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Incognita

When Mohammad Raees of our village came to ask if he could make a telephone call from the office, I merely pushed the phone towards him with my left hand, without raising my eyes from the file. I didn't hear the name of the person Raees asked for on the telephone; however, when he repeated, "But this was the number she gave me," some unknown reason prompted me to note down the number on the paper lying before me. Replacing the receiver, Raees looked at me guiltily. Amused by his comical expression, I said, "Try dialing again."

I watched Raees's face as he started dialing again after opening his diary to confirm the number. Meanwhile, the guilty expression had vanished from his face. A moment later, he said, in embarrassment, "Sorry, I'm very sorry. The call has been diverted to you again."

When Raees began to wring his hands after replacing the receiver, it was I who said, to save him from awkwardness, "The person who gave you the number must have made a mistake, or you have noted it wrongly. So, who are you trying to call?"

"You wouldn't know the person."

"Who answered the call?"

"A lady."

Though slightly embarrassed at mentioning the "lady," Raees informed me in good humor that her voice was extremely sweet. Rather like Tripti Mitra's.

I laughed out loud. "You are well acquainted with Tripti Mitra's voice on the telephone, it seems?"

Raees guffawed, too. He said, "No, why would that be? Haven't I heard her plays on Kolkata radio?"

I agreed with Raees. Once heard, the voice of Tripti or Shaoli Mitra cannot be forgotten. Observing that Raees had let slip the opportunity to converse with a lady with such a voice, I said, "It's hopeless; you can't accomplish anything at all."

Raees was embarrassed. Eventually, he said, "I'll take your leave, brother."

I, too, had been hoping that Raees would leave soon. The telephone number was staring me in the eye. I didn't know if Raees had seen me writing the number on a piece of paper; even if he had, he wouldn't tease me too much about it. He was much younger than I was, but would address me as "brother" because we hailed from the same village. He taught now at a college in Comilla. When he visited Dhaka, he would see me at least once and call me every now and then.

After Raees had left, I felt quite amused. I'm quick to avail myself of any opportunity to chat with women on the telephone. Although I can't quite offer a detailed explanation for this, I can say that the thought of whispering into the ear of someone who is somewhere far away, through this inanimate instrument, produces an extraordinary thrill. When old Dr. Muhammad Enamul Haq named the telephone a *dur-alapani*, or "long-distance communicator," in his attempt to popularize Bengali definitions of English words, I think nobody was happier than I. When he was young, he certainly did not have the opportunity to converse on the telephone. If he had, this incomparable name would have become ours earlier.

Let us return to what I was saying. While I was thinking of a couple of points with which to engage Tripti in an interesting conversation on the telephone, my senior officer sent across an urgent file. I received two telephone calls as well. Neither call was for me. One was for my peon, the other for a colleague from a different section. The peon could not take the call because I had sent him downstairs, but the colleague chattered for a full fifteen, perhaps twenty, minutes in a pure Barisal accent, on subjects such as the sale and purchase of land, his niece's wedding, and his son's job interview. Trying to concentrate on the file marked URGENT, I found my colleague's Barisal vocabulary excessively jarring to the ears. I put down my pen and sat in silence. When the conversation was over, I opened the file again, only to find that it was necessary to discuss the matter with my senior officer before presenting my conclusions. By then, Tripti-or-Shaoli had vanished from my consciousness; when she reappeared, it was almost two o'clock.

Glancing again at the number I had got from Raees, I smiled to myself as I dialed one digit at a time. I think I have an inborn affinity with this instrument. And yet I am an utterly rustic person, far from being accustomed to the sight of a telephone from birth. The first time I ever saw one was when I was a student of Class Eight or Nine. And I actually used a telephone only after completing college. That, too, after I arrived in Dhaka. How my hands would tremble at first, and even my throat would feel parched. I would speak in a very loud voice. Lest I hold the receiver upside down, I would remind myself that one must keep one's mouth close to the end of the receiver attached to the wire. When I consider why the telephone should cast such a deep shadow over the life of one such as myself, I feel it's because of this congenital affinity. If I tell an anecdote, you will

understand what I mean. Since my wife will not read this, I state fearlessly in writing that, before marriage, we used to engage in many telephone conversations. Even after marriage, I have engaged in a few long-distance talks that have come close and then floated away like flotsam in a tide. I have no regrets about them. One of my tele-mates called me a few days back to ask how my chats with beautiful strangers were going. Without pausing to think, I said, “Wonderful. I can’t leave the throne vacant after all.” I think she was upset to hear my answer.

Long live the telephone, known in refined language as the long-distance communicator. Dear departed Dr. Muhammad Enamul Haq, you might seem fearsome to students of the Bengali department on account of your grammar textbook and your history of literature. But you are a man after my own heart for coining this term. I shall now use your long-distance communicator to speak to Tripti Mitra or Shaoli Mitra. Please grant me your blessings.

The phone rang just twice before Raees’s Tripti-or-Shaoli-Mitra answered it. “Hello.”

“Is this 654321?”

“Yes.”

I suddenly couldn’t remember what topic of conversation I had planned to raise after Tripti-or-Shaoli said yes. As I groped for words—groped all around the receiver, all around the room, in all the leaves of the deodar tree beside the window—the voice at the other end asked in considerable surprise, “Who are you—whom do you want to speak with?”

“No, I mean, no woman could be expected to answer the phone at the number I have dialed.”

Exactly, exactly as in the play *Aparajita*, Tripti-or-Shaoli laughed in a husky voice. “But the number you mentioned is correct.”

Summoning up a catch in my throat, as if I had never been so surprised in my life, I said, “That’s what I think, too, but how is it possible?”

“Quite a while ago, a gentleman had also called, asking for this number. Was it you who made that call?”

I hastily replied, “No, no, why would it be me?”

“Oh-oh-oh.”

From Tripti-or-Shaoli’s expression of surprise as she said “Oh-oh-oh,” I struggled for a while to assess her age; finally, I blurted out, “The sound of your voice is exquisite, I must say.”

I thought my comment would have pleased her. But I could not understand what she felt; I only heard her say, “Is that so?”

“I’m merely speaking the truth.”

Tripti-or-Shaoli gave a small laugh, followed by an even smaller reply, “How would I know?”

I was looking for just such a cue, one I could build on to extend the conversation. As soon as I heard her say, “How would I know?” I replied, “Perhaps you are not meant to know, but we listeners can tell.”

This time she laughed rather loudly. I sensed that my words had struck home. I have seen that when words are appealing, both parties can effortlessly carry on chatting for twenty to thirty minutes even while asserting that there is nothing to be said. I immediately began to prepare myself. And just then, the voice at the other end said, "I'll ring off today."

"Will you?"

"Can you tell me the time?"

"Twelve past two."

Tripti-or-Shaoli let out what sounded like a scream of pain. Before I could ask what had happened so suddenly, or why she had cried out, I heard her say, simply, "Goodbye."

She had barely pronounced the word when I heard the click of the receiver being replaced. It suggested that somebody had turned up or that she was almost caught out, or that at around two o'clock, she had some urgent task she had forgotten or become confused about in the course of our conversation.

I knew the number, of course. Should I call her again? There was no hope of her calling me back. She didn't know my number!

No, I made no other calls that day. Not the next day, nor the day after. The root of the matter lay elsewhere. After I left the office, I don't know whether the peon, while arranging the things on my table, had tucked Tripti-or-Shaoli's phone number away under some papers or thrown it in the wastebasket; but I did not see it when I came to work the next day. I remembered that I was to make a call that day, but not finding the number within easy reach, I couldn't, nor under the pressure of work did I find time to hunt for the number. At the end of the day, I asked the peon, "Where have you thrown the slip of paper on which I had noted a phone number yesterday?"

The peon simply could not recall the paper I was referring to. In a very calm voice, I just said, "Before discarding papers and other such things, you must show them to me."

Coming out of the office, I felt it was better that I had not called that day. It was very simple: if my words had moved Tripti-or-Shaoli's heart, she would surely have awaited my phone call today; and if they had not moved her, she would have forgotten them. Perhaps she had spoken to me civilly because it was the first occasion, but there was no guarantee that she would do so on the second day as well. In this situation, it was necessary to let a few days pass for me to gain greater worth in her eyes.

On the third day, when Tripti-or-Shaoli's phone number peeped out from amidst a pile of assorted papers, the urge for communication skyrocketed. I had not yet decided how to begin the conversation, but I had decided to disconnect the call if she did indeed speak harshly to me. Replacing the receiver would not harm me in any way. She knew nothing about me: neither my name, place of work, nor my telephone number. Hence, if she were to swear at telephone pests—labeling them bastards or

swines, demanding to know if they didn't have mothers and sisters of their own—I would digest the insults myself, with not a soul in the world to bear witness. I would remain respectable in the eyes of my wife and children. But how extraordinary! Tripti-or-Shaoli was not at all annoyed at receiving my call. When I reminded her of our previous conversation, she answered, with the same theatrical laugh, “Yes, I remember.”

“How amazing, you have a very sharp memory, I must say!”

“Is that so?”

“Certainly. Otherwise, how would you remember all the things we had said the other day?”

“Yes, that is true!”

Immediately, a way of pleasing Tripti-or-Shaoli occurred to me. I said, “You must have been a very bright student, but I don't know whether you still are.”

“Your assumption is correct, but that was ages ago.”

Before I could ask what “ages ago” implied or what she used to study at the time, she asked, in a very natural manner, “Why did you call today?”

I was not ready for such a question. When I laughed to hide my discomfort, she asked, “What is it that makes you laugh?”

