

## THE FIRSTBORN BY ADITHA DISSANAYAKE

Nimmi held Asitha's hand and studied his face as they sat at the corner table, their usual retreat, at the Misty Mountain restaurant, whenever they came to Nuwara Eliya. After finishing the work in town they would come here for coffee. His eyes sparkled with warmth and love; he was visibly happy. She thought so and hoped... But as she watched, a deep frown appeared on his face, and slowly spread over his rugged features.

Outside the window, a thin drizzle kept falling on the already drooping geraniums. The headlights of a car briefly flashed on the cypress trees by the roadside. The wet leaves glistened in the sharp light. A cat ran across the portico mewing piteously.

'Life sure is what happens when you are planning something else.' Asitha turned to look at Nimmi. 'Do you know who said that?'  
Nimmi shrugged.

'Me neither. But it's so true.' He paused for a moment. 'What shall we do now?'  
Nimmi shrugged again, but this time her face broke into a wide smile. She looked like a kid who had been given a chocolate treat. 'Isn't this what we have always wanted? Oh, it's so wonderful! Just when I had given up all hope it happened, or rather it didn't happen.' She grinned again, wrinkled her nose and said, 'I wouldn't go to that doctor ever again though. He gives me the creeps.'

'We'll consult the best doctor in Colombo,' Asitha assured her and placed his hand on top of hers. 'How are you feeling? You mustn't drink your usual cup of milk coffee today. Coffee might be bad for you. I'll order tea for both of us.'  
After the waitress had left with their order, Asitha resumed the conversation. 'What shall we do now?' he repeated the question this time rubbing his forehead with his index finger.

Nimmi took his hand into hers. 'We'll go ahead with what we had planned,' she said with determination. 'We can't go back on our word now.'

## THE HAIR TRAIL BY BALRAJ KHANNA

**W**e met in strange circumstances. In fact we never met. We had just been thrown together by the roll of the dice. By the invisible hand of fate – to share briefly the space I would have liked to avoid by all means.

My fourth day at St Mary's. The initial shock of being in a hospital had been overcome by then. My leg, well stitched up, was in plaster to the knee. Now I could sit up in a chair, even walk a few steps on crutches with the help of Immelda, my beautiful Filipino nurse, young and still a trainee (later to be the most important person in my life, and now my wife of twenty years). Almost everybody in the all-male ward was friendly. There was an odd exception, though. The man four beds from mine on the opposite side. He had a few toes and fingers severed in a road accident. He cried when he talked and said how everything was 'wong, wong, wong'. No one minded what he said. We all felt for each other - blacks, browns and whites united by a 'wong' roll of that dice.

Every morning, we woke up to see one or two new arrivals – live mummies in brilliant white bandages – groaning or sedated. Our ward seemed like a Red Cross encampment in a war zone which was sending forth a truculently regular supply of casualties. The theatre of war, however, was no further than the London roads!

The bed next to mine, I noticed after waking up one morning, was empty. Its occupant until yesterday morning, a man of sixty who had driven his car into a lorry at a traffic light, and had lived to tell us it was not his fault, left in the evening on the arms of his young son and daughter-in-law. But I had a distinct memory of someone being transferred to it from a trolley in the dead of night. To see it empty so soon was really upsetting.

As I stood up to be taken for my morning walk (anxious to stumble so Immelda would steady me by putting an arm around me), I noticed that the pillow of the empty bed next to mine had a few strands of long black hair.

## THE RUINS OF CARTHAGE BY AMIT RANJAN

**T**here was nothing unusual about the evening. The day had just begun after rounds of tea at the university dhaba, spiced with jokes and a heated political discussion. He came home and then it was Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's absorbing qawwali resonating from the computer screen, filling the room with sublime ecstasy. To any evening visitor complaining about the persistence of Nusrat, he would say testily: 'If walls have ears, they better listen to some cool stuff, and acquire a taste.' A whole new world opened up with the qawwal's wanderings into a territory where Sufi lyrics push against the limits of language. Slowly coming out of Nusrat's spell he would sit down to work.

Lying on the floor, he was flipping through a book of short stories by Naiyer Masud, and occasionally looking at the ancient ceiling fan whirring above. One story, 'Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire', particularly gripped him. It's about a house inspector in Lucknow. The man discovers that every house he goes to has an eerie corner where he is seized by a chilling fear. In another corner, a strong sense of desire. The inspector gets obsessed with this alternating pulls of fear and desire, and instead of focusing on assessment of a property, he gets busy mapping these spots.

Engrossed in the story, he wondered if this new house he had recently moved into, had such spooky spots as well. He had noticed traces of its weirdness: unanswered letters from the postal era, letters written to him that he had not answered – now staring him in the eye. Lost in the reverie, he was rudely jolted by the noise of a book falling from the shelf above. Even before he could realize, the book hit his head. A Turkish book that he obviously couldn't read - still he kept flipping through it, perhaps induced by the smell of its yellowed pages. The first page of the book, the one that is left blank, was a letter from her that he had read many times over.

## A FISTFUL OF SILENCE BY SELINA HOSSAIN

**S**hamsul Alam started keeping a diary after Jennifer went back. It's been eight days. He has kept a red ballpoint along-side the diary. When he doesn't feel like writing, he leaves a red mark on the page for the day. If he is in a better mood, he draws little flowers and birds, or simply puts a tick on the page.

His head has felt jammed since morning. Shamsul loiters around the house, from one room to another, and walks out on to the balcony. This small balcony on the south was Jennifer's favourite too. How often did they sit together here, relishing their tea? He looks up at the sky above his Dhanmandi house. A tiny patch of blue. The high-rises all around have blocked out most of it. The little slice visible is now covered with dark clouds though there is no rain as yet, not even that moistness in the air or cold winds. Dense clouds somehow choke him up. Jennifer enjoyed watching clouds, though not rain. Rain is a spoilsport, she would say. 'I enjoy the bliss of love watching the clouds float around.'

Shamsul held her hands and said, 'The dark, dense clouds of monsoon...'

'I first saw such clouds only after I came here, Shamsu... For me they are an expanse of your love, I see your love in them... your love fills me up...'

He scribbles these words in the diary. And feels good. Then switches on the deck. Suchitra Mitra's voice floods the room:

*Shimar majhey ashim tumi bajao apan sur...*

The infinite plays its tune within the bounds of the finite...

Jenny would laugh and say, 'This is the most beautiful song of love...'

Shamsul feels he has found the true meaning of loneliness at last. There was a time when he felt sad being alone. Now, being alone means feeling Jenny's presence all the more.

## THE CASTAWAY BY DAYA DISSANAYAKE

Kita's eyes followed the slow, majestic glide of a seagull. Suddenly his eyes caught a small speck on the glittering water. It unsettled the placid picture of a deep blue sea and an equally limitless sky. Kita wanted it to go away so the beautiful picture in front of him would not be marred.

'The boat must be from a ship that was passing by,' Minda explained to his son.

When they came alongside the other boat, Minda threw a rope and tied it to their own, and stepped into it, careful not to disturb the body. Kita tried hard to keep the two boats steady.

'We have to take him to hospital,' Minda said. Kita knew his father would not leave the man behind to die unattended.

In the evening, seated on the front porch with his father, Kita said, 'Will the monks be able to save him?'

'I am sure he will recover.' Minda put an arm around his son. 'I want to help him.'

'We will go to the temple and pray to the Bodhisattva,' his wife said. 'Where is he from?' she asked as an afterthought.

'He is not from our country. Nor from the mainland either. He must be from a faraway place, sailing in a trading vessel,' Minda said looking into the distance.

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He heard voices, coming from a long way away; indistinct strange voices. What time is it? Is it the middle of the night? He tried to guess since the glazing sun was no longer on his face.

## MARTIN'S AT MIDNIGHT BY MANOJIT MITRA

They called him the Texan. Subir Roy was tough and rash and daring, rather unlike the average middle-class Bengali boy. A big-built young man with strong hands, whenever he met an old friend, he greeted him with a resounding thump on the back that left the poor fellow wincing in pain. After graduation, he decided not to pursue studies any more, and joined his father's business. But the strong, extravagant man never remained confined to the office. He was often seen in the coffee house hanging out with his old buddies. Boisterous and large-hearted, Subir would always pick up the bills for the whole table. The jovial and generous man was popular among us. Sometimes he took out his father's car and drove recklessly through crowded streets. If you happened to be in the passenger seat, you could see the speedometer needle touching 80. Fearing for life, friends seldom accepted his offers for a lift. But Subir would laugh dismissively and drive like mad, enjoying the frowns and tense moments of his friends.

To us he seemed to be having a carefree life, enjoying himself thoroughly. His mother had died when he was very young. His father had many businesses – automobile spares, electrical appliances and so on. Subir went to the office and did his work – clearing files, taking meetings, phoning up clients and chasing orders. But then, all of a sudden he would simply disappear without telling anyone anything, for going to a movie, or a bar in Park Street or pick up a friend and drive off to Diamond Harbour where the Hooghly is wide and turbulent. His father knew he was temperamental and didn't let it bother him too much. He had other assistants to manage things. The old man was a non-interfering type. Since his wife's death, he had become quiet and a bit stoical. He hardly worried about his younger son let alone ask him where he had been. Perhaps he knew the mettle his son was made of and accepted him the way he was. Perhaps he knew the futility of trying to mould his son.

