

A TRANSLATION OF SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM’S SHORT STORY, “KATHPOKA”

Woodworms (Part II)

BY NOORA SHAMSI BAHAR

“I’m doing what I feel like doing. What’s that to you?” Aslam retorted. He opened the door and said, “Like mother, like daughter. Get lost.”

Now, Ohona was not a simple girl, despite her looks. She also did not like to be shouted down. She said, “You are a crude person, Baba. Uncultured. Are you drunk?”

Aslam charged towards his daughter. Her facial expressions filled with anger. “Disgusting,” she said and then left.

Once his daughter had left, Aslam sat on the divan and realized his foot with which he had kicked the bookcase, had started to hurt a lot. He pondered over the issue as he massaged his foot. No, not over the pain in his foot, but over Ohona’s behavior. It was positively certain that Ohona loathed him. He also thought that she lived in this house only for her father’s money. Ohona was greedy for money. “*Shala* Ohona!”

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On the third night, Aslam was in an agitated mood, although he should have been happy. He had sacked the sensuous Dana – the culprit behind his woes. He had also fired Mamata Akhter, even though Mamata’s son, who had a rheumatic heart, was in United Hospital, and for whose treatment, an exorbitant sum of money was needed. This afternoon, Aslam had gone to the head office of a government bank – and strangely enough, he had forgotten the name of the bank; he could vaguely remember that the bank’s name had a similar ring to the color of a foreign actress’s blonde hair – and had received a huge sum as loan. After sending the termination notice to Mamata, he had called Rehena and told her, “If you call me back within fifteen minutes and tell me, ‘Salu, keep Mamata, let go of Dana,’ then I will do just that; not only will I do so, I will even give her a raise.” But there was no response from Rehena. Calling back was out of the question. The fact that she had absent-mindedly received Aslam’s aka Salu’s call – Rehena had given him this nickname on the night of their wedding – made her so angry she bit her hand for lifting the phone instead of letting it ring. Aslam returned home at 11:00 at night. He had had dinner outside, and didn’t even switch on the TV; he went straight to the study. He picked up a book without even looking at it. As he sat in the easy chair, he thought

he would dispose of all the books. For some reason, the books weren’t the reassuring company they had been all along. He realized that for the last three nights, he had been reaching out for the same book and yet hadn’t been able to read a single page. He didn’t even know what sort of a book it was – a novel, a play, or a book about the share market. He had already decided to get rid of Rehena, but now he resolved to get rid of the books along with Rehena. Tomorrow, perhaps, Ohona will be a part of the list. “*Shala* books!”

He felt a certain sense of fulfillment by cursing the books, as if he was cursing the Professor *Shala* once again. But before the satisfaction of cursing could fully set in, the chainsaw gang was at it again. As if a hired assassin had aimed



his machinegun at him and had started to fire – krr krr krr.

Now Aslam’s temper shot up and blew his top. He felt a strong desire for vengeance. Baba’s mahogany wood bookcase! A token of his affection! He couldn’t accept the slightest bit of injury to it. Had it not been Baba’s bookcase, he would have taken it into the field and set it on fire. But even without burning it, it is possible to eliminate the machinegun-firing murderer and/or murderers. He suddenly recalled Dr. Babul Fakir’s name. Babul is an entomologist, and teaches at the same university as the Professor friend. It’s been a while since they’ve been in touch. He managed to find Dr. Fakir’s number from a dairy and called him.

It was pretty late. But when Babul answered, Aslam could clearly hear the sound of the television. Aslam felt comforted. He said, “This is Aslam, Dosto, your Aslaimma, do you remember?”

“Why wouldn’t I, Dosto?” Babul spoke back in a thunderous voice. Babul was watching a blockbuster Hindi thriller, *Kahani*, on the video. He asked his wife to put it on pause and said, “I read in the newspaper that you’ve stolen forty five crores from a bank. *Shala*, you’re doing well, earning fame by spending others’ money,” and burst into laughter. Aslam was mad at himself for calling Babul; he thought he would kill himself for this after hanging up. But before that, he would have to kill the woodworm or woodworms.

Babul then shared his knowledge, based on his expertise. “Woodworm or

Its mandible is so hard that that even if one places it on a hard base and smashes it with a grinding stone, it won’t break.

How abject! “But Dosto, woodworms don’t feed on good wood or seasoned wood – they don’t feed on Teak wood or Cashmere wood. They won’t feed on the red portion of the wood of the jackfruit tree.”

Aslam had told him that the woodworms had infested the back portion of his bookcase. Babul cackled and said, “If you make a bookcase with bogus wood, woodworms will of course make a meal of it. Or is it that you’re so used to being a phony, *Shala* that nothing but a counterfeit catches your eyes? Okay Dosto, good night. I’ll have to hang up now. Bidya is after a criminal. Let’s see what happens now.” As he hung up, Aslam heard him telling his wife, “Shopna, let’s get back to the movie. Play.” He didn’t say a word about how to kill the woodworms. Bidya Balan’s fate was more of a priority to Babul than the woodworms’.

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Dr. Babul Fakir’s words burned Aslam’s ears. And now, the rage singed his hair. Smoke rose from his head. But soon enough, his fury subsided. Phone in hand, he remained motionless. He felt that Babul Fakir was tugging at the ground beneath his feet. “*Shala* Fakir!”

