position with his back leaning against her stomach, and then picking him up and holding him in a horizontal position. He did not seem to mind being tossed around in this fashion, and kept staring at me (or so I imagined) as he and his female companions tried to shuffle him around to make themselves comfortable. I did not have my glasses on and the lighting was not very strong where we huddled; I was hoping that the seat next to mine so that I could see him from up close. I got up, and offered my chair to the lady holding him, but she declined. One of the other women in the group sat on the chair he had vacated.

He looked incredibly cute, and now was starting to put his tiny hand in his mouth, and even sometimes suck his thumb! I was a little puzzled that he was doing so since I started to wonder: how does a little baby so young learn to lick its thumb? (I did not know how old he was). Two of my younger brothers had sucked their finger(s) so when they were young, but as far as I can remember they did so when only a few months old, whereas this baby did not seem to be more than a few weeks old.

My wife complimented the woman holding the baby on his cuteness and his demeanor. The woman replied, "My nephew, Henry, is a happy baby and we are sorry to see him go!"

"Where is he going?" we asked, now that we were all smitten by this lovely baby.

"To Africa."

"Where in Africa?"

"Zimbabwe."

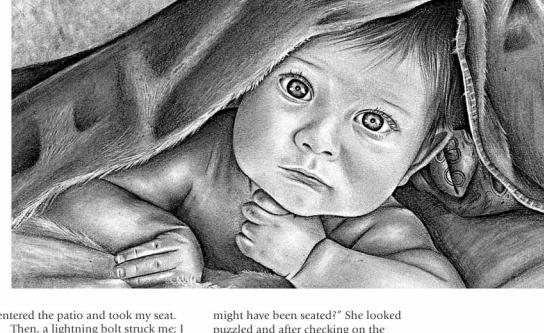
At this point I, my wife, son and daughter all paused and took in the information. We were all very well-travelled and had visited many countries either for sightseeing or to visit family and friends. We also knew of Zimbabwe, from a personal perspective, as well as the political, social and economic history of the incumbent Mugabe regime. Why on earth would a baby, who looked very non-African, with three very attractive young women who were waiting for a meal in one of Cambridge's most well-known eateries, be heading for Zimbabwe, where nothing but chaos and misery rules, if one believes the Western press? And what fate would await a young, innocent, child sitting now so comfortably on his mother or aunt's lap, as soon as he would land in Harare?

I wanted to know more about Henry but realized that my inquisitiveness might not go down well with the woman. I had in the meantime informed them of my elder brother, who died in Zimbabwe, just outside Harare, in a road accident. I did not want to alarm our little audience. I did not want to alarm our little audience, together with the pleasure of telling them a distant of Mugabe, roads in Zimbabwe, and the pain and loss I have endured since my brother passed away. But I could not conceal from them or from my family the excitement I felt at meeting a new baby who is going to Zimbabwe, as did my brother, and who would live there and even travel the same roads my brother did. I also, probably with my enthusiasm, made it clear to them that I considered Zimbabwe to be my favorite country in Africa and was happy to meet another soul heading for Harare. I've never been to Harare, although I had promised myself time and again that I would do so one day.

All this time my children and my wife were chatting with each other though I was by now totally immersed in Henry's world. The memory of losing my brother in Zimbabwe often haunts me, and I frequently search for his wandering soul all around me, but tonight I was going to put aside any dark thoughts lurking in the shadows. I was determined not to entertain any feeling that could tip the balance even slightly.

Right then, I saw the hostess coming in our direction to inform us that our table was ready. As the hostess waited for us, I looked at Henry again. He was calm and appeared to be ready to say goodbye. Without thinking I wished him "good bye" too and, as an afterthought, said, "Bon voyage," as I was then.

thinking of leaving him with a parting message, "See you in Harare." But before I could, I felt a gentle tug on my sleeve from my wife, I turned around and started walking. As I walked behind my family and followed the hostess towards our designated table, I knew his eyes were following me. I don't remember if I said, silently, "See you in Harare soon!" but I dragged my feet as I



entered the patio and took my seat.

Then, a lightning bolt struck me; I thought of asking for Henry's contacts in Harare. I got up, and excused myself on the pretext of going to the Men's Room. I went back to the waiting area and looked for the family from Harare. Frankly, I went next to the dining area and scanned it for the family but could not locate them anywhere. This

might have been seated?" She looked puzzled and after checking on the computer screen, came back and said, "Sorry, I didn't see any group with three adults and a child on our guest list." She moved on, only to leave me there completely befuddled.

Abdullah Shibli lives and works in Boston.