

Anisul HOQUE

Stories and poems

One Who Could Dream

A Short story

We had a sister; don't know why her face reminds snowfall: particles of snow floating down from the sky like raw-cotton. She came like a drop of dew, a sudden, soft light coming down from the sky. Her name was *Akhi* (eye), and she had really large eyes, collyrium was melted over those eyes, over the darkish face and cheeks. Her existence in our family was very slight. We did not know at all she was something special.

She loved crows. Her first language was that of crows: *ka*. She would watch crows all day long. Crows would come rarely to our yard in the small town; but all of a sudden when they would come with their long legs and wings larger than the oily black bodies, *Akhi* would be thrilled at their sight. She would clap and call them: *ka ka!*

Usually she did not want to eat; we used to feed her tempting with a lie that the crows had come.

Akhi learned to talk very early. In the very beginning she spoke about everything in the language of crows. She would call mother *ka* and father *kaka*; but called water *mum* as all the children usually do. But after one and half years of age her voice became clearer, along with this her love for animals also increased. she had gradually become a mimic, she could mimic voices of all animals, she could continuously utter: crows call *ka ka*, dogs say *bhuk bhuk*, cats call *meu meu*, horses say *cheehi cheehi*, cows call *hamba hamba*. After saying *hamba* she used to burst into laughter, when a magic spell spread all over her face, and she looked so cute!

We lived in a government bungalow, a single-storied house fenced by barbed wire and full of trees. Very quite was our life, nothing would happen which could raise a roar. Lots of trees were there, and there was a *bokul* tree, which bloomed plenty of little brown-white flowers like rice crisps. In the dawn the tree shade would look like a huge plate full with rice crisps. Cool morning breeze would come along with the first light of the day when sweet fragrance of *bokul* flower would splash our windows.

I would wake up and head for my reading table to complete home-tasks when *Akhi* would come up, and grabbing one of my fingers, she would urge: 'brother, let's go to collect *bokul* flowers.'

We would go along with *Chhotokhala*, the younger sister of our mother, who lived with us in the same house, and collect plenty of *bokul* flowers, and carry them in our clothes. The flowers wetted *Akhi's* frock, as they had been drenched in dew whole night. But then, within ours her frock would dry up, and around noon, no one could trace a sign of moist in the piece of cloth but there would remain the sweet fragrance of *bokul* flower.

We would store the collected flowers on the mat of our *chhotokhala*, the aunty, upon which she would sit in the veranda, and escaping her morning studies, she would start wreathing with flowers, using needle and thread. We would count the number of wreaths and store them in a suitcase where Akhi gathered all of her toys. Stale wreaths of *bakul* flowers would spread an attractive smell; we enjoyed the special kind of fragrance of those *bakul* garlands.

One day, our *chhotokhala* lost one of her earrings. It was the first incident of our house that created unrest. Golden ring, dropped somewhere from ear, but no one could trace it, not in yard, not in bushes near the *bakul* tree, nowhere! Servants of the house were rebuked; mother was sure that maidservant Bakul had taken it.

Losing her earring *Chhotokhala* started crying. Mother assaulted Bakul the maidservant, and all of us became deeply worried thinking what would be the next when father would come home. Father stayed at home very rarely: most of the time he had to travel for official tours; we saw him on very rare occasions, and when he was home, the whole house remained scared, no one ever dared to make a noise.

In such a situation I could not find Akhi. Later I found her in the storeroom which was a place of our hide-and-seek game. Mother had a disease of fainting, so she lost her consciousness. Everybody rushed to flow water over her head. Hot black peppers were put in her nose; we two, brother and sister, were very scared to see all these happenings. I could not shed my tears; my eyes were full of water, a brick of sorrow blocked on my trachea. I cried out loudly.

Akhi said to me, 'do not cry, brother. I can tell you where the lost ring is. Let's go to sleep now.'

Then of us two went to the rooftop of our house with a mat to sleep on in the winter afternoon. Shaggy trees were there over the roof, among which there were two *boroi* trees. One produced fruit every year, the other not. As the second one could not produce *boroi* fruit, its head was full of *swarnalata* (gold creeper), and it looked like a golden tree.