Whether this was a reproach or wounded pride, I could not comprehend. How could I tell her, or explain to her, that speaking to women on the telephone was one of my few pleasures, that I had been rather eager to speak to her? Finally, I blurted out the truth.

“There's quite a resemblance between the sound of your voice and the voices of Tripti Mitra and Shaoli Mitra.”

“What? Did you say Tripti Mitra and Shaoli Mitra?”

“Yes, the two renowned theatre personalities of Bengal! The mother-daughter duo.”

“I know, I know. Tripti Mitra is the wife of Shambu Mitra; she hails from Thakurgaon in Dinajpur. What an extraordinary artiste, and my voice is supposed to resemble hers? What nonsense!”

“I speak the truth.”

“No, no.”

“Yes, yes.”

From “no-no” and “yes-yes,” we slipped into an exchange of no and yes until the entire matter struck us as extreme. It was I who broke the spell. “I think we are behaving like children.”

Startled, Tripti-or-Shaoli paused abruptly. But only for an instant. After that, when she burst into laughter—people of eminence would describe her laugh in formal language as bursting the floodgates of mirth—I shouted to stop her, saying, “What's this—what's the matter with you?”

She stopped laughing and replied, “There is a child in every human being.”

My mind failed to grasp her meaning. I thought that I might as well ask her, but before I could pose the question, she asked anxiously, "What is the time?"

"It is quarter to one."

"Oh, OK."

From her answer, it was clear that there was no cause for anxiety. I was about to initiate a new line of conversation by simply asking, "On the last occasion, too, why did you disconnect the line after asking the time?" But just then, I saw the chairman's special peon, Mannan, standing before me.

"What is it, Mannan?"

"Sir sends you his greetings."

Signaling with my hand that I would be coming shortly, I told Tripti-or-Shaoli about Sir's message and put the phone down. When I returned to my room after a discussion with the chairman, it was almost two o'clock. Immediately, I called Tripti-or-Shaoli again. But this time the voice that answered seemed to belong to a maidservant, who informed me that Begum sahib was in the outer room and would not take the call.

I was not offended by the maidservant's response. A person might be busy, I thought, or at such a time a guest might need to be entertained in the outer room, and so on. Deciding that I would call her the following day and ask about her eagerness to know the time, I wound up my office work for the day and went home. Nobody could tell how much turmoil that question was causing in my mind. I was affectionate to my children, amorous to my wife; and through my entire period of wakefulness, as I fondly cherished Tripti-or-Shaoli's words, I saw beauty in all things in the world, the entire universe brimming over with sweetness, and in the kite stuck in a tree branch, I saw the supreme beauty of the universe. The sorrow of it belonged to the person who had lost the kite; but I couldn't be certain that the joy of it belonged to me. Today, I would adorn Tripti-or-Shaoli with a new name. What name might that be, what name would render this unseen woman romantic to my imagination? As I thought about these things, suddenly a name—"Anamika," the Nameless One—presented itself to me, concentrating within itself all the minutest joys of the universe, an image of complete bliss.

Today when I called, not at twelve or one in the afternoon but at around ten o'clock, joy choked my throat when Tripti-or-Shaoli answered upon the very first ring. But at the very outset, she wanted to know, "Who is speaking?"

"Me. It's me."

"But who are you?"

I was utterly baffled. Counting today, I had called four times; I had not needed to mention my name on the other two occasions besides the first. At that moment, the fact that I couldn't ask for Mrs. So-and-so or say that I

wanted to speak to her seemed to me the most dangerous situation I had encountered in the course of my extensive perambulations on the path of long-distance communication. In a hesitant tone, I answered, “You see, I don’t know her name, but I have spoken to her several times before this.”

“Oh, I understand.”

Tripti-or-Shaoli let out a long sigh. Then there was silence. Unable to guess if she had rung off, I said, “Hello?”

“Ji, you had been speaking to my mother.”

“Your mother?”

Amazement had rendered me speechless. Mother and daughter had identical voices, just like Tripti and Shaoli Mitra!

“Yes, my mother. Because our voices are similar, many people mistake us for each other.”

“Yes, Kolkata’s Tripti Mitra and her daughter Shaoli Mitra’s voices are also impossible to distinguish unless one is told who it is.”

“I know that.”

With extreme deference, I asked, “Is your mother not in?”

“She is.”

“Is it possible to call her to the phone?”

“No. Ma does not speak to anyone today.”

I was caught in a dilemma, not sure if I should ask why she didn’t speak to anyone that day or if I should put the receiver down. I could sense that a strange sound was coming from my throat. Understanding the situation, Shaoli came to my rescue. She informed me, “It’s because my father went missing on this day, that’s why.”

“When, when did he go missing?”

“In 1971. Baba went to work, never to return. As Baba would go off duty at two o’clock, Ma waits in the outer room from two o’clock onwards.”

Translation from Bengali by Radha Chakravarty