

# Once Upon a Night

NISHAT ATIYA SHOILEE

A translation of Rabindranath Tagore's short story, "Ek Ratri"

Surabala and I went to school together, played husband and wife, being the kids that we were. Whenever I went to their house, her mother would treat me like a member of the family, slowly mumbling to herself, "These two look rather nice together, don't they?"

For that age, though, I kind of understood what she meant. That I held a special place in Surabala's heart became such frequent a thought that I could not help being a little aggressive, rebuking her at times for no good reason. She, too, chose to respond or not respond to all that I did or rather, undid. The adolescent narrator's pure ignorance of how she felt inside did not help either, with the girl being a quietened vessel of no significant account, anyway.

My father was a *nayeb* babu at that time under the reign of the Chowdhury zamindar. He wanted me to get into the age-old family service as well, but my heart rebelled against the idea. The way Neelratna fled from Calcutta, completed his study and became a collector's *najir*, now that's what I wanted in my life. Even the minor position of a head-clerk in the community court would do, for I always saw how Father used to worship these people: the bigger and better piece of fried fish and the larger banknotes of green beauty would be kept on the high altar with utmost reverence, specially reserved for the Avatars of Justice, the reincarnated minions of Ganesh himself, or perhaps, a better one on that, since the earthly creatures enjoyed even more privileges than an entire realm of celestials could have possibly imagined in their divine enterprise.

Inspired by Neelratna's exemplary gateway, I decided to come to Calcutta, lodging in a certain brother's house and with additional help from Father, I began to continue my study without bothering too much about anything.



In the meantime, I joined all the assemblies and public processions in the city. I was positively affirmed that staunch nationalism is the ultimate answer to everything. Even though the situation we lived in had something else to say, my people and I readily refused to feel dispirited; for unlike the smart city-boys, who found it mandatory to laugh at anything they deemed "funny," we, the "village boys," were yet to lose our touch with the innocent curiosity that makes all things mundane, special. For instance, when our leaders delivered their fiery speech, we, the young apprentices would spend the entire day running about hours after hours with the *chada-khata*, collecting money for humanitarian purposes, you see, and then loudly advertising them on the open street.

And if anyone spoke ill of our supreme commanders, we would not really mind exchanging blows with the opposers and what not, even if it meant that we would be called names, "those *Bangals*" in particular. No one could possibly stop us from turning into potential Garibaldi, far away from what I originally I intended to be.

At this crucial point in time, our parents decided to marry off Surabala to me, the sheer impossibility of which scandalous idea left me dumbstruck. I was fifteen when I left for Calcutta, and Surabala, eight. And now I was eighteen, determined to prove responsible for the wellbeing of an independent motherland, not that of a petty girl. I rejected that proposal outright before it could be given a full breath of life.

And somewhere within the next two or four months, I cannot remember exactly when, the news of Surabala being married to Ramlochonbabu, the local lawyer, reached my ears. The overwhelming pressure of the political business I had to deal with at that time made it as insignificant and shallow a detail as it could be, meant to be lost into oblivion. I could not care less. As time went by, I passed the Entrance exam and right when I was about to enroll in the Arts program at a municipal college, Father passed away. Like any other wayward middle-class son, I left everything behind and started working as a secondary master at an Entrance school in Noakhali, so that the Mother and two of my sisters back in home didn't die of starvation.

I convinced myself that this was the best job of them all, for what could be better than moulding some of the future warriors of the nation by your very own hand? Yet, disillusionment was not too late to follow the tracks to the battleground as my brave soldiers were more preoccupied passing the

