

carriage ran over him and killed him the day before yesterday. And that girl who had promised to marry him – she eloped with a British sahib the very next day. Runi knew of the girl's whereabouts. Can't you recognize Runi? She was the most popular dancer in town, but now she is involved in politics. I met her on the street the other day. She used to be as thin as a reed; now she has become quite overweight. Upon running into each other, she took me to a restaurant and gave me a treat. When she got to know I had married, she asked: How does the wife look?"

"That's enough! You can take leave now, Renu. Ugh, once he starts talking, there's no end," Rahat would try to stop him.

Renu would say, "Oh, he can blabber continuously."

And in saying so, she would turn red, out of annoyance or out of a sense of coyness.

And yet, Topu wouldn't stop. A smile would spread across his face and he would continue to explode fireworks of jibber-jabber. "Alright, fine! Since you don't want to hear about others, I'll speak about myself. If I can complete my MBBS, I won't live in this city. I'll go off to the village. I'll build a



cozy little home there. And you'll see, my humble abode won't be spectacular. It will be a simple, lowly home. Yes, there will be a little dispensary, nothing else."

Sometimes Topu would have dreams about his future.

There was a time when Topu fancied joining the military.

But he had poor luck. He was born lame. His left leg was an inch or two shorter than his right. But, given that his left shoe's heel would be custom-made slightly higher, his limp wasn't too conspicuous from afar.

Our lives were quite mechanical.

We would wake up early in the morning, when the crows would be cawing. Topu would be the first to rise. He would awaken the two of us – "Get up, can't you see the sun has risen? Why are you sleeping like buffaloes? Get up!" Topu would pull the quilt off our bodies, and force us to get out of bed. He would open the window close to the head of the bed and say, "Look, there's a sweet

sunshine. Enough of sleeping. Get up!"

Waking us up, Topu would make tea himself.

We would open our books after finishing the last sip of tea from our cups. Then, until 10:00, we would have bathed and breakfasted, and then gone to class.

Afternoons would be spent in merry-making. On some days, we would go to roam around in Eskaton. On some days, we would go on the other side of the Burigan-ga. And on days when Renu would be with us, we would walk alongside Azimpur and get lost into some faraway village.

Renu would sometimes fry a mixture of chickpeas and peanuts at home and bring it for us. As we would walk the village path, we would munch on the crispy, fried mixture. Topu would say, "Rahat, do you know what I wish sometimes?"

"What?"

"This meandering, red-soiled, dirt path. What if this path would never end? What if we could walk this path forever?"

"What is this? Since when have you become a poet?" Rahat would interject, with a furrowed pair of eyebrows.

"No, no, why would I become a poet?" Topu would fidget. "Yet for some reason, I wish..."

The dream would sink into his dreamy eyes.

It was the three of us.

Topu, Rahat and I.

Our days went by quite well. But there was an unexpected phase. On that fateful day, a crowd of innumerable people had gathered together at the wide, green field outside the hostel. At the break of dawn, enraged men – young and old, were chanting slogans into blowhorns, and then there was one who was swaying bloodied clothes hanging from a long stick. Pointing their forefingers at those clothes, they were saying something amongst each other, with chapped lips moving about haphazardly.

Topu tugged at my hand and said, "Come."

"Where?"

"Why? With them."

I looked out and saw that the massive crowd was slowly moving.

"Come."

"Let's go."

We stepped into the procession.

A little later, I looked back and saw Renu panting and rushing towards us.

As expected, she ran towards Topu and held his hand tightly. "Where are you going? Let's go home."

"Are you mad?" Topu freed his hand from hers and said, "Why don't you come along with us?"

"No, I won't go. Let's go home." Renu held his hand again.

"What an awful way to rebuke him."

Rahat felt vexed. "If you wish to go home, then go. He won't." Renu turned around and glared at Rahat fiercely. Then, with a lump in her throat, she implored, "I pray to you, please let's go home. Ma is crying."

"I already told you I can't. You go." Topu freed his hand once again.

I felt pity when I looked at Renu's doleful face. I said, "What's wrong? Why are you acting this way? There's nothing to be afraid of. You go home now."

Dithering for a while, Renu went back with eyes brimming with tears.

The procession had then crossed the Medical College gate and had neared Curzon Hall.

The three of us were walking alongside each other.

Rahat was chanting slogans.

And Topu was carrying a large placard

that had the words "Rashtrabhasha Bangla Chai" written in red ink.

When the procession reached the High Court intersection, the people in front of us suddenly started screaming and scattering in all directions. Before getting the scope to figure out what was happening, Topu, along with the placard, had sprawled out on the ground. Exactly at the center of his forehead was a round hole. And from that hole, blood spurted out like a fountain.

"Topu!" Rahat wailed.

I just stood there dumbfounded.

Two military men rushed towards us and carried Topu's dead body away, right in front of our eyes. We didn't move an inch; we didn't bar them. It was as if my body was frozen stiff. Then, when I retreated, I screamed out, "Rahat, run!"

"Where?" Rahat looked at me, dumbfounded.

Then, gasping for breath, both of us ran towards the university. That night, Topu's mother had come here and wallowed as she wept. Renu had come too. A stream of tears had flowed down her unblinking eyes. Renu didn't say a word to us. Rahat had whispered into my ear, "It would be better if I had died instead of Topu. What a strange incident. We were next to each other. Yet nothing happened to us. The bullet hit Topu's forehead. How bizarre!"

After Topu's demise Renu had come one day and taken away all his belongings. Two suitcases, one trunk full of books, and the bedding. On that day too, Renu had pulled a long face.

She didn't speak to us. She glanced at Rahat once and asked, "He had a warm coat; where is the coat?"

"Oh, that's in my suitcase." He slowly took out the coat and handed it to her.

Topu's place at the hostel had been left empty for a few days afterwards. Sometimes, at the break of dawn, we would feel someone touching us to wake us up.

"Get up. Enough of sleeping. Get up."

Opening our eyes, we would see no one. We would only stare at his empty bed and our hearts would bleed. Then one day, a new boy took his place at the hostel. That boy stayed for about three years.

Then came another. Our new roommate. Quite a bubbly chap.

The other day, sitting on his bed, he was turning the pages of the book on human anatomy. He brought out the skull that was part of the skeleton, which was tucked into a basket under his bed, and he was comparing it with the figures in the textbook. Then at one point, he looked at Rahat and asked him, "Rahat sahib, can you take a look at this? Why is there a hole at the center of my skull?"

"What did you say?" We gawked at him, startled.

Rahat got up and took the skull in his hands. With hunched shoulders, he studied the skull, astonished. Yes, there was a round hole at the center of the forehead. Rahat looked at me, and I didn't fail to understand the language in his eyes. I murmured, "His left leg bone was two inches short..."

Before I even finished, Rahat picked up the bones from the basket. His hands were shaking. Shortly, he screamed agitatedly, "The left leg's tibia and fibula are two inches short. Look, look!"

Perturbed, I too, was trembling.

A little while later, Rahat held the skull in both his hands and said, "Topu..." But his voice was stuck in his throat.

Noora Shamsi Bahar is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English & Modern Languages at North South University.