

SHAFIQUR RAHMAN

## Eerie Silence<sup>\*</sup>

**I**T WAS NEW YEAR'S EVE. Don, Nick and I sat chatting around a table with four chairs in our favorite corner of the ballroom in a hotel hundreds of miles away from the battlefield. The fourth chair was Jeff's and it was empty. A few days earlier his bomber hadn't returned from its mission and he had been declared missing.

Although our friendship went back only a few years, our togetherness at the front had made us close friends. Don came from New Zealand, Nick and Jeff were Canadians. We often took time off together to vacation in this hotel and sat at this very table in the ballroom. This year again we decided to spend Christmas here and meet at this table.

The bad news about Jeff didn't reach us until after we arrived. Nick had brought along Jeff's things: the muffler, gloves, and kerchiefs he had taken with him after our last get-together. I'd brought my chocolate rations, which I saved for Jeff. He was crazy for chocolate.

It was the last night of the year. A colorful gaiety had swept over the entire hotel. An Italian crooner had been especially commissioned for the celebration. A famous orchestra and a few dancers had also been arranged. The ballroom had been beautifully decorated. There was a profusion of artificial flowers, silver and gold streamers, tiny stars, colorful balloons, and lots of other sparkling, glittering ornaments. And there were so many chandeliers and light bulbs that their collective glow made it difficult to distinguish between night and day. The music was different, as were the dances. Everything exuded a lively air of animation and restless exuberance.

The crush of revelers was made up of mostly young men and women like us on leave from military service.

"We don't have a picture of all four of us together," Don said. "I don't even have Jeff's picture. How much I begged last time to have a photograph taken with all four of us together. Oh, well ... But we must, this

---

<sup>\*</sup> "Sannāṭā," *Savērā* No. 2 (n.d.), 152–61.

time when he comes. God, let him be alive! If only he were here with us today! How much he would have made us laugh. Telling us all sorts of interesting things. How happy we would have been ...”

“My heart tells me that he’s alive,” Nick said. “Boys like him are born to live. War or peace, no harm can ever come to Jeff. My heart says he’s alive.”

“I wasn’t able to bring anything for him this time. When we last got together, he wanted to buy a very expensive watch but didn’t have enough money on him. He asked me to loan him some. I shilly-shallied, thinking it was a waste. He must have felt bad, I’m sure of it. I should have loaned it to him. He already had a watch. Maybe he just fell for that expensive piece. He must have felt very bad. I’d made up my mind to buy the same watch and give it to him as a present this time. How I regret not doing it before. How awfully much we miss friends when they’re far away from us.”

“Jeff is such a good friend. So sincere, so cheerful and generous. He’s not offended easily. You can curse him, become angry with him, not write to him for ages, ignore him, but the next time you see him he’ll always be as warm and loving as before. Like nothing has changed. Here, this is his kerchief. The same faint smell that his clothes gave off is wafting from it. Who knows, perhaps somewhere Jeff is reminiscing about us too.”

The English proprietor of the hotel walked over to our table. “Give the boys a drink,” he ordered the waiter. Don asked that we be excused, “No drinks for us. Our friend isn’t with us today.”

The Italian crooner took to his microphone and started singing. He was an old man. His hand gestures, the expression on his face, the rise and fall of his voice—they all seemed to indicate that he needed every ounce of his strength to sing. The song ended in applause, the crooner bowed a few times. A jazz tune was struck up next and people began to jitterbug.