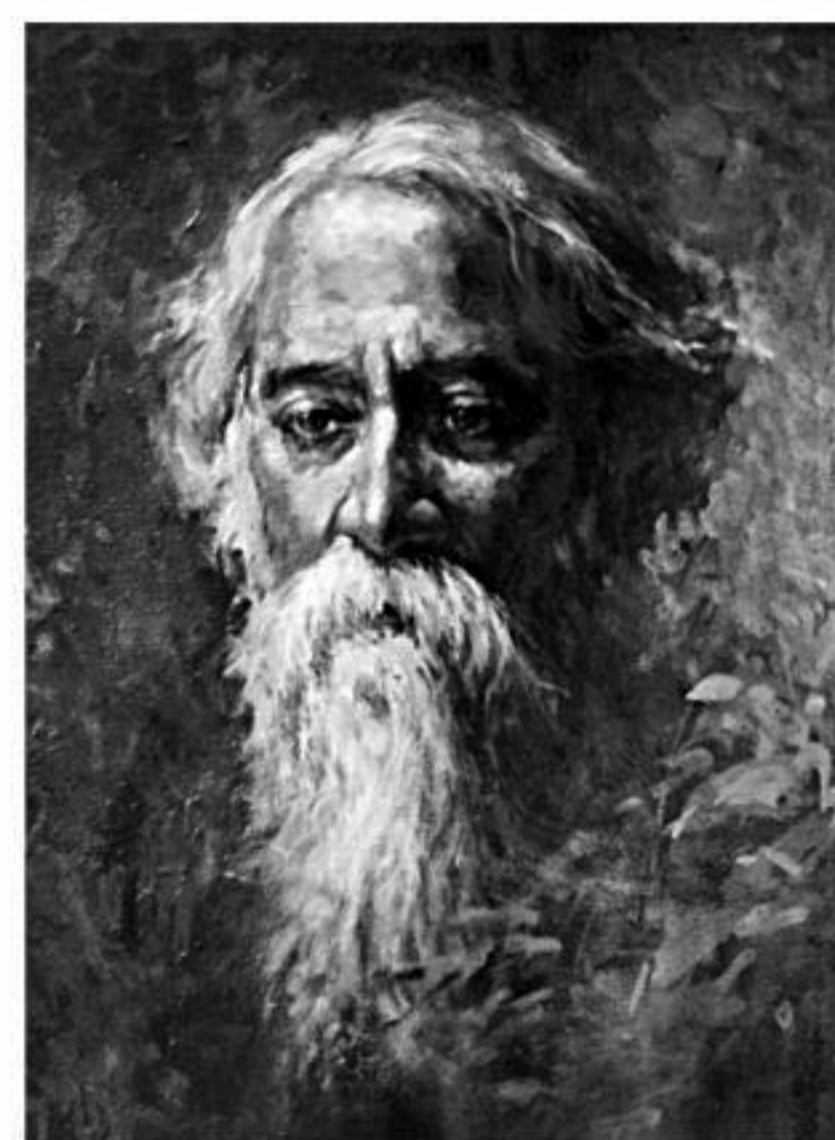
exams than rescuing the nation from grave dangers. The headmaster, likewise, did not prefer his disciples crossing the safe-line of algebraic equations.

If you ask me, mere spectators like us are forced to feel comfortable at the corner of the house, painting fantastical creatures in our minds, building magnificent castles in the air, collecting pearls of wisdom from the endless blue; for when it comes to dreaming big, the worker bees come back to their lonely nests like distraught farmers, too exhausted to notice the dawn slowly descending into the dusk. Our daily concerns boil down to managing a meal per day, and that's about it. Dreams that are dead are kept that way, buried and out of sight.

There is one tiny piece of

information I somehow forgot to add here. Ramlochonbabu, the gov't pleader's house was rather close to where I was living then, and so was his better-half's, Surabala, my childhood friend. I did happen to have some one-to-one formal sessions with that man, but not once did I feel the necessity to even mention that I used to know his wife before she was married to him. Frankly speaking, that idea didn't even occur to me at that point.

One holiday morning, I went to the lawyer's house to talk about God knows what, could be the administrative corruption ruining our country, her



consequential downfall and all. It's not that we aimed at redeeming the long lost spirit of the nation by this one impassioned of a conversation, but the topic was easy-go enough for us to munch on an all-too-known communal grief.

Right then, an almost inaudible tinkling of bangals, a gentle rustling of cotton clothes, and subtle footsteps on the wooden ground took over my senses, like an all-consuming whirlwind. I knew very well that the source of the brittle sounds was standing behind the open edge of the window, looking right at me, or through me, if I may, with a cautious curious eye, secretly pursuing every move I made from a safe distance. I can remember those eyes now - beaming with the integrity of a childlike faith, a shy sparkle, the calm and kind stare of innocent youth.

Suddenly, a pain-like sensation filled me up from the inside, something I cannot claim to have experienced before. It managed to remain the same even after I came back home, like a stubborn pendulum unwilling to let go of the heartstrings.

I had to collect myself that evening and think what made me feel this way. An unseen voice whispered from the back, "Why did you let her go?" Another one replied, "She was not to be mine, anyway." "Undoubtedly so, when you are the one who made her do it in the first place," hissed the first one, "The Surabala who was right within your reach, is no longer yours. No matter how much feel her presence around you, the sweet scent coming from her hair, the brisk trails her footsteps leave on her way, all these are lost forever. A long and thick wall of disruption will always be there to stand between, keeping apart what's meant to stay apart."

"Well, let it be, then. Also, who is this Surabala, anyway?" the second

voice attempted to defend itself in a hush-hush secrecy. The other one rumbled almost instantly, "Somebody that you used to know, but not anymore."

There is no denial that it was difficult for me to pretend and handle the unpleasant truth, the one I decided to bury underneath my unconscious mind a long time ago. She could be all mine, the closest companion to cherish, the resort to my restlessness - and yet how painfully distant, how unimaginably detached we were from each other! A grave sin it felt now to see her, to want to talk to her, to even think about her. That Ramlochon, out of nowhere, flew into the scene and took her away like a vicious bird of prey.

It's not that I was trying to introduce "what ought to be and ought not to be" to the system breaking the old for the sake of the new. Rather, it was the pang you feel while trying to wear your heart at the sleeves, and say what you feel like saying out of a sense solely subjective, therefore, confidential. The Surabala, freely roaming about Ramlochon's sham of an abode could be the Surabala who belonged to me - this thought kept haunting me like a restless spirit. But what I can admit is that I kept on pondering, and you could call it dishonest even.

I couldn't concentrate on anything more. When the students began to chant in tune and everything would stand still in the middle of the noon - not even a leaf you could see trembling, or the *Neem* flowers blooming high in the trees, then I could feel a yearning within, not really sure for what, but certainly not the one which involves teaching our future leaders of India the correct usage of grammar.

Once my duty was over, I did not feel like staying home. The meaningless murmur of the coconut trees outside during my lonesome nights and the nonchalant pond nearby made me realize how complicated a web of emotions human race has created around itself. Never do you do the right thing at the right time; it's all about a tribute to the things gone wrong.

"A man like you could easily marry that girl and have a 'happily ever after' of your own. Look at you now - a half-baked Garibaldi of his time and a secondhand school-master in the middle of nowhere! And that Ramlochon Roy, it was most unlikely that Surabala and the lawyer would be together, wasn't it? And yet the farce of the Fortune - bombarded with insults today when the milk on the stove is burnt and a big fat gold chain tomorrow when the foolish clients are willing to pay the money, five tk per day, to be exact." Did she feel the urge to sit by the silent pond and celebrate the melancholy of the moon? I wondered. Ramlochon left the place after a few days, fighting a big case as they said. And as I was all on my own in that little schoolroom, so was Surabala, I believe, in that little cocoon of hers, in her own way.

I remember that day like it was yesterday. It was a dull and gloomy Monday morning with patches of dark clouds taking over the entire sky, followed by a much worse storm breaking out the next day. The headmaster decided to call the day off. It was the east wind that hit us first, and then came the stronger waves from the north and the north-east, determined

to destroy the world as we knew it.

At nights like this, it is almost impossible for one to simply sing themselves to sleep. I wondered how Surabala might be doing then. The schoolhouse we had over here was much stronger than that of theirs. Ah, how many times did I ask myself, "Should I bring her here in this schoolroom?" But the raging storm outside couldn't silence the one I felt inside, slowly yet efficiently swelling into a monstrous shape.

When the clock struck around one or one-thirty in the night, suddenly the incoming rush of the rising tidal waves could be heard from my yard, as if an entire sea full of armies were desperate to devour this little place we called our home. Finally, I took a hold of my nerves and got myself out of the walls. No sooner than I crossed the schoolyard, it went all knee-deep under water and the moment I regained my composure enough to stand straight, a second wave took me off by the feet.

One part of the sidewall surrounding the pond itself had a higher platform than usual. When I tried to climb it on the lower edge, someone else found her way on the other side closely facing that of mine, leaving me completely baffled, an all-too-known tingling sensation spreading from my head to toe, and I had no doubt that the other poeson felt it too.

We stood before each other as the thunderstorm reached its peak, engulfing all that we knew or thought to know down the sinkhole of unmet dreams. The starless sky above or the lampless households on the ground didn't break their silence, and neither did we. Not one word we said to each other while the dense darkness roared beneath our humble feet.

It was Surabala herself standing before me. It was me she chose to remember after all these days - the Surabala from my childhood, warped in the mystery of foggy memories. From all the people in the world living and breathing, she chose me, for then. After all, this is how she appeared in my dream, leaving behind the comfort of a sunlit space than the fear of a moonless night. The grand wave of life itself brought her back to my shore - one more swing of the formidable wave, and we would have our strings with the earth-core detached, ready to dissolve into each other's souls.

Be it as it may, be it that the perfect storm could not reach the shore at the perfect time, be it that Surabala belonged to someone else. For me, that one night was all one could hope for, a long-awaited onrush of fulfillment, not chaos.

As the night began to fade away into the light of the day, so did the storm. The water ebbed down and we parted from each other, saying nothing.

Neither was I the *najir* I thought I would be, nor the office clerk, nor even the Garibaldi of the neighborhood - just another second master of a nameless school around the corner. And yet, it was that one night in particular that made all the difference, one night that reveals itself perhaps once in a blue moon, one night that stood out, making my insignificant life worth living. I am talking about that Night of all nights.

The translator is Lecturer, DEH at ULAB. She is also the sub-editor of the Star Literature & Reviews Pages.



## POETRY

A POEM TO CELEBRATE THE MOTHER'S DAY

# Mother

RONNY NOOR

None can fathom  
her beauty in younger days  
if they hadn't seen her  
wrapped tight in her teens  
in *jaba*-printed salwar kameez.  
There goes Her Majesty,  
passersby would purr,  
eyeing her honed features -  
the moon face, the button nose -  
as she sashayed down the street:  
the Mumtaz of their dreams.

who never, ever aspired  
to be anything higher in life,  
letting her sacrifice  
her meager morsel with a smile  
when there wasn't enough to eat.

My dear skeletal mother,  
grown feeble before her time,  
still shines golden in the sunset  
with blue veins coursing  
like my land's zillion canals.

She gifted eight healthy babies  
to a clerk of modest means,

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