

FICTION

Body Selim

A bit of an argument followed; then he found himself inside a perimeter of five policemen, being led to the station—a five-minute walk. He stopped arguing. If he had given them the 500-taka note in his wallet, it would be over. He didn't. It wasn't that he refused; he simply didn't remember to.

NASIMA ANIS

We know Body Selim. If you look around, you'll find that after this incident, many people came to know him through the newspapers. You may have known him in an official capacity, and you may hear of him again. I know him personally; he used to come to Suhrawardy Udyan, almost regularly, to "take the stuff." We used to ask, "Selim bhai, how many push-ups can you do at once?" Selim bhai would laugh—a naive, innocent laugh. Then he'd say, "Not many, I've got no shokti!"

Before taking the stuff, he was quiet; after taking it, he became an incredible chatterbox. To put it simply, he was unmatched at spinning tall tales. It's true that by working as a bodyguard for powerful industrialists and bank chairmen, and by becoming an accomplice in their countless misdeeds—acting as a part-time supplier of alcohol, drugs, and women—he had reached a certain "special" level. He found relief in vomiting out these stories to us. Perhaps it was for this added release, along with the marijuana that he left his own neighborhood to come to ours. He always tried to prove that his neighborhood wasn't beneath him, but we understood why he came here. After pulling on the stuff together, we didn't really have much contact; none of us wanted to take this relationship home to our families. Even if someone shared something personal while high, no one kept it in mind. Yes, we kept his phone number just to exchange news on the availability of "the stuff." By "stuff," you understand, right? Tobacco, tobacco... ha ha ha!

After the incident—or perhaps a small one, really—occurred, Body Selim called me. He said, "Brother, I have your number memorised. Inform my wife. Tell her to arrange to get me out. Tell her to go home first. Saba is alone in the room." Before I could ask where his phone was, the line cut. I called back and learned he was at the police station. The crime: caught with drugs.

In the afternoon, his wife had gone to her sister's house with their two eldest children. Saba, two and a half years old, had a dentist appointment; Selim was left with her, since the wife would be back by night anyway. After bringing her back from the doctor in



PHOTO: FILE PHOTO | DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

the evening, he put Saba to sleep by giving her Tofen, as per the doctor's advice. Niru told us all this later.

My guess is, how long can an unemployed man watch television? While guarding the child, a craving must have kicked in. A winter evening can't be passed without a hit. As evening faded, he probably realised he didn't have a single stick left. Oh, how will I manage today? Niru might not be back until 10 PM—then what? Yes, Niru is his wife—foul-tempered, slightly promiscuous, and terrifyingly beautiful. She stayed under the same roof despite almost leaving several times. Even after having three kids, she had nearly walked out.

One afternoon, a year ago, in the scorching heat, I got a call from Suhrawardy: "Kajol bhai, can you come for a bit?"

"In this heat?"
"I have some business!"
I went and found his face flushed, a brown envelope in his hand. He held it out and said, "Read this to me."

Opening the paper, I was stunned. A lawyer's divorce notice. I read it aloud—as he could not read. I said, "Brother, your wife sent a legal notice. She won't stay with you anymore. She won't take the kids either; she's giving them to

you. What happened? Where is bhabi now?"

Selim bhai started crying—crying like a child, tears streaming down his cheeks. I felt bad. I said, "Tell me everything. We're here, don't worry!"

I didn't say out loud: Hey, you married her by force after getting caught red-handed. These things are bound to happen. I said nothing. I've learned not to take advantage of someone when they're down.

I stayed there until evening, ditching my own work. I called Topu and Atiq with their bikes, and Rehan and Sojib too. I told them, "There's a small job to do after evening. Tonight, I'll treat you to a full belly of kacchi biryani."

Body Selim was still sitting with his head bowed. I said, "Brother, call your wife. Track her location." Niru didn't pick up. Selim said, "She's probably at Sutrapur, at Rajib's house. That Rajib ruined my family!"

"Do you know the house?"
"I do. The scoundrel used to be my friend."

Six of us arrived on three motorbikes. With a toy pistol and a few punches, it didn't take much to overpower the frail Rajib. The next day, Niru showed up with the three kids. We gave some Humayun Ahmed-style dialogues

on the field: "There are vitamins in beating, Selim bhai. Give us a hundred push-ups." Selim bhai did the push-ups and let out a roaring laugh: "I've got no shokti!"

Niru didn't like me after that. No matter how much I said, "Selim bhai, don't stay out at night. Bhabi manages three kids, it's hard." We used to head home around nine. Selim bhai would stay back to brag to someone else—descriptions of how many types of perfumes were in Atiq Muhammad's toilet, the bathroom fittings in the bank chairman's house, or about the Jamil Group. He had plenty of time to talk. Talking was perhaps his primary entertainment; we truly had less time. However, this wasn't every day—two or three days a week. He had his own work schedule too.

Once or twice a month, he would bring expensive bottles—gifts from his bosses. Why wouldn't they? He was the one who collected these shipments from various places at great risk. If he ever got caught, those powerful parties would get him out in an instant. If caught with the goods, he used to laugh and say, "Pick up the phone, Sir. Just talk to them!"

A night or two in lockup was just a minor inconvenience for him—he'd

get treated like a son-in-law there. The sentries would think, what luck, even in jail! He didn't show off his muscles; they just stood out on their own as he walked out of the station—like Mr Bangladesh! Some bosses would even send a car. The police would look on with respect. A grand life indeed!

But a winter evening doesn't pass easily. After two or three hours, he saw it was only 7:30 PM. Three-year-old Saba was asleep. Pacing back and forth, Selim gathered the courage to step out. It's a 15-minute walk; he took a rickshaw. Five minutes to go, one minute or less to buy, five minutes to return. In 11 minutes, he'd be back; the girl wouldn't realise a thing.

