

SIDDIQ ALAM

Two Old Kippers*

. . . sleeping as quiet as death, side by wrinkled side, toothless,
salt and brown, like two old kippers in a box.

—DYLAN THOMAS, “Under Milk Wood”

RECENTLY TWO PENSIONED OLD MEN IN CALCUTTA met by chance in a public park. Six years ago, but on different dates, they had both retired from government service. Ever since, providence had been preparing for the day when they would be found sitting side by side on a single bench. Apparently they had each lived their lives and were now trying to invest their leftover days in something useful. Having arrived at this point, they were still poles apart.

Since retirement, one of them could be seen every evening without fail—every evening, that is, unless he was out of town—on one of the wooden or concrete benches at the edge of the grassy patch in the park. He spoke very little and when he settled down on a bench he stuck his umbrella vertically between his legs and rested his chin on its handle. Usually he preferred a bench that was remote and empty, but sometimes, when all of the benches were taken, he deigned to choose the one that had the least number of people and sat crouching in a corner so that if anyone tried to accost him he could pick up his umbrella and leave without wasting a second. During these six years he had surgery on his right eye, and most of his brow had turned grey. The crown of his head was bald and in the last light of the evening he often looked like a corpse that had escaped from the morgue of the nearby medical college and crossed the street to come here. All in all, his face seemed to be that of the ideal government pensioner who'd left everything that was his inside the walls of his office building.

The other old geezer, because he'd retired from the railway service, was able to get two free travel passes, which he used for visiting places

*“Kabḥī Dō Pir-e Fartūt,” appeared in *Āj*, No. 59 (July 2008), 150–62.

within the country. His addiction to gambling, acquired in his youth, had nearly ruined him. But now, at the tail end of his life, he mostly went to see religious sites, such as those at Varanasi, Puri, Tarkishore, etc. He'd also bought a little hut in a hermitage at Puri so he could spend his last days in peace. But mentally he wasn't yet ready for that, so, instead, he spent his days leafing through newspapers, or sitting idly and dozing on the terrace outside his building, or going to the public park. Now and then while dozing, he unconsciously found himself standing on the Antipodes with the waves of the Pacific swelling up around him. But all he could see, even on the waves, were racehorses swimming, or playing-card jokers rowing boats, or whirlpools circling around him like a roulette. These Antipodes had stuck in his mind since his school days when his geography teacher had resorted to using a globe to explain the true shape of the earth.

One evening when a tired sun was breathing its last on the *kadamb* and *karanj* trees planted outside the park's parameter wall, a chubby-cheeked boy was seen crossing the grassy patch escorted by his nanny. Noticing the two old coots sitting side by side, the boy, for some strange reason, began laughing and kept on laughing for quite a while as he repeatedly turned around to look at them. The first old man was still trying to figure out what might have made the boy laugh when he heard the sound of another laugh. Without thinking he turned sideways to look. It was another man, about his own age, perched on the other end of the bench.

"Why was the kid laughing?" he asked the other man in spite of himself, although it was the laugh of his own peer that was bothering him more than the boy's.

"Perhaps because he thought we're so old," the other replied and started to laugh again.

"Well now, that's not so strange that you should laugh about it. At his age, I'd have laughed too." He came to the boy's defense for no reason at all. "And anyway what are old-timers for?" He was pleasantly surprised at his own magnanimity.

"What for? To burn in the Nim Talla crematory—what else!" The second man tittered heartily. Then he stopped, leaned toward the first and asked, "Tell me a secret: would you allow them to perform an autopsy on you when you're dead?"

"What kind of question is that? And if they did, would I be there to stop them?"

"But you can. You can tell them in your will, I mean if you die a normal death."

To get off the subject the first man said, "Oh well. We'll worry about it when we cross that bridge," but deep inside the question had rattled him. For a while he gazed at the immense field where giant tents and canopies were set up during the winter for the circus. The buildings outside the park rose high into the air like so many cardboard boxes, which some tiny hand might reach up and send crumbling to the ground any instant.

"But why was the kid laughing—really?" he wondered to himself.

Later he was surprised to realize he'd blurted out a whole lot of things to that stranger—that didn't jibe at all with his reticent nature. Then, in quite a mysterious way, the two old men ran into each other the next evening, and again the following evening, and then every evening. Neither had asked for the other's name. They also avoided talking about personal matters, which was good; it helps prevent discussing many painful subjects.

One day the second old man asked, "Why do you always have an umbrella? Especially now when the weather is fine?"

"I feel defenseless without it," the other replied unpleasantly. "I've been lugging it around all my life. I can't give it up now. Impossible!"

