

FICTION

The brown gown

SHARMEEN RAHMAN

I loved the Portsmouth Ancient Museum more than any museum in all of England. It is just awesome! The gothic interior and the collections were perfect and exactly my type! I simply loved the ancient Greek, ancient Egyptian and old royal English collection; but the old English collection was my most favorite! To make things better, the museum was in the neighborhood and I visited the museum again and again! Sometimes with my parents, sometimes with my younger brother Ralph and sometimes with my friends.

I would rush to the second floor and then straight to the old royal English section, where I could see silverware, ceramic crockery, royal garments and shoes, jewelry and guns.

As always, I ended up convincing Ralph to visit the museum with me one weekend.

It was a cloudy day and we walked. The breeze was slightly chilly and the sun didn't rise after the previous night's rain. So the day appeared gloomy to me and this was one of the excuses I used to be at the museum as it would cheer me up!

"I am tired of your museum trips, Rebecca. This is the last time I am coming!" Ralph said with a sulky face.

"Oh come on, Ralph, it's the weekend. Plus you have so much to learn in the museum," I insisted.

"Ya sure! For you the old British collection is everything in the world to learn!" Ralph said vehemently!

I didn't say anything further because I realized deep down inside that Ralph was right!

I ran to the second floor as soon as I reached the museum.

"Hey, Rebecca! Wait for me! Come on, man! At least for once let's visit another section first! Hey! Why did you me bring then?" I could hear Ralph shout behind.

But I was too excited to visit my favorite section again!

Every time I visited it, it felt like the first time.

I quickly finished climbing the stairs and crossed different aisles and corridors and then reached the British department; I started staring at everything as if I had never seen them before.

I walked around enjoying when my eyes suddenly caught something. A door half open with "restricted entry" written on it. I had always seen it closed.

I was just about to ignore it and walk on but something inside the door attracted me and I couldn't help proceeding towards the door!

Something brown and shiny! Like a fabric!

Very slowly, I opened the door fully and looked around. There were brown wooden racks all around the room with stones, silverware, clothes, shoes, small statues, etc. A huge brown table was in the center of the room with chairs all around it with lamps all around the table and files and papers scattered all over it. There were different objects inside plastic bags and there were small wooden boxes on the table too.

I glanced around and quickly understood that this was a staff area where they prepare new items that come to the museum before display. They also keep a record of them here too!

Then once again my eyes fell on what had brought me to this room! A brown gown! A long chocolate brown-color silk gown, a lady's dress

I stared at in wonder, admiring its beauty and craving to want one like that in my lifetime. I raised my hand to touch it; the fabric appeared too tempting to resist touching.

I slowly rubbed my hand on the top part of the gown. The silk felt soft, smooth and slithery but some kind of dampness gave sign that it was old! Which I was sure as it ended up in the museum and looked luxurious and gorgeous enough to belong to some past royal personality!

I didn't know how and why I felt like picking the dress and wearing it; just trying it on over my clothes.

My subconscious mind hesitated and tried to stop me, making me feel it would be wrong to do this.

However, my emotions took over and made me think that just putting it on for a few seconds was fine. Besides, these kinds of clothes were my life-

and healthier lady!

I looked around for a mirror but didn't see any.

I then looked at the laminated white paper on top of the glass box of the gown; it lay loose, perhaps to be fixed later for display. I curiously grabbed and wanted to read about the gown.

But before I could start, something started to happen! Something weird!!!!!! And the paper dropped from the hand and landed on my coat.

The gown began to get warm and then hot in a few seconds; smoke started to come out in no time!!!!!! And most strangely it started getting smaller!!!!

I tried to loosen it but as soon as I touched it I realized it wasn't actually getting smaller but tighter!!!!!! Tight enough to stick to my body!!!!!! And it shrank and shrank and stuck to my

Then the most horrific thing of my life happened. The dress started feeling like a blanket of blades! I could feel it scratching my skin. Then to my shock I felt like I felt long sharp cuts all over my body; which hurt enough to make me scream at the top of my lungs! I looked at my body, I could see thin streams of blood gushing from my both hands and legs, my neck and chest and soaking on to the dress! The cuts hurt like the most painful thing in my life.

I started giving up hope of being helped but what happened after that made me sure that I was going to die! The scorching devilish laugh of a woman came from somewhere!

I screamed and screamed so loud like never before!

Just then somebody burst into the room with a loud thud.

"Hey ...OH MY GOD! What on earth are you doing Rebecca?"

