

Shorelines Without Sea



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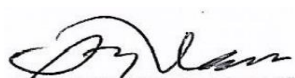
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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.



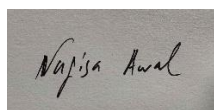
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DECLARATION

This thesis presents my original research work. Wherever the 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.

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature appears to read "Nafisa Awal".

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Dedication (optional)

**Seema Nusrat Amin, without you, there would be no one who would
encourage me to pursue creative writing.**

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This thesis would not have been possible without the generous support, encouragement, and belief of many people.

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I am deeply thankful to my teachers and mentors in the Department of English at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, who not only taught me literature but also showed me how to think and feel deeply about stories—my own and others. Your influence is woven into every sentence of this thesis.

This thesis is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real persons, living or deceased, or actual events is purely coincidental. The work does not intend to depict or represent any real individuals or communities.

Table of Contents

Introduction	-----	7
Chapter 1:	-----	12
Chapter 2:	-----	16
Chapter 3:	-----	21
Chapter 4:	-----	26
Chapter 5:	-----	31
Chapter 6:	-----	37
Chapter 7:	-----	46
Chapter 8:	-----	50
Chapter 9:	-----	55
Chapter 10:	-----	59
Chapter 11:	-----	64
Chapter 12:	-----	68

Introduction

Shorelines Without Sea

Nafisa Awal

In Bangladesh, education is not merely a personal pursuit but a collective family project, a symbol of honour, resilience, and sacrifice. It is often the dream not of one, but of many. For young people, particularly boys from middle-income or lower-middle-income urban families, the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) and subsequent university admission process are seen as decisive thresholds. The years leading up to and following HSC are viewed as the formative bridge between adolescence and adulthood, where the pressures of ambition, identity, and family expectation collide. *Shorelines Without Sea* is a fictional narrative that traces one such coming-of-age arc—Raif's story—as it unfolds across two vastly different Bangladeshi cities, Chittagong and Rajshahi. It is, in essence, a Bildungsroman, but one told through the cultural, emotional, and educational landscapes that define contemporary Bangladesh.

The title *Shorelines Without Sea* functions both literally and metaphorically. Chittagong, Raif's hometown, is a city defined by its proximity to the sea. Yet the shoreline in this narrative is not just a geographical marker—it becomes a symbol of memory, belonging, and absence. A shoreline without a sea is an image of longing without fulfilment, of place without anchoring. It encapsulates what Raif feels when he moves to Rajshahi: the familiarity of place, but not the comfort of home. The metaphor evolves throughout the novel to reflect Raif's emotional states—he is often near to what he desires (success, stability, peace) but unable to fully inhabit or possess it. This paradox of nearness and distance, of presence and absence, is the emotional spine of the novel.

The decision to write this thesis in English, rather than Bengali, was not taken lightly. English as a medium provides access to a broader literary and academic readership and allows me to engage in cultural translation. I am not merely translating Bangladeshi experiences into English; I am translating emotional truths that exist in a Bengali context into a language that can carry them beyond the immediate cultural borders. This act of translation is part of a larger tradition of South Asian English fiction, where language serves as a bridge between worlds—internal and external, traditional and modern, regional and global.

Furthermore, writing in English allowed me to explore Raif's consciousness with a specific narrative distance. It helped me avoid sentimentality while still maintaining emotional intensity. I found that some concepts—like "salami," "mezbaan," "boti," or the use of sleeping pills as a coping mechanism—gained greater resonance when presented through the lens of English but rooted in regional specificity. I deliberately used cultural codes, dialect references, and social norms deeply embedded in Bangladeshi life, particularly Chittagonian culture, without explaining them away entirely for the sake of an "outsider" reader. This was a balancing act between clarity and authenticity, accessibility and rootedness.

One of the significant structural choices of the novel was to set it across two contrasting cities: Chittagong and Rajshahi. This is not merely a setting choice, but a thematic one. Chittagong represents roots, family, tradition, emotional warmth, and the known. It is a coastal city filled with wind, salt, ritual, and memory. It is where Raif's sense of self is deeply anchored—even as it becomes a place he must leave to grow. Rajshahi, in contrast, is an inland city—calmer, colder, quieter, and, for Raif, emotionally disconnected. It is a place of duty rather than desire. By placing

Raif's story between these two cities, the novel explores the idea that identity is formed not only by where we come from but also by the distance we travel from it.

In particular, I wanted to portray the regional nuances of Bangladesh—the way food tastes, seasons shift, and people behave differently in different districts. Chittagonians are portrayed as emotionally expressive and firmly attached to their families, which mirrors Raif's intense longing for his hometown. Rajshahi, by contrast, is portrayed as slower, more judgmental toward outsiders, and socially rigid—a place where Raif finds it difficult to belong. This contrast also serves a symbolic function: Rajshahi becomes the "shoreline without the sea"—a place with all the trappings of life but none of the emotional tide.

One of the novel's central themes is the pressure on young people in Bangladesh during their educational journey. HSC exams and university admissions are portrayed not merely as academic milestones but as emotional and existential crucibles. The novel attempts to show how a system designed to measure intelligence can often distort identity, damage self-worth, and amplify mental health issues.

Raif's decision to sit for the HSC improvement exam reflects the double burden many students face: not only must they succeed, but they must do so on the "first try," or risk societal judgment. Yet the paradox, explored in the story, is that happiness is not guaranteed even when one gains admission to a prestigious engineering university. The success Raif achieves becomes another source of quiet suffering.

There is a quiet irony that pervades the story: that despite all the sacrifices made, despite all the missed calls, lost meals, isolation, and insomnia, success does not fill the void. Instead, it magnifies it. The novel grapples with the emotional cost of meritocracy in a context where mental health is still poorly understood and achievement is often mistaken for emotional well-being.

Shorelines Without Sea is also an exploration of memory—how it shapes us, haunts us, and ultimately defines how we see the present. Much of the novel is filtered through Raif’s reflections: his childhood with Mahir, the emotional impact of his mother’s illness, the collapse of Nishat’s dreams, and Rumi’s suicide. These moments are not presented as dramatic climaxes but as slow-blooming wounds.

The narrative is intentionally non-linear, fragmented like memory itself. Raif often returns to specific days, sounds, or objects—the call to prayer at Maghrib, the sea breeze of Patenga, the stitched cloth of the Six Seasons diary—not because they move the plot forward, but because they give shape to his internal life. In this way, memory becomes a form of resistance. Even as the system attempts to reduce him to a grade point average or a CGPA, Raif retains his humanity by remembering.

The novel also explores intergenerational trauma, particularly through the story of Farida, Raif’s grandmother. Her past is presented in fragments, mirroring the silence surrounding many older women’s stories in traditional households. In telling her story alongside Raif’s, the novel suggests that the emotional legacies we inherit are not always visible, but they shape our responses to love, loss, and resilience.

This thesis does not follow a conventional plot-driven narrative. It comprises emotional episodes, turning points, and recollections (non-linear narrative). There is no single climactic event or resolution, and this is deliberate. Life, particularly in Bangladesh, often does not unfold in neat arcs. There are rarely tidy endings. Instead, there is movement—subtle, slow, cyclical. The novel ends not with an epiphany, but with quiet acceptance. Raif returns home but realises that even home has changed. The shoreline is still there, but the sea he once knew is not.

This emotional structure is meant to mirror the inner lives of many young South Asians—those who carry both ambition and fatigue, memory and anxiety, love and distance. The story has no villain, only a series of misunderstandings, structural constraints, and human limitations. Even the adults, like Noorjahan and Iskender, are not faultless. But they, too, are doing their best in a society that rarely allows for softness.

Shorelines Without Sea is ultimately a story of quiet endurance. It is about the invisible costs of success, the silent burdens carried by young men who appear to be doing well on paper but are unravelling internally. It is about how we keep going—not because we are sure, but because we must. It is about how people change, not always for better or worse, but because change is the only option that life permits.

Raif does not end up where he imagined. That may be the point. Perhaps *Shorelines Without Sea* is not about reaching a destination at all. Maybe it is about learning to live with the ache of longing and carry the shoreline with us—even when we never find the sea.

Chapter 1:

“How were the Maghrib hours when I was younger?” Raif asks himself and thinks about it while lying down on his bed and watching the sky darken through the balcony door.

Dawn and evening share the same sky, and a quiet weight settles over the evening. The call for prayer rises, mingling with the birds rushing to return to their nests. Raif suddenly remembers a Hindu neighbourhood near his home in Chittagong. When he’s in Chittagong, as soon as the Maghrib prayer ends, he hears the distant hum of the conch shells drifting through the air.

What feels notably different is him lying down at this hour; his mother never liked it when he was with her. His mother, Noorjahan, used to say, ‘Never lie down or study when you hear the call of the prayer.’ Her logic is that it signifies declining intelligence; only idle people lie down at this hour. Noorjahan made a habit of praying, especially the Maghrib prayer; she would always say, ‘The world will end at the time of Maghrib, so you should always pray.’ And now, Raif only says the Jumma prayer so his and at every hour, guilt lingers- not heavy or sharp, but always persistent.

Raif and his elder brother, Saif, used to go to the nearest mosque, a minute’s away from their home. Raif always liked doing his ablution at the mosque’s pond. It gave him a sense of adulthood since the adults performed their ablution there. And then, when he got into class 9, trapped within the four walls of Badhon bhai’s coaching centre, the call for Maghrib prayer started eluding him.

Raif is much like Noorjahan; everybody in his neighbourhood says this. The sharp lines running from his nose to his lips are identical to his mother's. He also has his mother’s height; his mother is taller than his father, which is unusual in the part of the world. People pay a lot of attention to the groom’s height. Still, Noorjahan’s father, Ali Ahmad, was always impressed by the innocent smile and respectful voice of Iskender while saying, “Assalamu Alaikum, *Chacha...*”

Raif's father. Iskender's humble background back then didn't matter to Ali; he only wanted an assured home for his daughter where the husband would always care for the wife.

Raif longs for his hometown, and every corner of Chittagong calls him back, yet only he can visit the past while lying in his small bed. His toes are always outside his bed, but he has nothing to do now since he's living in Rajshahi. From a Facebook group, he bought this bed from a university senior, where seniors sell their belongings before leaving Rajshahi.

He keeps thinking of his mother every evening; he misses her. But he would not call her, firstly because she wouldn't pick up the call, which annoyed him every single time. Secondly, even if she picked up the call, his worried voice would make Noorjahan worried. Raif doesn't want Noorjahan to know what is going on with his life, though he calls his family every night at 11. He is always anxious that his family might sense something is going wrong with him, and they would worry. He never calls them when worried; things are bad enough for him, and he doesn't want to worsen it.

Raif feels more anxious during the evening, mainly about his future. He rented an apartment with four classmates at Jamuna Abashik, a quiet area. The landlady's son is also a RUETian like them, so she is never strict with them; Raif also knows that if they were not RUETians, she would never let them be here. Raif is respectful towards her gestures, but Ifad takes full advantage; he secretly smokes joints.

A car passes by without honking, its headlights sweeping across the ceiling like a shifting wave; it reminds him of wanting to buy a sunset light from Daraz; he would enjoy the fusions anytime he wants. The glow is almost beautiful, but stings Raif's tired, sleepy eyes. He blinks against it and turns his head to the side. The bed is uncomfortable, and the curtains are see-through: both are completely useless; whoever sold it to them, Raif wants to sue the person now and then. But who

has the money to sue or buy new curtains and a bed? No one, at least not him, not anyone he knows.

Raif stands up without switching on the lights and goes to the balcony. He actually shares this room with his roommate, Maruf. Since Maruf is not here, which means a rare moment of solitude, he lights a cigarette lightheartedly on the balcony while leaning on the cornice with his elbows. It's already 7:50, and Rajshahi's night air is slightly more remarkable than the day. He looks at the city lights, which are not as loud in Chittagong but are still beautiful.

He again thinks of home. He never smokes in Chittagong; his parents are too strict about it. Cigarette is his number one privilege in Rajshahi, and Rajshahi gave him some rare fortunes like this. For him, cigarettes hold memories, sadness, and loneliness. While smoking, he often goes back to the time when he first started smoking. His ex-roommate, Sarwar, was a wicked one. He was not a drug addict, but he was pretty regular with joints. One day, Raif was upset with his first-year results. When he came to his room, Sarwar was smoking, though the mess owner never allowed it. He took the lighted cigarette into his fingers and inhaled rashly. That did nothing; all it did was cause coughing.

Rajshahi is the second place Raif has ever lived, a door to a different world. He firmly belongs to Chittagong, where his forefathers had lived for generations. Leaving Chittagong was never an option for him; RUET successfully changed his mind, which was bravery back then when he was admitted, and now a regret. Raif feels homesick at the end of the day; Rajshahi is nothing like Chittagong and never feels like home. The weather, the food, the people- everything is different here. The heat suffocates in summer, and the winter is bone-chilling; food is bland, and people are too judgmental towards outsiders. Raif never passes a single day without thinking of home: the sound of *Patenga* waves, the smell of freshly cooked *Mezbaan* at a wedding, the warmth of her

mother: everything! The murmuring voice, heavy with the sorrow of his ninety-year-old grandmother, still rings in the ears, ‘Why Rajshahi- so far away from me? Can’t you study here?’

The voice lingers in his head—it always does. Regret feels heavier. She was right all along: why Rajshahi? He takes the last drag of his cigarette, crushing its butt into the ashtray before Maruf comes.

Chapter 2:

“Why does every day feel the same?” Raif asks himself this question every morning as if waking up resets the cycle of his existence. He feels his life has become like a show, playing on an endless loop, rewound and replayed with meticulous precision by Allah. Often, he tries to find a purpose for his existence, searching for answers from an existentialist perspective, yet the routine remains exact. But in the end, his breath faltered under the weight of his fate and the quiet exhaustion of fighting battles no one saw.

He had bought a pretty expensive diary from a posh stationery store near Rajshahi University. The diary was called *Six Seasons*. Its cover was no ordinary print — it was a cloth-bound edition, carefully stitched with delicate patterns, each representing one of Bangladesh's six seasons: the riot of colours in spring, the fierce rains of monsoon, the golden glow of autumn, the misty tenderness of winter, and all the fleeting in-betweens. The texture under Raif's fingers felt alive, almost breathing, as if it carried the pulse of the changing air back home. Inside, the thick, heavy pages were carefully chosen—pages that wouldn't betray the ink, no matter how heavily he pressed his pen. It was made not just to be written on, but to be lived in. In a way, *Six Seasons* wasn't just a diary. It was a quiet promise: whatever storms passed, there would always be another season, another chance, waiting beyond the page.

He appreciates keeping a diary as a record of random yet meaningful events. Still, he stumbles to pour his thoughts on paper, and a beautiful diary is never for his bad handwriting and tangled thoughts.

But today, something shifts, and he opens his diary and hastily runs his fingers over the thick and uneven textures of the pages. Maybe today's a different day, the same day, and the same loop with brief changes. On the first page, he writes,

“The mistakes I've made in my life:

One, I studied hard.

Two, I left my family and my beloved hometown.

Three, I came to Rajshahi.

Four, I study at RUET... ”

Without another thought, Raif closes the diary. But hesitation lingers within the first four unfinished sentences. A moment later, he opens the diary again, aiming not to betray the thoughts he does in front of people regularly. This time, he writes some unfiltered thoughts that are not carefully crafted, something that happened a year ago. Words spill onto the second page, and he writes down the truths he carries alone, the truths stuck in his throat, words that try to come out of the cages of his ribs, and the words that should be louder but refuse to be louder. Here’s why:

“I’ve been taking sleeping pills regularly. When I went to Chittagong a year ago, I told my psychiatrist that I might be suffering from depression. The psychiatrist was a close friend of my father’s, so I measured my words and crafted them like a politician. I forced myself to swallow the words meant only for someone I trusted with my heart—words too fragile to survive being spoken. Instead, I only told him that I couldn’t study away from my family, which created immense pressure on me.

He smiled, almost amused at my words. No, I am alright; it’s just the pressure I feel due to my high ambitions. Just overwhelmed. ‘It’s natural,’ he said. ‘Very few people can study at a reputed university in Bangladesh, let alone an engineering university or a medical college.’ He spoke in the same way we studied in HSC Bangla Second Paper, “Failure is the Pillar of Success.” As if only studying at RUET would cure my anxiety, the achievement that could silence the restless cacophony in my head.

Only if he could know how I struggle to make friends, how teachers see me based on my CGPA and not the person behind it, and how sanity feels like a thread unravelling. The joy and peace I felt in Chittagong are long gone, erased from my life like they never existed. I ask myself daily, is this the life I studied hard for and fought for? The life I once dreamt of?

I couldn't tell him that; he would never understand; I know that.

I can never sleep without taking sleeping pills; after a while in Rajshahi, sleeping pills became my closest friend, who could only soothe my pain. That should be a friend's job, but I have no one. No matter how much I try to be around the people I meet, I lose myself in my thoughts. I know now that this is not the place or life I asked for...

How is this even a life?

I wake up every morning before 8—not because I want to, but because I have to. My alarm rings every day at 7, and I press the snooze button until 7:40 because I have no desire to go to the university; I look at the ceiling for at least five more minutes in dread.

Three years. Three years in the same city with the same cycle without having a single breakfast. Maybe I've always hated breakfast, as I feel like vomiting when I eat something early in the morning, or perhaps I just can't stand the food here. Then, during the lunch break, I force myself to eat the bland Rajshahi food with watery gravy in every curry. I tend to eat while thinking about my home's fluffy steaming Atop Chaal- each grain is light and separated, thick red spicy beef gravy- always carrying the warmth of my mother's hands. I eat hastily, only to survive, not to enjoy; then, I see my empty plate, and so is my stomach. I grab unhealthy snacks to feel full, but it never works. I have lost weight significantly in three years; my mirror reminds me of this every morning when I brush my teeth.

After lunch, the labs begin at 2:00 in the afternoon. Hours of doing things I never understood, do they have any practicality in real life? Things feel meaningless; my hands only move, and my mind goes beyond the walls. Every minute feels longer than it is, stretching like a quality flour dough, not a low-quality one like Rajshahi's. 5:00 is supposed to be the end, but it always feels like a lifetime away. When the long-awaited 5:00 finally arrives, I walk straight home, throw my bag away like I want to do with my university, and then throw myself onto my small, rough bed until 8:00. I lose myself in the void, just as the daylight slowly fades into the evening sky.

The worst part pops up from nowhere as I lose myself in my thoughts and lab reports. I curse the lab reports given by the teachers while doing them. Some faculties even demand handwritten lab reports at this age. Can you believe this? But I've seen worse in some departments, so my department, Mechatronics Engineering, isn't the worst. But rationality doesn't help when you feel helpless.

After nearly two hours of cursing my lab reports and the people who assigned them, I turn down my laptop's display without manually shutting it down. I usually have no patience after writing at least four lab reports daily. I go for my dinner alone, and I expect to lose my temper after tasting the first mouthful of rice. Even the food reminds me that I don't belong here and should leave everything behind.

At the end of the day, I surrender to the silver lining of my bad situation- the small bed and sleeping pills. I take the dose, sometimes higher depending on how I feel, and let the weight of exhaustion pull under me. Sleep comes in the form of tiredness and dizziness- total artificial sleep that's always empty but never feels enough. I know that the same morning loop will come soon, dragging me to RUET at 8:00 in the morning.

My life is on repeat, a life I never asked for when I regularly raised my hands in supplication during admission...”

Chapter 03:

Chittagong—whenever people hear the name, specific images immediately surface in the minds of outsiders: the deeply traditional communities, religious people, the unmistakable Chittagonian accent, and the conventional notion of not marrying beyond the district's border; as Raif's mother says, 'Nodi er oi paar' (The other side of the river). Outsiders often complain about how Chittagonians point it out explicitly, saying you're not from Chittagong. Yet, strangely enough, when people plan their tours, they always choose Chittagong or Cox's Bazar.

Some things, collectively, never change. People sometimes say, "This happens in a million/exceptions isn't an example." But an exception isn't just a change; it suggests a difference—the silent crack of a pattern that can create a legacy or disaster.

Raif often thinks when someone asks him why you came to Rajshahi when you had CUET in Chittagong. Isn't it too much for you? Whoever asks this question is absolutely right. After all, he has endured in Rajsahi, Raif feels the weight of their words. He quietly hides his disappointments and says the words that conceal his weaknesses in a monotone: "RUET is older than CUET, and the academic environment is incomparable."

His words contain some truth. RUET ranks just below BUET. And the reputation had been enough to uproot him from the familiar streets of Chittagong. But he hadn't anticipated the cost of leaving his roots behind to start a new chapter of life. He had never imagined that leaving home—abandoning the sea breeze, the familiar faces, and the shelter of his hometown—would carve such a deep, aching hollow inside him.

And it makes sense—Chittagonians are known to be seriously homesick. Raif has heard of this since childhood and has laughed about it. Now, he carries the truth like an invisible weight as heavy as a massive stone on his chest, carrying it all around, all the time.

Never a single day goes by without Raif thinking about his home or family. He went home for barely a day several times, with a round trip of 26 hours altogether. After thinking closely about his choices, he tries to find a cause. Why did I come here? Why did I choose Engineering? I could've selected CUET instead—all the thoughts popped like unwanted notifications later at night.

Raif's choice—an exceptional one—always felt unusual back in his housing colony days. At that time, he believed that stepping out of the familiar path might lead to something better, something bright after endurance and beyond the lines of certainty. But now, caught in the quiet aftermath of his decision, he finds himself more and more like his grandmother, Farida Khatun.

For no particular reason, he sometimes playfully calls her “Farida Cartoon,” a private joke that no one else shares. In his moments of what he has lost and gained so far, Raif wonders if such exceptions marked her life. Perhaps my grandmother had an exceptional life, just like me, Raif muses, a sigh rising from deep within him as his thoughts drift back to her story.

Farida's story began on the day when his husband vanished from her life, leaving her behind with their two sons. Abdul Hamid, Raif's grandfather, left home one morning and never returned, abandoning everything- his family, old mother, his roots, and promises. For the people of Chittagong, such an act was unthinkable. Chittagonians are known for holding their families close, just as they once guarded their goods at the port. But Farida's life was an exception to even the oldest traditions.

Back then, the Chatgaiyas were known as Saudagar, merchants of the sea, their lives intertwined with the tides and trade routes of the port city. Haimd had tried to chase his fortune there, but the pressure from his family and peers. But what he wanted to do was still a mystery; he had been too inconsistent and scattered. Men like him, unreliable and absent-minded, found no

place in the steady world of commerce. Why would someone hire a man whose thoughts are far away?

Farida, however, remembers her wedding day vividly, even though she is at an age where she forgets everything. She can still picture the red saree draped around her, the minimal gold necklace against her young skin, the matching earrings and bangles, and the Tikli shining on her forehead. For one fleeting day, she felt like a heroine in a film, soaking in the unfamiliar warmth of affection and love that she had never felt before.

Sometimes, her mind drifts to the wedding night- the beginning of everything or, perhaps, the quiet beginning of an end. Hamid had entered the room late, eyes dulled by exhaustion. He looked at her briefly and said, 'It's been a long day. I should sleep now. You should also sleep.' And without another word, he lay down beside her at a careful distance.

Farida, even then, had not been particularly surprised; she just felt uncomfortable. She had quietly convinced herself this was the beginning; things would take time to settle down. Perhaps, she thought, her husband needed only a few days to adjust and to look at her with the affection she had hoped for. After all the attention she had received as a new bride, the way everyone's eyes lingered on her jewellery, saree, and bridal glow, it was painful to realise that the man for whom it was all meant barely cast her a glance of tenderness.

But day by day, the truth settled over her like dust in a locked room. She realised she was trapped inside the household, a cage built not by walls but with the hollows of absence, whether it was the absence of Hamid or the lack of love and understanding from all the people around her. Her husband was never home, and the silence stretched endlessly. Even now, when Farida watches the newlyweds in her neighbourhood, her mind drifts back to the night. She secretly prays that the

young bride across the street never feels the quiet, acute ache she once felt in the shadows of her wedding chamber.

Hamid, her husband, had never intended to become a husband in the real sense of the word, the weight the word carries. Responsibilities are something that never touched him. Yet, her mother-in-law, Sajida, was relentless in expectations, saying to Farida, “A good wife’s job is to make the husband settle down in the family. Men never settle down until their wife makes them do so. If you don’t fulfil your duties, mark my words, and my son will never return. I’ve only got him married so he can settle down and be responsible. Now, only you can make him do that.”

But Sajida herself was no stranger to disappointments. She could never recall the last time her husband had gifted her a simple Resmi Churi- bangles that symbolised the rarest form of affection to her. All she had ever longed for was a dozen humble glass bangles. Instead, what she received were duties disguised as blessings. Sajida never considered her rights as a wife; no one had given her that privilege. Nor had Farida. In their world, women were not objects, as modern voices sometimes claim- they were not subjects either. They were never truly seen as women. They were mothers in waiting, never wives in fullness. They were caretakers of men’s legacies, not companions in life’s journey.

Noorjahan had been more fortunate. Iskender, her husband, had surprised everyone by not becoming like his father- he became a family man. He cared deeply for his family, a rarity that Noorjahan never took for granted. But Farida, shaped by her own scars, couldn’t help but remain the archetypical mother-in-law, sharp-tongued, often throwing thoughtless taunts at Noorjahan. Yet, Noorjahan, with her resilience and quiet strength, never let these barbs settle too deep. She weathered them with grace, never raising her voice in return. Farida, in her quiet moments, admired Noorjahan’s wisdom. She still did. But admiration couldn’t quiet the old emptiness inside her.

Even now, the memory of Hamid's departure clings to her like a shadow. She finds herself returning, again and again, to the day he walked away, leaving her alone with two sons and a life with unasked-for resilience.

Raif never knew anything about his grandfather, and his parents never discussed anything about them. He came to know everything one night when he was about to sleep; Farida has a habit of talking nonstop when she can't sleep. For an extended period, she's been on sleeping pills, as she has been over ninety. Farida suddenly started talking about Hamid while Raif was scrolling through Facebook. Hearing Hamid's name, he put aside his phone and listened to his grandmother. "When your grandfather left, we started living with my brothers...I was lucky enough to have them by my side. Otherwise, life would've been critical for me."

"Did Dadabhai ever contact you?"

"No, he didn't until several years later, I was told that he had married somewhere else."

"Do you know anything about that family?"

"No, I wonder why someone would marry a man like him? And when he died, nobody from the family came; perhaps he didn't have any children from that woman."

Raif sighed and remained silent. Farida murmured and said things beyond comprehension; her voice, firm in the beginning, gradually sank into nothingness under the sway of the sleeping pills.

Chapter 04:

Everybody has a golden period in their life. In Bangladesh, it's almost always childhood. People return to quiet moments of their childhood when they reminisce about the good old days. For Raif, those golden days glimmer softly in the corners of his mind, inseparable from the memories of Mahir, his maternal cousin. Whenever his thoughts drift back to that time, they carry the warmth of simpler days, and Mahir's face is always there, like a companion shadow, walking beside him through the sunlit path of memory.

If somebody asks Raif his favourite memory of Mahir, he will laugh and say, "One day, I was at a book fair with Mahir. Walking through the fair, Mahir stood in front of a stall; I saw him holding a book named *Medhabi Chatra Houar 101 Koushol* (101 Ways to Become a Brilliant Student). I laughed and told him not to buy the book; these motivational books never work. But he insisted and said, *Can't you see, it says that if you want to become a good student, it's unnecessary to study all the time?* Read the opening line of the book. He then bought the book and never touched it again."

This was Mahir. Where Raif was a studious one, he was the complete opposite. His *Mama*, Alam, requested his sister, Noorjahan, "Please keep my son with your family until he finishes his HSC. I believe he'll do well if he spends time with Raif. I want my son to be attentive in his studies." Noorjahan seemed a bit concerned as she thought her brother's hope might be dashed. She told his brother, "What if *Bhabi* doesn't like the idea? What if things turn out negatively that we can't predict?"

Alam hesitated momentarily, then nervously laughed and said, "Don't be worried about your *Bhabi*; she'll accept it for Mahir's sake. Also, he needs to learn about basic manners and etiquettes. I feel ashamed that his mother is not concerned about teaching them. I believe you, sister; you can teach him everything he needs to know."

Noorjahan sighed, and thoughts drifted to her own family. What would Iskender honestly think of having her nephew under their roof? From the very first mention of the proposal, an unspoken sorrow had settled in the chest of Noorjahan. Noorjahan had been uneasy about bringing Mahir into their home, but she kept her worries to herself. She had no choice but to accept it, and Iskender did too, not out of joy, but out of duty. Even years later, Noorjahan never spoke of how he truly felt.

For Saif and Raif, though, it was simple happiness. Having Mahir with them, seemingly forever, felt like an unexpected gift. Children, at that tender age, remain blissfully unaware of the quiet politics that go on behind the curtains.

When Mahir's mother, Fazila, sighed over how she might convince her husband to change his mind, Noorjahan's worries ran deeper than hers. She thought of not changing the decisions already made but of how she would hold the family together now, balance the added weight of responsibilities, and what uncertain paths the future might lead them down.

But none influenced the boys by projecting their own opinion, neither Noorjahan nor her *Bhabi*. The two brothers were overjoyed; their days suddenly filled with the excitement of football matches in the colony. They listened to radio programmes stealthily away from the eyeshots of Iskender late at night and shared secrets with each other. This is what childhood is—a season of unknown happiness, untouched by shadows quietly gathering around them.

Raif often drifts back to those careless, tension-free days when Mahir would trail after him everywhere like a persistent shadow that refused to leave. He remembers vividly how Mahir looked when he arrived at their house— a tall, fair boy in class five with feet so enormous that finding him a pair of shoes was a borderline impossible mission. Apex, Bata, and every other store

in the market had one thing in common: no Mahir-size shoes. It became a family quest, and when they finally managed to find a pair, Mahir's gift for disaster would take over. No matter how sturdy the shoes were, Mahir somehow managed to destroy them within a few days, as if his feet were at war with the footwear.

Alam had been right about Mahir all along: his common sense and basic courtesy were practically non-existent, as if these had abandoned him when he was born. At mealtimes, Mahir shamelessly served himself the best piece of chicken or fish, or more than one piece, without thinking of anyone else- like a king at his banquet. Helping with the chores? Out of the question. One day, Noorjahan told him to serve Farida a glass of water, and he broke the glass; water was all over the table.

Iskender watched all of this unfolding with a quiet disbelief, often exchanging puzzled glances with Noorjahan. And Noorjahan, catching those looks, felt ashamed. She had promised her brother that she would teach Mahir everything he needed to know, but Mahir seemed beyond reach. Farida, of course, didn't bother with subtle glances- she went straight for the jugular. "My grandchildren aren't like Mahir, Noorjahan," Farida said one day with utter outrage, "What on earth has your *Bhabi* taught him? I can't believe he's from your side of the family!" Noorjahan, mortified, shot her mother-in-law a pleading look, "*Amma*, please keep your voice down," she whispered urgently, her eyes darting towards the room where Mahir was, "What will my family think?" Farida sighed, lowering her voice to a hum, though her expression remained thoroughly unimpressed. Noorjahan drifted into her own restless thoughts, Farida's voice growing faint, the world around her melting into a slow, indistinct haze.

Raif misses those days; oddly enough, he knows he will miss them until his final breath. Those times were tough, no doubt about it. The house only had three bedrooms: one was sacred territory, permanently reserved for Farida. No one dared to enter. Another belonged to Iskender and

Noorjahan, and Saif and Raif shared the last humble little room. When Mahir moved in, he claimed the boys' bed was his own. Saif and Raif- skinnier and far less aggressive sleepers- were regularly pushed to the edges of the bed, clinging on like survivors on a sinking raft. Many nights, Raif found himself wide awake, crushed against the wall, where Mahir sprawled luxuriously across the mattress like royalty. Mornings were no better. Raif dragged himself to school, bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, while Mahir strolled off to class looking fresher than sunrise. And then came mealtimes— battles of survival. Mahir ate with the enthusiasm of someone preparing for hibernation, often devouring enough for two people, leaving Raif staring miserably at near-empty dishes. Back then, Raif had burned with fury. Now, he chuckles at the memory. *Nostalgia is the dirty liar*, he thinks.

He remembers, as clear as the day, the moment he could take it no more. Raif crept into Noorjahan's room and, in a muted voice, pleaded, "Can't we send back Mahir? I can't sleep. What if my grades drop? I can't even eat properly, *Ammu!*" Noorjahan, without missing a beat, looked at him dead in the eye and replied flatly, "If someone wants to study, they can study anywhere. Don't give me excuses. Adjust."

Years later, Raif understood why she had said it. She had no other choice; she was caught in her own quiet storm of helplessness and duty. But back then, her cold response had stung. He sulked for days, and barely spoke to his mother. Noorjahan noticed, of course. She understood perfectly. But her way of making amends was predictable and straightforward: "Come and eat," she would say at mealtimes, as though food could fix everything.

And somehow, it almost did.

Chapter 5:

“Okay, then, 5000 taka a month it is. There’s a room upstairs with an attached bathroom for you. I hope you will not have any issues with the room and the food,” Iskender told Samad, the lodging

teacher of Saif, Raif, and also- Mahir. Back then, Saif was in class 9, Raif was in class 8, and Mahir was in class 6. But none of them was the reason to bring Samad; the reason was Noorjahan herself.

Raif remembers that afternoon with piercing clarity.

It was a Friday, just as the call to Jummah prayer began to echo through the neighbourhood. The threshold had crouched him, lost in a game of marbles, when his mother's scream tore through the quietness of noon—a sound raw and desperate, unlike anything he had ever heard from her. Before Raif could even get up, the neighbour women came rushing in, their sarees brushing roughly past him, their footsteps slapping against the floor. The air around him thickened with hurried whispers, panicked questions he couldn't understand. Heart pounding, Raif stumbled after them toward his mother's room. It was already crowded—the women pressing close, their faces drawn tight with fear and helplessness. One was pouring water over Noorjahan's head, the droplets running down her still face. Raif froze at the doorway. His eyes locked on his mother's motionless form, wide and bulging with dread, unable to take even a single step forward.

He still remembers rushing towards his Quran and hurriedly opening the holy book. He started reciting the first verse he saw, hoping that would help his mother.

Around him, the hushed sobs of the women filled the air, tangled with choked whispers of despair. "What happened to Saif's *Ma*? Why did this happen to her?" The questions floated around him, the same questions that had rooted themselves deep in Raif's mind. The sorrow in the room shallowed the very light of the noon, drowning the purity of Jummah. Even the sacred call to prayer seemed to fade beneath the weight of all.

Iskender wasn't at home that day; he was busy with work. Suddenly, Alam called him. Alam's usually steady voice now trembled with panic as he told Iskender about Noorjahan's condition. The words struck a blow. As Alam's frantic words poured through the receiver, Iskender felt the ground tilt beneath him. His head spun, his vision blurred, and before he could steady himself, he lost his grip and collapsed onto the floor.

No one told Saif or Raif what had happened to their father. People nearby rushed to Iskender's side, their faces tight with fear. They splashed cold water over him, again and again, watching with held breath until, at last, his eyelids fluttered open, and a faint sign of life returned to his face.

To this day, Noorjahan regularly visits the doctor. Back then, when her illness struck, the household descended into chaos. Well-meaning neighbours had crowded around Iskender, offering unsolicited advice in hushed but urgent tones. *"She's not bleeding, and there's no broken legs or hands,"* they reasoned. *"It must be a jinn's doing. Call a Kabiraj. Call a Hujur!"* Iskender, already overwhelmed, felt their words swirl around him like an unwanted storm. Their relentless suggestions only deepened his restlessness. For two whole days, he did nothing but grapple with uncertainty, his mind caught between fear and responsibility. At last, he called Noorjahan's mother and sisters, asking them not to leave their home and stay for a few days. He hoped that seeing her family might uplift Noorjahan's spirits.

Iskender was right. Noorjahan, surrounded by familiar faces, seemed to brighten slowly as if the warmth of her loved ones pushed back the shadows that were settled over her. Watching this, something inside Iskender steadied. He found his resolve. He made up his mind to seek the best doctors in the country for treatment; no more guesswork or superstition.

At night, as Noorjahan slept, her face softened in the gentle quiet of slumber, Iskender turned to prayer. With quiet desperation, he asked Allah for her recovery, whispering his hopes into the

stillness of the room. Finishing his prayer, he leaned closer to Noorjahan and recited the sacred verses of Ayatul Kursi. His breath carried the words over her as if wrapping her in an invisible shield of protection. He still does it; while Noorjahan sleeps unaware, Iskender recites the same verses and blows over her, holding onto his silent ritual of care. She never knows. But he never forgets.

It remains a haunting memory for Raif even now. Whenever his mind drifts back to the darker corners of his childhood, his moment rises, unbidden, to the surface. Back then, he had been utterly devastated—lost in fear, drained of all desire to study, play, or do anything at all. One thought consumed him, looping endlessly in his mind: *Is Ammu going to die? What will happen if she dies?*

Raif remembers staying away from school for months, slipping in only when necessary. Back then, attendance wasn't as strict as it is now at RUET; he could remain at home without consequences, and home was the only place that still felt safe. He didn't sit beside Noorjahan every hour, but never strayed far. It was as if he had placed himself on quiet, unseen guard duty.

Whenever she drifted into sleep, Raif would tiptoe to her side, his hands trembling slightly. He would place her right hand beneath her nostrils, holding his breath, waiting for that soft, warm whisper of life. The relief that came when he felt it was something he never found words for. It loosened the knot inside his chest, just a little. Enough to carry him through the next hour. Enough to believe she would stay. Perhaps Noorjahan will never know how deeply she is loved by her husband and her sons. Or perhaps she knows, and simply holds that love quietly, the way some truths are too heavy to be spoken aloud. No one can ever say for sure. Iskender, meanwhile, was worn thin, juggling work, bills, and the weight of worry. Still, they were lucky. They lived in a neighbourhood where people believed in standing close through hard times. The women around

them cared for Noorjahan as if she were their own, bringing food, sitting with her, checking in daily—Not for a week, not even a month—But for as long as it took.

Only when the chaos started to settle did Iskender notice something alarming: none of the boys were studying—not Saif, Raif, or even Mahir. Despite being the youngest, Mahir had mastered the art of academic avoidance with the elegance of a seasoned politician.

Iskender's mind was distressed. He feared Alam might notice, misread the situation, and worse, confront them. And if a clash occurred, Noorjahan would suffer the most. Her health couldn't take another wave of household stress. But Iskender, even the restrained storm, said nothing. He only waited quietly for the results to come in. When the report cards finally arrived, they spoke louder than anything else. Iskender didn't raise his voice a bit; he didn't yell, probably for Noorjahan's sake. He walked up to Saif, delivering a sharp and precise slap that echoed down the hallway like thunderclaps. The sound was enough. Before Iskender could turn, Raif and Mahir had opened their textbooks and started reading as loudly as possible. Mahir even briefly considered sitting down for prayer, but quickly calculated that flipping a math book was faster than performing ablution. Survival first, sincerity later.

The three boys barely passed—just above 33—the sacred Bangladeshi line between failure and freedom. In the Bangladeshi grading system, 33 out of 100 marks is the minimum passing score; anything below it is considered a failure. Crossing that line, even by a hair, meant survival. Iskender was furious and mystified, as though the boys had pulled off some academic heist. It was a miracle, a divine comedy of scraping by to him. He sat with his head in his hands, trying to process how all three of them had managed to walk the tightrope of mediocrity without falling off.

The biggest issue was that Noorjahan had always been the one to teach the three. But now, with her unable to help, something had to change urgently in this house.

Iskender made up his mind that very night. He would hire a lodging master without any delay. He started asking around and eventually heard about Samad, who, conventionally, was also looking for work. Back then, many young men from across the Chittagong division- especially those studying BA or MA- would migrate to the capital city to earn a living. The lodging-master lifestyle was a rite of passage, and Samad was part of that proud, slightly broken tradition.

From the very first glance, Raif disliked Samad. There was no logical reason at first- only instincts and vibes. Well, one reason: Samad was from Noakhali. That was enough to plant a seed of suspicion in Raif's young, highly regionalised heart. And two: Samad's eyes were always red. Not that tired-red just always suspiciously red. Raif tried to uncover the truth behind Samad's red eyes, as if it were a scandal- betel nut? Cigarettes? Forbidden things? But Samad drank tea like a monk and never missed a prayer. The mystery only deepened.

And then came the studies. Raif's dislike matured into full-blown irritation. Samad had the unwavering self-confidence of someone who had once passed an exam back in 1996 and never stopped talking about it. He never missed an opportunity to brag about his academic roots— Chittagong College—as if it were Harvard by the Bay of Bengal. Raif never understood his pride. He just nodded silently and flipped pages. But one day, Samad looked straight at him and said, "I'll see what you do with your life. If you even get near Chittagong College, I'll be satisfied." It wasn't even a challenge to Raif- it was an oddly specific curse to him.

Raif disliked him for sure. But there was no other way to study at home. Either he swallowed his pride or failed his exams- there was no in-between. And then there were Iskender's slaps waiting for him. Between Samad's lectures and Iskender's slaps— the choice was obvious.

Chapter 06:

Time moved so silently that by the time Raif noticed, winter had already crept in, and class 9 had begun. The air grew colder, and with it came the heavy and unfamiliar weight of new textbooks—thicker, heavier, and more intimidating than anything he had seen in class 8.

For the first time, Raif truly understood: the road to his dream destiny would not be easy. He would have to study harder, for longer hours than before, and most importantly, be smarter than before. Not long ago, there had been a time when his dreams were like video games- one inevitably followed another. His only goal had been to achieve that golden GPA 5 in SSC- the golden egg, as he thought of it, though he wasn't sure why he wanted it so badly. Perhaps because everyone around him spoke of it with such reverence, as if it were the single key to a life well-lived; otherwise, life would be destroyed completely.

But a few weeks into class 9, Raif's ambition was skyrocketing. Now, it wasn't just about grades; it was about a place, a name. He wanted to earn admission to Chittagong College- the city's crown jewel of higher secondary education. The dream wasn't crafted out of logic or careful planning; it was born from something simpler, almost instinctive- like a rule to get higher and higher in a familiar pattern. In Raif's little world, which felt so unstable, he needed something solid to reach for. And for now, that something was where he believed greatness waited for him, just beyond the gates of Chittagong College.

Raif started harder than he ever had in his life. Gladly— or perhaps fatefully— Samad was there. No matter how much Raif disliked him, he now knows Samad was the true architect of his transition. Samad made him a real disciplined, determined, and steady student. He was strict with Raif, far more stringent than he had been with Saif and Mahir. Back then, Raif didn't know why. Now, he does. And he remains quietly grateful for it. Samad instilled a straightforward rule: Raif had to sit at his study table no matter what happened. Even if he didn't feel like studying, even if the world outside called for him, even if every bone of his body begged for distraction- he had to sit. But there were also days when Samad wasn't interested in teaching, and the two chattered for hours.

Every day, Raif made his ablution, said his Maghrib prayers, and then took his place at the study table, a small soldier at war with his own laziness. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, Raif began to change. He started sitting from 6 PM to 11 PM without fail, day after day, the hours folding into each other until study became less of a chore and more of a rhythm.

Those were the most memorable days of Raif's life. Their home felt full of stability, of warmth, of quiet happiness. Noorjahan's health improved, and Iskender and Farida were healthy and smiling. Mahir was still with them, and most importantly, Samad was there, quietly steering Raif toward a future he couldn't yet see.

One moment would drift back to him whenever he thought of the days gone by. One evening, Samad said, "You should sit for the government school entrance exam. Your current school isn't ideal for SSC. You're capable of more." It was just after his JSC examination. Like an obedient boy, he had become, Raif nodded without hesitation. The exams were barely a week away, but he threw himself into preparation, studying as much as he could cram into those short, nervous days.

When the results came out, Raif had secured a place in Chittagong Government Boys' School—one of the best schools in the city. The family was overjoyed. Yet, not everyone could share their happiness. Raif's old school's teachers came to his home, urging him not to leave Sanowara Boys' School. He had been one of their best students, a shining name on their modest record books.

Raif didn't particularly love Sanowara, as he had always felt small and cramped. But the idea of leaving it behind, leaving behind familiar faces and dusty classrooms, still weighed on him. He was upset, but he thought he couldn't explain why. Still, when the time came, he packed his bag and walked through Chittagong Government Boys' School gates, padding into a new chapter of his life.

Unexpectedly, Raif learned a hard truth within his first few days at Chittagong Government Boys' School: the school was much farther than he had ever imagined. It took him two and a half hours just to reach the campus, and then another two and a half hours to return home. Each day, five hours dissolved into the dust and noise, lost to the roads, the crowds, the slow grind of waiting. Within just two exhausted days, Raif made his decision. Quietly, without drama, he returned to his old school.

His teachers were overjoyed to have him back. From that day onward, they treated him with even more care, as if they had been given a second chance to hold onto a star pupil they thought they had lost. And in a way, Raif was happy. Sometimes, it's not a grand ambition but the quiet comfort that shapes a best life.

But then something happened in Raif's family- something so absurd that, even now, he remembers those days with a strange fondness. It was a circus, no less. A loud, chaotic, unstoppable circus.

Noorjahan's younger sister, Nahida, had brought her eldest daughter, Nishat, to stay with them. Nishat had an unknown condition, probably her mother hid it till this date. To this day, nobody knows precisely what it was. All anyone knew was that every day, like a clockwork, Nishat would lose control, usually aimed squarely at her own mother. Her hatred for Nahida burned so fiercely that sometimes, Nishat even tried to attack her with a *Boti* (a traditional Bengali cutting tool for fish, meat, and vegetables). Raif vividly remembers one afternoon when Nishat suddenly snapped and chased Nahida around the house like a wild dog. Raif, only half-scared and half-delighted, could barely process the chaos. The real comedy came from Hamida, Raif's maternal grandmother. Usually patient, Hamida's endurance wore thin after a few days of madness. One night, thoroughly

fed up, she burst out, yelling, “Tie her to a big tree and beat her up! She’s just pretending and doing all those dramas!”

Unfortunately, Nishat had just heard what Hamida had said, every word.

Within seconds, Nishat turned her fury towards Hamida. And that followed was nothing short of legendary: Hamida in her saree, gathering it in her hands and sprinting through the house, with Nishat on her heels, waving whatever she could grab. Raif laughed so hard at the sight that he stubbed his foot on the bed corner and screamed out in pain. Noorjahan, caught between horror and helplessness, looked around the chaos blankly, wondering, *What should I do?*

For nearly a month, their house transformed into what Raif later described, half-jokingly, as a mental asylum. Every day brought new drama, doctors, and miracle remedies that didn’t work. Nahida had chosen her sister’s house because, in truth, everyone relied on Noorjahan. She had always been the calm centre of the storm, the one everyone turned to when life fell apart. And she still is, just older now, and a little slower, quietly carrying the weight of those years in her hands.

But then the ending took a tragic turn.

Humayun Ahmed, one of Bangladesh’s most beloved writers and dramatists, once joked in one of his dramas, *“The cure for madness is marriage.”* Nahida seemed to believe it too literally. Within a month, without consulting anyone-not Noorjahan, not even Iskender-Nahida hurriedly arranged Nishat’s marriage. No careful search, no thoughtful consideration. Nahida wanted one thing: someone or anyone to marry Nishat. And she found the one- an unsuitable groom.

While Noorjahan was surprised, it was Iskender who was truly shaken. He stood firmly against the marriage, but Nahida remained stubborn. Iskender understood what she wouldn’t say out loud: she just wanted Nishat out of her life.

He tried his best to stop this marriage. He reminded everyone that Nishat was once the brightest among them and was admitted to the Mathematics Department at Chittagong University. She deserved more, not this rushed fate Nahida was forcing on her.

Without consulting anyone, not even Noorjahan, Iskander went alone to Hasan's neighbourhood—the boy Nahida had chosen for Nishat. He didn't go inside. He simply roamed the lanes, searching, observing.

It was unfamiliar ground for him. He didn't know the people here. He was about to leave when someone called, "Aren't you Iskander Bhai?"

He turned to see a man approaching warmly. "You probably don't remember me. I'm Nahid. I used to visit your shop." Iskander forced a smile. He remembered Nahid vaguely—one of the dozens of polite customers who passed through without much conversation.

"Why are you here?" Nahid asked. "Looking for someone?"

Iskander hesitated, then sighed. "Sort of. Do you know anyone named Hasan? What's his family like?"

Nahid's face shifted immediately. He seemed unsure how much to say. But slowly, he admitted: Hasan's family was... complicated. Hasan himself was a complete mama's boy, unable to take a single step without his mother's permission. The real trouble, though, was Hasan's mother, known in the area for picking fights with neighbours and boasting endlessly about her son, though Hasan had never achieved anything noteworthy.

Nahid said bluntly, "If you're asking for someone you care about... don't let them marry into that family."

Iskander's heart sank.

But how could he tell Nahida now? She had already made up her mind, barricaded herself against advice. Still, Iskander tried. He went to Nahida and pleaded with her without pride or ego: "Please don't do this. Think about Nishat. She deserves better."

Nahida stared at him blankly. Then, with a cold, cutting voice, she said, "*Dulabhai*, you didn't even ask my permission before going to Hasan's house. It's none of your business who becomes my son-in-law. Your jealousy is the only thing driving you to interfere."

Iskander stood there, stunned. His only fault had been thinking of Nishat as his daughter.

Two weeks later, the marriage went ahead. No one from their side—neither Alam, Noorjahan, nor Iskander—attended the reception. Like that, Nishat disappeared from their lives, folded away into a future none could see. Days passed. Then weeks. Then months. No word came from her.

Almost a year later, when things had quieted down, Raif visited her in-laws' home by chance on Eid. He hadn't seen Nishat since her wedding. At first, he didn't recognise her. The girl who had once laughed and run through their house was gone. In her place was a thin, hollow-eyed figure who drifted through the house like a ghost.

As he stood awkwardly in the courtyard, her mother-in-law hovering nearby, Nishat suddenly appeared. She whispered, almost too quietly to hear, "Raif, you wanted to go to the bathroom, right? Come, I'll show you." Confused, Raif nodded and followed her. Away from watching eyes, she pressed a folded note into his hand—1000 taka. "This is your *salami*," she said, managing a faint, brittle smile. (In Muslim culture, "salami" is a traditional gift of money, often given to younger relatives during Eid or special occasions.) Raif looked at the money, then at Nishat's pale, worn face.

He remembered who she had been and could have become if only Choto Auntie had let her dream

live. Was this because she had been *mad*? Or simply because she had been *a woman*? Raif wasn't sure. But standing there in that narrow, airless house, he knew one thing for sure: Nishat had been lost long before she ever left.

After Nishat left, Raif's life returned to a quieter rhythm. The endless family drama vanished with her. Raif found himself oddly missing the chaos for a few days—the noisy gatherings, the constant movement, the feeling of a whole, living house. He had always enjoyed family gatherings, the laughter, the arguments, the sheer life of it all. But this time, the silence that settled was different. It wasn't peaceful; it was empty.

Still, life moved on. Raif settled into the familiar grind of being a schoolboy with one clear mission: to score above 80 in every subject. He worked religiously toward his goal, building his days around his studies like clockwork. He woke at 6 a.m., had a quick breakfast, and rushed to school. After school, he went straight to his coaching classes, then returned home only to sit again at his study table—despite having already spent the entire day in classrooms. Because if he didn't, Samad would beat him.

Iskander never interfered. Like many other parents, he saw it as usual: as long as it's about studying, a little beating is acceptable. Driven by fear and ambition, Raif pushed himself every evening. After Maghrib prayers, he sat down to study again, and he didn't go to bed before 11:30, maintaining his routine with near-military discipline.

In those years, Raif also became part of a new circle he never expected. The best students in school—Matin, Istiak, and Tishu—took notice of him after his golden A+ in the JSC exams. Raif was pulled into a group for the first time, not by his own effort, but because others wanted him

there. He had never had real friends like this before, and even though it started with academics, it soon became something more.

Life moved steadily through those days until the science fair arrived, just before Raif's birthday, when spring hung lightly in the air and everything seemed a little more possible. Raif loved science fairs. He loved anything that spoke of discovery, invention, and engineering. He didn't know exactly what engineers did—only that they built, designed, and changed the world somehow—and that was enough to fill him with wonder. At that year's fair, someone caught his eye while drifting among the projects. A girl who is knowledgeable, confident, and from a reputed school. Her project was far ahead of what others were presenting, advanced in a way that immediately impressed him. Raif didn't know much about love then, but he knew admiration when he felt it. Something about her—a kind of awareness, a light in her work—stirred something new inside him. At the time, he thought, *Someone like her could improve me. She could make me see more of life.* Looking back now, he realises it was just the beginning—the first flicker of liking someone, the first quiet discovery of preference. Her name was Faria. And though they never had a relationship, she remained, quietly, a pioneer in Raif's memory—the one who opened a door he hadn't known had existed. Sometimes, even now, Raif wonders if it would have been better had he tried, had he said something, reached out. But back then, it wasn't possible. All that remains is a smile, a faint regret, and a memory that drifts back to him on certain quiet evenings.

Chapter 07:

As Raif grew older, he often heard people say, "Life begins when you step into college."

It turned out to be true for him, though not in the way he had imagined. Back then, he had only one wish: to avoid Hajera Tajul College at any cost. It wasn't pride that pushed him; it was fear—fear of ending up stuck, of living the same disappointments he had seen in Saif's eyes. He wanted something different, even if he wasn't sure what that "different" would look like.

He had seen Saif, his brother, struggle there—heard the disappointment in his voice, seen the quiet frustration settle into his face. Watching Saif had made Raif even more determined to take a different path.

But fate, as always, had its own cruel sense of humour. Despite securing a golden A+ in his SSC exams, Raif didn't get into his dream college, Chittagong College. When the admission results came out, Raif was devastated. And to make it worse, the only place he got a seat was the very college he had sworn to avoid—Hajera Taju. He was crestfallen, caught between anger and helplessness. All the dreams he had built up in his mind seemed to crack silently, like thin glass under pressure.

Around the same time, another chapter in his life quietly closed: Samad. Samad, who had once been the force driving Raif's discipline, was no longer the right fit for the science curriculum of HSC. He couldn't guide Raif through the complex demands of physics, chemistry, and mathematics. And as Samad grew busier with his new school job nearby, his interest in teaching Raif faded away. Eventually, he packed up his things and left. Just like that, the chair he used to occupy at Raif's study table sat empty, gathering dust.

Raif still remembers how hard those first few weeks were. Every time he sat down to study, his eyes would drift to the vacant chair, as if expecting Samad to watch over him. The dust on the seat thickened, untouched, as if no one had ever sat there at all. Even though Raif had often disliked Samad's strictness, he couldn't deny the deep attachment that had formed through years of routine and resistance. And now, the silence felt heavier than any scolding ever had.

It wasn't just Samad's absence that Raif had to adjust to. First, it was the new syllabus—complicated and overwhelming. Then, the reality of starting at a college he had spent years avoiding. Still, time moved on, and so did Raif. He had to admit: Hajera Tajü had changed. The college had introduced ID punching at the gates, upgraded the uniforms, and even started co-education—something he had never experienced, having come from a boys' school. At first, he felt awkward, sitting in classes with unknown girls, unsure how to act, uncertain how to be. But after a few months, he found his rhythm. He maintained his distance, focused on his studies, and got used to the new norms.

And, surprisingly, he began to notice other things, too—the campus was large, clean, and far better maintained than his old school had ever been. Little by little, Raif began to soften toward the place he had once sworn to hate. Sometimes life doesn't start where you plan it. Sometimes, it begins exactly where you least expect it.

Soon after Raif's college life began, a new trouble quietly stirred at home. It was Mahir—at last. Even now, Raif recalls the whole incident with a disbelief that has never quite left him. Noorjahan had warned him many times over the years: *"Something will go wrong one day. Just wait."* Back then, Raif had brushed it off, thinking his mother was simply overthinking and too cautious for no reason. Now, he knows better.

It wasn't overthinking—it was years of lived experience, quietly weighing her words. The downfall started over something petty, almost laughable in its smallness. Mahir's mother had been upset from the very beginning about her son living under Iskander's roof. Though she never spoke openly at first, she had carried her grievances silently, building arguments in her heart. For years, she pushed to bring Mahir back home. But Alam had denied her each time.

Like a patient strategist, she waited for the right moment. And when it came, she grabbed it. She called Mahir more often, pouring sweetness into her words and taking extra care from a distance. TSheshifted his loyalty, through the phone, making him feel that real love and belonging were back in his "true home"—not under Noorjahan's roof. She secretly invited Mahir home, treated him like royalty, and made him feel like a king in a house that once barely made space for him. Slowly, Mahir's discipline crumbled. His grades fell. And with Samad no longer in the house to enforce strict routines, no one was left to pull him back onto the right path. At the time, Raif had been furious. He couldn't understand how Mahir could betray the care and sacrifices of Noorjahan and Iskander.

But now, as he looks back, Raif understands. It was adolescence. It was a confusion. It was the inevitable mistakes of growing up in a world far too complicated for a teenage heart. Mahir had been unable to comprehend the quiet love he had received—love that didn't parade itself with grand gestures but wrapped itself around him in small, steady ways. Now, whenever Raif sees Mahir, there's no anger left—only a dull ache. Once full of mischief and life, Mahir's eyes are weary with hopelessness and unspoken remorse. And Raif feels the hurt in his own heart, too.

Neither of them speaks about it.

They don't need to.

The silence between them carries the weight of everything lost—the wild, dreamy days of their youth, the endless afternoons that once seemed so permanent. And both of them know that some

things, once broken, can never be mended.

Only remembered.

Mahir left soon after the family drama erupted. After unjustly blaming Noorjahan for everything, Alam took Mahir away without a second thought. Like any restless teenager, Mahir truly wanted freedom, but neither Alam nor his family considered it. They simply decided for him. For Noorjahan, it was a deep shame. Despite everything she had done—every small sacrifice, every act of quiet love—she was made to carry the blame. Iskander's reputation, too, suffered unfairly. He walked around with his head lowered, the weight of false accusations pressing down on him, making every moment suffocating.

And just like that, Mahir was gone. The house that had once echoed with his loud laughter and Samad's stern voice fell into a claustrophobic silence. It was as if someone had turned off the life inside their home, leaving only the walls and furniture to breathe. For Raif, it felt like living among ghosts. He wandered through the house feeling hollow, lost—like a boy trapped in a place that had once been full of colour and noise but now stood frozen and grey.

This was the first time Raif truly understood sadness. It was the first time he tasted overthinking, that endless looping of thoughts he couldn't escape. A mountain of studies was still waiting for him—deadlines, textbooks, exams. But there was also the unbearable silence. And somewhere in that heavy stillness, Raif met loneliness for the very first time.

Chapter 08:

People who have crossed the thorny paths of HSC often look back in disbelief, wondering how they ever survived it. Later in life, Raif would meet people who still said, half-jockingly, *"I'm just glad there's no second HSC in life. I still have nightmares about it."* HSC is undoubtedly one of

the hardest tests. Not because the syllabus is cruel, but because adolescence is an unforgiving battlefield. The pressure of HSC exams and university admissions can defeat you before you even begin to shape your own future. You can sit for BCS exams a dozen times, but HSC gives you only one clean shot.

Raif sat for the HSC twice. The second time was an improvement attempt.

After hitting the lowest and loneliest point in his life, Raif realised that sitting for the exam just once would never be enough if he wanted a place in an engineering university. He needed to try again. He needed to take the risk, even if uncertainty gnawed at him from the inside. But first, he needed to tell his family.

Raif sat alone in his room, repeating the idea in his mind. *What if they refused? What if they thought I was making excuses? What if they got angry?* Cold sweat broke across his forehead. He knew he couldn't face his parents directly—not at first. He needed Saif. Only Saif could say the words Raif's fear would mangle. That night, Raif walked into his brother's room with hesitant, slow steps. Saif was lying on the bed, scrolling through his phone lazily.

"Bhaiya," Raif said, trembling slightly, "I need to talk to you."

Saif didn't even glance up.

"Is it about some girl? You're too young to think about girls. Go and study."

Raif's face turned red, but he shook his head vigorously.

"No, Bhaiya! It's not that."

He stood there, gathering himself, then took a deep breath, squeezing all the fear out of his chest, and said in one rushed breath: "I want to sit for improvement next year."

At that, Saif finally looked up. His brows drew together sharply, a frown setting on his face. He stared at Raif for a long moment, trying to process what he had just heard.

"You're not even done with your HSC yet," Saif said slowly, his voice somewhere between disbelief and irritation. "How can you be so sure you'll need to sit for improvement?" Raif stood silent under his brother's gaze, heart pounding, but a small, stubborn certainty growing somewhere deep inside him.

Raif sighed and said, "I won't get good grades this time. I've not studied since Samad sir and Mahir left the house. I feel isolated and lonely. I've been studying with them for the past five years. I did not study a bit." Then Raif started sobbing. Seeing his younger brother cry, and it was not a silly matter as well, Saif was hesitant to say anything. He took a deep breath and said, "Now, what do you want me to do?"

Raif was sobbing, his nose was runny, and tears were all over his face. He cried more, saying, "I'm only requesting to talk to Abbu and Ammu regarding this matter. I can't tell them by myself. If you tell them, they will agree on this. I can't make them understand what I'm feeling..." He sobbed so hard that his cries turned into hiccups.

Saif was confused and anxious at the same time. He stood up and extended his water bottle towards Raif, saying, "Sit and drink the water first. Let me think about how to tell Abbu and Ammu. Remember that Abbu might say things you're not willing to listen to. But if you want to do this

and are determined, don't listen to the bad things. He's our father, he can sometimes say things like that..."

Raif remained silent; his hiccups were almost gone. Saif looked at the wall clock and said, "It's time to sleep now. I'll talk to Abbu tomorrow. Would you like to sleep with me or alone?"

"With you."

"Okay. Bring your pillows and sleep now."

That night, for the first time in many days, Raif slept soundly. His mind, usually heavy with worry, was calm. He believed in Saif—he believed that somehow, his older brother would manage their parents.

A day later, Saif gathered the courage to talk to his parents.

Iskander, usually cool-headed, lost his temper almost immediately after hearing about Raif's "demand." Without letting Saif fully explain, he shouted, his voice slicing through the room: "Is there anything I haven't given you two? I've spent over a lakh on your education, and now you want me to gamble it all? If he knew he wouldn't make it this time, why didn't he study harder?"

Saif stood silently, head bowed, letting the anger pass over him. Across the room, Noorjahan sank into the sofa with a heavy sigh. This was not the day she had ever imagined for her younger son—the boy who had been a bright light from childhood, the one teachers loved and relatives praised, the one who had always made them proud. Why was he doubting himself now?

Noorjahan had no answers. And worse, she didn't even dare to take Raif's side, caught between fear and confusion.

Iskander continued, frustration tightening every word: "Does your brother even know anyone who's done this before?"

"He says he knows some seniors," Saif answered quietly, "though I don't know them personally."

There was a long, charged silence. Finally, Iskander muttered, almost to himself, "I don't know what to say anymore," and he stepped out of the room, the door swinging shut with a soft, final thud behind him.

In his room, Raif sat frozen on the floor. He had heard everything. Every shouted word. Every disappointed sigh. He pressed his forehead to his knees, his whole body trembling. Was he making a terrible mistake? Was it foolish to even dream differently? He sobbed quietly for hours, the lights turned off, the house silent around him. Everyone believed he was sleeping, but Raif was awake—every word had carved itself into his heart. When he finally crawled into bed, he cried into his pillow until it was soaked, his throat aching as if a stone were lodged inside.

At dawn, after praying Fajr, Noorjahan slipped into his room. She hadn't slept all night. She had tried, in her gentle way, to make Iskander understand. But she knew her husband—knew that he needed time. He would come around. But tonight, the heaviness was too much.

Without turning on the lights, Noorjahan stood beside her son's bed, illuminated only by the faint glow spilling from the hallway. She raised her hands in silent prayer, whispering to Allah to

ease Raif's path, to grant him what his heart longed for. Then, softly, she leaned down and blew over him, sealing her prayer.

Raif was awake. He didn't move, didn't even breathe too loudly. He lay there, letting the warmth of her prayer settle over him like a fragile blanket. When she left, he cried again—until the first light of the morning cracked through the windows. That night marked a turning point in Raif's life. Years later, he still remembers it—the night he understood what silent love looks like, the night he felt a prayer wrap itself around him and carry him forward.

Night, his mother's prayer was granted.

Chapter 09:

Raif's first attempt at HSC turned out to be mediocre—not as bad as he had feared, but not nearly good enough for what he truly wanted. And he had been right all along: it would never be enough to get into an engineering university. During that time, when everyone around him was frantic and stressed by exams, Raif remained strangely calm. His classmates were puzzled—Raif, one of the

best students in college, was walking around almost carelessly. Whenever someone asked him about the exams, Raif answered in the same flat tone, over and over again: *"This isn't my exam. I'll be sitting for improvement next year."*

Nobody really believed him. And why would they? In a world where success is measured by first attempts, who dares to say they'll take the long way around?

Raif took the results of his exams lightly, but he didn't take the exams themselves lightly. He paid careful attention to each question paper, analysing patterns, memorising the style, the traps, the rhythms. He understood one crucial thing: if he could crack the system, next year would be different. And in this quiet rebuilding, Matin became his biggest support.

Matin had always been the serious one—since their school days, he had been steady, determined, aiming straight for the engineering universities. Raif's dream of becoming an engineer had quietly grown around Matin's influence, like ivy wrapping itself around a strong, steady tree. Through thick and thin, Matin guided him—sometimes with advice, sometimes just by example. By that time, Matin had already crossed one milestone—his HSC exams had gone well, and he was stepping confidently toward university admission. Raif, however, was still trapped in the weight of unfinished dreams, preparing for his second attempt at HSC, while the world around him seemed to move on.

In Bengali households, it's often said that the younger ones learn by watching the elders. For Raif, Matin was that elder—not by blood, but by the sheer gravity of his discipline. Matin often repeated one piece of advice: "Admission isn't just about studying hard. It's about tactics. No matter how much you study, if you don't understand the game, you won't reach where you want to go." It was Matin who told Raif to enrol at Udvash—a prestigious coaching centre—even though

it wasn't Raif's official batch yet. Raif hesitated. It felt overwhelming, almost too big for him. But he didn't dare dismiss Matin's advice. Standing there, unsure and a little breathless, Raif asked quietly, "How much are the fees?"

"Seventeen thousand taka. One-time payment."

Raif fell silent. How would he tell his father now? His mood shifted so quickly that it was impossible to predict how he would react from one moment to the next. There was no safe way to approach him directly. There was only Noorjahan.

Raif went home and headed straight to his mother's room. It was a hot, drowsy noon, and Noorjahan was napping—something Raif had seen her do since he was a child. He didn't have the heart to wake her up. Carefully, he sat at the edge of her bed, waiting. When Noorjahan stirred awake, her eyes immediately found Raif staring out the window, where children were shouting and playing football in the sun. His gaze was distant, almost heavy.

"Do you need anything? Did you have your lunch?" Noorjahan asked softly. She already knew—mothers always do.

"Yes," Raif said, his voice calm, "I need some money."

"How much? And for what?"

Raif hesitated for a moment, then said, "I'm going to enrol at a coaching centre for admission coaching. I need seventeen thousand taka."

Noorjahan nodded without hesitation. "All right. I'll give you the money tomorrow. Does your father know?"

"No," Raif said quickly, "You tell him. I'm too afraid to ask him myself."

Raif stood up and left the room, the noise of children playing still floating through the air. He paused at the doorway and sighed. "*When did I become an adult? Where is happiness now?*" he thought.

That night, Noorjahan entered Raif's room while he slept. She placed an envelope with the money on his study table, careful not to disturb him. She had already spoken to Iskander. He was surprised—and hurt. "Why didn't he tell me himself?" he asked, confused. "He's afraid of you now," Noorjahan replied quietly. "You didn't mean to scare him, but he's going through a difficult time." They sat together in silence, both staring at nothing, thinking of all the ways this risk could end badly. They cared deeply, but they couldn't show it the way they wanted to.

The coaching centre, Udvash, was unlike anything Raif had ever experienced. If anything, they cared even more about their students than the students' own families did. There's a saying in Bengali, "*Ma er theke mashi er dorod besi*" — sometimes, the aunt shows more affection than the mother. Udvash lived up to it relentlessly.

After every class, there were exams. And every score, no matter how bad, was sent straight to the parents' phones. Even if a student tried to block the number, Udvash had backup numbers ready. There was no escape. Raif soon realised that neither engineering nor admission preparation was as

easy as he had once dreamed. A few weeks in, overwhelmed and disillusioned, he started skipping classes, though he still sat for the exams. His scores were pathetic at first—13, 15, sometimes 17 out of 50. Thankfully, he had listed Noorjahan's number as the guardian contact, and Noorjahan, blissfully unaware, never checked the messages.

From December to January, Raif changed his method. He stopped depending on coaching and burned his own midnight oil instead. Slowly, painfully, he began to see results. His marks rose—40, 45 out of 50—quiet victories he had no one to share with. Ironically, when he had failed, there was someone to know. Now that he was improving, there was only silence.

Raif was preparing for his HSC improvement and university admission tests side by side. Studying for the admission tests made the improvement exams feel easier, almost secondary. He still thanks Udvash—not for the classes, but for the brutal realisation: Nobody can study for you. Nobody can save you but yourself. Day by day, Raif's room transformed. His walls filled up with math formulas, chemistry reactions, and physics equations. Posters, paint, colour—all disappeared under layers of paper and notes. There wasn't a single space left. Some days, Raif stared at the walls and couldn't even remember what colour they had once been. His eyes were fixed on one thing now: The starting day of his improvement exams—the day his second chance would begin.

Chapter 10:

That damned luck—it never carries you where you plan; it breaks down just when you need it most. Everything had been going well for Raif. But Physics Second Paper wasn't something he could wrestle with. This wouldn't be the year BUET opened its doors for him. And he understood quickly—painfully—that if he had gambled everything on BUET, it would have been a mistake.

Around him, the ambitious ones who believed a strong HSC result would be enough kept preparing for BUET. They clung to hope, refusing to let go. Raif quietly closed that chapter for himself with a rare moment of clarity. Every aspiring engineer dreams of BUET; it's more than just a university—a symbol, a name passed down with pride through generations.

The other options were good too, but BUET weighted its own, something no other place could match. There was no time for guilt, no room for remorse. He wasn't alone. Many around him faced the same dead-end that year. If it had been only him, he might have drowned in disappointment. But knowing he was not the only one made it easier to breathe. Instead of wasting time mourning what could have been, Raif shifted focus. He started preparing seriously for RUET and CUET.

Back when he was preparing for university admissions, he had never once set foot on BUET's campus. And when he later saw photos, strangely, he wasn't impressed. RUET's campus, however, felt different. Vast, green, open—a campus that seemed to breathe with space and possibility. Even through photos, Raif felt drawn to it. As for CUET, it never tempted him much. He had seen CUET too many times growing up; it was familiar, too familiar. There's a strange truth about human desire: we are often more fascinated by what is distant and slightly out of reach. Raif hadn't placed all his hopes on engineering. He had been cautious, leaving doors open through other university science units. And somewhere along that path, Badhon Bhai entered his life—a senior from coaching days, calm and steady in a way Raif needed. If Matin had given Raif dreams to chase, it was Badhon Bhai who showed him how not to lose himself along the way.

Raif's situation felt like standing with two feet on different floating boats. Miraculously, the boats were moving at the same speed. Otherwise, he knew, he would have fallen long ago. Compared to

the brutal rigour of engineering admission preparation, regular university exams felt lighter, almost manageable. The OMR sheets he once feared now seemed almost laughable. He reminded himself before each science unit exam, "*You've already survived tougher battles than this.*" And he pressed on, steady and silent, toward the future he had reshaped with his own hands.

What Raif had feared wasn't wrong. Engineering admission tests demanded more than effort—they demanded precision, endurance, and strategy. Unlike regular exams, these tests had both MCQ and written sections, and the written answers had to fit into brutally tiny spaces. At first glance, Raif was stunned. *How am I supposed to fit a complete calculation here?* He thought in panic. There's an old saying that coaching centres often repeat like a mantra: "*Kothin proshikkhon, shohaj juddho*" — "*Tough training makes the war easier.*" Raif understood the truth of it better every day.

There wasn't a single morning Raif woke up late. Every dawn, he prayed and then sat with his math problems, while the world outside was still sleeping. Those were his golden hours—quiet, clear, focused. Once the day began, distractions always found a way in. Sometimes, as he solved problems, his mind wandered: *What subject should I choose?* He never dwelled too long on it. He knew he had no luxury to pick and choose. While he dreamed of studying something like Robotics or Artificial Intelligence, he knew that just getting into an engineering university was the first mountain he needed to climb.

After finishing his improvement exams, Raif needed to re-enrol at Udvash. But now came the more challenging part: asking for money again. There was no way around it. He approached Iskender and explained everything. At first, Iskender listened with a flat, unreadable expression.

Then, suddenly, his voice rose: "How much money should I keep giving you? What are you even doing? Where are your marks?"

Raif stood still, his heart pounding, but his voice steady. "You can call Udvash, Abbu. I'll give you the number. You can check my results yourself." He didn't cry or argue. He said what needed to be said, and then he waited.

Iskander said nothing more that day. But the next day, he came into Raif's room, dropped an admission slip onto the study table, and said simply, "I've re-enrolled you. I've given my own number this time." Without another word, he turned and left. Raif watched him go, the half-solved physics problems still open in front of him. He exhaled deeply, then turned back to his work. There was nothing else to do but study.

When Raif first stepped off the bus in Rajshahi that December morning, the cold hit him like a wall. It wasn't like Chittagong at all. The air was thick with fog; he could barely see a few feet ahead. The chill seeped straight into his bones. He had never worn a beanie in his life—he used to laugh at the older adults who wore them back home. Now, he would have paid anything for one. Iskander was no better—he sneezed miserably, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. "*You want some tea?*" he asked, teeth chattering. Raif nodded eagerly. They found a small tea stall near the bus stand, the kind with plastic stools and steaming tin cups. Raif vividly remembers that first sip of tea—strong, sweet, and scalding hot. It didn't taste like home. But the milk was richer, and somehow, it comforted him.

