

BLAME IT ON the rain

"Is this seat taken?" I stopped reading. Looked up. There was a young girl – in her late twenties or early thirties – standing across the table. Her curls visibly wet along with her dupatta and kameez. Drenched at the hands of the merciless downpour.

"It's full," she gestured with a swirling finger, pointing out that the seat in front was the only unoccupied chair in the eatery.

"Is this seat taken?" she repeated, this time with a hint of annoyance.

"It is now!", I smiled. Trying to be helpful, I gave her a hand to remove the pile of paper scrappily placed on the other side of the table. I had always been a messy customer – whether it's the food I eat or the paperwork I do. I always tend to make a mess out of it.

She took her seat. "Thank you" she said; relieved, it seemed after finally finding a seat. I took a sip of my morning tea. And went back to my reading. "The weather is terrible today. Been raining since dawn. I came here for a coffee before going to work, and now it seems that I am stuck here for at least an hour," she said, in a nervous tone.

I looked up as she spoke, she was arranging and rearranging the cutlery on the table, probably without even noticing that she was visibly unnerved.

I took a good look at her. Her curls were probably the most prominent feature; she was desperately trying to tidy up her wet, disheveled hair into a neat up-do. And she was struggling as it seemed.

"My hair, sometimes I wish I could just shave it all" she said earnestly. And finally succeeded in bring some order to the chaos. With the hair now in place, her charming face came to prominence. I could now see the oxidised earrings and part of her necklace against the sides of her neck. And the perfume she was wearing seemed like a mesmerising desert rose. I noticed her large eyes, blank from exhaustion. She had an impish grin, a smile like the fabled Cheshire cat, ear to ear. She was not pretty, but neat over-all.

"Do you work, at the hospital?" I asked. Trying to make a conversation with this girl at least ten years younger than I!

"I DO" she said assertively, not hiding her disbelief. "Is it THAT obvious?" – she smirked. Her grin flared her button like nose.

I broke out in laughter. "I am afraid it is", pointed out at the head of the femur

bulging out from her backpack, which she had placed down on the floor as soon as she took the seat. "I hope I don't scare any of the children with the human bones" she said.

"Or attract the police!" I said comically.

"Sabina!" she said. "Resident pediatrician at the hospital." She introduced herself.

Guessing it was now my turn to exchange pleasantries, I was taken off guard. I don't expect to introduce myself to a random girl at a coffee shop while I am having my breakfast.

For the last few months I have been spending all my time at Iqbal's place, trying to do research for my writing. But disclosing this fact seemed like a violation of my privacy, although I have been stalking on the customers at the eatery like a voyeur.

All this time I preferred to dine alone. My table was always cluttered with papers, newspapers, books. The waiters knew I was not to be disturbed. And I wasn't. Until this morning.

"Muad! Nice to meet you."

"Do you come here often?" "As a matter of fact I do. I practically stay here all day." And I was not lying.

"What is good here? She asked, while screening the menu. "Since you are the self-proclaimed 'regular' here," she added, with a hint of mockery.

"You can try the burrito. It's pretty good."

"Really! What does it have?" Sabina asked.

"Scrambled egg whites, black beans, shredded cheese, all wrapped in a tortilla."

"Well at this price, I just might have to spare my kidneys, but as you are recommending it – burrito it is!"

She called the waiter and placed her order. "And apple juice. Thank you."

"So what is it that you do?" Sabina asked. Still toying with the cutlery, waiting for her burrito.

"I fancy myself a writer."

"Really! I have never met someone who writes. What do you write?" "Anything really. Anything that pays for my 'overpriced' burrito."

"Touché!" She smiled. The same grin, ear to ear.

"Thank you" this time directing the gesture to the waiter for bringing her breakfast.

"Do you come here often?" I asked.

"No not really." She was analysing where to put her first bite. "The food always seemed overpriced. Today, it was the only refuge that I could find to save me from the downpour." She took a bite. "Mmmm. This is good."

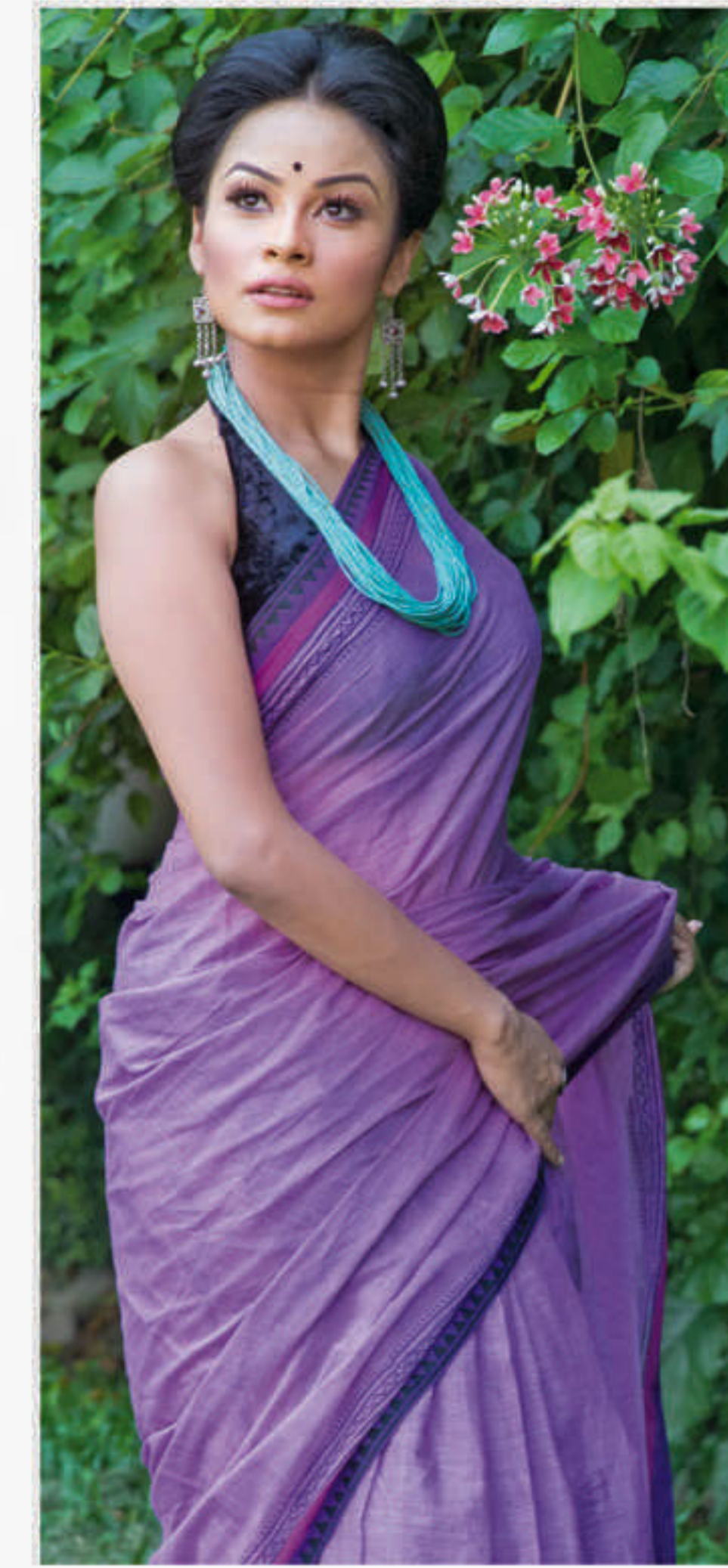
"I told you so," I said, never too shy to take credit.

With Sabina busy managing her burrito, I got back to scribbling notes on the pad.

"I hate monsoon. It causes all sort of problems and this city that you people live in is simply filled with filth" Sabina went on, probably not noticing that I was trying to shift away from the conversation.

"You are not from Dhaka?" I asked, rather clinically.

"No I am from Jessore." "I came here to study medicine."



at all last night. And it has been raining since morning. It stopped for a while and the moment I got off from the bus it started again and I had to rush into the eatery all wet, as you can see!"

"Menace is what it is!" she further added, visibly annoyed. Probably ridiculing my admiration for the rains.

"Well think of it this way, if there was no rain today" I continued without any signs of giving up, "you would not get stuck in this restaurant and we would not have this conversation!"

"Seriously! This is all you could come up with." "Aren't you a writer?" "You should be a little more creative!" she said, laughing all along.

"I will always be a 'sucker' for the rain. "No matter what!" I said.

Well you will have a hard time explaining the 'benefits' of rain to me. At least of monsoon in Dhaka! She said.

"I tend to look beyond the unbelievably stagnant traffic, the water logging or the stench of the nightsoil coming from the potholes, but rain gives me hope that the putrid city that we live in has some hope, some vitality in it." I was planning to go on.

"Tell that to the guy who has a meeting at 10, just got down from the bus and is not drenched like a crow on the lamppost" she was ready to argue.

"Well you can say that for summer, even winter as well. Every season has its demerits and so does winter. But the emotion that monsoon evokes in people's hearts, at least my heart, is unbeatable." I stopped.

"Go on." Sabina was in a mood for more. She said, while sipping her apple juice.

"Rain always brings back old memories, memories made up of small things and it is the small things of life that

matters." "Isn't that a cliché?" "Well the truth nevertheless."

"People running in the rain in search of shelter; street children making merry with the neighbourhood stray dogs; young boys planning a game of 5-A-side football – these are the subtleties that makes life in the city worth living."

"The beauty of rain is the memory of the first raindrop on your head while holding hands with your loved ones, it's the late night coffees at work waiting for the rain to stop."

"Hahaha!" She was laughing now. But I did not stop, "...everyone makes memories, every day and rain gives me back my innocence where I can go back in time and find some solace despite the things and the dirt that we see and face every day..."

"Many people associate the rains with nature and how it gives life to the barren earth. And that is perfectly okay. Monsoons are indeed scenic days, but it is the spirituality, feeling of feeling free while the heavens bless you with a downpour that makes it so magical. Rain is an experience that you must feel deep down inside. The End!"

"Our house in Jessore," Sabina said, "had a tin roof. The sound of rain on the rooftop used to drive me crazy. But now that it's no longer there, I kind of miss it."

"That is exactly my point, no matter how bad the time is or the state of mind I am in, raindrops pacify my soul. I can simply walk in the rain and start singing like Gene Kelly!"

So that is your memory. Your walk down memory lane; your one moment with nostalgia. How will we remember rain? Anything pleasant left for us?" This is where she got me. Seriously, rain equated to chaos. The pleasant

rainy gust no longer seems pleasant in our urban existence. But I was too eager not to lose this argument.

"Every generation has their moments. Maybe the youngsters today will remember monsoon as the drizzle of water on the windows of their cars, the wind crashing against the windshield."

"Or maybe the one accident when the rickshaw tripped and you fell hard in the dirty water..."

"Ahem! Happened to me once," Sabina admitted.

"There you go... memories made!" She stared outside looking through the glass walls of the restaurant and it seemed that the rain had abetted.

"MrMuad, I must beg leave. The rain has subsided I believe. It was nice talking to you. Btw, the burrito was still overpriced!"

"Hahaha!"

Sabina and Muad never met again. Muad frequented the restaurant for a long time, making mental notes for his upcoming book. Sabina had seen Muad from a distance many times but did not dare to exchange pleasantries.

The author with a quizzical look, greying hair and a charming personality always seemed immersed in work. Preferably, not to be disturbed. The rainy day conversation with him was possibly an experience best kept untouched and built-up on. To Sabina, it was a small thing; a nice story to be relished over a cup of rainy-day tea.

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