So we fell asleep in the shade of the tree, which wore ornaments like a member of a royal family. When we woke up, the sun had gone under the faraway trees, leaving the twilight. The open field could be seen from the rooftop, the cattle were on their way home and smokes from nearby houses were stunned at the weight of fog, when Akhi said to me, 'brother, the ring is in the drain of the bathroom. The crow came when I slept and told me.'

Just awake, we rushed for downstairs after folding the mat, with our eyes puffed due to sleep at daytime, we met mother at the bottom of the staircase. She recovered consciousness by now but her hair was still wet. She was about to say something when Akhi declared: 'Ammu, the ring is found. It's in the drain. Let's go to pick it up.'

Puzzled by the four-year-old daughter, mother started following her. It was the moment in the evening when the ground floor of the house was full of the smell of kerosene as the hurricane-lanterns have just been lit, when the mother went following little Akhi with one of the hurricanes in her hand.

And what a miracle! The valuable gold ring was found in the mesh flow of the drain out of the bathroom wall. Mother hugged her daughter, lifted the little girl on her lap and asked, 'did you see it?'

'Yes.'

'Then why didn't tell me before?'

'I told you right after seeing. I just saw it.'

'Where, from the roof?'

'No. The crow came in my sleep and told me.'

That was my sister, a tiny, bitsy girl who could dream!

One autumn morning, when the temperature just began to fall, we went to collect *sheuli* flower. The shed of the tree was full of flowers, and I carelessly bruised a flower under my foot; seeing this she cried out with sorrow, took the flower and kissed it and then said to me, 'brother, tell dad not to go to office today.'

Father planned to go to office by the 8 o'clock train, and everything was ready accordingly: Mother woke up and left the bed in the very early morning and then boiled water of rice began to come out of the pot that was put on the yard's earth-built oven; a chicken was caught and slaughtered accordingly to enrich father's menu.

I said to Akhi, 'but why?'

'The crow came last night,' said Akhi, 'and told me, stop your father from going to office today; otherwise he will be in great trouble.'

I went to mother. 'Ammu, tell father not to go to office today.'

Mother looked at me and said, 'gone mad?'

I know the mother's weakness and warned, 'father will be in great danger if he goes.'

Mother cried out, 'who says this?'

'That doesn't matter. Please forbid him.'

Putting hot pieces of chicken cooked with potato, yellow-red with turmeric and chili spices on father's plate, mother said to father, 'the children do not want to miss you today. Stay with them.'

Smiling, father said, 'the minister will come today to the head office, I will lose the job if I am not there.'

Akhi stood holding the door. She dragged father's office-bag to me and, 'brother, let's hide it.'

'Please give me the bag, child.' said father.

Akhi started crying loudly. She rolled herself on the floor and went on crying.

Then mother urged, 'if you want to go, please go by the 2 o'clock train.'

Abbu said, what a problem, tenacity of children prevails. Minister will come at 11 am, what's it going there at 2.

Abbu, please do not go. Akhi continued crying.

Abbu was determined to go, as we hid his bag he could not move, all the necessary documents were in the bag. There will be no benefit going office without these. He started rebuking mum. We two went to the shed of bakul tree and sat down

together. We had a secret place there under a bush. Nobody knew the place. There were some big green grasses that covered the place. As we tried to feed our red cow big grasses we had discovered the secret place.

We came out of the place when the train whistled and left the station. Entering the house, we discovered that the situation was worse. Abbu was scolding mum by saying, where your children hid my bag. Mum was senseless.

Next day dad returned from the office with the suspension order in hand. His face was totally sullen. Akhi said to him, Abbu, you will see it will be good for you. Those who went to the office yesterday will be in great loss. Everybody will be in deep trouble. Do not show your precocity to me, dad reacted sharply and slapped at her leg. Akhi did say nothing. Just remained silent. I was afraid that she did not talk. I said to her, my dear sister, please talk, if you not, I will just simply die. But she remained silent. In the next three days she did not utter a single word. I cried a lot in those three days. My eyes were full of water when I was on the lonely roof, under the shed of Bakul tree or at midnight.

After three days dad came back with a smiling face, brought with him a full bunch of bananas and a new sky coloured frock for Akhi.

Seeing dad's face with smile the cloud moved from the whole house, like the sun, which shows its face after a long interval, removes darkness. We stood around him.

Abbu said, it brings good, as I did not go to office that day.

