



FICTION

# Late Night Calls

MARZIA RAHMAN



Late nights calls are risky, reckless.

They look relatively naïve in the morning. And I went about my day, sweeping the house, peeling oranges, baking cookies, paying for a magazine I couldn't recall buying. It was in the evening that a strange unease would grow. I could no longer work or think or sit at ease. I'd go outside and watch darkness lurking in the shadows, scrambling in slowly but forcefully.

Akram likes to watch the news after dinner but he dozes off quickly. And when I urge him to go to bed, he complies like a sweet little boy. What's wrong with him today? Why was he still here? Eyes closed, he slumped on the couch, his bald head dangling like an over ripe bael fruit. I paced around the kitchen cum living room a couple of times; every time my gaze turned to the cordless phone on the wall between the two rooms. "Go to bed," I prodded him gently, trying hard to hide the irritation in my voice. The urgency.

At last, he stood up. I released a sigh of relief. "Aren't you coming?" he asked.

"I have work to do," I said, pointing to the dishes stacked in the sink.

"Turn off the TV," he said and headed towards the bedroom. I stood there for some time, with the TV remote in my hand. The television blared nonstop. A man in Honolulu did something unique, a woman in Madagascar did nothing unique, yet her smiling face flashed all over the screen. I pricked up my ears. He would brush his teeth, drink a glass of water or two. He would start snoring the moment he closed his eyes. I looked at the big clock on the wall. 10.30 pm. It was time. I went to the kitchen and turned on the tap water. I stared at the street bathed in moonlight. A dog barked somewhere, water filled the sink, the cold water numbed my fingers, my heart started beating faster, faster—the clock, too—tick tock—tick tock.

At precisely 10.40 pm, the telephone rang, shattering the unbearable monotony. I rushed

to pick up the receiver. I could feel the vibration, transmitted from the cord to my racing heart. To the veins of my body.

The sound of his voice soothed me. Made me crave a little more. How long would it go on? I wondered. Every story has a beginning, a middle and an ending. It's the end I feared most.

We talked in whispers. The dirty dishes stayed dirty. The night progressed gingerly outside. I asked him not to call me again. He knew I didn't mean it. So, he would call again. I would wait.

When I went to bed late at night, feeling happy but a little conflicted too, I found Akram awake. He looked at me and asked, "Who was it?"

My heart skipped. I tiptoed towards the bed. Should I say, *no one*? How much did he hear?

"Who were you talking to?" he asked again.

I sat on the bed, facing the wall, damp and dirty. I could hear the thumping in my chest. I bit my lips and mumbled, "Mira." I had no idea why this name popped into my head. I hadn't spoken to her for ages. I didn't even know where she lived.

"Who is Mira?"

"A friend," I said.

"Never heard of her."

"Do you have to know all my friends?" I snapped.

"Why are you getting upset?"

"I want to sleep," I muttered and lay down, my back towards him.

"Okay," he said and turned over.

I started counting seconds, minutes in my head. One, two, three... sixty seconds or was it fifty-nine? Numbers can be treacherous. The wall seemed to be closing in, or was it the bed, dangerously close to the wall? If I stretched my hand forward, could I touch its rough surface or the cracks snaking here and there? He began to snore, while I tossed and turned a long time before I could finally fall asleep.

Marzia Rahman is a fiction writer and translator.



POETRY

# My Two Worlds

TOHON

Now that I am old and have time,  
I take stock of my life.  
I crisscross as far back as my memory goes,  
Along my chequered memory lane.

As I remember,  
I have always been happy even without toys.  
Happiness was my twin but, sadly,  
Not without its dark shadow.

I would be saddened to see the suffering among the living –  
The animals, insects, men and even plants.  
I cried during my lonely hours;  
I gave away my precious possessions; and  
I even became one with them, sharing their pain.  
And then I begged God again and again  
For His mercy, but nothing changed.

All through my life  
My happiness was burdened with sorrow.  
It was like an ever-vigilant shadow of the light;  
It was like a deep, dark abyss of the height.  
All through my life  
I remained a prisoner in my own solitary, dark cell.

Now, before I die, I want to break free from the chains.  
I searched for so long, so deep in my soul,  
Only to hear a whisper again and again:  
'Thou shall know Truth and  
Truth shall let you know that you are chained.'

