

The Intriguing Melody

(Tale of the Old land)

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There was barely any warning before the dark fluid monster rushed through the pitch-black night flashing its killer claws. The village, located in a flood prone corner of Bangladesh, was suddenly pulled into life from the uncanny quietness that shrouded it.

Sitting on his porch folklore singer Nijam was trying out different tunes on his two-string, keeping it low. He was the one to notice it first. A singer and philosopher, nothing in life stroke him as very important or serious. He called out for his wife in a rather trifling voice, "Simul's mom, there comes the water. The dam must have given away."

Nuri couldn't sleep. She had miserable headache since evening. She was lying on the bed messaging her throbbing head. Hearing the warning, she instantly jumped out of the bed and screamed at the top of her voice, "Flood! Flood! Get up Shimul. The water is here."

One scream proved enough. The village woke up in a blink of eye. Everybody knew the flood was coming. The only hope was the dam. It wasn't anything fancy. An old, shaky structure but still it was there. They feared often that the ferocious current would blow the poor thing away in one moment's forceful push and rush toward the village with all its might. Tonight, was the night. The dam broke; the deadly sharks swam with their wavy, smooth bodies, flashing their sharp bloodthirsty liquid teeth.

The first burst of sweeping water flooded Nijam's yard. Hypnotic, Nijam observed – O' Mother Nature! Look at the

power, the strength and the unimaginable beauty you hold! Cold water touched him, his cloths get soaked, and yet he couldn't move. He just sat there with his mind spilling with heart wrenching fillings.

Nuri was a smart woman. She quickly realized the graveness of the situation. Forcing Shimul out of bed, she packed up some rice and lintel in a jute bag and some cloths in another. Handing over the cloths to Shimul she fetched out the money that she was saving in a small cavity inside a bamboo stick.

The whole village was drowned in chaos, as if the fearsome dacoits had hit. The water level was rising fast, the current becoming forceful, the yards of the mud houses going under, the clusters of paddy drowning. The numerous, untimely call for prayers, a traditional response to disasters, echoed the air; the neighbor's infant baby cried with her lungs out; people cautioned each other. All these noises were easily buried by the ominous howling of the flooding water.

Holding her daughter's hand, Nuri stepped out on the yard. She stared at her husband softly. "Let's go Simul's dad. We need to move out before it's too late. Water is going to rise. Everything will float away. Come on, let's go."

Nijam had unconditional love for his wife. He often wondered how this beautiful, quiet woman managed the innumerable issues with the daily life so calmly, never bothering him with anything. He followed his wife and daughter quietly.

Dozens of families had gathered together in knee-deep water. The village school located south on a hill was less likely to get underwater. That was their destination. Before they started, they checked for the last time to ensure all the family members were with them. The men shouted, children cried, elderly screamed, poultry cackled and cattle lowed. Once a head count confirmed everybody's presence, a few young men with lanterns in their hands led the group ahead. They all talked, about the flood, about the houses they left behind, about the unripe

clusters of the paddy; the elderly even got into an argument over the correct time line about another big flood in the past. Nijam, following the group, oblivious to his surroundings, unmindfully played his fingers over the wires of his two-string, ding...ding...ding...!

The schoolhouse was a small mud structure with hay roof. Everyday a few kids gathered here with their slates and chinks while an otherwise useless man with an S.S.C. certification taught them how to read Bengali alphabets in a high, rhythmic chorus. There was a promise for the school to be extended, more rooms, blackboards, and free supplies for the kids. It proved to be another hollow promise of Chairman Hedayet Ali, who never ran out of excuses to divert people's attention from it.

This unfortunate, barely standing structure called the schoolhouse became the final shelter for the group, a few families with too many members. The clouds packed the sky; wind pushed harder; current became stronger. The river spilled out with even further vigor, the earth sunk, the poor villagers were reduced to bare minimum existence.

Nijam maintained a distance from the crowd. Shimul flanked him, quiet as ever. Like her father she spoke less, preferred solitude. Staying nearby, Nuri conversed whisperingly to Ali's wife Jinnat, keeping an eye on her husband and daughter.