The police even along with the minister arrested those officials, who went to office that day, said Akhi.

Abbu was astonished, how could you know all these?

Akhi said, surely they will be terminated from the jobs and also will be kept in jail, because they did a very bad thing in the office that day, is not it right, Abbu?

What's the bad thing, I asked.

It cannot be disclosed before children like you. It's an adult affair, said Abbu.

There was full moon that night. We -- me, Akhi, mum and dad--sat on the roof. Sweet fragrance of sheuli was spreading from the tree. Abbu suddenly took Akhi on his lap and cried loudly, mum, I am supposed to be in jail right now. Crows are deluded in such a moonlit night. A flock of crows are calling from a long distance. The calm night of mofussil town, the voice of fox from a long distance was heard, *ka ka* sound of crow overshadowed the continuous chirping of cricket. All of these composed a sweet orchestra. We all were weeping with happiness.

Everybody understood steadily that my sister had the ability to dream. When football match of Dhaka League was broadcast in radio, I used to ask her secretly to know which team would win. As she woke up from sleep, I curiously went to her. Some days she could tell, some days not. On the day when she told me that Mohammedan Sporting Club would win, I bet Taka 10 with Babu of next door, who was the supporter of Abahoni Club and told him, the result of today's match is Mohammedan-1, Abahoni-0. Bate. Babu surely lost in the bet.

Abbu called Akhi and took her on his lap and said, mum, you took my job and in exchange, saved my life. Now, tell me what should I do? Akhi said, Abbu, wait till

morning, I will tell you. Akhi told me in the evening, I would have to call the crow tonight. She went to bed early that night, but was suffering very much at her sleep. She was tossing restlessly and continuously in sleep.

When she woke up in the morning she was very happy.

She said to dad, Abbu, you should write a book. Textbook of college. It will bring huge cash. Abbu followed her advice. He wrote a textbook of physics with huge attention. Physics for Higher Secondary Students, by A. H. Khan, it brought good luck to him. Publishers came to our house to buy his manuscript with Taka 3,00,000. We became rich and went to Dhaka, leaving the mofussil town.

The whole family was driven by the dreams of Akhi. She told me, brother, I saw you became a famous engineer. You were very famous in America. I saw you working there with a computer. From now on, you have to attentive in your study. If you do so, you will be first at your class. Following her advice I was working hard to do well. I stood first regularly in my class of Dhaka Laboratory School.

Relatives gathered at our residence asked Akhi if she could dream for them. Our Younger Uncle asked, Akhi, I bought a lottery ticket, Kindly have a dream that I have got Taka 1,00,000.

One day Akhi told me, brother, I dreamt a lot, but do not tell all of those, because the dreams I told have become real, others not. That's why I only tell about the sweet ones, not about the bad ones.

Do you see bad dreams also?

I will not answer. If I tell you, those bad dreams can be real.

There was a discussion in the office about the withdrawal of the suspension order of dad's job. It needed that someone should follow-up the process. That time, as Abbu was very busy in writing a manuscript of the textbook of Chemistry for Higher Secondary level, Ammu had to communicate to the office. Akhi was a student of class four. She could not tolerate Ammu's absence. I asked her, why? In answer, she said, I had a bad dream. But I do not want to see it happening in reality. Ammu, very often, had to remain outside for dad's purpose. Abbu was very isolated. He was dependent on Younger aunt for having food and other silly things.

Akhi, that time, could not tolerate aunt at all. She told Abbu to appoint a maidservant and tell aunt to leave our residence. That time, I could not understand how aunt could know what Akhi told to dad.

Akhi often quarreled with aunt. I remained busy with my study and did not want to think anything but my education. One day Akhi said to me, tell aunt to leave our residence, otherwise I will die.

I told Ammu what Akhi informed me. She was ready to go outside. Ammu wept hearing this. She had a very bad quarrel with aunt and slapped her. Then Dad physically assaulted mum. I put on pants and shirt with a hurry and left for school. Returning from school I discovered that everything had been finished. Akhi lied on bed. A sheet of cloth was over her body. Ammu remained senseless. I took the cloth of her body and saw that the whole body of her was blue in pain.

