

## Skyward

Mili thought she had, at last, found out the source of the smell.

For a brief moment, she stood bewildered looking at the cockroaches, inert and decaying, in the narrow ill-lit passage between the wardrobe and the bedroom wall. And then to take a closer look, she shoved them one by one onto the open floor with a broom – her eyes unblinking in a stiff and defiant gaze.

It was mid-day; she went on examining the rotting insects, turning them over with the broom under the bright light streaming through the window. The touch of the broom had left some of them ridiculously bare, shorn of deep-brown skins. Others lay huddled amidst the remains of severed legs and whiskers and the fraying tiny pellets that were their heads, exposing whitish oily bellies.

Mili shut her eyes and pressed her nose with her *sari anchal*.

By late afternoon Mili knew she had been wrong in her surmise. The foul smell that had been beating at her nose since the last few days had returned to her by that time. It couldn't be cockroaches then.

After the exodus of the cockroaches the floors had been sprayed with disinfectant and swept clean and dry. Mili didn't sense the smell for sometime. But by evening sitting with Haroon for tea upon his return home, she had barely taken her first sip when suddenly the smell struck her.

The smell had been with Mili for some days now. She hadn't given it much attention at the beginning – hadn't been bothered at all, and why should she be? Smells are there all over. However, lately she had been observing that the smell was different, it seemed to target her only and no one else in the house. It was only she who could catch it. It visited her any time – morning, noontime, evening – swooping on her at work or at leisure, even while she slept.

It would mount aggressively all over her and then hang perilously close to her face. The strong stench wouldn't last long, yet the effects lingered on. At such a time, squeezing her nose or pressing it hard against her *anchal* or a handkerchief wouldn't stop the smell from sneaking into her brain.

At the beginning all Mili could do was sniff the air and look for possible sources of the smell. She would thoroughly inspect the kitchen bin, the shelves where leftovers might be

rotting and indeed the hidden or unseen corners of the furniture. The inspection had resulted in discovering many probable sources, and each time she found out something she felt relieved that her search had mercifully ended. Finding a slice of bread with a greenish coat of fungus on it or a forgotten piece of cheese in the fridge made her feel certain she had succeeded in catching up with the culprit. A daylong drive cleaning the kitchen and the storeroom would give her the feeling of a temporary reprieve. But no sooner had she allowed herself some sense of self-satisfaction than the aggression recurred, and she found herself totally unguarded against an unseen aggressor.

Still, Mili did not give in. She sent out heaps of clothing, bed sheets, pillow covers for laundering, put away the blankets, curtains, the carpets on the rooftop to dry directly under the sun. She arranged for the floors to be mopped every few hours, sprayed eau de cologne all over herself several times a day and finally, as a tentative recourse, trained herself to hold on to a bottle of cologne next to her nose while asleep.

While Mili remained busy with all this, she found out that it was she and she alone and no one else in the house who was getting the smell. Haroon didn't get it, the maid Sufia didn't get it. Haroon looked thoroughly confused. Not finding any clues to deal with the smell, also intrigued as though by a wicked prank, he went on to try a different technique – a crudely straightforward one, though. Drawing in all the air he could pump into his puffed-out chest sniffing hard, he attempted to hunt down the slightest trace of the smell from the atmosphere – but to no success.

Nevertheless, by way of a generous and no less extravagant gesture of sympathy, he joined Mili in her drive to track down the smell. The unseen and covered spaces were the obvious targets, but it wasn't too long before he pulled back, reassured it didn't exist. The maid, Sufia in her search was more determined. She literally rubbed her nose at almost everything in the house and was overwhelmed by the delicate, strong, intermingling and even the secret, private and disguised smells of all the various objects she put her nose to. She too didn't find any trace of Mili's aggressor. Mili was left alone – to her own devices.

It turned out that the smell was Mili's alone. It was she who had been getting it right from the beginning, and no one was able to share it with her. It was at that stage that Haroon took a different route to handle the situation. Rather than disagreeing with her or disputing the presence of the smell, he proceeded cautiously, "Tell me when do you get it – is there any particular time in the day or night? Or, does it come when you're in a particular

state of your mind – say, when you are angry or upset about something or someone? It could be a state of mind – couldn't it?" He tried to explain in a slow, deliberate way.

Mili was not impressed by Haroon's reasoning – not as much at the earnestness with which he proposed it as much as its strangeness. She was not angry with him nor did she feel obliged to consider the fact that Haroon was not dismissing the matter out of hand and was somehow making an effort to understand what her problem truly was. At heart, she remained convinced that the matter was too intriguing to be reasoned out.

The smell, as Mili came to experience it over the days, approached her without a bang. It would come quietly and suddenly, with almost a physical sensation, hitting at her nose first and then taking its whirling tour inside her head. The tip of her nose would quiver, the nerves at the center and the sides of her forehead jangle and the back of her head weigh down heavily in pain. The symptoms were physical, yet so privately her own. She felt herself alienated day by day.

Mili still responded to Haroon's investigative, yet methodically monotonous probing:

"Do you feel the pain when the smell presses you?"

"It hits."

"Your nose at first?"

"Quite strongly."

"Then inside the head?"

Mili nodded in agreement.

"Then it spreads to the eyes, to the forehead?"

Mili nodded.

"Yes or no."

"Yes."

"What do you make of it when it comes – is the smell familiar?"

Mili waited, searching for what she thought of the smell. It was neither familiar nor altogether unfamiliar. A strong, offensive stench. She twitched her nose, drew in some air but felt awkward to identify the character of the smell.

Haroon asked, "A rotting smell? Like that of a carcass of a dead animal?"

"Could be."

"A cat, for instance, dead and rotting?"

"How would I know of a dead cat?"

“Really a foul smell, nothing compares with a cat rotting. You feel as if your entrails are bursting. Something like that?”

“Could be.”

“Or like that of rats or moles?”

“Could be.”

“Too many could-bes. Have you thought of the rubbish emitting a thick, moist stench like one gets walking along a footpath?”

Mili kept silent not wanting to repeat ‘could-bes.’

“Is it like the smell coming from open drains? We don’t have open drains nearby though, but exposed manholes are there.”

“In that case you should have gotten it too.”

“That’s precisely my point. You alone are getting it – it’s haunting you day and night, and still you can’t account for it.”

“So, you think I’m lying? Why must you think it is necessary for you to get the smell just because I get it? Do you have a headache when I have one?”

“We aren’t talking of headaches. Getting a headache and getting a smell aren’t one and the same thing.”

“That’s just the point. I want to know why you don’t get the smell when I do – I get it so badly, it almost chokes me to death.”

For some time Haroon kept away from the subject. And when he started all over again, he was more cautious. He said, “I’ve heard there could be a physical reason – allergies perhaps.”

Mili asked absentmindedly, “Tell me what you’ve heard?”

“Those who have migraine, for example.”

“I don’t have migraine.”

“Sinus infection is another.”

Mili forced a pale smile. She knew that Haroon was aware she didn’t have any of these symptoms, and his referring to them, she thought, was an excuse for his faulty reasoning, or perhaps it could be a trick, not wanting to allege that she herself had cooked up the problem, that it was all a product of her imagination.

At the very beginning Haroon didn’t give it much attention but as the situation began to worsen, he got worried. He felt confused about the entire affair. At the start it was Mili

alone, suffering – and he thought it was a temporary matter, but its lingering presence made it into a true crisis threatening to last long enough to bring complications in their lives. Was it anything more than just smell that bothered her – a manifestation of something wrong in their relationship he didn't know of, never bothered to know at all? As husband and wife they were under the same roof ten years now, and Haroon could claim he knew his wife well enough. It would be odd to imagine anything abnormal about her ways that she had kept away from him all these years. He had no knowledge of a fetish or a mania she suffered from that some housewives run into due to the sheer tedium of daily errands. As a homemaker, Mili was thoroughly sensible, she would never decide on anything without looking into the pros and cons, and would try to find a good solid reason for what she thought or did.

This being Mili, it was unthinkable that she should be caught in the *smelly affair*. For Haroon, the problem was not one of believing or disbelieving, but of seeing her suffer about which he was unable to do anything.

The house, over the days, had ceased to be a house. A variety of disinfectants and air fresheners got sprayed all over thickening and fortifying the air from probable aggression. Back home from work, Haroon sometimes wondered if he were touring a hospital ward! And once in a while Mili would give him a fright, saying, “So I'm a maniac, you see.”

As days went by, Mili found out that the smell did not confine itself within the four walls of the house. She felt pinned by it elsewhere as well, in the fish market one day, and on another, in a wedding party just when she was all set to pounce on the all-enchanting chicken-biriani and hot rezala.

Inside the house, it remained equally nasty not sparing her at all, not even when she was entwined with Haroon in the literal sense. One night driven into a fiery passion locked in Haroon's arms, she suddenly got restless being struck by her tormentor. Freeing herself, she blasted at him, “Is it rape you're up to?”

As Mili learned to live with the smell, she began to reflect quite a lot differently. The smell, she now pondered, had no source of its own, that it sprang from nowhere and everywhere. It also occurred to her that it was not independent of the circumstances and situations that turn and rotate the wheels of the universe – the complex, unending, composite process of which human life is only, if not insignificant, a part. She was soon to conclude that the entire system of the universe floated on myriad layers of smells, and since everything – human and animal life, nature itself – survived simply by drifting on the smells,

a shift of balance might cause the subdued smells to invade all they come across with their huge, hungry mouths.

It was at that point that she began to gradually free herself from the routine sanitization, and relaxed the cleansing drive she had been carrying on undeterred since the advent of the smell. However, as her last and only defense, she kept on holding a bottle of cologne close to her nose while in bed.

Mili now knew that it was primarily her sensitive nose that was to blame. But she wondered, was it far too distant when other people's noses would also respond – their blunt nostrils jolt like hers! If that was not to happen, why should she carry on with the burden of others! Her burden had become heavy simply because it wasn't hers alone.

She wondered at the indifference of other people's noses to the smell. What then was an organ such as the nose for?

