

LIFE IN FOG

Nwa Abbas Rizvi

Waves of fog had snuck into the house during the night through one of the many openings. It hung thick, a little above her face, like a canopy shrouding her as she lay in bed, her eyes wide open. The sun had barely brightened the musty sky when she decided to get out of the warmth of her bed and into the dense chill that had settled in the room. She looked at the clock on the bare wall facing her, its two hands moving jaggedly but inexorably around its face. Their bizarre, stunned jerks were a reminder of her progress towards the future. *There are only fifty-nine of them*, she thought to herself. It was time for her to get up, even if she was being robbed. Shaking off her weariness, she realized once again that she had not died in her sleep. She heaved her legs off the edge of the bed and groped for her slippers. Sliding her feet into them, she felt relieved. Like always, she looked for the hole in the right slipper and poked her thumb through it for a little comfort. Picking up the shawl from the bedside, she flung it around her shoulders and shuffled into the corridor.

The fog in the corridor was even thicker as it lay completely undisturbed. It floated around her and cascaded down the staircase into the shadowy hall, where life was yet to stir into another day. On the right, it spread out in waves into the open living area, which functioned mostly as storage for all the sunken equipment of her half-cooked start-ups. The fog shimmered in the soft morning light and rose to the level of her waist, making it seem as though she was standing in shallow waters.

The wooden floor beneath her feet felt damp, the moisture creeping up through her shoes, socks, entering her bones past her skin. Suddenly, feeling lonely and vulnerable, she wrapped the shawl tighter around her tense shoulders as she moseyed into the room opposite hers. She took a deep breath, allowing her head to loll back on her shoulders for a while, the weight of it straining her into wakeful preparation.

Did he die in his sleep?

The door was slightly ajar, allowing a bluish hue to escape its confines, carrying the sound of an answering heartbeat with it. It mingled with the fog and vanished into its depth somewhere. She touched it tenderly, where the blue mixed with the white, and then nimbly pushed the door open with the frozen tips of her fingers. She peeked in – a pale, diseased light filtering in through the blinds on the windows picked out the prone body of a child on the bed. She could make out his stubborn chest mechanically rising and falling as he slept deeply. Next to him on the lone sofa was splayed the body of a male attendant she had hired only recently, a tell-tale proof of her failure as a mother. He reposed unimportantly, his mouth hanging loose like a dead man's.

She looked at both of them and then moved inside, her shuffling transformed into a quiet but purposeful stride. A tune she remembered from her childhood suddenly came back, and she began to hum.

It had been a song in a movie she had snuck into with her cousins. She had been too young to go with them, but they hadn't noticed her hidden somewhere in the big gang. Her father used to run

the snack bar at the cinema – a favour extended to him by the theatre owner, who had pitied his relentless struggle to stay afloat. The somnolent ticket master hadn't bothered to protest the entry of the gang into the empty theatre gallery. He had retired to his seat at the back and they had piled against the carpeted wall of one of the boxes in the gallery.

The carpet had been lush red, smelling as pungent of dust and passion as it was comfortable to sink into. They watched the song sequences in awe, one in the selection making them blush hotly in the blanketing dark with its censored depiction of the shadows of two lovers in the grip of passion by candlelight on a stormy night. In the pool of light from the screen that picked out the warmth of colour around them, they sat mesmerized, not really understanding the extent of the scene unfolding before them. They took pleasure only in the knowledge that they were stealing from life some time that was just for them. Even if they had nothing else in the world, it was enough.

One member of the gang slipped his hand into hers, promising to marry her like that, and when she smiled at him in the dim light from the screen, he said, 'I'll shower you with gems to match your eyes.' She giggled. Upbeat, he went on, 'And I'll make sure you're always smiling.' This bit was an echo of the hero's promise to the leading lady on the screen.

'Will we have kids?' She had already dropped her guard.

'Lots.' He buoyantly hugged her.

'Lost,' she murmured now, and then immediately rebuked herself with a shake of the head as she crossed the floor to the bed. A maze of wires – looping and overlapping – over the glinting floor tiles; the whole bulk of it connected to various machines beeping all around her. They were responsible for one life in the room and the droning buzz in the air, which was complemented by the automated puffing of what seemed like grey accordion lungs. All this kept the beep going, the beep she had known so well since it had first come alive inside her womb.

She bent down near the bed to pick out a phone charger from the forest of wires and put it on the desk next to a glass and a jug of water. Then she looked closely at the creature in the bed but failed to recognize him as the one who had been part of her life for a few years now. She tried desperately to dredge out some kind of maternal emotion from a well that had run dry. And another part of her tried to stifle the unholy annoyance rising inside her. Bending to kiss his forehead, she touched his arm, running her fingers from his elbow down to his left hand and clasped it tightly. He did not notice. Not the slightest of movements on his face, barely any expression; not a sign that he had felt her presence any more than she could his. Yet, the wires going in and coming out of his body seemed to tighten protectively around him, the blue light suddenly becoming hostile towards her. When she raised her head at the charge in the air around her, she could swear they sneered at her.

She glanced at the switch beside the bed and then back at his face. Shaken out of her usual calm, she started to pant. Hearing the throbbing of her heart, she let go of his hand and hastily stepped back, closing the door behind her with a swift snap, barely audible above the hissing inside.

THE OLEANDER GIRL

Meghna Pant

I could feel her presence. She was inside me. I stopped pushing. It didn't matter that the labour pains were sawing my body into half. It didn't matter that all I wanted was to hold my child. I did not push. Around me, people began to shout:

Push! Push!

