

## The cage and its strange bird

Suleman was being dressed in fresh clothes after a long time. The heady smell of naphthalene coming out of the newly laid out dress tickled his nostrils, even the eyes and maybe the ears too. It's been a long time since he had last smelt that scent. With the tickling going on over the layers of his brain, his head danced a bit as one or two slow, dizzy bubbles rose causing the mud-soft indent of the brain to tremble just as someone else grimaced – nice, nice! Suleman closed his eyes as the bubbles of the scent rose one by one. How nice! Good, good!

The jangling inside the head increased. Suleman opened his eyes. There was nobody around.

Last night Habildar Jamal came to him in his disturbed sleep. He is short and stocky with a lively deep laugh in his betel-juice-reddened mouth – his teeth blackened by *kbayer-jarda*. These days, his appearance disturbs Suleman. Jamal probably knows that and that's why, he comes, laughs with his blackened teeth, grimaces. Nice, nice! Suleman cannot find any reason for such behaviour. What has made him so mad at him that he won't leave him alone? Is this envy or a joke?

In earlier times, Habilder Jamal would stand still, dark faced without making any noise, without uttering any words. His head would sway like a raft in the waves. He would arrive so many times in Suleman's slumber and half-sleep during the day and at night. Recently, his manner of presenting himself has changed. He has become keen about playing with Suleman. He would smile exposing rusty teeth while repeatedly playing his games. Sometimes he would confine himself in the softest layer of Suleman's brain, and sometimes emerge just to make faces. But amidst all these, like the sound of the roaring cloud from a distance, Suleman also hears an utterly different voice – single shot, rapid fire...

Suleman noticed that his tiny room had undergone a quick makeover. Dust had been cleaned, garbage removed, pillow covers and bed sheets replaced and the soot on the wall swept away before giving it a fresh coat of paint, albeit in a hurry. Outside the room amidst the swishing leaves of the coconut tree peeping from across the balcony, the heated up March morning had swollen up like a balloon. Suleman looked to find the morning full of light and air. Nobody seemed to be close by. A silent crow's flying shadow caused a ripple in the coconut leaves.

Some people were coming to visit today after a long time. Suleman tried to regain his mental composure!

There was a time when Suleman was enthusiastic about the visitors. Besides the usual natives, there were the white-skinned British, American, French, Scandinavians who came frequently, sometimes the soybean oil-complexioned Japanese too. Different faces, different body odours, heights, voices and designs of shoes. The diversities were enjoyable. But for Suleman, it was a different kind of fun.

The visitors became bewildered at their first meeting when they tried to exchange greetings with Suleman. Seated on his wheelchair with only his left leg on the footrest, he would extend his handless right hand and ask amusingly, 'How do you do?' Viewing the tiny skin-wrapped shard of a bone sticking out of his emptiness of his right shoulder, they would be shocked. To reassure them, Suleman would dance the 'hand' fiercely in front of them pointing it towards the heaven like a spear.

He always enjoyed their first reaction. Day by day, the limb was getting thinner like the pointed edge of a weapon.

The visitors would want to know about him but their questions had the same pattern. The stereotyped and monotonous conversations bored him. Suleman would change the monotonous pattern by taking control of the conversation and directing it at his will. If the visitors were foreigners, local officials would escort them. They would be enraged by his behaviour but Suleman did not bother. He enjoyed that too. Here's how it went:

'Do you live here?' – Visitor.

'Sure, sure.' – Suleman with a silly, pointless smile.

'How many of you are here?'

Suleman tells a number.

'What about this place. Is it a comfortable place to stay?'

'Good.'

'Food?'

'Good.'

'Medical facilities? Recreation?'

'Good, good.' (So many 'goods' for the sake of the escorting officials.)

'How long have you been here?'

'Haven't counted, eight, nine...'

'Months?'

'Come on, years.'

'Oh, don't you get bored?'

'Yes, ha ha. Can I have a cigarette?' (Suleman breaks the conversation pattern)

'Of course. Your brand? I've Camel, will that do?'

'Oh, Camel! Roasted tobacco. Of course, it will do. I can't see it these days. Triple Five and Benson are everywhere. Camel's taste is different, all the others are nothing compared to Camel. See here, the picture of the camel on the packet – not an ordinary picture, it's highly imaginative. Do you remember that advertisement, that famous one, can you remember what was written in there, can you?'

