

FICTION

Faded blue suitcase

Did Grandmother really leave that suitcase for me? Did she assign me the solemn right—the single right—to open it? What could be inside? Perhaps, behind that mysterious suitcase, another grandmother will be discovered—a grandmother I never knew. Or perhaps some unknown secret of hers will be revealed from within. Maybe she hid something there she would not tell anyone else;

ADNAN SYED

We once lived in Jackson Heights, Queens, New York City. Those days still return to me, especially when my grandmother's death anniversary comes around. At such times, I drift back into the past and live quietly within my memories. My grandmother was no ordinary woman. You may call her Birangona, but to me she was a brave freedom fighter of Bangladesh, shaped by courage and sacrifice. Her name will forever remain engraved in my heart. The story is written in her memory.

The old, rusted key now rests in my hand.

As I run my fingers over its rough metal surface, I feel the soft, velvety touch of my grandmother's hand—as if time itself has folded back. And it's not only her touch I sense; I can also smell her. Grandmother used to rub jasmine and hibiscus oil into her hair. Whenever she entered a room, the air would fill with that sweet fragrance. Even now, I can smell it—as if she's standing right beside me, smiling softly, her hair scented with hibiscus oil.

My eyes are full of wonder, and my heart trembles with curiosity.

What could be inside this magical suitcase?

Before she passed away, Grandmother had said something strange:

"After my death, this suitcase will belong to my only grandson, Nabil."

From my very childhood, Grandmother had been my best friend. When I lived in Bangladesh, she was the center of my world. Once, she used to teach at a girls' school in a small town. Perhaps because she was a teacher, she had a deep love for reading and knowledge. It was she who first placed a



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

book in my hands—the collection of children's stories.

Then one day, holding my parents' hands, I left for America. I was only 10 years old. But even after all these years, I've never been able to accept that separation from her. I remember pleading with my father again and again,

"Baba, why do we have to go to America?"

But he never really answered.

He only said what all grown-ups say: America is the land of opportunities—better studies, a good job, more money...

No one thought of the loneliness we were leaving behind—of my grandmother who would be left all

alone. No one thought of the nights when I wouldn't fall asleep wrapped in her arms, or of the sky-high stories she would whisper into my ear.

Our separation began the very day we boarded the plane for New York. I still remember, at the airport she placed her hand on my head, whispered a prayer, kissed my forehead, and hugged me tightly. She said softly in my ear:

"Nabil, don't be sad, my dear. Life will have its hard times. But never forget your grandmother—ever! Write me a letter every month. Call me. I'll be waiting by the phone. And when you go to America, you'll read many new books, learn so many new things. But promise me, don't read alone—read to me too. You'll see, one day I'll come to

visit you there."

And she kept her promise—she came to America twice.

But America never felt like home to her.

No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't keep her there.

She used to say,

"How many days do I have left to live, my dear? I want to spend my last days in my own country—in my own soil."

Did Grandmother really leave that suitcase for me? Did she assign me

the solemn right—the single right—to open it? What could be inside? Perhaps, behind that mysterious suitcase, another grandmother will

be discovered—a grandmother I never knew. Or perhaps some unknown

secret of hers will be revealed from within. Maybe she hid something there she would not tell anyone else; maybe she wanted only me to know. The mystery tightened around me. For days I felt an odd mixture of curiosity and the scent of adventure. I could not wait.

Let me tell you a little about my father.

His name is Raqib Khan—a face full of quiet intelligence, fair complexion, a sharp, high nose. He stands nearly six feet tall. At first glance, he could easily be mistaken for a model. He works at a bank in New York and occasionally writes in Bangla newspapers. Recently, he has been working on a manuscript about the contribution of Bangladeshis around the world to Bangladesh's Liberation War—in other words, he is preparing himself to be a future researcher on the history of our independence.

Though he lives in New York, his heart remains in Bangladesh. In our living room in New York hangs a black-and-white photograph of my grandfather—Bir Muktijoddha Farooq Khan. On the TV stand rest two flags side by side—one American, one Bangladeshi. Even on our car dashboard, there's a small mat with the flag of Bangladesh. My father's pride in his homeland never fades. How could it? He lost his father in 1971—only three months before independence, on a dark night in September, when the Pakistani military attacked their home.

It's a long story, but let me tell it briefly.

This is an excerpt. Read the rest of the story on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature's* websites.

Adnan Syed is a resident of New York, USA, and occasionally writes for *Star Books and Literature*.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Growing up with a new nation THE DHAKA WE ONCE KNEW

AHMED AHSANUZZAMAN

Children of 1972-73 came of age alongside Bangladesh itself. In Azimpur's close-knit colony, a telephone became a neighbourhood lifeline, television was a shared ritual, and the Buriganga was our afternoon escape.

There are generations whose childhoods are braided with the birth of a nation. Ours is one such cohort—those who walked into their first classrooms in 1972 and 1973, as Bangladesh itself took its first uncertain steps. We learned our lessons while the country learned to hope. The Dhaka of that time was

block. Neighbours used it freely and gratefully, passing messages to cousins across town. We became both switchboards and messengers: "Khalamma, call asche!" we would shout, and someone would hurry over, sari rustling. Connectivity then was communal, not personal; a single number stitched a dozen families together.

Most of us attended West End High School. There were no uniforms in those days; we wore what our mothers pressed and our fathers approved. We did not carry schoolbags either. Instead, we clutched sturdy briefcases—often leather, sometimes tin—whose metal snaps clicked like small declarations of purpose.

the newspaper boy slipped Daily Ittefaq and/or Bangladesh Observer under hinged doors or tossing them expertly onto balconies. Before school we stopped by neighbours' flats—sometimes to borrow a ruler or a fountain pen, sometimes because their breakfast smelled too good to ignore. The rituals were ordinary, but like beads on a tasbeeh they added up to something sacred: a sequence of small certainties that steadied our days.