Still, I didn't. Suddenly, there was the sound of wet wind between my legs and out came my baby. But it was her head that my trembling eyes first saw. Her little shoulders were hunched in prejudice. Her chest heaved up and down in anger. Her gleaming pupils eyed me with distaste. Those tiny fists pounded me with fury. And those little legs – my baby's little legs – started to kick me. I screamed in pain. She had consumed my baby to come as herself. She drowned out my moaning with cries of horror.

The whole village came and stood outside my door. Just when I couldn't take it anymore, she yanked my umbilical cord and swayed it in front of my eyes. She laughed. Then she spat the cord on my face, bonding us forever...

I sit up with a numbing horror of disbelief. Beads of sweat dance on my forehead and drench my cotton sari. I look over to my right. Suresh is fast asleep in his white kurta, his head hidden in the white sheets – almost like a mirage.

She coughs. I can hear her in the next room. I startle. I wait for some nameless revulsion to seize me, but all it does is draw me into a reverie.

From an indistinct past, I hear Taiji running towards me, even though no one knows that I'm home.

'You are back from the hospital?' she says, her voice strained and already accusatory. I feel Suresh fade into the background, leaving me alone with her. 'Oh Devi Mataji, as your humble servant, I pray... *I beg you*, that this time she has good news.'

Taiji's eyes bore straight into me, and she clutches me with an overpowering grip, 'Tell me!' Her hands leave indentations on my shoulder.

I stare at her, aghast. What is she doing up on her feet?

Running? How can someone bed-ridden for the last two months do that? The typhoid has made her frail and sick. The hakeem had informed us that she was on her deathbed, unlikely to survive more than three or four months. We have been instructed to take care of her, to never disagree with her, to please her – none of which are new things to us.

So, this year, it was my husband – not her – who took me to the city hospital. He was with me when I received the news about our child. During the seventeen-hour dusty bus ride back home, he planned how best to break the news to the matriarch – his dead father's sister-in-law. I knew his fear of her would stop him from actually saying the words. I would have to deal with her alone.

I grapple with how best to tell her, as her grip turns to steel and her stare to lashes. Eventually, I blurt out, 'It's the... the same... a daughter.'

She turns away from me in disgust.

In the last five years, Taiji has taken me three times to the big city. The ordeal is horrifying because I know I have to take that ultrasound test again. Lying on the taupe bed, laminated with light oak, tears come to my eyes from staring at the overhead white light. My stomach churns as the jelly-like substance falls on it. My mouth becomes dry in nervousness. I keep looking at my hands, white in fear, thinking of what they would be touching in a few months – my newborn baby or my shallow empty stomach.

I pray for a little kindness from the transducer: *show me a penis, show me a penis, show me a penis*. But the viewing monitor remains patchy and grey – revealing nothing. I wait with bated breath till the results come out, petrified of Taiji's reaction. But it's the same each time – a loud curse, the heavy stomping of her feet, an embarrassed nurse telling me that my Tai has left.

I run out of the clinic – frantic, partially disrobed, the gel still stuck to my abdomen – terrified that, in her anger, Taiji has left me behind at this wretched tiled place. I have no money. I have no phone. Such things corrupt women like me. But she waits for me, brings me back home, cursing me each second. And I go with her, knowing that I'll be back here in ten days with Suresh, to have an abortion.

This time, there are no curses or stomps. She sits down on the flagstones, heaving and sighing. 'How can you do this to me? How can you do this to my brother? How can you put our family to shame? I have waited five years, and this time you again want to bear a girl? We are cursed, cursed with you and your womb.'

Through the sting, I recite my rehearsed lines: 'B... But Taiji, Jyotish Maharaj has told us that the next child may... it *will* be a boy. And the ones after him. So why not have this girl? She will grow up looking after her brothers. We can save... save the expenditure on dropping this child... it may not be that bad and surely –'

'Not that bad! Have you gone mad, woman? To save us three hundred rupees for an abortion, you will make us spend three lakh rupees? Who will pay for that parasite's ear-piercing ceremony? Who will pay for her clothes and food? Her – oof – wedding, her dowry, her jewellery? And after all that, for the rest of her life, we'll have to send her in-laws gifts for every occasion – Holi, Teej, Diwali, Sankranti! Who will pay for all the mithai, huh? You and your cursed womb?'

When I'd come as a new bride to my new home, Taiji had greeted me by stubbing a lit bidi on the inside of my left wrist. She'd shut my scream midway with a smouldering look and told me in her thin raspy voice, 'Never forget your place in this household.'

I haven't. But I cannot abort my fourth child as well. These abortions have taken their toll on my body and my unrealized dreams of being a mother – the sole purpose of my birth, I've always been told. This time, the loss and emptiness of losing a child seems more unbearable than disagreeing with Taiji. 'Um, we don't need to spend so much on her. I am sure if we educate her, she could work. I saw in the city, girls are working, so maybe –'

THE TALKING TREE

Sheba Taraz

What else did I have, to give vent to my grief and anger, that every woman like me didn't have? Yes, for a homemaker that's the only weapon – a metre-long tongue. And why not? When one's talent has gone unrecognized, when one's propriety hasn't been appreciated, when one's good manners have won no approval, and one's sacrifices not been duly acknowledged, what else could I have turned to but this venomous snake of a tongue? This is the only thing that always came to my aid. What choices did I have but to frequently make use of it?

If the maid turned up reluctantly after a day's absence, and my children cried from hunger, and the women in the neighbourhood hadn't given their houses a good washing, in such situations, I had no choice but to unleash my weapon on all of them. Again, when in the afternoon the children on our street fought and screamed raising a ruckus, what could I have turned to but this – my sharp tongue channelling my disgust and anger? What could I do but use it to the hilt?