Ralph said in an astonished tone. I looked up at him, just when I felt the pain started fading away!!!! And the dress started to loosen up! And within seconds the dress was back to its normal shape and size, exactly how it was when I first wore it; but I could still see blood all over my body!

"What happened to you? What is all that blood in your body and what are you doing in this room?" Ralph questioned sounding angry but surprised.

"If I am not wrong, you wandered and entered this room curiously and somehow ended up getting hurt right?" He continued.

I stared at him blankly as I didn't know what to say, I was still shaking and breathing loudly because of what had just happened.

"What, Rebecca? Answer me! What are you wearing and why are you on the floor?" Ralph started again, this time yelling at me.

I slowly sat up, pulling the gown out of my legs.

"I cannot believe your interest and love for this section went to such extremes that you ended up here and started trying out museum clothes!" He started again, bending towards me to help me stand up.

"Now hurry up and let's get out of here before someone comes and we get into trouble!" he said, holding my hand and making me stand. He quickly removed his jacket and wrapped it around me to cover the bleeding, not noticing that my coat were on the floor.

I swiftly threw the dress on the side and grabbed my coat as Ralph pulled my hand and we ran out of the room.

We ran down the stairs as soon as possible, then across the lobby straight to the main gate.

As I left the museum and started walking on the street, I started feeling safe and relaxed. Ralph was walking in front of me without saying a word. I don't know if he was angry at me or what but I was surprised he didn't even ask if I was ok or should I go to a doctor. I was getting cold, so I took off Ralph's jacket and handed it to him.

I then patted and shoved dust away from my coat and was about to put it on when something fell down from it.

I looked down; it was a white shiny paper. I bent down and picked it up and continued walking. It was the laminated white paper from the museum that had the gown's history written on it for display.

Before thinking about what to do with it, the first thing that came to my mind instantly was to read it.

I kept on walking and started reading it. It belonged to Lady Annie, a member of one of the royal families in the 1600s. It was her favourite dress which she had got as a gift from someone unknown. But the gown was said to be cursed. Supposedly anyone who wears it dies as the previous owner's soul kills her and her soul kills the next owner and it goes on. Lady Annie died the same night she wore it for dinner in a party.

I stopped as I read the horrific fact about the brown gown.

"Hey Ralph, STOP! You know what? That gown I wore is supposed to be haunted! It is cursed! The soul of the previous should be killing me!" I said smiling as I didn't believe it completely.

"Guess I got lucky, huh?" I continued, still looking at the paper.

"NO YOU DIDN'T REBECCA! I AM STILL HERE AND I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" A lady's voice said!!!!!!!!!!!!

