

A SERENADE OF THE SEDULOUS

UPOMA AZIZ

She was named Karina, but not after the popular Indian actress. She would come to know about her namesake and be compared to her constantly - which would at first evoke pride in her, and eventually a guised dismay of being aeons away in every aspect from the perfection portrayed on the silver screen.

Her name was the amalgamation of the names of her parents - Karimul and Rubina. The name of the child was kept even after Rubina bled to death within hours of the arrival of her daughter, due to childbirth-related complications. Her child was torn away from her womb and the process damaged some of her vital organs as well. Rubina passed away quietly leaving her daughter and the last half of her name as the only bequests of her brief, insignificant life. Her mother Morsheda was never the same again. It was the second child she lost.

I was there when Rubina got married. The ceremony was held in the shabby structures made of tin and wood hoisted in a piece of borrowed land where the members, ex-members and half-members of their family elbowed each other to make enough room to dance to the song being blasted from a rusty, rented speaker. Rubina was beaming as Monalisa, our neighbour, did her makeup. She was barely recognisable, which wasn't a bad thing. Maybe her life too would change, she thought; for better, and for worse. And it did, briefly. After the ceremony, she moved away to a city an hour's drive from her home.

For the first few years of her life, Karina lived with her father, who had remarried shortly after her mother's demise. Karina would oscillate between her mother's home and her father's. Her grandmother Morsheda worked at five or six households, including ours. She coddled the child, a reincarnation of her lost daughter. When she worked, Karina would frequently be seen loitering around, shrilly screaming, "Nani! Nani! Nani!"

Little Karina came by our house, and mum let her sleep on our sofa, and always pushed a ten taka note into her hand. Trying to befriend her, I would turn on the TV and find a channel with cartoons. I would initiate small talk, but get bored a while later, and then retire to my own room.

Years later, old age and sorrow would hit Morsheda one after one; sometimes like a tsunami, a hurricane at other times. The fragile woman would curb into an even smaller frame, and Karina would be her barricade. She would mother her grandmother back with a love fiercer than she had ever received.

Mum told me over the phone that she had to find a different domestic help because the people who originally owned the land asked Morsheda and her family to leave.

"Where are they living now?" I asked mum. She told me that they had moved to their native city.

"Did they cry?" I asked. Of course they did, it was a stupid question to ask, they had lived there for over a decade. I never thought I would see any of them again, but of course nothing in my life goes according to plan.

It had been raining since four in the morning and was a drab, dreary day. Dreading that I would definitely find no transportation, I began listing excuses but decided to give it one last try anyway.

A few stray dogs swam across the road. I sighed. I hoped for a miracle and made a few promises in my head I had no intention of keeping. But then a bright yellow minibus showed up, and I reconsidered my stance. The bus was surprisingly clean. I felt bad for dragging the mud from my shoe inside, and sat on the seat next to the door.

After I had settled in, I looked around and realised it was a female-only bus, probably a new entry in this route, which explained the cleanliness. The driver was a young girl, and beside her an elderly woman sat quietly, her limbs folded in.

"Zubeida aunty?" I asked, shell shocked. The woman stared blankly and shook her head no. "Oops," I muttered and tried not to look embarrassed, but the woman looked familiar, so familiar-

"Morsheda aunty?" I asked again, hoping I didn't misplace the name this time, the woman looked curious this time, and then the driver turned to look at me. She didn't look familiar at all, and I stared blankly even after she exclaimed, "Tara aunty?"

I nodded unsurely, then she smiled at me, "Aunty! I'm Karina!" It took me a while more to adjust my brain to find out who that was supposed to be.

"So how long have you been here?" I ask after exchanging a few meaningless pleasantries. "Oh, it has been a while. I worked in a garments' factory, but that

hampered my studies."

She then told me that she had enrolled herself in a polytechnic institute, and was trying to get a degree. She moved back here with her grandmother a few years after they left town, and her grandmother didn't want to keep her unattended, so Morsheda sat there while she drove.

"You know," I said, opening my backpack "Maybe I will work from here today, listen to your story and write something on it."

Karina told me that her grandmother saved up to buy a piece of land, but it was in the name of her husband who willed it to his children from his first marriage, and that was when they moved. There was some trouble with the thugs where they lived, who demanded money and would harass people.

"That's when I took up self defense lessons," her eyes shone brighter. I thought of how I still half run the dark part of the alley to my home if I'm running late. She then told me how she started supplying paper packets to shops from her school days, then the multiple times they had to change places.

"Aren't you ever scared?" I ask her. "Who isn't?" she laughs "But I can't really afford hiding away in fear."

Karina waved at a passenger getting off the bus. I tucked my pen and paper inside and watched the rain slow down to a weak drizzle.

Upoma Aziz is a slouching-crouching-grouching time bomb now, and she goes off without any detonator whatsoever. Poke her at your own risk at www.fb.com/upoma.aziz



ILLUSTRATION: RIDWAN NOOR NAFIS

Season of the Black Leopard



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

In this village bordered by a sprawling tea plantation, many say that they have seen the leopard. Mostly during the night, when the moon hangs so low you can pluck it right off the darkness and eat it like some fruit.

