

Home

Winter 2007

Autumn 2006

Summer 2006

Spring 2006

Winter 2006

Fall 2005

Summer 2005

Spring 2005

Editor's Note

Guidelines

SNR's Writers

Mail

NOW STAY BY ABEER HOQUE

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*Winter promising, 17°C
who are we, he asked
lovers, she said
to his wrinkling nose
it's not enough, he replied
not even close*

The red glow of the lights inside Qualities made everything seem both high and low class all at once. Of course the patrons were high class. Hardly anyone in the South Kolkata bars weren't, but those at Qualities were bearable only in their indifference to everything but the cheap drinks. That's why he had picked this place for their meeting. He knew she'd be late and he wanted to be able to pay for his drinks while he waited. He lit another cigarette and caught himself coughing in anticipation. Clearing room in his lungs, he thought to himself ruefully and laughed.

"Bhai, ek Kingfisher," he asked the reluctant waiter who was probably hoping for a more monied customer. It was ok. He'd be rewarded when Rox showed up with her flair. There was something about Rox that never failed to look foreign. No matter where she was or what she wore. No matter that she was the one who had been born in Kolkata while he was a transplant from the South. He was sure it would be the same now, though he hadn't seen her in years. It was the only thing he was sure of about her. Everything else was up for grabs.

He had forgotten about her when she came up behind him. He had been lost in thought about his new short, a meditative aural experiment. His idea was that the audience be challenged with sound, to notice its presence, its absence, its power. He had been shooting in Ballygang for two days now with a crew of two dozen including one precocious brat of a child actor. There was something about using kids in films that felt like cheating to him. The scene only had to start and the boy's earnestness took care of the rest. No, it was more like integrity than earnestness, a hyper accessible and inevitable leap from thought to action. Of course, an audience would accept a child's actions and motives. Wasn't that the definition of a child – purity of intention? It was one of Arya's goals to elicit that reaction from an audience, but about a seriously unreliable adult character.

"Arya," Rox said in his ear. Her hand cupped the back of his head. He put his glass down on the warped wood bar and turned. She was thinner, more angular than before. His arm slipped around her waist, as her skin offered itself to his hands. Was it always going to be like this? That first split second of drowning in her smell?

“Let me look at you,” he said, pushing her away from him. She withdrew in amusement. Did she know what he was thinking? No, he decided. It was just Rox’s way to always look as if she did. Besides, he had no desire to rekindle their affair, no matter what his body thought. It had been torture, their breaking up, though she had never guessed. She had imagined herself the only casualty in that war, as the starry ones often do. True, his slow fading to a shadow of himself had probably not lasted any longer than her gloryburst of grief, but her stamp on his life was a wound he still treasured a decade later.

Rox took his hand and pressed it into his chest, curling her wrist in a familiar gesture. Her knuckles against his heart.

“It’s good to see you,” she said.

Her eyes were brighter than he remembered, her skin and hair darker. She was wearing a knee length cotton kurta and jeans. The kurta was thin enough he could see the silhouette of her torso through it. Her body was leaner, her breasts the same magnificent same.

“You’re here for a week, right?” he said suddenly.

“I am,” she said.

“Would you be in my new short?” he asked.

“No,” she said, just as promptly, “But I want to invite you to dinner. Come.”

“Where?” he said letting himself be pulled along. It was like this with Rox. You just got swallowed into her orbit.

“You tell me.”

He could never tell when Rox was being real. She claimed it was all the time, but he didn’t quite believe it. The last time he had seen her was five years ago. He had moved back to India after graduation and she had come on a health clinic assignment. They had both been in between relationships and she had been obviously wanting. He hadn’t known why he had (mostly) denied her. It was impossible to completely deny Rox. She exuded something that unabashedly sexual but in a way that was without guile. The physical was for her something separate from emotional. Or perhaps an extension of her often platonic affection.

But he couldn’t touch Rox without feeling something that went beyond the physical. Or maybe that was just his loneliness trying to make meaning out of nothing. Shamoli, his last girlfriend had gotten under his skin. She had made a project out of their relationship and having helped him get in on a sweet production gig, had promptly moved onto her next mission. But the year he had spent with her in his tiny Broad Street flat had proved his most adult romantic encounter. He was still angry at his feeling of loss.