RUET's campus was a dream. As Raif sat for his entrance exam, he found himself gazing out the window, distracted by the quiet beauty of the campus. "If only I could study here," he thought, almost ashamed of the hope rising inside him. Somehow, that silent wish was heard against all his doubts and fears.

A few days later, when CUET's exam day came, Raif simply didn't go. He didn't wrestle with the decision, didn't lie awake over it—he just knew. His heart had already chosen Rajshahi, long before he realised it himself.

Back home, Raif became a minor celebrity in his colony and among coaching centres. Coaching centres that once barely noticed him now proudly used his name for their marketing. One afternoon, while wandering through Chawkbazar—the old hub of coaching centres and memories—he spotted something that made him stop in his tracks. A banner. And then another. And another. Each one plastered with his photo and bold letters: "*Raif Hasan—Admitted to RUET through our coaching centre! Join us today!*" He couldn't help laughing. It made sense for Udvash to claim him—they had been part of his journey. But the other two centres? They had barely taught him. Now they were cashing in on his success. Typical, Raif thought, smiling to himself as he walked through the crowded streets of Chawkbazar. Once, he had been a nobody here. Now, he had solid ground beneath his feet.

And a whole new future ahead.

Chapter 11:

"*Hah, this place!*" Raif muttered under his breath, staring at the cracked ceiling above him. "*I'm just rotting here now... breathing, surviving. This was once the place I dreamed of.*" He thought of Mahadi Bhai, the first person he had excitedly called after getting into RUET. Back then, he had said, full of naïve hope, "University life will be far less hectic, right?" Mahadi had only smiled. "The scenario here is completely different," he had warned. "You'll have to work

even harder to get a good CGPA. It's nothing like what Udvash told us every day, something like stay committed—your dreams will be yours to conquer.”

Raif could still hear the mantra Udvash teachers had drilled into them, over and over, like a song stuck on repeat. At the time, it had felt empowering. Now, it just felt like brainwashing. Maybe they had brainwashed him into living his dream. And now that he was living it, he wasn't sure it was a dream at all.

It's not that things were entirely upside down for Raif. But they weren't good either. One day blurred into the next. Every day felt stretched thin, like chewing gum pulled too far—tedious, repetitive, lifeless. The same routines, the same faces, the same hollow sense of moving forward while but standing still. He was surrounded by lively crowds, loud laughter, and friendships blooming everywhere. But none of it seemed to touch him. He had everything around him, but nothing within reach.

Sometimes he asked himself: *Did I make this choice for myself? Or was it just a dare to prove something during those desperate days of the improvement exams?*

He looked at Matin—happy, thriving, adapting effortlessly—and wondered what had gone wrong with him. Even other Chittagonians at RUET didn't seem to suffer the way he did. There were plenty from his city, contrary to the old belief that RUET was a lonely place for outsiders. Tuhin, another student from Chittagong, spent most of his time watching TV series or football matches, blending into university life without much struggle. Raif often wondered why the homesickness that others brushed off hit him like a rock.

He liked his floormates enough, even if they weren't exactly people he connected deeply with. And then there was Maruf—Maruf, stubborn and unyielding, the self-appointed king of every argument. He would insist on his opinions, no matter how flimsy or illogical they were. Even when faced with clear facts, Maruf clung to his own version of reality with alarming confidence. Long ago, Raif had realised that debating with him was pointless. Now, he simply nodded along whenever Maruf spoke, letting the nonsense pass through him like background noise. Agreeing was easier. Disagreeing took too much energy, Raif didn't have anymore left.

The five of them had jokingly named their flat "Las Vegas," though ironically, there wasn't a single woman in the house—or even the distant hope of one. Their routines were hectic, their lives crammed with classes, labs, and assignments. Everyone seemed happy enough to escape Rajshahi the moment vacations started. Only Raif showed visible signs of unhappiness. The others seemed neutral—maybe even quietly enjoying their independence. Yet the moment the holidays began, they packed their bags without hesitation. Raif found it puzzling. He didn't just want a break. He wanted to leave Rajshahi and never come back.

Some people, though, came here and never left. Rumi was one of them.

Raif had never been close to Rumi, but there are always those figures in our lives—admired from a distance, quietly shaping us without even knowing it. For Raif, Rumi was that kind of presence.

Rumi loved poetry, true to his name. He was unlike any typical engineering student Raif had ever met. His love for literature, for words and metaphors, was fierce and pure. Through Rumi, Raif found himself reading books he never would have touched before. He had always known

Rumi as a name from viral Facebook quotes—assumed he was just another romantic poet like Mirza Ghalib.

Once, in a casual conversation, Raif had said, "Isn't Rumi overly romantic? Beyond my understanding."

Rumi had laughed—a warm, understanding laugh. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean...everything he writes feels so romantic."

"Haha, I get what you mean," Rumi said. "But Rumi isn't a romantic poet. His work is rooted in Sufism. Facebook made him look like some Persian version of Mirza Ghalib. But they're worlds apart."

They ended up talking for over an hour, discussing how Jalaluddin Rumi spoke of the soul's longing for union with the Divine, while Mirza Ghalib sang of earthly love and human sorrow. In those years at RUET, most of the books Raif read were because of Rumi's influence. Through him, Raif discovered a world that stretched beyond logic and physics—a world of longing, surrender, and something larger than life.

Raif will never forget the night when it all began to fall apart. One evening, out of nowhere, Rumi messaged him, asking about his academic results. Rumi had failed three courses—something completely unexpected. The real blow wasn't just the failure; it was the damaged relationship with his course advisor, a silent war that no one outside really knew about. Raif tried to comfort him and lift him. But deep down, he knew words would never be enough. Not this time.

Six months later, it happened. Rumi failed again—this time in four courses. When the results came out, he turned off his phone. The shame, the fear, the unbearable weight of it all crashed down on him. It wasn't the consequences he couldn't bear—an extra two years at RUET was survivable. But it was a shame. The silent judgment. The way people would look at him. And so, quietly, Rumi chose to leave the world instead.

There's always an Angel of Death wandering through RUET. Sometimes, he visits other universities. But Raif always tells himself, *"His real home is here."*

Chapter 12:

Munier Chowdhury, a celebrated voice in Bengali literature and thought, often reflected on how fragile and changeable human life can be. In one of his works, he captured it simply but profoundly: “When a person dies, they decay; when they live, they change—for reasons and for no reasons at all.” Change is the natural course of human life. To survive, people change—sometimes by choice, sometimes without even realising it. Perhaps Raif had changed too—not for better, not for worse—simply for survival.

One January had brought him to Rajshahi four years ago, but another January has now come to take him away. Time had moved slowly here, painfully even—but somehow, it still ended. The long-awaited return home was near. And yet, Raif felt a void inside him, a kind of emptiness he had never known before. “*People are slaves to their habits,*” he thought to himself.

As Raif and his flatmates packed their belongings, stripping the life out of their “Las Vegas” flat, the rooms grew emptier—and so did he. He had once hated Rajshahi. He had counted the days to leave it. But now, as he closed suitcases and sealed boxes, he realised the strange, aching truth: Leaving Rajshahi felt like leaving a part of himself behind. A part of his pain. A part of his golden days. A part of his growth and independence—things he would never get back, even if he returned. A place stays alive because of people, because of time shared. Rajshahi was that: A city that had quietly, stubbornly become a chapter of his life. Chittagong would always be his first love—the unchanging love of birth and belonging. But Rajshahi was different. Rajshahi had been the testing ground of his spirit, the cradle of his becoming. And though a quiet distance always existed between them, it didn’t make the bond any less real.

The five parted ways. Tuhin and Raif returned to Chittagong together. In the long, sixteen-hour journey back home, Raif sat with his head against the window, lost in a sea of reflections. He thought about RUET. About the hardships and loneliness. About the independence he had carved for himself in the slow, heavy air of Rajshahi. About everything he had become. He realised he could step back into his old life in Chittagong easily enough. The streets were still there. The faces were familiar. But he could never step back into Rajshahi the same way. That chapter had already closed.

And yet, Raif was wrong. No emptiness stays unfilled forever. Something always rushes in—whether happiness or sadness—to fill the hollow space. Going home, Raif found another void waiting for him—A void stitched into the familiar faces, the familiar tones. *"What will you do now? You're an engineer now! You must achieve great things!"* The words came rushing at him, thick and heavy, before he had even set down his bags. Unsolicited advice, impossible expectations—All from people who had built him up in their minds without ever really understanding the battles he had fought. Raif stood silently amid the noise, asking himself: *"Am I really capable of all they dream for me? When will I ever be enough? Wasn't RUET enough?"* But he didn't say it aloud. He couldn't.

His room wasn't the same. His favourite books were somewhere else. His clothes, his belongings—shifted, displaced. Even his old bed now belonged to Farida. It was as if the family had, gently and unconsciously, accepted that he wasn't returning for good—that if he did return, he wouldn't stay.

One evening, Raif stood at Patenga, watching the familiar waves that had once soothed his restless boyhood soul. But now, they felt different. Through the misty veil of his tears, the waves of Patenga blurred—and somehow, strangely, they resembled the Padma River of Rajshahi. Home and away, belonging and exile, they lived together inside him now, braided inseparably in his heart.

The old wind brushed past him like a voice half-remembered. He stood there for a long time, watching the endless movement of the waves. It was the same place he had known as a boy—the same salt in the air, the same cries of the seagulls overhead. But something had shifted quietly inside him, a shift too profound for words.

Home had never left him, not even in Rajshahi or when loneliness gnawed at him in silent Las Vegas rooms. He realised now: the places we live shape us, but they never fully claim us. We carry fragments of every city, every season, every sorrow stitched inside us like secret maps. Life had not given him the clarity he once craved. There were no grand epiphanies, no neat endings. Mahir had drifted away. Rumi had vanished into memory. His mother's soft prayers still echoed in the quiet corners of his mind. Some questions would remain unanswered. Some losses would stay raw no matter how many years passed.

But Raif had learned to live inside the unfinished story.

The river does not stop flowing because it has lost a few stones along the way, and neither does the heart stop hoping because it has known grief. He thought about how human beings are always chasing something—dreams, love, success—believing that they will finally feel complete once they have it. But even when they reach it, even when they hold it in their hands, something quietly slips away. Fulfilment never stays as long as longing does.

And yet, there was a time when happiness had needed no reason at all—when a marble on a dusty threshold or the laughter of a cousin was enough. It was childhood that had held the real, unshaken happiness—the kind that required no achievements, no victories, no explanations. As the first stars bled into the evening sky, Raif closed his eyes, feeling the sea wind on his face, steady and real. Maybe life was not about finding one clear ending, he thought. Perhaps it was about carrying every imperfect season inside you—and walking forward anyway. In that quiet moment, Raif did not feel lost. For the first time in a long while, he felt at peace with the losses, the longing, and the small, stubborn light that refused to go out inside him.

The waves kept moving, and so did Raif. That was enough for him to survive: he learned how to survive now.