"What kind of protection do you expect from an umbrella?"

"Why?" the other said irritably. "There are many advantages, not counting the sun and rain. Suppose we're sitting on this bench and a snake slithers out of the grass right between our legs. We can at least defend ourselves with the umbrella. Or suppose you're late getting home one night and you take the Carmichael Hospital route where you find a body on the pavement. You can at least poke it with the umbrella tip to see whether it's alive or dead. And to tell you the truth, I can't even remember how many times I've used it to fend off attacks from stray dogs."

"Wow! But you're forgetting one other advantage." The other old coot was having a hard time suppressing his laughter. "Say you're sitting on a bench and you're afraid you might have to face this man you really don't want to see, so you snap your umbrella open and hide comfortably behind it. Isn't that something? Ha-ha-ha!" He was laughing heartily as usual.

"Have you ever been a circus clown?"

"No. But I've wallowed enough in the Hugli mud to be a turtle," the old man retorted.

There was a fence on three sides of the area of the park earmarked for the circus, and a row of dense and not-so-dense almond, *kadamb*, *ashok*, *chatiyan* and *karanj* trees ran along it. Beneath the trees, at suitable intervals, wooden or concrete benches had been placed haphazardly. Around this huge area a blacktop path had been laid out for strollers. When the lights came on in the buildings outside the park, the area was submerged in a kind of semi-darkness in spite of a few halogen lamps

installed by the city. Many couples came here to take advantage of the semi-darkness. They sat on the thick carpet of grass and spent time enjoying the nice cool breeze. The two old coots just looked at them indifferently, as if they had no interest in whatever strange acrobatics were going on in that darkened spot. They had stopped holding forth critically on society's many different ills a long time ago anyway.

"Life's an awfully tiring game," the second old man said philosophically one day. "That fellow above," he pointed at the sky, "is a mighty dangerous scorekeeper. No matter how many goals you score, he cancels them out in the end and you're left with a big zero."

"Have you started thinking about dying?"

"What good would dying do? Even if a tree stops flowering or bearing fruit, even if no leaves sprout on it, it's still better that it stays put. If nothing else, at least snakes and squirrels can find refuge in it."

In the fading daylight their eyeglasses would light up as if somebody had carried off two mannequins from the show window at the Grand Hotel and set them down next to each other. The first old man was used to wearing a dhoti and kurta, so he appeared much older than his companion, who wore old-fashioned pants and a shirt.

"Judging by your clothes, you still look quite fit. Perhaps you'll live longer than me."

"Don't curse me," said the second man. "My grandfather was already bedridden at fifty, but he dragged on for another thirty years. The old coot made life miserable for everyone. So, it's kind of difficult to say."

Then he came up with an idea: "Why don't we toss a coin. Heads you'll live longer, tails I will."

Before the first old man could say anything, the other had pulled out a five-rupee coin and was holding it between his thumb and index finger looking at him expectantly.

For a moment, the first old man stared at the other. His pupils didn't move and he appeared to be immersed in thought. Suddenly he leaned toward his companion and said, "You take heads and leave the tails for me."

A derisive grin splashed across the lips of the second man. He tossed the coin in the air. It went up, spiraled down in front of the bench, rolled and then disappeared into the tall grass. They both got up from the bench and started looking for it. The second man stretched his hand out under the bench and ran his fingers through the grass. The first one thought it was his duty to provide moral support and joined in. They went on searching under the bench, behind it, and on either side, but the grass was so thick and the daylight penetrating that thickness so weak it seemed

impossible to ever find the coin. Even so the two old codgers went on rummaging through the grass until their fingers became soiled. Strollers passing by gawked at the two with wonder and amusement. Some even stopped to watch a while.

“Looks like those old geezers have lost their dentures,” a teenager mockingly commented. The two stopped searching and quickly sat up. They were holding on to the edge of the bench, panting as if they had traveled a long distance. Suddenly their eyes met and they both realized the disappearance of the coin was in perfect accord with their wishes. Suppose they *had* found it? At least they were happy now.

But the second old man wasn't satisfied. “We can think of some other way, can't we?” he said.

“For instance?”

“You see that fellow coming toward us. We can ask him his name. If he turns out to be a Muslim you'll live long, and if he's a Hindu I will.”

“What if he's a Christian? Quite a few of them live in this part of town.”

The second old man shook his head, disappointed.

“In that case, we'll need a third party to play this game. But what's the use. This world is so divided on every issue there aren't enough coins in it to suffice.”