“Dokhin is meeting us,” Rox informed him.

“He’s here too?” he asked with genuine pleasure.

“We’re sharing a room at the Tolly. We’re both going to Ayon’s wedding,” she said, “Didn’t I tell you?”

“Really? The Tolly?” he asked. It was his turn to be amused, though he knew Rox had moved far past their days of bread and cheese for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In their London uni days, they would often surprise each other with little

additions to their “gora” meals as they called them, more for the pale shade of the food than the race of people. Mini bags of potato chips, rolls of chocolate chip cookies, a chunk of salami on special occasions.

“It’s only for the weekend,” she grinned in acknowledgement. Rox was high class, even though she hadn’t grown up that way. Her parents still lived in a squashed three bedroom rowhouse in Liverpool and she and her brothers had worked since they were teenagers. But there was something about her bearing, the set of her jaw. And she didn’t give a shit about class, which was the only reason he had said yes when she first asked him out. They had been at a party at Dokhin’s flat his third year, her first, embroiled in a heated argument about globalisation, a topic overlapping her business courses and his media and politics interests. Suddenly, Rox had interrupted herself.

“Can I ask you something?” she had said a bit hesitantly.

“Of course,” he had replied, wondering at her change of mood. Had he been his usual overbearing self and offended her as he did most everyone?

She had swallowed the rest of her beer in a deliberate and disarming motion and asked him out. He had been so taken aback he hadn’t said anything at first. It would be the first of many times he would wonder how she could switch topics so quickly. Had she really been invested in the earlier conversation? How could she be so intense one moment and then laugh so quickly another?

“Conversational genius,” Dokhin would proclaim, “All Bengalis have it.”

“Or we’re essentially fickle,” Rox would add with utmost sincerity.

But Rox was different this time. She wasn’t being careful or restrained, but she was taking more time with her responses. Surprisingly, it was making him more reckless. More drawn to her. Was it another Rox plot, he wondered, and immediately felt guilty for ascribing subterfuge to her actions.

“We got a good rate at the Tolly, plus we’re splitting it two ways,” she said, “You should stay with us.”

“Like old times,” he said and they both laughed. The last time all three of them had been together was when they were all in London. Dokhin would stop by their tiny East End flat, often at inopportune moments, but for some reason it had never seemed to matter. Both Rox and he liked Dokhin tremendously and they would invariably end up all getting drunk on Dokhin’s whiskey and talking into the night.

Arya decided they would eat at Dhaba, a crowded family style joint in Ballygang. Dokhin came straight from the airport to join them. He entered with his usual understated energy and hugged both Rox and him for a long time. Then taking Rox’s hand, he assailed Arya with a barrage of questions about filmmaking. Dokhin came from money and there was never any doubt that he would continue the tradition. Much to his family’s dismay, he had refused to take over his father’s highly successful electronics company. Instead he had made good on his own within the burgeoning outsourcing market in South India. But he never spoke more than a disparaging sentence or two about his work. What he was interested in was everything else. Art, politics, war, literature, women, anything but business.

They were soon having a spirited discussion about the making and selling of film. What was the point of art? Was it to provoke intellectual response through emotional means or vice versa, or something else altogether? What about Arya’s impulse to ignore both intellectual and emotional space and focus on the senses instead? Love, said Rox. Justice, said Dokhin. Touching, Arya thought. The most primal sense of all. And since he had no way of reaching his audience that way

using film, he was playing with sound, the next least unspoiled sense in his opinion. The structure of his latest film had stayed close to his original storyboards, but because of the boy, something fundamental was different. Or maybe he was imagining the disconnect. Either way, seeing the film later had the effect of watching someone else's vision. No matter that he had micromanaged every angle and shadow. He wondered if it was the same for everyone. He knew some directors couldn't watch their completed films easily. Others, like him, scavenged every frame.

