

FICTION

She-wolf

HASAN MARUF

The forest was still in the early hours of a cold autumn morning. The silence was broken only by the breeze through the trees and the restless trickling of a stream running through the middle of a clearing. A ghostly mist slowly descended over the dew-sodden ground faintly illuminated by the waning glow of the moon overhead. Nothing moved apart from the crystal-clear water. No creature made a sound, and yet among the dark shadows, a pair of circumspicuous eyes peered over the clearing and observed the scene with extreme caution, studying every detail as though hunting for any signs of life. The slightest movement or sound, the smallest disturbance would mean potential danger. She was weak, hurt, and vulnerable.

A gap in the clouds passed over the moon and temporarily brightened the scene. A faint rustle from the fallen leaves nearby caused her body to tense, probably just a rodent, but she couldn't afford to be careless. But with the trickling water beckoning her, she surreptitiously moved out of her hiding place and crept toward the stream, each step as delicate and as deliberate as the first. Her grey and white furs were wet with dew and blood. She limped from a savage injury to her hind leg with her tail between them. Her body was battered yet her spirit was defiant.

A gust of wind hit the trees and made them hiss. Somewhere a branch cracked and she stopped motionless again, crouched lower and ready to run with the last of her effort. Another fight now would surely be her last. Her tattered ears erect and her nose twitching, she waited until she was sure that she was alone, and then crept closer to the stream until she stood at its edge.

The smell of the fresh clean water filled her nose with pure delight. Her mouth pined for its sweet taste as she heartily lapped it up. Each time she tried to swallow her throat burned. Such was the ferocity of the previous night with



several sets of jaws trying to leave their mark, yet her need compelled her to carry on.

After drinking as much as she was able to, she stood on trembling limbs and again observed the surrounding area. The night was beginning to brighten. The hiss of the trees and trickling water were becoming faint as her ears were succumbing to increasing tinnitus. Only the sound of her heart remained audible as a rapid relentless beat.

She steadily walked into the water until she found a shallow place somewhere in the middle. It was so cold it stung the pads of her paws, yet the increasing sensation of tension throughout her body and her near-total exhaustion made her care little for any more pain.

Enough was enough. Panting deeply, she looked at her wavering reflection as the moon found another gap to shine through. Her snout was covered in cuts and gashes. Her right eye was swollen, her left ear was torn.

Her limbs grew effete. Slowly, she lowered until she was lying

in the water. One final look around, and she curled herself up, laying her head on her paws to keep her snout out of the water, then gradually, her eyes closed as a strong numbing sensation spread through her whole body, eliminating the pain and the biting cold of the stream.

The wind eased. The mist continued to creep steadily over the ground. The birds had long since begun to sing yet none flew over the clearing where the stream trickled over rocks and stones. Gradually, from out of the surrounding forest, various animals began to dare their way toward the stream as they do every morning. Today, their instincts told them to stay away. Something wasn't right. Among the animals was a stag, the Leader of a group of deer. It sensed something, potential danger, yet his group needed refreshment. He stepped towards the stream until he stood by the edge. Everything seemed normal except for what looked like a new rock in the middle of the water. All around the scene were clumps of white and grey

fur flickering in the breeze. An unfamiliar smell told him that there was something to be cautious of.

He looked back the way he came, twitching his ears and licking his lips; then dipped his mouth to drink. Other members of his group hurriedly yet quietly came up to join in. As more came he walked further into it, getting closer to the new rock. The strange smell was coming from it and it was covered in more of the wispy fur being blown away by the breeze. He sniffed around it then dared to gently nudge it. Then it moved. Instantly the group of deer ran back to the forest. The stag stopped just before disappearing and looked back. The rock was a young human woman looking back at him with wild fearful eyes through strands of long wet hair.

She stared on as the stag leapt into the overgrowth and vanished. Shivering, naked, and weary, she looked around her. Amongst the residual physical pain from her catalogue of injuries, she felt a sense of great relief. She was alive and alone. Her wounds had closed but no doubt it won't take them long to find her. Enervated or not she had to keep moving, had to give herself the chance to heal and gather her strength to face them again. One more fight should do it. Another victory and they will be the ones running.

