

A translation of Syed Manzoorul Islam's short story, "Kathpoka"

## Woodworms (Part 1)

BY NOORA SHAMSI BAHAR

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It's been three nights that Aslam hasn't been able to sleep. He has been trying so hard to fall asleep on the divan for three nights – the divan that he fancifully got carpentered and laid out in the study room of his gigantic apartment in Bashundhara, for the specific purpose of lying down to read and eventually doze off. As it is, Aslam has the habit of staying up late. These past few days, since he had to sleep alone in the study room, he didn't feel like going to sleep before 2:00. But as soon as his eyelids start to droop, the sleep-shattering song of the woodworms begins... krrkrkrkr. This song is cacophonous, it lacks melody; there's terror in it, and there is no trace of salvation.

is two past midnight: it feels as if the room has drowned in the middle of the Meghna river. But when he rests his head on the pillow, he can't even go as far as a quarter mile into the path towards slumber. The nightly trumpet, played by the woodworms' chainsaw begins – krr, krr, krr.

Once or twice, it occurred to Aslam, that the woodworms had appeared to serve summons to him, on behalf of a judge, or to put his punishment into effect. And the punishment was the prohibition of his sleep. Sleep was very dear to Aslam; as soon as he would rest his head on the pillow, the goddess of sleep would quietly claim him. When that sleep deserts him, the punishment seems worse than hanging. Why should

what was the Bengali word for "voluptuous". I had said, "lashyamoni, indriyoshukhkor." But poverty peeked through the girl's sensual front. There is a dread somewhere within, the fear of being homeless. The sensuousness was only a mask that concealed the fear. As a result, she looked more pitiful than sensual to me. Apparently, Aslam was caught while being intimate with this girl – and the one who had caught them in the act was Mamata, another secretary at the office, who happened to be Rehena's stepfather's first wife's brother-in-law's daughter.

Aslam has a university-going daughter who is a BBA student, besides two older sons.

It takes a lifetime to know one. It has been so in Lalor's time as in ours. And yet in the case of this man, Aslam, a friend since college – until, say, five to seven years back, by which time he had become a multi-millionaire – I was under the impression that I knew him like the lines of my palm. Sigh!

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When, on the second night, the woodworms appeared with the summons to banish his sleep, Aslam sat up on the divan and remembered the advice given by his friend, an English Professor, to stay away from the sensuous girl. Why didn't he follow his advice? But, he argued, was the move to become intimate his or hers? What intimacy? He never even did so much as hold her hand. It was in fact the girl who suddenly clasped his waist and pulled him towards her. Then why would Rehena let this get to her? Aslam got really mad at the sensuous girl, and also at the Professor friend. He picked up his phone and dialed the Professor's number. The Professor was awake. He too, had the habit of staying up late. Aslam told him he would throw Rehena out of the house. Why should he suffer for someone else's crime?

"Who is this someone else?" The Professor asked.

"The sensuous one."

The Professor laughed for a while. Then he told him, "The girl is poor. And vulnerable. She would never invite danger by pulling you towards herself." "Besides," the Professor asked with a chuckle, "have you seen yourself in the mirror these days?"

"Why?"

"With the shape you are in, would even a non-sensuous woman try to get intimate with you, even by mistake, except maybe the one and only Rehena? Then, is the fault hers or *Shala* yours?"

Angry and frustrated, Aslam hurled his phone away.

"*Shala* Professor."

He recalled how the *Shala* Professor had asked him what is the use of stocking a room with books, when he probably didn't read one in a month. Aslam had replied by saying that foreign buyers visited his house from time to time. So did ambassadors, ministers and MPs, when he threw parties. They peeked into the study room and would be in awe.

"Oh."

"Besides, I'm a voracious reader. I have spent countless nights reading on the divan."

"Oh."

Aslam remembered how the Professor was amazed by the sight of the bookcase that Aslam's father had made long ago with mahogany wood, burnished black – on whose shelves his father's books were impeccably arranged – placed right next to the extravagant brown and gold bookcases. Aslam's father was a high-school teacher by vocation and a reader by addiction. It took him a long time to save the money to make the bookcase, and once it was made, he filled the shelves with books, stood next to it, and got a picture taken with a sense of pride and pleasure that can be likened to the gratification Gunter Grass felt when he posed in front of the camera after receiving the Nobel prize.

Aslam had moved to this flat two years before his father's death. It's a spacious, four and a half thousand square feet flat, but he could never bring his father to it. Every time he implored, "Do come, Baba," his father would respond with a smile, "Not now, son. I'll go when the time is right."

But before the right time arrived, his own time came to an end. Before he died, however, he had called Aslam and bequeathed to him the bookcase along with the books, and his picture taken next to it. Entrusting him, he had said, "Take good care of them. I have invested my dreams in this bookcase." And the investment, we know was as clear as the sky of that fateful autumn day.

With his eyes fixed at the autumn sky, he then left the world, which was beyond all investments.

After cursing the Professor, Aslam rested his head on the pillow. His thoughts were filled with the memories of his father. And for some reason – and Aslam couldn't figure out what exactly it was: perhaps one's heart softens with age, perhaps it is the consequence of diabetes, or perhaps when you earn fifteen and a half crores in one day, the feeling of joy manifests itself in vapors in your eyes – he became tearful. He wept for a long time, wetting his pillow, before sitting up. Now, fury overpowered him. "How dare those woodworms sink their teeth into Baba's bookcase? *Shala* woodworms!" He suddenly jumped up and switched on the lights, and started kicking the bookcase.

Surprise, surprise! The woodworms' chainsaw stopped on its track as Aslam's kicks landed on the bookcase. Despite his rage, Aslam laughed. Comparing the woodworms with the offspring of a forbidden animal, he shouted, "You need a strong man to control a rogue." But before the passage of five minutes after the kicking had stopped, the chainsaw was back: krrkrr! He kicked harder this time, and the noise caused by all the kicking brought his daughter Ohona – the BBA student – knocking at the door, and shouting, "What is going on, Baba? What do you think you are doing?"

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Aslam feels as if the woodworms were manipulating a chainsaw, and that the noise of the chainsaw had found its way into some music band's amplifier, which magnified it across the room.

Such a peculiar woodworm. Or is it woodworms? Aslam isn't sure whether there is one or many of them. But that doesn't matter. The noise is atrocious, unmerciful, like a contract killer who is after you. Surprisingly, after Aslam finishes his dinner, watches the news on the television, and enters this room, there's silence within. When he turns on the air conditioner, plops down on the easy chair, and turns the pages of a book, then too, he doesn't hear any noise other than the humming of the AC. It is one past midnight: a blanket of tranquility has engulfed the room. It

Aslam be punished? He should, because he had cheated on Rehena. He was seen to get intimate with his female secretary, the one who puts on a lot of makeup. And when the news reached Rehena's ears, she kicked him out of the bedroom. It's been three nights since then. The secretary's name is Dana. There is a pretentious sensuality in her facial expressions. In her gaze, there is a come-and-get-me provocation that Aslam finds hard to resist. The one time I had been to Aslam's new office, he introduced me to the girl, even though I wasn't interested to get to know her, who, I was told, had been employed only a month back. Aslam had told me, "We get a lot of foreign buyers. We need a voluptuous secretary, you know, one who will entertain them." He then asked me

to demonstrate that they are an honoured guest.

With regard to servings, foreigners tend to really mean it when they decline offers of more food.

If you forego the usual practice of piling more food on the plate despite repeated protestations from the guest, the foreigner will not perceive it as demonstrating a lack of generosity or welcome. Similarly, don't expect the foreigner to shield their plate with their hand to prevent additional servings from being added. They are unaware of this practice.

Be generous with water. Foreigners are thirsty

people who have the unthinkable habit of sipping water throughout the meal, rather than drinking a glass or two at one go at the end. While this makes no sense at all digestion-wise, they do it. Thus, if they take their hand off the glass while there is still some water in it, this doesn't mean you can remove the said glass from the table because they are done. Equally strange, foreigners aren't in the habit of touching the glass base with the back of their right hand when they drink. Don't let this shock you.

At the end of the meal, when it comes to tea, don't be surprised if they ask for no sugar, and if they do, it's best not to ask in return if they have diabetes. For some reason, many foreigners prefer foul, bitter tea regardless of their health status. It can also be advisable to tell the foreigner to chew on rather than swallow the betel leaf.