Nick started talking about his regiment. The area where it was stationed came under aerial bombardment almost every day. One of the soldiers there was a very courageous young man well liked by everyone. “I’ve never in my life seen a more courageous and fearless man,” Nick said. “He always went out in front of everyone. I personally saw him move forward through a volley of bullets and stand alone at sites that came under heavy bombardment. Every night he stole into enemy territory for reconnaissance, and even though his helmet got riddled with bullets every time he never even suffered a minor scratch. A smile always played on his lips. And what a smile! It seemed as if it came from the

depths of his soul. I always found him smiling. My own fears vanished when I looked at him, reassured that nothing in the world could ever harm him, that as long as I was in his company I was absolutely safe. So I always tried to stick near him. During the most dangerous undertaking his smile revived me and dispelled my fear and I would start smiling too. One day we found out that our unit had suffered casualties. When we got there, the dead were being identified. I suddenly spotted him in the pile of dead bodies. For a while I couldn't believe my eyes. He was dead, but his lips were still serenely parted in a smile. The smile of dead lips—I don't think I will ever forget that. I've never felt as afraid as I did then. I trembled with fear in the dead of night. Even now when I remember that face I get goose bumps all over my body."

"Did you think about something else?" Don said. "When enemy bullets and bombs are raining down on the battlefield, a person doesn't feel all that scared. The body gets so stirred up by the excitement that you forget everything else, including fear. You don't feel anything. The worst dread comes in the stillness that takes over after the noise of bullets and exploding bombs has died out. To this day it baffles me that such harmless silence should strike up so much terror in the heart. That's when a sinking feeling ravages the heart; utter terror envelops the soul. I've seen the bravest, most seasoned soldiers lose their guts in this eerie silence and their faces blanch. It's a strange silence, devoid of the slightest movement or sound, but it keeps getting thicker and you feel as though centuries have gone by.

The hotel owner again came over to them. "Boys," he admonished, "on a night like this it's a sin to be glum. Those three girls over there, they're sitting all alone. Go talk to them. Dance, be merry. Okay, I'll go get them."

We looked at each other. None of us had the least desire for fun, but Nick said, "All right, just for a while."

My dance partner was a tall, red-haired girl wearing bright red lipstick. She worked on a ship. Her hair was in disarray, and from the languor in her eyes and her disconnected speech it was obvious that she was tipsy. She was asking me, "Why are you so quiet? Why are you dancing so slowly? This is a jitterbug. You have to dance like you have a bunch of honeybees or wasps trapped under your shirt and both of your hands are tied behind your back. Now come on, faster."

After the dance she said, "Let's go to the bar." She insisted that I should drink too. I told her that I hadn't started drinking yet. She didn't believe it. "So how can you live? Are you sure, you don't drink? You haven't seen life. You haven't seen anything. You're not getting your

share out of life. If a lady asked you, would you still not drink? Okay, if you don't want to, I'll drink your share. This, this is your share."

The music resumed and we started dancing again. At the end of every dance she insisted on drinking. By now her face had become quite flushed and the languor in her eyes was getting deeper. After one dance she asked me to escort her to her room. She began to wobble on the stairs and asked me to help her. I supported her with my arm.

"I like your raven black hair and your dark eyes. And you know what? I like your asceticism too. Support me with both arms. If a lady asked you, wouldn't you support her? You keep saying no to everything. Here, here's the key."

I opened the door, but she didn't let go of me.

"Your lips are so cold. Utterly cold and lifeless. It's obvious you haven't experienced life. You're miles away from its excitement. Take my word, start drinking today, this minute. That chest over there, there's a bottle inside. The New Year will be here soon. Let's celebrate by drinking. No—again?"

"What's this on your finger?" I asked.

"My engagement ring. I'll be married soon. My fiancé is on a different continent, but he's always in my thoughts. We write to each other every day. I carry his picture next to my breast all the time. Here, have a look." She showed me her locket. "Isn't he gorgeous? So utterly dashing? I love him more than my life. I like him a lot. But I also like you. I like your dark hair, your dark eyes."

"Your fiancé must be thinking of you right now."

"Perhaps. Perhaps he's celebrating the New Year drinking with his head in the lap of some girl and he's showing her my picture. Perhaps he's remembering me. You know, I've only got a week's leave. After that I'll go back to the sea, where we're mortally afraid of submarines, of missiles exploding underwater, and bombers keep hovering overhead. Stay with me a little longer. Your lips are so cold. Now you know my room. Come see me. I'll be waiting for you. Don't go yet. Stay longer. If a lady wants your company, would you refuse her?"

Shortly afterward the three of us were seated around the same table again. Don started to light up. He lit two, blew out the matchstick, and then lit a third one for himself with a fresh stick.

"Downright superstitious! What was the harm in lighting all three at once?"

"It's a bad omen."

“Bad omen my foot! Absolute nonsense. It got started during the last war. You know how? Three friends took out their cigarettes in the trenches. One of them struck a matchstick and lit his. An enemy soldier was lurking somewhere around and when he saw the glow he became alert. When the second guy struck his match, the soldier took aim with his gun, and just after the third friend struck his match he fired and downed one of them.”

“Whatever. The fact is I believe in omens. Just a few weeks ago my fiancée’s photo fell to the floor and shattered for no reason at all. Sometime later I heard that she’d married someone else.”

“Married?” we started. “Who?”

“Some millionaire. A hoary old coot ... bald and ugly. But he can give her all the comforts of life. What did I have? Just love. But love is so cheap and so common you don’t have to look for it. Beauty never shines without a good bit of fame. Had she married me, her beauty would have diminished and withered away. I hear just about everyone talks about it now. Wherever she goes, it precedes her and everyone is ready to sacrifice himself for her. So I’d say she chose the right person. I don’t hold that against her at all. But she was crazy about art. It was the sole purpose of her life. That’s what had drawn her to me. She was ready to give up all of life’s comforts for an artist. What made her change her mind? She used to say that she would wait for me no matter how long it took. Most likely our four-year separation caused her to change her mind. And four years is a long time. Anything can happen. Love can change. Perhaps the thought crossed her mind that I’m too poor ... have nothing ... neither a past nor a future. Or perhaps she really fell in love with this other man—a millionaire, a hoary old coot, balding and ugly.”

The Italian crooner was now singing a doleful love song. People were chatting. The whole place was resounding with boisterous noises and loud laughter.

Don pointed in one direction. A pair of faces was peeking from behind the curtain. They were hotel employees who worked in the kitchen.

“How frightened they look ... such dreariness in their eyes. And look how stealthily they’re peeking. Don’t they have a share in life’s many-splendored fanfare?” Don was overcome with emotion. His eyes moistened. “How unfeeling I used to be. Now the littlest thing makes me cry. Look at the Italian crooner. He’s an artist. He’s playing with utmost dedication. Would you say he’s happy? An old man who sings doleful songs in front of a packed audience—an audience that’s not paying attention, that’s indifferent to his singing, is busy making noise, drinking, drowning its own sorrows in the hullabaloo. God, how unhappy man is, and how

ridiculous this spectacle we call life! This trudging down an arduous track, how difficult it is to live! Sorrow and suffering everywhere, a fresh calamity on every step, accidents, rotten luck, now a friend, now an enemy, now human, now divine ...”

“But Don, didn’t you use to say that life is nothing but a great big void, and everyone daubs it with bright or gloomy color depending on their perspective? One time you even gave an example: whenever an insurance agent talks about life, you said, he always starts with death and ends with death. He calls people who die shortly after taking out a policy and have their survivors rake in huge sums fortunate. He invites everyone to have such good luck. But it’s also true that the agent isn’t an evil person at all. He doesn’t wish evil on anyone.”

“All this is true. I only wish I weren’t so sensitive, so emotional. Let’s talk about something else.”

The main door opened and in walked a black man. He just stood there for some time scanning every face as though he was looking for someone he knew. Finally he walked over to a corner table and sat down by himself. He took out a bottle from his pants’ pocket and downed half of it.

Why not invite him to join us, we thought. Jeff’s chair was empty after all. So we asked him over. He thanked us and settled into the empty chair. “I’m Darling,” he introduced himself.

“Great luck, everyone calling you ‘Darling.’”

