

Two Haibun

ROCHELLE POTKAR

Conch

Once oysters are nowhere to be found, he searches for *shunks*. 130 Indian rupees for an hour of diving.

He spends hours, over years, under the glittering blue of coral. The last two minutes of holding his bubbles. As time expands, he follows the path of mollusks. Digging the seabed for reverberation trapped in chambers of white shells. Last gasps of lovers, or the singles who drowned from waterfall-selfies. The suicides holding murmurs of marine life. The ocean... their last whimpers.

Drawing out bodies, their hands intertwined - he earns extra notes from the government. Their mouths always open in surprise, eyes desolate like empty oysters, water snapshotting their stark breath.

Water graves that unite the logic of logging off, in a soundless lap of a new language. And he going deaf from staying too long with all those secrets.

*the echo of fjords -
in the bedroom of marriages
white bangles*

Chaise lounge

When the earth spins backwards, it displaces deserts, greenlands and rainforests over its face - volte-facing the imaginary axis, twilight zone.



When her head spins backwards... she shadowboxes boredom with the mixing of drinks, as her eyeshadows smudge. No TGIF's for her. Or crumbling igloos in cold.

Reflections in club-toilet cisterns and cesspool gurgles. Raging against an output-driven world in a retro song-beat

from the renegade flower children (of the 1970's).

Theme party - hippie. Gypsy. Out of this world. Destiny's children. Children of god.

When the world capitalizes the day, she lets the night run loose. Mad ground-hog.

Her 30's no different from her 17's

- slow strobe of wandering street lights, wolfling down tequila.

*millennium silhouettes -
butts smouldering
on potholed galaxies*

Feeling the catharsis of a life never

lived, epiphanies never examined. Prolonging time, jutting out her tongue, addicted to selfies. She grows sleep like bonsai and cacti into her body.

When the earth spins backwards, it alters wind and oceanic currents.

When her head spins backwards, she changes from her tight dress to a bloated one for hangovers.

Crazy outsiders morning-jog, or jaunt to school, work, college as she remembers nameless boys, looking at the bloom of blue moon, fire raging through her belly. Watching the telly for stale news, chomping on celery, speaking to her family with a slur - a headache that craves a sip of pungency.

The freedom from mist, fire, ice, and never-ending pubescence.

*frozen stars -
half a glass of
migraine*

A Charles Wallace Writer's fellow, Rochelle Potkar is the author of *The Arithmetic of Breasts and Other Stories*, *Four Degrees of Separation*, *Paper Asylum*. She has won numerous awards and her works have been published in *The Best Asian Short Stories*, *Kitaab International*, *Wasafiri*, *Indian Literature*, *Asian Cha*, and *Chandrabhaga*.

MEMOIR

A Mother's Plight

MAHIM HOSSAIN

After a heavy shower the city life sighed a breath of relief. I can still hear the clogged up rain water streaming down the rooftop and beating against the exhaust machine of the air cooler, affixed right outside the hospital cabin where my mother has been admitted.

About three weeks earlier, Amma, who is now in her mid-sixties, came back from visiting my sister who lives abroad. I recall that morning when even before the first gleam of dawn broke out, my mother had to be rushed to the emergency room as she was feeling a severe pain around her neck and chest.

It all started at the time of Suhur or Sehri, as the Bengalis pronounce it, when it had finally started to pour heavily. Usually, my wife wakes me up for the early meal by calling my name softly and caressing my hands gently. Otherwise, I have the tendency of jumping out of my sleep with a fierce shriek and shudder. But that morning, the blaring ringtone of my mobile phone had made me jump out of my slumber to a surreal realm. Sleepy eyed I saw my elder brother's name flashing on the screen of the

phone. Even with my senses of time and place yet to be awakened, at that instant, I knew something was gravely wrong!

Answering the call I discovered that Amma, who sleeps in the room next to mine, needed to be taken to the hospital. So with frantic motions, I leapt out of the bed and threw the door of my room open. I ran towards the glowing light that was flooding out of her room.

When I entered the room, I saw Abba who is at the threshold of his eighties, was helping Amma to pack her clothes. Bhaiya who lives in another part of the city, told me on the phone that he was on his way to pick us up. So with droopy eyes, I too got out of my checkered pajamas and the ragged tea-shirt, and slipped into something more decent for the trip. By the time he arrived with his car, the outpouring had dwindled down to a light drizzle, and I could hear the call for the Fajr prayer floating in from the nearby mosque in our neighbourhood. Meanwhile, Amma was becoming more and more restless. So with a fit of urgency, the three of us set out for the hospital, while Abba and my wife stayed home.