It took a bit more than five minutes to get there, but only seconds to get the packet. He had let the rickshaw go. Before looking for another, the world felt like his own; he shook his shoulders and looked at the sky. Everything was shrouded in fog; no planets or stars were visible. People brushed past him—he liked them too. He felt a bit cold; he realised that in his excitement, he hadn't taken his winter clothes. He had just wrapped the red muffler around his neck as he left. He tried to remember: was he wearing winter clothes inside the house? He couldn't recall.

He hailed a rickshaw. There was a light jam on the main road. He thought of his daughter—just two more minutes! Before the main road ended, someone suddenly grabbed the rickshaw handle. The rickshaw stopped with a heavy jolt. Two policemen surrounded him from both sides.

"Get down!"
"What do you mean, get down?"

He got down. He wanted to say, "I am Body Selim, everyone knows me. How dare you!" Before he could say anything, they barked, "Hand over the stuff!"

Only then did he realise he hadn't brought his phone.

This is an excerpt. Read the full story on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature's* websites. Translated from Bangla by Alamgir Mohammad.

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REFLECTIONS

Boishakh in fragments: Food, storms, and memory

NADIA KABIR BARB

There is a tendency to become nostalgic about the smallest of things, and nostalgia can be a powerful emotion. It has a way of weaving itself into memory, quietly colouring moments. Memories themselves have a way of appearing unbidden, never seeking consent. I find myself treasuring my memories, guarding them in case they slip away. A song drifting from a shop doorway, the familiar smell of someone's deshi cooking as I walk down the street, the soft haze of a misty morning—and suddenly I am somewhere else, transported to another time, to another place. I often wonder whether my childhood memories of Pohela Boishakh are snapshots in time, blurred at the edges, or borrowed memories from snippets of conversation or old photographs, my mind filling in the gaps.

In London, the celebrations are smaller and more intentional. They are arranged around busy schedules, often taking place in someone's home rather than out in the open. There is food, music, and conversation—familiar elements but quieter and on a smaller scale. There is a different kind of intimacy here: a sense that the celebration exists because we must make space for it, all of us gathering to recreate something of what we remember.

Over the years, with friends having moved away, and my children having grown up, there is a lessening of the flurry of activity, the excitement less palpable. I miss going to the Boishakhi mela that takes place in May, around the Brick Lane area in East London, famously dubbed 'Bangla Town.' The first time I went was 20 years ago. I took my children because I wanted them to experience Pohela Boishakh for themselves instead of a second-hand retelling.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

We arrived just as the procession began, instantly greeted by the rhythmic pulse of musicians and the graceful movements of dancers making their way through the crowd. Among the highlights was a large metal tiger float, followed closely by children wearing colourful tiger masks and waving Bangladeshi flags. The atmosphere grew even more vibrant with a couple dressed in traditional bridal attire, perched atop a rickshaw. As the procession gradually wound down, our focus shifted towards the stage in an adjacent field, where an eclectic line-up of performances awaited. The sounds of Bangla rock reverberated through the air, followed by Bollywood melodies, energetic bhangra, and innovative East-West fusion. The scent of festival food mingled with the music, while the swirl of costumes and lights added to the sensory richness. This diverse entertainment reflected the

festival's inclusive spirit, appealing not only to the Bangladeshi community but also welcoming a broader audience eager to immerse themselves in the rich tapestry of culture and celebration.

The last time I celebrated Pohela Boishakh in Bangladesh was in 2019. Dhaka is always bustling, but even the streets had a different energy. The intricate designs of the alpona painted on the long stretch of Manik Mia Avenue leading to the Jatiyo Sangsad Bhaban was a sight to behold. I had been invited to a lunch organised by friends, and I felt like a child once again, rummaging through my mother's wardrobe and wearing her off-white jamdani saree with red motifs, and slipping matching bangles onto my wrists. What I remember most is the food—a spread of several types of bharta, panta bhat, fried hilsa served with green chillies and onion, and more dishes than memory can do justice to.

The food was presented in clay bowls and pots, others on banana leaves. My eyes were definitely bigger than my stomach by the time the mishti was served. For a moment, it felt as though memory and reality had quietly met.

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

Nadia Kabir Barb is a British Bangladeshi writer and journalist whose work has appeared in international literary journals and anthologies. Her debut short story collection, *Truth or Dare*, was named one of the Indie Press Network's "Best of 2023" and was a finalist for the 2024 Eyelands Book Award. She was also longlisted for The Bridport Prize Peggy Chapman-Andrews "First Novel Award" and The Novelry's 2025 "The Next Big Story".

POETRY

The aviary within

SHIBLEE SHAHED

I slip into your hut
and salvage bones, a soul,
the core architecture of living cells.
Feathers, if they fall my way, are a blessing—
I press them softly against my chest.
Thus, bit by bit,
a sanctuary of birds has flourished within me.
Behold—cuckoos, parrots, kingfishers, egrets,
and the long-billed hoopoe—
that timeless envoy of history.
I tend to them, unflinching, twice a day.
At times, I read them from Tolstoy.
Delighted, they break into songs of shifting
seasons.
Listen—my urge toward self-destruction has
ebbed.
My steady self has finally found its way
as I earn my keep bartering wind—
and sustain myself on the invisible.

Dr Shiblee Shahed is a public health specialist, essayist, poet, and translator. His debut poetry collection was published in 2013 by Shuddhashar Publications. His poems and articles have appeared in numerous national and international outlets. He is a regular contributor to *The Daily Star*.



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