

almost hideous under the sun

By Tawsif



THE day I got my O Level result, my father died. It was a car-crash not a heart attack. So I wasn't hanged for the C in English. My father, Tofayel Ahmad, was a one-man business-corporation. He did almost everything for a living, starting from petty contractorship to selling fire extinguishers in garment factories. He was pretty cheeky at what he did, though, and as a result, things used to go along pretty fine. We even had a car for ourselves, a 'dream machine' according to the sales-man, a second-hand Maruti Suzuki!

Now that I stared at the Dream Machine, its golden-metallic luster reduced to a mere heap of metals, its seat-covers stained in my father's blood, I wondered if it was worth the ninety thousand bucks.

'The lorry collided head-on,' said the lower-constable.

He didn't need to. I was already aware of the accident details, thanks to the traffic policeman who had brought father's dead body to the hospital. Later on, when Mom was fainting every now and then, and the relatives who had swarmed into our place to show condolence were done with the display of sorrow and were getting bored, I was the one to tell them the car-crash epic, over and over again. It wasn't something that I liked doing. But you've got to keep your guests entertained, right?

'He missed the traffic-light.' The lower-constable reminded.

Indeed, it was entirely my father's fault. It was the first Sunday of the month, and he was supposed to drop into the bazaar on his way home. When the traffic changed he was probably dreaming of the lobster he would buy. He sped ahead, and the lorry collided head-on. The good news was he didn't get to hear of his son's bad result. The bad news was, well he lost his life.

'He died on the spot.'

I took a good look at the constable for the first time, wondering if his brains were smaller than that of the G.W. Bush moron. I was in the backyard of the Ramna Police station, paying a rather solemn visit to the battered automobile that had borne witness to my father's demise. It had already been there for the last couple of months, and seemed pretty much at home with the other cars (equally dilapidated) scattered here and there. The morons at the stations had perhaps assumed that I'd mistake one of these cars for a Porsche, and try stealing it. So they'd sent this midget of a constable to keep an eye on me.

The lower-constable yawned, displaying a rather intricate array of brown teeth. I was tempted to name a few mouth fresheners, or perhaps buy him a packet or two, for the sake of sheer humanity, not to mention public-safety. But, I had to be at the Komolapur Railway Station by five o'clock, and hanging upside down in the Police lock-up wouldn't exactly serve my purpose.

'Enough for one day,' I announced.

The lower-constable showed me the way out.

The sun was rough on my skin once I hit the road. Then again, I looked like a thug anyway. I hadn't been shaving for the last couple of weeks, and if Dad were alive, I'd have been grounded by this time. It wasn't that he was strict or something. In fact, he was pretty lenient most of the times.

Back in the ninth grade, I had a rather huge crush on a school hottie. When the Valentine's Day came around, I bought her a mushy, but otherwise dumb card from the Hallmarks. Dad saw it on my desk. Instead of grounding me, he increased my pocket money from the next week.

It's just that he hated beards.

It was one thirty. The train would leave at five, which meant I had quite a few hours to kill. I could either go to the Chemistry class, or to Nadia's place. Since I was starving, and had only two takas in my wallet, Nadia seemed to be the better option.

Nadia opened the door and flinched. I told myself with quite a bit of optimism that it had nothing to do with me resembling a clueless zombie from *Resident Evil*. That she was simply annoyed because she had warned me again and again not to come to her place in the afternoon and I hadn't bothered as usual. Nothing personal. It's just that her mom went to the boutique in the afternoons, which left her all alone in a duplex apartment. Unshaven guys in rugged jeans weren't exactly encouraged to visit her in those two hours. She had gotten into trouble because of me in past. It seemed she'd have more.

Nadia was about to shut the door on my face, then remembered that I had lost a father only a couple of months ago. She shrugged and held it open for me to enter. One of the advantages of being an orphan, I mused.

'Long time no see, Rishan.' She smiled. 'I was almost worried.'

