

## The Dogs of Dolphin Lane

The day the dog catchers of the City Corporation finally came, and quickly rounded up, killed and carted away the stray dogs, the people of Dolphin Lane heaved a sigh of great relief, despite the sudden action and the cruelty of the catchers' technique.

Those living in the lane had been through great misery for long, being routinely visited by what they had discovered to be a menace. Every night just as stillness was about to settle in the lane – after the cars had stopped honking and the fog had wrapped the lampposts with blind shrouds – the timing would be just right. No sooner had the tired and sleepy souls of the lane crawled into beds to drop their heads on to single or twin pillows than the menace would tear through the silence. And it would be the beginning of a nightlong torment.

First, one or two forlorn howls. Then a few more. And soon a torrent of riotous clamour. Once started, it would continue for ever – a planned ritual, so it seemed, in retaliation for what they endured during the day. The kicks, the hurled stones or what you will.

The canine numbers had been growing. No one in the lane actually noticed – not a sight to feast one's eyes on. One bitch bred as many as seven to eight puppies at a time. Some of them starved to death, while some got lost under the running wheels. Still, a good number survived and kept on growing. And the people in the lane through their regular nocturnal suffering finally realised that the survival rate was quite high despite recurrent deaths.

In the beginning the people had thought that since dogs were dogs – alert and dutiful – their barking was about something that they sensed. Maybe thieves, maybe something else which none but the dogs would know. And although no one had trained them, masterless that they were, it could perhaps be an over-alertness of their instincts that drove them rip apart the night's silence.

But how could one do without sleep all night! Not even rest one's tired head on the pillow!

No one had thought of a solution. Because, as the nights passed by and daylight broke out, the nightly problem remained forgotten under the toilsome rat race that ran all day long. But as soon as night returned crashing down on them with the routine horror, all they could do was toss and turn in their sleepless beds.

It was when things were at such a state that one morning, the City Corporation's dog-catching squad raided Dolphin Lane, and as if by sheer magic, caught, killed and hurriedly dumped the wandering packs in a truck and raced away. Had the Dolphinites not witnessed the spectacle with their own eyes, they wouldn't have believed that a job as complex and elaborate could be accomplished with such deft competence.

Credit indeed went to the catching squad. They had done their job with great professional skill and discipline. First they had dispersed themselves in small groups of twos or threes to lure the dogs into catching range with pieces of bread or biscuits. The men also made inviting sounds from their mouths to further trick the dogs into coming nearer. And as soon as a dog responded approaching close enough, one of them would grab the victim with strong iron tongs, while his partner would quickly thrust a foot-long syringe right through the upper neck like a drill penetrating into solid earth. It was quick work, delivered with the right timing. What followed was a faint whining until the victim choked and dropped still.

The rest of the job was simple enough – dragging the light, middle and heavyweight bodies onto an open truck and moving away.

Those in the lane who had watched the proceedings up close – shopkeepers, laundrymen, vendors, passers-by, 'blind' beggars – didn't get to catch all the details. The dazzling competence of the dogcatchers bewildered them. Later, when they encountered each other with shock and surprise, words got lost in their mouths. The late November sky hung overhead as timeless and distant as ever.

Despite the havoc caused by the dogs night after night, nobody from the Dolphin Lane had initiated the action secretly. The fact remained that the dogcatchers were a specially trained squad of the City Corporation, and lest they forgot their hard acquired skills they rehearsed their catching practices in chosen localities a number of times every year. There was a time when their technique was crude. Instead of poison-filled syringes, they used huge wooden hammers. A single knock at the back of the head was perfect to make a dog sleep eternally. In comparison, the present-day device was smart and convenient. Over and above, since it was easy to identify the wandering folks, the catchers could successfully conduct their operation in chosen areas without having to seek help from the local residents.

The truck-ride of the dogs marked the day with a refreshing change for the people in their daily gossips. For the youngsters it was sheer fun. They passed a busy day endlessly

recounting the event and narrating their reactions to it.

Reactions of the grown-ups, however, were mixed. Some of them credited the City Corporation for its timely move lauding the efficiency of the dogcatchers. They praised the City Mayor saying that dog catching (with such skill and swiftness) was indeed crucial to the Mayor's scheme to make urban life peaceful. They wished in the coming days similar raids would target stray cats, beggars, footpath-occupying vendors, muggers, toll collectors, drug addicts, bribe takers etcetera etcetera, and that all would be dispensed with, though not necessarily through similar truck rides.

