

Naiyor: A Tale of Two Passages in Two Eras

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Imagine, dear reader, a youthful village belle. Transport yourself back 50 or 60 years ago. She lives with her husband and her in-laws in a farming homestead in rural East Bengal. It's been a few years since she arrived in her new home.

What a change a few years wrought! She is no longer the diffident young lady who entered a new family. She is now older than her years, an important part of her adopted family.

There is a lightness in her step today. She is ready to embark on her 'naiyor.' (A fond rural Bangla word for a married woman's visit to her childhood home.)

It's been unseasonably cold in Atlanta this year. My shivers, however, have less to do with the winter chill than my nervousness. As the big day for travel approaches, I get jittery. I try to calm myself: All I actually need are my travel documents.

My annual sojourn comes with a familiar mixture of feelings. Euphoria, joy, stress of travel. In today's wired, global age, we're seldom far away from each other, regardless of tens of thousands of miles. I've already chatted with my sisters, my octogenarian mum. Thanks to Facebook, my relatives and friends are expecting my impending trip.

As the crow flies, the distance from our village belle's in-law's home and parents' home is not that long. But this is rural Bengal, so it takes a long time. She sets off at dawn, and by the time she reaches her ancestral home, it's almost dusk.

The journey begins with a long walk over raised pathways that crisscross verdant paddy fields. After reaching the riverbank, the boat ride takes almost half-a-day. Another long walk follows.

No matter. Our village belle is giddy with excitement, keenly anticipating her reunion with her family.



It's a long haul from the U.S. to Dhaka. Long hours on the airplane plus an extended layover add up to over 24 hours in travel. The change of time zones adds another layer of disorientation. No matter. The adrenaline rush of coming home sustains me through it all.

My two sisters pick me up, and I reach home at last. My mum, 86, has been waiting at home.

She embraces me in a long hug. "Oh, my poor baby," she murmurs. (I turn 60 next year.) "Living all by himself so far away from everybody. For the life of me I don't know how you manage!"

That is my mum for you. Not a word of complaint about the fact that as the constraints of age and infirmity creep closer, her son lives 10,000 miles away. Not a word about her aching longing for my company, always unspoken, except when she remarks softly with a deep sigh, no matter how long my stay in Dhaka: "Oh, it's just only a few days. Soon it will

be time for you to leave again."

However, my mum, a firm believer in action, is not one to wallow in sentiment. There's urgent business on hand. Battle is joined with gusto: Operation Force-feed. A relentless campaign is launched to feed me 24/7. All protestations fall on deaf ears. The cook, the maids and my sister Alpana merrily join in.

I confess this is all a bit exasperating, but it's really hard to get annoyed. Love finds odd ways of expression, and this is the classic Bangladeshi mode.

Later at night, after the magical moments of excitement, our village belle retires. She reflects on her reunion.

The overwhelming feeling is of joy and love. She is overjoyed to learn that her love for her near and dear ones endures, and is reciprocated.

However, she is troubled by disquiet and sorrow. Is father getting a little weak? What's the shadow of worry that clouds mother's brow?

She is relieved that things are running smoothly at home without her, but feels a little pang of pain that life goes on without her. Slowly she is becoming more a fond memory rather than an integral part of this household.

With a touch of sadness, she realizes that there really is no going back.

But she doesn't wilt. Women of this region know how to steel themselves in adversity, and one of the core truths of life in this riverine delta is that the river is both a destroyer and creator. It builds a new bank even as it destroys an older one.

That's just the way it goes.

My return to Dhaka every year unleashes a maddeningly contradictory mixture of feelings. It's like meeting a long-lost lover again after many years. A core sense of deeply comforting familiarity is undermined by a disquieting sense that nothing remains the same. Among the familiar faces and feelings is the sense that time is insidiously drawing me further and further away from the people and places that were once an organic part of my life.

Did I come home, or did I leave my home in Atlanta? Many years ago, I could say with some certainty it was the former. With every passing year, I am less sure. For the really fortunate it can be both, but I don't think I am there yet.

In fleeting, happier moments it seems to be both, but more often, an odd, sharp pang goes right through my heart, and I wonder why no place really feels like home.

It's something I wrestle with. It's something I am still trying to come to terms with.

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