If I hadn't relentlessly flayed everyone within sight until evening, until my heart rested easy in my chest, venting out my pent-up grief and anger, what options did I have when the father of my children came home at night? My acid-dripping tongue that stung, poisoning him with its venom...

A lot of time has passed just like this – the houses on either side of ours have become pucca, with brick and mortar, and their floors tiled. Meanwhile, complaints had started pouring in; first from the neighbours, then the relatives, tongues wagging here and there, about one sharp tongue – that's mine. The situation took an awkward turn when my children complained to their father about the lash lacerating them, about the thirst and hunger they were subjected to. Only then did the severity of the situation unfold before him. Then, when he, too, complained of being tired of my tongue to the point of desperation, my heart felt as though someone had drilled a hole into it.

Tensions escalated, and the situation took a turn for the worse when, I suspected, everyone around held my tongue responsible for the terrible things happening all over the world – carbon footprints, political unrest, civil wars. So, one day while peeling eggplants, something occurred to me, and I chopped off my tongue...

Yet, having lived together for so long, I had become attached to it as much as it had been to me. Looking at the sad sight of the severed tongue, I felt sorry; instead of throwing it into the garbage, I wrapped it up in an envelope and kept it in my purse. This way, I thought, I could still keep in contact with it; contact meaning I occasionally opened my purse to look at it.

Doing so also became necessary because, out of habit, it would keep wagging in my purse all the time, causing the purse to swell like a balloon. Unwillingly, I had to empty my bloated purse out every now and then. I did this by sometimes pouring out dialogues into flower beds, sometimes into potted plants.

THE MISSING MAN

Zoya Anwer

Bhabhi, I will get some real good langra mangoes tomorrow and ask Amma to make baisani roti for lunch,' Rabia told her cousin's wife. 'You need not bother about cooking, just bring the twins along by Zuhra, and we'll have a feast.' She punched the air with her fist excitedly. Looking from the rooftop at the cartful of juicy, ripe mangoes, her eyes widened. Rabab, busy spreading the wet dupattas on the washing line, felt grateful that the water supply had resumed after two days. 'I'll ask Tasneem Kakka to save some dough for Sajjad. He loves baisani roti.' She paused before continuing, 'But then, who doesn't?' Both of them laughed.

The next day, Rabia anxiously waited for the text telling her the salary had been credited into her bank account. She felt comforted knowing it would double the moment she went full-time. Rabab insisted she finish her bachelor's programme because it's impossible to get back to studies once you started earning.

Putting on a black kurta over jeans, Rabia chose the tiny red jhumkis complementing the red laces crisscrossing her sneakers and the strands of *kalawa* on her right wrist. Her mother, always up with the first larks, was already putting portions of her beef pulao and kebabs in casseroles to be delivered to the offices. 'Amma, please make baisani rotis today. Bhabhi will join us for lunch, and here's a request from her – save some dough for Sajjad bhaiya. My classes end at one, so I should be home by 1:30.' After saying so much in one breath, Rabia gasped. She nibbled on a kebab, talking to her mother about her schedule for the day.

'Understood, boss lady. Will the twins come here straight from school, or should I go and pick them up? Also, you will have to help me with the chow mein tomorrow – orders have gone up four times.' A smile spread over her face talking about the rise in business. Rabia grimaced; she dreaded waking up early in the morning.

'I'll ask Bhabhi to call you, and what Ma, can't we fix a day for chow mein? Didn't we make it two days ago?' Rabia pouted.

'I know... didn't you tell me to give more options? Once you finish your studies, I am sure we can start a little eatery or catering business. We have such a busy calendar – Rajab, Shabaan, Ramzaan, then Muharram. Oh yes, Muharram reminds me... please pick up the karras from Ashraf's shop. I'll give *niyaz*, you can start wearing yours again,' Tasneem said in a staccato voice. More things to do – Rabia hurriedly wrote them down on her phone.

'I need to get going. See you then, Ammi.' Rabia stepped out as Tasneem said the usual prayers and kissed her daughter goodbye.

Rabia boarded the bus and luckily got a seat. Settled, she peeked into her purse, curious about the blinking light on her phone. Her account had been credited. She breathed deeply in relief and started making mental notes about her finances.

Life had never been easy for Rabia. At four, she had lost her father in sectarian violence. They were Shias and saw such deaths as martyrdom. Tasneem was still a young woman – in her early thirties. The community leaders told her it was an honour to have a martyr as her husband. That

she should remain resilient to face the grief head-on. Little did they know that honour and grief did not feed hungry mouths.

Turning twenty-three in a while, Rabia now recalled her mother's struggle those days. Giving tuitions to young children was not enough; she had started sending lunch boxes to offices. Back from school, she often saw their relatives gathered up in their home, telling Tasneem to end her lone battle by marrying again.

'We know you gave tuitions even when he was alive; he let you because you were stubborn,' Imtiaz, her cousin Parveen's husband, said. 'Look at yourself, you are still beautiful. I am sure there are many men willing to take you in. Plus, you are such a wonderful cook, you can also woo, you know.' The man winked perversely.

Tasneem was silent for a few moments, to collect her thoughts. She smiled curtly at the couple sitting before her, picking up the tray of assorted cutlets.

'It has been a year since he died in the gang attack.' Tasneem turned to her brother-in-law. 'I loved him; I did not marry him for wealth. For me, my love is more precious than money and comfort. They are not linked. I still miss him. I mourn him every day. And if you ask me, I still love Raza a lot. I don't think a woman marries for just money and comfort. I will not marry a man unless I love to look at him, unless I can think of him before I fall asleep.' Tasneem looked sharply at Imtiaz, then pressed her knees together and folded her hands on her lap. 'I know what upsets you, Bhai Sahab – that I meet all those men who order lunches from me? That I am doing business on my own? You would be lazing in your bed if my customers were school kids. The thought that I am stepping out of the house, dealing with men on equal terms, telling the world of my skill is bothering you. You have rushed here to tie me down to another marriage.' She looked away from Parveen and Imtiaz.

The two sat uneasily in the stuffy room. It was a new Tasneem they were discovering – firm, determined, very much her own woman.

She turned to them again. 'You wanted me to stay home, complete my Iddat instead of taking part in the protests and let men in the family handle such issues. I am all that Rabia has, her only security. I want her to be an independent woman. I can woo – you said. Well, let me tell you, some of my customers are bank executives drawing big salaries. My man is lying in the grave; there was no one before him in my life and there won't be another after him.'

Lost in thought, Rabia did not notice that the conductor was yelling her stop. She hurriedly got up and started moving to the front door. Getting down, she saw a young man from a window seat blowing her a kiss. Quickly showing him the middle finger, a gesture she had learnt from a friend, Rabia walked away. Some of the passengers, who saw her rebuff, gasped.

Rabia entered the campus and bent down on one foot to take out her earphones from the red backpack. Plugging them in, she walked up to her department for the back-to-back classes.

THE CYCLONE SURVIVOR

Selina Hossain

A dark, pitch black night – something Halima is very familiar with. But in this moment, everything seems unfamiliar, alien.

The darkness feels human. It's like Halima's body. A time comes when, looking at your body, you see nothing but darkness. You seem like a stranger to yourself. Right now, Halima cannot open her eyes, see herself; she does not feel comfortable in her own skin. Still, she knows she is alive – her body pulsates; she feels her breath.

Seconds, minutes... hours go by. When Halima finally opens her eyes, she sees daylight flooding the room.

But that light does not touch Halima – her mind is drowning in darkness. The same darkness that had consumed her last night, devoured her whole. Halima remembers nothing else – nothing but that darkness.

The sound of water, the sight of a crumbling ceiling. Halima suddenly remembers – she once had a home. A home where she had a husband, a daughter – Moina, her little girl, only a year and a half old.

Where are they now?

Halima snaps out of her daze and sits up. It is dark again. She looks around. *This is not home; just a deserted house.* Halima is stuck under the collapsed ceiling.

For a moment, she feels that this might be her home, but it is not. It is unfamiliar. This village, too, is unfamiliar. She's never seen any of this in her life. She peeks out of the shambles of the broken roof and then pulls herself out of the debris.

A spell of dizziness makes her almost lose her footing. Another stretch of darkness – again. Her legs tremble, she feels thirsty.

After much struggle, Halima makes it to the veranda. An uprooted tree lies on the ground. She walks to it and sits on its trunk. Exhausted, she cannot walk any more; she keeps looking at the roots that now lie exposed.

The sight of the fallen tree is strange. Halima has never seen a tree break like this, not even in the wildest of storms.

Halima hides her face in her hands. She feels thirsty, her throat parched. Scared, terrified, she starts to cry – for how long, she does not know.

She looks for comfort in the branches lying on the ground – some kind of shelter, a little shade. The sun overhead is overwhelming. Halima takes refuge in the shade of the leaves. Even through the cool curtain of the tree branches, the sun beats down more harshly.

And yet, despite the sun's unrelenting glare, Halima is in darkness.

When evening settles, Halima tiptoes to the pond to drink some water. She stands on its edge, completely stunned – the water is dark black.

Curious, a few people around come forward. 'How come you're here, Moina's ma?' they ask.

Halima does not respond, she looks on, stupefied. She just cannot speak. Her thirst has vanished. Water is swirling inside her. All around, there is nothing but waves of water and layers of darkness.

‘Do you not recognize us?’ one of the men asks.

‘Who... who are you?’ Halima is still tentative.

‘Me, Sadar Ali... Dulal’s father.’

Halima shakes her head. ‘I have never seen you before.’ She turns away. Among these strangers, Halima feels uncomfortable – vulnerable. She hears someone say: ‘Tch... she has lost her mind.’

Another man steps forward. ‘Would you like some puffed rice?’

‘Okay,’ Halima says eagerly. The voices of the two men seem familiar. She now recognizes them. ‘How’re you, Bhaijan?’ She smiles widely. ‘Have you seen my husband? My daughter – my Moina?’

The men look away, not sure what to say. They exchange looks, and then, quietly, they undo the knot of a handloom towel to offer her the puffed rice. The puffs are no longer crisp. They put a handful in Halima’s lap. They all sit munching on the rice puffs.

As they eat, the sun goes down in the west – in a while, it will disappear over the horizon, plunging the world into darkness again. The three continue to eat in silence – sad, mournful. None of them had found their families washed away in the flash floods.

Even in the midst of their tragedy, the two men eye Halima greedily. Teary-eyed, her lips trembling, she mutters, ‘Moina... my Moina. Can you tell me where I will find her?’ She looks pleadingly at the men.

The men keep quiet. They absently look into the distance, unsure where to look. After a while, their gaze settles back on Halima’s face – her sad, despairing face. The hole in her sari over the forehead is showing. An inexplicable beauty lights up her sad face.

The rice puffs over, Halima looks at the two men gratefully.

‘I seem to have survived the cyclone this time around.’ She smiles mildly. ‘Since this massive cyclone has not taken me, who else can?’ she pauses, thinking about something. ‘How’s my man?’

