

DEMONS

Nesar Nadim

This is an excerpt of Nesar Nadim's debut novel "Demons". The book is available in the bookstores and at rokomari.com

Uxbridge was a small, remote town in southeast Texas. About twelve hundred people lived in it. It was founded as a logging village in 1691. A dense forest of pine, hickory, and oak bordered it.

Near Uxbridge town center lay a long, curving road named Hillingdon Road. Rows of picturesque, two-storied, brick-and-wood houses lined it. One of them belonged to Saad Haque.

One hot May morning, Saad woke up and stepped into his living room. His wife Nusrat and three-year-old son Sameed were asleep upstairs. Saad was a Bangladeshi-American. He was twenty-nine, tall, and lanky. He had light brown skin, sullen brown eyes, and black hair that had started to gray above the temples. Stubble covered his cheeks and jaw. He wore a blue T-shirt and tan shorts.

Bright, golden sunlight slanted through the French doors on his right, warming black leather sofas. In front of him stood an electric fireplace. On the mantelpiece above it was a framed photo. Saad looked at it.

It showed Saad and Nusrat sitting on a sofa. Sameed, tiny and two weeks old, slept in Nusrat's arms. Saad held Nusrat with his right hand and caressed Sameed's head with his left.

Saad and Nusrat were smiling at the camera, their eyes sparkling, their faces glowing with happiness. A happiness that seemed like it would last forever.

But then the darkness came.

Today was Friday. Last Friday, Saad had quit his job at Uxbridge High School. He had just lost his temper and handed in his resignation letter.

He had worked there five years as an IT technician.

And now Saad didn't know what he was going to do. How could things have gone so wrong? Life used to be simpler.

Saad had grown up in Dhaka, Bangladesh. His father was a retired colonel of the Bangladesh Army. His mother was a housewife (she was born in USA; that's how Saad got his American citizenship). They had sent Saad to an English-medium school. Saad had been a good student

and was particularly good with IT and computers.

In 2005, he moved to the U.S. to study Computer Science at Rice University in Houston. His father had paid the university's tuition fees. Saad had worked as a baggage handler at George Bush Intercontinental Airport to cover his living costs.

He met Nusrat in his first year. Nusrat was an English major. She was born and brought up in Houston. Her father was Bangladeshi (Houston has a large Bangladeshi community). Her mother was Armenian-American.

The result of this mixture was stunning: long, dark-brown hair, greenish-brown eyes, sharp features, colt-like legs, and the sweetest smile Saad had ever seen. Saad fell in love with her. Luckily, she felt the same way about him. They were together throughout college.

Saad and Nusrat graduated in June 2010. Saad applied to dozens of IT jobs, attended several interviews, but didn't have much success. Then, in September 2010, he got the IT technician position at Uxbridge High School.

The job involved looking after their IT, database, and website. The money was good for a first job. Nusrat became a first grade teacher at Uxbridge Elementary School. Saad and Nusrat moved to Uxbridge. It was a two-hour drive from Houston, so not too far from Nusrat's parents.

Saad dove straight into his work. He redesigned the school's website, created a database to store their information, and ordered new computers to replace their old ones. The school had been pleased with his work. He passed his six-month probation

period.

Saad and Nusrat got married in April 2011. They bought their house on mortgage in September. Sameed was born in July 2012. Saad and Nusrat were overjoyed and filled with hope. Their future looked bright.

Then the problems at work started.

Just after Sameed was born, Linda - the school's principal - held a meeting with Saad. Linda was fifty-five, tall, chubby, with short blond hair, and bright, blue eyes.

"The school's going to undergo funding cuts," Linda said. "So we all have to tighten our belts. Since you've done all the web and database work we hired you to do, I have to make a case to my boss why you're still needed."

"I want to keep you. But we need you to take on additional responsibilities. Your job must evolve."

But by evolve Linda meant degrade.

Frances, one of the admin staff had just retired then. Part of her job was to keep track of the school's phone and extension numbers. Now it was Saad's job.

Once a year, the town electricians came and tested all the school's electrical equipment; everything from computers and printers to fans and fridges. To test an item, they would plug its power cord into a handheld testing device. The device's LCD screen would display PASSED or FAILED when the TEST button was pressed. The electricians would date and initial PASSED labels and stick them on the passed items. The failed items got thrown.