“Boy, wouldn’t I wish that? No, actually they call me ‘Mr. Darling.’ Back home, though, I’m ‘Darky,’ because of my color. But I don’t mind. It’s no fault of mine.”

He told us that his plane had arrived that evening and he was allowed off for just a few hours. He was on his way to the battlefield. He took out the bottle again and offered it to us. When we declined, he finished off the rest. He told us about himself. In just a few years he’d seen many of the big cities and famous countries of the world.

“At first, it all looked very nice. New cities, new continents, new people—I really enjoyed it. But I got fed up quite soon. There are only four or five different types of landscapes: oceans, mountains, forests, deserts, and plains. In one place you see forests and the ocean, in another forests and mountains, and plains and mountains in still another. The same scenes keep repeating over and over again. And the cities, they all look more or less alike. Same train station, a few plazas with statues of famous men, a few wide, spacious streets with their countless automobiles and street-cars. Cinema halls not much different, maybe an aviary or a zoo, a couple

of famous monuments, look-alike hotels and the same girls in them—I do think a single breed of girls is found in all the hotels of the world, with identical make-up that hides their true features—the same conversation, same dances, same drinks. All I want now is to go home. And once I get back, I'll never ever go anywhere again.”

Then he started telling us about the officers of his regiment, how obnoxious they were, and he recounted the faults and shortcomings of each one of them. He laughed often. At first we laughed with him, then he laughed and we only listened. He thought everyone in his regiment was an absolute moron, dim-witted and lazy. Nobody knew anything or wanted to do anything.

He took out another bottle from his jacket, finished half of it and said, “Do you know why I'm telling you all this? Because I'm a coward, an out-and-out slob and a coward. I find faults in my mates just to satisfy myself. It feels good. Whenever I read about the calamities that befell the world's great men, I smile and feel a strange joy filling my heart. If truth be told, we're all very ordinary and small. Generations have come and gone and we haven't accomplished anything. We're all very God-loving, very superstitious, and very honest. We're absolute cowards.”

He got up and joined the dance moving with total absorption. When he returned he looked at his watch. Still had two more hours to kill. He started dancing again.

This time Darling returned with the hotel's owner in tow and he pulled up a chair and sat down with us too. When he saw the insignia on Darling's shoulder, he asked him about his regiment. “Oh, then you must know Jack?” and he gave Jack's full name.

Darling nodded.

“Where is he now and how is he?”

“I've been away from the regiment for a few months now.”

“Jack is my son, my only son. He was at college when they drafted him. He must be about your age. Tall, lean, with an incredibly innocent face. If you heard him talk, you'd think he's a young boy. His mother and I live for his sake. We're both very old and need rest, but Jack needs to finish his education so I have to work. His mother also works, but she's in our hometown, while I'm here. We last saw Jack two years ago. He was looking absolutely gorgeous in his airman's uniform. He was just a youngster when he went into the Air Force. In just this short time he had begun to look like an experienced young man. He told us about his new life, his new friends. Whenever his mother sounded anxious, he would say, ‘Mom, don't worry about me. I always carry the Bible you gave me in my chest pocket. I read it every day, without fail. And I always say my

prayers before going to bed so God will protect me.’ And I have no doubt that God will protect someone so good and innocent, our only child, for whose sake we live, someone who has never told a lie or hurt anyone, who hasn’t got an enemy in the entire world. Tell me, when did you last see him?”

“Quite a while ago. I’ve been away from the regiment for a few months.”

“He’s been intelligent and wise since he was very young. He never insisted on anything or spoke to us harshly, and he always willingly accepted whatever we said to him. If I was held up at work in the evening, he would come and stand quietly near me and say, ‘Dad, let me do some of the work.’ He ushered me into the new day every morning with a soft, sweet ‘Good morning.’ So little and so lovable. His beaming smile made me feel like I had seen a ray from the rising sun. One time I lost my walking stick and I wanted to buy a new one. I liked one in our local shop but it was too expensive so I didn’t buy it. When my birthday came along, Jack gave me a present. It was the very same walking stick. He had bought it by saving his pocket money for months. So far God has saved him from all kinds of dangers. Twice when he was involved in car crashes, once when he was thrown several feet away from a motorcycle he was on. He didn’t even have a scratch on his body. I vividly remember the day we lost him at the beach. We searched the whole night. It was chilly and there was a gale raging, but we found him intact the next day.