‘Where do I look for him?’

Even now, no one speaks. Sadar Ali dusts his towel and puts it on his shoulder. Halima sits quietly, pulling the sari’s pallu over her forehead again and again. As if she does not know what else to do. Darkness engulfs her again.

‘Let’s make a move then,’ Sadar Ali says hesitantly.

Halima nods in agreement.

‘Where will you spend the night?’ he asks.

Halima quietly points to the collapsed house. Then she mutters, ‘Where will I find my husband?’

ANOTHER MAN

Arooha Hijazi

It was a day just like any other. She opened her eyes to wake up to the same chandelier that dangled from the ceiling. Such a delicate, expensive beauty! She smirked, as if mocking it. What use was such a lavishly beautiful thing when it just hung from the ceiling languidly, mostly overlooked, its presence ignored? Unless lit, its beauty is rarely noticed, let alone truly appreciated. But then, her smile faded. She, too, was mostly ignored and overlooked – like the chandelier.

Snapping out of her reverie, she sat upright and looked at the empty bed. Again. Another night he had not come home, another wretchedly long wait, hoping every moment that he would turn up. She could have rested her sore eyes on him... She got out of bed, put on her slippers and walked into the bathroom. The warm tiles felt good – she could just sit there on the floor all day. What else did she have to do anyway? Certainly, nobody would miss her anywhere. As it is, she had so many days to spare, so many days to just wilt away, diminish to the point of invisibility. She quickly undressed to get into the bath. The last bit of clothes shed, she looked at her body in the mirror. A sudden feeling of self-pity seized her. She despaired – for what? She didn't know. Sadness seeped into her mind as she dropped into the foetal position, her arms wrapped around her conch-shaped breasts. She wanted to feel safe again. A tear rolled down her cheek and landed on her chest, its warmth waking her up to the reality of the hour.

An hour later, she was standing in a bathrobe, staring at her wardrobe. All these dresses just hanging there – inertly, inexpressively. *Why dress up at all? For whom?* The same question that troubled her every day. *Shouldn't this day be different?*

'Today, I have to give all I have,' she muttered. She kept checking out dresses, one after the other and then another and another and another... nothing was good enough. Lost in her thoughts, she suddenly stumbled upon a black dress, a suggestively elegant fish-tail outfit with sequin detailing. The same dress she had worn to the wedding where he had proposed to her. Yes! This was the perfect one for this evening too. He would definitely be curious about her in this dress, a throwback to the time when things were warm and exciting, when she felt his breath hot on her face. He would finally see her – perhaps go back into the happy days they had soaked in together. Ah, those days – uncomplicated, pure, raw... every moment a celebration. How could those high tides turn into such morbid shallows? A cloying fullness breaking into unseemly bits. *Why do beautiful moments sour into callousness?* The question played in her mind for a while. This dress was a reminder of the good days – not many in numbers but intense, they did come back to trouble her. Why couldn't she hold onto them longer, forever?

Another three hours, and the sharply slender black dress lay on the bed. Around it was a pair of black Jimmy Choo heels, a delicate diamond necklace that would complement the dress just right and an elegant black, sequined bracelet.

Today, nothing could be less than perfect, nothing should be less than exact. Lost in her thoughts, she sat with her hand on the dress, almost grasping it, like grasping her share of happiness and love from life. Unknowingly, she tightened her grip, as if she was holding onto a buoy, a lifeline.

Yes, it's a critical situation. Everything she had given to this marriage was being snatched away – her youth, her passions, her entire existence. She had changed everything – her likes, dislikes – to adjust to his liking, his taste, to what he wanted her to be. She had become his idea, but truth be told, nothing was ever enough. So many years later, nothing of the marriage remained, except the formality of the relationship.

Ding-dong!

The sharp sound of the doorbell echoing in the hallway brought her back to reality. She quickly rushed down the stairs to see who it was. In that moment, she could be mistaken for a new bride, anxiously waiting for her man to return. The maid had already opened the door to a smartly dressed man. Still watching from the stairwell, she tried to recall the face. *Have I seen him before?* Perhaps not.

Lost in her thoughts, she missed out on what the maid was saying. The old woman cleared her throat. 'Ma'am, this gentleman is saying Sahib has sent him to make arrangements for a house party in the evening. He is from an event management company.'

'All right, tell him to wait in the living room.' She went back into her upstairs room.

A party? Tonight? She felt butterflies in her stomach – like a 16-year-old discovering that her crush liked her back. She gripped her soft belly. Was she happy, excited at the hint of the house coming alive with soft noises, tinkling of glasses and the aroma of rich food? Like bubbles floating around because the kingfisher in you wanted to fly over a blue lake. He had not, after all, forgotten their anniversary. She could not control her happiness. She quickly fastened her robe and walked down into the living room, still trying to contain her excitement.

'Yes? How can I help you?' she asked.

'Ma'am, I have been sent by Boss. He wants me to take charge of the party this evening. I've got the guest list, invitations sent out weeks ago. Some very important people will be here to celebrate your anniversary. My job is to make everything perfect. Now, I just need your permission to bring in my team and start with the decorations and food preparations. May I –'

'Why, yes certainly,' she said, without letting him finish. A talk-of-the-town party out of the blue! A bevy of celebrities, impeccably refined, would walk into the house to make the evening special for her. She at the centre of it all – praises floating around her like confetti. But soon, harsh reality confronted her, ending the brief spell of ecstasy. All of this – she knew in the heart of her hearts – was a build-up to his well-calculated move to win accolades for his accomplishments, to seek appreciation for his success. The guests tonight would eat, drink, banter, crack jokes but, most importantly, admire his trophies. He wanted these people to see his decorated life.

