

Memories of Kabul

An Evening to Cherish

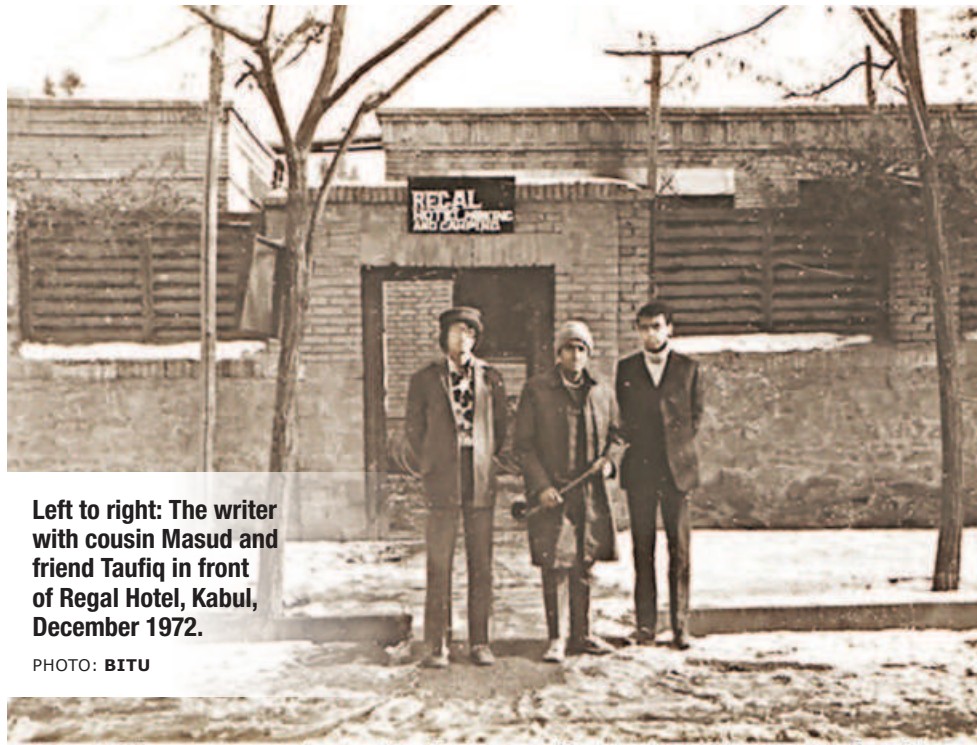
In the wintertime, the craggy heights of the Margalla Hills which provides a picturesque backdrop to Islamabad would sometimes be snow-capped, not to mention the faintly visible Murree hills... a distant bluish-white haze. However, until Kabul I had never lived through a snowfall, let alone a blizzard. Therefore, the first intermittent yet heavy snowfall I experienced and lived through for almost three weeks with incredibly low wind-chill factor was in Kabul. And, in the early evening of that Christmas Eve, we witnessed our first 'White Christmas,' which incidentally is also the title of a memorable song sung and recorded in 1942, by the world-famous American crooner Bing Crosby, the first multimedia star of the 20th century.

WAQAR A KHAN

It was in Kabul, Afghanistan, on 24th December, 1972, when suddenly in the late afternoon the first snow flurries of the season began. It was a gorgeous sight with an unmatched beauty of its very own. The snow-flakes came floating down gently at first like the feathers of a white dove and, then copiously draping everything in white. It seemed to coax nature into hibernation. Although, while living in Islamabad, Pakistan, we had sometimes experienced frigid temperatures and occasionally saw some hoar frost in the early mornings, we had never experienced any real snowfall. Whenever, we visited the colonial era hill-station of Murree in winter, it was always after a snowfall. In the wintertime, the craggy heights of the Margalla Hills which provides a picturesque backdrop to Islamabad would sometimes be snow-capped, not to mention the faintly visible Murree hills... a distant bluish-white haze. However, until Kabul I had never lived through a snowfall, let alone a blizzard. Therefore, the first intermittent yet heavy snowfall I experienced and lived through for almost three weeks with incredibly low wind-chill factor was in Kabul. And, in the early evening of that Christmas Eve, we witnessed our first 'White Christmas,' which incidentally is also the title of a memorable song sung and recorded in 1942, by the world-famous American crooner Bing Crosby, the first multimedia star of the 20th century.

It all started when in late December, 1972, a group of us – all young Bengali men – intrepid adventurers, albeit enforced travelers had just escaped from Islamabad to Kabul with the help of a Pathan cartel on our way to New Delhi and thence to newly liberated Bangladesh. For further details of our 'great escape from Pakistan', you may like to visit Google to see my feature article in The Daily Star entitled, 'From the Labyrinth of Memory'.