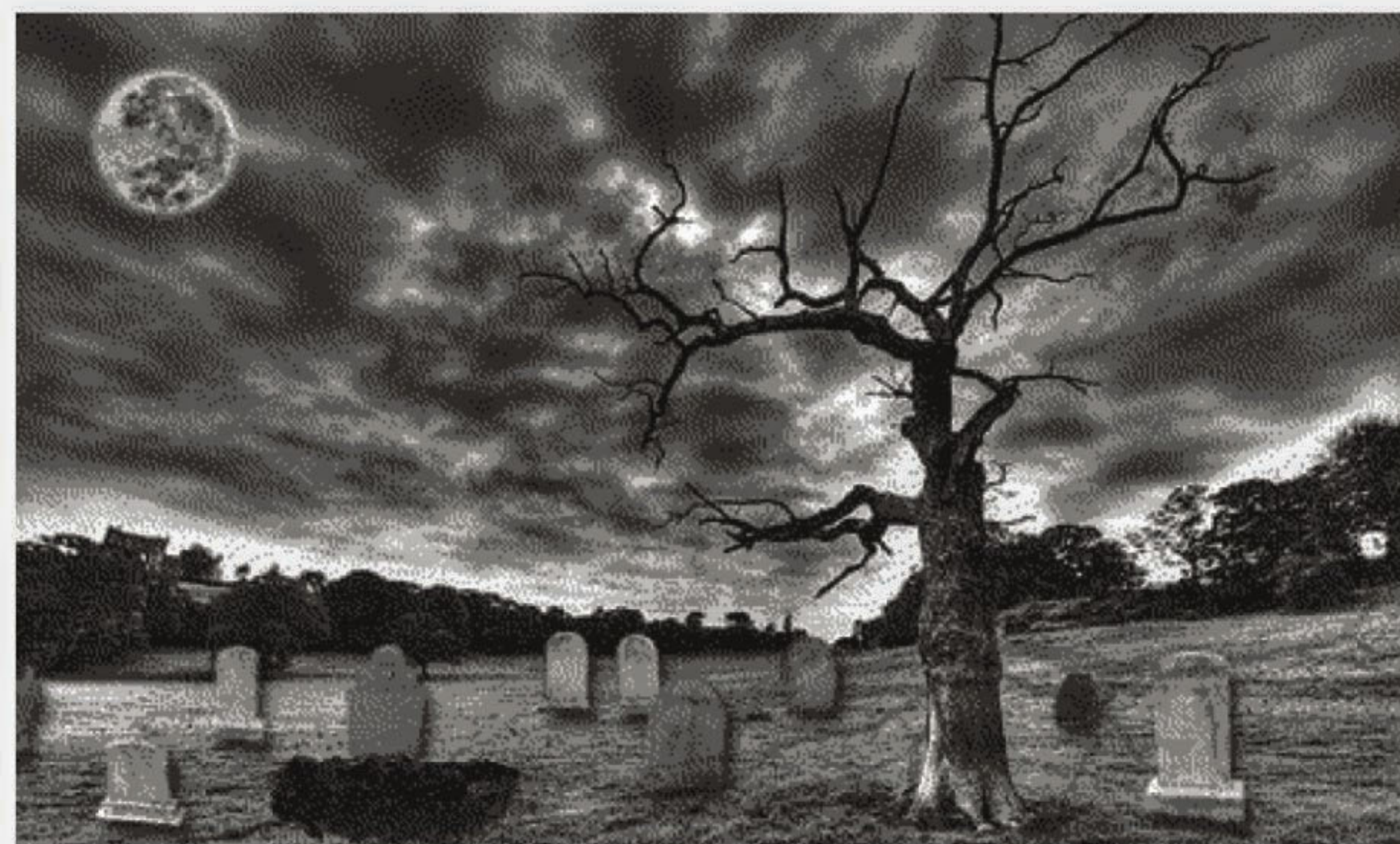
A chill ran down my spine and I looked up, Ralph was staring at me with an evil grin! I looked at him carefully as I unfortunately felt that the voice came from him.

And my fear came true!!!!!! Ralph's eye color had changed from blue to white! And he spoke again looking at me.

"YOU WORE THE BROWN GOWN SO YOU DIE!" Ralph said in the lady's voice again!!!!!!

My eyes bulged out in horror and I stepped back as he came close to my face! A ball of fear stuck on my throat and I closed my eyes as I realized Lady Annie's soul came inside Ralph and was going to kill me!!! Just then Ralph put his hands around my neck and started squeezing it...

SHARMEEN RAHMAN WRITES FICTION.



actually; full straight sleeves with brown lace frills on the wrists and bottom, straight sleek up to the waist, pearl buttons on the chest and a huge frill from the waist to the toe that appeared like a bloated skirt. It looked like a princess's dress.

It wasn't too gorgeous, though still attractive. It was simple but beautiful! Something unique and exclusive was in it that would make everyone look at it again! I didn't know what it was, if it was the glaze from the silk or the rare color. Whatever it was, I just fell in love with it, especially when I was always a crazy fan of these English royal dresses!

I quickly realized that it had newly arrived at the museum as I had never seen it before and it hung from a wooden stand placed on an open glass box. I could tell they were just preparing to display it!

time favourites!

Without hesitation, I made up my mind. I was going to try it! So, I just wanted to put it on for a few seconds and then remove it immediately!

I quickly opened the coat I had on and put it on the floor.

Then I slowly put my hand on the gown and held it with my hands. I felt faint out of nervousness, my hands went numb and cold sweat broke out on them. But I badly wanted to put on the gown. I quickly turned it around to see the opening, the opening was a zip on the back; I unzipped it in a split of a second and put the gown towards my leg and put my legs inside, like wearing a skirt. Then I pulled the gown from my legs to my body and put my hands behind to zip it!!!

It was loose and long enough to prove that it had belonged to a taller

body like scotch tape!!!!!! Horror crept all over me and my throat dried up in fear!

I tried to pull it away from different parts of my body, but it felt tighter and tighter! I got scared enough and I tried taking it off; but in vain! THERE WAS NO WAY OF EVEN LOOSENING A PINCH OF THE GOWN!!!!!! It felt as if it would get stuck to me forever!!!!!!