In spite of himself, the first oldster had started to take an interest in this game, all the while conscious that what was happening didn't sit right with him. But their meeting every second day had acquired the force of destiny. Every time he traversed the distance from his home to the park, supporting himself on his weak, spindly legs and his umbrella, he was always overwhelmed by a compelling desire to go back, but some invisible force kept pushing him to the other man and that familiar corner in the park.

“Do you realize,” the second old man brought it up again, “we can still do a lot to make our remaining time meaningful.”

“What do you want me to do? Start working again? Or join some social movement?”

“Of course not!” the second man smiled. “Old men like us aren't good for anything. We have to stay the way we are. I do feel, though, that a hermit's life, the fourth state in which old men live in the wilderness and practice renunciation, is about right for us. This will cure the world of many ills. The new world will belong to new people. What do you think? I've gone so far as to buy a small hut in a hermitage. All it needs is a bathroom, which will be built soon. It's right on the edge of the sea.”

“I lost my faith during the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1947, or rather, I threw it into the fire.”

“That’s strange.”

“Isn’t it though?”

“And you think this will bring peace to your soul?”

“Well, at least it’s made me rise above these filthy events and look at them dispassionately.”

For some reason the second old man started grinning again.

“You know what?” he whispered. “We should try again. Maybe this time we’ll succeed.”

“What difference would that make? Whoever dies first, it will be the same for the other. Sooner or later we’ll all be on our pyres. But if you insist, all right ...”

“Oh no, I wasn’t joking. I’m quite serious. All right, let’s just let it hang for a while. God knows why I occasionally begin to fear you.”

Sometime during the afternoon it had rained and the smog had been cleared from the sky over Calcutta. The stars appeared large and bright in the sky. The second old man shifted uneasily on the bench. Perhaps he’d arrived at a fresh decision. He lifted his finger and pointed toward the pole star that had risen with the sunset.

“You see it, don’t you, shining right between the two almond trees? It’s my guess that in half an hour it’ll be over the top of the tree on the right. Let’s walk around the grounds once. If the star doesn’t reach there by then, you’ll live longer.”

“Who wants to live longer? Even so, if you must insist ...”

The two old-timers started to walk along the edge of the blacktop path. The first man was intentionally walking fast, followed by the other, who was plodding along slowly on his long, spindly legs.

“You’re walking fast,” the second old man said from behind laughing. “Looks like you’re hell-bent on living long.”

“That’s nonsense,” said the first old man, slowing down because his heart was beating quite fast, which made it hard to breathe. “This nonsense is not likely to alter the course of nature.”

“Then why are you practically running? You’ll ruin your heart. Remember your age.”

“You’re really a pest,” said the first old man as he continued walking. “You should have been in politics. That kind of work suits your kind of dirty people.”

Without bothering to look behind him, he kept walking and covered half the distance in the dim light. The second old man had been left far behind and was shaking his head meaningfully. The first one stopped to catch his breath.

“If you walk so slowly, you’ll miss the pole star.”

He heard the other shoot back from behind, "Shut up! Can't you stop blabbering? Your mouth stinks, dirty old man."

He started off again, but with each step his heart pumped so hard he felt as though a hefty hammer was pounding away inside his rib cage. Time and again he would stare up at the sky. He felt as though all the stars were rushing forward, as if they too were hell-bent on defeating him. He started to walk even faster, so fast that cold beads of sweat started to sprout on his skull. He could also feel traces of muted pain in his chest which quickly grew so intense that he promptly sat down on the ground, clutching his umbrella tightly. As he drew quick, deep breaths he felt as though the people and lights around him were fusing together in the cool atmosphere pervading the area.

The second old man was standing in front of him, grinning.

"If you run so fast, this is what you have to expect. It's not good for your health. So greedy and at such an age!"

Rubbing his chest he ignored his interlocutor. His chest pain was beginning to subside a bit. He got up, took a few steps on his wobbly legs and stopped again. The pain had returned.

"Let's drop this foolishness," said the second old man, gently rubbing the other's back. "Where in the world have you heard of a star moving? Why would it inch its way to the top of a tree? It's the earth that moves and gives this mistaken impression."

The first old man was pissed off. Grabbing his umbrella, he pointed the tip at the other man, making a gesture, and mumbled something.

"Don't get mad," the second old man said. "Looks like you're not feeling well. Shall I take you to your house?"

"Go to hell!" the first one pushed the other's hand aside rudely. "I don't need your help to get home. But I do feel we should rethink our acquaintance. Perhaps we're not meant for each other."

And tap-tapping his umbrella, he started walking in the dim light of the field toward the park's southern gate. The second old man shook his head in disappointment.

"Strange! Why should it be my fault if the stars don't move?"