The families sat scattered inside the schoolhouse, a fog of melancholy bore its imprint on their faces. The initial excitement was gone; the thought of future shrouded their minds. The children, restless and hungry, cried sporadically as the helpless mothers scolded them to quietness; the able bodied small but muscular fathers stared at the deep dark circulating water with expressionless eyes as they puffed frequently on their handmade cigarettes and breathed out the cloud of poisonous smoke.

Umor Mia had enough with such strenuous silence. He

threw the cigarette stub in the water, watched it driven away quickly. The rising water level couldn't hide the inevitable from his sharp eyes. The devil was stepping up to them, slowly but surely. He yelled like a lonely midnight fox, "Guys, what's the use of sitting like dead? Can't you see the water level rising? Do you want to get buried here with your families? "

He glared at everyone. Some of the men moved uneasily, their faces hardly visible in the weak light of the lanterns, expressions still hidden. The children watched keenly giving the pointless crying a break. Umor enjoyed the attention. He yelled with even more enthusiasm, "Get up guys! Let's get out of here before the water reaches us."

He however restrained from giving any specific solution. The water level was now at least up to the chest of a grown man. It was next to impossible to take the kids and the elderly to safety through such deep water.

The silence prevailed. Ignored and irked Umor burst out, "What's the matter? Why don't you say anything?"

Umor had a reputation as a thief. He had never been caught but sudden presence of wealth in his otherwise poverty ridden dwelling gave people ideas.

Taleb, Roushan, Samad, and Abed – none of them liked Umor much. They themselves weren't any saints. In fact, they frequently stole bags of rice from their employer's storage whenever the opportunity knocked. But yet, they were not considered thieves.

"Shut up, bloody thief," yelled back Taleb. "Let the water rise. Who hasn't sinned has nothing to worry about."

Umor objected vigorously, "Don't dare call me a thief. Did you ever see me stealing?"

Taleb shouted back, "Who in the village doesn't know that you are a thief? What's there to see here? When we have hard time feeding our families, you are having three hot meals! Where do you get so much supply?"

"That's not your headache. I take from the stinking rich,

the ones that suck our blood to build their empires. There's nothing wrong in robbing them." On the spur of moment Umor did not realize what he was saying.

Samad chuckled. "There you go - a full confession finally. You son of a thief, keep your big mouth sealed."

"Watch your mouth, Samad. Don't you dare swear at me!"

"Oh, no? What are you going to do...huh...?"

He couldn't finish his words before Umor threw his body on him in a mad dash. Grabbing each other by the torso they rolled on the dirt floor, growling in rage, as the rest hesitantly watched the two men take it on each other, a few half heartedly attempting to separate them. The dozing children startled back into their crying feat, the women screamed, the elderly offered their trembling advice; Nijam Baul touched his strings – ding...dong, as the rushing river continued in its aggression.

Nijam really wanted to put his mind into completing the unfinished tune, but he could barely concentrate. His mind was restless. The endless gatherings of the dark, cottony clouds had surprisingly allowed a few stars to glitter through, the random striking of the lightning brought in the fearsome thunders, the darkness to the brightness, the silence to the deafening noise, all these collectively blew his mind away – he saw, he heard, his mind filled with the beauty and glamour of this mother earth, of that infinite sky! There was music in the water; there was music in the clouds; there was music in the stars! Oh, the kind one, the great one, what a wonder have you created! It was the right moment to observe, to feel, not to waste time on trivial music.

The water kept on rising, as if it had desired to gulp the schoolhouse. The adults continued to watch its progress with blunt emotion. A few adventurous kids braved playing hide and seek. They were put to their senses mercilessly. Scolded and beaten the kids joined in a chorus of cry, their collective noise

attempted to challenge the roaring of the clouds in vein.

Sobhan, a strong, descent looking farmer hand, had feelings going for Lili, daughter of one Naimuddin, for a while. He hadn't uttered the word of love yet but frequently thought about it. Lily, a pretty and lively girl at fourteen, was just as much in love with Sobhan. Noticing him standing alone Lily slowly walked to Sobhan. "Hi!"

Clearly pleased in her presence, Sobhan shyly said, "Are you okay, Lili?"