But nothing remains the same forever. Things began to happen in Subir's life too.

## A BLATANT LIE BY NK KANNAN MENON

The beach was called the Tourists' Paradise. He was fond of watching the gigantic waves fiercely crashing on the shore. Barely clothed visitors – men in trunks and women in daring two-piece bikinis – were loitering around the beach.

From many parts of the world, they were having a ball of a time, blissfully hugging and kissing their partners. Adorable children were building castles in the sand, and then in a whim, smashing them. Swimmers plunged into the sea against the soaring waves. Black, white, brown – men and women of all skin tones were strutting around him, gushing and giggling. He loved watching them, their warm intimacy, euphoric mood. He would sit for a while, then walk in the silvery sand and lie on his back gazing up at the crystal blue sky. Sometimes he took a catnap. All through the summer this was his routine – spending the evenings on the beach. He reached the seafront after work and sat at his usual spot beside the mossy, jugged rocks. He loved looking at them.

He recalled the lengthy email that had come from his father:

My Dear Son,

It has been many days since we got a call or an email from you. Almost a month! You seem to have completely forgotten the two souls anxiously waiting for any communication from you. Your mother sits in front of the computer looking for your message on the screen. At times, she would get up at midnight and switch on the PC. Seeing none, she would grumble for a while and spoil my sleep. When it becomes unbearable, I give her a sleeping pill. You know she has high blood pressure. Every other day, I take her to the doctor for a checkup. She has to pop more tablets than food. The doctor warns that she needs to shun tension and worries. Son, why did you force us to buy the computer and get the internet connection too? You have no time to write an email, drop a letter or make a call. You said since you have a new laptop you can contact us anytime. Just two lines! Can't you only say, '*Amma*, I am doing fine?' I am writing to you in detail about everything happening over here every week. Don't you read my letters? Are you not interested in knowing about us?

## OUT OF THE COBWEBS BY USHA HAYES

Walking towards Ruislip Underground Station she looked up at the morning sky and noticed the crazy confusion of the seasons. The sun which had shone brightly a while ago livening up the carnations, magnolias, daisies and the soft tiny buttercups, suddenly hid behind layers of moist loitering clouds. All the four seasons seemed to have over-lapped into each other.

The well-groomed young man in a black pinstripe suit, leaning against the arched iron back of the lone wooden bench, looked up from the front page of the *Metro* and slowly went back to it. The well-groomed young man in a black pinstripe suit, leaning against the arched iron back of the lone wooden bench, looked up from the front page of the *Metro* and slowly went back to it. The paper screamed Brexit! in red, and yet – he intermittently looked up until the train slashed out after a 40-second stop. The station didn't exchange many passengers and the seats around her continued to move languidly.

The windowpane had quickly cobbled up her face and splayed it out fleetingly. Surprised, she looked at herself, expecting a sad, shrunken face, the sum total of the year gone by, a terrible time that had seen her stop smiling, lose her wry sense of humour, and her faith in the battery of angels that she had believed since her childhood had thrown a protective ring around her.

The face on the windowpane was still youthful and lustrous, and belying her worst fears, unetched. The ravages within would perhaps take some more time to show through. There was much to cry about, but also, now increasingly to celebrate. The latter of course was an afterthought, almost like a prayer she had said as a child, fearing to fail her exams, or at night, to make sure she did not slide into the pit in a corner of the sprawling court-yard of their haveli near Patna, to ward off ghosts and witches.

All negative thoughts, fears, she learnt as a child, had to be exorcised; otherwise they would grow into a demon to devour her. She had learnt this a long time ago.

## THE BRIDE BOAT BY TAHA KEHAR

The steamer had drifted along the rough, sapphire waters of the Indian Ocean for many days before we arrived in Bombay. As we drew closer to the port, the mist that had hazed my view of the clouds and seagulls flying over the sea gently lifted.

When I saw the central dome of the colossal Gateway of India, the newly-built monument with its regal arch, along the shores of Bombay, my heart leaped with fury. Akhil's India of elephants and long monsoons had been interrupted. From my vantage point, it seemed that the images Akhil had painted for me of his city had been disfigured. In his absence, Bombay had been held hostage by strangers. In a fit of wild inspiration, some-one had redrawn the city landscape, changed its skyline, altered its layout by adding unfamiliar streets and boulevards. It looked nothing like the city Akhil had told me about.

