



DESIGN: AMREETA LETHE

FICTION

Accursed

"This is a strange incident that happens here. But as this place is near the fringes of the Sundarbans and as there is no human habitation here, it is only familiar to the boatmen. There is history behind it, but that is not well known to the boatmen. Let me tell you instead."

BIBHUTIBHUSHAN BANDYOPADHYAY

A very strange thing happened in my life then. It was about three years ago. I had to visit a place near Barishal on business.

I got on a boat from a bazaar in that area around noon. There was a man from Barishal on the same boat. Time passed by in gossip.

It was just after puja. The sky remained cloudy throughout the day. It began to rain occasionally. But the sky became a bit clearer moments before the evening. The light of the chaturdashi moon was revealed gradually through the broken clouds.

As soon as evening fell, we left the big river and came to a canal—we heard that the canal began from here and united with the river Meghna passing through the north of Noakhali. It was my first time going to East Bengal; everything appeared new to my eyes. The chaturdashi moon glittered behind the clouds in the rain-bathed screw pine jungle on the two sides of the narrow canal. There were big fields on the bank of the river at intervals. In certain places the zedoary, cane, and fern bushes bent towards the water of the canal...Though it was cold outside, I sat out of the chei watching everything...That part of Barishal was close to the Sundarbans. Small lakes and canals were everywhere, and the sea was not very far—Sandip and Hati were only 10 or 15 miles southeast. The night grew late. The solitary jungle on both sides of the canal appeared strange in the dim moonlight. In this part, there was no habitation, only dense forests and big hogla trees by the water.

My companion said, "Don't stay outside at this time of night. Come inside the chei. In this jungle—Do you understand?"

He began to tell many stories of the Sundarbans—of how his uncle was supposed to have worked in the forest department, and how he had visited many parts of the Sundarbans on his launch.

It was almost 12 o'clock at night.

We only had one steersman on our boat. He said out loud, "Babu, there will be a big river ahead. I cannot cross the river alone at this time of night. Let's keep the boat here."

The boat was tied down at that very place. Meanwhile, the moon had set behind the big trees; I saw big woods engulfed in darkness on the two sides of the narrow canal. There was no sound; even the insects had fallen silent...I said to my companion, "Mister, the lake is so narrow—Won't tigers jump on the boat from

the banks?"

My companion said, "I'll be surprised if they don't."

Hearing this, I sat against the chei in great astonishment. We sat for a while, and then my companion said, "Come, let's lie down a bit. We won't be able to sleep, and we shouldn't sleep, but let's close our eyes for some time."

I remained silent for a while, and when I went to call my partner I saw he had fallen asleep. I did not think that the steersman was awake either. I thought then, "Why should I stay awake for no reason?" I made preparations to follow in the footsteps of great men.

What happened next was an uncanny experience. When I was about to lie down, I heard someone playing the gramophone somewhere deep inside the jungle, on the other side of the dark woods...I sat up in a hurry—gramophone? Who would play the gramophone at this time of night, and that too in the middle of these dense woods? I listened carefully. It was not a gramophone. From where the dark hijol hinal forest grew dense, someone was saying something in a loud, afflicted voice...After listening to it for a while, I felt it was the combined voices of more than one person. This was almost like the music which comes from the roof of the neighbour's three storied building—a bit intelligible, a bit unintelligible, but still a nice unbroken melody reaches the ear. Incomprehensible Bangla words reached my ears, but I could not discern what they were. The sound lasted only a few minutes, and then the dark forest became as silent as before...I quickly came out of the chei. The surrounding darkness was as black as luffa seeds. The forest was silent except for the murmur of the ebbing water beneath the boat and a kind of incomprehensible noise in the screw pine bush by the water due to the late-night breeze. The trunks of the black hijol trees away from the bank assumed a strange look in the darkness.

I thought of waking my companions. Then I thought, the poor fellows were sleeping—what was the point in waking them up? It would be better if I stayed awake. I lit a cigarette while standing. When I was about to go back inside the chei, a clear, loud and afflicted sharp noise, resembling the drone of crickets, pierced the breast of the concrete darkness like an arrow and reached the sky from somewhere in the vast forest: "Hey! Passengers of the boat, who are you? Are you there? We are suffocating to death...please save us."

I began to listen to the history of Kirtipashar Gour in the smoky light of the kerosene lamp amid the bosom of the dark forest.

The steersman of the boat woke up in a hurry. I called my companion, "Mister, oh Mister, wake up! Wake up!"

The steersman pressed against me; his voice was trembling with fear. He said, "Allah! Allah! Did you hear, babu?"

My companion woke up and asked, "What, what, Mister? Why did you call me? Is there a beast or something?"