'Take the whole packet if you wish.'

'Thank you, Thank you. You are so nice! What's in your bag?'

'A camera.'

'Just a camera?'

'A few books and a laptop too. Why do you ask?'

'I thought you might have a small one, a really cute small one, ha ha ... a Champagne. Take a look inside, you might find one there. Aren't you French?'

'How do you know that? I haven't told you yet. Oh, I understand, it's my accent. Otherwise you would think me a Scandinavian as many people do. Any way, your observation is very good. But I don't have any champagne in my bag. If you like I can send you some from my hotel.'

'I don't think you will.' (Suleman looks away gritting his teeth)

'Pardon?'

'Nothing, I'll sleep now.'

'I haven't asked your name yet.'

'Napoleon.'

'Pardon.'

'Napoleon Bonaparte, living here since the Waterloo.'

This playing with names was not new for Suleman. Though the pattern was the same, he found it amusing especially when the questioner didn't understand the joke immediately and shook his/her head for nothing or said 'pardon' at least twice while looking at him with

empty eyes.

Once an elderly Polish woman finishing the routine questions, took his photographs from various angles and then, coming close to touch the skin-wrapped sharp-edged bone of a hand, discovered that he had only one leg on the footrest – the whole right leg was gone. Eyes filled with tears, she asked, ‘May I know your name, dear?’ She then wiped her eyes and brought out notepad and pen to write down his name. Suleman answered, ‘Adolph Hitler.’

He had thought that the woman was a German (and that she would be pleased to hear that name). But she was a Polish and her reaction was different. It was evident that Hitler-phobia was still there in Poland. The woman was dreadfully shocked as if the Nazi infantry parading into Poland had suddenly surrounded her from all sides, or Suleman’s handless right hand had become a bayonet pointed towards her ribs.

He had had much amusement once telling an American his name. The man was very tall. He had to fold his body over to kneel and face Suleman. His face was expressionless, almost indifferent. He was different from other visitors and Suleman did not like him. The man didn’t seem eager to initiate a conversation. Finding this odd, Suleman suddenly pronounced, ‘My name is...my name is... (at first, he wanted to say Fidel Castro, but immediately changed his mind) Saddam Hussein.’ The man was angry. ‘Fuck you’, he said straightening his body and moved away in long, jerky strides. Suleman was delighted and guffawed hitting the wheelchair’s footrest with his lone surviving left leg and swinging his left-over hand.

But the same thing cannot be repeated for years. The same playing games with names. The elements of amusement were the same and had become a cliché. And now Suleman understood that monkey-plays are interesting, but monkeys do not prosper.

Over time Suleman’s interest in visitors was gone. Visitors hardly came anyway. He too didn’t feel any eagerness to know if anyone came. In the past, visitors used to come frequently. The Rehabilitation Centre was kept neat and clean. Kamrul, the caretaker-cum-cook, walked about busily from room to room, his voice ringing filmy tunes every now and then.

The visitors brought rustling cereals, apple juice, chocolate drink, instant soup and many other expensive gifts for the inmates of the Centre. They would hand those over to Kamrul, with a strange sense of guilt before they departed. Kamrul generously consigned the gifts to

the shop next door without much bargaining. The visitors also left cash for the residents, and Kamrul would receive the cash too. At that time, his income from the cash and the goodies was much more than his salary.

With the decline of the visitors, goodies and cash flow had also stopped. Almost nobody came anymore. If somebody at all did, the officials would remain glued to the visitor so that nothing could escape them.

The officials would tell the visitors in advance not to leave any gifts for the inmates. The government was taking care of the Centre and every need of its residents, they would claim, adding it was a priority sector and well looked after. They would brief the visitors that there were more than five hundred such Centres all over the country, of which three hundred and thirty four were in Dhaka itself. If the government didn't look after the inmates, who would? They are our most pristine national pride, the officials would further add. And that's why, no one should meddle with matters concerning their welfare. The government only has the right.

But the present was lean. Kamrul had to rely only on government ration – rice, lentil, flour, salt, oil. From the allotted fish, meat and vegetable, he couldn't save anything as nothing remained after meeting the hunger of the inmates. One litre of Australian apple juice could easily be sold at two hundred takas without bargaining. Cereals also had a great demand.

The situation had not changed abruptly or without any reason. One-legged, one-handed Suleman knows the reason well enough.

It was a convention in the Centre that if the visitors were foreigners, the residents would be presented as appropriately as possible. All of them would be given freshly laundered clothes that were kept for such occasions. They must wear those. No objection would be allowed. They had to comb their hair and bathe properly. They would then be placed in wheelchairs, crutches, beds or such other places wherever they fitted in.

If the visitors were very important, an advance team of officials would come. They would brief the inmates and threaten them elaborately that if anything untoward took place or something disconcerting said, the culprit would be thrown into the streets to live on begging or rag-picking.

The briefing would be directed mainly at Suleman. Only Suleman annoys them by his impudence. He is dangerous – the most educated and obstinate of the lot in the Centre.

One day a distinguished team of foreign visitors was expected. The advance team of officials came to examine the Centre. They inspected the rooms, clothes, crutches and wheelchairs and briefed the inmates, and as usual, warned them with prospects of begging or rag-picking.

To Suleman, they told sternly, don't tell a thing, not a word, be careful. Suleman moved his head with a smile to indicate assent. His head was swinging a little from the scent of the naphthalene wafting from the freshly laid out clothes.

The noted foreign team appeared on time. It was made up of a couple of British MPs, British journalists, and accompanying them were local TV crew and government officials. In the two-storied building of the Centre, ten people lived in six rooms. They were waiting for the visitors. As they entered, everyone scampered around, agitated, making a lot of noise with their crutches, and wheelchairs banging the floor in saluting the visitors. How do you do? Nice to meet you.

Suleman's room was at the far end of the first floor. It was smaller than the other rooms and he was the sole occupant of that room. The entire armada of visitors entered his room after finishing all others, though for so many it was rather small. When the lights of TV cameras were turned on, Suleman felt dizzy amid all the glowing bulbs and curious faces.

There were rapid questions for Suleman from all sides. There was too much light and noise, and he suddenly felt sleepy. He kept silent. The scent of naphthalene prowling about his brain cells seemed to cause a strange numbness, but he was jolted into awakening when he was asked his name repeatedly.

'Your name please?'

He heard the question again and again as he drifted between sleep and sense. What's your name? Your name?

This team was eager to know his name, Suleman was certain. In his half awakened state, he could not understand the purpose of his name.

Someone inside him whispered, what's in a name? There were so many names spread all over! Does the world need more names? Abraham Lincoln, Pablo Neruda, Adlof Hitler, Charles Chaplin, Karl Marx, Ishwar Chandra Bidasagar, Kamrul. Different names, different smells. He was so overwhelmed by so many different names that he became exhausted remembering them. Surja Sen, Maulana Bhashani, William Shakespeare, Mir Jafar Ali Khan, Rabindranath Tagore, Havildar Mohammad Jamal. He was shivering and trembling just

because of the names.

In this state of excitement, Suleman opened the shutters of his eyes. All around him were eyes eager to know his name. They must know his name. One could not imagine how stubborn they were to learn the name from his own lips. Even the officials who had earlier warned him not to open his mouth, tried to cajole him to say his name. Why don't you tell them your name? We have given them all necessary information about you. We have shown them all the records; they have even taken a handful of them. But they cannot take all the records; it will be a burden for them. They already know your name; they just want to hear it from you. Do please utter your name.

For the first time in his life, he was not interested to make fun of names. But where had his name gone away? Why couldn't he remember his name? He shook his head as if a raging animal was shaking its head in desperation.

Suleman hunted for his tiny name in the forests of forgetfulness. Where had his name gone? And then as if in a strange joke or rage, he felt two drops of blazing tears roll onto his cheeks. Immediately, he was stung to his senses. When his body was crumpled by a mortar shell many years ago, his eyelids had remained dry. But after all these years, the eyes betrayed him in such a meaningless effort as stating his name.

His handless right hand was itching to act. He glanced at the gushing faces, and as if to avenge the betrayal of his eyes, he did something he had not thought of. He stretched out his still-able left hand from the arm of his wheelchair, the five fingers and his palm full of intricately crisscrossing lines, in a gesture of begging.

The lights of the local TV crew shut down, while the foreign cameras flashed and sparkled intermittently. And Suleman's agitated left hand got lengthened. He was possessed with a strange feeling about his hand; he kept the hand stretched out. He could feel that his twisted body was trembling in excitement. He was stunned by his own excitement, and could not remember how many times he had felt this way in his life before. He only gazed at his spread out hand in front of him. Silently, the hand was becoming larger and larger.

The incident provoked great reaction in the media. The 'mad, deviant, crippled freedom fighter', the newspapers screamed. It was a national scandal, the media said, adding that every palm shared the same desire, openly or in secret, to stretch out for alms but does it mean that it had to be so shamelessly, this way?

Suleman had thought that the foul left hand would be cut off and hung around his neck.

If needed, it could be shaped out as an exact match of the other hand. He became somewhat curious as to what would follow. How would they do it? After putting him to sleep in an operation theatre or just by slashing it off with the stroke of a dagger?

There was always the possibility of something happening and what ultimately did happen was quite extraordinary. A two-member enquiry committee was set up. Suleman was totally confused faced with the committee members, by the barrage of questions they put to him one after another. Apparently, their purpose seemed to bemuse Suleman. When one of them asked a question, the other immediately followed by asking another. One asked how many hands a man had, the other at once wanted to know how many legs? If the purpose of one hand was to eat rice, what then the other one was for? Everyone had legs and hands in pairs, but why was it that Suleman had less – just one each?

Suleman could not decide whether or not to answer the questions. He also couldn't make out if the purpose of the cross examination was simply to make fun of him. If it was so, then he could also make appropriate jokes. But the attitude of his interrogators confused him. One looked almost like Habildar Jamal with his salt and pepper moustache, while the other's bearded face was contorted with what looked like a self inflicting dignity and righteousness. He looked at them with blank eyes in a daze. And then he realized that the two had not come to crack jokes, they had specific jobs in hand.

The men with the moustache suddenly grabbed his left thigh and dug his nails into his flesh, saying, 'Having just one hand and one leg is a lot of fun, isn't it? Where is your other arm, the other leg? Where have you hidden them? Come on now, show me. You know magic? I see you are enjoying hiding your entire thigh inside your belly? You have stuck your thigh in your belly? Tell me, how did you push it in? Which one entered first – the leg or the hand? For how many years have you been going on this way? Hasn't the hand or the leg been digested inside by now? Are you sure they are in tact? You have only one hand-- with that you eat, clean your ass, beg too-- a multipurpose hand, marvelous! Now tell me why did you stretch you hand out that day? What do you want? Money, cigarette, wine, women? Done. You will have them all. But tell me first, why did you stretch out? Or, do you need arms to fight again?'

Suleman felt the man's nails clawing deep into his thigh. Simultaneously, the man took his handless right hand – the skin-wrapped bone and began to twist it. As he wrenched the limb, the man asked him in a soothing voice, 'Did that hurt? Does it pain too much? It will hurt



dear. How famous this hand or this leg is! Do you remember how they once looked like? Or, have you forgotten them entirely? Because of these two, the nation is now free. Is there a nation on earth freer than ours?’

The man kept on talking and twisting the bone from right to left and left to right, as if pulling out a stake dug into the earth. Suleman kept on looking with steady eyes and pricked up his ears to listen to any sound the pulling and twisting would make. The man kept on saying, ‘Oh! Your sweet leg! Your delicate hand! Where have they all gone? Where are they now? Where?’ The man kept lamenting and with great regret it seemed, kept on twisting his hand.

But for how long could one enjoy twisting a thin, insipid piece of bone? The monotony of the action bored the man. Giving one last parting twist, he said, ‘Bastard’ and let go. Suleman was surprised that the matter had ended without any further ado.

After the incident visitors stopped coming to the Centre. It began to look more and more rundown everyday as sweeping and dusting lessened and the rubbish was strewn all around. Visitors were not going to come, so who would take the trouble to keep it clean? Kamrul had continued to be here though he rued it all the time. He was perpetually flaring up. All his rage was directed towards Suleman. If that dirty cripple hadn’t stretched out his hand, things would not go to such ruin. Only the building has survived after all these years. Only the word Centre in white letters painted against a black background could be read on the signboard that hung atop the gate.

The word ‘rehabilitation’ had faded away by the rain and the sun. The shine had gone from the letters on the signboard. Now only Centre resonates.

No local or foreign visitors came here and the only people who did were the itinerant hawkers who took shelter on the veranda from the rain or the sun. They would sometimes venture in and peep into the rooms and if anyone stretched out his palm, they would generously throw a half-rotten cucumber, a fistful of puffed rice, perhaps a few ground nuts too. At night, some decrepit prostitutes would take over the room at the attic and light a few flickering lamps courtesy of Kamrul.

Suleman was relieved as the Centre lost attention. No visitors, no anxiety, no excitement about making the place look good. No undue haste to know the name, no extra effort to make up a name. Just have two meals a day and somehow pass the time sleeping or waking

or doing both at a time.

As he passed his days idly, Suleman sometimes became intrigued by the questions of his interrogators wanting to know about his missing leg and arm. It was true, he hadn't paid any attention to his unseen limbs in years. He hadn't yearned to remember how they were, or how would they now look had they lived. He hadn't washed them for such a long time or cut his nails. The nails were no ordinary nails; they were sharp and strong like talons. Who could tell how long the nails had grown after all these years!

He could, however, remember that his leg was tough and stubborn. When it kicked the ball, it didn't care about its life or death. When it ran, it pounded on the ground like a hammer. And once when it suffered a split on the knee in a soccer game, it was laid down for long but when it recovered, it returned to its own ferocity and strength.

Compared to the leg, his hand was soft, his fingers delicate. Night after night, it wrote poems holding tightly the tip of the pen. But when it took up grenades, it was as if they were a better pen.

He wondered why didn't he look them up for so long? They were not with him, but must they be somewhere. Could they be together, the hand and the leg, moving about as an odd pair – in hills, forests or deserts? Won't he be able to catch up with them, see them for once, caress them with hands, wash them – or scratch them if bitten by mosquitoes!

Memories of the lost limbs haunted him. Sometimes an unbelievably fleshy part of the missing arm seemed to appear on his right hand's dry bone and then disappear like a magic. Sometimes a soft skin would cover the soft fingers and immediately vanish. But despite all his efforts, the miserable thigh, knee and ankle would not wake up to answer the call of the vast emptiness of the lower part of his body.

As he thought and tried to remember them, his missing limbs played hide and seek with him in his moments of awakening and slumber. And even after he awoke, the drowsiness remained glued to his eyes. In such a state, Habildar Jamal would come, whether to save or sink him, he couldn't tell. The short, robust body had remained the same as it was long ago, his betel-chewed red lips, teeth like melon seeds. Suleman would sometimes wonder, was it the man he knew long ago? His style of standing had not changed – his hands at his waist, the legs unwavering and still. But why was the face so grave? Where had the liveliness of his eyes gone? In those days when the man led them to parade on soft wet earth at dawn, taught them how to pull the lever and shoot with a three-naught-three rifle, his mouth would spew

like a torrent of fireworks.

Rapid abuses would flow from his tongue and he would twist his face and shout in accompaniment. 'You son of *nawabs*...have come to fight a war, have you? Can't move your ass? You have come to fight? Do you know what fighting is? Fighting and fucking aren't the same. Use your hands; God hasn't given them just for nothing. Pull the lever with your left hand and cock the trigger with your right. How many times do I have to show you! Your heads are full of words and are junks when it comes to work... can't do a single thing. Fuck you, you useless eggheads. Take single shot at a time, single shot, single, not rapid fire... who will give you bullets if all are spent! Bullets won't come from heaven. Not rapid, single...

In his state of trance, Suleman saw a shadow. The shadow shook and Habilder Jamal's face also shook in waves. Why didn't he have any words... Why was he so silent? Rapid or single – couldn't he decide what to say? Or, had he forgotten those scolding? Should Suleman remind him that? This still and dark face did not fit him. Where had he been? How did he find Suleman after all these years? Suleman examined the face closely and waited for his stream of words. Or, was it that after all these years, the abuses have left his head.

It was at this time that Suleman began to live a new life. He felt that the difference between day and night was dissolving. A thick-deep-unfathomable hypnosis behind the light and darkness was pulling him down. Habilder Jamal appeared to be behind it. The unsatisfied soul had come back from its grave lured by the attractions of war. He wanted to entice Suleman to join him. He would take him to the battle field pushing his wheelchair. There was no definite time for his coming. He came whenever he wanted to before the dimly lit eyes of Suleman and slowly vanished dissolving as it were, in a shroud of mist. There was no screaming or shouting, just a stunned look on his calm face.

Suleman would closely examine Jamal's face as it drifted between his slumber and waking. Sometimes he seemed to be grieved by Suleman's handicapped body, and sometimes in his eyes burned the sparks of envy. Suleman looked at the face, and in his discomfort and helplessness, shriveled. How strong and powerful the man was! His harsh and deafening voice was an extra weapon. During the training periods, he would compensate his miserly shortage of bullets by the fireworks from his throat. But when it came to real fighting, he was not a miser at all. In fact, he was quite extravagant while laying an ambush. Then, it was just rapid fire and rapid fire and rapid fire...

That restless mouth was suddenly frozen shut by a single shot that went through the middle of his forehead. Suleman now could not find any trace of the shot as he closely examined the forehead. There was no sign of the tunnel that had burrowed through the middle of his two brows. The tidy forehead confused him. Had he gone into hiding all these years just to seal the canal, fill it up so that Suleman didn't find any trace that it ever existed? And now that it was gone, sealed impeccably, he had come back to steal Suleman back!

Slowly, day by day, Habildar Jamal's face changed. There would be the small expressions visible on his face – a crumbling of the stiff shoreline around the edges of his lips. And finally, the day his face trembled, his salt and pepper moustache shook and the mouth parted open, Suleman looked at him with surprise. He was then stunned to hear that the man was asking for explanations – why did Suleman stretch out his hand in that fashion? As if the action of his hand had reached him deep down in his grave and hadn't let him be in peace.

In a voice, at once stiff and controlled, Jamal told how lucky Suleman was! Although Suleman did not have a leg or a hand, yet his crippled body was a witness to so many things. It's only because people like Habildar Jamal had cleared the path that some one like Suleman had become a sight to be viewed. But what had he done? Suleman could hear the voice swirling around inside his head. There was no arrogance, no hope, no aggression in his voice but at the bottom of it seemed to lurk dim flickers of envy.

Suleman thought, what was this man saying! Didn't the man know that by dying, he had been saved and Suleman being alive, lived here with his eyes and ears open condemned to be better dead than alive? Let the man judge which one was better and which worse. Or, had he lost the brains to judge the facts. Was this the reason he had returned from the cold home buried deep beneath the earth to be ravaged by agony and envy? Did he have the right to demand an explanation? Being dead, he was freed of all responsibility. A single shot to his forehead. And Suleman, who should have been blown away by the mortar shell, was left with a single leg and a hand on a wheelchair. Why had he stretched out his hand? Did he really do that? It didn't matter now because if he had the chance, he would do it again.

A single shot to the forehead was better than a mortar shell. He would make the man understand this. After such a long stay in his grave, his head was not there anymore. It had become a pile of mud.

After observing Habilder Jamal a few more days, Suleman realized that the man not only thought him lucky but seriously envied him. When Suleman would see him in his waking

hours, the man appeared subdued but in his dreams, he was quite eloquent. In a halting voice, he would speak of many things. Of the pain and drudgery of his long prison life inside his grave. At the same time, he would whine that he had never had the chance to savor the air and light of life outside. Reminding Suleman of his perforated forehead, he would poke at it and remove the earth that had filled up the hole exposing the tunnel the bullet had bored.

He showed the hole to Suleman with great care. The bullet had gone through the skull without turning an inch, straight to the back of the head opening the lid. He twitched his face in frustration. If only the hole had been elsewhere other than his forehead! If it were in the belly, the chest, the shoulder! Or, if instead of a single shot, had it been a mortar shell crumpling his hand, leg and the body! Why only one hand, why not both? Maybe the face could be charred too. Only if the nose was spared for sucking in free air and eyes, maybe just an eye for seeing. If one just had a chance to somehow pull in the air and an eye for seeing, one could have spent the rest of one's life in the grave, even with a shortage of oxygen. Listening to all this, Suleman could only think of a trick. Fooling the man into his wheelchair, Suleman would set out looking for the cold grave. Let the idiot sit like a clown and suck in a belly full of free air.

Suleman would drift in and out of the trance of his tousled mind. Shapeless, meaningless images would dance in his head. Some days he would see that the right leg had returned to its original place. It seemed a little unfamiliar after all this time – the taut skin on his thigh and the knee, the muscles looked different than before. But what surprised him was that the entire leg seemed to be smeared with tiny drops of blood from mosquito bites. Holding the drops in their mouth, hundreds of small fleshy hives covered his thigh, knee and the ankle.

On some days, he would see Habildar Jamal with a pair of rusty old pliers. He would measure the length of Suleman's right leg in the emptiness and then swing one of his hands like a magician as if he was going to conjure up a red rose or a pigeon from thin air. But what Suleman would see in his hands was his missing leg. Snatching the heavy fleshy leg from mid-air, Jamal would start to put it in place tightening the nuts and screws with his pliers.

Suleman realized that all this was a game for Jamal. He also played another trick with his leg. He would bundle Suleman up in his arms and leave him in an empty field. Suleman would find piles of legs strewn everywhere around. All of them right legs, severed from the

hip. Thin, fat, heavy, all kinds of legs. Some were bent from the knee, some were lying on their sides and some in prone position. Jamal would ask Suleman to quickly search for his leg and fit it to where it belonged.

Suleman would hop on his solitary leg desperately looking for the missing leg in the pile. Not finding it, he thought maybe another one would fit him. But there was hassle in that as well. He would put them on, pull them out one after another – they wouldn't fit. Some were too tight, some so loose that if wearing them one walked, the legs would fall away. Watching Suleman's hard work, Jamal smiled widely with his blackened teeth saying, 'great great!'

For Suleman it was an appalling shock. The man was making fun of him. But how was he to believe that he had heard or seen it right? He could barely see a thing because of the foggy shroud swelling all around. He strained his eyelids and pushed at the fog. Some of it shifted as he kept on pushing, and it was then that he saw he was lying inert in a cage for long.

The cage would be wet with rain, dried by the sun, and it trembled gently in the wind. Nobody was pulling him out of the cage, and couldn't do it even if someone wanted to. The bars seemed made of mercury as they appeared to shiver and tremble. One was afraid to touch, afraid.

The centre was alive after a long time. There was the hustle-bustle of cleaning up all around. The air was heavy with the scent of incense. People with busy feet were moving from room to room, pushing, shoving, moving things.

Suleman had been dressed in freshly laid out clothes. The smell of naphthalene wafting from the folds of the clothes tickled the nose, even maybe the eyes and the ears. He pulled at the smell after a long time.

Despite the tickling, the freshly liberated and slightly pungent scent reached the layers of his brain. And amidst all this, came the words – nice nice good good! Sitting in the softest ante-room of his brain, Habildar Jamal was mocking at him.

Suddenly, everything seemed different to Suleman's eyes. Outside, the mid-morning sun sparkled with light and air shimmering restlessly on the drooping coconut leaves. A long, hushed buzz blew like a silent music, on and on.

Suleman looked at his own reaction with a start. His surprise grew. Is it then, is it? He felt an exhilarating shiver in his body and soul. The smell of incense and other herbs was rising above the odour of naphthalene and churning the air in the room. He said to himself, hey,

what's up? He then noticed the dress he was wearing. He was draped from head to toe in a white dress he had never worn before. Suleman wondered, ah...well, well...

So, he was going to be taken out of his cage after all these years? Was the smell too pungent? Someone else would replace him in the cage, someone valuable as an object of curiosity. Suleman felt excited. In the vacant, limbless parts of his body, the excitement was the highest.

People were coming in a line, moving around in a circle. So, these are the visitors. The visitors were in a serious problem today. They weren't able ask him his name. In which sector did he lose his arm, in which the leg, which one went first – the hand or the leg, did it hurt, how bad was it...so many questions wriggled inside their heads.

Suleman realized that nobody could touch him now, make him dance at the snap of a finger. He also saw standing in front of him was Habildar Mohammad Jamal. But he was not mocking at all. There was no envy, no jealousy on his face. Then whom did he see all these days? Suleman was startled watching the face. No, there was no mistake. There he was, lips reddened by tobacco juice and betel nuts, bushy moustache and the hole on the forehead from the single shot. Suddenly, he heard the howl of a voice, as if from a thunder-capped sky, 'rapid fire'. Suleman got down from the wheelchair, sprang to his lone left foot, and started to run. As he ran behind the man, he could not see himself. Neither his body nor his shadow. It would have been nice if he could, this running on and on, his one leg was going so well.

-----

Translated by **Afsan Chowdhury**. Published in *Shabdoghor* – a bilingual monthly literary magazine from Bangladesh, 2015.

**Translator:** Media personality, fiction writer, free lancer on a widely diverse range of socio-political issues, Afsan Chowdhury's remarkable work includes '*Bangladesh 1971*'—a three volume documentation of the Bangladesh liberation war. He lives in Toronto and Dhaka.