Linda wanted Saad to do the electrical testing so the school didn't have to pay the electricians. Saad tried telling her that the school had over a thousand electrical items.

"Oh but you don't have to do it all on the same day," Linda replied. But that wasn't all. She wanted Saad to take photos with the digital camera when needed, so they didn't always have to pay the town photographer.

Saad protested. He told Linda that these things didn't fit his job description. "Your job description will be updated in due course," Linda replied. She always got her way (her favorite saying around the office was 'We all have to sing from the same hymn sheet').

Saad had no choice but to accept. He had a wife and son to support (Nusrat had quit teaching after Sameed was born).

But Linda became ruthless. She started treating Saad like the help. She'd tell him off for the smallest things. Once she had shouted at him in front of the other admin staff.

Saad put up with it. But the stress followed him home. He felt tired and depressed all the time. Nusrat and him used to make love almost every night. Now they were lucky to

have sex once a week.

So many bright, sunny days, Sameed had asked, "Daddy, will you take me to the park?" But Saad had said, "Not today honey. Another day." He didn't even have the energy to read him bedtime stories.

But there were worse things. Much worse. One Saturday Saad had slapped Nusrat because she was late with his lunch. It was the first time he had ever hit his wife.

Saad had felt like someone else was driving his body and he was a passenger watching things happen. One moment he was shouting at Nusrat ("I work in that bloody job to feed you two but you always put HIM first!").

The next moment his right arm swung out and his palm connected with Nusrat's left cheek. Nusrat cried out in shock and pain while Sameed stared with wide, frightened eyes from his blue high chair.

Saad had cried and said sorry to Nusrat ten minutes later. But it wasn't the last time. Another Saturday or Sunday, Sameed had started crying while they were watching TV in the living room. Saad had grabbed Sameed by the T-shirt and slammed him into the sofa.

Later, he had worried over his son, asking him if it hurt anywhere. Sameed had replied: 'Head!' Saad had wished he was dead then. How could he be such a monster to the people he loved? Was it the work stress? Or was it just him going mad?

Sometimes, in his mind's eye, Saad would see himself grab Sameed by his T-shirt and lift him into the air. Only, instead of slamming him into the sofa, he'd throw him at the wall.

And Saad's blood would turn to ice. So he promised himself never to touch Nusrat and Sameed again. Life went on. But the problems at work continued.

Last Friday Saad was supposed to put up a page on the school's website (one of dozens he was working on). Saad hadn't done it because he was waiting for Terri, Linda's secretary, to give him the text for it. Saad tried explaining this to Linda.

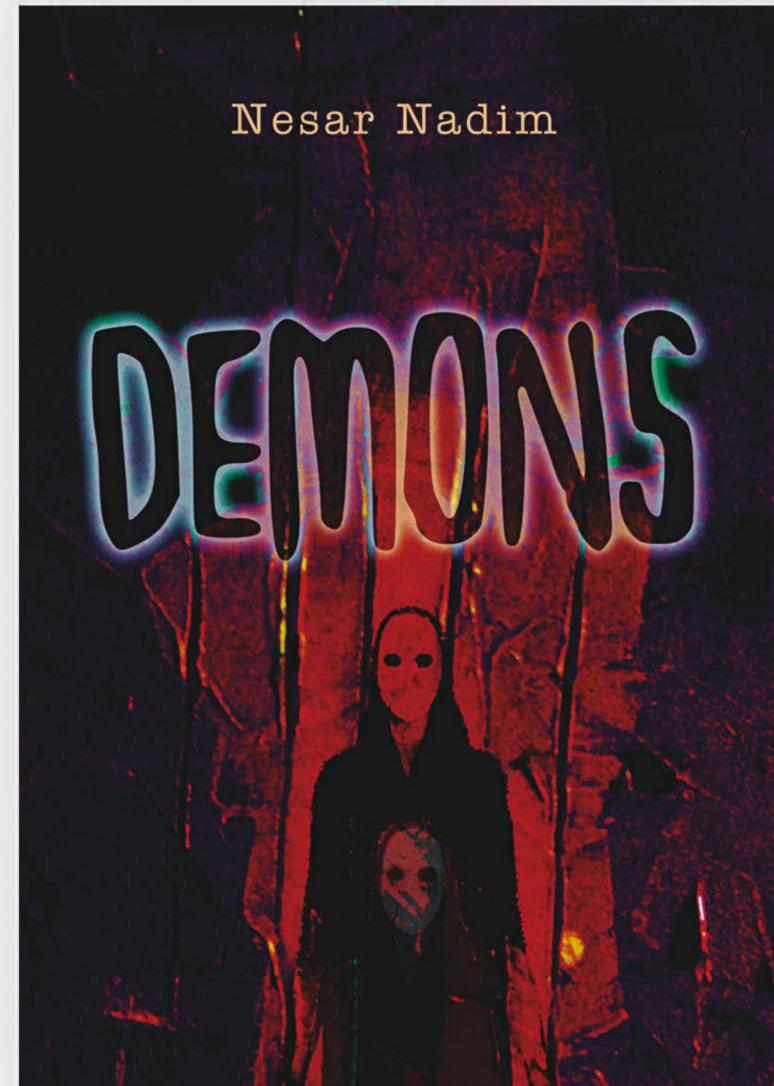
But Linda started shouting at him, "NO! YOU were supposed to put up the web page by Friday morning. But YOU didn't do it! DID YOU?"