Most importantly of all, don't stress. While these simple tips may help your foreigner to enjoy their invitation in your home, there's a reason why Bangladeshis are renowned for hospitality. As it was with my Tajik guest, your foreigner is likely to enjoy the occasion of their visit whether or not their peculiar social habits are taken into account.

Andrew Eagle is an Australian-born author and English teacher who has lived in Bangladesh for quite a long time.

## A Villager's Guide to Feeding Foreigners

ANDREW EAGLE

If you're a straightforward villager like me, you'll be curious to entertain the foreigner. Before you do there are things to consider. Foreigners have foreign ways; allowances are required. Yet, despite the inherent challenge it's good to feed one. Even foreigners need to eat.

I write from experience. I write because I chanced upon a foreigner in our Dhaka neighbourhood, a Tajik as it turned out. It seemed only natural to invite him for Friday lunch. I write to share what I learned in the hope it may help other villagers seeking to feed the foreigner.

If you've relocated to the capital, the first difficulty might be the address. If your foreigner is British, they'll count the building floors from "Ground." Americans start counting from one. For foreigners from other countries it's anybody's guess, though one thing likely to confuse any of them is to say, for example, that it's on the third floor, lift button two.

At the front door there may be the issue of shoes. Americans tend to leave them on. In the interest of courtesy if this occurs it may be overlooked, and of course if you live in a mud floor residence there'll be no issue here.

Indeed, if entertaining at a village home it may be worth considering the merit of rats running along the rafters after harvest time, or chickens parading through the home at any time of year. A monitor lizard hiding under the showcase is similarly likely to surprise your foreign guest.

Before considering the menu, think cutlery. Bizarrely, foreigners rarely know how to eat with their hands. If they're adventurous, they may wish to try it, but best to have a fork and spoon ready. Indeed, if they're westerners and you do give a fork and spoon, it'll still be exotic to them; they'll think they're in Thailand since westerners generally eat with a knife and fork, but then who keeps a table knife at home?

Conversation is likely to be the biggest challenge. Your foreigner might not speak Bangla or they may be restricted to a total lexicon of twenty Bangla words with which to express every notion, life philosophy and pleasantries. In such case you'll have to detect the nuances in meaning when they say everything is "bhalo."

Alternatively, you could try to converse in the language of the Britishers. If pursuing this option, you'll likely discover that your foreigner speaks English with some oddball accent. There can be garbled grammar to contend with, such as if the foreigner is trying to say something simple like they've had a lot of works to do, it can be that they omit the final "s" from "work." Even though you know that "a lot of" is clearly plural, in the interests of making your foreigner feel at ease, it's best not to correct them.

As for conversation topic, it's an area fraught with risk. Asking a foreigner their salary amount may not warm them to your hospitality. Similarly, it's best not to ask about their marital status, age or how many children they have. For reasons unknown, foreigners feel uncomfortable with such harmless chit-chat inquiries. Similarly, asking for a visa to their country might not be the best conversation starter.

Further, if seeing the foreigner on a subsequent occasion, it's advisable not to open with "You're looking fat," or "You've put on weight," though inexplicably the opposite observations are well received.

Carefully consider the menu. Foreigners like bland food. If you take a simple menu of say, chicken, an egg curry, vegetables and rice, it'd be wise to prepare it without a green chilli in sight. Sure, you won't enjoy it much but the foreigner may be thankful. *Shutki* might be one dish to avoid if it's the foreigner's first visit to your home and think twice before offering the foreigner a fish's head to

demonstrate that they are an honoured guest.

With regard to servings, foreigners tend to really mean it when they decline offers of more food. If you forego the usual practice of piling more food on the plate despite repeated protestations from the guest, the foreigner will not perceive it as demonstrating a lack of generosity or welcome.

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Be generous with water. Foreigners are thirsty people who have the unthinkable habit of sipping water throughout the meal, rather than drinking a glass or two at one go at the end. While this makes no sense at all digestion-wise, they do it. Thus, if they take their hand off the glass while there is still some water in it, this doesn't mean you can remove the said glass from the table because they are done. Equally strange, foreigners aren't in the habit of touching the glass base with the back of their right hand when they drink. Don't let this shock you.

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