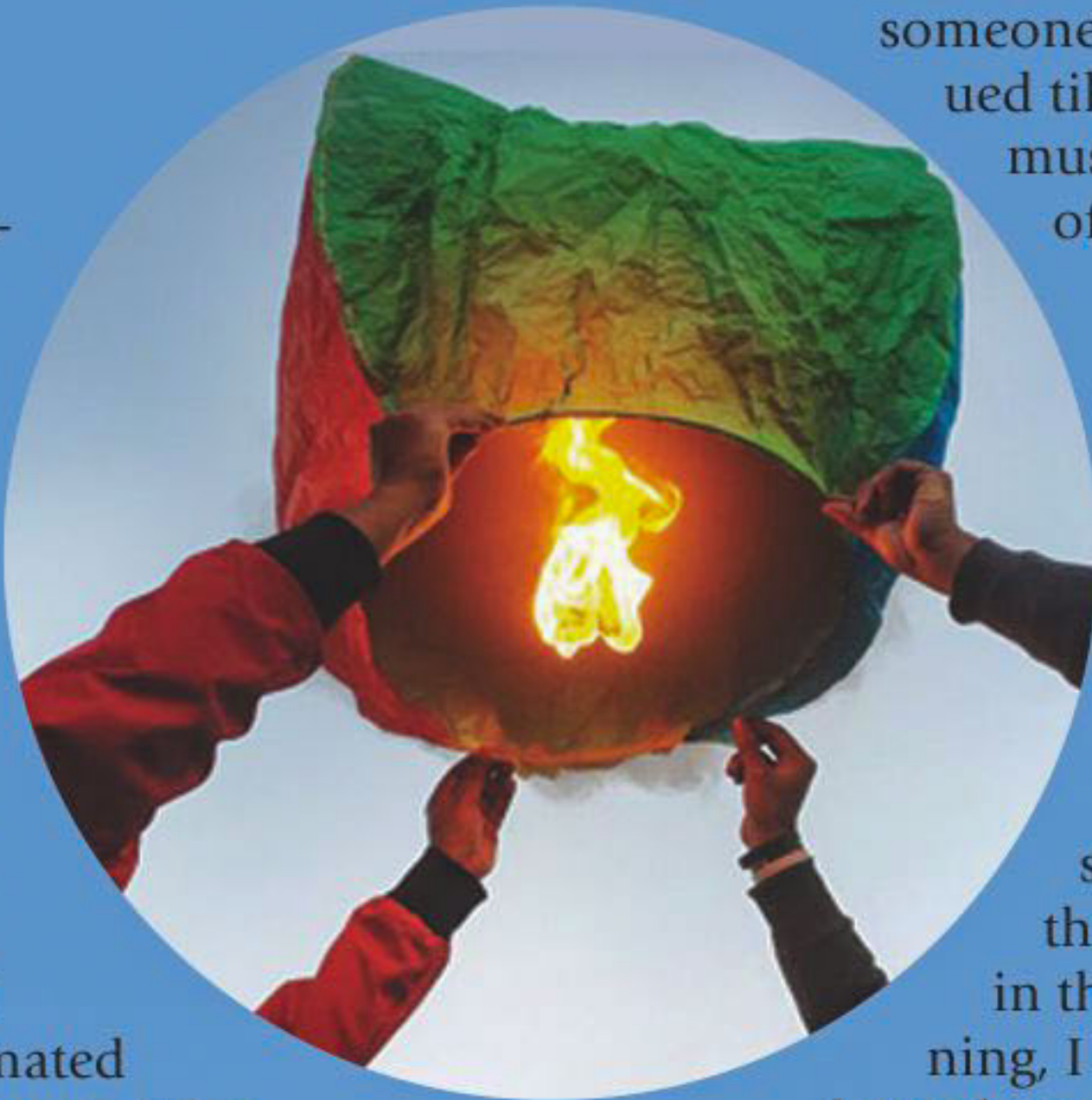


ENTRY 1: SHAKRAIN

ARMAN R. KHAN

Ever since I heard about Shakrain celebration, particularly the kite festival, in Old Dhaka, I've been meaning to go there. But try as I may, I missed the festival for the last two years. So I was adamant to attend Shakrain this year, celebrated on January 14. Although it is held in different parts of the Old Town, I went to Laxmibazar with a local friend. Upon arriving, I realised that I had underestimated the popularity of Shakrain; it wasn't just another festival, it was THE festival of the Old Town. My friend informed me that groups from every few buildings would raise a fund and organise a bash every year for Shakrain – Old Town style, with lights and sound systems.

And of course, kites. Hundreds and hundreds of them. You look heavenwards and instead of birds, all you see are kites of all shapes and colours. The kite flyers – ranging from school children to adults – weren't just flying kites for the heck of it; they were battling each other, trying to cut the strings of their rival's kites. I could see a flicker of joy in their eyes every time



someone succeeded. The intense battle continued till dusk amidst the blaring Bollywood music and the ever growing crowd on each of the rooftops.

As dusk fell, the next phase of the festivities began. Fire breathers started their act, spitting and spinning flames like there's no tomorrow. Soon the entire locality was filled with fire breathers showing off their techniques. Even in the chilly January evening, I broke into a sweat from the heated atmosphere. It wasn't just one or two people who put up a show, there were many. Had I not known better, I'd assume that breathing fire was an inherent skill of the Old Dhaka boys, or at least an initiation into manhood. Standing there, entertained, I wondered if I could ever summon enough courage to try something like this, and felt a pang of envy.