But while he was cursing Babul, he suddenly saw before his eyes, the woodworms, resting on the bookcase’s glass. Not one, but a multitude. White bodies, black heads, antennas longer than the bodies. Shockingly, the insects were looking at him, and they were laughing.

Aslam stood up, walked to the bookcase, and stood close to it. The insects didn’t move, didn’t flee; they just sat there, immobile. Twenty days after their birth, their bodies fattened up by vapor and microbes, they looked invincible. Avoiding the insects, Aslam put his hand on the bookcase. The chilly air from the AC had turned the bookcase cold. He felt a strange sensation of cool dewdrops in his hand. The sensation traveled to his heart. But as soon as it got there, it started to turn torrid. Aslam realized his blood was boiling. This blood would now shoot up to his head. Is the woodworm – or woodworms

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– the reason he was so furious? No, Aslam felt furious and exasperated because he had come to the realization that his father had been cheated when he got the bookcase made. The furniture maker had promised him mahogany wood but had tricked him with bogus wood.

“He deceived Baba? My Baba?” The more he thought about it, the more he seethed. He decided if the man who had cheated Baba were still alive, he would send people to hunt him down, wherever he may be. Then he would summon him to appear in front of him. Then he would see what he would do.

With this in mind, he felt some solace. Going back towards the easy chair, he told his Baba, “The one who pulled a fast one on you won’t get away so easy. I’ll get him. And make him pay. You, the conman!”

As if in applause to his words, the woodworms started with their squeals: krr krr. They began nodding their hard jaws while laughing, as if they were saying something. Aslam noticed that along with the woodworms, the reflection of his Baba’s smiling face surfaced on the glass plane of the bookcase, and he said something too, synchronizing with the trumpet of their chorus.

“Are the insects saying, scammerrrrrr? Is Baba saying the same too? To whom?”

“*Shala*...”

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Things I Thought I Thought Tonight

ABDULLAH RAYHAN

They have given me a grilled piece of chicken and a naan with the face of moon on a plate. The grilled chicken leg is brown with sides turned to dark coal. Grains of burnt spices glaze the piece. The naan has some sort of bread crumb slathered all over it. It is white and has a large brown spot on one side. Soft and fluffy, it glistens with brushed ghee or butter. The chicken piece also glows with its oily skin: the juice of the piece dripping. The heavy smell of spices and the soft smell of naan form a great combination. They also gave me a plate of salad. Pieces of cucumbers soaked in a splash of yogurt sauce. Its pink color hides the faded greenish white of the cucumber. Also, there is a glass with water filled almost to the rim. On the outer surface, drops of water cling to the glass, some dripping. Every drop reflects the white light over my head.

I tear a piece of naan, tear a section of the chicken with the same fingers and cover it with the naan. How much is the chicken? Cannot be over Taka 100. Tomorrow I have exam on prose. The short story mainly explores the loneliness of heart and the meaninglessness of our effort to fill in that void. I take two thin slices of the yogurt covered cucumber with the naan and put it in my mouth. How much money do I have? Maybe 500. Well, doesn’t matter. It will cover this. My father was supposed to be in Barisal today. Maybe he didn’t go. He’s ill after all. But he should have gone this week. The naan and the chicken taste good with the yogurt. No, he shouldn’t have. I take a sip of water. The buses outside are roaring.

They will head to my campus. Tomorrow I will have to get on one. Aarrgh! I didn’t take a shower today. I rode the bus twice today. I am filthy. What kind of question will we have to answer tomorrow? I will take a bath tomorrow.

Wow, this tastes really good. Doesn’t matter, whatever the questions maybe, I have a clear idea on the whole thing. It is about the loneliness of the heart and the meaninglessness of the efforts to try to fill that void. The bone of this chicken is so soft. The taste of this sauce is so smooth and soft. I will buy chips so that I don’t get hungry at night. What chips can I buy? How about I take another naan? No, that will cost too much. Why isn’t there any soap? There was one every time I came here. My hair is long. But I won’t cut them. The water feels good against my skin.

“Tissue,” it’s funny how he is standing with his fat belly.

“How much is it, a naan and a quarter grill?”

Where is the tooth pick? How much did he return? There!

Ok, its ok. Will I buy chips? No, let’s not. There was a pretty girl at the coffee shop today. Did I pay the bill of coffee today? Oh shit, it’s so slippery! What is this smell I get every time I get inside this lane?

Oh shit, here we go again. One, two, three, four.....twelve, thirteen, thirty four....Where’s the key!

It’s only the sixth floor. One more to go.

“A heart that’s Fill up like a landfill A job that slowly kills you Wounds that won’t heal.”



Oh, a little bit more. Ahhhhhh, where’s my phone? “Found you.” Tap tap tap tap tap tap tap..... I will study tomorrow morning. “Good night, Mou.” What will I think of today? A good day it will be when I will finally learn all the things I wanted

to and practice them every day. I will practice guitar a bit before leaving for campus. Will read books during the intervals of classes. Must practice German daily. I will buy *The Trial* this week. The books in my collection...of course a *Sherlock Holmes Omnibus*, *The stranger*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Midnight’s Children*...And...Ummm...And *Catcher*

in the Rye...*Catcher in the Rye*...*Catcher in the Rye*...*The Complete Works of Franz Kafka* is a must, and one of Murakami. Which one? Read the *Norwegian Wood*...*Sputnik Sweetheart*...Oh and *Lolita*.

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