THE GHOST'S VOICE

Arooha Hijazi

It's going to be a big day for Sana. She feels excited. For the last time this semester, she is going to give a presentation in front of her professors. *I'm going to wear my best dress.* She makes a hunt for her purple top in the wardrobe.

Then, she takes a deep breath and looks in the mirror – ready for the day. *It's going to be okay. Yeah... absolutely.* She laughs, comforting herself. *Everything will be fine.* She takes one more look at her new top. Happy with her choice, her confidence coming back, Sana smiles.

Her dress on point, the makeup to her taste, she feels comfortable in her own skin. She is wearing an attitude and is unapologetic about it. She wants to catch people's attention, surprise everyone on campus, even though vanity does not come easily to her.

Picking the bag from the ground, she slings it over her shoulder and rushes out, closing the door behind her. Standing at the front door, her mother looks at Sana, her face beaming. She takes her in her arms and kisses her forehead. 'Sana, you're always in a hurry. Come, have your breakfast, then go. It's not good to skip breakfast.'

'No, Ammi, I am running late. I want to get there before time today. Also, have to wait for the bus for a while.' She hugs her mother.

'Oh, don't worry, your uncle should already be on his way here. He can drop you off on his way to work.'

'It's okay, Ammi. I'll just take the bus.'

Sana lets go of her mother. Her smile fades, as if all the energy in her body has just been drained out.

'No need, he'll drop you,' her mother says, ending the debate.

'Mom... ' Sana begins, but the gate opens, interrupting her.

Sana sees her uncle walk in.

'Hello, everyone! And oh my god! Look at you! My favourite niece is a real princess.' Sana smiles reluctantly, trying to not betray her discomfort. 'Mom, I am leaving. Getting late.' Her uncle holds her shoulders, then hugs her. 'Aww, my poor child, why do you want to take a crowded bus? I'll drop you.' He goes on to grab her from the side.

Reflexively, Sana pushes him away and rushes out the front door, slamming it behind her.

Her phone starts ringing as soon as she gets onto the freeway leading away from the neighbourhood street. It's her mom, probably wanting to talk some sense into her, telling her she was outright rude.

Her eyes water as she walks even faster. She wants to outrun her thoughts, her fear – escape her body if she can.

FALLING STARS

Neeru Iyer

From where I was sitting, I could clearly see right down the front, where it was written: ‘Standing – 25’.

I almost laughed out loud. Yes, in an ideal world. On the bus, I was lucky to have got a seat. There were definitely close to 50 people standing. Probably even more, if you could count the people hanging from the footboards at both the front and rear doors.

At that moment, I wasn’t even sure I was lucky that I was travelling seated. First of all, the person standing next was pressing into me, and there was practically no space to move about. Not that I needed much space to sit, but I began to feel increasingly claustrophobic, surrounded by human walls closing in on me from all sides.

Secondly, the old woman next to me seemed to be quite fond of chewing paan and spitting blood-red betel juice out the window. The first time she did that, I must have given her a look that told her how it repulsed me, for she just smiled, revealed all her stained, brown teeth, and said, ‘Don’t worry, the rain will wash it all away.’

It was raining – a steady downpour. No drama for dear Chennai. The city was surprised, caught in a pouring rain. I always thought that as soon as the first drop touched the scorched earth, traffic would just stop everywhere. Somehow, it never seemed like it was really raining, but all hell broke loose, and all the people on the road – drivers and pedestrians and tramps and hawkers – all alike, went mad.

The bus was inching ahead, one step after another. Obviously, the frustration was getting to all the people, because I could hear multiple tongue-clicks, people complaining on the phone, and the driver himself complaining on the phone. There was an assortment of smells hovering around inside the bus, trying to top the fresh smell of rain – food, leather, talcum powder, perfume, jasmine flowers, hair oil, fish...

There was a bit of a shuffle as the old man standing pressed to me finally tore himself apart from me. I heaved a sigh of relief, despite knowing that this relief would only be short-lived. A moment later, a young woman entered my peripheral vision. When I looked up at her face, I saw her shrinking away from everyone around her. She wasn’t looking up at anyone, and kept her eyes focused on her feet, on the floor of the bus. Suddenly, as if she knew I was studying her, she looked up at me and smiled apologetically. She would have been hardly twenty, give or take a couple of years. And she was heavily and unmistakably pregnant.

A pang of some strange emotion shot through me. I got up and gave her my seat.

She looked surprised at first. Then, she thanked me softly and sat down, her face showing obvious relief.

She was so young. Even though she had a tired, weary look about her, nothing could hide her youth and the clear, sharp lines of her face.

She probably thought I was going to get down at the next stop. But when the next stop came and went, and I was still standing next to her, she looked up at me and said, ‘Weren’t you going to get down?’

‘No, I need to get down only at the terminus,’ I replied. She looked at me with her wide, disbelieving eyes.

‘That’s really nice of you, you know,’ she said.

I shrugged it off with a smile.

‘I need to get down at the terminus as well,’ she said. ‘I’m new here.’ I nodded. I thought she might need help with some address, location, shortcuts – that kind of thing.

‘Oh my God,’ she whispered.

I closed my eyes for a second. I was used to this reaction from people when they saw me walk with a limp.

‘It’s no big deal,’ I said, becoming increasingly uncomfortable by the minute.

Her eyes were filled with tears. ‘You gave me your seat.’ I shook my head. Maybe it was her pregnancy, but the girl had gone through a lot of trouble in her life – that much was clear.