Maybe I live in two worlds –  
One of darkness and the other of light.  
I am chained in one but free in the other;  
I suffer in one but celebrate the other.  
And when I die, I will be reborn in the other,  
Without sorrow.

Tohon has been a regular contributor for the Star Literature page. Life's Invisible Battles is his recently published memoir.

## Star REVIEWS

# How Change Happens: A Review

Cass R. Sunstein. ISBN: 9780262039574 344. MIT Press, 2019

BY AFSANA TAZREEN

It can often feel hopeless to be an activist seeking social change on an issue where most people seem opposed or at best indifferent to it. However, according to a new book by Professor Cass Sunstein, we should not lose hope because significant social changes often come when we least expect it. Sunstein, a law professor at the Chicago Law School for 27 years and a Harvard Law Professor since 2012, was also an administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs during Obama's first term. In 2018, he was awarded the Holberg Prize for having "reshaped our understanding of the relationship between the modern regulatory state and constitutional law." Currently the most cited American legal scholar Sunstein has written on a diverse array of topics that include cloning, Wikipedia, animal rights, pornography, and even Bob Dylan's lyrics, despite his specialty being constitutional law.

*How Change Happens* (whose original title was *Why Societies Go Whoosh*) started 25 years ago with a draft of what is now chapter three. However, Sunstein hit a speed bump on the way in the 1990s and the 2000s, as he got distracted by other projects. The book is divided into three parts and sixteen chapters. In Sunstein's words, the chapters "do not make for a unitary narrative," but "they are connected by an effort to connect findings in behavioral science with enduring issues in law and policy, and by an effort to show how seemingly small perturbations can often produce big shifts."

The first three chapters explore the power of social norms, the importance of social cascades, the phenomenon of group polarization, and the expressive function of law. A general theme is the shift from the "unsayable" and even the unthinkable to the conventional wisdom and vice versa. Chapters 4 to 11 explore the uses and limits of "nudges" as tools for change. His question here is how public or private institutions might affect behavior and sometimes "unleash" it, through seemingly small steps. In these chapters, Sunstein raises the following questions in the fields of law, economics, and political philosophy. Chapters 12 to 16 explore issues at the intersection of public policy, behavioral science, and political philosophy. Sunstein argues that transparency is often crucial because it promotes accountability and also allows choosers to obtain information that they can use to increase overall public welfare.

So, what are the mechanisms through which such changes occur? How can a society that seemed to support the status quo bring about change in years, months, or even

weeks? Sunstein explores those mechanisms, identifies the triggers that lead to social change, and also does not fail to include the possibility of a backlash that sometimes occurs when a new social norm is promoted. Groups within the society reject those changes, refusing to let go of the existing norms.

For Sunstein, even the smallest of change can have significant impacts, particularly when it happens in an environment where the support for existing norms have declined, revealing hidden preferences that might have existed all along. Once the hidden preference begins to see daylight, the support for that existing norm begins to disappear, creating a tipping point as a result and ultimately a "cascade," after which the new norm finds a secure footing in the society.

The key to such changes appear to lie on the shoulders of "norm entrepreneurs" who step up and draw attention to the harmful consequences of existing norms. These people are alert to the existence of collective

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action problems and often carry out this role by pressing a change in the public and private conduct by insisting that most people secretly oppose those norms as well and thus eliminating the pluralistic ignorance in the process.

The definition itself brings to mind two people who neatly fit the description of a norm entrepreneur, although standing from entirely different points of view: Greta Thunberg and Donald Trump. Greta took the

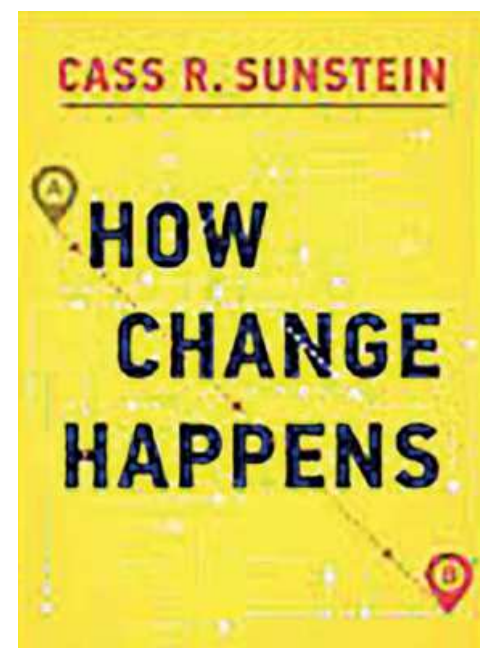


initiative to begin a movement that advocates protecting the environment by asking us to rethink our existing habits, practices and norms that create an adverse impact on our ecosystem and on the overall wellbeing of the planet.

On the dark side of the moon, Donald Trump as a norm entrepreneur, has broken every social norm that defines the role of a president-elect and later as the commander-in-chief of the United States by insisting on the existence latent opinions in his favor. He can be better defined by another term coined by Sunstein: *professional polarizer* or *polarization entrepreneurs*. These people have political agenda and intend to create spheres in which like-minded people can hear a particular point of view from one or more people and participate in a deliberate discussion in which certain point of view becomes entrenched or strengthened. Fitting the description, Trump succeeded in harnessing public sentiment and ultimately in creating cascades where he is discarding political correctness in exchange for normalizing hate-speech.

It would seem that Sunstein's unleashing thesis offers a reasonably accurate analysis of the forces at work in the resurgence of climate change movement as well as the rise of white nationalism in the US. We can thus see that Sunstein's theory of change appears to describe at least some forces that create social change.

Another phenomenon that affects social change that Sunstein discusses is what he



describes as "enclave deliberation," which is "deliberation within small or not-so-small groups of like-minded people." For Sunstein, this enclave deliberation "is, simultaneously, a potential danger to social stability, a source of social fragmentation, and a safeguard against social injustice and unreasonableness." (35) On the positive side, enclave deliberation, particularly in a heterogeneous community, tends to create clusters of like-minded people who may explore and press the boundaries of existing norms and ultimately create spaces in which those new norms can emerge and spread to other enclaves.

While Sunstein's approach tells us a lot about how social change occurs, it is somewhat incomplete. Sunstein rightfully identifies the necessity of addressing social norms in order to change something in the society the role of social norm needs to be addressed. Change still needs norm entrepreneurs who can manipulate nudges in effective ways to unleash hidden public preferences to create norm cascades, but sometimes it is not enough. Norm entrepreneurs also have venture outside the world of nudges and do more, such as organize other like-minded people, protest, sue, boycott, and engage in social media campaigns and other collective-action options. While nudges are certainly effective, as Sunstein has shown through a thorough empirical research, nudges cannot accomplish every social change on its own.

The first three chapters of the book are

undoubtedly its most thought-provoking and engaging part. Sunstein niftily conducts an archeological excavation on several historical and more recent events, connecting mazes and fitting the puzzle pieces, ensuring that the reader experiences a guided tour through a catacomb of opportunities and pitfalls that led to those events. For instance, he lays out the abrupt formation of the Communist Revolution in Russia and how its speed had even shocked Lenin. Other examples include the #MeToo movement, Arab Spring, legalization of gay marriage and the rising white supremacy in the United States, and more. However, I wish that Sunstein had spent more time elaborating on the concepts and terms introduced in the first part (i.e., the first three chapters) of the book. For instance, it would be interesting to know more about these aspects of change. For instance, how do we know if we are close to reaching a tipping point? What are the signs, and are there any ways to forecast them? Sunstein barely scratches the surface of "tipping points," whereas "nudge" (which is Sunstein's magic word), occupies more than half the book.

However, contrary to the common criticism of his work where he is accused of imposing a solution to every problem through "nudging," Sunstein admits that not all norms can be altered by these small, yet deliberate efforts and admits that sometimes when nudges fail and when the greater public welfare is at stake, more aggressive, and sometimes costly, efforts are called for.

Sunstein's *How Change Happens* is a timely contribution to the growing number of academic publications on scholarship on spurring social change. While most of that research offers retrospective analyses on how social change has come about through digging into the success stories of social movements, such as Lester Crutchfield's book of the same name, Sunstein offers more of a theoretical analysis of the potential triggers of social change. While some of Sunstein's solutions lean more towards the technocratic side and the most pressing problems of today will certainly not be solved by technocrats, Sunstein pitches important ideas to us that can help guide social changes, both large and small. Cass Sunstein's *How Change Happens* can indeed prove to be an instruction manual for the norm entrepreneurs who strive to discard banal norms, as they carry on their drive to unleash hidden preference, create norm cascades and embed new norms.

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