Saad reiterated that he couldn't do the work without Terri's text.

"Well you should have reminded her!" Linda said. She pointed her finger at Saad. "YOU'RE our IT guy! THAT'S your job! SO DO IT!" She slammed her palms down on her desk.

Saad said nothing more. He went home for lunch (his house was five minutes walk away). When he reached his blue front door, a voice in his head said: *That's it.*

Saad turned around. He walked back to the school and into his office. He sat down at



his desk and started clearing it out. He searched his desk drawers and the cupboard behind him.

He found old notebooks, printouts, manuals, and CD-ROMs. He found cards his colleagues had sent him for Christmas, his wedding, and Sameed's birth. He found an orange plastic grocery bag. He even found a pair of black socks. It's amazing how much shit can accumulate when you've worked at a place for five years.

Saad threw the greeting cards, notebooks, manuals, and CD-ROMs into the waste basket below his desk. He put his framed family photo, his socks, and other personal effects into the orange plastic bag. He didn't bother to take his big fat Database Systems textbook from college.

He typed and printed the following resignation letter:

Dear Linda,
I hereby tender my resignation.
Best regards,
Saad

(It was only later that he realized he hadn't put a date or any last names)

Then he picked up the resignation letter and the plastic bag. He walked to Linda's desk. He handed the letter to her. Linda was shocked. She started arguing, blaming Saad for his 'mistakes.' But Saad no longer had to put up with her.

"Look Linda!" Saad said, "It doesn't matter anymore! I quit! So good luck with the website!"

Linda became silent. She could see the madness in Saad's eyes. She looked back and noticed the other staff staring. Linda said no more. It was better to let Saad go quietly.

Saad did.

He turned and walked out of the school with the orange plastic bag in his hand. He had finally stood up to Linda.

But now Saad had no job. How would he support his wife and son?

Pay the mortgage? He didn't know. It was all his fault. He should have thought of his family and controlled his anger.

Saad continued to gaze at the framed photo on the mantelpiece. A snapshot of a happier time. A brighter day. If only he could go back to that moment. If only he could do things differently.

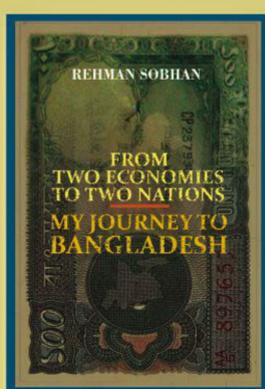
MARCHING HUMANITY

S M Shahruckh



Syrian refugees at the Budapest Keleti railway station, Hungary.

They are walking altogether dragging their feet limping, sobbing, silently through paths made slippery by mud, knee-deep, Making tracks on the desert sand, ephemeral, some have chilly mountains to overcome, clattering teeth, but the caravan of pain moves on. Not a sound but footsteps of sighs only the children cry, they don't know better. It's a sad world we live in people running from guns from machetes of steel, bleeding. A blue sky does not guarantee a glorious day, drones hide behind the blue, ready to pounce. It's a strange world we live in despots push the buttons and puppets run helter skelter. It's an unjust world we live in where justice can see and do as the kings wish.



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