Black. Glossy in the moonlight. Its white whiskers asserting an implicit, involuntary dominance. Its supple body effortlessly sliding up and down the teak trees that are abundant here. A shadow - a dark emissary of the night - drifting among the plant kingdom like a fugitive.

Those who have not seen the leopard, wish to believe that it is a false imagination - one that has consolidated itself in the leopard watchers' consciousness like an unbreakable stone. They wish to believe that it must have been a civet. Or a marbled fishing cat. Or simply a black cat.

But the clawed scratches that clothe the teak trees' trunks, and the pugmarks that dot the sandy riverbank, the earth of the banana, jack-fruit, bitter melon plantations imply otherwise.

It is a matter of surprise that the leopard hasn't harmed anyone until now. The British rule came with its loud boots and left. Then a Partition made the earth wet with blood. Then a war. A new flag stirred the air. Not a single leopard attack.

Whenever Mohsin gets the chance, he tells everyone in the village how he stumbled across the leopard on several occasions during the war ten years ago. He was 20, and a fighter. If he didn't have a rifle slung over his shoulder or if he were completely alone during the encounter, he would probably faint or wet his pants, he says jokingly. The leopard's lithe movement came with no warning - no leaf rustled, no hooleck gibbon screeched, no wind blew over him and told him to run. So in that regard, he and the fighters of his crew had to remain careful when hiding from the marauding alien-tongued, olive-headed enemy in the vegetation, the thickets, around the fig, the peepal, the banyan, the teaks.

It was a cold, rain-bloated July night. Mohsin was installing a landmine, a few meters away from the enemy's camp in the forest. After finishing the task, as he took to his heels, he fell in a cave and was knocked unconscious. He woke up after an hour or so, his vision battered by the mad rainfall. Crawling his way out of the cave, he spotted the green eyes. His first encounter. Disbelief seeped into every nerve of his being. Was he hallucinating? Or was it actually a black leopard, an animal he had never seen? He kept staring at its hypnotic, electric green gaze. Until a gunshot from the camp or perhaps the main road rang in the air and reverberated through the forest, and they parted their ways.

Hamid, who was eighteen when he worked for the alien-tongued man who lived in a bungalow in the tea estate at the village's periphery during the war, is also one of the fortunate ones who have seen the leopard. Before the war, during the war, and after the war, when a new country was born with its new flag, when its people could speak their own language, dance at their own festivals. He remembers how the moon was a yellow boat in an aerial, inky, cloud-tinted river when he aided the fighters in getting inside the estate and blowing up the bungalow. He remembers how the black leopard's face was awash in gold when the bungalow was held captive by the long fingers of flame.

Just a few days ago, Asma spotted the leopard lingering around her chicken coop at night until she shooed it away with a siren scream. Krishna, the milkman, also spotted it prancing around the paddy field, in the fiery glow of his hurricane-lamp. Hasnat, the imam, saw it gracefully climbing up the banyan tree across the mosque, as he readied himself for the Fajr azaan. Khokan and his friends, after they finished killing a monitor lizard for some reason, saw it walking over the snaking rail tracks, holding a brown deer in its maw while the sun slowly disappeared, dusk crept in, and bats, crows, and kites headed home in loud mobs.

It takes the leopard five minutes to die. Five minutes. Its soul smokes out of its body. Snaking its way towards the

heat-wounded sky against the seething sun. The leopard that felt the tremor of invaders in its bones when the country was under siege. The leopard that felt the boom of victory beneath its paws when liberation came. The leopard, the silent observer, the audience from the forest, the shadow with green eyes, white whiskers, a sleek body, a long tail.

They catch the leopard as it rests on one of the spaghetti branches of the banyan across the mosque. It is charged with the disappearance of three chickens from Osman the chicken vendor's compound. It is possible that monitor lizards did it. Or the marbled cats. Or the civets. But they charge the leopard because they, without any effort, find it resting on the banyan's branch, under which a few feathers remain unattended. It is a rare occasion - the leopard's effortless sight when the sun is out of the sea and up in the sky.

Only the squirrels, the rats, and the gibbons and other

primates who were present at the crime scene know that it was a small legion of civets that took the chickens. That the charge placed on the leopard was pure fiction.

The next day, the leopard-free village wakes from a slumber and perceives the crazy irony of leopard-free-ness. There are paws poking out of the coppery earth, the jack-fruit, the pumpkins. The paddy fields are overrun by long whiskers that almost look like kashphool. So are the snaking rail tracks. Writhing black, long tails wound the banana plantations and the bitter melon plantations. They also dangle from the winding branches of the figs, the banyans, the peepals, and the bodhi tree at the center of the big field.

The village groans. The leopard laughs from up above.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a freshman studying International Relations.