There were others who spoke differently. They expressed their utter disgust and termed the event a stupid eyewash to hide the authority's failure to attend to a hundred important jobs such as – traffic jam, flies, mosquitoes, garbage, water logging, robberies, and murders and so on. They made predictions that in the coming election campaign the ruling party would flaunt dog-catching as a grand achievement of its rule and exhibit some desiccated dog tails as glaring proofs of its claim.

Whatever the reactions, there could be no disputing that the lives of the people in Dolphin Lane had been made miserable by dogs, and so after their epoch-making exit through the truck-ride, the people were fully convinced that the approaching nights would be full of peace, with sleep.

This made the men, women and children joyous. In fact, they were shocked to imagine for how long their eyes had not been visited by sleep – that they hadn't dipped into that mysterious stillness where colourful fishes called dreams danced and swirled with their resplendent fins and tails! How they had passed night after night haunted by bad dreams! They felt distressed to think how the agony of their life lurked all day long only to hammer on their doors at the dead of night!

At long last, they were going to sleep. They felt exhilarated, and to some of them, it seemed like freedom. Nightlong freedom after the tiring captivity of the day.

A few nights passed by. Quiet, peaceful nights. As the nights progressed, dark and thick, the Dolphinites were amazed by what seemed to them an enchanting stillness that shielded their senses from the outside world – an unearthly quietness they thought only the dogless nights were able to deliver. And because of this overwhelming stillness, they were able to catch the feeblest of noises that swished past their ears; at times it was their own breathing that took them unawares. An altogether new experience, they mused. They couldn't recall if

they had ever been through such a wonderful interregnum of silence.

After long chaotic nights their hearts and minds were immersed in an all-captivating silence, but there were disarrayed thoughts too that whirled about in their minds. They thought of events – lost or frayed – from their childhood. They thought of nature, of the splendour and majesty of nature offered by silence. And more than anything else, they thought of freedom – this unseeing freedom they wished they could touch and smell, hold it in their fists, smear it all over their bodies like some sweet aromatic oil!

As the thoughts hovered about, they let themselves sink more and more into the depths of stillness. But trying to shut their eyes for sleep seemed neither smooth nor trouble-free. It was the ceaseless throbbing of their lonely or yearning hearts that they came upon every time they thought of their long-pending sleep. They had missed this magic ripple, they thought, this beating of their hearts in such harmony and rhythm all these years. An extraordinary gift of silence, but they couldn't make out what to do with it. They couldn't sleep.

They discussed their new nightly experiences amongst themselves. They felt good talking about something so different and exceptional; but going about narrating their intimate, personal feelings to one another they discovered that these were neither uniquely personal nor exceptional but unvaryingly common to them all. They could feel through each other's experiences, could see through each other's hearts. However, because of the sleepless nights, their eyes were itchy and swollen, and with their swollen eyes they looked at each other and soon found themselves as though engulfed in the silhouettes of shadows and sunlight of the dogless Dolphin Lane.

After the successful raid, the City Corporation conducted similar raids in nearby localities with the same deftness and speed. Newspapers carried front-page stories commending the good work. Life in the neighbouring areas too had been rendered as miserable due to the nightly turbulence; and with the exodus of dogs through similar truck rides, the people living in those localities heaved a sigh of similar relief like the Dolphinites – despite the sudden action and the cruelty of the catchers' technique. And just as the Dolphinites had experienced, the stillness of the dogless nights stirred up strange emotions in their minds and their eyelids too remained open all night.

Neither sleep nor freedom seemed to be approaching. They just looked to be creeping in but cleverly slipped past, and in the wake of the fleeting images emerged, slowly, a restlessness that held onto their bloodshot, sleepless eyes.

They wondered what it was that they didn't have now! What it was that the tranquil nights failed to offer! Their hearts had yearned for this silence for so long!

Was it something they missed but didn't know of? They asked themselves but failed to find an answer.

Was it something that they didn't see or feel but which had lived in their heads, within the closet of their minds or inside their hearts – like the protective charms of amulets! They didn't have it now! Gone.

With their swollen eyes they looked shattered. Day after day, they thought and wondered, got weary, weak and at times totally distraught.

Some of them remembered the snouts and the eyes of the departed dogs – males, bitches, puppies in herds, some tailless, some lame and mauled, with festering sores oozing blood and puss. They were of varying shapes, colours, weights.

They were everywhere. Weren't they? In front of the houses, groceries, butcher shops, in drains, garbage bins, in all the spaces eyes could travel. Also deep down the hearts of the Dolphinites like some inseparable limbs and appendages.

Did some limbs and appendages of the Dolphinites were carted away along with the dogs when no one was watching? Just about when they had thought of freedom and heaved a sigh of relief?

*Translated from the Bengali by the author*

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## Enchantment's Deception



Wasi Ahmed

### I

So what was new about suffering when construction was going on! Late at night, the sleep of all the surrounding people would flee due to the din of truck lids opening and the sounds of sand-grit-brick chips being shoveled onto the road, accompanied by the raucous shouts and yells of laborers. During the day, there would be other assorted noises – the long continual groaning of the cement mixer – while above all these noises would rise the sharp, screeching whines of the tile-cutting machine that would fry one's ears. Once that noise entered the ear tunnel it never seemed to leave, but kept whirling round and round inside there.

There were other things going on, too! During the day the trucks carrying bricks came—though how these trucks came in the daytime since they were supposed to be on the roads only at night... that was

an entirely different matter. A whole other topic. After a great deal of scrutiny, Manzur Hasan had observed that no matter how each laborer was built, whether strong or weak, he had to carry six bricks on his head. Not five, not four. One by one the bricks were placed until the pile rose to about two feet above the head, after which the feet advanced slowly and surely, moving so surely, that looking at it, one felt enchanted. The basic thing seemed to be whether the piece of wood, about the size of one's hand, which was placed above the straw or cloth coiled on the head was set dead right, to make sure of that. If the laborer was right-handed then the first brick was placed on the left, and then while balancing the load, the second went on the right. After that the task was easy – at least that was how it seemed – one brick on the left, the next on the right. While placing them, it seemed the practice was to press the two rows of bricks tightly against each other so that no gap or space remained between them. This was how it went—three bricks on this side, three on the other. Then the eyes look straight ahead, and the careful one step, then two steps. There, that was it, off he went! There could be no bending of the neck, no shaking of the head—the brick load was carried on a ramrod straight neck and on top of it, an unmoving head of stone.

Touching seventy, rendered frail by high blood sugar, either because retired professor Manzur Hasan perhaps had not had the time to make detailed observations about a lot of things or because he had not considered the subjects he had taught to be anything else other than merely subjects to be taught, being enchanted by the ingenuity needed to carry half a dozen bricks on one's head seemed to be something that nobody else was overly curious about or paid much attention to. There was another professor in the house, like him, retired – his wife Shahana Hasan – not even she. That first day, when at noon, under the influence of his excitement, he had called out to her to share his great delight his wife with a kindly smile had said, “Is this the first time you have seen it? What did you do your whole life, just teach?”

Her meaning was easy to grasp. While her husband had simply taught, she, on the other hand, had not only taught but had observed the life around her.

Despite this gentle rebuke, Manzur Hasan's enchantment did not abate.

About six months after the old house had been demolished, the new apartment building was going up. Before the demolition job had begun, while survey work had been ongoing, Shahana had said, “How are we going to live here, this is going to go on for a year...”

The depressing prospect had made her sigh. Which was understandable. It really wasn't simply a year-long affair. Would the work proceed as planned? After some time, no doubt, it would come to a standstill, either problems with the bank loan, or one of a thousand other complications that usually cropped up. Not only the future tenants would have to suffer, those who had paid their money and were now eagerly waiting to move in, but also the people around the construction site. Shahana's younger sister, after booking an apartment in Lalmatia, had had to wait three years for it. The developer had said fourteen months, but then got embroiled in some lawsuit with the land's owner; for some time they had feared that all her dreams of owning an apartment would come to a big fat zero. But her luck had held, and finally everything had been settled after fourteen months had extended to thirty-six months.

Anyway, enough of that! On the plot next to theirs had been a small, double-story house. The plot of land had been at least one *bigha*, with plenty of space in the front and back, and there had been trees, where, after midday, a broad shade would spread across it.

With the new building going up, it became clear that not one inch of space would be left unutilized. And therefore, there remained no doubt in either Manzur or Shahana Hasan's minds that it would engulf their south-facing balcony. So when Shahana had thought the construction would take a year, what she actually was stating the time they had before their apartment would become completely airless and without light—a frightening thought! But what could they do? After leaving their university quarters it had taken Shahana quite some time to come to terms with this apartment. It had seemed densely pressed on all sides by people, and in the midst of human babel the whole day. The area,

though residential, was not a leisurely one. But there came a time when both of them accepted it for what it was—accepted it because they had to. After all, they had retired, and had to leave the campus area, where they had lived their whole lives.

When construction began, it was not just during the day, but late into the night too there were numerous disturbances—both, however, had agreed that they had to live with it. It was during this state of affairs that Hasan Manzur one day shared a thought with his wife. “‘Construction’ is not at all a vague term,” he said. “It’s like your ‘deconstruction.’” (His wife had taught literature).

Shahana had instantly responded, “Of course. We can find the meaning in the dictionary. And so...?”

Manzur Hasan ventured ahead, “Our country’s problem is development – and this is not my thought, somebody else said it, most possibly Abdullah Abu Sayeed, the Bishwa Shahitto<sup>1</sup> fellow – you know who I am talking about. Construction is merely the most visible aspect of development—like roads and highways, flyovers, power plants, apartments, and buildings. We are living in the middle of a transition phase of society—of development, in the middle of constructions. Man is essentially selfish, which is why his own sorrows loom large to him.”

“‘Essentially selfish’ meaning puts his own interests first and foremost,” his wife responded.

“He should think more collectively.”

Let us now come to the heart of the matter. Within six months the building was, so to speak, blazing upwards. The developer was an experienced one. The funds needed, the planning for the project—all seemed to be well-organized. They had leapt into the task with the necessary men, material, and equipment. Sure, all the racket and clamor was a huge annoyance, but now that he had decided to put up with it, Manzur Hasan thought, let me see—there’s so much to see, even if not to learn. It was impossible to observe it up close, so he looked while sitting on the balcony, reading the paper, glancing at it from his reading table in between his work. It was with the six bricks in two rows on tops

of heads that the laborers carried that in fact had marked the beginning of his watching phase.

There were so many other things he noted. Women and girls, wearing gloves cut out from old tires, breaking bricks all day; lifting and dropping swaying buckets of cement-sand mix by means of pulleys; hammering, by hand, and measuring purely by the naked eye, large and small MS iron rods into unblemished, desired sizes and shapes.

He had never before observed so minutely these things. Now while scrutinizing he felt that just as the work demanded success, so too the act of observing them closely was nothing to be dismissive about. That the bricks one by one, row by row, rose to the head with such ease – without gaps, without spaces – this was due no less to his scrutiny, their flawlessness an expressive aspect of his watching. The one who worked, was he aware of the watching, or rather, would he have the capacity to be aware of it?

Manzur Hasan thought of other things too. The discipline amidst the chaos and clamor. He thought of this too—the art of building. More expressive than merely construction; and far more so than development.

On the other side of things, Shahana Hasan opined, “The way you are thinking of the act of seeing, the way you are glorifying it, that is absolutely not what it is. You seeing is your action, a very individual, subjective act. Nobody gives a whit about it. The nineteen- or twenty-year-old boy who is cutting the tiles only using his naked eyes for measurement, not making any mistakes while cutting away the whole day, he knows all credit is due to him, not to the material or his equipment—and so too is the pain and agony. Your watching—that is not reality.”

“So what is it?”

“Flight of fancy.”

Manzur Hasan was delighted by this. He knew that his watching was important to him; so what if it was solely felt by him alone. His enchantment, or to put it differently, his perception, that too was his alone. Why should it be compared to somebody else’s?

Shahana continued, "To see is to be deceived. Not only is it an isolated act, but in terms of context it is also dishonest."

"My seeing is my seeing. How did dishonesty come into it?"

"It comes into it because, based on your seeing, you could act on it."

"Like?"

"Like... like... you could bring into existence a book called *The Unbelievable Lightness of Bricks*. Or, say, you did nothing at all, but went around telling people about your enchantment, or not even that, kept it a secret in your heart—that too is the same thing. Meaning, that's how corruption starts, you know."

"Corruption?"

"Keep on watching. See if you can catch anything on the margin of your enchantment."

## II

It had been cloudy since morning. Even though it seemed it would rain any moment, not a drop landed. Urged on by the wind, the thatch covering around the under-construction apartment building rose up and down like waves. At times, during stronger blasts of wind, it seemed as if it would tear off any moment to lay bare the demonic skeletal structure underneath. Sitting with the newspaper on his lap, it was not as if Manzur Hasan was paying close attention to the wind's play on the thatch surface. Nor could he muster up any enthusiasm for the spread-open pages of the newspaper—the vulgarity that was being printed in the guise of news every day!

Why did the subject of corruption come into Shahana's head?

By the time noontime rolled around, there had been a good amount of rain. It was mid-April. The hot season had begun by the beginning of March. There was hardly any summer season anymore; the hot season seemed to last the whole year, with the rains at times bringing in a difference. If climate change meant only changes in the climate, then perhaps it wouldn't have been a talking matter. The

summer would have felt hotter, with floods in-between. But how could that be? Climate change was a whole package, not just the frequent battering by storms-typhoons-earthquakes or tsunamis, but something that lay in wait to ambush and lay waste to mankind by upending all rules and conventions. Now a global racket had emerged centered on it. Thousands, if not more, were profiteering from it. Writing rubbish in the name of consultancies. Showing false projects to pocket donor money, even as the carbon credit business was booming. All the rules and practices governing business were changing fast. So much change in just the last fifteen-twenty years! All these houses and buildings going up at meteoric speed, rising without let-up, one would think they were the fruit of long-term planning. But, no, these would not last beyond fifteen-twenty years. Earthquakes would not bring them down. Men themselves would, who would then build anew. If there were ten- or twelve-story structures on a single plot now, then how many stories would be there when ten plots were combined to form a single one?

To these changing thoughts the rain threw out a challenge. It had slowed down to just a drizzle. His eyes straightened, and—good God, what was this? From the top of the wet, thatch-enclosed building dangled a thick, swaying rope, and coming down it was a thin, gangly youth, about twenty or twenty-one years old. Not sliding down the smoothness of a betel-nut tree trunk. Holding the rope in both hands, he was coming down with jerky movements. He had on a yellow t-shirt and a *lungi* whose bottom half he had wrapped up at the waist. Each downward slide was at least an arm length or two, until his feet gripped on the next tightly-tied knot on the rope. A jerky slide, a newer knot, another length down.

Looking at him, Manzur Hasan felt dizzy. No matter how strong it was or how tightly the knots were tied, the rain had made the rope wet and slippery. The way the loose-hanging rope was jerking around, how long would it take to invite catastrophe! What guarantee was there that the feet would land on the knots, what assurance that the hands would continue to grip the rope?

Manzur Hasan's heart said if something were to happen, it

would happen right now. That he was watching, in fact staring at it open-mouthed, he hoped this watching would not turn to death. In anticipation of horror, he closed his eyes.

There was a hideous sound, accompanied by the sudden cawing of crows. Somewhere something had blown up, and an explosive scattering of things and images danced across the screen of his closed eyes.

Opening his eyes, focusing them, he saw smoke rising from an electric transformer a short distance away. Four or five crows were wheeling over it, madly cawing. Here, however, the knotted rope dangling in the misty rain was unbroken, peacefully whole. On the ground below it the youth – the very same youth – had unwrapped the *lungi* where it had been knotted at waist and wrung the water out of it. He had exchanged the rope for *lungi*, holding his garment in both hands in front of him as he walked. And kept on walking.

At night as he related the incident to his wife, he felt both fear and enchantment. When later Manzur Hasan did confess to his fear, Shahana asked him, “You felt very afraid, right, even as you were enchanted?”

How could he deny that he hadn’t been! But if he said it out loud, what if Shahana caught him red-handed at the corruption thing...

#### End Notes

1. *Bishwa Shahitto Kendro is a non-profit institution in Bangladesh to promote reading habits and progressive ideas among students and the general public. Its founder is writer, academic, and television presenter Abdullah Abu Sayeed.*

#### Glossary

<i>Adda</i>	The all-purpose Bengali term for hanging out with friends, talking, passing the time pleasantly.
<i>Abimsa</i>	Creed of non-violence
<i>Alpona</i>	Traditional Bengali decoration and motifs
<i>Anna</i>	Old coinage where 16 annas is equivalent to one rupee or taka
<i>Arre</i>	Exclamatory term
<i>Asharh</i>	The third month of the Bengali calendar.
<i>Ashwin</i>	The sixth month of the Bengali calendar corresponding to the months of September/October. It is a month of several major Hindu religious festivals.
<i>Babui</i>	Weaver birds who build elaborate nests.
<i>Bel</i>	Wood-apple
<i>Bhadrolok</i>	The traditional Bengali term for the respectable, genteel class.
<i>Bhai/Bhaiya</i>	Term of address for older male person, literally meaning brother
<i>Bigha</i>	Unit of land measurement in Bangladesh, equivalent to one-third of an acre.
<i>Boudi</i>	Respectful term for the wife of an elder brother/brotherly figure
<i>Char</i>	New areas formed by fertile deposits from upstream in the lower passages of a river, usually in the far coastal areas of Bangladesh.
<i>Crone</i>	A number equivalent to ten million
<i>Dada</i>	Term of address for older male person, literally meaning brother
<i>Darwan</i>	A guard at a gate
<i>Dewani</i>	Civil court; in jail, offenders under the civil code
<i>Dhuti</i>	A traditional men’s garment; also refers to white cloth worn by women
<i>Didi</i>	Term of address for older female person, literally meaning sister
<i>Dotara</i>	A musical instrument like a ukulele with two strings that is plucked.
<i>Gamcha</i>	A handloom-woven piece of cotton cloth used as a towel or to wipe things—in common usage in both West Bengal and Bangladesh.