It was the nose that mattered. Mili began examining her nose in the mirror under a thorough scrutiny; she examined its shape and architecture comparing it with the other important or relatively less important items fitted to her face. Apparently, the eyes seemed to be very important but the functions were somewhat overrated. Seeing was not the only important thing in life. One could perhaps see without the eyes, the invisible third eye shouldn't be dismissed for just a myth. However, compared to the eyes, the mouth appeared crudely functional, but not the lips. A passionate kiss, Mili knew, was sometimes invaluable. As for the nose, despite the facade of impudence offered by its physical altitude compared to the other neighbouring features, it was to her the most important organ for its matchless ability to communicate with the unseen and the mysterious.

When Mili narrated her observations, Haroon listened without a word. She further went on, "Of all our senses, the power to smell is the most unique, it's power proper. What do you think?"

Seeing that Haroon was not responding, she abruptly wrapped up the conversation, "A maniac, I really am."

Haroon was in a quandary. Was it possible for a manic to get to know the symptoms common to maniacs? Or, was she conscious of what she was doing?

One morning Haroon read something unusual in the newspaper. A news item in bold declared a citywide cleaning operation giving an outline of the elaborate programme drawn up by the authorities. From the news item, Haroon learned that the entire city had become a

dump yard for garbage and that there were countless sources – habitats – of bad smell all over the city. These habitats had come up everywhere, in all the places – roads and alleys, parks, kindergartens, playgrounds, parliament house, office buildings, chests and cabinets, newspaper offices, teleprinters, TV channels.

Having read the news, he handed the newspaper to Mili. When Mili had finished, he was surprised not to find any visible reaction on her face, she didn't so much as glance up from the paper, as if it were about as irrelevant as the picture of a minister inaugurating a flower exhibition huddled around by his cronies. Or, as if it were as inevitable as a shower of rain in a cloud-cast June evening.

Mili, however, responded to Haroon's curious look after a while. She said, "Will they clean the dustbins?"

"Why the dustbins alone? They'll clean up all the places, all the habitats as they called it. A fine expression, isn't it? I had no idea there were so many habitats".

"Will they be using bulldozers?"

"Why not, if they feel it necessary."

"Run them over kindergartens, parks?"

"Why should that be?"

"Run over the secretariat, the parliament building, newspaper office, teleprinters...?"

"Oh, Come on, You ..."

"A maniac, yes."

That night Haroon woke up with a start. Opening his eyes he had a bizarre feeling, of being hit somewhere at the back of his head. He couldn't move his head weighing heavy with pain.

He waited a few seconds to be certain that he was not sleeping and then he sprang and sat up on the bed. For the next few moments he was at a loss to figure out what was going on. He could somehow sense something whirling inside his head and beating around the softness under the skull. He felt heaviness in his chest and as he struggled to breathe, he became baffled by an utterly disgusting odour piercing his lungs.

Jumping off the bed he switched the lights on and began a frantic search on the pillow, the bed sheet without a thought. Then crouching on the floor and crawling on all fours, he hunched further down the bottom of the cot. Failing to find anything, he stood up looking awkwardly about the room – his feet trembling to hold him up, his body unsteady as when

under a feverish spell, in the eerie midnight silence. Then slowly, he lifted both hands to his nose pressing and squeezing it with all his might.

Haroon was now aware of what was going on. He realized that Mili was no longer alone; the smell had overtaken him too.

By then, Mili was awake. She felt the smell right away but watching Haroon transfixed on the floor at the dead of the night with his hands pressed to his nose, she hurried to him. “Do you get it? Feel it now?” She asked, her voice low but urgent.

Haroon nodded with a mild jerk of his head. Mili saw that Haroon was not able to stand on his feet, his body trembling as he slowly slumped to his knees in a half-squatting fashion. Bending her head forward kneeling on the floor, herself squatting, Mili wanted some confirmation, “Isn’t the pain in the head terrible? Don’t you feel choked in the chest?”

Haroon nodded again.

“Is it a rotting smell? Like that of dead animals?”

Haroon pressed his nose hard as if to crush it.

“Of a cat, dead and rotting?”

Haroon closed his eyes.

“Like that of the rubbish – with a thick, moist stench?”

Mili stopped. She decided to handle him softly. Sounding calm, she said, “Now that you have it yourself, can you identify the smell? It’s so very strange; it’s neither familiar nor totally unfamiliar. Can any one find out where it comes from? How can one know of its source – its habitat!?”

Deep at the night they climbed the narrow, dimly lit stairs to the rooftop holding each other’s hands. The breeze in the open felt cool but the same smell hovered above in the dark, bare sky.

They stood in a far corner of the rooftop, elbows planted on the railings, their eyes lifted upward. Straightening themselves as far as possible, heads tilted back, they gazed at the distant sky. A faint flicker from a tiny dot of a star descended on their eye-pits. Transfixed by the speck of light they sensed drips of cool air oozing out of the womb of the sky.

As they held on to their positions straining their necks they looked away briefly from the sky and the star, and their eyes caught the sight: crowds of people bunched up against all the rooftop railings, far and near – straightened features, heads tilted back, eyes skyward.



-----

Translated by Rani Ray and the author. Rani Ray, Tagore translator and former Professor of English, Delhi University