Almost worried, eh? And, that smile looked genuine as well. I wondered if she was going to hug me too, then decided I was push-

ing my luck.

'I was hitch-hiking.' I tried to smile like a pro.

'You look like you've stepped out of the sauna.' She observed. 'Stop flinching. I'll make you some lemonade.'

I watched as Nadia cat-walked her way out of the room.

Nadia took everyone by storm when she came to our school in ninth grade. Our hormone-dripping brains were desperate for a high school sweetheart, and she had the perfect timing. She smiled, giggled, and simpered, and, in a matter of weeks she had all the guys underneath her feet. (Whom was I kidding? I was there too. Only for a week, but that's barely an excuse.) She was almost irresistible in those days. If you were trying not to hit on her, it helped to be a girl. A straight one.

Nadia was taking longer than she was supposed to. I assumed she was making some junk to go with the lemonade. Either that, or she was painting her lips.

'Did I take too long?'

She did. But, it was worth it. She had a club sandwich wrapped up neatly in a tissue paper. And, her lips seemed pinker. Both looked delicious.

'How's Arif?' I asked, as she handed over the refreshments.

I couldn't have cared less. I just wanted to remind myself that I was talking to my best pal's girl friend, and just because I had lost my father in a car crash didn't necessarily mean that I had enough liberty to start seducing her.

'You're his best friend. Why do you ask me?'

'But aren't you the one who's dating him?'

'And, aren't you the one who said these things don't last more than a couple of months?'

'Did I? I didn't remember.'

'Hmm. You're trying to suggest that you people don't make out in Dhanmondi Lake anymore, eh?'

'Does that bother you?'

The way things went it seemed we'd be hurting questions at each other till the end of the civilization. But, I wasn't backing off.

'Is this a chicken sandwich?'

'Can you be any dumber?'

I rummaged through my wits for a smoother reply, but ended up clueless. Nadia gave up on me, and started studying her perfectly manicured fingernails. I started studying my sandwich. Dumb or not, I had something better to study. Better and more edible.

'It's weird, you know.' Nadia knew I wasn't

running away till I'd finished the sandwich, and she wasn't going to leave me alone. 'I always thought you'd be the one who was going to ask me out.'

Oh, yeah. If only you weren't so busy flirting with Naved, I thought wryly. Naved, Tushar, Sakib and all the other pretty boys who're still weeping over their lost love. Frankly, I never reckoned Arif had much of a chance with Nadia. I always thought it would end up like one of my older crashes. The one where I saw *Desperado*, fell head over heels for Salma Hayek, then realized after one week or so that she wasn't hot enough for me. As it turned out, Arif was one lucky moron.

'Arif is such a loser,' Nadia said as-a-matter-of-factly. 'I started dating him in the first place because I thought that he was nice. As it turned out, he's just another loser trying to act all smart.'

Isn't it always the same with puppy love? A guy and a girl meet. A few phone calls and Ferrero Rochers. And voila! They're in love.

A few months later the hormones ebb away, and the soul mate doesn't look cute anymore.

The lovebirds become wise all of a sudden, and come to realize what a blunder their so-called relationship had been. Soon, they get into a skirmish, and the girl becomes a bi**h, and the guy a loser.

'Someone should change cupid's diaper.' I mused.

Nadia didn't reply. We went quiet for the next few minutes, both composed in our own thoughts. Love, devotion, and broken relationships in her case. Sandwich and lemonades, in mine. I'd have made a lousy Judith McNaught hero.

'Where's Aunty?' Nadia broke the silence.

After Father's death we had to leave our rented apartment. We had spent the last two months at a relative's place.

'I'm not sure,' I shrugged 'She's supposed to visit some relatives. I'll see her in the railway station.'

Which reminded me that the train left at five, and if I was to walk all the way to Komolapur, I'd better get going.

I finished the lemonade in one big gulp, and got up.

'You're leaving?' She asked.

'I don't want to miss the train.'

'Hitch-hiking again?'

'I'm making up for the work out sessions.' I grinned.

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