



## Transmigration

Farzana Quader

Subodh maneuvered his way through the pile of cycles and scooters crowding the narrow alley, stepped over the stream of slush at the dingy entranceway, walked up the dark flight of stairs, and entered the large hallway of his office breathing heavily. Pushing his chair back, he straightened the blue and white towel that covered the backrest and then plonked himself on the seat with a sigh of relief. Turning his face upwards, he stared for a while at the fan whirring in the high ceiling of the decrepit old building. The sweat that dripped from his face, neck and hands began to dry slowly.

It was half past ten by the office clock, hung on the bare plastered wall. This was his usual time of arrival, although office hours were from 10 to 5. As he took up the file on the table and idly leafed

through the pages, tea was served by the 12-year-old Mondal, from the neighbouring tea-shop, in a tiny earthen pot. The owner maintained their individual accounts on a monthly basis. Subodh's job was to record the countless pipes that were used for sewerage jobs. He had to keep track of the work being done in drains in various parts of the city.

The three chairs beside him were still vacant. From the Despatch section, the voices of Nirmal babu and Sharmila-di could be heard hotly debating the latest gaffe of the ruling political party. Sumit was making plans for a getaway to a seaside resort near Digha with his friends, over the phone. The other office staff in that large hallway were yet to make their appearance. Many of them took the local train from the districts and arrived around noon.

He had got used to his usual routine. He was shaken out of bed promptly at 6.30 in the morning with a stentorian cry, "Get up, it's getting late, you have to reach Tapu to school. You know their principal is very strict, . . . she was marked late the other day. . . get up, get up, get up. . ." Unsparring and unceasingly the voice droned on. Gulping his morning cup of tea placed unceremoniously before him, he escorted his daughter to school. He was in favour of her travelling by the school bus, but his wife disagreed because it would mean more expenses. Besides, she said, the school bus would take the poor girl all around town and wear her out by the end of it.

The nagging continued as he quickly glanced through the news headlines, "Don't forget to bring some bitter gourd and shrimps from the bazaar. I'll cook brinjal curry with shrimps tomorrow. Oh yes! Tapu's friend Maya is spending the weekend with us as her parents are accompanying her younger brother to his boarding school in the hills . . . she doesn't want to stay at home with her grandmother, Maya wants to stay with Tapu. ..Maya's parents are very rich, you know----- if we give only fish, it won't do . . .now don't shame me in front of outsiders by bringing in the low-priced smaller variety of fish Bring a kilo of mutton instead . . .I'll cook some tempting *kasha* mutton curry ...it's been months since we've had mutton . . . Tapu loves it too. . ." it went on and on.

On his way back from Tapu's school, he headed straight for the market to purchase the daily rations and once a month for groceries. After that he rushed home and took his bath while Nomita prepared his morning meal. He devoured it quickly and set out for work.

When Subodh returned in the evening, his wife would relate to him all the neighbourhood gossip as he heartily chewed the *beguni-piyaji*, the deep fried snacks that she prepared for tea, with puffed rice.. Urged by Nomita, he spent the greater part of the evening helping his daughter with her studies. Later he surfed through the different news channels on television. He couldn't remember when he had last read a book. It irritated him not just a trifle, when some people in the neighbourhood got together to raise funds for starting a literary club. They asked him to be the President of the club. Ha, ha, ha, as if he had nothing better to do. They even dug out some relics of his poems published in 'little magazines' some decades ago. The foolishness of the young. He refused flatly. On Sunday evenings, he looked forward to a few rounds of drinks and a game of cards with some neighbours. Nomita made a distasteful face and turned the other way in bed. But he would not give it up, it was the only time he had for himself! Subodh had got fairly used to his predictable life

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But he had no inkling of the surprise awaiting him that fine Monday morning. The day began in the usual manner. On his way to work he got up from the rear entrance of bus number 221. And whom should he see? There was Hrishikesh propped up on a seat at the front. The latter had seen him too. They exchanged smiles and Subodh moved up to him.

'How're you, Hrishikesh? It's been years since I saw you.'

Hrishikesh replied, "I'm well, and you?"

'Oh yes, everything's fine.'

'Kids?'

‘Yes, a daughter. How about you?’ Subodh asked in turn.

‘No, I didn’t marry.’

‘You’re the same Rishi. What’re you doing?’

‘Teaching and writing,’ answered Hrishikesh. ‘Are you still working at the Municipal Corporation?’

‘Yes, I do. Have you taken up apartments? Or do you still live in that boarding house, near Lotus cinema?’

‘Oh, yes, I’m at the same place. I’ve come to meet a publisher here.

Bye Subodh, I’ve reached my stop.’

‘Come over to my house sometime,’ Subodh called after him feebly.

As Hrishikesh got down, he smiled at his friend through the window, waved gently and walked off.

After Hrishikesh walked away, Subodh too got down midway instead of heading to his place of work. He walked into a little park and sat on a bench staring vacantly into space. The sky drained of its colour and the world seemed empty. Strange! He had not even spared a thought for his classmate from college since they had drifted apart fourteen years ago. Yet today! At the sight of him, something seemed to stir in that clerk’s soul of his. He began to draw deep draughts of air. The wind rushed in and hit the pipes of his airways. He choked on the mud and filth that had clogged the vents. It was painful.

Suddenly Subodh didn’t want to count drains anymore! --- even if it fetched him, the security of a government job, a regular salary, domestic comforts, the new flat of which he was the proud owner. No! Hrishikesh had none of these. He lived in a dirty old ‘Mess’ and subsisted on the meagre uncertain earnings from tutoring students and freelancing for struggling publishing houses. He survived on unhygienic, scalded food from the pavement eateries. There was no one to look after his household chores, bring him a hot cup of tea or run up to him crying *baba* endearingly after a hard day’s work..

Touched as if with a live wire, Subodh froze into stillness as two imaginary reels played out the contrasting pictures of their lives. Yet he questioned, persistently, resisting. not allowing the mud to be sucked out by the wind blowing in, that was now threatening to engulf his very being: How was Hrishikesh's life better than his? He didn't want to be like him . . .What had his friend's uncompromising ways, his political ideals, got him? No one ever published his writings, he didn't get two decent cooked meals. Nomita and Hrishikesh had loved each other, but the latter couldn't afford to marry her. And she had ended up marrying his own close friend!

Like an animal in its death throes, Subodh thrashed backwards and forwards. It was like plunging into an abyss. The well-planned fabric of his life was falling apart. How he wished to trade all his acquisitions gained so meticulously over the years for that careless abandon. Falling low on his knees, he looked up at the wide sky as if in supplication to an imaginary God:

“Take away from me this name Subodh, which means ‘the obedient’!

Take away all my possessions too.

Love Nomita as you used to;

But give me back my soul

Change me to Hrishikesh, the aloof, the mystic.”

Slowly agonizingly, minute by minute with each motion of the clock, the sun's blazing hues turned from east to west. Subodh sat silent rebellious resistant. And then as the day ended, he woke up as if from a daze. Remembering his daughter and wife were waiting for him, he set forth to renew his old routine. And he walked with his back to the sun. To the call of the plains. Homeward bound!

## **Farzana Quader**

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