I do not know how Akhi died. Our family was ransacked. Mum was admitted to Pabna Mental Hospital. Dad admitted me to a hostel. His circulation of textbooks fell rapidly. Aunt gave birth to a daughter. Her colour was also black. She also had big eyes; she looked like Akhi at her childhood. But she never was Akhi.

I went to Pabna to see mum several times. Sometimes she could recognize me. When she could, she said, giving birth of a daughter is not all; she never will be a dreamer. That girl moved the whole family forward to prosperity, my daughter, and your sister, my dear Akhi. I will seek justice of her murder. I burst into tears, because I was more close to her than mum. Such a good pair of brother and sister can very rarely be found. My sister- the dreamer.

There should be an investigation of her death, I wish. But it happened long ago. Even there was no general diary in the police station. Digging out the grave, nothing can be discovered except earth. Other than that, mum promised, touching the head of dad, that she should not ask police to the incident. It would be a great scandal.

Defaming stories regarding our family would be published in the newspapers. I wish I could return to the residence of Rayganj. Wish to lie on mat over the roof with Akhi. Akhi would again dream. The dream will bring a happy conclusion to our family. That everyone can live happily and peacefully as is seen in the fairy tales. But that's not possible. We killed her, she, who could dream. There will be no trial of her killing and if so what's the benefit! We could not find her alive. Her dreams were very indispensable for forwarding the family. She dreamt not for herself, but for all of us.

Translated from the Begali by Anwarul Hoque

**One Who Could Dream* is a non-political family-based human-interest story. But the readers who know the political history of Bangladesh may find its similarity with a tragic incident of Bangladesh. Some military soldiers killed the father of the nation and first President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and later on a law barred the trial of the killers. This story raises voices against killings and urges for the trials of every crime against humanity.

After 34 years of that killing, finally the killers were brought into justice.

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Newspaper Column

The letter that did not reach to Mum*

Dear Mum,

Hope that you are well. I am really worried to know that your suffering due to gastric pain has been increased. Don't you take your meal regularly? You need to consult with a physician. If it would possible to visit a doctor by anyhow saving money! Why do you think to engage Amina here in a job? She should continue her study, I want. Then she can manage a good job. She will not be able to bear the heavy working load here. Again, you should not think of my sufferings here due to heavy load. I have accustomed. I can.

I am sending Taka 300 this month. Discussion is going on for increasing salary from the next month. Then I would be able to send more money to you.

How has Akkas grown up? Does he say anything about her sister? I will go to home if Eid holiday is available. What gift should I buy for him, can you give any suggestion?

Does Dad still want to marry again? Here we have an excellent female pious. I will bring an amulet for your enchanting husband. You just have to put it under his pillow secretly.

Mum, what did you write in your last letter? What have you hinted? Who did tell you all these stories? Where do I have so much time to make fun? I go out in the morning with two breads and some fried vegetables in a tiffin-box. I have to work all the day at factory. What a huge light there, you cannot imagine. If you see one day, your eyes would be dazed. It is I that can work there. Then there is only work and work. Like a machine I have to do a lot. No leisure. No way even to talk with other girls. It is not allowed to go to bathroom without emergency call. When I return at night, there is no other thought than to reach home.

Mum, do you remark how the flock of sheep grazing in the Khejuravita land of Munshi just to the west of our residence? Do you see, how cowboys bring and take them to home? No sheep ups head to see where cowboys are taking them, what their way is. One sheep puts its head to others body and moves forward blindly. We also walk in the road like a flock of sheep. When the shift ends at factory, we come out with a hurry. One comes close to other, so close that one touches the body of other. Then we walk like dumb, not looking around. Spoiled boys tease a lot; we do not hear. They say to themselves, hear by themselves, who cares? After returning, there is cooking. I have to go out to buy vegetables and groceries.

Works are also in home. In some days there is cloth washing.

Where do I get extra time?

Even till today, I never go to cinema.

Yes, I will not tell a lie to you. One day the elder brother of Kulsum came. Along with him Kulsum and I went to market. He bought a watch for me telling that the job in garment is related to time. How it can be possible for you to go to and return from factory in time without having a watch. I sincerely forbid him to buy it. He was obstinate. I did not say more till he stayed. After his departure I returned the watch to Kulsum. Why do I accept a watch from an outsider like him?