Since it was an early morning in the month of Ramadan, and on top of that, it was pouring profusely a while back; it did not take us more than twenty-five minutes to reach the Cardiac Hospital, which is situated in Shahabagh. On arriving to the emergency room, the duty doctor and the nurses commenced their investigation. After three long hours of scrutiny and assessment, nothing acute was diagnosed except that Amma was still fatigued and therefore somewhat agitated, and needed complete rest. The doctors suggested that we could keep her there at least for a day for observation. And unanimously we concurred because if she went home in this condition, she might again indulge herself in household chores which would make her even more distraught.

Later in the morning, she was shifted to a cabin. Unlike others government-subsidized hospitals, the cabin was quite spacious and well-furnished with all the modern amenities. It even had a flat screen TV, a refrigerator and an oven. And the patient's bed was canopied with all kinds of wires, tubes and

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computers screens. But what seemed most intriguing to me was, there was a wooden bookshelf—mounted on a wall—with three separate compartments, each accommodated a thick book. And at the bottom of each compartment there was a hand-written tag in Bangla, pasted with transparent tape. The first tag from the left read: *The Holy Quran*, the second one: *The Holy Gita*, and the third one read: *The Holy Bible*. I have been to many hospitals, mostly to attend my parents and a few times as a patient myself, but I have never before come across this kind of approach to piety in any hospital.

Anyway, after laying her on the mechanic bed, the nurse drew the curtain encircling the bed to change her attire. Meanwhile, I was sitting warily on the sprawling couch and could hear the nurse instructing Amma. Once the curtain was removed, I was utterly stupefied by the sight inside!

I witnessed a spiraling wire, which was coming out of a monitor and spreading out into four separate claws, was attached to her breast underneath her gown, reading her heartbeat and pulse rate. Then there was this tube swirling down the container of saline, mounted atop a stand, which went through another device that monitored the dribbling until the sharp end of the tube pierced through a canola, carrying the substance into her veins. When all these wires and tubes were not enough, the nurse had put an oxygen mask on Amma's face and turned the handle on the gigantic cylinder on, which was nestled behind the bed, as they had found a hint of cold in her breast. Seeing her wrapped in a web of wires and tubes like some helpless lab rat, for a moment, I began to reconsider our decision of keeping her in a hospital. Meanwhile, the nurse had injected a yellowish substance in the saline, which she said would help her to rest for a while. Within minutes after administering the injection, she started feeling drowsy and

slowly submerged under the influence of the medicine.

While she was asleep, I kept staring at her for a while, listening to her pulse rate stabilizing on the monitor. At that moment, I could not help but reflect, there was a time when Amma could put up with stress and even stride against the tide, despite countless adversities of life, and could take care of others with complete devotion. But that day, it grappled my heart with profound agony seeing her lying helplessly on a hospital bed; seeking assistance from others.

Two hours later, while I was leafing through the *Gita*, and was perusing chapter three, titled, "Karma Yogh or Yoga of Action," where Lord Krishna categorically explains how it is the duty of each and every member of the society to carry out their responsibilities in their respective stages of lives, suddenly, I thought I heard a murmur. When I raised my head, I saw that Amma was wide awake and moving her hands.

Later in the afternoon, after having lunch and taking her usual medication, she seemed to have retrieved some of her composure. Afterwards, she started treading back to her past, rather unexpectedly.

Usually, she does not talk much about her childhood with any of her children. It is because the life before her marriage was filled with heart-rending memories of deprivation and hardship. Yet that day, she opened up her heart and laid it before me; throbbing with agony. For the next two hours, she kept narrating fragmented incidents from her childhood that had a profound impact on her young mind. She mentioned how her mother had died due to lack of proper treatment, and the rage she felt when her father got married to some other woman, abandoning his children from the first marriage. While listening to her stories, I thought to myself, it was a good thing that she was able to ventilate her frustration as it had been devouring her soul for ages.

I'm sure there are many mothers like her who dedicate their whole lives for the betterment of others without asking for any return. My love and salutation go to such unsung heroes. But unfortunately, I feel that mothers like her are increasingly becoming extinct, and the concept of joint family is becoming a myth in our society. As a result, the forthcoming generations are being deprived of the joy and pleasure of being in the company of such role models. I can only hope that we will be able to return at least some of the love and magnanimity that we have received from our mothers, and cherish every living moment with them by keeping them in a blissful ambience.

Mahim Hossain lives in Dhaka and likes to read and write during his leisure.

