

# Nights with Nicole

SOHANA MANZOOR

"You gave me such a fright last night! I thought you were dying."

The words came from a young woman hovering around my bed. She was a white woman in white apron with auburn hair and bright blue eyes. Her face was not classically beautiful, but arresting with a charming smile. I watched her injecting medicine in the saline bag hanging from the apparatus by my bed.

Good Lord! Where was I? Did I die? But this looked like a hospital. Then memories came flooding in. I had tremendous pain in my abdomen; so much so that I fell on my way from the Morris library to Faneer Hall. After the pain subsided a little I got up and walked slowly to the Student Centre. I called a friend and crumpled down on a bench right outside the building. My friend Aneek was the one who took me to the Health Center. I could not clearly recall how things happened. But one thing led to another, and finally, I was transferred to Carbondale Memorial Hospital and had to undergo an emergency surgery. This was my first night after the surgery. I could not recall anything about the previous night except that someone called me from time to time, fixing my pillows, and checking temperature.

"Who are you?" my voice sounded hoarse in my own ears.

"Oh, I'm Nicole, your night nurse." She smiled again and continued, "It's early in the morning. My shift ends at 8:00. But your pressure is awfully low. You need blood."

"Oh." What else could I say to that?

"I checked your blood pressure late last night and I could not believe my eyes! It was down to 52. I was so scared. And I thought I would lose you any time. I called out to you from time to time and you opened your eyes every time I called. It felt so strange—like those horror movies, you know. Finally, it's morning and the doctor has come."

I recalled that it was summer and this small town had lost 70% of its population to summer vacation. Even the doctors were mostly gone. They had to bring a specialist for me from another town for the surgery.

I watched as they administered blood. I croaked feebly that I had low blood pressure anyway and they should not be so worried. Then it was time for Nicole to go. A new nurse had come in and Nicole left after saying good bye.

"I'll see you again after dark, Sohana," she said smiling. She put a few things in her bag, waved at me and left. The day nurse was an ample woman—kind and boisterous. "You can call me Anna," she said. A black woman in white popped in—another nurse who looked after a patient

in the next room. She said her name was Chelsia. Anna and Chelsia chatted away merrily with anecdotes from their lives. I listened though did not catch everything. But something about their chirpy chats made me content.

"What would you have for breakfast, Sohana?" Anna asked. She pronounced my name 'Suhaennaa'.

"I don't know," I mumbled. "What's available?"

"Let me ask the kitchen. They'll send a menu upstairs."

After having boiled eggs with bread, butter and marmalade along with coffee I felt less drowsy. Then visitors started pouring in. The usual time for visitors was afternoon, but it was summer and there were very few patients at the hospital. Besides, it was also the Eid-ul Fitr, and the



Bangladeshi community in Carbondale could not possibly leave a fellow sufferer alone in the hospital. After my fourth visitor, however, I felt exhausted. I dozed off and when I woke up, it was late afternoon. After drinking some hot soup I fell asleep again. But I kept wondering why I didn't feel like going to the bathroom. I wondered with embarrassment if I had peed on the bed. That would be awful. And I did not want to ask Anna; I still was not quite free with her.

Next time I opened my eyes, it was Nicole again. And I asked her, "Umm... Nicole, don't you think I should use the toilet?"

Nicole smiled. "You don't need to get up right away. We have put you on catheter. No worries. You can use the bathroom tomorrow."

I looked at her helplessly, but also in gratitude. In my entire life, I never felt so

feeble as I did during those three days and four nights I stayed at the hospital. I was far away from home. My mother also just had had a surgery in Bangladesh and could not possibly come to visit me even if she wanted. And here were this group of unknown people taking care of me at the hospital. Somehow, Nicole came to represent them all. The night passed in a half-awakened stage. But whenever I did wake up, Nicole was there, "You want water, Sohana?" "Are you in pain?" "What do you need, sweetie?" Perhaps she said those things to all her patients. But for me, those were like words from my mother or grandmother who stayed awake through the nights when I had fever as a child. I wept tears of gratitude.

On the second day, my PhD supervisor, Dr. Collins came to visit with a bouquet of orchids. My eyes went round because I had seen those at flower shops and knew a stick of orchids cost 20 dollars. And he had a whole bunch! A rare treat indeed for a graduate student like me! But Kenny Collins was a wonderfully affectionate old man and he walked in while saying, "My dear Sohana, what has happened to you? I just got this email from Marie saying that you're at the hospital." Yes, it was very sudden and I did not even have the time to think. I had just called up a few friends and my aunt informing them about it. Dr. Collins stayed for about 20 minutes asking if I needed anything and assured not to worry about classes or teaching. Everything would be taken care of. It all happened right before the fall semester started and I felt guilty. Dr. Collins asked, "Just take rest, Sohana. You worry too much. We all know that you did not have this surgery to shirk your duties." He left with that fatherly smile and a twinkle in the eye that made me weepy all over again.

The morning I finally left the hospital, the sky was overcast. I sat on my bed and watched my friends packing my stuff. I was not exactly going back to my apartment but to live with a friend as I was still too weak to be on my own. I was eager to be on my feet again. But as I looked back at the red brick building of the Carbondale Memorial Hospital, suddenly, my heart felt heavy as if I was leaving behind some very dear friends. These were the ones who had made it possible for me to live. My experiences at that place taught me a few things about life and I learnt how to make home among strangers. And, Nicole? Well, I never saw her again, but I will always remember her and those nights with gratitude.

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## POETRY



# Confused

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

I am mixed-up — cannot help English and Bengali under my belt

I can read a bit of Hindi

Cannot understand much of French  
A little Chinese ... low class, they said...

I am mixed up — cannot help English and Bengali under my belt

I grew up thinking I will find a way  
But now pidgin is all that I can say

I write in English — the language borrowed from the West  
The language that taught us or brought us unrest  
The language that through The Raj spread  
Importing Nationalism in its tread

I am mixed-up — cannot help English and Bengali under my belt

But my life is that of the non-English,  
A probashi Bengali at best.  
People say I am not typical, not quite the right type  
A mixed-up Bengali — I said  
Culture is something I dread at every tread  
Because what Culture I have is mine  
— Not of a Race, a Country or Religion —

Human being is the only race to which I belong.

Help protect my home, the Earth — its every drop, its every stone.

In a world of 7.7 billion, can I be alone?

I am mixed up — cannot help English and Bengali under my belt

Mitali Chakravarty's poetry has been published online and as part of anthologies, Harbinger Asylum Quarterly (November, 2019), In Reverie (2016), An Anthology of Indian Poetry in English (1984). She is also a translator.

## A Translation of Manik Bandopadhyay's "Pragaitihashik" Prehistoric (Part-II)

MOTIUR RAHMAN

Bhikhu apprehended that Pehlad might disclose his name to take revenge. Of course, he would not think twice of the consequences with his house being set on fire and all. The police had been trying to arrest Bhikhu for quite a long time now, and his murder of Baikuntha Saha had only aggravated the whole situation. Besides, it would be too risky for him to appear in public within the next twenty/thirty miles of the crime area. Before dawn he arrived at the town of Mahkuma and docked his boat against the ghat. He took a bath in the river — washed the bloodstain away from his body and entered the town — famished and penniless. Left with no choice, Bhikhu begged to the very first person he encountered on his way to the town, "Two paisa, sir?"

Looking at his disheveled appearance and especially his thin disabled arm, the man took pity on Bhikhu and gave him a paisa.

"Only one, sahib? Give me one more!"

Angered, the man replied, "One wouldn't do for you, huh? Get out of my sight!"

With much difficulty Bhikhu swallowed his rage and an urge to hurl a dirty remark at the stranger. He gave the man a keen, hard bloodshot glance instead.

That marked the beginning of his life as a beggar.

Within a few days he mastered quite successfully the tactics of one of the oldest professions ever. Like a beggar by birth, he learned all the right gestures one needs to know asking for alms. As he refused to take a bath his hair gradually twisted into unruly dreadlocks, allowing space for some lice families to thrive. Someone gave him an overcoat which he used to hide the wound on his shoulder. However, he decided not to hide his lean arm no matter what- his strongest

advertisement. He tore that arm of the coat apart to make a good display of the wound, also managing a wooden cane and a tin-mug to go with it.

From dawn to dusk he used to beg under a tamarind tree by the side of the town-road. In the morning he would have his breakfast with some puffed rice, and for lunch he cooked by himself in a nearby deserted garden. In an earthen stove he sometimes cooked small fish and sometimes, vegetables. After a square meal he would lean against the banyan, smoking a bidi to his heart's content. Then he could be seen to take his seat again and resume his session. In a wheezing hymn he would continue tirelessly, "Give me a paisa, give me one, and find God in return ..."

Hundreds of people passed by Bhikhu every day, and on average one out of fifty gave him a nickel or a cent. He earned six to eight taka a day. On weekly *haat* days he earned altogether more than what he did on a regular day.

The rainy season was gone by then. Bhikhu rented a small dilapidated hut close to Binnumajhi's home to spend the nights. He got a thick blanket from a malaria patient who had recently died. He also made a somewhat thick bed for himself, stealing straw from other people's hay stacks. The shredded clothes he got from his frequent visits to the city worked as a pillow for him. When the cold winter-wind would blow, he wrapped himself in a warm cloth- carefully fetched from his ragged knapsack.

Enjoying such comfort and belly-full a meal each day, Bhikhu regained his former health sooner than expected. His chest widened, showing muscles at each move he made of his arm. He begged for alms in a usual calm and affected tone, but if anyone refused, his rage knew no bound. Innocent passersby had to confront his verbal abuse when no one



else was around to hear it. When girls went to the river for a bath, he would emerge out of nowhere pretending to beg. He took pleasure frightening them, and grinned boastfully in response to their plea for him to step aside. This uneventful life without the company of a woman was of no liking to him. He remembered and then, craved for his eventful past.

Not so long ago he had spent countless wild nights at local pubs drinking. With tottering steps he would

make his way to the closest brothel and spend the rest of night in a delirious frenzy. Sometimes deep in the night he, along with his gang members raided farmhouses. Surviving all the counter-attacks and injuries, they claimed the valuables and just vanished in the dark without a trace. What else could be more satisfying than a sight where a husband would be beaten up mercilessly just before the eyes of his wife, or the horror of a mother wailing at her dying son? Actually, he was happier even when he had to hide there in the jungle and here by the riverside, successfully keeping the police at bay. Many in his gang had been incarcerated for many times, but he, only once- seven years for kidnapping Shreepati's sister. Very soon he managed to escape, too, by climbing over the prison wall in a stormy evening. Then he broke into a farmer's house, and at broad daylight snatched ornaments from a village woman. Afterwards, he took away Rakhu's wife and reached Hatiya through Noakhali crossing the sea. He left her there on her own after six months of living together. In the following months he continued his feats of getting into new gangs and plundering villages far far away- all of which he could not remember now clearly, just that a few days ago he slit the throat of Baikuntha Saha's brother.

What a life once he had, and what had he turned into now!

The same man who took pleasure slaughtering people now only satisfied his agitation by throwing abuse to a random pedestrian who denied him alms. His physique retained the same strength but with no way out to channel that. Sleepless merchants were there in depots counting notes deep at night; and many a woman was left alone home! Instead of owning it all just with a sharp machete he silently passed his nights in a hut, pathetic and solitary.

More often than not Bikhu's anguish knew no bound especially when he could not help taking a look at his disabled arm. Among those countless cowards, frail men and women on the loose, he was the one with true vigor and thirst for life. Just because of his missing arm, however, he was rotting himself to death in a dark corner. How could someone possibly be so unfortunate!

Perhaps, he could bear with it all simply by acknowledging the reality as it was, but staying single forever was an idea Bhikhu was completely unable to even entertain.

At the entrance of the market there was a woman who had been begging in the area longer than Bhikhu. She was not that old and quite well-built. The only problem with her was that she got a very bad gangrene in one leg right below the knee. The wound helped her earn more money than Bhikhu and hence she did not care to cure the condition. Sometimes Bhikhu went to her and asked, "Won't it cure?" Unable to hide his enthusiasm he continued, "Please, do something about it! Get the treatment and you won't have to beg anymore. I will take you with me to my place."

"As if I am interested!"

"Why not! You will be at our home, and I will take care of you. What's wrong with that?"

She was not so easy to win over. Chewing on a mouthful of tobacco, she replied rather carelessly, "After a while you will throw me out. Then who will give me my gangrene back?"

Bhikhu promised her loyalty, tempted her with a prospect of happiness, yet she declined. Heavy-hearted, he went back to his hut.

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