‘I’m not an invalid,’ I said, more amused than annoyed at her display of emotion.

She struggled a little to control her tears.

‘Do you need any help finding where to go?’ I asked, surreptitiously checking the time on my watch. I was late, and I knew my husband was at home, probably wondering what I was up to.

‘No,’ she said. Before I could say anything, though, she added quickly, ‘Could you please have coffee with me?’

We ended up walking to the nearest coffee shop.

‘I’m a psychology professor,’ I said and named the college I worked at.

‘I was studying psychology back home,’ she said, her face forlorn. Her name was Smriti, and she was just as young as I’d feared – nineteen.

‘Why did you drop out?’ I asked. ‘Because of your pregnancy?’

‘I had to,’ she said, a closed expression on her face. She clearly didn’t want to discuss it. I was okay with that; it wasn’t like she knew me well.

Somehow we’d hit it off, this girl and I. I had a strong feeling she needed someone she could trust. I wondered if she ever spoke to her husband as animatedly as she did to me. If she did, she probably wouldn’t need me.

I couldn’t help but steal glances at her tummy. It was high and rounded, and she had to keep shifting in her seat and fanning herself to feel more comfortable. But as restless as she seemed, she made me long to touch my own tummy.

THE MORNING RESOLUTION

Firyal Kauser Soomro

It was another one of those sleepless nights. Her mind was on fire. She tossed and turned without being able to sleep even for a minute. She closed her eyes tight, hoping that sleep would come. But something was scalding her within. And then – before she knew – the alarm went off. She vaguely remembered she had pressed the snooze button quite a few times before. The alarm clock would not listen to her anymore. It raised a storm inside the closed room. Reluctantly – her body pulling her down – she dragged herself out of bed to the call of another day’s battle.

I need money to survive, and for that, I have to go to work. She was dreading getting late for work again. She fussed about the missed breakfast, being pulled up by her boss. Another pay cut. Another day of feeling as if the whole world had turned against you.

I don't give a damn! She hurried out of the bathroom only to realize she hadn't ironed her clothes last night. Like a New Year's resolution, every week she had promised herself that on Sunday morning, she would iron her clothes for the next six days. But somehow, she ended up not doing that. Rummaging through the wardrobe for something not entirely crushed, she recovered a headscarf, a pair of trousers and a comfy shirt. How could you expect so many clothes to turn up as if they were ironed? Since weight was the last thing she was losing, she was badly out of clothes. Everything in the wardrobe was one or two sizes smaller. Her salary had lost the race to her weight long ago; the only thing she was losing was her patience. Wishing the office were closer home, she flopped into the back seat of the cab and was soon lost in thought.

There are many walks of shame in life – an overweight young woman moving past a neighbourhood to the brutal taunts and dismissive looks of strangers marked the highest form of embarrassment.

The second was walking into the boss's plush cabin to mark your attendance as he glared at you for being late.

She said a silent prayer: 'Oh, God, let him not be at his desk pleaaaaaasseeeee... shit.' *Don't look back! Look busy as if rushing back to attend to something urgent.*

Impeded by her heavy bulk, she still hastened towards the boss's office. 'NAAFFIAAAAAA...' The boss – screaming. Shit! Shit! 'See me in my office. Right now! And close the door.'

A perfect start to the day. The next two hours, she was lectured on her inefficiency and shortcomings.

'Send me a pic,' her mother whatsapped. Nafia groaned. It was already eleven, and she hadn't had breakfast. She was hungry and her system badly needed a kick that could come only from caffeine.

She walked over to the cubicle of her work neighbour Humaira – a 30-year-old, independent, single woman living on her own (how amazing, nah?). New in the organization but wise of the world, the petite woman was both cute and kind. She had already had her breakfast but still agreed to walk to the coffee dispenser with her. Ah, Humaira, one of the sweetest humans she had come across in life.

Conscious of her figure, the slender woman had never ever mentioned Nafia's girth, her bulging tiers. Nor had she even remotely suggested that Nafia lose weight. For Humaira, her friend was just another human being.

'I saw you going into the Boss's cabin. What did Monster Ali say? I mean, what's his problem!'

They intensely hated the man for his overassertive ways of enforcing discipline in the office. 'I'm just tired of him, he gets on my nerves.' Humaira's words had a ring of truth about them; this Ali Boss would not let even one minor incident go by without putting her down.

Busy with her work till lunch, Nafia had almost forgotten her mother's send-a-pic messages. Over lunch, she took her call.

'Send winning pictures, from the right profile. That way you look a lot slimmer,' her mother gushed. Nafia knew her mother's biggest worry was that she actually DID NOT LOOK SLIM. 'It's about a very good *rishta*,' she sounded ebullient. 'Remember, you must look slim!' her mother stressed.

Nafia hung up, suddenly feeling weary. A sinking feeling gripped her. Unknowingly, her mother was hurting her, denting her self-esteem. *No rishta is more important than my self-respect.* No one at home seemed to understand that.

Her mother, not always a housewife, had worked for years until she decided to retire recently. Her aunts and uncles, all informed progressive people, her cousins who had gone to the universities for their master's degrees. But their views converged on this point – for a good *rishta*, the girl must look slim. To drive this point home, they did not hesitate to body-shame her. As if her whole worth hinged on this single point. For a young woman, marriage was the destiny, and a suitable bride must look lean and slim.

It's like a vicious loop, one assumption leading to another.