I told him the matter. He also climbed out of the chei quickly. The three of us listened together, carefully. Everything fell silent again...The ebbing water made a greater sound than before, pooling beneath the boat.

My companion asked the steersman, "What is it then?"

The steersman replied, "Babu, Kirtipashar Gour is on the left."

"Then why did you tie the boat here at this time of night? You fool!"

"I tied it here as there are three of us. It was not possible to pull back the boat against the ebbing tide," said the steersman.

Listening to the nature of their conversation, I asked my companion, "What, Mister, what is the matter? Do you know anything?"

It was not in fear as much as it was in astonishment that we all had become alarmed. My companion said, "Oh, you! Light your kerosene lamp. Let's sit with the lights on. There's still a long night ahead."

I asked the steersman, "Did you hear the sound?"

"Yes babu," he said, "the sound woke me up. I've heard this call twice before while steering my boat."

My partner said, "This is a strange incident that happens here. But as this place is near the fringes of the Sundarbans and as there is no human habitation here, it is only familiar to the boatmen. There is history behind it, but that is not well known to the boatmen. Let me tell you instead."

I began to listen to the history of Kirtipashar Gour in the smoky light of the kerosene lamp amid the bosom of the dark forest.

This is an excerpt from Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's short story "Abhishapta", translated by Dipty Rahman.

Dipty Rahman is a lecturer in the department of English, American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB).

POETRY

Will you remember me?

A.M. FAHAD

When the night goes quiet
and the Krishnachura and lilies sink into their graves
and softly whisper into my ear—"come"
Will you think of me when my foot is already one step outside the door?
If the meaning to our lives primarily revolves around love
I would be a middle aged gambler on the brink of announcing bankruptcy
Gambling away pieces of my heart like that in a slot machine
from pouring on a bottomless empty cup
Have I disappointed you with my fragility?
Are my eyes no longer beautiful in the sunlight that pierces through 359 AQI?
Am I still lovable like that day when I was grumpy to myself until fed a BFC burger
when I smiled and all my bare teeth shone back to you
But only maybe the possibility remains
I was never beautiful and you were never the sun
If I disregard the mutual exclusivity of our fundamental disinclination towards pulling our eyes from their lonely sockets and handing them to each other to see the world through



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

Will you acquit me of all my failures?
And have me detach my arms from around the bend of my throat
I cannot live like this much longer
The illusion in the moonlight lies in its coexistence under the same sky with the sun, just a few hundred thousand miles away from the ground the sun can touch, you will find a patch of grass devoid of sunlight
When moon fades into dawn and when I pass away with it
Will you think of all that I was?
All my love, my incessant monologues on brain rot or Nintendo or scummy corporations—
when the night goes quiet
and the Krishnachura petals and lilies sink into my grave
In your ever-unchanging plane of self destructive solitude
Will you remember me?

A.M. Fahad wants to become a more prolific poet and writer. He is based in Dhaka, and he loves creating stories out of the mundane. Send him tips at amfahad1747@gmail.com so that he can stop falling into slumps every other week.



POETRY

Tupperware cake

RUBINA NUSRAT PUSPA

I baked a cake for your birthday recently—or better yet, I tried

The ingredients for this cake were like no other:

1 and 3/4 cups of sugar, 2 cups of i-love you (my mother

warns me that is too much / what is the use of loving

someone so much other than your direct family?),

3/4 cups of dark cocoa powder, 2 cups of flour (this,

my mother is okay with), 1 tablespoon of anxiety (are

you sure that's enough?), some sprinkle of baking

soda, baking powder, and salt, 2 teaspoons of vanilla

extract, 2 tablespoons of anger and resentment (you

will need more sugar to balance out the bitterness),

3 large eggs, 1 cup of buttermilk, 3 cups of i-hope this

year-treats you better-than-the-last (a frown marks

my mother's forehead for always giving too much of

myself away / she sees herself in me and she does not

like it), 3/4 cup of vegetable oil, 1/2 strongly brewed

coffee, and lastly, 1 cup of i-am-proud-of-you (who is

proud you, my mother looks me in the eye and asks / my mouth is sewn shut)

I take the frosting out of the fridge—because really what is a cake without the frosting; (because really what I am without celebrating the day you were born)

I flip a Tupperware to build a make-believe cake box (my mother looks at me with pointed skepticism laced into her stare / it's a hack I saw on Instagram, I tell her / she finds it absurd, the miles I am willing to go for you)

I press the Tupperware shut and wonder if you, too, will feel the same

Rubina Nusrat Puspa is a part-time writer and full-time student with question marks floating around her head. You can reach her at rubinanusratpuspa@gmail.com.

ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA