

Bolai

(Inspired by Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Bolai")

Tohon,¹ Bangladesh

I

I am lonely in my new home. I have been in England for three months now. I landed here amid a miserable, bitterly cold winter – weather that I am not used to. To make things worse, I am far from my home in Calcutta and even further from *Kakima* and Shimul.

I do not remember my mother. She died when I was small. Her untimely death pushed me to a crossroads in my life. At first, my father did not know what to do, but then he decided to go to England to study engineering, leaving me with his only brother. *Kaka* and *Kaki* were a childless couple. They were happy to have me with them and raised me as their own.

Kaka was a serious man. He spoke little and did not indulge my whims and wishes. *Kakima* was my refuge. She loved me dearly. I occupied her entire big, empty heart and meant everything to her: happiness, joy and fulfilment. I would lovingly call her *Kakima* – a *Kaki* who was more like a mother.

As I grew up, my only companions were the plants in our front yard. It hurt me if someone plucked a flower. I tried to hide my emotion, fearing that others might not share my sentiments. It was unbearable for me to watch the neighbourhood boys throwing stones at trees, targeting the fruits. To make things worse, to hurt me, they would deliberately hit plants with a stick and even break off their branches. I tried to fight back my tears, for I knew that it would only make me a laughingstock.

One of my worst moments was the day the gardener showed up for lawn mowing. I desperately ran to *Kaka* and then *Kakima*, begging them not to hurt the grass and all the little, tiny plants that were so close to my heart. They would say, "Bolai, please be reasonable. How can we not mow the lawn? How can we not get rid of the weeds?" I realised then that I was a lonely soul in my inner world. My innermost pain for the suffering plants was something no one shared.

One day I noticed a shoot sprouting on the pathway leading to the house. I ran to *Kaka*, brought him to the site and asked him, "What plant is it, *Kaka*?"

He said, "It is Shimul."

¹ **Tohon** is a short story writer for *The Daily Star Saturday Literary Page* (Bangladesh). He is author of *The Jihadi* (2016) and *The Landscape of a Mind* (2015), published by New Generation Publishing, London. He is currently working on *Life's Invisible Battles* – a philosophical memoir. Email: mikabir@hotmail.com.

I don't know why I felt an instant emotional bond with Shimul. I loved him dearly, cared for him and watered him daily. For me, Shimul was not a plant. He was my friend, companion and, above all, soulmate.

One day, in excitement, I shouted, "*Kaka, Kaka!*"

He was reading the newspaper on the veranda. He walked over to me and asked, "Now what?"

"*Kaka*, see how big Shimul has grown!"

I saw his burning eyes. He murmured, "I can't allow this. This tree is blocking the pathway and should be removed."

I ran to *Kakima*, crying. She said, "Don't cry, *shona manik aamar*. I'll take care of it." And she did.

It became increasingly difficult to contain *Kaka's* irritation because within a year Shimul became tall; taller than me! Every time *Kaka* spoke about removing Shimul, I would run to *Kakima* and she would comfort me again, saying, "Do not cry, *shona manik aamar*. I'll take care of it.' And she always did.

Years passed. I was about twelve. Shimul by then was big and in full blossom, covered with beautiful red flowers and white cotton. My joy knew no bounds. But I had no clue that there was a much bigger calamity waiting for me around the corner.

One day, a stranger arrived at our door with luggage. He and *Kaka* hugged each other. The visitor then extended his arms towards me and said, "Come to me, Bolai." *How does he know my name?*, I wondered.

My father was back home after ten long years. And my life came to another crossroads and took a turn for the worse. My father was discussing something, first with *Kaka* and then *Kakima*, I knew not what. I saw *Kakima* crying and sensed that it was a bad omen.

It was a disaster for me. *Kakima* told me in tears that my father planned to move me to Simla for English schooling. I too cried. *How could I live without Kakima? How could I live without Shimul?*

The day I was to leave, I got up early from the bed while it was still dark, tiptoed out of the house and walked to Shimul. I held him in my arms and cried. Shimul, too, wept in silence.

That was it. I was moved to a residential English school in Simla – it was lonely. My father would visit me occasionally. My heart would cry for Shimul every day. The more I missed him, the more I loved him. Our two souls became one, united and indivisible.

A couple of years passed. I was fourteen. My life reached a new milestone bringing me to a third crossroads. My father announced that I would be travelling to England to continue my studies. I asked him if I could visit *Kakima* before my journey. He said, "We shall see."

That night I cried in bed, wetting my pillow. In the morning I wrote to *Kakima*: “I will be heading for England soon. Please send me a photo of Shimul.”

I was in Simla for another couple of months while my father made the travel arrangements. I eagerly awaited the post, day in and day out, with an increasingly broken heart – but Shimul’s photo never came.

My father brought me to my new home in the middle of a freezing winter and then he returned to Calcutta. Life had never been so miserable. Gloom sat heavily on my heart. I would lock myself up in my room, with the window shut and cry in the dark.

The days passed slowly, but bit by bit I noticed a brightening sky and the cold did not seem to cut me so deeply. One day, I glimpsed a ray of sunlight pushing its way in around the window. It was the long-awaited spring.

The spring lifted my days. In between my classes and studies, I would go out for a walk in the neighbourhood park. The blossoming flowers brought me happiness, joy and the same warmth I had received from Shimul.

One of the first things I learnt in England was the idea of a “letterbox” – a slot on the front door of the house with a plywood box inside to catch letters from falling on the mat. Although I hardly got any mail, except occasional letters from my father, I developed a habit of checking the box anyway. Secretly, I had never given up hope of receiving a letter from *Kakima* with Shimul’s photo.

Today, on my return from the school, I find a letter for me in the letterbox. I look at the handwriting on the envelope and judge that it is not from my father. I become excited with anticipation. *Is it a letter from Kakima?* I rush to open the envelope, but its contents shatter my already broken heart. There is no photo, only a letter. And even the letter is not from *Kakima* but, of all people, from my serious *kaka*.

I walk up the stairs to my room, switch on the light, open the window, sit on my study chair and unfold the letter. It is dated 27 Falgun 1335 [Bengali year]. It reads:

Dear Bolai,

I understand from your father that you have reached England safely and are settled in your new home.

Your *kakima* did receive your letter. But she is not able to respond, so my letter will have to do. I want to explain why we failed to send you Shimul’s photo. But before I do that, I want to tell you about my circumstances.

I always believed that a man’s life is the sum of all creatures from all time. One can observe that a man inherits animal instincts and traits in various shapes and

forms, as if he is a unique blend of them all; as if his body is a cage where a tiger and a cow, or a mongoose and a snake are held captive. But, somehow, you have been an exception in that, you are connected more to trees and plants than to animals.

I spoke little but I always observed you while you walked around the garden looking at the plants, touching them, keenly watching the shoots grow. The garden was your wonderland and a constant source of joy and curiosity. You were particularly fond of the smaller plants – the weeds. You loved the grass, too. You enjoyed rolling on the slopes of the lawn and almost became one with the grass. I would notice your troubled heart on the days the lawnmower man showed up. But, unfortunately, I failed to share your pain.

My eyes followed you when you walked to the giant *debdaru* tree and stood alone under its shade. It looked like you were able to see the tree's soul – the very living spirit within. This spirit did not speak to you, but you both seemed to know each other from time immemorial.

You and I did not see eye to eye about Shimul. For me, it was just another tree blocking the pathway and it annoyed me every time I saw it growing. Unfortunately, by the time I realised that Shimul was your own reflection, it was too late.

You made me realise that the first life on Earth must have been a plant that sprouted in the depths of murky water on a rocky, muddy sea floor. This first-born was our original ancestor. All living species – land-based plants, birds, aquatic and land animals, reptiles, insects, worms and even humans – are all descendants of this primal life, our first parent. The plants feed us, nurture us and even sustain the environment. Without trees and plants the living species would not only become orphans but die, as if deprived of their mother's milk.

Your letter asking for Shimul's photo made me realise that you belong to the plants. You are a plant in human form! Plants are your closest kin; closer than humans, including your *kakima*. You are not a fourteen-year-old, but millions, if not billions, of years old, linked to the very first primal life on the seafloor by the unbroken chain of life's propagation. I now understand why you are so mature for your age. You know things that most people have no clue about.

Unfortunately, my realisation came too late. Upon receiving your letter, your *kakima* asked me to get a photographer. I was puzzled. She explained that you wanted to carry Shimul's photo with you to your distant home.

Bhagwan forgive me, I had already removed the tree to clear the pathway. A deep remorse engulfed me and burnt me to ashes. Your *kakima* did not touch food for a couple of days. She did not speak to me for some time.

Your father took you away from your *kakima*, slicing the embryonic cord between you two and then, to make things worse, your *kaka* slayed your soulmate. The wounds in your *kakima*'s heart are deep, bleeding incessantly.

I know this letter will hurt you. It will cause you pain. You will be angry at me and hate me. All these months I have hesitated, but I have decided to write to you, for I am not prepared to die with so much guilt.

Yours lovingly,
Kaka

My eyes become blurred and the dripping tears smudge the paper, blotching the words. I re-fold the letter, slide it inside the envelope and put it away. I walk to the window, shut it, switch off the light and lie on the bed, face down on the pillow. With my hands I press the pillow to my face, almost choking myself. The pillow works as a silencer as I cry in total darkness, alone.

I do not know how long I cried. At some point I must have fallen asleep. When I wake up, I realise that my life has reached a new crossroads: the paths of darkness and of light.

I get off the bed and open the window. The morning light floods my small room. I stand at the window, breathing the fresh air and looking out at the sunny, beautiful day with its clear, blue sky.

I walk to the park. I find it full of life with coloured, fragrant, blossoming flowers. I sit on a bench and behold the plants – my closest kin.

From my schoolbag I take out my notebook and begin to write.

Dear *Kaka*,

Thank you for your kind letter.

Please do not distress yourself for cutting the tree down. You did the right thing for the right reasons. I did love Shimul and still do. He now lives in the deepest recesses of my mind. Between Shimul and me, at first, there was you, but now there is only me. Shimul and I were one soul in two bodies. He may die when I die, but I hope Shimul is immortal and he will find another heart as his new abode.

I am indebted to my mother for my life, *Kakima* for her love, my father for changing my life's direction and to you for the light – the deepest secrets of life that you wrote about in your letter and which no one has ever taught me before.

I am no longer angry at you, for I have chosen to follow the light that you have shown me. As you say, plants are our ancestors. Therefore, we humans, too, are plants, only in a different form. Our thoughts and words, knowledge and wisdom, actions and reactions are nothing but fruit, like the fruit in the trees – some are sweet, some are sour, some are bitter, and some are even poisonous. But they all offer, in different ways, nourishment to the living world.

I am sorry about *Kakima*. Please tell her that I shall be writing to her soon.
Your only nephew,

Bolai.

II

Dear *Kakima*,

It was cold, windy and gloomy when I landed in England three months ago. It was worse than the Shimla winter. But it is now spring season and the weather is nice – it is sunny and warm. The flowers are blossoming. It makes me so very happy.

I live with an English family here in Surbiton, not too far from London. This is a big change for me. I was timid and shy at the beginning. But now I am comfortable and enjoy their company.

They are very nice to me. They have a son, Jonathon (they call him John) of my age and a younger daughter, Isabel. I have a room of my own upstairs – they call it the attic. There is a window facing the front of the house towards the east. I like to look out through the window. I see cars, women walking their dogs and people peddling their bicycles. And then there are tall trees, flying birds, clouds in the sky and the sun. By evening, though, the road becomes empty – no people, no cars – and it is dark. I feel depressed at these times.

I go to the kitchen downstairs in the morning, afternoon and evening for meals. I do not understand why they call dinner time “teatime.” They serve me vegetables. John’s mother also cooks rice for me. I do not think she knows how to cook dal. In the morning she gives me something like *muri* – they call it “cereal” – with milk. Some days she serves roti-like pan cakes with sweet syrup that tastes like honey. I love my breakfast.

The shower and toilet, too, are downstairs. There is a hot water tap in the shower. I find it relaxing to take a shower with warm water. John’s mother washes my dirty clothes every Saturday and irons them. She even used to polish my shoes, but I do it now.

Initially John’s mother would be concerned if I did not show up for meals or shut myself away after coming home from school. In due course she understood that it was to do with my homesickness and left me alone, respecting my privacy.

When *Baba* introduced me to the family, he told me to address John’s mother as Mrs Williams and his father as Mr Williams. *Baba* also told me to always say “Good morning” in the morning, “Good evening” in the evening and “Goodnight” when I finished the day with them. The other thing *Baba* said was that I should always say “Thank you” when they offered me anything or even when they enquired after my well-being. He said that being courteous was an important part of English culture. He also said that, unlike the British in India, English men in England are humble, polite and thank people at every opportunity.

When I came here, John’s mother took me to the shops to buy me school bag and uniform, shoes, books, notepads, pencils and other small items. She also

bought me a pen and a paintbox. I think *Baba* has made some arrangement with them to buy me things and provide food and lodging.

I love the pen. I now love to write letters. With my paintbox I sometimes paint colourful plants and flowers. I tried to draw Shimul with its blossoming red flowers, but it did not come out well.

John, Isabel and I go to the same school. Most days we walk together. The school is not far from our house. I can see the school building from my window. On the way back I mostly return home by myself. I reach home before John and Isabel do. Isabel is a beautiful girl, like a flower. I find it difficult to take my eyes away when I look at her pretty face.

John's mother calls me Bolai. It makes me feel at home. But at school I go by my formal name, Vishwanath Thakur. They find it difficult to pronounce. My English teacher, Miss Ellis, once asked me if my first name meant anything. I said, "Lord of the Universe." She looked at me intently, as if looking deep into my soul, and then said, "That's a beautiful name, Vishnu." I do not know how she knew that Vishnu is the Lord of the Universe. Then she said, "We are blessed to have the Lord as a beautiful boy among us." I wondered, *Would the Lord of the Universe cry if he landed on the Earth from heaven?*

The way they speak English here is different from the way my Indian teachers spoke it at Simla. I have some difficulties following them. I am OK with John's mother. She always asks me if I need anything. I say, "I am OK." I also say, "Thank you, Mrs Williams." She tells me to spend time downstairs with John and Isabel, but I am happy upstairs on my own.

John's mother gives me money to buy food from the school canteen – they call it the "tuck shop." The shop sells cookies, a kind of home-made biscuits, and other stuff. I like the cookies with chocolate chips, but, *kakima*, I miss your *malpua pitba* so very much. They also have bananas, oranges, apples and some other varieties of fruit. I like the one they call "pear." It's soft, sweet and juicy.

John's father goes to work in the morning driving a car. He wears a jacket and tie and looks smart. He returns from work before the evening meal. He does not speak much, but he is nice and kind to me.

When all five of us sit around the dining table for the evening meal, we hold each other's hands, making a human chain. John's father says a few words, thanking the Lord for the food. The others say, "Amen."

When the meal is finished, I say, "Thank you, Mr Williams. Thank you, Mrs Williams. Goodnight." They also bid me goodnight.

The school here is nice; better than the one in Simla. The students and teachers are friendly. They talk to me. In Simla, the white boys never spoke to me nor the other Indian boys. There are a few Indian boys in this school. One of them is from Calcutta, so we speak to each other in Bangla. Most students play games after school, but I prefer going home.

During the winter I mostly stayed in my room after school hours. There is a heater to keep my room warm. Alone in my room, I thought of you a lot. I cried sometimes.

But now that it is spring, I go out to the nearby park. There are a lot of plants of all kinds and many colourful flowers. I am happy.

Kaka wrote that he has removed Shimul. It made me cry but now I think it was a good idea because one could get hurt bumping into Shimul when walking in the dark. Also, the cotton spreading all over the place from its branches must have been messy. I now have many friends here in the park, so I do not miss Shimul as much nor do I cry for him every day.

I miss you, *kakima*, but leaving home has made me realise how big the world is. I enjoyed travelling by ship, the London buses and the underground railway. The journey by ship was exciting. The ocean was so big. It looked endless! I wondered how deep it was and how much water it did contain. Sometimes there were big waves that rocked the ship. I did vomit a few times, but that was OK. *Baba* looked after me.

I also loved riding the two-storey red buses in London when we arrived. It was fun to see the city from the upper deck of a bus. The journey on the underground railway reminded me of all your “*patal-purer golpo*” – the “underworld stories” – that made me shiver.

Baba tells me that once I finish school, I can return home, so I am eager to finish and spend most of my evenings studying.

Kaka, in his letter, wrote that plants are our closest friends. We are like their relatives. They do not talk to us, but we can talk to them. I used to speak to Shimul. The day I left home I visited him early in the morning to bid him goodbye and we cried together. I think my new friends at the park understand me. If they do not, I can teach them Bangla the way the school teaches me English. Or maybe plants have their own language. There must be a way to learn it.

Kaka told me the secrets of life, how it all began and how it flourished on the Earth. Like my *debdaru*, *Kaka* does not speak much but he knows a lot. He is wise.

I know you are lonely. So was I. I did not like it here at the beginning, but I do like it now. Beside my companions at the park, I now have a few friends at the school. And then there are my caring Mrs Williams, loving Miss Ellis and the ever-blossoming Isabel.

Now that I have a pen, I will write to you often. You will know about my life in this distant, foreign land. Please write to me and ask *Kaka* to write as well. The letters will make a bridge between us. Although we cannot travel on that bridge, our minds will be connected, and we shall be closer to each other again.

Yours lovingly,

Bolai.