



January, Elmhurst, New York

As the wind rustled up the lifeless bits of paper on the pavement, a solitary figure emerged from the hospital building. The stubby height and the unflattering curves gave away to the fact that it was a girl. As the wind picked up pace, the girl zipped up her hoody and stuffed her balled up hands into the front pockets. Unwilling to take out her now luke-warm hands to pull up her hood, she left her long straight hair dancing in tangles behind her, not caring. Straightening up she headed for the subway, a block away. As she took brisk steps, she looked around alert for danger. It was late at night. Halfway through she started to relax only to be swamped up by worries about the woman she had just left at the hospital. What was she doing? Were the nurses giving her the insulin on time? Was she able to eat the inedible hospital food? The distressing questions swarmed her mind like a frenzy of bees. She was at the foot of the subway stairs. Climbing up she headed for the Seven Train. Getting on she looked around. It was nearly deserted. Sitting down at the corner window seat she stared out counting the stops as they went by. It was the same routine: take the Seven to Queensboro Plaza; switch tracks; take the N to Thirty-Sixth Avenue. Out of habit she chanted the rounds till she was safely aboard the N. Finding herself a two-seater bench she sat down and stretched her legs and looked out the window as the city lights swished by. Her eyes roamed around the compartment taking in the beefy Mexican guy dozing, the crippled old man counting his day's earnings and an assortment of commuters who made up what the Big Apple was all about. So this was what freedom and independence was all about. A crooked grin touched her mouth the moment the thought occurred. So much for that. She missed home and all its bindings. Finally the train stopped at Thirty-Six and she got down and quickly walked the half block to the apartment dreading the encounter with its occupants. She was in no mood for an interrogation. The click-clack of the locks announced her arrival. The two inhabitants of the apartment were slouched on the sofa watching back to back episodes of *Six Feet Under*. Giving her a cursory glance they asked her to sit and watch to which she declined. Preparing herself a bowl of fruit loops and carrying the phone she went to the spic-and-span room she was occupying and dialed the number she now knew by heart. It rang. Once, twice, thrice... Click...

"Maa...."

April, Manhattan, New York

The black hoody flippantly tossed on the chair back, the girl poured over a MTA map desperately trying to hark out a map. It was a nearly futile effort given that it was a subway map that showed very few landmarks. Taking a break she bit into her muffin while observing the other customers of Au Bon Pain. The New York traffic rushed by outside. Finishing her makeshift breakfast she gave herself a thumbs up. Waiting in the biting cold since 5am had been worth it. Her passport had been stamped. Now she had the whole morning to herself. She got up and left the café, map in hand. After walking for two blocks she entered the subway and got on the One. A couple of stations later she got down and turned around the corner and entered the institute. Walking up to Admissions she asked about her application and then left when she discovered that the Fashion Museum was closed. Once again she boarded

the train and switched to the blue line after a couple of stops. Finally she got down at the Avenue and entered best Buy knowing very well that she didn't have enough money. After a brief round she stepped out and entered the adjoining Barnes and Nobles and bought herself two McNaught novels. Stepping out she counted the blocks to the Met and started walking. As the wind played hazard with her hair she thought to herself: freedom, independence. This was what she had always dreamed of. Aimless strolls through Manhattan, through this big city that she loved so dearly. Home was a faraway thought. At this moment the world was her oyster and home was just another streak on its shell. Eight blocks later she was informed that the Met was closed but that didn't matter to her. Central Park, the tall, age-old buildings and the traffic were sights enough for her to drink in, feeling thoroughly alive she headed back to the embassy...

April, Water Front, Toronto

The breeze from Lake Ontario played with her hair while she and her friend caught up on old times. They reminisced about home and parties and old friends. It was almost as if they were back home, sitting in her friends room, chatting away. But it wasn't. They were halfway across the world and then some. But they were glad to be back together again. After a while they walked to the tram line and boarded the tram deciding to ride it from one end to the other, similar to their aimless rides around town back in Dhaka. It was like old times but not quite the same. This wasn't home. At Spadina they got down and boarded the subway...

May, Grove Street, Oneonta

She felt like a fish out of water. As the music blared on people rubbed shoulders desperate for some space. Beer cups in hand, they spoke in drawling voices tinged with alcohol. Her companions were genuinely friendly but the beer was making them slur. She was only glad that one of them was a softball player and was sober. Luckily she would be driving. She turned to find herself face to face with that creepy guy from down the hall. Christopher, she thought. He pumped her hand and complimented her on her show. She tried her most humble smile and failed but thanked him nonetheless wondering what in God's name she was doing at this party. And Jinx was always telling her to go. Well now she had it on her list of experiences and she didn't like it one bit. She wasn't cut out for this. This wasn't her place and these weren't her people. She was meant to go on rickshaw rides, spend hours on the roof and while away her time with the people she had grown up with. She wasn't the booze-chugging, bar-going freshman that the rest of the people in the room were. Then why was she trying to fit in when obviously she wasn't the trying-to-fit-in type? She prayed to God that her companions would declare the party 'whack' and leave. She wanted to go back to her room. She wanted to go back home...

Dhaka, Bangladesh

By the time the plane touched down she was too wound to feel excited. Waiting for the luggage was a torture. Finally she was in her beloved car. The ten-minute drive through the empty streets of Dhaka seemed like hours to her. Finally she got down and took the elevator to the third floor. She rang the bell. The door opened. She smiled. "Maa..." She was home.

By Tahiat-e-Mahboob

## Death match

THIS sales man is really getting on my nerves. He has gone in the back room of the store to get the 'item' I wanted. It seems he has gone for ages. I wanted to yell at him and shout out some obscenities but I could not. This is a part of the town where everyone keeps a shotgun or a baseball bat with him. One or two bodies do not bother the police much. I am already living a bonus life after the awful car accident. I am not the trouble-monger tough guy anymore. Rather I am cursing him and his uncounted forefathers under my breath alone in the shabby counter.

"So...looking for ecstasy?" A familiar voice beside me interrupted my continuous muttering. I turned my head and instantly felt the shiver going down my spine to see the man. This cannot be true. The person looked exactly like me. In fact, the person was me.

"It's not even evening, Don't you think it's too early to look for it?" he continued as the sparkle in his eyes showed that he was enjoying my perplexity. "Anyway, follow me, we need to talk" he said in a commanding voice.

I followed him spellbound. It was me alright. He wore the same brand of jeans I wear and the same kind of T-shirt. "This is a dream" I said to myself. This just cannot be true. I followed him to a poorly lit alley. He started again "I know it is a bit hard for you to believe it, but I am you. More accurately I am a clone of you." Clone, impossible. Human cloning and the related research is banned in almost all countries and some little known companies claimed the feat without showing any substantial evidence just to hit the headlines.

"I know what you are thinking, I am the first successful outcome of a secret project, you won't believe who funds and runs it. It's done by our anti-clone government itself." He giggled. Then on a serious note he added, "I am the one, the first to be successful, because I got what it takes". Indeed he is the one, for he has all the arrogance and false self-belief I have.

Then he elaborated the story. After my near fatal road accident the doctors got all that they needed for their research when I was in a coma in the intensive care unit (ICU). It was almost six months ago. They researchers did a Herculean task to make a mature human being and to give my personality, memory etc which they

saved in digital format after scanning my brain. Now he shares my entire past which is not something to be proud of. We walked to the sewer drainage system.

"Did you really have to kill Lisa?" he asked me as if he was joking. He knows the answer. He knows everything. Lisa was my girlfriend. I loved her with my life. Hah! With my life. I taught her the art of striping cars. She was a good apprentice. May be too good. Soon she was surpassing me. She was becoming a more 'skilled' car stripper than me. It was my very own world where I was the best and I was not willing to share it with anyone else who even threatened to overshadow me. That's why she had to die. She just had to. I have no remorse or regret. "I don't want to talk about that", I replied.