Do we need a watch? We know how each moments pass in the factory. We do not need to calculate days. We do not need calendar to understand how months are passing. We just

understand, today is heavy rainfall; we have to wet in rain to reach the factory. Heavy cold today; it is an urgent necessity to buy a shawl this year.

You should not think of me. I will not get married all at a once and leave you all in a deep sea of uncertainty. I will serve as many days as I can. Amina would finish her study, Akkas would be grown up, and do you think these days of miseries will stay for forever?

Your loving Asma.

The letter was in the polythene bag at her hand. There was a tiffin box beside her body. Perhaps, she brought iftar in the box.

There were spelling mistakes. Mistakes were even in sentence construction. No matter. The writer could express her feeling in the letter in an arranged way. The polythene bag, the tiffin box and the letter were unimpaired.

Only the letter writer is no more. She was tramped under the feet, now motionless. It is impossible to look at her face.

One can have a nice t-shirt with just Taka 30 (40 cents). It would be smart enough if you have Taka 50 (70 cents). The price of a shirt is Taka 100-125 (less than 2 dollars). The revolution in ready-made garment sector can be traced. When we buy shirts of a brand company in abroad and find in the label 'made in Bangladesh', we feel proud. The indicator of economy is on rise; the foreign exchange reserve is in better condition. Satisfaction is everywhere.

Just one extra alternative stair and an extra key for the lock of collapsible gate of factory cannot be made available. And there rings the fire alarm!

Numbers of Asma have lied in a row.

She could not put the letter she wrote to her Mum into a letter box.

*This is one of the articles published as a regular weekly satire column in the daily Prothom Alo.

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The Mermaid

1

One night, I wept, why the moon floated on the water! The salted body of the sea lost the drop of my tears! Look, you need your own sky to weep. I cannot cry because I don't have a window. Where can I get a ventilator in this house of water?

Why did you teach me the lessons of cry? Today the sky is full of cloud and the sea is restless.

Look at the oyster-girls! How happy they are with their savings in the wombs. They are like green moss, floating pleasure!

If the moon rises tonight! If the water trembles like the eyelids of a girl!

The salt of the sea is the pearl of my soul; there are clouds in my throat.

But I don't have any window to sit aside and to weep.

2

It's a joke: look, I have breasts. But if you cast a net in the water, you will get only scales of fish. I don't have a lung in my body, but a gill instead and a world of water. Many of the youthful young men, driven by the new water of the body, came close to me, I confess that it was my fault.

I spread my body to dry in the moonlight. The trapped heron got nothing under my navel. There is no such adulterer on the land to sleep with a fish. The fury of the teeth and nails of the unsuccessful young men was washed away. Not even the fish-boys did come! Probably they got the smell of men and were frightened.

Fright? Rather awe! The blood of the fish is also red, but we never met together.

Under the moon, today I hear: some hermaphrodites are laughing. Tears come out from their laugh!

3

One day you told me the tales of the city. For a long time, I have been staring at the horizon where the evening-lights are enkindled.

The solemn carts carrying salt go to the city, I watch. I loved to hear the tales about your girls. They have long hair decorated with the fish-bones.

One day the sea was calm. I watched my face on the mirror of water. I

had been staring at my image until wave came to break it.
How happy the girls of the city are! Their images never break. The yellow light of the evening falls upon the buildings of the city and your girls begin to comb their hair. But look at the sea, the evenings are so lonely here.
Images break down. Do your city-girls know the purple colour of the sky means pain? The tales of the city are very sweet and one day you told me the story of the city. I have kept a bone in my wing, so that any of your girls dress her hair with this bone someday.

4

Through the window of the stone-palace, the moon in the sky is seen.
Tonight there flows high tide in the sea. The moon is powdered with the foam of waves. The fish-girls are running over the peak of wave-hills. They are laughing forgetting the teeth of the sharks.
The water has got no chains.
Why am I in this city? This building and cage of bricks have locked me.
Oh wooden door, please allow me to get out, freed me from the golden chain.
This milky white softy bed is valuable, but this not a bed of water.
The artistry of the cot is useless, unendurable!
The coral and the conch in the show-case don't have any problem, the colorful fishes in the aquarium are laughing, they don't have any memory.
Only my eyes have salt.
I cannot forget the water-room, water-games, water-music and the childhood. If I collect all my tears, this house will be washed away!

Translated from the Bengali by Rehnuma Sazzad