The next day he arrived at the park somewhat early, wondering how his companion was doing. But the old coot couldn't be seen anywhere. And he didn't appear for the next two weeks either, although the second old man went about methodically looking at every bench. A feeling of guilt began to stir in his heart: Maybe the joke wasn't suitable for a man his age!—he thought. One day he simply couldn't stand it anymore and set out to look for him. He'd always seen him come into the park through the southern gate, so he went out that gate and started walking along a

fairly big street. He wandered in and out of the many small streets and alleys that branched off from it. He stared at the windows and balconies of buildings hoping to spot him somewhere, until night descended on Calcutta. Suddenly a dog materialized from somewhere, lifted one of its hind legs and started to pee on his shoes. By the time he realized what was happening, it was too late. The dog was already gone. Vanquished and unsuccessful he returned home with wet feet. He washed his socks and hung them on the line to dry in the balcony.

“Oh Lord, could he have died?” he wondered, pressing his eyes.

Three days later he suddenly saw him, but on a different bench and in a different corner. He leapt toward him, but before he could reach him the first old man snapped open his umbrella and hid himself behind it. Stopping in front of the umbrella, he smiled, cleared his throat and said, “I’m sorry for what happened that day.”

The umbrella didn’t reply.

“Yesterday, I tried to look for you. But perhaps that was a foolish thing to do. To tell you the truth, I don’t even know where you live, your street or your house number.”

The umbrella remained silent. The second old man gave a long, cold sigh.

“I’ve decided to go to the hermitage. That’s all I’m good for now. I can give you the address if you like. It’s a nice place. You would like it. You can stay as my guest for a week or two.”

The silence continued. Finally, he admitted defeat, turned around and left the park.

Three years later he returned to Calcutta. It was two o’clock and the park was deserted. On the grounds in front of him, a little boy was playing with a rubber ball under an almond tree. As soon as the second old man entered the park his feet carried him to the same old bench that stood in its place somewhat skewed, as if it had all happened yesterday. He sat quietly on the bench for a long time. The trees’ shadows grew longer, stretching across the field. It seemed as if the circus had just left a few days ago because potholes could be seen everywhere and there were animal droppings here and there. Remembering his old companion, the man smiled. Who knows, he might meet him again on this very bench. And if he did, he would tell him about life in the hermitage, about the tranquility and peace he had found there. He would tell him how nice it felt to walk along the edge of the sea, with the land behind and nature’s azure secret stretched out in front of his eyes. The sea from which Brahma

and his progeny had emerged, from which every living creature had crawled like a fledgling just hatched from an egg. Look old fellow, if you're listening to me, if you want to live long, if you truly believe in living, you must consider abandoning the cares and noise of the city. The city's demands gnaw a man completely hollow from the inside. I wouldn't be surprised at all if one day people began withdrawing inside themselves. God knows what kind of ribs keep them from deflating or what strings help them walk.

He remembered all the wagers he'd put to the other man. And how, despite appearing indifferent on the outside, deep inside they were both anxious to win, as if their whole life depended on some insignificant coin or the movement of the polar star. What if his companion *bad* won! The sky wouldn't have fallen. If one really takes stock of a man's entire life objectively, would it be so wrong to say that he has nothing to lose or gain?

His reverie broke to find the little boy standing before him.

"You want something? What are you looking for?"

"My ball," the boy said hesitantly, pointing with his finger under the bench. The old man turned his head and looked behind the bench where a pink ball was waiting to be rescued from the small jungle of green grass. The man stretched out his hand to pick it up when something suddenly glittered on the wet ground beneath the grass.

"Good God!" Handing the ball to the boy, he stood his frail body up on its legs, went behind the bench and squatted in front of that shining object. It was a coin, a five-rupee coin, its Ashoka column side facing up. Wet from a recent rain, the coin was sending a shaft of cool dim light toward him.

"Heads!" he screamed. His mind raced back to the time three years ago when the first old man had bet with him one evening about living a long life. "So, I won the bet that day. What a miracle! How strange, this coin's been lying here all this time!"

He pried the coin from the wet dirt, returned to his place on the bench and started rubbing it between his thumb and index finger. The boy was kicking his ball under the almond tree. The jagged edges of tree shadows had advanced quite far and were touching the fence around the field. He realized time had flown by and he raised his slumped shoulders.

"Curse me! The one who said that in the end it's a man's character that counts was right. I'll probably remain a worthless old man till the day I die."

He got up, wiping tears from his wrinkled face, and walked over to the grass behind the bench. He stuck the coin back in the wet dirt under the grass with its tail side pointing up. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon