

ISHRAT JAHAN

"There are three things I won't do in life: smoke a cigarette, sleep with a stranger and get married to you."

He smirked. His kind of smirk, a cynic's smirk with an ingrained sense of reckless abandon.

"The last two are pretty much the same."

She lied there without a reply, allowing the distant blares of 2 AM parties to sweep away the teasing silence.

With eyes fixed on the stillness of the ceiling fan and lizards darting across cobwebbed corners, she memorised his presence.

Fingers that drew whimsical circles on her palm.

Breaths exhaled in exhaustion, smelling of mint and coffee. The drumming toes against her thighs, under the worn-out comforter. The heat of him, the smell of him, bringing back a handful of crisp April mornings and empty Dhaka streets. The rhythm of his breathing, ragged with asthma and corporate demands.

She knew all this, she had burned them into her mind. But she worries that one day he would be no more than an empty space in her world, a he-shaped hole that would take away her April mornings and imaginary circles. There is a constant foreboding of oblivion, a permanent end that storms in a corner of her head. Persistence and constant, like his drumming toes.

So she lay there, her nakedness covered by his heat and a shared comforter and she memorised.

Collecting years in hours, counting infinities in moments.

"Years haven't changed you," he said. His voice as light and dreamy as the circles he drew on her skin.

"Neither you. Except for that receding hairline," she spoke, masking the human ambiguity of heartache and happiness with humour.

He laughed, "You're beautiful."

She smiled, "I know, right."

He went back to drawing circles. She kept on gathering infinities.

INFINITIES.

THE HOUSE GUEST

ARMAN R. KHAN

The creature standing in front of Rishan did not have a specific shape. One moment it was round and blue, the next moment it resembled a purple pear like one of those "Dumb Ways to Die" characters. It wasn't a ghost. Honestly, Rishan didn't know what it was. Rishan had grown used to the thing in the last ten months or so. It no longer scared him or kept him awake at night, like it did initially.

Rishan remembered the very first time he encountered the creature. He was outside the door of his apartment in Kolabagan when he heard someone playing the miniature piano in his living room, if you could call it playing; more like randomly slamming on keys. Rishan thought it was a burglar or something. But then he unlocked the door, walked in and turned on the lights in a matter of

seconds, and saw it. It was maroon and wobbly that day with slanted, orange eyes. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't. The thing was scared too, it seemed. It just hopped away and hid behind the sofa.

The next morning, Rishan thought he had just dreamed it all up. But he hadn't; it was still there, hiding behind the curtains in the living room. No matter how much Rishan tried, the thing didn't leave. He phoned Afiyat and told her about the creature. Now, Afiyat was one of the most understanding people Rishan had ever known. They'd been friends for over a decade and in that time Afiyat always came up with solutions to Rishan's constant series of whining. *Do this, do that*, she would always say, and Rishan's troubles would all be gone. But even she laughed it off as Rishan's nightmare or something. "You're seeing ghosts now? Ha-ha!" she said. "It's high time you get

married, dost. I bet it's your loneliness messing with your head." And he knew right then that nobody would ever believe him, so he didn't risk confiding in anyone else. After all, he had his tough, corporate big-shot image to preserve.

But all those were just bittersweet memories now. He had accepted the fact that this being was not going to do him any harm. Besides, it never ate any of his food or messed up his apartment. It only was. On the bright side, Rishan thought it protected his apartment. He even named the thing Minion because it was sort of cute; not that he ever talked to it, let alone calling it Minion. Whenever Rishan was around, Minion remained silent, pretending not to exist. To this day, Rishan never discovered where Minion slept, if at all. On weekends when Rishan woke up late and read the paper, Minion would just bounce around in the living room, silently. And sometimes Rishan

sensed it sneaking up behind him when he was watching the telly. It seemed fascinated by the telly. But he would bump into Minion every once in a while, and it would run away to a corner; well, more like hop away than run. And it took extra precaution not to be seen whenever Rishan brought any company home.

Anyway, so it was standing in front of Rishan today; the first time it actually came up to him rather than eluding him. Today, Minion was square-ish with round edges and had a green hue to it – the type that reminded Rishan of the little marble balls he used to play with in his grandparents' backyard some two decades ago. It stood there in front of the TV silently and stared at him. And even though it did not speak, Rishan heard everything it had to say. It was time for Minion to go home. They had finally come to rescue him.

That was a shame. Rishan would really miss the poor little thing.