“Just last year he wrote to his mother that he would be flying over our city on such and such day and would come home for a while if there was a chance. But he couldn’t come. His mother spent the whole day at the window. He flew over the house. He asked her to always keep his room ready. He’d like to have a cup of chocolate as a nightcap and to wear his soft, furry slippers in the morning. His mother always keeps the room ready, every night she prepares the chocolate, and his slippers always lie right beside his bed. When our dog died, his mother didn’t want to get a new one, afraid that it might bark at him. At night she doesn’t even turn off the light over the door and she never goes far from the house, just in case he might turn up suddenly and have to wait...”

He kept it up. When Darling started to pay his bill, the old man stopped him. “No, you’re a friend of Jack so you’re my friend too. My guest. Give him our good wishes for the New Year when you see him. Tell him, your parents are waiting for you and pray for you.”

After a while he left our table.

Everyone was looking eagerly at their watches. The year was ending. A few minutes later the New Year arrived and a veritable pandemonium



broke out. Bells started ringing. The ballroom was filled with singing. We wished each other a Happy New Year.

And then Don asked Darling, "You were deliberately hiding something about Jack. Where is he?"

"He was with me during an attack. A bullet went through his chest right in front of my eyes. It went through his pocket Bible and pierced his heart. War's a dreadful thing."

The orchestra had struck up a boisterous tune. People were singing loudly. Some boys and girls showered us with glittering stars and streamers as they passed by.

Darling got up. His leave time was almost over. He thanked us and when he was leaving his eyes brimmed over with tears. "As much of a coward and wastrel as I am," he said, "I'm also equally sentimental. My heart aches when I have to say good-bye to friends."

He kept turning around to look at us as he made his way toward the main door.

People were getting more and more tipsy as time passed. Their talking had become disjointed and their walking unsteady. When someone became really drunk and started acting ridiculous, everyone laughed and made them the butt of sharp, cutting remarks and clapped thunderously.

Suddenly people started pointing and everyone looked at this one particular man. His every movement prompted a deluge of uproarious laughter and loud clapping. The man was struggling with his tea. He would slowly pick up the spoon, stick it into the sugar-pot, scoop up a spoonful and dump it into the milk-pot. Then he would place an empty cup over the milk-pot and stir it with a spoon. When people laughed, he quickly dropped the spoon. After a while he again lifted it stealthily and poured two spoonfuls of milk and a bit of tea into the ashtray, and again people clapped loudly and jeered at him, which made him freeze. He waited for a while but this time he spilled the tea all over the table and quickly started wiping it up with his kerchief. Another salvo of jeering laughs was fired at him.

Just about everyone's eyes were glued to him. The second he started his routine, a hush fell over all of them and then a sea of laughter swelled up everywhere.

He got up abruptly and started to look every which way with his vacant eyes. When the noise subsided, he said, "Friends, forgive me. I'm blind. I can't see. A fragment from an exploding bomb took away my sight. I'm completely blind; otherwise I wouldn't have fumbled around

like this. Friends, do forgive me.”

Meanwhile someone came from the other room and led him out holding his arm.

The music started again, people sang, and the dancing got going.

Hundreds of miles away from the battlefield, an eerie silence—like the silence heard at the front after the noise of the gunshots and canons and screams has died out, and which deepens and becomes more dreadful with every moment, sucking out the last drop of blood from faces, causing the heart to sink, and spreading a dreadful chill in the soul—swept away the exuberance and gaiety of the ballroom. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*