"But you loved her and still love her, you got her photo in your wallet. Don't you?" he hit back. I did not say anything. I just moved to the rundown railing of the huge sewer drainage and bowed my head to see the dark bottom of it.

I jumped to my left side. It was not quick enough, though. His dagger missed my neck but struck my right shoulder. The six-inch blade of my dagger made no mistake. It went right into his belly and the body rolled over the railing into the drain like a slow motion scene in a movie. Those researchers are successful, no doubt. That doppelganger had the sense of supremacy and also the cunning to catch someone off guard, just like me. I broke into a hysterical laughter despite the pain in the right shoulder. I am swearing at the dead 'me', who did not need any parents to get the passport to this world.

The researchers could have killed me in the ICU of the hospital but they did not. Now I have become a test to pass for their creation to survive. Survival of the fittest (or the fitter?). This time I won. But they will not be sitting idle. They will send a second one. And I cannot say what will happen next time as I will face my match. I have to hone my expertise. Suddenly the world looks more attractive. I get Lisa's photo out of my wallet. Oh boy, isn't she cute, I love her so much! But I have no intention of joining her so soon. Lets see how far I can go with my bonus life.

By almosthero\_bd

## You've got to be kidding!

What do you mean that I have turned into a lazy, antisocial slob? You've got to be kidding. I am the most outgoing and efficient person that I know! But I was speaking to an empty line. My best friend had already slammed the phone down; a clear indication that she believed our conversation was over for the time being at least.

'Dumb Girl', I muttered to myself. Since when did devoting some time to oneself turn out to be a crime? I had planned this vacation to be simply perfect and I intended to let nothing come between me and my 'perfect' vacation, not even my best friend's squabbling. I decided to go back to sleep again; 'She'll come around' I decided. She always does.

An idle mind is a devil's workshop they say. Don't get me wrong. I am not idle and I am definitely not having devilish thoughts. Just because I have recently become close friends with the TV and junk food and awarded my bed the noble position of my 'best friend', doesn't automatically label me as a 'weird' person. Or did it? Slowly I sat up in my bed and took a look around my room. It was a mess. There were clothes everywhere. Pens, papers and loose stationery littered every available table in sight. I looked under the bed. At least fifty crisps packets and fifteen coke cans smiled back at me. It seemed the entire garbage of my room was enough to fill two large trucks.

Is this really 'me'? This couldn't be me...the flawless 'miss perfect'. That was how I usually was. It had to be organized! It was time I got to work, I decided.

In less than five days, I had my room back to almost normal. I spent an additional two days restoring it to its previous pristine condition. When I was finally satisfied and while I was still on a roll, I decided to put things right on the social level. The next minute I was on the telephone, apologizing to my best friend about what a jerk I was, and inviting her to spend the day. She came over in no time and almost underwent a heart attack after viewing



my room. 'What have you done?' she shrieked. 'You've made this place look like a hospital or a hotel or something! This isn't normal!'

'You've got to be kidding,' I countered hotly. 'I am the most normal teenager you can find!' Giving me one of her famous exasperated looks, she stalked out.

That night, having difficulty sleeping, I sat up on my bed and warily looked around. The floor was spotless. All my clothes were either neatly folded or else neatly hanged, lying in my closet. There were absolutely no pens, papers or any loose stationery littering any table surfaces. I looked under my bed. Empty space stared back at me. Two large trucks could dump their garbage in my room and I'd still be able to find a place to sleep!

Is this really 'me'? This couldn't be me...the unruffled 'ideal teen'. That was also how I usually was. It had to be messed up again! It was time I got to work, I decided.

(Dear readers, you get the point. I ended up spending my entire vacation decorating, redecorating and re-decorating my room. Not bad, but after my vacation was finally over, I decided that I definitely needed another one!)

By Jennifer Ashraf