And, on that particular Christmas Eve, as snow blanketed Kabul and a light blizzard with howling winds rattled the mock French windows of our hotel room, we listened to some great music by: Isaac Hayes (of the 'Shaft' fame), James Brown, Santana, Doors and a lot of jazz. On that memorable evening



Left to right: The writer with cousin Masud and friend Taufiq in front of Regal Hotel, Kabul, December 1972.

PHOTO: BITU

in our makeshift hotel named, 'Regal Hotel' (unregal, really!), we were joined by Andrew, an African American with a portable cassette player and an inviting bottle of Jack Daniel's and, a little later by a tall, lanky, long haired Netherlander (Dutch) with a guitar and bongo. Outside in the snowfall, groups of boisterous inebriated young Westerners on the hippie-trail went by ringing bells and singing Christmas Carols. And in the faint mellow light, amidst the moaning wind and a mini-blizzard which we could view through the large windows, we were treated by Andrew to a cassette-recording of a soul-searing blues song sung by the incomparable American jazz singer 'Lady' Carmen McRae in her inimitable style of raw passion, the tone and tenor of her voice – virile – almost masculine! It was a powerful rendition of the song 'The Look of Love' (1967), which ends with a heartbreaking piteous pleading, "Don't ever go, because I love you so." It is a song that I cherish to

this very day. I was already fond of Jazz, but became enamored of it ever since that particular evening. Later on, I would have my fill while in the US in the early 1970s, where I attended a number of exhilarating jazz festivals, in some former antebellum Southern states, especially in New Orleans which has left an indelible impression in my mind.

However, on that particular evening long years ago, the ambience in our hotel room in Kabul was such: we were six young men with yet miles to traverse, far away from our kith and kin, suddenly thrust into a latter day 'medieval kingdom,' kept warm by the glow of an 'ancient' wood-lit fireplace while listening enraptured to an amazing blues song, the sheer intensity, beauty and pathos of which seemed to slowly but surely seep deep into our finer sensibilities.

Waqar A Khan is the Founder of Bangladesh Forum for Heritage Studies.

Empty Mirror

ZAARA OMAR

Come dawn, I am a daughter
Sweet
Obedient
Caring
Oh mother, father,
For you I'd do anything

Come noon, I am a friend
Spirited
Playful
Loyal
Oh comrades,
For you I'd do anything

Come evening, I am a lover
Adoring
Indulgent
Devoted
Oh darling,
For you I'd do anything

Come dusk, I am me
Lonely
Empty
Confused
Oh mirror, do tell me
What am I now?

Zaara is a seventeen-year-old tennis player living in Spain. She is currently doing her A-Levels. Her passions include cooking, eating, reading and writing.



FICTION

DILEMMA

KHAMA MAHMUD

TRANSLATED BY: AMREETA LETHE

Pushing the glass door open, Anita heaves a sigh of relief as she leaves the office for lunch. The sun is blazing down outside. Sometimes this place feels like a gold cage. Even working at her desk job in this air-conditioned room – chilly enough for anyone who just walked in to mistake it for somewhere in Antarctica – inside the corporate office of a renowned advertising firm in Motijheel, leaves Anita out of breath.

I really need to switch jobs soon, she thinks. Images of two and three-storeyed NGO offices in Lalmatia, verdant and secluded, fill her mind. They at least work for poor people; you could still justify working in a place like that. But this corporate environment, obsessed with ceaselessly tracking and counting its own profits and losses, has not suited her at all. She isn't one to trade her entire life for a job like this, chasing after profits and a swelling bank balance; surely, work has to be a little more meaningful. Counting down days and collecting cheques at the end of each month can't be all there is

around more and more these days. It's been so long since she last attended a song rehearsal at Chhayanaut. She has been left out of quite a few recitation programs already too, since she just couldn't make the time. She had to start her career working at this cutthroat corporate job, didn't she, where the only thing that matters is how much money is being made!

The visage of a tall man gradually grows clearer as he approaches. Their offices are close to each other – a brief walk apart. They leave their separate Mohammadpur houses in the morning, catch the bus together, and commute to work. Raihan drops her at work first and then leaves for his own office. If there isn't too much work, the two try to meet up in the afternoon for lunch.

"Don't even get me started. Trouble showed up just as I was getting ready to leave," Raihan says as he catches up to her. "Let's go." They walk forward towards Kosturi. The place serves excellent Bangali food. It's a mutual favourite.