She looked at her reflection. Her pretty face will have scars, as will her throat, chest, and the rest of her body, a small price to pay for what she's fighting for. Her eyes were still the eyes of the wolf. She cupped her hands and splashed her face several times until her reflection showed them to be human again.

Four weeks until the next full moon. Four weeks to avoid the others and be wary of the humans. She looked hard at her tremulous face in the water. She had nothing to lose now, yet everything to gain!

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Lies Woven in Olive Wreaths

WAZIHA AZIZ

Men wearing wreaths uphold their sacred emblem

They extend an olive branch.

Hold round-table talks on their next daring conquest.
Fill banks with our blood. Build forts of crisp notes.
Offer helpless smiles to victims of wars that they sell.

They empty the bowels of our earth for oil,
tie a string from end to end
watch our futile attempts to cross the chasm.
Listen intently to the thud of our bodies
piling up in their holes of gold.

Plant poppies in our rice fields
then tut at our spindly limbs and bloated bellies.
Their honeysuckle voices deem the massacre of
terrorists
a riot.

As we are led to the chambers
and Zyklon fills our lungs behind the waving
cerulean flag,
mothers and their children, hum a long-forgotten
prayer.
They will hang.



And brittle bone peeks out of the ruptures in his neck,
as Agesilaus hangs, grey-blue toes barely
brushing the earth.
in Vouves, from a firm contorting tree,
Agesilaus hangs from a firm, contorting branch.
Fat worms make their way through the gaping
hole of his mouth.
And a swarm of flies feast
on Agesilaus'
yielding yellowed flesh.

The writer is a class II student of Cantonment English School and College, Chattogram. Her work has previously been published in a few online platforms, as well as SHOUT magazine.

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A Season of Hope and Despair: Reminiscing My Dhaka University Days

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

I am one of the privileged few to have experienced Dhaka University—the nation's citadel of higher education *le plus excellent*—from both sides of the spectrum, first as a student and then as an academic. I entered Dhaka University as an undergraduate student in the Department of English in 1973 and graduated with a Bachelor's (with Honours) and a Master's degree in 1978. I returned to Dhaka University after completing my PhD in English literature from Flinders University, Australia, to take up the position of Assistant Professor of English in 1992. But an offer from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, in 1993 cut short my teaching stint.

corruption and thuggery infiltrated every artery of social life and a large-scale famine loomed on the horizon.

It is in this state of affairs that I enrolled at Dhaka University. I was in the English Department—"the king of subjects," I would often whisper to myself. Yes, I knew that the language carried the taint of colonialism; it was an essential instrument for the exploitation and thingification of colonial subjects. But it was also the language of the world's best creative minds, from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Whitman, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. The more I read these writers, the more I was convinced that English as a language was rich, elegant and resourceful and could not be faulted for its horrific abuse by the crafty, cold-blooded colonists. English opened my eyes to the glory of the world and the splendour of human history as I could now read any book from any time or society in English translation.

Soon I started making friends of all stripes and interests at the University. However, I had an inner circle of friends I treasured most. Some of them were from the department and others from Mohsin Hall, the residential hall where I lived during my entire study period. *Adda* with these friends became a pastime. I would often sit with them and chat about everything under the sun—from English and Bengali literature to film, theatre, music, food, religion, philosophy, politics and what have you.

Adda would take place between classes in the Department Seminar Room or the corridor, but we would walk to Sharif Mia's Canteen whenever we had an extended break. The University had two famous canteens on campus: Madhu's Canteen and Sharif Mia's Canteen. The two attracted very different kinds of patrons. Madhu's canteen was the hub of student leaders and their mobster buddies, and Sharif Mia's Canteen was the meeting place for the more intellectually and culturally inclined. Somehow, we all knew where we could find our friends.

When the *adda* ended, I would casually walk into the library and spend hours browsing through books. I would return to my residential hall in the evening and sit with my books



again after dinner. I was under the spell of Francis Bacon's aphorism, "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man." I read all kinds of books, but the religious, philosophical and spiritual ones fascinated me the most. I spent days on end reading the *Qur'an*, the *Bible*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*; the poetry of Rumi, Hafiz, Blake, Wordsworth, Whitman, Hopkins, Tagore and Nazrul. Rumi, Emerson and Tagore emerged as my all-time favourites. Many of their ideas have remained a source of inspiration for me ever since.

One day I read the following verse in the *Qur'an*, "O believers! Stand firm for justice as witnesses for Allah even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or close relatives. Be they rich or poor, Allah is best to ensure their interests. So do not let your desires cause you to deviate from justice," and instantly fell under a spell. I realised how splendid Islam was as a religion. But I also wondered if Muslims were up to this sublime faith; if they could truthfully espouse its selfless, altruistic teachings, forsaking their mundane, give-and-take capitalist reading of the religion. I was equally mesmerised by Krishna's teachings on love, faith, duty and compassion in the *Bhagavad Gita*—"A man is made by his beliefs. As he believes, so he becomes"; "Set your heart upon your work but never its reward"; "We behold what we are,

and we are what we behold"—but shared a similar cynicism about our Hindu brethren. All because of human frailty and the inability of mortals to comprehend the divine.

The more I read these spiritual works, the more I fathomed that the Ultimate Reality comprised both the perceptible and the imperceptible, visible and invisible. Money, success and power were not everything in life; morality and spirituality also mattered. Fulfilment lay not in hatred, fear, anger, arrogance or riches but love, fellowship, empathy, integrity and sacrifice. Knowing one's true purpose in life, like the way Krishna wants Arjuna to find his during the battle of Kurukshetra, was crucial, and by now, I had an inkling of what the purpose of my journey on this planet was.

If books were a source of hope and inspiration for me, so were my teachers in the department: Professors A.G. Stock, Serajul Islam Choudhury, Ahsanul Haq, Razia Khan Amin, Husniara Haq, K.M.A. Munim, Nizamul Haq, Niaz Zaman and others. They were living, walking examples of honesty, integrity and simplicity. They filled our hearts with the love and excitement of knowledge and learning and the joy of imagination and expression. They were dynamic, devoted and impartial in their dealings with us and never sought to limit us to their own learning. We were the growing plants that they tended with

warmth and care so that we may make the world a better place in future. They didn't expect any hero-worshipping from us; all they wanted was that we should be able to fly into the sky with a little nudge. How lucky I was to find some of those icons of student days as colleagues when I entered the department as an academic in 1992.

The castle of hope I built around me was tested repeatedly by the violence on campus and outside. Some of them were so deadly that they broke through the walls of our interior lives and left us despondent for days: the seven killings in front of Mohsin Hall TV Room in 1974; the killing of Siraj Sikder and the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu with his family members in 1975; the execution of Colonel Taher in 1976 and many more. There was another incident that threw us into a whirlpool of sorrow: the death of the National Poet in 1976. I and some of my friends were present at his burial next to the University Mosque.

These incidents agitated us and filled our hearts with hopelessness, but we would soon get up, dust ourselves and return to our ways of hope and optimism. We were young and full of aspiration and readily believed in Dostoevsky's dictum, "To live without hope is to cease to live."

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1973 was a time of both hope and despair. It was full of hope because we were a newly independent country. We had attained our sovereignty only in 1971 after a protracted colonial rule, first by the British and then by Pakistanis. After centuries of brute subjugation, we were now in full control of our national destiny; this created a feeling of euphoria and triumph. But it was also a time of despair because we had earned our independence at a high cost in human life, untold destruction of private and public property and the dignity of 200,000 *biranganas*. Besides, we were trapped in a postwar milieu of chaos, confusion and political ferment: guns rattled at street corners, hooliganism was rampant, political