"The water level keeps on rising. We can't stay here too long", Lili said almost as a casual observation. There was no real anxiousness in her voice. All she cared now was to be near Sobhan.

Sobhan hold her hand softly. Lili quickly looked around. Finding nobody noticing them she dared another step closure to him.

"Don't be scared. We'll find a way out." Sobhan sounded low, passionate. His fingers played hers; a fresh and joyous energy soothingly flew between them.

"I am not scared. I fear nothing when I am with you."

A strange feeling of happiness made Sobhan almost lethargic. He even had the luxury to dream of a sweet future with her. "Lili, next year, I am going to ask your hand in marriage, I promise."

Sobhan knew it was a hopeless dream. He had to support his sick mother, two teenage sisters and old granny. Poverty had no patience for dreams.

Lili, moving even further intimately whispered, "Someday we'll be together."

Suddenly Naimuddin, Lili's father, darted toward them. Pushing Lili away from Sobhan he barked, "I see you trying to seduce her one more time I'll cut you."

Hurt by such unholy interpretation Sobhan said, "Uncle Naimuddin, I love Lili. I plan to ask her hand in marriage."

Noimiddin came dashing like a bull, intending to tear the youth off with his horn less head. Sobhan stood his ground, braced Naimuddin with his strong arms as he wrestled to get free, finally pushing him into the water. Naimuddin, calmed down, struggled up from the water and walked away in disgrace. Sobhan tried to read Lili's reaction. In the dark he could hardly see her face, let alone the emotions.

The water marched up, about to touch the floor. The silent figures moved back anxiously, danger was imminent. Such danger hadn't come for so long now. One elderly woman cried out, "Take the name of Almighty you all; take the name of the Allah." Someone called out for prayer at the top his voice.

Jinnat, a woman in her early twenties, wept silently. Timid and softhearted she only confided in Nuri, who guided her like a big sister. Caressing Jinnat's hair, Nuri said, "Be strong, dear."

Jinnat sobbed hopelessly. "Sister Nuri, I can't take it anymore. He hits me all the time, no matter what I do. If I talk I get smacked, if I don't I get smacked. There's no love, no respect. How long can I cop up with this? "

"But Ali was never like this. I know him for so long now."

"How would you know anybody looking from a distant? Inside he is a pure devil, a greedy monster. He keeps asking my dad for more dowries, beats me brutally when refused. My father has no means to comply. All my ornaments are already sold. There's nothing more I can give him. What am I going to do?"

The plethora of sorrow that had been gathering dust deep inside Jinnat seemed to find a way out, her hopeless and apparently futureless life with all its relentless agony made her insensitive to the approaching danger. Just one year after marriage, her life turned into a complete void, a pure worthless existence.

"I want to die, sister, I just want to die." Jinnat burst into

tears.

Nuri, tears in her eyes, pulled Jinnat close, lovingly. “Don’t say such stupid things, dear. Allah will be offended. Only he has the power to take us back.”

“What’s the use of living like this, sister?”

Nuri didn’t have an answer for her. She just sat there silently, embracing her. One could hear Nijam Baul’s two-string rang uncertainly ...ding...dong...

The clouds thundered, lightning pierced, water rose, further and further, covered the floor of the schoolhouse. The women wailed, men became restless, the children silent in anticipation, the elderly cried out the name of the creator. One little girl, seeing her mother weeping tried to wipe out the tears, “Don’t cry mother. Why do you cry?”

And then, right at that moment, Nijam Baul found the tune he was searching for. He felt as if in the command of a super power the discord that persisted among the sky, the wind and the water had merged into a single harmony taking the shape of something unimaginably big. He observed the dancing waves; he observed the floating clouds; he observed the distant, quiet darkness; his whole heart filled with the music of infinity; the beauty of the creator reflected through the shadowy creations. His fingers moved spontaneously on the two-string, the simple ding...dong... started to take the form of an actual tune. Keeping his voice in tuned with the wild nature around he first started to hum, soon, inadvertently Nijam’s voice rose, it rose until it surpassed the howling of the current, wailing of the wind and roaring of the lightning – the song of little, insignificant men offering his love for the immortal One.