

Five Postmodern Short Stories



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Five Postmodern Short Stories

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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



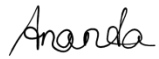
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DECLARATION

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



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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all the characters of the stories.

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Abstract

This is a creative project as part of a dissertation. It has five short stories that share the same universe. Although each of these stories is self-contained, they are written in such a way that they can have sequels, perhaps even prequels. They are mostly character studies but they explore single units of the characters' personas. That is the power of short stories, that they can explore a specific side of a story, or in other words remind us that we all know only part of a person's story. While novels have the potential to explore characters and stories more holistically, short stories work as miniatures of that. But a collection of short stories can be written so that they connect with other stories in the shared universe, and each of the stories can explore a singular event or characteristic of the characters in it. That is something I have explored in my stories here. The stories also marry an aspect of the character's persona with a particular theme of that story. These stories are psychological, and have some elements of magic realism. But ultimately they are what someone would call postmodern tales. The stories, however, are not intentionally postmodern, but the times we live in reflect the postmodern perspective in my writings.

Critical Introduction

A novel makes you want to dive deep into it, surrounding your temporal existence while you are submerged within it. A short story pervades your mind as it dives deep into you and smears itself like butter all across your psyche. A novel invites you, while it is you who invite the short story. But that is not to say one is better than the other, they both possess great power and they affect the readers in very different ways. However, this thesis will focus on the allure of the short story as a literary form. A short story is like a child: it will attract your attention, but it is you who will invite the story, like a parent invites a child to have dinner, or to take them out for shopping. In that sense, short stories are empowering. They empower the reader. Novels can be empowering as well, showering the reader with deep thoughts and teaching them about philosophical aspects, but it takes the credit for itself. A short story credits the reader, and empowers the reader in a truer sense of the word. It does that by having incited a particular feeling and notion about itself in the reader. The short story allows itself to be molded by the reader. Although it exists as a fixed form of alphabets in the physical realm, it will form drastically different notions and feelings in the reader's mind. The reader will feel like they have achieved something by deciphering the short story.

Steven Millhauser, in his essay for *The New York Times*, writes, "I imagine the short story saying to the novel: You can have everything — everything — all I ask is a single grain of sand. The novel, with a careless shrug, a shrug both cheerful and contemptuous, grants the wish. But that grain of sand is the story's way out. That grain of sand is the story's salvation. I take my cue from William Blake: 'To see a world in a grain of sand.' Think of it: the world in a grain of sand; which is to say, every part of the world, however small, contains the world entirely."

A short story is like a child, full of bolstering creative energy and possibilities (thus the ambiguous nature of a powerful short story), but it can always grow into the more composed adult, the novel. For example, many of Stephen King's novels actually started off as short stories, and he eventually let them snowball into novels. A writer can achieve great results by writing short stories existing in the same universe to create larger scales. They may or may not share the same protagonist. Writer Andrzej Sapkowski wrote three books of short stories, all sharing the same protagonist, Geralt, and eventually he wrote five novels with the same protagonist. This was a masterful plan, because the short stories helped create the sense of the universe for his characters in the readers' minds. This is not to say that short stories, or even poems are gateways to novels, or epics, instead they are a separate art form in themselves.

It is funny that even though my creative project is a collection of short stories, I make the first comment in this introduction starting with the novel. It is an inherent trait of the modern mind. We tend to compare when it is clearly irrelevant to the respective subject matter. It is because short stories or even short films are seen through a patronizing lens. I have also done so. It is a necessary "evil" to have started with that. But it is a predominant narrative, somewhat blatantly unspoken, that bigger is better. And short story writers have often felt inadequate when someone else would ask if they have ever written a novel. Here is an excerpt from *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* by Valerie Shaw:

Katherine Mansfield's reaction to a friendly enquiry about her work: "What do you do in life?" she was asked.

"I am a writer"

"Do you write dramas?"

“No.” It sounded as if she were sorry she did not.

“Do you write tragedies, novels, romances?” I persisted, because she looked as if she could write these.

“No,” she said, and with still deeper distress; “only short stories; just short stories.”

Later on she told me she felt so wretched at that moment she would have given anything if she could have answered at least one “yes” to the “big” things. Both participants in this conversation are in no doubt about what the “big things” are — dramas, tragedies, even romances. Compared with these, short stories seem flimsy, calling for apology rather than pride, and subduing the firm announcement “I am a writer”. (Shaw 2)

The aim of the collection of short stories I have written for this project is to demonstrate a simple philosophy – strength in numbers. I did this without undermining the raw and inconspicuous power of short stories, in the sense that the stories are self-sufficient, but are parts of a larger universe. When a protagonist of one short story makes a cameo in another story with an unrelated protagonist, it is an amusement for the reader. There is also a sense of belonging. These short stories, or any other for that matter, are like a child’s toys. These toys may belong to the same franchise or may be from different universes. But a child does not mind pitting Batman against the Incredible Hulk even though they are from different universes. Short stories are like that, they are modular, and for this project I wanted the stories to be unrelated to each other and yet belong to the same universe. They speak of different stories and philosophies, yet they are tied by familiar faces. These stories are also written in such a way that they can be read in any order, and the order will define the overall experience for the reader. Because the stories are written in such a way that the knowledge of a particular story will determine how the reader will

read the next story, but these are done in subtle ways. This brings me back to the original point that these smaller stories add up to become a larger portion of a shared universe, and that is a truly unique experience a novel is unable to provide, often due to the unbearable pressure that encumbers it – the insatiable need to be coherent all through. This heavyweight also creates a momentum for the novel, like Newton’s second law. A novel is tougher to pick up, but also tougher to put down. With short stories the reader can be playful.

I also believe that short stories are far better fitted to delve into postmodernism as opposed to novels, because postmodernism reeks of minimalism, and modular or individualistic ideas that can also meld to form newer things. Although it was not my intention to make the stories postmodern, they became so on their own accord. I am someone from this era, and my thoughts are, of course, affected, and that is how the postmodernist elements came to be in the stories. On closer inspection, readers will find that my stories feature the following postmodern tropes: metafiction, intertextuality, the unreliable narrator, self-reference. Perhaps internet memes have affected our thoughts this way. Memes are self-referential ideas that generate newer ideas within their own chain of narratives, and keep evolving – they are very Meta. But if we think back, and delve into etymology, this is the same process that has caused words and their meanings to evolve.

A Brief Introduction to the Stories

“Cold Coffee” gives reference to two other stories in the universe as fictions existing in the aforementioned world (even though those stories have happened in real life within the universe). It also references another story – “DSLR,” in the way that it is a real event within that story. Thus we get elements of metafiction. It reminds the reader that they are indeed reading fictions. “Cold Coffee” also brings references from the play *Waiting for Godot*. While in the play two men wait for someone, perhaps for an elusive god (signifying men’s need to believe in a higher power in a world that is perhaps abandoned by god), in “Cold Coffee,” the girl does not care and is nonchalant when her boyfriend goes missing for days. Everything is plain, like a flat line – just like the stale coffee. There is also a lot of content hidden inside the title of this story. In the general sense a cold coffee is soothing and refreshing, and also energizing. But a cold coffee in the context of the story is stale, and without passion, and even though it does give energy, this energy is spent on nonchalance. But in spite of all that, there is a certain kind of beauty to be found.

Intertextuality is omnipresent in all the stories. As I have previously mentioned, reading a text determines how you will feel about the next text, and the reading order is left up to the readers. So every reader will derive unique experiences in subtle ways. If sentences can create allusions, short stories can do so as well. “Cold Coffee” and “DSLR” create such allusions. There is a postmodernist trope – the author is dead. Roland Barthes talks about this concept in his seminal essay “The Death of the Author.” “DSLR” fully explores that idea (within the context of the story itself), where in the author becomes the art himself, and in “Cold Coffee,” another author (Zaid) literally kills himself. Another elusive character is Haroon, who is referred to in both “Cold Coffee” and “Pride.” He named Parul’s cat as Bastet, an Egyptian cat goddess.

But in both the stories, both Haroon and Bastet are missing; they also have almost nothing to do with the narrative of the stories. He is portrayed as a strong character who knows what he is doing. But he is nonexistent, to say the least.

In some stories, as I will mention later in the introduction, there are certain things that I did want to say. In that case the author is not really dead, as Barthes contended, but it is to be understood that the power is not being taken away from the author, but rather power is being given to the reader. In other words, it is not dealing with absolutes. But at the same time, if the entire process is seen holistically, I really did not know what I was writing till the stories were finished. I was able to derive a meaning of the stories as a whole when I completed the process. This is what Barthes was meant when he stated that the author must “die” or disappear to let the characters come alive and “entrusting the hand with the task of writing as quickly as possible what the head itself is unaware of (automatic writing)” (144). I did this by reading through the stories as a reader, and then creating the meaning. But since I was the reader of a text I authored, I had the “privilege” of assigning a meaning – I said the stories are postmodern, I said the power is being given to the reader. But in the end some meaning is being derived by the author as well. The words did not come from randomly picking out words from a newspaper. They were indeed written with some degree of intent. And even if some stories were to start with no goals, the words, however arbitrary, would have come from some sort of biases and experiences from the author’s side. So when we read the text by Barthes, these are some of the things to keep in mind. What Barthes is trying to say, according to me, is that sometimes critics might come up with interpretations that they attribute to the author. I think if the interpretation is “wrong”, and is then shoehorned as something the author intended, then it might not be the best thing for the author or their image. But when we consider the text or art for what it is, the audience is able to assign a

meaning to it, without having to tie the author to their interpretations. This is how I have interpreted Barthes' work. To quote Barthes, "We know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 8).

"Sami's Cow" has an unreliable narrator. All throughout the story the narrator says that Sami has bought a cow, but the reader somehow knows that the so-called cow is actually a donkey. It ends with a magic realist twist when Sami too becomes a donkey. The narration of "Pride" is also unique in comparison to the other stories. It is somewhat similar to "DSLR." The narration happens in third person, yet it seems as if the character in focus is speaking his mind. The narrator becomes the character (again the author is dead). There is a certain kind of unreliability in this kind of narrator. The father thinks his son is not like him; the son thinks that he is nothing like his father. There is meaning behind the previous sentence. The father hopes his son would be like him, the son believes he will never be like his father. One is positive negativity, another is negative positivity. But from their conversations, the reader knows that they are more similar than they admit or know they are. Again, this way the story is empowering the reader instead of the story or the author. There is a recursive pattern in postmodern literature or even our daily lives, that is, the concept of The Ontological Dominant. An excerpt from the essay "Postmodernism and the Ontological Dominant: The Poetics of Integration" in Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee* by María Jesús Martínez explains this briefly:

McHale devises his well-known proposal by extrapolating Higgins' distinction between cognitivism and postcognitivism (1978:101) to a field — literary fiction — that Higgins does not take into consideration (at least explicitly). Thus, McHale suggests that postmodernist literature foregrounds its ontological structure as opposed to modernist

literature, which is based on an epistemological dominant. Modernist literature is centered around the pursuit of knowledge, asking (cognitive) questions such as: “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?”

Postmodernist works, on the other hand, foreground the plurality of ontologically distinct worlds as they elicit (postcognitive) questions such as: “Which world is this? What is there to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (Martínez 106)

The narrative style of “Pride” does that, the reader is living in the moment, or the plane of existence that the spoken character possesses. A hint is also given in the title – Pride, a feeling that stresses too much on the “I”. Interestingly enough, when the author is dead, the “I” shifts its focus from the author to the reader. What is even more Meta about the story is that, since the reader knows better than the narrator, the reader is becoming empowered, like I previously stated that short stories are empowering for the reader. The entire collection of stories is also based on the ontological dominant, that is, even though they are all parts of the same universe, the reader is at a time a member of each of the unique stories. They are living or more accurately being in the individual stories, one at a time, despite it being the same universe. Even our real lives follow the concept of these ontological shifts, and ever so rapidly. We are now reading, and next thing we will be watching Netflix, and the next thing we know we are going to be perhaps driving, or out for work. The computer and mobile phones have made these transitions ever so rapid. In the social media we are being bombarded with information overflow and we lose this sense of belonging to one plane of existence. We are constantly shifting. The same thing happens when one reads the five short stories, making the whole thing more ontologically dominant. In that sense, I believe short stories are more effective mediums when dealing with postmodernism, and

are more reflective of the state of the world in many matters. This is not to say one is better than the other, when it comes to lengthy art and compact art. They are simply what they are.

Pride

Rafiq Mian gets up after his regular and ample serving of rice, daal, and fried fish. He likes his meals on a big plastic bowl. He has the typical serving of a regular man times six. Rafiq is no ordinary man in his neighborhood. He is a short and stocky man, with a tough belly. Not a day goes by he is not deprived of an abyssal hunger. Over the years he has grown fond of this great hunger, and he looks forward to the next meal, and then the next. It is not like he particularly is fond of satisfying his taste buds, such luxuries would not suit him. Rather he likes to fill up his stomach, and the fulfillment of that gaping burning emptiness gives him a sense of satisfaction.

Raqib is his twenty-four-year-old son. He runs the local gym, a shoddy place with no air-conditioning, equipped with instruments geared towards muscle building. Weight loss could be done with freehand exercise he says. He is somewhat of a push-up expert and is known in the neighborhood for having done a thousand push-ups without a rest. He attributes his strength to the prayers that he makes, says praying five times a day has contributed to his strength, especially when he goes to sujud. He hates the idea his father has practiced all his life, prayer is not something you use as a trophy to show off to people. Raqib is different. He is not like his father. He does not show off his act of prayer.

Rafiq Mian returns home from his duty at the local cemetery. He digs soil to make room for the deceased. This digging business makes him hungrier than the normal folks. He makes room not only in the soil, but in his stomach. Both are abysses that he needs to then fill up – the abyss beyond, and then the abyss within. He goes to his bedroom for his prayer for the night. He has been pushing his forehead too hard against the floor during his prayers, a practice he has been following since his teenage years. The two black spots that have formed on his forehead were a mark for his piety; a man needs to don such a mark. When people look at him, they

notice the black spots first, and then the looks that he gets are that of reverence. But he is humble. The spots are a key to paradise. People can learn from him that there is a key even they can get. He does not like how his son promotes prayers as a sort of sport for health benefits and a way to flaunt his muscles. Prayers are spiritual. His great strength for digging up graves comes from this source. His son is nothing like him.

Raqib gets out of the gym to return home for the night. He has said his prayers in the gym today. He is aware that his strong arms do not necessarily come from prayers but due to the rigorous workout regimen he follows. Yet he does not force his forehead against the floor during prayers. Instead, he applies the force on his arms- a rebellion against his father. This act also gives him the extra spiritual strength to follow through with this tough training every day. Prayers hold great spiritual powers, and he must have the strength to manifest this power into tangible strength. He is not like his father.

Rafiq Mian and Raqib return home from the Friday afternoon prayer and get prepared for lunch.

“Son, pass me the salt, please. One really can’t go about eating without some extra serving of salt,” remarks Rafiq.

“Father, extra salt is no good,” Raqib passes the salt.

“I am old Raqib, I gotta have this little enjoyment I get. At the end of a week, I like enjoying my meal. Hot rice, and some beef curry. I love this.”

Raqib smiles. It is usually him who buys luxury food like beef. Rafiq makes little money from his work. But he is otherwise happy, as long as there is food on the table. Rafiq can be happy.

“How is the curry today, father?”

“It is good! I mean, it’s nowhere as close as your mother used to make it, but you did well. I would have preferred some more oil. But I am good; as long as there is food on the table I am happy.”

“Too much oil ain’t good for us father. I have told you that too.”

“Son, I don’t care. I am happy with my food.”

“No father, of course you care! You are always complaining about salt and oil. Yeah I mean, you don’t go crazy about *biriyani* or *tehari* like Hossen uncle does every single day. But you are complaining about either oil or salt every other day. But then you go about saying you are happy.” Raqib loses his temper for a bit and then he sighs, “Why are you like this father? I know you work very hard but if you are happy then why complain? I save up money every month to buy beef for us, you know?”

“I know Raqib, I know. I should not complain. And I am grateful that you are taking care of us. Your poor father can barely provide much. But I get you. There you go, I won’t take this pinch of salt,” Rafiq pushes back the saucer full of salt.

“That is not the point here. What I said was that do not complain so much. I am doing the best I can, and if you fall too sick, don’t think I can afford to take care of you. I am not so rich like your nephew Haroon. I did not go to those English schools as he did. I get it how you say that he has direction in his life like he is some great author of his life, and he writes it however he pleases, and he leads it magnificently. But I am doing the best I can. I am.”

“Raqib, are you now rubbing it on my face? Did I not send you to a government school; I did the best I could. Who was it who took care of you when your mother died? I did not even bring a new wife, thinking she might not love you.”

“No, you did not bring a new wife because that woman called you fat! I am saying, you complain too much instead of getting things done! You never take care of yourself!” Raqib is now a bit exasperated.

“Raqib, you hurt me today. Real bad.” Rafiq Mian angrily finishes off the remaining food from his bowl and leaves.

As Raqib sits there alone with his food, feeling somewhat guilty, his father comes again. He yells at him saying, “You see these marks on my forehead? These are the marks of a real man. These are keys, the keys to salvation. Your pride and muscles won’t open the doors to paradise.”

Raqib, upon hearing this, slams hard on the table which leaves a permanent dent and a long crack on the middle of the table. His right-hand bleeds as he leaves his seat.

Late at night, Raqib hears his father panic. He runs to his father’s room and notices that his father is writhing in agony on the floor.

“Father, what is wrong with you?” Raqib picks his father up from the floor, worried sick.

Rafiq Mian is unable to speak, he only screams and groans in pain. Raqib seats his father on the bed and turns on the light. There is ample blood on the floor and his father’s white cotton vest is drenched in blood, pouring down from his head. There is a pair of horns being conjured from within his forehead. Where there were previously the black spots are now replaced by black horns. Raqib thinks he is having a nightmare, but it is all too real.

“Father you have horns growing out of your head!”

“The devil has consumed me!” Rafiq Mian cries out. “Break them son break them!”

Raqib becomes impatient like his father and grabs both the horns and twists with all this might. Surprisingly, they were very easily broken. However, the fragility of the horns has caused

hundreds of splinters to puncture the palms of Raqib. The father and the son stare at each other. The first thing that appears in their mind is the same. They cannot pray for many days because of their pain.

Rafiq Mian and Raqib are looking at the river from the steamer heading towards their hometown. They have not been able to pray for weeks. Rafiq Mian is unable to go to sujud as half of each of his uneven horns is still protruding out, and it pains him whenever pressure is exerted there. Proper removal of his horns would require some money. He will need to sell some land he has back in his hometown. Raqib's hands are still under the bandage, and it will be a while before they can again say their prayers. They question their own lives in shared silent agony. They both remain silent, aware of each other's agony, but they do not share it among themselves. Their pains are at differing levels. He would not understand my pain, they both think.

Sandwich

Rahim's eyes start to tear as he chops onions. His large glasses slide down to the tip of his large and round nose. It's not the sting of the onion that bothers him. He is crying because his daughter plans to move out. He can't fathom the separation. He fights the heavy drops mobbing at his eyes, he doesn't want them to drop into the food. He tightens the grip of the glasses that have slid down, keeping it there, but tighter. The tears are better off stuck within the glasses. He sprinkles the finely chopped onions over a slice of bread that was covered in sauce. He reaches out to grab the spatula, picks up the meat patty, and slaps it on the bread. Putting a slice of cheddar, he covers it with another slice of bread.

He carries the very nicely arranged meal to the lonely customer seated beside the window. Not a lot of people come to his restaurant, so he alone is able to take care of most of it. He makes a decent living out of it. The customers are quite dedicated, much like the man who was seated. He was a regular and need not speak of the order; Rahim knew what to get him, always.

Driving back home, he keeps an eye out for some apartment complexes that has the notice 'TO-LET' on them. Maybe it was time Reyna went out and made a place for herself in the world. He cannot stop her, but at least he could find her a nice place not too far from theirs. There is this very beautiful building, but sadly there are two construction sites on either side of it. So, he decided not to go for it. After stopping for a bit ~~and~~ to appreciate the place, he starts for his house again.

He sits on the couch and turns on the TV feeling pretty good having showered after such a long day at work.

“I told you not to munch shit food late at night! Also, what is this that I have found in your purse?”

(... tonight’s news flashback... prime minister Hason Raja said...)

“You checked my purse? Who are you? Why would you even do that?”

“You tell me, when did you get into drugs?”

(... he also added that as long as the prices of...)

“Mom! That is not a drug? Okay? They have medicinal benefits, okay? What kind of a boomer are you?”

Rahim looks back at the doorway, he softly throws the remote beside him and gets up to check out the commotion.

(... we cannot let our economy be sandwiched between...)

“Reyna, what is that she found in your purse? Is it marijuana?” Rahim asks entering the room.

His wife cuts in, “Rahim, look at this!” she lifts the joint, “Have you ever bothered talking to her? You let this happen to her!”

“Wait, what have I done? Why are you blaming me?” Rahim feels defensive despite his daughter being the one in trouble. After all, how was it his fault?

“Not blame you? You have not picked her up from college yesterday. I told you so many times. If you had she would not have had the possibility of getting this!”

“Are you saying she became a druggie because I did not pick her up?” Rahim keeps getting more defensive. “Your toxic behaviour got her into this mess today!”

“Dad! Did you just call me druggie, seriously what the hell? You are both just toxic boomers! You are supposed to back me up here! We talked the other day about its benefits! There was this show, Dr. Dent on TV, WE - TALKED - ABOUT - THIS!”

“Wait what, Rahim did you get her into this?” Mehrooba is now furious.

“How was I supposed to know she would get a joint? We just talked. I did not ask her to buy it! She probably had it before too!”

“Rahim, are you blind? That is not the point!”

“Dad, are you serious, what do you mean I had this before? I sometimes feel like, even though I consider you my friend, you barely know me.” Reyna bursts into tears and leaves.

“Rahim, I am leaving for Malaysia tomorrow and Reyna is going with me.”

Reyna stops in her tracks and turns back, “I am not going anywhere with you, neither am I staying here,” she says pointing her finger at Mehrooba, then she snatches the joint from Rahim’s hand and storms out of the room.

Rahim is making those sandwiches again for his usual customer. He has gotten really good at making this meal. He did not think people would like it so much. The guy who always orders it has talked about it to his friends, so he is making a bunch of sandwiches for them. He is not crying tonight, but he is a little down thinking about the family’s future. He will have to spend the next few months alone, perhaps even years. Or perhaps if Mehrooba leaves, Reyna will stay. But she also needs to find her place in the world. Perhaps he is overthinking.. The new customers enjoy the meal and appreciate Rahim for his skills and the cozy vibe of his cafe.

Rahim shuts the cafe early as soon as they leave. He drives to the lake close to the cafe to spend some time alone by a bench. It is his favourite spot to relax. Lighting a cigarette, he walks

towards it after parking his car. He sits down and looks at the city lights reflecting off of the water. He wonders what the fishes think of the night lights. As he sits there, he hears the footsteps of another person. It is the man who is always ordering that sandwich.

“Do you come here often?” asks the man.

“Yeah, well, it’s been a while since I’ve come here.”

“Yeah I have not seen you in a while. I usually walk here, but I guess you never noticed me. I used to notice you here quite often before.”

“I felt like I needed some time to chill out, and watch the sky, the lake, or whatever.”

“Yeah, it is nice here- a bit of nature, tucked in the heart of the city. I like it here too but I come here right after I have that sick sandwich of yours.”

“I’m glad you like it, it is pretty basic,” shrugs Rahim.

“Well yeah! Basic is goood!” There was a satisfaction spread in his tone.

Rahim shrugs again, his posture nonchalant.

“Something bothering you ?” The man asks.

“I can tell you, I mean I think it’d be nice to share.”

“Yeah, do tell me!” The man has unusual energy.

“My daughter and wife are always fighting almost every day. Sometimes over the silliest of things. And I feel I am sandwiched between them, like in their fights. I am quite easygoing. I never cause or incite the fights, yet I find myself sandwiched between them.”

“Haha, you have been making too many sandwiches lately!”

Rahim chuckles staring at the grass below him.

“But man, in all seriousness, why does that bother you?”

“Because...”

“Nah, like tell me, what is beneath the layers of the sandwich?”

“Umm, the patty, or the meat?” Why is that even a question?!”

“If you feel sandwiched between, you are like the meat, the best part!”

“No, you don’t get it, I am always sandwiched between their fights, and they are both now leaving me! You know what that makes me, a toothpick. We found weed in her purse, and I don’t think it’s hers, I know her, she would not. I think she’s selling them, she wants to move out.”

“Brother, listen. It is you who said you feel like a sandwich of sorts. I am just showing you the bright side of your way of thinking. And you know what, sandwich IS good! And trust me, your daughter isn’t leaving, it is probably hers. See you are the meat, you can hold them together, be together as a happy family! All you need now is some cheese! Do you know how they say cheese when taking a group photo? It holds them together, and makes them so happy in the photo! – The late photographer Rony, he had said something like this.”

“Hahaha, what are you saying man?”

“I am serious, you know this part of you wants to see them together as a happy family! That is why you feel sandwiched. You just gotta hold them together. Listen to their issues. There is a strong connection between you people. And don’t blame yourself for everything. If people tell you about their troubles, usually they are not pointing fingers at you. We all need a place where we can fall back to, embrace it. Be a place of comfort, man!”

“You just might be right, friend.”

“Yeah anytime, I don’t want to miss your sandwiches, with you falling depressed.”

“Yeah, and tomorrow’s sandwiches are on the house. Bring your friends.”

“Why don’t you bring your family over, and make them sandwiches.” The man winks as he takes his leave. “See ya, man!”

The man lights up a joint as he leaves.

Rahim makes some great sandwiches for his new friend and his friends. He serves them on the table, and sits beside his daughter, tossing his chef cap on the other table.

“Did you see your mom off today, dear?”

“Nah, she’s canceled it, she asked to take a sandwich home for her.”

“Aah, I will go and make another then.”

Sami's Cow

gorur haat – a makeshift bazaar where merchants sell exclusively cows for consumption.

Gadha – ass, donkey

Lungi – a sarong like wear popular amongst Southeast Asian men

maa-er doa – mother's blessing

Sami is slowly walking towards his home. He went to the *gorur haat* to buy a cow for his family. Since he is a person of large stature, he can manage on his own. His elder brother Shaduan works at a bank and so he cannot accompany him. In his free time at home, he plays online video games with his friends. Moreover, because the previous night Sami had sabotaged their game match in a competitive round, Shaduan is extremely angry at him. But Sami is a grown man and can take care of family matters alone. He looks back and smiles at the little cow he bought as he walked on holding its leash.

As he walks home he notices people laughing at his cow. He laughs too, but internally. People are so judgmental these days. So what that his cow is small. They are only four members in the family, their parents and them. This little cow can keep them fed for a long time. Some people also ask him the price of his cow and calls out to him as an ass. But Sami is not stupid like a donkey. He intentionally says that his cow cost him 10,000 Taka even though it cost him 80,000. He knows that if he speaks the real price, people might steal it from him. He knows why two people referred to him as an ass. It is because his cow is small. He thinks about how corrupted the world has become and that buying a big cow has become associated with social standing. He might as well have become a philosopher.

He recalls his time back at the *gorur haat*. The famous sandwich shop owner was there too, with his daughter and her husband. They are famous Instagram influencers. Rahim_bhai00 is quite popular on Instagram these days.

“Can I please have a selfie with you?” asked Sami.

“Sure!” Rahim bhai pleasantly replied, but he seemed in a hurry and left with a cow with his family.

He could have stayed and talked with him a bit more. Influencers are rude. But at least he has a photo with him. He has also successfully managed to buy his cow, to share with his family, although it was Shaduan who gave him the money. Well, he practically stole it. He wants to surprise and impress his family.

After Rahim bhai left, Sami wandered around the marketplace and could not find a suitable cow. All of them were too big to be carried back home. He noticed a man wearing a pink T-shirt and red *lungi* calling out to him. The T-shirt said *maa-er doain* in blue Bangla fonts. The man must be good as he believes in the blessings of his mother, thought Sami.

“Yes brother?” Sami approached him.

“You looking for a nice cow?” the man asked him with a gentle smile.

“Yes! I am, but I want a small cow. All of them are too big. We are a family of four, a small cow is enough for us.”

“Will this do?” The salesman gently slapped a cow not too big on the back.

“Nah, I need a smaller one.”

The salesman seemed a bit worried.

“What about that one?” Sami asked pointing a significantly smaller cow. It was nicely decorated too, and even had a backpack on it.

“Oh, that? It is not for sale.”

“Tch, too bad.”

As Sami turned around feeling dejected, the man called out to him again.

“Listen, brother, I will sell it, but it will be 80,000 Taka.”

“Will you give it to me with all the decorations?” Sami is filled with guileless joy.

“Yeah, why not, let me just take off the backpack.”

That is how Sami got hold of this cow. He is close to home, but the scorching sunlight is making him dizzy. The salesman swindled him. Had he given the backpack as well he could have kept a bottle of water in it. But whatever, at least he got a cow. He stops at a nearby shop to get a bottle of water, while still holding onto the leash of his cow.

“Can I have a bottle of YUM water?” asks Sami.

“Here you go.” The shopkeeper takes out a bottle of water from underneath his counter and hands it to him. “Delivering meat?” he asks pointing at his cow with his eyes.

“Yeah, meat. Not much but enough,” says Sami. This shopkeeper is a strange fellow, addressing his cow as meat. It is indeed, but it is still alive.

As Sami pays for the water, the shopkeeper hands him a study sack, saying he needs it more than him, and that he should carry a bag. Sami accepts it. They will call the butcher tomorrow to slaughter the cow, and the bag would be handy to carry the meat upstairs since the butcher will be doing his work in the parking lot downstairs. He gently lays the empty sack on the back of his cow and heads home.

Since his childhood, Sami had often been called by this word – *gadha*. But as he grew up he started hating this word. Sometimes, he partly believes that he is somewhat of an ass, but he gets defensive with all his might if he is referred to or rebuked as such.

He ties the leash of his cow to a metal bar in the parking lot and heads upstairs to call his dad to look at the surprise.

“What did you buy, you *gadha*?!” his father is in shock as he stares at Sami’s cow.

“Abba, do not call me that,” Sami retorts, “I know it is not a big cow, but it only cost 80,000 Taka.”

“Eighty-what?” his father screams in awe. “That is an ass Sami, an ass!”

“Don’t call me that Abba!” Sami squeals.

“Sami, are you out of your mind, you are a pure *gadha*! And how the in the world did you manage to find 80,000 Taka?”

“I borrowed it from Shaduan,” Sami replies, looking down, and then towards his cow.

His father sighs heavily. “Come on, where did you buy this from, take me to the place.”

As they are about to get out of the apartment garage, Shaduan makes his entrance. Looking at Sami’s cow, he shouts out, “Why do you have a *gadha*?”

Sami pounces at Shaduan as soon as he hears that, “Don’t ever call me a *gadha*, ever again!”

There are tears in his eyes.

“Hey, hey, calm down you boys,” their father reaches out to them in a desperate attempt to calm them down.

“He calls me *gadha* all the time, I can’t take this anymore. What have I done to deserve this?”

“I did not call YOU a *gadha*, you *gadha*! I am talking about whatever that is.” Shaduan points at Sami’s cow.

“Yes, I bought it, with the money you lent me.”

“Wait, what! Did you steal that money I kept for buying our cow?”

“I did not steal! I bought the cow, for all of us!”

“Sami, that is not a cow,” their father shakes his head disapprovingly.

“Then what is it? A horse, eh?”

“No that is exactly whatever that is pissing you off when you are called by that. Or at least you think you are being referred to as.”

“Oh,” Sami is dumbfounded, then he asks. “Is that a donkey?”

“Yes, you dimwit!” Shaduan shouts at him.

“Umm, is it worth like, 80,000 Taka?”

“Maybe 15,000 at most,” their father replies.

“Oh no,” Sami finally feels like a *gadha*. “What do we do?”

“We go back and find the guy who tricked you.”

Shaduan stands there, trying his best to control his anger. It’s not Sami’s fault he is like this.

Back at the *gorur haat* they ask around for the conman, relying on the description Sami had given them. Not the best source for descriptions like this, but that is the only lead they have.

“Have you seen a man who had a donkey with him? He wears a red lungi and pink *genji*.”

Shaduan asks one of the cow salesmen.

“Yes I did,” The man pointed him towards a direction.

The rest is history.

It is quite a walk to the old banyan tree. Although it was not possible to miss it, it took the two and a half men, and the donkey and a half over thirty minutes to reach the tree that day. They found the man with the red lungi sitting comfortably under the shades of the old banyan tree. He was playing a catchy tune with his flute.

As soon as they got closer, the man did not even twitch a muscle other than the ones needed to peacefully play his flute. His eyes were closed, and he looked rather smug.

“Oi! Stop playing that! You have to answer to us, you scum!” Shaduan confronted the man.

He kept playing his flute.

“Get up you scumbag!” Shaduan pulled up the man by his T-shirt.

“*Aapne amar mayer doa leha genji taina dilen?*” The man got heavily disappointed at Shaduan for pulling on his favorite T-shirt.

“You made a *gadha* out of my brother, motherfu...” As Shaduan was about to punch the man in the gut, he heard a loud BANG!

He looked behind him to see that there were now two donkeys, and his father stared at the both of them, dumbfounded.

Sami is walking down the aisle with his best friend Samsa. They are delivering mails to another town nearby. The digital Dark Age has come upon mankind, and people have resorted back to delivering mails by donkeys. A letter fell off the back of Sami. The envelope must not have been glued shut by mistake. At the end of the letter it went like this:

P.S.: you are an ass.

Cold Coffee

Parul is sitting alone at the coffee shop waiting for her drink to arrive. She looks at the time from the watch on her right wrist. She lost her phone today. It must have somehow dropped on her way to the café. Her boyfriend knows how to track phones, so she waits patiently. How tough can it be to track it? He is supposed to be here by 5:30 pm, so perhaps it is not a big deal if she cannot contact him at the moment. She is known for her patience during such situations. This one time, she had lost her purse on a rickshaw, and three days later, she got it back. The same rickshaw puller had come by at her place and had dropped it with the security guy. The money was there, and nothing was lost.

She likes her coffee cold, not the ice-cold kind, but the kind that loses the heat and cools down to room temperature. She looks at her empty cup; there is no sign of Haroon, her boyfriend. She goes up to the barista and asks if she can use his phone to call her boyfriend. He complies politely and lends her the phone. She dials in Haroon's number, but his phone seems to be switched off. She returns the phone and goes back to her seat.

She finally gets up; the time is 7:24 pm. She calls a rickshaw and heads home. Her mother answers the door, and Parul realizes the grimace on her face.

“Sorry Ma, I lost my phone again. I waited for Haroon for a long time, but he also did not show up.”

“At least you are okay Parul! You have no idea how worried I got.”

“Nah, I am okay. I tried calling him from someone's phone, but he is out of reach.”

“Don’t worry, we will get you a new phone, it is nothing new.”

Parul gives her mom an embarrassed look and heads back to her room.

She always enjoys a cold shower during a hot weather like this. And the pandemic also requires everyone to take a good shower once they are home. She picks up the cute little mask she bought the last day and washes it. While she does it, she breaks down and starts crying. She covers her face with soapy hands, and the soap gets into her eyes.

She is lying on her bed, with a white towel wrapped around her hair. With her reddened and slightly irritated eyes, she looks at her two cats, Vladimir and Estragon. The two brothers are playfully fighting with each other. Their mother was named Bastet, after the Egyptian cat goddess. She left, jumped off the veranda one day, a couple of years ago. She was never to be found. It was Haroon who chose the name for their mother. He had found a pregnant cat on the street, hungry. He brought it home that night, and they took care of it together. Parul wonders if Vladimir and his brother still look out for their mother, hoping she might one day return.

Parul gets up and reaches for the cabinet above her study desk. She takes out the cat food container and fills up the bowl for her cats for the night. She notices a newspaper on her desk. After returning the container to the cabinet, she picks up the newspaper. It can allow her to kill some time before she falls asleep. No phone tonight. She is surprisingly calm about the fact that she has lost her phone. She unwraps the towel, spreads it on the clothesline on her balcony. She shakes her head sideways, her medium hair brushing the air with droplets of water. She closes the balcony door and opens the window to the right side of her bed. She notices the cats munching on their favorite food. Lying down on her stomach and resting her elbows on her soft pillows she opens up the newspaper. There is a particular photo that catches her attention

immediately. It is the picture of a man, who has a photo of another man's face pasted on his face. She then again reads the title that had caught her attention at first – Noted Photographer Zaid Suffocates Himself. She read the remaining story. It is about this photographer who glued a printed copy of a photo on his face and died of suffocation – suicide to be exact. He had taken a photo of another photographer who was dying and the photo had become famous. But in time, the subject of the photo became more famous, and Zaid wanted to become one with the art he had created. His body was found in the National Museum. A sign that perhaps he had left said – One with the Art and The Artist, A posthumous performance art. Things that people do for fame, Parul thinks. She has had enough to read for the night, she wishes she had not read such messed up news. She gets up and turns off the light, and lies down on her back on her soft comfortable bed. Hoping that she does not have nightmares, she falls fast asleep.

It is Friday and she has no work today. She woke up late, so she is still feeling a little groggy. She spreads the marmalade on her toast and puts a fried egg on top. She loves this combination for her breakfast. She misses having peanut butter spread on top of the egg. But she hasn't had it for over a month now. She takes a bite of the toast and sips her green tea that is mixed with honey and lemon. The morning is very peaceful. She is looking outside, through the veranda of the dining room. It is the same veranda from which Bastet had jumped off, or maybe she fell. She wonders whether she will ever return. She reaches out for her phone on the left side of her plate. A good day for a photo in the veranda she thinks. She then realizes that she had lost her phone. She also immediately gets reminded of Haroon. She takes another sip from her tea and misses Haroon for that duration. She looks at the golden yolk of her fried egg. She always saves that bit of the toast for the last. She picks it up and tucks it in her mouth. It is just so good.

It makes her be in the present. She savors it with her eyes closed. She takes the last sip of the green tea from her white porcelain cup, and then she sighs with relief.

She is wearing a grey tank top and loose white shorts, the dusty rays of sunlight are reflecting on her white shorts that seem to be blending in with her white bed sheet. She is reading a book – it is a collection of short stories, almost absurd to be honest. There is this story about a man turning into a donkey and another where this man has grown horns. Reading books makes her hungry for some reason. It is noon and she is craving some sandwiches. If she had her phone she would have ordered some of Rahim Bhai Sandwiches.

“Hey mom,” Parul enters her mother’s room. “You have Reyna’s number, right?”

“I think so, you check it,” she gestured towards her phone.

Parul picks it up and calls Reyna.

“Hello! Reyna, what’s up?”

“...”

“No, yeah, like I lost my phone yesterday.”

“...”

“I know, don’t wanna talk about it.”

“...”

“Yes, the fifth time.”

“...”

“Hey, wanna meet up tonight?”

“...”

“Oh okay. But I called because I am craving Rahim uncle’s sandwiches. Can you order some for me from your app? I will pay you when we meet.”

“...”

“Thank you so very much, Reyna. Say hi to Rahim uncle for me. Your dad is just too awesome!”

“...”

“Yeah, bye-bye! Thank you again, Reyna!”

Parul is on her rocking chair on her balcony. She is munching on the leftover sandwich from noon. Beside her is a cup of coffee, still hot. The dusk is one of her favorite times of the day. Birds go back home, and bats come out. The sun takes a dip, and up comes the moon. It is that state of change. This is the time of day Parul feels most like herself. She believes that she is like the eternal twilight. She is always in that transitory stage. Perhaps that is why she likes her coffee cold. Better to say, likes her coffee at room temperature. She would do the same for ice coffee as well; let the ice melt, and the coffee return to room temperature. She would have it then. This room temperature, what Parul refers to as *thanda* or cold, is something that is in a transitory stage. But this cup of so-called cold coffee is comfortable being like that. Just like that, it is not so much the temperature that Parul likes. It is that feeling or essence of comfort that the

cold coffee provides which Parul truly appreciates. Of course, she does not think so much about it. But she knows it from a more subconscious state of being.

She takes a sip from her cold coffee. her legs curled up on her comfortable rocking chair, as she keeps her chair slowly swaying back and forth. The sky has darkened itself to a shade of dark blue, and a thin strand of orange light can still be seen on the horizon. She sips on her coffee and rocks her chair a bit more as she hums a tune.

D-SLR

Single-lens reflex (adjective)

: Denoting or relating to a reflex camera in which the lens that forms the image on the film also provides the image in the viewfinder.

Rony is all by himself, waiting for an airplane to fly past above his head as he twiddles the knob of his DSLR camera. He is sitting on a stool on his balcony. The railings are about waist-high, and one could easily topple over if they wanted to. He aspires to be a photographer of extreme proportions, but he believes his magnum opus is yet to be captured. He takes pride in his works because it is photographers who can keep a moment in time infinitely suspended. They stop not only a tide on an ocean but the very fabric of time from wilting. He just needs to capture one great moment. None of his photographs have been selected for any exhibitions so far, but he is somewhat well known in the community for he is a very sociable person. But whenever he talks about getting his photos to an exhibition, the curators somehow brush the topic off. He does, however, get a fair amount of paid works, but not of the artistic kind. He usually gets gigs for taking landscape and architecture photography, a lot of them for calendars.

Even though he makes a generous sum of money every month, he is quite jealous of the younger photographer from his university. This person left his studies because he could not afford it, but he somehow became very well known; his photos got displayed at the best exhibitions across Asia. He is a young talent everyone seemed to be talking about. Rony craves that kind of attention, but he is not a peacock, flaunting his talents from far away, and quickly hiding them in front of others, to establish a fake sense of humility. Zaid is like that, he acts like he is humble, but he is the proudest prick there is. He flaunts and lures in people around him, and then acts as if they came to him on their own accord.

Rony recalls an event that he will not forget; he was taking photos near a train station that night. He noticed a man in a black shirt inconspicuously dragging a dog down the rail tracks. Upon closer inspection, as he stealthily approached the gruesome scene, he noticed the dog was battered, and almost dying. He rushed forwards, and the man in the black shirt quickly turned around upon hearing his footsteps and asked Rony to help him out. Rony got close to pick up the dog, and as soon as he touched it, he heard some clicks. This man took some photos of Rony reaching out to the dog, and Rony also noticed there was a machete on the ground beside him. The man laughed out loud, “haha, the dog butcher of Kamalapur,” as he stared at the photo in the camera’s viewfinder. Rony got up and tried to attack the man with bare fists, but he stopped in his tracks when he heard a train approaching. He did not even get the time to get the dog off of the tracks, and they both saved their own lives, as the blood of the dog splatters all over them. Rony heard a few more clicks as he stared dumbfounded and angry at the train that passes by. He noticed a few people still awake at the dead of the night, staring at them. The man beside him was also gone. He later got to know about the man’s identity when “The Dog Butcher of Kamalapur was exhibited”, it was a photo showing Rony’s back, so no one knew about his identity.

But he did become anonymously notorious. Since then he made several encounters with Zaid, mainly at the big exhibitions across town. Their encounter from that night etched Zaid’s smug and proud face into his memory, and he had always hated the sight of him every time they encountered him. For Zaid, on the other hand, Rony was almost nonexistent in reality. Zaid did not speak to anyone about who this so-called butcher was to people, and neither did Rony, for obvious reasons. Rony did not know what to do about Zaid, he simply silently abhorred that man. He, still to this day, does not know what Zaid’s intention with the dog was, he did not want

to save him. Perhaps, he wanted to make a sick photo, but Rony's presence made it even more so. He often wanted to ask him, but he hated his guts, and more so he felt a fear that he might cause him greater harm, not actively, but perhaps do something that will cause Rony to harm himself. Rony hated himself partly too because of the fear he felt.

Rony hates Zaid's shrewd characteristics, and his drive to rise to the top. Zaid is not a talented photographer, and he lacks the pristine technic that Rony possesses, yet he can speak. Not much, but perfectly enough to garner the kind of attention he requires with arcane precision. Rony cannot give up, he needs to capture the greatest photo he ever took, and he would also give up the concept of morality like Zaid did because if it means he can win against Zaid, it will be worth it. However, Rony cannot bring himself to cause shame or hurt to another person or even an animal. He remembers how Pulitzer's guilt caused him to take his own life. If guilt and shame were to come at a certain time in his life, it should not be an act of harming others. An artist must make sacrifices to achieve greatness, and he knows what he should do. He needs to get over his fear, only the ones with the courage to make sacrifices achieve greatness. He turns on the timer of his camera and faces the lens towards his face, holding the camera as far as he could with his two hands. He presses the shutter button.

As the timer starts ticking, 10, 9, 8... Rony jumps off the balcony. He will have captured a moment perhaps no artist was ever able to do, his magnum opus, an expression that could only be captured within a brief frame of time. His fame will be posthumous; a man like Zaid will never be able to top this, this will be the greatest photo of the year. Falling is not easy and uniform, and Rony realized his ignorance as his camera fell from his grasp, and it was that moment that he felt true fear for the first time in his life. Even more fearful than death was the sight he had under his eyes, a man with a camera taking continuous shots of his falling action.

Zaid is again the winner of this year, he has captured an expression no photographer ever achieved before; he calls it, A Portrait in Terror. He says the photo embodies the terror of facing death, and he hopes it causes people to think twice before suicide. Zaid plans a series of anti-suicide campaigns and is later acknowledged internationally as a humanitarian. The photo is still known as Zaid's magnum opus, and even though Rony failed to create one himself, he has become one.

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