



REUNION IN A METROPOLITAN MESS

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The crumbling two storey house is flanked by an apartment building on one side. Just a few days ago, the house on the other side met the fate that its fellow two storey friends have been meeting all over this ever-growing metropolis for two decades now. The piece of land on which the house once stood now stays crowded by construction workers and bulldozers. In two years' time, a huge building serving as a shopping mall will stand in its stead. The stories of hope and despair written on the walls of those old two storey houses over the decades have been erased and shattered.

On the rooftop of the crumbling house between the apartment and the construction site, two middle-aged people sit in silence, looking at the sky. Their eyes survey the city around them. There was a time they could see the centuries-old graves in the cemetery at Wari from their rooftop, but now the view has been blocked by the many buildings that have sprung up over the years, creating a metropolitan wall between them and the graveyard in which so many of their ancestors have been buried.

One of them breaks the silence. "It will be 12 soon."

"Yes," the other person replies. "I can't believe I will get to welcome the New Year with you again, after all these years."

The other person smiles – a smile emanating grief. "I am glad you came, Thomas. I can't express how much it means to me. Everyone has left the country. The O'Briens, the Gonsalveses, the Perairas...all our old friends and neighbours. And now I

am the only one left here."

"Isn't there anyone else?"

"Yes, but they are scattered all over the city. I don't even know where they live. Patricia has a niece living in Eskaton, but I don't know her. I can't just show up at her place one fine morning and say, 'Hi dear, your aunt and I used to be best friends in school. Oh, what a tight-knit community we Anglo-Indians were back in the 1970s...'"

Another silence follows. Thomas starts humming a little tune and then, interrupting himself, says, "Oh, Emma, you must be so lonely here."

"Lonely? I don't think I am lonely," Emma says. She walks to another side of the roof and looks intently at the mango tree that adorns her backyard. Emma can't recall a time when the tree wasn't here. When they were little, Emma and Thomas used to collect the mangoes that the rage of Kalbaishakhi storms forced down from the branches. Thomas walks up to her.

"You should have come to Australia when you still had the choice," Thomas says.

"I never wanted to leave Dhaka," Emma says curtly. Her tone surprises Thomas and he says quickly, "I didn't mean to...offend you."

"Thomas," Emma laughs, "you are my brother. I know you well. I know you didn't mean to offend me. I know you would have loved it if I had accompanied you to Australia after Dad died. But I simply couldn't imagine leaving Dhaka behind. I couldn't imagine staying so many miles away from our parents' graves.

I couldn't imagine being away from the narrow lanes of Shankhari Bazar and Chawk Bazar. Every single alley of this city is close to my heart –"

"But Emma," Thomas interrupts her, "Dhaka is not our Dhaka anymore. It's a metropolitan mess. There is nothing but unhappiness and decay left here..."

"I don't care, Thomas," Emma says indignantly. "I grew up in this city. I can't bear to be away from it. Let's not talk about this anymore."

"Fine."

They stand silently for a few minutes. On the rooftops of the houses around them, teenagers have arranged barbecue parties. Some are singing at the top of their lungs, while others are dancing to Hindi songs. The chaos around them does not seem to affect the siblings maintaining their moment of angry silence. Even though they are well into their fifties, silent treatment is still the way in which they express their fury.

This time, Emma breaks the silence. "Thomas, I am not lonely here in Dhaka. I love teaching. I adore my students. You know, the other day a young woman approached me in the streets. She told me she had been my student eighteen years ago. She burst into tears seeing me. She kept saying how vividly she remembered my classes. I am not bragging, Tom, but these are little achievements that I cherish with all my heart. Who would give me a teaching job in Australia? I would have to start from scratch and I didn't have the courage to take that risk."

"I understand, Emma."

"I do plan to visit Australia next year. It has been such a long time since I last saw your children."

"They would be delighted to see you."

Emma smiles. "It's 11:58, Thomas! We will step into a new year in two minutes."

"Remember the New Year parties we used to have back in the day?"

"Yes, in Aunt Mary's house –"

"Oh, those delightful parties! Those dances and cakes...Remember the Elvis songs that we played?"

"How can I ever forget them? Oh, Thomas, I am getting so nostalgic! And all those people...some of them have left...and some of them will never leave this city..." she points in the direction of the cemetery that cannot be seen anymore.

As the clock strikes 12, the teenagers on the rooftops of the neighbouring houses scream at the top of their lungs and burst crackers. In the midst of the chaos, Thomas says, "Emma, let's sing."

"I haven't sung in years!"

"Let's try. I haven't sung in ages either."

Emma nods and then, just like she used to sing and welcome a new year back when Dhaka was a city where two storey houses existed and rang with laughter and glee. She starts singing –

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?*

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
and auld lang syne?*

When he is not dealing with mood swings, Shounak Reza devours books and tea and longs for eras he has never lived in. You can contact him at www.facebook.com/shounakreza