Even some of her bright, brilliant friends, those who had won gold medals passing exams at the top of their classes, agreed. 'You need to settle down,' they said. 'It's high time you married a good guy – handsome, moneyed – and for that, you need to take a few steps as well. Why don't you join a gym?' Among such counsellors were friends who had gotten husbands of their choice, and those who had made it a point that they wouldn't marry unless the men were taking home a six-figure salary.

'You're almost 30! At this point, you need to compromise a little and, of course, shape up.' COMPROMISE! How many layers of meaning had been packed into this simple three-syllable word! What intrigued her was why no one thought she was settled enough. With an MBA degree and reputation for efficiency at work, she was independent, paid her own bills, had financed purchases, even a trip to Europe. What more did she have to do to look settled-down? In fact, had she not been distracted by such advices, perhaps she could have gone up further in her profession – and faster. She had thought of enrolling for a PhD programme at a university. But her friends and family only seemed to stress that she needed to groom herself to carry a higher premium in the marriage market.

THE DATE

Sabyn Javeri

If you had peeked in through the dusty, grey windows only a few minutes earlier, you would have seen a middle-aged man and a young woman struggling with each other. You would perhaps think that the man was trying to subdue the girl. But you'd be wrong.

He wasn't particularly forceful and she not really shy. The aggressor was not towering over the frail woman to unleash his hunger in a one-sided affair. What was on view was actually in keeping with what tradition demanded. A girl should not give herself away too easily, nor must a man appear wimpy. It was in the fitness of things that she should resist – not give in too easily.

So, they went back and forth, tussling and tossing, aggressing and fending off, each knowing in their heart of hearts that this was only a warmup before the big match. Like any other transaction, sex outside of marriage, in this part of the world, has certain rules that must be followed.

But now, the two bodies lay still in this shady Karachi flat. One pale as ivory, the other like melting dark chocolate, both breathing heavily. Every now and then, a sound from the streets punctuated the silence – the roar of a motorcycle or the sound of a rickshaw spluttering along the lane outside. But nothing was enough to stir the inert bodies. The man and the woman were both lost in their own thoughts, reflecting on the terms of the transaction.

The transaction, or 'the date' as the girl liked to think of it, had all begun with one question. A question that, in hindsight, seemed more like an assumption, for it really could only be answered with an affirmative. If you were to ask her how the question came about, she would have blamed it all on a scarf.

You see, she had joined the man's office only a few months ago. One day, he called her into his glass cabin. She knew she had been punctual and hardworking and had no reason to fear. Yet, she felt a rising panic in her throat as she pushed open the glass door.

Smoothing her dupatta over her head and holding it close to her skin, she stood waiting at the door. When he pretended not to see her, she cleared her throat audibly. 'Sir?' she asked with some trepidation in her voice.

The man leaned back in his chair. The creaking of the faux leather under his bulk reminded her of a series of small farts.

'Come in, please.'

She was surprised to hear his voice, which was strangely seductive and husky, unlike his exterior, which she found repulsive.

'The manager was saying your mother is unwell?'

'Sir...' she began but lost her words to a wave of embarrassment. She felt herself blushing, for the *sick* mother had only been an excuse to leave early the past few days.

Perhaps he mistook her silence for grief. Or – and this was quite possible – he knew her kind only too well. For whatever reason, he asked her if she would like an advance on her salary.

When the girl finally left his glass cubicle, she felt a sense of immense relief and just a little spark of excitement.

In the following days, he called her in many times, mostly to ask about her mother and then about her own life. Was she married, where did she live, did she like working here...? The girl was only too happy to be in his air-conditioned office, away from the harsh glare of the computer screen and the oppressive heat of the overhead fan.

And then one day, he asked her if she would like to meet him outside of work.

Before she could respond, as if to answer his own question, the man pushed across his expansive chipboard and laminated desk a small square box wrapped in shiny silver paper and adorned in an elaborate bow. He did not look at her. And she did not look away from the present. There were very few occasions in her life when she had received gifts, and this overly shiny, glitzy box appealed to her. Without accepting it outright, she began a guessing game in her head.

A perfume, some chocolate, jewellery?

The man leaned back in his chair, finally glancing up at her as if trying to gauge her reaction. He seemed confident that she would accept his proposition, given her non-designer cotton salwar kameez and the white chiffon dupatta wound loosely around her hennaed hair and unevenly bleached skin – from some local fairness cream he was sure.

There had been one or two young women in the past, of the same class and background, who had chosen to take the moral high ground. One of them even had a similar name... He recalled now how most of the receptionists who had come to work for him had some innate inkling as to what was required, but there had been a few who had pretended not to understand him and left without notice.

The man narrowed his eyes, watching her appraise the present. *No, she was not the 'moral' kind.* There was something about the way this woman stared for a long time at the blank screen of her computer, stirring only when the phones rang. *A break-up, an unrequited love, trouble at home...* To him, she seemed to be in search of something that would fulfil her emptiness, heal the ruptures inside her. And he was there to help her.

He sat up suddenly, and she stepped back instinctively. Gingerly, he placed his hand next to the shiny silver square. Her gaze moved away from the box and travelled all the way from the hair covering the back of his hand to the gold of the watch peeking out from beneath his stiff white cuffs, up the length of his short arm, narrow shoulders, thick neck and to the round, almost football-like head that sat awkwardly on his shoulders.

He smiled crookedly.

She looked away, a dizzying wave overcoming her. What surprised her was not a feeling of guilt but the lack of it. Why wasn't she revolted? Where was the disgust? Instead, she felt a prick of excitement, as if she was about to embark on a thrilling adventure.

He lifted the lid of the box and pulled out a beautiful silk scarf.

'For you,' he smiled indulgently.