



Charon's Obol

RAZIA SULTANA KHAN

Author's Note: Dedicated to Ruhul Ahmed Babu, Sub-sector Commander, Sector 4, Subsector 4 of Sylhet. This story is based on his war memories.



"Mukti?" The word was a tremor of butterfly wings.

My grip on the 9mm sten-gun tightened. Boom! Boom! Boom! A moment, a second, or perhaps a minute passed when all I heard was the beating of my heart. The part of my brain which was calm and logical raced through the gamut of possibilities: a Pakistani soldier waiting to catch a member of the Mukti-joddha in action? A local Razakar spying for the Pakistanis? An innocent Bengali

the darkness.

There was a note of irritation in it now; or perhaps it was fear.

"Well? Well?" The tremor of the butterfly wings had turned into the hiss of a hornet.

The moon, a full one on this particular night, decided to join in the fray and suddenly we were drenched in the softest of luminescence.

It was a young girl, hardly fourteen, fifteen at a stretch. Her sari was wound around her slim figure the way the locals wear it, without a blouse, and she seemed to be encased in it. Her shoulders and face shone with an ethereal light. I heard a number of soft yesses from my companions. I made a mental note to reprimand them later.

"I've been waiting for you. I knew you would come!"

Again that moment of suspicion. How did she know we were coming? What was she doing here all alone? Who was she? I was of a scientific bend of mind and didn't believe in *bhoots of petnis*, but in moments like these, I was happy to err on the side of caution. Some of my companions, however, did not seem to share my suspicions and throwing caution to the wind had come out of their hiding places to cluster around her.

"Come, follow me," she said, a note of authority rang in her voice as she strode through the tall reeds.

We followed her. Why? I wonder now, but at that moment we followed because her voice demanded it. Soon she was on the bank of the river wading in. Wait, I wanted to say, *we can't go into the water*. We were a demolition squad. The PEK (plastic explosives), and cordex might endure but we could not risk the fuse, the .22caps and matches getting wet.

The girl turned around and whispered, "They're here."

I stiffened. The moment I had been dreading. She was giving us away! How could we have fallen for the age old trick? I had loved reading stories from Greek mythology at college and now I was reminded of the Sirens, beautiful creatures who lured sailors to their doom. They were said to be half bird and half woman. I squinted to see better but could not make out anything in the dark.

I waited for some response to her call, but nothing happened. No order to stop and no burly Pakistani soldier or Jinnah-capped Razakar materialized. It appeared she was addressing us.

"Here," she repeated, as she waded into the water.

Soon she was submerged up to her shoulders. Her head disappeared and we saw the dark waters creating circles of ripples extending outwards. Something silver quivered in the air close by before being enveloped into the shimmering water with a soft "plop."

Then all was silent. Even the night breeze seemed to be holding its breath.

A little further away from where she had disappeared, a sleek dark head bobbed up and rose like a sea creature. It was the girl. She seemed to be born of the foam of the waters as she started moving towards us. I stood motionless sizing up the situation, but some of my more rash companions had waded in and were knee deep in water.

"Halt!" I said in a falsetto.

The men froze.

But not the girl. She moved languidly, laboriously, as she floated towards us. Something else rose with her. It was dark and a sort of upside down V – the keel of a boat, the paper-boat shaped *nokahs* that the locals used.

Suppressed shouts of exuberance and encouragement wafted from the men as they waded deeper into the water to relieve her of her burden. Suddenly, like the sound coming on to a silent movie, the night ruptured into commotion: the men's undertones of relief, the susurrus of the waves hitting the river bank, a lone frog croaking its annoyance at being disturbed, a distant owl in search of its prey; I could hear each sound distinctly – and together, like an orchestra.

"Come!" I said retrieving my position of power and the few cautious ones who had kept their cover, detached ourselves from the dense vegetation and climbed into the boat.

The girl had got hold of a *laggi*. Literally skimming the surface of the water she leapt in among the men. Seated at the opposite end of the boat, I saw her silhouette, a slender silver birth, her wet clothes hugging her body, outlining her figure in soft curves. I felt a strange stirring in my heart, and then suddenly, it was dark.

The clouds had taken over the sky. As if on cue, we were completely camouflaged. We couldn't see or hear anything as the *laggi* silently pushed the boat forward.

With my vision gone, my mind started working double time. Where was she taking us? Suddenly again, she jumped out and caught hold of the front of the boat and I was jolted back to reality. We had crossed the river and were on the other side. We alighted and ran for cover in the dark foliage close by.

Once safe, I made sure my share of the explosives was secure and dry, then I turned around to thank our savior. The darkness had swallowed her up.

Our mission was successful though we lost two of our men. That night we talked in soft tones, going over the events of the day, as we shoveled our meagre rations of rice and dal into our mouths.

"Who was the girl?"

"She wasn't a girl!"

"She was a spirit!"

"A ghost!"

"But a good one."

"See how she vanished into thin air!"

"But the boat? It vanished too!"

The thought of supernatural help reinforced our strength. Allah was on our side!

Safe and satiated, I zoned out. I kept my thoughts to myself. She couldn't have been a spirit, nor a fairy. She was probably a simple village girl; one of thousands who helped the Mukti-joddhas to free the country from the enemy.

There was one thing that bothered me. "We should have thanked her." I blurted out.

The others lapsed into silence. I was conscious of the looks being passed among them.

We went on many other raids, always coming back successful, always coming back a couple or three fewer than the original number we had set out with. Each celebration was dampened by the loss.

Three days short of December 16, I got shot in the thigh and soon after that I was sent to London for treatment. I felt a little cheated as I could not join the parade celebrating our freedom.

It would be a month before I was able to walk out of hospital. My twentieth birthday was just ahead. It would be eight more years before I returned to a

liberated motherland.

I meant to go back to that small village. I must go and visit her, I promise myself over and over again. But something holds me back. Something prevents me from finding out. I am reminded of the image of an adolescent girl with green eyes looking intensely at the camera in the cover of *The National Geographic*. The picture was entitled *Afghan Girl*. The identity of the girl was not known when her picture adorned the cover but it was named, "the most recognized photograph" in the history of the magazine. The Photographer, Steve McCurry, became obsessed by that face and made several attempts to find her. Finally in 2002 she was located as *Sharbat Gula*, in a remote region of Afghanistan. She looked different. Her eyes were still green but the intensity had faded and the glow extinguished. The charm of the young face ravaged by poverty and four children.

I remember wondering if the photographer shared my emotions. Did he wish he had left her a mystery, forever young and elusive? The virtual image more real than the authentic one?

The instinct that I might be disappointed made me waver in trying to find the girl who had helped us that night. In my mind I saw her as a female version of Charon, the ferryman of Hades, who carried the souls of the newly deceased across the River Styx and Acheron that divided the world of the living from the world of the dead. He was given an obol, a bronze or copper coin, as payment. For us each mission was a journey across the border between living and dying. We never knew who the fortunate ones to return would be, or who would be the even more fortunate, to get eternal life as a hero.

Forty-seven years have passed since that fateful night. But I cannot forget her. I wake up in the middle of the night and see her face. It is hazy and a sad aura infuses it. I still see the lithe body under the sheer sari. I wake up trembling. Not sure why. The thought that comes to my mind is I must go visit her. Will I be able to find the place?

One thought keeps playing over and over in my head, I did not get a chance to thank her for her help that night.

Razia Sultana Khan is a short story writer and academic.



bystander out for a breath of fresh air at night!

A few minutes ago we had scoured the horizon and noticed in the skyglow, the silhouette of a hut or two far in the horizon. I was one of thirteen who had crossed the border into East Pakistan. Our mission that night was to blow up a bridge near the village of Barlekha in Sylhet. It was a relatively small bridge but it was a crucial connection to a number of villages where Mukti-joddhas would take shelter.

"Are you Mukti Bahini?" A voice out of

POETRY

Independence, how this word became ours

NIRMALENDU GUN

TRANSLATED BY TITO CHOWDHURY

With the excitement of waiting for a poem to be composed hundreds of millions of frenzied anxious restless rebellious listeners seated on the garden-shore of a human-sea since morning: "When will the poet come?"

This garden wasn't graced with trees in bloom, that day, this slumberous faded afternoon wasn't that day. Then how was the afternoon of that day? Then how was that ground, heart of Dhaka now the site of Children's Park, of benches, trees, and floral garden?

I know, to wipe out all the memories of that day dark hands are on the move. And so today I gaze in this poet-less averse terrain-poet against poet, field against field, afternoon against afternoon, garden against garden, March against March.....

Oh child of the future, oh poet of the coming days, now swinging in the multicolored rocking-cradle there in Children's Park, one day you'll come to know it all; and with that in mind, I'm writing the tale of that great afternoon. That day this ground had a different look. No park, no floral garden, nothing of these were there, like a piece of seamless sky, the grass covered the vast ground inundating the horizon, verdant, rich green on green. The green of our independence-loving hearts merged with the green of that expansive field.

Fastening red bandanas on forehead and wrist iron workers from the factories rushed to come to this filed, with ploughs and yokes on shoulders, loin-cloth-wearing farmers came in clusters, snatching arms from the Police came the vibrant youths. There came the middle class with death clenched in fists, dreams in their eyes, so too lower middle class, humble clerks, women, aged prostitutes,



vagabonds and young kids just like you, the urchins, the leaf-pickers, teamed together.

A poem would be declaimed, and for that, so very anxious was the waiting crowd: "When will the poet come?" "When will the poet come?"

At the culmination of hundreds of years of endless struggle, in steady stride like Rabindranath, at last the poet came and stood upon the platform of people. Then in a flash in splendid shimmer water gushed in the boat, ripples frolicked in the heart, high tide surged upon the human sea-all weirs washed open. Who's to resist his thunder-voiced massage? Jolting the platform of mass-sun, the poet delivered his immortal poem: "The Struggle this time is the Struggle for our Liberation, the Struggle this time is the Struggle for Independence."

Since then the word independence is ours.

Tito Chowdhury is a Pharmacist by profession. Translation, however, is his passion.

Not Like This

RONNY NOOR

The wise their moments spare will spend In intellectual recreation.

The foolish do that time expend

In vice, or sleep, or recrimination.

- Narayana

They rose to the occasion, hearing

The darion call to free the nation,

United in a singular purpose.

Not like this -

Chasing each other with knives and

Sticks, thirsty for brothers' blood.

They rushed to face the enemy -

Hand in hand with all they had -

Theist or atheist, man or woman.

Not like this -

Robbing neighbors of life or honor

For following their own bent.

They raised the green flag of victory

Giving their lives and limbs

Without craving prizes or profits.

Not like this -

Lining theirpockets for their Begums' chambers in far-off lands.

Those who prevailed at Plassey

Drank life to the lees, daring beyond

The utmost bound of human thought.

Not like this -

Seeking solace in ancient myths,

Shackled to inimical habits.

If we wish to honor the brave souls

Who gifted us liberty, we must build

Forts of knowledge and creativity.

Not like this -

Burning buses and shutting books,

Freezing the highways and streets.

Ronny Noor is an English professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, U.S.A.

He is also the author of Snake Dance in Berlin, Slice of Heaven and Other Essays, and Where Heaven Spreads Wide & Other Stories.