"So, what do you want to get?" All the restaurants located in Motijheel's "office neighbourhood" buzz with people around this time. For however little time, using lunch as an excuse, these people come outside to breathe a little more freely. There are so many people here, thinks Anita, so many people and so many of their stories taking up each occupied table.

"Tell me what you want to eat." Raihan's voice snaps Anita back to reality. She looks up to see the waiter standing by the table waiting for their order.

"Ah, anything light works for me." Once the waiter leaves with Anita's order of spicy chicken curry and Raihan's catla fish curry, mashed taki fish, and daal, Raihan shifts his gaze to Anita. "Something wrong? You sure don't look like everything's fine."

"Same old. Nothing that serious," replies Anita. "Did you go out somewhere?" Raihan asks again.

Anita nods. She works as a client service executive, so she has to go out rather frequently to meet her clients. Since she's still new, a senior typically accompanies her if she's meeting with someone important. Once they're acquainted, Anita can meet them by herself whenever needed.

"Tell me what happened," Raihan insists.

"Piklu Bhai and I visited a really important client's office today, and I'm still quite angry

about what happened there. We're working with them on a particularly lengthy report, and it still had a lot of errors that needed to be fixed. The deadline's over, so we went there today to show them the final draft. And then Piklu Bhai suddenly says to me, 'You go and talk to them. I'll be downstairs.' I was dumbfounded. He hadn't even briefed me about the state of the report. I had tagged along with him so that I could learn what the project.

"What was the point of pulling something like this with such an important client? The lady was a foreigner, too. After I went to her room and introduced myself, I showed her the draft; she had an outburst. Not only had I never seen this side of a foreign woman before, but I hadn't even imagined I would ever experience something like this! She was deeply dissatisfied with the quality of the work, and pointed out the numerous mistakes to me. And this was apparently supposed to be sent to the press in a day or two. Can you imagine how that felt? Anyway, I told her a few things along the lines of 'I'll look into it' and 'It won't happen again,' had the work properly explained to me, and left. And once I go downstairs, I see the one and only

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Piklu Bhai having a smoke nonchalantly. You know what I think? Piklu Bhai doesn't speak English too well, and that's why he pushed me into this mess."

Raihan bursts out in laughter. "This is just business as usual for these corporate types. Happens to us pretty regularly, too. A job ultimately means you have to suck it up and accept it. It's a slave's work, you know? At the end of the month, they send a handful of crisp notes to your bank, and if you're a little careful with regular expenditure, you're good to go. A few added benefits...that's about it. And in exchange, we're the pawns that they've bought. Do you understand, my lady?"

There are so many people desperate to get any job they can get their hands on. Then,

why do we have such strange thoughts about work? Anita wonders.

The food arrives as they continue their conversation. Puffs of steam waft into the air. The fresh, steaming hot food here is why everyone crowds to these restaurants.

"How have things been on your end?" asks Anita.

"Same old..." Raihan looks up at her as he eats. "The work situation is more or less the same everywhere. You just have to accept it and move on. It all depends on how well someone can adapt to these conditions. I keep feeling so restless too, every now and then. There's so much work to get done at the office that I barely get any time to work on what I really want to. My novel – the one I wrote half of – has been gathering dust...by the time I get home at night I'm so worn out...nothing comes to mind anymore. I don't know how long I can keep going like this. And this is just the beginning! It's been eating me up inside...but I need the money, too. We're getting married in another six months and..."

Anita grows increasingly troubled the longer she listens to Raihan. She finished eating sometime ago, so she listens on and watches him eat. His love of fish comes through with each bite, as he quite contentedly finishes the fish curry and then the daal. After washing his hands and lighting a cigarette, Raihan says, "Let's go. I need to catch a meeting."

"I guess, things will continue as they are, and it'll be fine as long as you're with me..."

Chuckling a little, he looks at Anita, places his hand on hers and gives it a squeeze, as if replenishing his fill of oxygen for the day. He feels bad for Anita too...she's part of a brilliant creative sphere. She sings so beautifully, and recites as well, but getting into a job has sidelined all of these pursuits. How will she find a way to move forward with these interests when this titan of a job devours any time she has? And once they're married...newer responsibilities will just keep cropping up.

With his concerned gaze still focused on Anita, his thoughts continue to coil and tangle like cigarette smoke.

Khama Mahmud is a Bangla short story writer whose stories have appeared in several online and offline publications. She has an MA in English Literature from the University of Dhaka.

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to it. Still ruminating on her work, she looks towards Shapla Chattar to try and see if Raihan is coming. He's usually here much earlier. Work must be holding him back. We're both in the same position, she thinks. It has barely been a year since they started working. Anita hasn't received her Master's results yet, although she was called in for the job anyway. The crickets in her head have been chirping