Afternoons transformed the colony into a lively playground. Children spilled onto the fields behind the blocks, forming teams instantly. We lacked branded kits and level outfields but made up for them with invention. Older boys taught us how to float a slower ball from the back of the hand, how to bend a football barefoot, how to keep score with pebbles. When monsoon arrived, the fields flooded just enough to make football exhilarating—a festival of splashes, sliding tackles, and mothers shouting from balconies to mind our colds.

Winter brought badminton courts chalked on the ground, nets tied between bamboo-posts, and the soft thwack of shuttlecocks slicing the crisp air. It also meant pitha-sharing evenings—bhapa, patishapta, chittoi—sent across homes by children, sometimes squashed slightly on arrival but always warmly received. In those exchanges, we learned a politics more durable than any slogan: the civic grace of giving and receiving.

By sunset, shadows stretched long across the grounds. Radios played songs or the news, and yet most children lingered outside, squeezing in the last minutes of play before mothers called them in. Friendships deepened in the dimming light—between marbles, stories, and whispered plans for tomorrow. If a quarrel broke out, it rarely survived the promise of



PHOTO: AZIMPUR COLONY CIRCA '40-'50S, COURTESY OF DHAKA DAILY PHOTO

not the relentless metropolis it is today; it was gentler, slower, a city that exhaled softly after dusk.

We lived in Azimpur government colony, in modest four-storey blocks that housed more love than luxury. Everyone knew everyone else. Parents of our friends were our Khalus and Khalammass; seniors were boro bhais, juniors choto bhais. Doors were rarely shut, and an unexpected knock was never an intrusion. We belonged to one another—at iftar tables in Ramadan, around winter stoves, and in the shaded squares where conversations skipped easily between households.

Only one family in our building owned a Philips television, and it turned their drawing room into a small cultural centre. On broadcast evenings, neighbours drifted in, seniors settling on chairs, stools (back then sofas were a luxury) and we, kids, on floors. The shows that etched themselves into our minds were imported wonders: Star Trek, Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea, Batman, The Saint, The Persuaders, and Hawaii Five-O. And how will I ever forget that wonderful children's serial Double Decker! The glow of that black-and-white set was less about pixels and more about proximity—the community gathered shoulder to shoulder, sharing delight.

Our home was one of the few with a telephone—a heavy, black rotary device that rang for the entire

Our school did not boast vast playgrounds; a compact field served us well. When we needed space, Azimpur's colony fields welcomed us with their forgiving grass and goalposts improvised from slippers.

As Class-V students, we often made for the Buriganga after school, swimming in waters that were then clear and kind. We returned home in the early afternoon, washed off the river, and ate with the happy hunger that only childhood provides. Then came the wait—the delicious, fidgety hour before late-afternoon games. Football in summer and rainy days; in winter, cricket, badminton, and volleyball. And always gollachut, daribandha, bouchi, race cue, and marbles, seasonless and timeless—games that asked little of money and everything of imagination.

Life in Azimpur moved to an internal rhythm—shaped by corridor conversations, stairwell secrets, and the comforting predictability of neighbours whose lives intertwined with ours daily. Parents discussed ration lines and rising hopes. Shared scarcity mingled with shared optimism, and somewhere in that mixture a neighbourhood identity formed: practical, resourceful, unafraid of inconvenience.

Mornings began with aluminium buckets clanging in impoverished kitchens. The milkman called out;

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another game the next day.

This is an excerpt. Read the rest of the article on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature's* websites.

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DESIGN: MAHMUDA EMDAD

POETRY

Notice for the poems that won't be written

OHONA ANJUM JUI

One of these days, you will lose one or two limbs to the slow erosion of years, the same silence that took Grandfather's stories mid-sentence. There will not be a neighbour left to eavesdrop on our arguments over Father's stubborn land, our hysterical laughter shaking the old wood table, our boring complaints of parents, aunts kids, generational debt, and leftover sweets.

Not a soul to recall how Mother's voice, frayed as prayer, would stitch the dusk back together.

There will not be a tree standing.

No guava branch to scratch the roof in a monsoon, no shade where your daughter took her first steps.

You won't have your broom, the one you bound from coconut leaves,

to sweep the dust of our name from this cracked threshold.

My death will not be news of terror, but a letter expected early, and came late.

The final stamp on a correspondence of worn-out silences. You will journey then, with an unknown woman on an exhausted donkey's back,

through landscapes where only the wind answers.

You will ask the empty road, unknowingly, where to go? For the empire of our past is just those same leaves you swept from our backyard each evening

figs, neem, and ash scattered beyond all recollection.

Our anthem of solitude was never sung; it hummed in the space between us as we shelled peas for dinner,

a vibration in the heart not from love, not from fear, not from the "I" that once held you close in the dark.

But listen. In closing, you will not merely remember that these battles are bigger than you.

You will wear that knowing, like the threadbare shawl Gentle woman embroidered with cranes, now loose at the hem.

They are of life, yes, but carved specifically for you the heirloom you wore without choice,

the dust of our courtyard you inhaled into your very bones,

the half-remembered lullaby Sister sang you to the other side of fear.

And when you finally look out, you will see a new world built on the weary bones of your mother,

father, sister, brother, and stubborn light filtering through their absence.

You will realize the battle itself was, the only thing that could truly give: the quietness of the scar.

Then you will plant your one good hand in the earth, not thinking of poetry,

but making a song of the silence, and calling it home.

Ohona Anjum writes, rhymes, and studies English literature.