

REFLECTIONS

The first American months



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

Here, I was like other Bangladeshis, always cautious, not wanting to break any rules intentionally or unintentionally. Structure and order that immigrants quickly adopt to participate in American life.

MIR ARIF

The sun was up. The sky was a perfect cerulean blue, the neighbourhood blissfully quiet. Through my window, I relished the sunny first day of 2020, with a cup of tea in my hand. The brown picket fence of my apartment flanked a narrow pavement that connected Hialeah Drive, the main street of the neighbourhood. Last semester, it was my usual route to school, a 10-minute walk from the apartment, especially when I woke up early and had time to cook an egg or make some French toast and tea. Taking this longer route, I crossed Maryland Pkwy and walked through UNLV Student Union, the hub of food stalls, a US Bank branch, an information desk, and lounging facilities, akin to TSC at Dhaka University, from where I had graduated four years ago.

The shorter route to school was through my backyard and through other people's backyards, unfenced and dotted with dog poop. To use this

route, I walked diagonally across Living Desert Drive down Ascot Drive to East Harmon, eventually crossing Maryland Pkwy without having to weave through the Student Union. It took six to eight minutes, or less if I jogged, to attend my only morning class, Modern American Fiction, during my first semester of MFA. Being a night owl, I had often missed my morning classes in Dhaka, but here in Vegas, an ever-expanding desert city, I couldn't afford to miss any classes, fearing a decline in academic performance that mattered to international graduate students living on a meagre stipend.

One day, I was awfully late. I had hit the snooze button twice or maybe three times before realising it was already past 8:30 AM. I got ready as fast as I could, then took the shorter route, thinking of the cold expression on the professor's face when she would see me half an hour late into her lecture on John Dos Passos's *The 42nd Parallel*, an experimental novel with newsreels, stream-of-consciousness, and brief

biographies of historical figures. I passed through my neighbours' garages and backyards—one, two, three. While crossing the fourth house, I saw a flash of grey and white fur streaking past me, frightened by my footsteps. It stopped before the dumpster between the houses and looked back. It was a grey cat, possibly a stray, with a bushy tail and rounded almond-shaped eyes. I didn't mean to frighten him by any means, but he was anyway and appeared shocked before he jumped up a wall, and giving me a contemptuous look, disappeared to a neighbour's porch. Later, I discovered he ate every day in the garage of the fourth house, between eight and ten. Someone in that house made that schedule, and the cat followed it precisely. I was an intruder, disrupting this harmless daily affair. No matter how I tried to please him, no matter how I meowed and cooed and called him by friendly, imaginative names, he was always frightened to see me, always kept a safe distance. I called him Mr. Thoreau, a loner living on the

fringes of society. The cat was watchful, reminding me of Naipaul's descriptions of crows in India, which he described as "Indian crows", and called them "rapacious and swift and watchful" (*India: A Million Mutinies Now*, 1990). I wondered what other special features I could think of the cat. How I wished I could see him more, spend a little bonding time, but I never did. We decided to settle with the status quo: we were to avoid each other carefully and mind our own business. Like him I was also going through a shock. Not by a person but by America in general.

The big shock was cultural. Everything seemed new, everything seemed different. Habits of my past 25 years were challenged. My legs wanted to cross the street when there were no vehicles around, but I had to press the button on the pole overlooking the pedestrian crossing, then I had to wait for the "walk" signal to appear, a white shape of a man pointing to the other side of the street. Of course, one could still jaywalk if there were no police around, like people did in New York and New Jersey and other busy, more populous cities. Here, I was like other Bangladeshis, always cautious, not wanting to break any rules intentionally or unintentionally. Structure and order that immigrants quickly adopt to participate in American life. I was left with only two choices: following my old habits and instincts or training myself into the ways of this new world. I decided to do the latter.

I was invited to a Halloween party, where we played a game called Fishbowl. We were divided into two groups, given some strips of paper to write down some names (celebrities, sportsmen, writers, famous people in general). I randomly wrote three names: Priyanka Chopra, Shahrukh Khan, and Muhammad Yunus. The idea was to select a player from each team who would draw papers from a round, transparent bowl primarily used as an aquarium. The player would provide hints to their team members what that name on the paper might be, but she would not tell us the exact name. In other words, we had to guess the correct names. For example, if one picked a paper that read Bill Clinton, she would perhaps give us some hints about Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, but she couldn't say Clinton's name directly. The team members would have to

guess the name from descriptions she provided, and if they could guess the correct answer, they kept the piece of paper. After several rounds, each team would count how many names they had collected, the higher number of correct answers ensuring their win. The game wasn't very complex—it was simply new to me. Since most of my colleagues were familiar with the descriptions and hints on American celebrities and politicians, they answered pretty fast while I stammered a reply sometimes, mostly sitting silently. These names seemed new to me, new actors and singers and writers I didn't know anything about before. It was hard for me to guess things, and it was so with the names I had written in my papers. Some of them picked Priyanka Chopra and didn't have any idea what hints to give to their team members. Some of them mistook Shahrukh Khan for Sher Khan, the Bengal tiger in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Muhammad Yunus was only an Islamic name to some. There was an awkward silence when the game reached this stage: unfamiliar, difficult names to guess. I felt bad for them; I could have chosen something American, so the game would continue more effortlessly. Suddenly, I realised it was an equalising moment, a hidden balance in the order of things.

Tough, as it will always be for graduate students abroad, the first semester made me realise that my differences were part of my story, my strangeness, my strength. It was learning about the routes that best worked for a person in a new country, like the way I would go to school in those first few months in America, learning from everything around, even from Mr Thoreau, who knew I was around the corner, waiting for me to pass so he could enjoy his little meal peacefully. Next semester, I would befriend the cat, learning a little history about him from an elderly neighbour who left a bowl for him outside her door. I would feed him treats that I got from the 99 Cents Store, sometimes even recite a famous Jibananda Das poem about a cat playing in the saffron sun and catching darkness with its paws, images of a world left behind.

Mir Arif is a Bangladeshi author living in Ohio. He is working on his novel, *The Second Interpretation*, while awaiting the publication of his story collection, *Adrift*. Find him @mirarif

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

A list of life lessons

Review of 'The List of Suspicious Things' (Penguin, 2024) by Jennie Godfrey

FARAH GHUZNAVI

Set in 1979, this is a story of monsters—the ones who prey on the vulnerable, the ones that exploit our weaknesses, and the ones that we elevate to positions of power.

11-year-old Miv does not have the happiest of home lives, though things were very different when she was younger. Her mother was lively and loving, and her father equally so. But suddenly, everything changed, and now Miv is living with a mother who seems to have lost interest in life, spending spells in hospital, and a father who is struggling to cope.

To make matters worse, her mother's inexplicable illness has resulted in Miv's Auntie Jean moving in with them. And Auntie Jean comes with a lot of baggage—not least of which are her ideas about "a woman's place". Set at a time when Margaret Thatcher has come into power, there are clearly radical differences of opinion in Britain about where a woman's place actually is.

In fact, there are only two things that the Yorkshire folk inhabiting Miv's social landscape seem to agree on. The first is that Thatcher's rise to power (earning her the nickname of "milk snatcher" for cancelling free school milk) will likely lead to problems in the Yorkshire mills and mines. And the second is that the serial killer, the Yorkshire Ripper, is bad news for everyone—even if it is primarily young women he's targeting.

When Miv overhears her father and aunt discussing leaving Yorkshire in the context of the Ripper murders, she is terrified to think of losing her best friend, Sharon. So, Miv decides they must catch the Ripper themselves to prevent that. How? Well, they can start by making a list of any suspicious things that they see or hear...

This is an evocative, often tender snapshot of northern Britain on the cusp of the 1980s which will strike a chord with anybody who lived through that time. I was a student at the London School of Economics nearly a decade later, and remember the shocking changes that followed Thatcher's ascension.

I had never seen people living in

cardboard boxes during my childhood holidays in London. But now, hurrying home from an evening study session at the LSE library, I would often pass homeless people huddled in shop doorways at night. Yorkshire fared even worse. And, set at the beginning of that period, there is a justified sense of foreboding that permeates this insightful novel.

Miv is an endearing protagonist, and her friendships—with Sharon, and the Asian newsagent's family—are beautifully rendered. A young widower, Mr Bashir, has moved from Bradford to make a new life with his teenage son, Omar. Unfortunately, the family becomes a target for local bullies, whose racist attitudes are further inflamed when Sharon and Omar fall in love.

This had particular resonance for me, as my earliest experience of racism was as a four-year-old visiting my uncle in London. I was puzzled when my English aunt got upset after the (white) neighbour told Auntie Steph that I was not allowed to play with her daughter because they didn't like "blackies". Too young to understand the significance of all this, I never forgot the disappointment of being unable to play with the little girl who had waved across the fence at me in such a friendly fashion.

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ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

After Sharon begins to lose interest in their investigation, Miv's continued preoccupation with the list of suspicious things may at times seem almost a little obsessive. But it is clear that Miv, struggling with her anxiety over the state of her family life, the threat of possible relocation, and the fear of losing Sharon's friendship to Omar, is simply using the hunt for the Ripper as a way to distract herself from her troubles.

In that sense, despite the title, this book is not really about the search for a serial killer. It considers a range of issues from that era, including racism, sexism, bullying, xenophobia, and mental health challenges, as well as the eternal and universal yearning for love, friendship, and family. And despite the gravity of some of its themes, the novel is undeniably engaging. There is also a very clever tie-in at the end, which reveals the

cause of Miv's mother's problems.

Above all, the story is relatable to anyone who remembers how it felt to be a child. When I was Miv's age, my friends and I were repeatedly warned not to sit near the edge of the roof, where there was nothing to hold on to and a three-storey height to fall from. So, as you've probably guessed, we just took turns breaking the rules—with one of us keeping watch, while the others sat on the edge of the roof dangling our legs recklessly off it and speculating, with typically bloodthirsty interest, which bits would be left intact if someone fell!

At its heart, this is a cautionary tale about how the world of children intersects—often uncomfortably, and sometimes disastrously—with the world of the grownups around them. Miv is a wonderfully vibrant figure who leaps off the page straight into the reader's heart.

The same is true of many of Godfrey's characters—like the librarian Mrs Andrews, whose charming husband Gary is not who he seems. Or Mr Bashir, Omar's father, who is remarkably perceptive when it comes to dealing with the people around him. Overall, this is a novel I highly recommend as an absorbing read, especially for those who enjoy coming of age stories.

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator, and development worker. Her work has been published in 11 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the USA. Writer in Residence with Commonwealth Writers, she published a short story collection titled *Fragments of Riversong* (Daily Star Books, 2013), and edited the *Lifelines* anthology (Zubaan Books, 2012). She is currently working on her new short story collection and is on Instagram @farahghuznavi.