Amidst all that, I heard booms echoing; the fireworks had commenced. Now this is the one phase of the festival that people *really* look forward to. And why should they not? I've never before seen fireworks remotely similar to what I saw

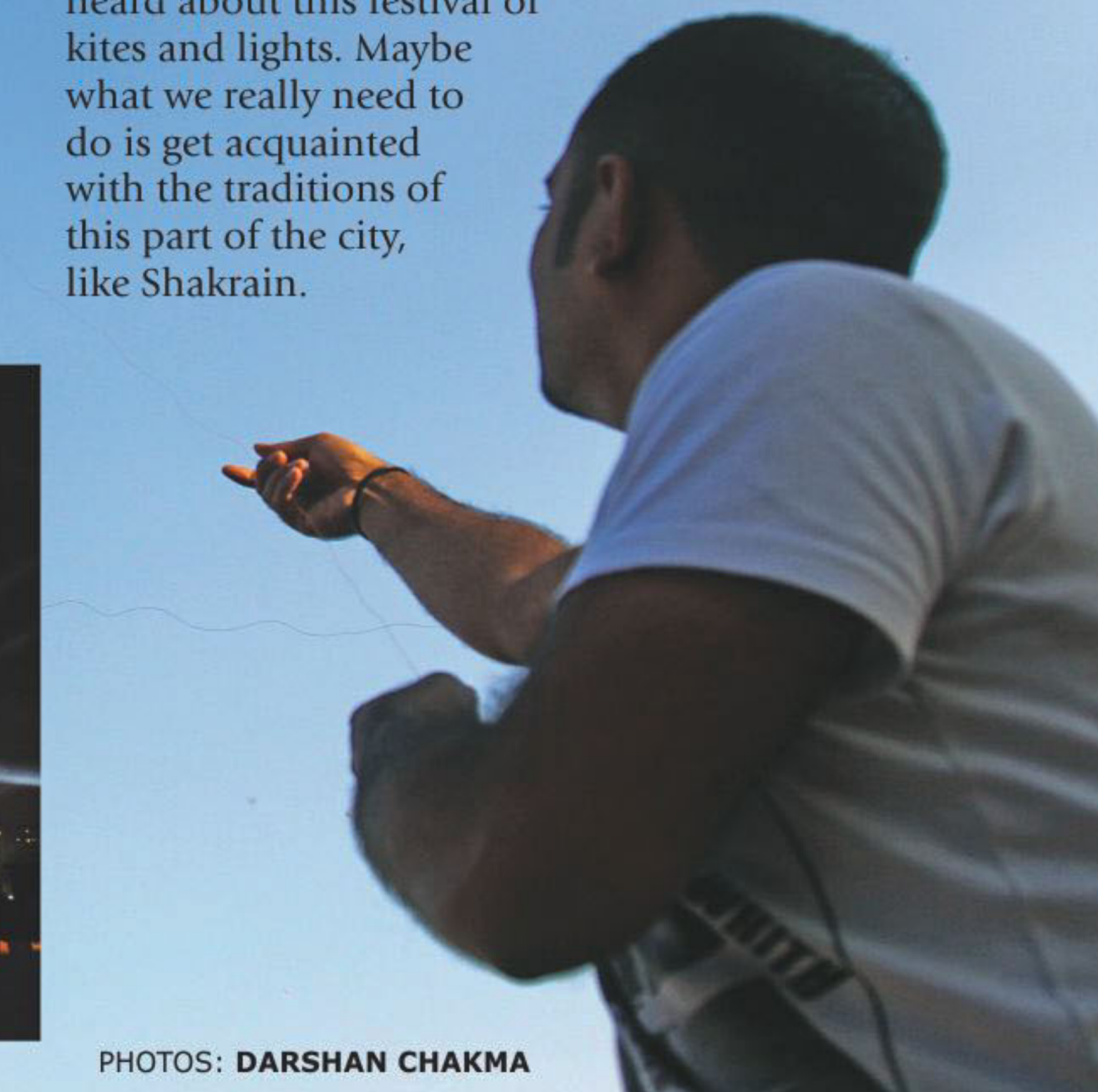
that evening. The sky was abuzz with blasts of colours and lights, and the air saturated with the mighty booms and the cheery applause of the spectators. I was so engulfed in it that I didn't notice when the countless *fanush* were set free into the night sky, incessantly gaining altitude, making their way through the fireworks. The scene was surrealistic.

The fireworks lasted for a good few hours. It was getting late, so I started the journey back home to this side of the town.

Before I left though, my friend Walid Piash from that neighbourhood, said, "It's funny. To us Puran Dhakaiyas, Shakrain is the ultimate festival. Yet most people from other parts of Dhaka have no idea about it." As I made my way back on a rickshaw, with more fireworks lighting the night sky above me, I thought about what he said. He was right; a good many of us have never heard about this festival of kites and lights. Maybe what we really need to do is get acquainted with the traditions of this part of the city, like Shakrain.



PHOTOS: DARSHAN CHAKMA



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