I panted loudly for air to breathe and cried to myself. Now it finally started squeezing my whole body! I couldn't breathe anymore!

I started shouting for help. The pain was so terrible and so unbearable that I kept shouting for help without fear of getting caught for sneaking into that restricted room. Within a few minutes I was rolling on the floor as a result of struggling to come out of the gown!

FICTION

Between dreams ...

TANZIN SULTANA

It is a cold night. He is shivering in the night as bomb blasts are heard in the distance. If he listened carefully he would swear he could hear the trickle of blood as it flowed down the expanse of the vast land they were fighting for. His breath ragged; with a mighty cry he raises his gun and fires upon enemies. In a haze of atrocious actions the enemy falls with a face devoid of emotions while a bittersweet feeling sweeps in him for fighting for a much bigger cause. But in a matter of heartbeats the scene is broken as he wakes up in bed sweating and panting. The moment is lost and he can no longer grasp the exhilarating feeling of moments before.

Is there shame in hiding? He asks himself in the safety of cocoons as he shuts his ears against the ongoing cries of war. Does it make him less of a man that he only holds his gun in a tangle of dreams caught between consciousness and slumber. Is his wife at fault for his not risking himself? He feels the weight of the world upon his shoulders and sometimes in the dead of night where there are no dreams at bay, he is a traitor in his eyes.

This time it is hot and sweltering. The paint on his face is dry and his hands and legs are ragged as he crawls upon the hard surface. The rifle on his back is heavy but it is a comforting weight. The sun is high and he glances around himself to look at his comrades. They are facing forward, concentrating hard on the landscape before them. He can sense emotions warring on their faces, threatening to break to the surface but cannot ascertain to what they exactly are. Is there fear? Pride? Resolution? Anticipation? He thinks so because they echo his own. He can still hear the call of war ringing in his ears. His stomach twists with a pleasant feeling, to fight for freedom. Freedom. It is worth lives. That is his last thought as dawn breaks and reality sets in.

He wonders what she thinks. His wife is tinkering in the room packing the last of their clothes. They will be leaving this village. He hears it is too dangerous to stay here. Sometimes he pretends he stays for her sake. He is after all protecting her. But is he really protecting her? He stops his thoughts from spiralling downwards. Because he knows, he knows all are feeble reasons cre-



ated in the invasion of his mind to excuse his inaction.

On the third time he dreams of his childhood. He and his best friend were stealing mangoes from the tree that belonged to the crazy old woman. She was not really

crazy. Well, at least he did not think so. She caught them while they were stealing from her and managed to grab his friend. He did not think and reacted on the spot. He had run away.

He stops with the excuses and

accepts he is a coward. He can fight but does not. So this time he blames God for making him weak. It is not his fault. It is never his fault. After all, if the Almighty made him stronger he wouldn't cower.

The war rages on. He wonders who will win. He and his wife have managed to evade enemies so far but he fears their luck will run out. His wife is crying and has been crying since they came across a mound of dead bodies. They seemed young and he wonders whether they were fighting in the war. Did they die happy knowing they had fought for something that was definitely worth fighting for? When he saw them he was rather glad that he was not among that pile of bodies. But now he wonders differently. Is he in a better place? A living coward instead of a dead hero? What if the war is lost and oppression continues. Would he live in servitude or wish he was dead? He prays that the war is won. It can be won without him; after all he was just one man. What can one man do? He ignores the fact that one man has already changed their lives.

It happens on an unremarkable day. He hears gunshots closely. Too close for comfort. He hears

shouts and cries and the pitiful sobs of frightened and broken women. His wife is wide-eyed, asking him silently about what they should do. He does not answer, he cannot. He is frozen in fear. He wants to run, wants to hide but he just sits and watches. He watches as the door is broken down and demons in the skin of men barge in. Watches as they grab his wife by her hair and drag her out of bed. She is screaming and pleading with them but they pay her no heed. He already knows the outcome. The bloody mess his wife would be in. Perhaps they would show mercy and just kill her.

He does nothing when a rifle is pointed at him. The demons are speaking but he cannot hear. It is just like his dream but this time there is no weapon in his hand. He will not die fighting. He does not beg for life. His smile is grim and twisted as he realizes that he is about to die but is not begging them to let him live. He looks them straight in the eye and shots are fired. This time he does not wake up.

TANZIN SULTANA IS WITH THE DAILY STAR.