

Graduate Thesis: Three Stories



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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kaiser Hamidul Huq', is displayed within a light gray rectangular box.

Kaiser Hamidul Huq

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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.



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Introduction

I was a stubborn child growing up. A way this manifested is in my refusal to sleep when the time came. All the best shows aired during the later hours of the night, and night time comes with its own charm and magic, so I always made a conscious fight to stay awake as late as possible. Like most parents, my dad opted to tell me ghost stories in situations like this, the catch being that I actually liked ghost stories, so he would have to make things up with the bargain being I would only get treated to these stories of his if I obeyed his orders, which meant I had to get to sleep early. Obviously, he couldn't keep making up stories, so he later brought be the first of many books, with various terms and conditions attached. So, looking at it informally, short stories are my first introduction to stories in general.

Of course, the situation gets changed once we take a formal look at the form. Short stories are generally stories no longer than 10000 words, and they generally have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Then again, this is always not the case. Kono Taeko's *In the Box* is a brilliant short story that merely works as an introduction to a conflict, and just when the conflict is about to start, the short story ends. I think David Lynch put it perfectly when he said that life is extremely complicated, something that seldom makes sense. The same should be allowed for films as well. I believe that these applies to all art, especially short stories. When one keeps this in mind when looking at the short stories presented in these pages, the way they are structured should start making a bit more sense.

You Can Win was borne out of a personal crisis I had during the winter break of my freshman year at IBA. I was smoking in a corner of the room one night when I saw that *The Washington Post* posting an expose about aliens. For some reason or the other, that gave me one of the biggest frights of my entire life. I saw a similar bigshot newspaper publish a

similar story in 2019, but I knew whether or not the news was true, it didn't matter. That's what I tried to do with the first story, I wanted to conjure up a world where bizarre stories like this do not matter, and the world continues as it always continues, one bullet at a time.

With *The Gaze*, I wanted to imitate the structure employed by Gus an Sant in *Elephant*. I wanted to take an incisive, impersonal, and a documentarian approach to Bangladeshi weddings, to focus on the festivities on the surface as they hid the violence deep within.

For *Asleep*, the principal idea was born out of a dream. I once had a dream that I was back in the part of Mirpur I grew up in, and I was running through the street trying to catch a friend. I could only see him from the back, and no matter what I tried, I couldn't catch up with him. It was afternoon both in the dream and in reality, and I had this feeling that if I didn't get up and go outside, I would miss out on something important. I wanted the protagonist to go through a similar situation where he would ultimately choose to get lost in the world of dreams, reveling in nostalgia.

Of course, the stories didn't go as planned. *The Gaze* ended up focusing on the journey of a woman as she is about to get married off, and *Asleep* focuses on a man as he turns his back on nostalgia and chooses to fully focus on his career. *You Can Win* is the closest I got to my original vision, but there are massive changes needed in the short story to fully bring to light the many themes and parts of the story that are submerged. The stories are best read as works in progress, and I plan to use the lessons learned over the course of composing this thesis to make them better. As for when that will be, another one of my influences, Haruki Murakami, has recently come out with a novel that's based on a short story he tried to write when he was young. He shelved the short story back then and used the themes to write a novel during the 80s, and he is revisiting those themes now to write the novel *The City and its Uncertain Walls*. I believe to have creative itch is to be never satisfied with the things you have produced. That said, if I can dedicate my life to trying to externalize all the ideas I have in my

head, I wouldn't ask for anything else. (Except for millions of dollars, of course. You need money to buy that kind of freedom, after all)

You Can win

On November 21, 2019, the Pentagon revealed the existence of UFOs. They did this by releasing some footage of UFOs that had been captured by one of their pilots a couple of years back. Of course, I already knew about this. I work as an analyst for Lockheed Martin, and part of my responsibilities is to keep tabs on external developments. As such, when this incident happened, I didn't have to grapple with any of the ethical or metaphysical questions that might arise from it. As the section chief says, all that matters is we make money off of it.

As always, I consulted the experts first: Government officials, PMCs, and controllers of global finance that are interested in seeing the defense industry grow. For good measure, I also reached out to independent researchers who are well versed in UFOs and the outer limits. As luck would have it, one of these ufologists turned out to be pretty useful. During the early hours of the 21st, he sent me this email:

Giant leaps of faith.

- J.S

While that might have been cryptic, all in all, Dr. S was a pretty strange guy. He had been with NASA before he was fired, and judging by his credentials, he was not the kind of person who would devote his life to the exploration of such strange phenomena. It seemed like he suffered from some sort of personal tragedy which inevitably led to his ruin. Well, you can't save everyone. The weak will be weeded out, only the strong remain.

After watching the UFO clip on TV, I went into the kitchen to make breakfast. I made coffee, put the pan on the stove, dropped a couple of eggs, and started frying at medium heat. Take two over-medium eggs, some chicken, onions, and lettuce. Put the egg on a slice of bread, add a bit of sauce, add another slice, add some chicken, some onions, some lettuce. Introduce some mayo into the mix and top it all off with a third slice of bread. Voila, you have the recipe for the perfect sandwich. Now set the table and wait for your wife.

When I finished making breakfast, my head started to get fuzzy, and I held on to the table's edge for support.

That's when Anna walked into the dining room.

She was wearing a green, flower-patterned dress. The morning sunlight leapt off the top of her head, creating a light gold hue throughout the room. Looking at her, I felt the ground shift beneath my feet.

Looking at her.

Looking at her...

After breakfast, I went into the study to start going over my notes. I had been working on a business proposal for the past year or so, and recent events were just what I needed for an expansion in the East. Anna lay opposite to me on the couch and read a book. My head was still feeling fuzzy, so I grabbed a drink. I poured myself a whiskey and got to work.

I had met Dr. S at his office approximately four weeks ago, down in the deserts of Nevada. He had a four-story building that functioned as his headquarters, and his office was on the top floor. It was snuggled up in a kind of soft, comforting yellow – the kind of yellow you find in luxury home offices – filled with indigenous relics and scientific accoutrements. Some were so old that it felt like they would crumble just by looking at them. Seeing all this, it was evident he did well for himself. But I only had to ask him about his day-to-day activities to find out the true scope of his operations.

I had a long conversation with him and to condense the details:

1. He had an observatory behind his building. While he didn't have deep space shuttles or the necessary budget to properly study the outer limits, he had contacts in the government that would notify him of potential events of interest. Using that information, he could tune his observatory to where those events would take place.

2. He had satellite dishes on the roof of his building he used for picking up radio signals from outer space. Almost always, these signals had natural, rational causes, but if there was even the slightest chance he could get something genuine out of all these, he wasn't willing to miss the opportunity.
3. He had PIs under his employ. In most cases, stories regarding UFOs were the result of Chinese whispers, mixed in with the haziness of crystal and moonshine. But according to him, there could be genuine accounts scattered through all these, and they just might play into his work one way or the other. Using PIs was his contingency for such a possibility.

Before coming down, I ran a thorough background check on him, and I could guess he ran a tight ship. To go into the UFO business and still achieve this level of success spoke volumes about the type of person he was. But even I couldn't guess the elaborateness of his operations. All of this was bound to cost a lot of money, and I was wondering how he funded it all. When I asked him, he took me down a floor. I was in a large hall – blinded by fluorescent white – filled with men in uniforms sitting in front of computers. Alongside donations, magazine sales, and advertisements, he also had a consultancy business where he advised writers and film-makers regarding what approach they should take regarding stories about the extra-terrestrial. Relevant parties would send in their stuff and he would have them reworked through an army of interns. Through his help, the scripts and films attained marketable qualities with mass appeal that made them successful in the box office, he explained. I asked him how the people who bought his merchandise took to this, as a large portion of his clientele were conservatives – a demographic that did not mix well with Hollywood.

“You think they care?” he smirked. “Even the brands that put out special campaigns during pride employ children as young as five, working away in their sweatshops doing who

knows what. The relationship between a company and its customers is transactional, where the company gets money in return for providing products or services. As long as that equation is maintained, who cares where we get our money from?" he laughed.

I laughed as well and lit a cigarette. He understood the game, alright. No wonder he did so well for himself.

We made our way to the lobby where his secretary set up a table. We sat across from each other and grabbed a bottle of scotch. After having a drink and finishing another cigarette, I said, "So, these UFOs..."

"What about them?" he smirked.

"What do you think?" I asked. "Is there anything out there?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Who knows," he laughed. "But does it matter? What matters is we make money, right?"

"Right," I laughed and had another scotch. Seeing this, he said, "I have a Macallan 40 and a bunch of other rarities stored in my office. Care to go up?"

"No thanks," I said. "Actually, could you point me to the bathroom?"

*

I splashed water on my face and stared into the mirror. I considered having that drink after all, but my head got so fuzzy that I had to hold on to the sink's edge.

"Get a hold of yourself," I said. "He's right. All that matters is we make money."

But I couldn't get the images out of my head.

We were returning from Anna's parents' on Christmas eve. On the way, we decided to catch a drive-in screening of a rip-off of Dr. Who. As the credits rolled, the sound of church organs flew in from a nearby mass, with the sky above filled with millions of sparkling stars.

"I can't believe they blew them off," she said.

“Hollywood never makes sense,” I scoffed. “You have beings who have mastered both time and space wanting to grant you wishes at no cost to them at all. Why’d you have to say no?”

“Idiots, literal idiots,” she said. “You can wish away your debt, get a penthouse with a killer balcony, go for a vacation in Japan...”

“Don’t forget their ability to regenerate.”

“Aw, is this about your hair?” she said. “I love that shiny little head of yours.”

“Little?”

“Here we go again,” she rolled her eyes.

“You know, you should be more considerate,” I said. “Your dad gets on my nerves, but you don’t see me saying anything to his face.”

“You sure do a good job hiding it.”

“The point is, I at least make an attempt,” I said. “I wish I could say the same for you.”

“How’s this for an attempt?” she said. “You can sleep on the couch tonight.”

“Really?” I said. “You know that was a joke, right?”

“Do you see me laughing?”

I cursed myself for making such a rookie mistake.

Moments later, I said, “So, Japan...”

“You’re still sleeping on the couch.”

“I know,” I said. “But if we’re going to Japan, we should start planning right away, right?”

“If you’re gonna be like that,” she said. “I want something else first.”

“Whatever you want,” I said.

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“Alright,” she said. “I want you to learn cooking.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“You’re not going to ask for a dress or chocolates?”

“I mean, if you’d like to crash at a hotel...”

“But why cooking, of all things?” I squinted.

“Since I’m considering giving you the floor,” she smirked. “Might as well get a good meal out of it.”

*

When I returned to the lobby, Dr. S had drained half the bottle. The interview was over, so we went outside and waited for my ride. There wasn’t anything more to do, so I lit a cigarette and he pulled out a picture – a picture showing two kids at the beach with the sunset against their backs. The way he looked at it reminded me of the picture of Anna I always keep in my wallet. The fuzziness just didn’t seem to end, so I lit another cigarette. I extended the pack towards him to see if he wanted any.

“Much obliged,” he said.

We smoked and leaned against the wall – surrounded by a deafening silence. It was late October with a clear sky, but the Milky way was all but barren. Then again, it could never compare to the sky we drove under on that particular Christmas eve. These days, nothing ever can.

“Tell me, do you have siblings?” Dr. S asked, putting the picture back.

“No,” I replied.

“That’s good. Makes you self-reliant, being on your own. Deep connections are a blessing, true, but like a double-edged sword, it can be a curse as well.”

The buzz in my head seemed to have paralyzed me, so I said nothing. Taking my cue, he paused for a while, before continuing, “What about religion? Do you believe in the divine?”

“I’m not convinced by it,” I muttered. “And these days, I don’t have many reasons that make me want to believe. But there are still things that appeal to me – religious feasts, for example. So yes, I do believe, in a way.”

“You can certainly have feasts without religion. And in this day and age, all holidays serve the same function. So, tell me, what else can be so alluring about religion that it appeals even to a rational man like you?”

“You’re right,” I finally regained my composure. “Forget I said anything.”

“Why, things getting a bit personal for you?” he smirked.

“Let’s just say I prefer to keep things in their separate spaces,” I said.

“They why do you want to know if anything’s out there?”

“Well,” I said. “A scare like this is bound to cause panic. Panic is always good for the economy, especially in my industry.”

“Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“If this was a routine visit, a simple call would have sufficed,” he smirked. “You’ve come for something else.”

“I think you have had a bit too much to drink,” I laughed.

“Just like you? Before you ran off, you looked like you had seen a ghost.”

“Just tired from working all day. I’m sure you can understand.”

“Is that why you left journalism?”

“How did you...” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

Dr. S laughed. “Do you take me for a fool? Just as you have looked into me, I have looked into you. I know it all: Why you left the news industry, why you came here, what happened three years ago...”

“Stop,” the fuzziness had returned. “Just stop. If you know about all this, then why are you bothering me?”

“Because you are avoiding my question. You think I will stop just like that? Think again.”

“You...okay,” I said. “Ask away.”

“As I was saying,” he smirked. “What can be so alluring about religion that it appeals even to a rational man like you?”

“Look, I won’t deny I have doubts,” I said. “But I’m hoping for at least something to be true.”

“And might I ask what that something is?”

“The resurrection of Lazarus,” I muttered.

“I see,” he said as he took out that picture again.

He asked for another cigarette and I lit one myself when he continued, “But isn’t that more of a shackle than anything else?”

“What do you mean?” I grunted.

He looked at the sky as he pondered over his answer. “When you get right to it, what is religion but an ultimate extension of that all too human quality of hope? And what is hope in a world destined for decay? When you look at it that way, doesn’t it turn out to be a false messiah?”

“I see where you are coming from, but I would argue it’s more of a leap of faith than anything else,” I retorted. “I mean, how else are people supposed to cope with their lives?”

“You don’t succeed at the game by ignoring the rules,” he smirked. “You take stock of your situation and roll the die. If you don’t even know what game you are playing, how are you supposed to win?”

I thought about my move to Lockheed Martin and sighed. I made the winning move alright, but it was already too late.

After a while, Dr. S started again, “But I do share some of your sentiments, about the rules of the game essentially being giant leaps of faith. That’s one of the reasons I do what I do - off the record, of course. I have exhausted the pantheons of great minds, and I have been exhausted by their illusions. I combed through the books of man, and I want to be free of the shackles they have become. In a universe where nothing matters, it seems the answer to my conundrum can only be found in the stars.”

“Conundrum regarding what?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” he laughed.

I’ve thought about this conversation many times after that night. Due to its personal nature, it kept me awake for nights on end. It was a conversation where we both opened up to one another, a mistake I haven’t indulged in for quite some time. To top it all off, he went ahead and committed suicide a couple of days later, leaving more questions than answers. Oh yes, Dr. S died during the early hours of the 21st, killed himself by flinging himself off his rooftop, dying with a smile on his face. Then again, something like this was bound to happen. If he focused on winning instead of asking questions, maybe it wouldn’t have come to this.

Two inmates want to escape an asylum. They make it to the roof and find the roof of another building some distance away. The first inmate takes the risk and jumps, but the second one is too afraid.

“Don’t worry,” the first one says. “I have a flashlight. I’ll point it towards you so you can walk right across.”

“Do you take me for a fool?” cries the second. “You’ll turn off the lights as soon as I start.”

Good joke, makes everyone laugh. But these days, it does nothing for me, nothing but putting me in a bad mood. Then again, for some time now, my head has been down in the dumps.

Anyway, I finished reading and lit a cigarette. Just the cigarette wasn't doing it, so I poured another whiskey and smoked in silence. By the time my head cleared up, forty minutes had passed.

I sat up in my chair and looked at the couch where Anna was lying down.

Unsurprisingly, she was gone.

*

My proposal was a success, and the expansion passed with unanimous approval. The bonus I got alone was enough to cover the last of our debts.

Soon after, I went to the office for the final time before Christmas. I had just gotten a cheque from the settlement with the pharmaceutical company, but it was too little too late. Who knows, it might have made a difference when we actually needed it. If I hadn't been so stupid to pursue journalism straight out of college, we wouldn't even need the money in the first place.

There's a railway track close to my office, a place that had been abandoned for quite some time. The plan was for a new subway to come out of one of the tunnels and connect the city right with the countryside, but it fell apart in the end.

I never did understand what had happened to it.

Then again, what matters is people made money off of it.

Newspapers had a field day with the topic. For the New York Post, it was the damned environmentalists again, trying to put an end to the unstoppable march of progress. For the Washington Post, it was Obama standing up for the little people, a way for the city to maintain its heritage.

What they should have focused on was the fact that a conglomerate bought the rights to the lot with plans of building a church. Of course, all they had to do was set up a mailbox, and they had the perfect front for tax evasion.

I generally get here by 1:30 and have sandwiches. There was a bistro here Anna and I used to frequent, and before they closed, I learned the recipe from the head chef. The morning I had perfected the sandwich was the morning I received the call from the hospital. Anna had been diagnosed with cancer – stage three, and she had been at the hospital for a year.

That morning, a nurse came in to give her breakfast and couldn't find a pulse.

They had called me down to take care of the body.

Before she had gotten sick, we used to go to the bistro all the time. She was a researcher in a pharmaceutical company, and her office was right next to the news agency I had worked for. Both of us had packed schedules, so we made it a point to always have lunch together.

We were out exploring one day when we found this patch of land full of bistros and carts. Anna had been craving sandwiches for a while, the kind we would have when we first started dating. We headed inside the first place we could find and ordered sandwiches. After taking a single bite, she made me promise to have lunch from there, and only there.

This continued for years, until the sickness came. She was forced to handle sketchy material at work, and we should have foreseen this. But tragedy rarely strikes with a knock. Most of the time, it comes barging right in.

Towards the end, it got pretty bad, and she could barely eat anything. During her final days, I talked to the doctor one day and took her out to *our* bistro. Halfway through the meal, she looked outside and suddenly stopped eating.

"What's wrong?" I asked, anxious.

"Look at that," she said. "They're closing this place down."

"It's alright," I said, picking up a fry off her plate and holding it to her mouth. "I have been getting on pretty well with the chef, and once a week for the past three weeks, he has been letting me into the kitchen and teaching me his secrets. I haven't got the sandwich down

just yet, but I'm getting there. Soon, you'll be treated to a homemade lunch straight from my hands."

"And once that is done and you are healthy and well, we'll book a one-way flight straight to Japan," I smirked.

"That's really thoughtful of you," she smiled as if she were smiling for the first time in her entire life. "So thoughtful...so...excuse me..."

She rifled through her bag searching for a tissue, while I sat there, dumbfounded. I cursed myself for bringing that up and decided the best course of action was to perfect the sandwich as soon as possible.

She must have known something was wrong with her. We had just gotten the latest round of chemo, and things were looking up. And yet, she still broke down, as if she knew that I wouldn't be able to keep my promise.

I often think about that day.

It doesn't help that I have lunch in the same place every day, a place that was reserved only for the two of us. It doesn't help that I repeatedly have the particular kind of sandwich I learned to make specifically for her. I guess it can't be helped, with my choice of surrounding and all.

A man loses the love of his life and falls into so much despair that he goes to see a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist is sympathetic at first, but upon finding out the session isn't going to be covered by the man's health insurance, he quickly changes tone.

"You're taking a natural part of life too seriously," he says. "You're a young man still in his prime. You need to relax. Take some time off. Grab some Mexican food. It will all soon be better in no time."

Hearing this, the man sinks deeper, until he finds himself at the bottom of the ocean – a place where no light can penetrate.

He decides to thank the psychiatrist and leaves.

Maybe, the shrink's right.

Maybe, I should take up Mexican food.

*

It's December now.

It has been a few weeks since the UFO reveal, and our stock prices have tripled. As for the questions I have regarding the event itself, well, unless I want to end up like Dr. S, it's better not to think about them.

Christmas break has started, and business is booming, so I get some time off during this time. I always try to fight it, and I had been on the phone with the section chief just last night.

"Company policy, sorry," he said over what seemed like the coverage of Afghanistan in the background. "Say, why don't you come over tonight? Sheryl makes a mean turkey, and I'm sure the kids would love to see you as well."

I said something inconsequential like I always do and hung up. If I'm going to be forced to take a vacation, I'd rather catch up on some reading. That way, I could at least be somewhat productive.

The problem with staying idle in the 21st century is that it messes with your head.

The machine demands we produce, produce, and produce; and ultimately, the continuation of our existence is tied up with our output. It also helps to keep occupied for someone like me, as I have a weird way with images.

I have been seeing Dr. S continuously for the past few days. He doesn't talk to me or anything. He just gets up on the roof, takes out that picture of those kids, gives me a wide grin, and jumps off with a bellow that can shake the grounds of hell itself. Then he gets up, takes the elevator, and does it all over again.

And again.

And again...

Like someone picking at a scab for the wound to bleed out repeatedly, he seems to find some form of twisted pleasure from this ritualistic self-torture.

I was terrified at first, but I have gotten used to it by now. The nature of the universe is such that it demands endless expansion in an effort to create the maximum amount of entropy, resulting in its violent self-destruction. If we are the universe made minuscule, it would make sense that we all share this basic facet within us.

I can stop the visions, of course. I don't like drinking, but drinks and cigarettes have always been a marvelous cure for this buzz inside my head.

But then, I wouldn't be able to see Anna.

She usually shows up three times a day, seven days a week. After a while, I drink some whiskey, smoke a cigarette, and drink some more to make her disappear. On most occasions, two whiskeys and a cigarette seem to do the job. During Christmas break however, I let go of that routine.

She always appears in a green, flower-patterned dress – a short sleeved dress that shows off her arms. She used to refer to the Greek goddess Artemis as her spirit animal, and I have always agreed with that. Throughout her life, she faced many hardships. She wanted to explore the stars herself, but she couldn't do it. Her next option was clinical research, but by the end of the program, she became a shell of her former self.

And yet, she pushed on. After a night of sulking, she would get up early the next morning, ready to take on fate with a new rigor. I guess people like her aren't meant to last long. Fate runs a tight ship, and at the end of the day, the house always wins. I just hope she has taken her rightful place up there in the heavens. A goddess like her deserves nothing but the best, a throne built with the finest of wood, adorned with the snowy white of sparkling stars.

When it comes to cooking, I make all the things I promised to make for Christmas, and I make servings of two.

She can't eat, of course.

She is an apparition, after all – a conjured-up specter built from my memories of her that are gradually deteriorating. So, I usually have to eat for the both of us.

Not that I mind, of course.

It's nice to spend Christmas eve with her like this, even if it's a mirage of the real thing. Of course, the stuffing means that I would have to drink more.

If I chose to drink, that is.

At the end of the day, alcohol is just fuel to help me get through my daily routine. Since I get a break now, I can take a break from drinking as well.

Still, it's high time I stopped with this childish fantasy. My wife is dead, and even the final traces of her bones must have disappeared from her grave. Her soul had left this plane the minute she died – if it exists, that is – and her body has decomposed into a feast for insects.

Come next year, I will be overseeing global operations in the Asia pacific from a satellite office in Okinawa. Again, it won't magically bring some meaning to this dead-end profession of mine, but it will bring in the money. Money that lets me imagine what could have been. Money that lets me imagine what should have been...

Ultimately, it should help me get over these childish pangs. As I mentioned, it is the nature of the universe to keep pushing on until self-annihilation, the heat death of existence as we know it.

As agents of this entity, it is our duty to keep pushing forward. Furthermore, whenever I stop, these visions keep returning. And while I long to be with Anna again, I can't be with her just yet. And I'm sure she would not want me to think too much about her, as that always results in my total breakdown.

She never did like seeing me have breakdowns.

As her dad tells me, “If you dwell on the past, that’s all you’ll ever do.”

“But if you look forward to the future, you’ll eventually get tunnel vision, and soon, you’ll be dead. Once that happens, everything ceases to matter anyway.”

I went out to the balcony to smoke my nightly cigarette - to the sound of someone throwing away Christmas decorations down the chute. The sky looked dimmer than ever, in a world where even UFOs have lost their luster.

When Anna appeared, I bade her farewell and kissed her goodnight.

“I think this is the last time I will be seeing you,” I whispered.

She did nothing, nothing but giving me a smile. I expected her to touch my cheeks so I could kiss her one last time, but she didn’t do it.

I guess this is her way of making things easier.

I went into the kitchen to throw away my wallet with her picture in it. At the last minute, I put it on top of the nightstand.

As I went to sleep, I repeated the mantra that has kept me going and will keep me going for the foreseeable future.

“The weak will be weeded out, only the strong remain.”

With those thoughts, I finally lay my head to rest.

The Gaze

The in-laws came on Saturday.

I hadn't eaten anything the entire night. I was going to the kitchen when I heard a scream coming from the living room. Judging by the volume, it was probably the TV, but at the same time, I couldn't get the scream out of my head. It felt too real, too lifelike. Father sometimes woke up early in the morning and watched the news, but I couldn't imagine the presenter showing something so violent. I went over to the living room to see what was going on, and when I saw the screen, I gasped.

Father made an unsuccessful attempt for the remote. "What are you doing here?" he shouted.

"I don't know...I heard a scream..." I stuttered.

He finally turned the TV off and turned towards me. He examined me for a while and asked, "What are you doing up this early anyway?"

"I couldn't sleep," I murmured. "I haven't had anything to eat since yesterday, remember?"

His expressions softened. He turned towards the screen one last time to make sure it was off. "Come here. Maybe sitting with your old man will make you feel better," he said.

"Or maybe it would be better if you let her eat something," I felt mom's hands on my shoulder. "We could at least give her some milk. We have some bread in the fridge as well."

I thought I caught a glimpse of rage in father's eyes. "You know it pains me to see her starve like this. But she must look her best for today, mustn't she?"

"Yes," I said.

"Still, she needs to eat something. At this rate, she'll faint."

"I suppose we can make allowance for some milk and bread," he relented. "Will you get me a cup of tea while you are at it?"

Mom took me into the kitchen and gave me some cake. She sat me down on a stool as she got busy making tea.

“Don’t mind your father,” she said. “You know how he gets sometimes.”

“Did you see what he was doing?” I asked.

Mom pretended not to hear and busied herself with her pots and pans. She finally let out a sigh, “Munmun, look. Your father is a man. He has needs. Every woman has to make compromises when she gets married. You’ll soon find out.”

Mom continued making tea while I returned to my room and closed the door. I splashed some water on my face but couldn’t get the video out of my head. The static of the screen couldn’t hide anything. The girl, she was young – too young. From the looks of it, she hadn’t even started high school. Then there was the rope, the two men, and the way they were treating her...

I brought out my phone and checked my email. Still nothing. I had applied for a couple of jobs after graduation but hadn’t heard anything back. I was hoping for a post outside Dhaka. The pay didn’t matter as long as I could get away from here. I wanted be away from this mess. I wanted to be away from my fate...

I suddenly found myself browsing through old photos of Azad and me. A bitter smile spread across my face. When you are born into the world of men, there is no way out. One way or other, you are screwed.

A little while after, I heard the main door opening. Father greeted someone and invited them in. “That must be them – the Khans,” I thought. “The people I am supposed to live the rest of my life with.”

I felt like I was in a dingy cell while an executioner sharpened his guillotine. I always tried to resist thinking like this, but now that my marriage was at hand, it seemed like there was nothing I could do.

It hadn't even been a year since I graduated. I had so much to do, so much to see. Azad was the guilty party here: he had no issues seducing one young thing after the next. When it came to repercussions, I was the only one who suffered.

Eventually, mom came in with a red saree and wrapped my figure in it. As she proceeded, I thought I saw a certain look on her face. Suddenly, images of the girl from the morning flooded my mind. I wanted to be left alone, just forget about existence and lie in my bed. She must have suspected something, because as soon as she was done, she made some excuse or the other and left the room.

Splashing more water on my face, I went into the living room. I sat down in the middle of mom and father, and opposite to me were the Khans. They were an old acquaintance of father whose son – Chomok – had come back from the states. Right after his return, father sat me down and asked, “Munmun, do you have anyone you like?”

“No,” I smiled. “I’m not that kind of girl. You know that.”

I had returned to my room and browsed through my email again. Later I found out my fate had been already sealed.

I looked at the guy I was supposed to spend the rest of my life with. Short hair, a stubble, and a smile that made me shudder all over. The university was full of guys like him, and I had been able to avoid them for the past four years. And yet, here I was, being shipped off to one of them, piece by piece.

“How do you like your bride-to-be, son?” Chomok’s mother asked.

“Perfect,” he gushed. “She looks like playmate right out of a centerfolds of Playboy.”

I didn't know what he meant, but I didn't like the way he stared. I could feel his gaze even as I looked down. It was thirsty, animalistic even. Mom noticed this as well, but she was trying to make a conscious effort to focus on other things. Chomok’s father asked me to sing. Chomok asked me to stand and walk around. I looked towards father with pleading eyes, but

to my disgust, I saw the same gaze in him that I saw in Chomok. I quickly made eye contact with mom. It felt like she was even more agitated than I was. But there was nothing she could do. There was nothing any of us could do.

The charade went on for an hour before the in-laws were satisfied. The wedding was planned for the Friday after. Returning to my room, I repeatedly scrubbed my body to the point where my skin began to bleed. But no matter what I did, I couldn't wipe off the gaze I felt at the back of my head. I had been showering like this for a year, since Azad made those unutterable demands of me. Ever since that day, the gaze had been by my side. Who knows, maybe I was bound to it from the moment of my birth.

In the afternoon, mom came into the room with a tray in her hands. She had brought a glass of Coke and a plate full of biryani. This particular item was a favorite of mine, but it took a good amount of work to even swallow a lump. After I'd eaten a bit, mom brushed my hair and looked into my eyes.

"Can I ask you something *ma*?"

"Sure," I forced a smile.

"Have you ever had sex?"

"What?" I tried to act surprised.

"I'll ask again," mom looked into my eyes. "Have you ever had sex?"

"No," my grin got bigger. "What are you talking about?"

She placed her hand on my head and tried to comfort me.

"I know about Azad, you know."

I tried to smile as much as I could. But before long, tears began to fall.

"If you know that much, then you should know the reason we broke up. I assure you mom; I wouldn't bring such dishonor to the family."

She collected the plate and glass and headed for the door. At the last moment, she stopped.

“Maybe you should have.”

“Should have what?”

“Have sex, I mean,” she paused. “You are going to have to do it sooner or later. So why not do it with someone you can tolerate?”

I didn’t answer. Mom didn’t seem to want to rouse me up anymore so she started for the door. As she was leaving, I whispered, “Mom?”

“Yes?” she turned around.

“Did you figure out my gender before I was born?”

“Of course,” she smiled. “What parent wouldn’t?”

“Why didn’t you abort me?”

Her face turned white. She struggled to say this and that in order to console me.

“I don’t know,” she finally answered. “Maybe I should have.”

*

“Please, put it away.”

“Munmun, I’m your boyfriend. When I tell you to touch me, you do it.”

“No. Let me go...”

I woke up with a start. My entire body was drenched in sweat. The walls of my room seemed to be closing in.

I needed some air.

I went up to the roof and took deep breaths. Towards a corner, there was a shed full of things I grew up with. There was the bicycle mom got for me when I started school. There was the telescope she got me for my eighth birthday. There was the inflatable life preserver for the trip to the beach that father later cancelled.

I brought out my phone and looked through my emails: still nothing.

I looked up at the sky, where not even a twinkle could be seen.

As far as I eyes could see, there was only darkness.

Around me, was silence.

*

Before long, it was Thursday – the day of the *holud*.

The week passed by in a daze. I spent most of my time glued to my email or flicking through old photos. On Thursday, I finally received a response. An NGO in Cox’s Bazar wanted to hire me. The pay wasn’t great, but it wasn’t bad either. With a few sacrifices, I could easily live on this amount. I could even take someone with me. As I was thinking about a response, mom came into my room.

I dreaded meeting the Khans again. When I got into the car, I heard there were going to be some modifications to my *holud* experience. Actually, there would be no *holud*., The relatives from both sides would meet at the Khan’s apartment, while there would be a private party on the rooftop for Chomok and me. This had been a special request from Chomok, and Mr Khan relented thinking this was what both of us wanted.

“See?” father said while driving. “Always trust your father. See what a splendid groom he has provided for you?”

The thought of being alone with Chomok made me sick to my stomach. Then again, this was just the beginning of my nightmare.

The rooftop was decorated with flyers and paper kites. By the side of the roof, there was a table filled with food, snacks, and various bottles that gave off a pungent odor. I picked one up and murmured, “What on earth is this?”

“Absinthe, my sweet,” a voice boomed from behind. Chomok closed the gap and put his arm to my waist. “Would you like some?”

I shuddered at the touch of his hands. I hardly even processed what was happening before he held my mouth and shoved the bottle between my lips.

I gagged. A bitter taste filled my stomach and made my head spin. I tried to put away the bottle, but I was no match against the strength of the brute. Soon, my body began to loosen up and my mind turned blank. The bitterness stopped hurting my throat and even began to feel good. Chomok took the bottle away from me, but I grabbed hold of it again and drank some more.

I didn't want to be there on the rooftop. Whatever was in that bottle helped me with exactly that. If I was going to survive the night, I needed all the defenses I could muster.

I don't remember much after that. All of his friends were male, cut from the same cloth. The gaze I always felt at the back of my head multiplied – it had now surrounded me. But due to the wine, it didn't matter. I kept getting back to the table and filling myself with poison, and after a while, I couldn't feel a thing.

When I came to, I found myself in a disheveled state. Chomok had sat me down on his lap. My saree was all over the place, and the stink I felt spreading across my body couldn't be attributed to a single source. He held my shoulder and tried to grope my breast. He lit a cigarette and blew smoke right into my face. The pungency of the situation had gotten too degrading, so I leapt from his lap and vomited in a corner of the roof.

I could hear laughter and mocking. The whole world started to spin. I couldn't take it anymore. I had to get out.

Mom was on the third floor. While I was going down, Chomok suddenly turned up behind me. He shoved me against the wall and forced his tongue into my mouth. My mind went blank, and before I knew what was going on, I bit him.

Blood filled my mouth. He let go of me and smirked.

"A feisty one, aren't you?" he grinned. "Well, we will soon take care of that. You better bring your A-game tomorrow. I can assure you; I am settling for nothing else."

I spent the drive home in silence. I thought of taking a shower, but there was no point. I changed into a T shirt and kept looking at the email. Was I really so helpless? Was there nothing I could do?

After dinner, father asked me into his room. Mom stood in a corner with that certain look on her face. I couldn't understand what was going on. I had done everything he wanted me to do. What more did he want?

"How was the rooftop?" he asked.

"It was fine," I forced a smile.

"Fine, huh," he said. "If it was so fine, why did you leave early? What was that all about?"

"I was feeling a bit dizzy," I stuttered. "These things can be very tiring..."

"Tiring, huh. Well, you must have been tired after hitting him and making him bleed."

I couldn't believe my ears. "I didn't hit him."

"Then he is lying? Is that it?" he shouted.

"I didn't do anything. We did run into some trouble, but he was..."

"Don't give me that bullshit," he shouted. "You are his wife. You are supposed to listen to whatever he says."

"Come now," mom came forward. "We could at least hear her out."

"Shut up, you dirty whore," it felt like his screams would tear down the house. "It's your fault I'm in this mess. It's your fault we have a daughter like this."

Mom came in between father and me. She shoved me outside their bedroom and closed the door. I tried to sleep, but I could hear shouting well into the night. I lay in my room for a long time, looking at the response from the NGO. Finally, I went into the living room and turned on the TV.

I switched from channel to channel, but I couldn't concentrate. I can't remember how long I stayed like that, staring at static like a corpse. I suddenly heard a noise coming from the door and saw mom coming in.

"Can't sleep?" she asked.

"No," I replied.

I turned the TV off and looked at her. She instantly shrank and hid herself in the shadows. Her face was as red as the sun. Dried up blood clung to the corner of her lips.

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

"Are we alone in the world?"

The silence lingered between us. A silence as dark as the universe, with no light in sight.

"Yes," she finally replied. "I'm afraid we are."

I took my phone and opened the email.

"But even then, all hope is not lost," she said.

"How so?"

"You have me," she looked into my eyes as she handed me a one-way ticket to Cox's Bazar. "You are always going to have me."

"But mom..."

"Shh," she put her fingers to my lips.

Mom leaned on my shoulder. After a while, I could hear her soft breath. I laid her down on the couch and fetched a blanket. I looked at the email one last time.

It would be hard, but two people could live on my income.

I placed the blanket over her body, made some room, and squeezed in. Her chest rose and fell slowly, rhythmically; hopefully she was having a good sleep. Friday was going to be hard for her. Friday was going to be hard for the both of us.

“Good night,” I whispered, and laid down myself.

Asleep

I haven't slept for the last three weeks and I don't mean that as a rhetoric. For the past 504 hours, I haven't got a wink of sleep, and frankly, I'm all the better for it.

Don't worry. It's not a big deal once you get used to it. Aside from some light drowsiness and a daze here and there, there is nothing stopping you from living your daily life the way you are used to. In fact, I would argue that your life would be better lived if there is no sleeping.

We live in an age of marvels, where everything, including time, is worth something. Especially if you invest your time in the right way, you can get returns that far exceed what you can even imagine. Doctors say that the human body needs six-eight hours of sleep per night. Can you imagine what a colossal waste that is?

I work as an investment banker, and in my line of work, the more time I can put in, the better. As such, this newfound gift has been a boon for me.

Now that I think about it, I first realized this miracle during work as well.

It was a Wednesday afternoon. I had been trying to finalize a proposal for an important client but I had gotten nowhere since morning. After staring at the computer screen a bit, my eyes would get blurry, and the whole world would start to spin in front of my eyes. I had been in a daze ever since I returned from Bangladesh, since the funeral. I tried to focus on the screen in front of me, and the whole world started to spin again. That's when it hit me. For the past week, I had gotten zero sleep. In fact, I had been wide awake ever since the plane landed.

I leaned back in my chair and lit a cigarette. "So what if I am not getting any sleep?" I thought.

"When I first started here, I used to work two-three days nonstop without going home. I never got much sleep to begin with, so what does it matter if I don't get any at all?"

I tried to reach for the ashtray on the desk, but I just couldn't move. There was a line of ants towards the back of my computer, but I didn't even have the strength to call the Janitor. This was seemingly turning into a problem, so I called John, and he put me on sleeping pills.

"I am putting you on Remextin, at the rate of one pill a night," he said. "It has built in countermeasures against dependency, so you have nothing to worry about. But you have to promise me you are going to stick to the prescription – one pill a night for one month straight. And if you don't like that, I'm sure there are other places at your disposal where you can get the same service."

"Alright," I said while lighting another cigarette. "Just fax me the prescription."

I still had work to do, but I wasn't going to get anything done in my condition. I had some plans with the guys after work, but I couldn't afford to stay out in that state. So, I did what I could with the documents, apologized to the guys, and headed back home.

I live in the upper east side of Manhattan, and I grabbed the pills on my way back. When I got to the apartment, I slipped out of my clothes, ordered a pizza, and poured myself a nice, tall glass of Whiskey. But the Whiskey tasted like water, and the pizza was as stale as porridge. I decided to just take the pill and call it a night.

It was barely eight when I was in bed, and something about this whole affair seemed off. Call me crazy, but no man in his prime should be going to bed this early. But I had nothing better to do, and I had to do what the Doctor said. I decided to turn off the lights and just lie in darkness.

I don't quite remember when I fell asleep. In fact, I couldn't even remember the last time I slept like that. When I had woken up, it was still dark outside, and I could faintly make out the singing of birds. I picked up the alarm clock and saw that it was six in the morning. I had been meaning to wake up early for a while by then, and seeing that I had finally achieved my goal, I shook off the anxiety from the previous night and went out.

I put my trainers on and ran my usual course: around a brick paved, oval shaved path situated towards the middle of central park. For some reason, I actually ran the course twice. I was energized, and I had more time to kill, sure. But there was something else at work there.

There was something different about the sun. s

There was something different about the world. Hell, the air I breathed seemed different as well.

Was New York always like that?

After my run, I came back, brushed my teeth, shaved, and took a shower. I examined my face in the mirror for a bit, before heading off for the kitchen. It was seven-thirty, and I wasn't expected in the office before nine. I decided to forego my usual breakfast – milk and cereal - and make myself some frozen *rotis* and eggs. I dressed up, got into my car, and drove to work.

I got into the office a little after eight-thirty and went straight to work. My colleagues circled around the watering hole – the water cooler around which everyone smoked – enjoying their morning coffee and cigarettes.

Sam called out to me, but I didn't feel the need to smoke.

I didn't feel the need for my other indulgence as well.

I opened up the proposal from yesterday, and I found that I could come up with the solutions as soon as I looked at the papers.

“If I do this, then this happens. And by doing that, I trigger this.”

At that rate, I would be finished with the proposal by noon and meet with the client by lunch. And so, I did.

By the end of the day, I had done so much work that I was already taking on clients I had set aside for next week. Sam came in during the afternoon to invite me out but I declined. I

was doing good work, true, but the drowsiness had returned again. All I wanted to do at that moment was go home, take a pill, and sleep.

That night, I sat down on the bed and looked at the drug I was about to take. It didn't even fit the tip of my fingers, and yet, a little pill like this had so much power.

Who would have known?

I woke up around six the following morning as well, and I went for a run. Running had never felt better, so I ran three laps around my usual course. I came back, brushed my teeth, shaved, and took a shower. While frying some bacon, I started contemplating getting some vegetables from the farmers market and packing my own lunch.

I certainly had the time.

At work, I performed even better than the previous day. Sam came around the afternoon once again but the urge to sleep had only grown. Since the weekend was coming up, I could sleep as much as I liked.

I woke up at nine during the next day. I would usually be wiped out on a Saturday morning like that. But since I got my sleep cycle in order, I felt fine that morning. In fact, I felt so good that I decided to make plans with Rajib, my son.

I called his mom to bring him over to central park. After a moment of silence, she said in disbelief, "Are you serious?"

"Why not?" I chuckled. "I have some time to kill, and it's not like I see you guys all the time."

"No, it's just," Raisa paused. "Never mind. Rajib wants rice and beef for rice. You can go out for a sandwich for a deli."

"Rice and beef are fine by me," I smiled.

Raisa seemed to be even more dumbfounded at this. I could make out the remnants of a sigh at the other end of the line, before the call abruptly came to an end.

I brushed my teeth, shaved, showered, and looked at myself in the mirror. I made myself a light breakfast and made a mental note to get something for Rajib. He had just turned five, and I had missed the party. This was my turn to make amends.

At the park, I met with Raisa, and played catch with Rajib, I wasn't sure what I should pick up for him, so I stuffed an envelope with a couple of hundreds and handed it right to him.

But he didn't seem to mind. It seems that when you are a child, the whole world is magical.

Around noon, we draped a blanket over the grass and had some sandwiches. Rajib was pretty beat around that point, and as soon as lunch ended, he put his head on my lap and went to sleep. I was thinking about lighting a cigarette, but looking at the sleeping face of Rajib, I decided against it. Seeing me put the pack back into my pocket, Raisa asked, "Shall I move him to the bench?"

"It's fine," I said. "Not having a cigarette won't kill me."

Raisa said nothing hearing this. She tore a blade of grass from the ground and played around with it. After a while, she turned to me with the same look she had when she had said that she wanted a divorce. That same look of regret and desperation – regret at what was about to be, and desperation for it not to be – gleamed from her eyes.

But she said nothing.

When Rajib woke up, she went back to normal, and I did the same. It's not that her look didn't have an effect on me. But there was nothing that I could do. In business as in life, you don't lament what you have lost. Instead, you focus on what you can gain.

A good portion of the afternoon was left when Rajib woke up, so we decided to go to a nearby theater and watch a movie. We watched the latest marvel flick and had some ice cream. It was getting late after that, so Rajib said goodbye and started leaving with his

mother. Seeing their silhouette walking away in the sunlight, I felt the same pang that I had felt that afternoon.

But like I said, it was too late for that.

There was nothing I could do.

I returned to work on Monday, and I did so with newfound rigor. Throughout the week, I finished one proposal after another and made so much progress that I couldn't believe my eyes. Sam continued to come into my office in the afternoon, but after a while, he stopped.

And honestly speaking, I didn't miss the parties that much. I always had sleep to look forward to, and I had made plans with Rajib that Saturday as well. All in all, I was pretty content with how things were going.

#

Something interesting happened during the beginning of the third week. In retrospect – it seems like the side effect of using sleeping pills caught up with me, but I didn't regard it as such back then. I had taken the pill at eight, and had promptly gone to sleep. Instead of having a deep sleep like the nights before, that night, I saw a dream.

I dreamed that I was back in Bangladesh, back in my old childhood home. I was asleep within the dream as well.

It was during the afternoon, so it must have been during the time I first started business school.

My phone was jumping around on the bedside table, and when I glanced at it in my sleep, I saw Rafi's name on the caller ID. It was December, so he was probably calling me to play badminton. I wanted to play with him as well, but for some reason, I just couldn't get up. As my efforts to reach the phone grew stronger, the slumber I was in only grew deeper. And before I knew it, I had woken up.

I picked up the clock by the bedside table and stopped the alarm. It was already seven-thirty, so it would be wise to skip exercise for the day and head straight for the showers. During the act itself, I ruminated over what I had just seen. It had been weeks since the funeral, but it seemed like I still missed Rafi. Raisa and Rajib were over my place the other day, and after lunch, we were looking through a photo album. Rajib saw me playing badminton in one of the pictures, and made me promise that we would do the same next weekend. Back in high school, badminton used to be one of my favorite sports, and I would play it with Rafi and the boys all the time. However, when I started university, I got so busy with things that I stopped hanging with them altogether. By the time I was getting on a flight for America, I had almost lost touch with everyone except Rafi – and that too remained because he made an effort on his part to stay in touch.

I always regretted what happened in those years. I always regretted losing touch with Rafi as well after getting into my job. But what could I do?

This is an extremely fast world. If one is not keeping up their pace, one would lose themselves forever.

The next day, I had completed work a little after four.

In all honesty, I would be pretty much done with everything by the afternoon, and would later loiter around the office just for the sake of it.

Since I had nothing better to do, I left the office and almost sprinted for my house.

I was looking forward to sleep, and the prospect of seeing that dream again made me all the more excited.

I went to bed around seven. Coincidentally, the dream started as soon as I fell asleep. This time, I was able to pick up my phone in the dream, and I was able to play badminton with Rafi just like I used to. When I woke up the next day, a drop of tear rolled down my eyes.

I should have picked up the phone when I had the chance. But at least I got to make up for it.

This continued for the rest of the week.

I would get finished with work early, and I would promptly go to sleep. At night, I would practice for my game with my son.

I was rusty at first. But before long, my skills started to return to me. It looked as if I was reverting back to my younger self.

When I woke up on Saturday morning, I was beginning to feel a bit nervous. I practiced in my dreams, sure, but I had not held a racket for the past 15 years. I was just beginning to rekindle my relationship with Rajib. I couldn't disappoint him.

In my haze, I went into the bathroom, and treated myself to some speed.

I didn't touch it once in those three weeks.

A little treat couldn't hurt, right?

When I got to the park, Rajib was already there with his mom. Raisa said that she would be busy running an errand, so I would have Rajib all to myself.

I took the racket in one hand and hit the shuttlecock in Rajib's direction. I went easy on him, so it wasn't hard for him to hit back towards me. But for some reason, I missed.

I got the shuttlecock off the ground, and served it towards Rajib's direction again. But I missed that time as well.

Soon, two hours had passed, and I had missed almost all of the shots that Rajib tossed my way. He didn't mind, but I was immensely disappointed in myself. I sat down on the ground - exhausted and sweating. I looked towards my right, and saw someone in a suit working in the park.

It all seemed wrong to me.

It was such a nice day.

Why put on something as boring as a suit?

Suddenly, I remembered that this is something that I used to do. During lunch, sometimes I would go out to the park and work on my laptop. This used to be my regular routine on the weekends I felt better as well. With this thought, it began to feel like the guy in the suit was in the right, and I was in the wrong. I tried to lift the racket again, but I had no strength. My eyes started to get blurry, and the world was spinning in front of my eyes. I sat down with Rajib on the bench and called his mom to come pick him up. Throughout the ordeal, I said not one word to Rajib, and when his mom came over, I left the bench and started to walk away without a word.

I was crashing, and the only thing I thought would fix this was sleep. I took the pill and went to bed around six, but sleep wasn't coming. Meanwhile, my anxiety was getting the better of me, so I went into the bathroom and did some speed.

I don't even remember how many times I repeated this loop. By the time I came to my senses, it was already Monday morning. I rushed into the bathroom to do what I could. After the shower, I looked myself in the mirror, but something strange happened. The reflection staring back at me was me, but I couldn't recognize it.

Did I always look like that?

I went into the office a little after eight, but I couldn't focus. My vision hadn't returned to normal since yesterday, and the whole world was spinning in front of my eyes. I started to get this hankering for a cigarette like I had not smoked for eons. I decided to head out to the watering hole and smoke with my colleagues. But as soon as I approached them, something strange happened.

It was eight-thirty, so the place was full of people. But when I approached them, all of them disappeared. Even Sam made some excuse or the other and headed for his room. I went into my office and lit a cigarette. I opened the front facing camera of my phone and had

another look at my face. My eyes darted towards the back of the computer where the ants marched on in one uniform motion.

And that's when I realized what was happening.

What the ants had there was the perfect system.

All of them resembled each other. All of them finished their work in the same way.

No one made an effort to stand out.

I made up my mind right then and there. I called John, and told him I was quitting the pills.

"I was afraid of this," he said. "I said you would have to do what I say while under my care. The pills are harmless if taken properly, but tempering with them is dangerous. If you choose to lay them off, I can't guarantee what's going to happen. I can't guarantee your wellbeing that way."

"As much as I appreciate your concern, there is an opportunity cost to everything," I replied. "While the pills have definitely helped, there were some unforeseen consequences. So, no matter what happens, I have to lay off the sleeping pills. I can't afford to go on like this."

"If that is your decision, then fine," he grunted. "Do whatever you want. But don't call me if anything happens, at least when it comes to dealing with the repercussions of this. You dug your grave, now it's time you get buried in it. "

I didn't like the hostile tone he had towards me, so I cut the call and had a cigarette. In the afternoon, I went over to Sam's and invited everyone in the office for Chinese. I did so much speed that night that by the time it was four, I was still as energetic as I had been the previous weeks. For some reason, I went into the office and worked until next afternoon. A week had passed before I realized that I had started to miss out on sleep again. But I stopped seeing it as a problem. In reality, it was an opportunity.

So that's what my life has been for the past three weeks. I haven't had an inch of sleep, but with speed and cigarettes, I don't need it. On most nights, I come back to the office after partying, and in this way, I have been the most productive since I started here ten years ago.

Sure, there have been some opportunity costs.

I've stopped meeting with Rajib, and I've stopped my morning run as well. Speed allows me just enough energy to work through the day, so I couldn't waste that on exercise. As for Rajib, well, when was I ever around for him? This way, he will learn the secrets of the world faster, and he would be better off for it.

My back has been aching a lot lately, and my eyes have sunk right into their sockets. But that is how I have always been.

I also kept the colony of ants towards the back of my computer intact, as a reminder of what my profession, and by extension – what I stand for.

The world keeps turning because everyone does what they are supposed to do. Birds announce the coming of mornings, ants take food into their homes, and people like me rake in the millions.

All is right with the world.