Over the years, he had told me about India, its tales and myths, its many hues and flavours. In the years that he and I had lived together as partners, these stories left a deep impression on me and kept him going despite heavy odds. They held me in a trance, and made me feel I had an umbilical attachment to that tropical country. Akhil was surprised by my intimacy with India, a country I had never been to. He thought that my fascination with the land had more to do with the fact that India was part of the Empire, the Jewel in the Crown. My Indian obsession, he mischievously remarked, stemmed from the gora pride, a white-washed view of the world that distorted the picture postcards of his childhood reminiscences. I did not agree with him.

'You're just jealous that I've got attached to India,' I sniped each time he disparaged my fickleness. My response would make his hoarse, deep voice dissolve into laughter. His reaction showed that culture was not a point of tension in our lives. It only lent more layers to our relationship.

## ALLAH KEEREM BY PAOLA MARTANI

A pair of brown Middle-Eastern eyes drowns into the blue of two European.

Stories never have a beginning and never an end. Some intertwine and untangle like knots, others cross paths without ever really touching. There are stories that seem to start with ‘once upon a time’ and end with ‘they all lived happily ever after’; there are others which never really have a concept of a starting point, the middle and an end. A story can open unexpectedly, even abruptly, with a sudden squall and the wind howling on a rustling, sensuous spring evening. Despite the suffering, loss and disruption, there can still be a golden cord tying the characters together. This story appears to have started in the East, in the land of elephants, colourful clothes and silver anklets, singers with a string instrument clutched to the chest, and of bashful women with tingling glass bangles up to their arms, and a round, bright bindi stuck to the forehead right below the neatly combed, thickly oiled hair. It is a recent story that unfolds without the mystery of the past, but is overwhelmed by the magic of the present. It is a difficult account – built on quarrels, and even more around hope – that takes shape in the Indian capital of New Delhi. A tale without a beginning is not difficult to tell, but I get the feeling that this starting point is only the starting point visible to the most blind. It is a story with a beginning, for us earthly people, but, on a March morning, sitting before the green park with the rich smell of mocha floating around from the canteen, someone whispered to me that it was coming from much further away. And before I forget, the past with its traditions and rituals does cast its shadow on this very contemporary story.

Maybe I should start from the end: the image of a blonde girl who gets on a plane heading to some city in Europe, leaving behind a heart that she no longer wants. Maybe I should start with her, in the Middle East, in front of a blue mosque, alone, in love now with a land that is not hers. Maybe I should start from the fact that, although distant, torn between his two selves, divided, he is still a part of her.

I do not know if God will bring them back together again or for this life their ‘we’ remains silent, only in the memory of her heart on a rainy night. I do not know if they will still walk holding hands... It all seems too difficult and too ruined for all that to happen.

## LOST WIN BY TINA BISWAS

*This top-notch Bollywood heroine was miffed with her beau after she found out about his dalliance with a new sensational model during a photo shoot in Durban... Was the Indian cricket team not there for a match with South Africa? After a string of recent hits, the prima donna is in no mood to tolerate the fumbling Fantu's waywardness. In that match he got out cheaply for what – just 16. And only one four!*

*The Filmfest magazine's popular gossip columnist Jodha Mehndi's column dripped acid. Her readers said that the feisty JoDi's tongue was not just forked but fiery, as well. Like red chilli. This reigning diva and her celeb boyfriend have been fighting like crazy! The buzz is that she's fed up with his jealousy and tantrums... Can you guess who it is?*

This beauty apparently had a couple of intimate meetings with a hotshot director at a film festival in Dubai and her man's not too pleased about it...

This leading lady's stunning outburst at a recent party made tongues wag as the problems of her personal life came tumbling out and were laid out on the carpet for all to see. I know by now you know who it is.

Anamika Khanna laughed wryly, then sighed and looked at herself in the mirror. This was not a morning she could start with a selfie (which she tweeted only after some judicious editing). Her fans would have to wait. She was tired. Exhausted. Years ago, she had ached to be looked at, to be watched, as if that simple act of attention justified her existence. She remembered one of her first visits to an ashram where she had been nurtured by a famous guru. The ochre-clad, long-haired man with a flowing silvery beard had pointed at the blue cushion she was sitting on.

'Is that cushion blue?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said, a little puzzled.

'Now go outside, and close the door behind you.' She obeyed.

'Is the cushion blue now?' the guru called out through the door.

'Yes,' she replied, after a moment's hesitation.

'How do you know if you can't see it?' quizzed the guru.