Dokhin had recently gotten engaged to a Kolkata socialite, though he had not let go of Rox's hand for a moment. His perfectly formed nails pressed into the centre of her palm, and Arya watched the faint half moons turn white and disappear. But Rox seemed oblivious to everything but their roller coaster conversation. Should the nonprofit model give way to for-profit social business, as she was beginning to believe? Was candid photography really a high art form, as Dokhin argued? Would Arya ever stop wearing cargo pants?

Since Dokhin was always prepared, he had a bottle of Black Label, his poison of choice. Many hours and a bottle later, they stumbled into a lux white sheeted hotel room at the Tolly. Within moments, Dokhin was sprawled on the king size bed, fully clothed and sound asleep. Arya followed Rox into the bathroom where she was brushing her teeth. She looked at him in the mirror, her mouth full of foam. He put down the toilet seat lid and sat down on it. She spit and rinsed and turned and leaned against the counter. Her kurta was incompletely tucked into the bottom edge of her bra, an old bathroom habit of hers. Her stomach stretched tantalisingly down into her jeans.

"How are you?" she asked.

"How aren't you?" he countered. This line of Rumi's had been their favourite ironic rejoinder.

"That bad?" she said smiling, "I heard from Ayon you broke up with someone recently."

He realised he had not thought of Shamtoli once that evening. That his anger had somehow dissipated. That all he could think of now was Rox. He pulled her body against him, smelling her skin. Her hands curled around his ears and then linked around his neck. He sat her down on his lap and pressed his mouth against hers. She kept her lips closed. He waited, as their eyelashes tangled, her long sharp nose brushing past his cheekbone. She started smiling slowly, the corners of her lips widening against his face, and then finally pursing, gathering, opening. He thought he had forgotten the taste of her tongue but realised in that moment that it was a memory that would never leave him. It was part of his sensory understanding of intimacy.

On the set of his film, the little boy had arranged two armies of different sized stones on the uneven sidewalk. An unusually smooth black stone was the general of one army. In between takes, the boy kept resetting the fallen soldiers because of some conflicted desire for symmetry, or what Arya imagined as fairness, or what Rox would still more abstrusely describe as a fallout of love. He kissed Rox again, for once thinking of nothing, not felled armies, not even himself.

The sound of Arya's mobile phone jangling woke him in the morning. He untangled himself from the silky cotton sheets and leapt up to answer it. As he spoke to his production manager in a low hoarse voice, he peered through the paisley brocade curtains. The light burned into his aching vision. He dropped the heavy cloth quickly and turned back to the darkened room.

Was that Dokhin's hand on Rox's hip? His other arm wrapped like a tentacle under

and around her? Arya closed his eyes and let the feeling wash over him. It wasn't just jealousy or possessiveness, feelings that until yesterday had been straitjacketed to his thoughts about Shamtoli. It was a lightning understanding of something deeper, that he could be with one person for the rest of his life, that he wanted the same.

It was true he could have been rebounding from his lost love with Shamtoli, misunderstanding his renewed ability to feel with this overwhelming sense of commitment. But it was also true that he had never felt more free, more desolate than in this moment. He opened his eyes and looked at Rox, stone general, bent on her glistening desires. He admired her love, the kind that never seemed to dim in intensity no matter how far and wide she sent it. His affection was less generous, weakening when shared, zero sum game. Perhaps this was his test. Rox was his unreliable character, but with enough integrity to fill a life. And Arya was the audience. Would he buy in?

The marbleised floor of the bathroom was cold and incompletely covered with plush towels. He picked up his crumpled shirt and pulled it on, sliding his feet into his broken down pumas. Rox made a sighing sound and he stopped at the door, his hand on the handle. Walking back to the bed silently, he stood over the bed. Just then, Rox opened her eyes and looked at him. Her gaze was neither curious nor passive. Only aware. It was then that Arya had the sensation that he had always been standing there. That this waking moment would last forever. He reached down and touched her face. Legion, this sense, feeling. This much was true, he thought.

Abeer Hoque is a writer and photographer living in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She'll have some of your Black Label too. See more at <http://www.olivewitch.com>.

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