

# The Cheapest Man on Earth

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Iqbal woke with a start as the Airbus A380 touched the runway at John F Kennedy Airport. Sadat was already awake.

"About time," Iqbal mumbled. The thirteen-hour journey had exhausted him.

Sadat merely grunted.

He did not like Iqbal. He was exceptionally good at judging a man's character and Iqbal, to say the least, was extremely cheap.

Iqbal and Sadat were both university teachers. They were going to a conference for university teachers under thirty from all over the world. The conference itself was only of five days while the whole trip was of fifteen.

So it was more of a tour than an official visit.

To Sadat, this was just a training program. He'd been to the US before. He was the youngest son of one of the richest men in the country. While two of his elder brothers chose to work for their father, he studied physics. After completing his A levels, he went to Singapore for higher education. He liked to think of himself as a patriot. So, after he completed his masters, he came back and started teaching in one of the best private universities of the country.

Iqbal was also the youngest of three sons. Two of his elder brothers also took up his father's profession. Except Iqbal's father was a farmer. He was the only one in his family to have ever gone to school. He got scholarships in classes 5 and 8, struggled really hard while studying in college, got into Dhaka University without admission coaching and then passed as one of the top ten in his batch. He now taught in a pretty renowned public university outside Dhaka. He had a two year old daughter with his wife of three years.

Sadat loved to travel. But people interested him more than places. So, even though he had been to the US multiple times, this trip was going to be no less fascinating. He was going to meet teachers from all over the world. So far, he had met only one and that too from his own country. And he disgusted him.

In their three hour transit, he chose

to sit and watch Sadat eat and bought nothing for himself. When asked, he replied with a shaky laugh that he was saving it for the plane food.

It made Sadat frown, but he gave him the benefit of the doubt and laughed back.

But Sadat's suspicion was confirmed on the plane. Seeing him hide the butter, jam and cheese packs from the breakfast tray in his coat pockets, Sadat asked, "Bhai, what are you doing?"

"Saving these for tomorrow's

breakfast."

"But we'll be given a complimentary breakfast from the hotel."

"Really? Lunch and dinner too?"

"Well, why do you think we're being given the stipends?"

Iqbal's eyes glowed. He was waiting for the topic to arise. His questions began:

"How much will we be given?"

"Wow, per day?"

"Does this include bus fares?"

"Do you have to show them the receipts of our expenditure?"

"Will we have to give the money back if we don't spend all of it?"

"This is why we're lagging behind," Sadat thought, "The middle class mentality! If one of these guys could have one wish fulfilled, they'd ask for an X-Corolla instead of world peace."

Sadat shuddered thinking he'd have to share a room with him. He will probably keep Sadat up all night while calculating how much he had spent and saved all day. And even worse is how much he'll degrade his beloved country in

front of everyone else.

Iqbal was completely oblivious of Sadat's feelings. The only thing in his mind, as Sadat had predicted, was how much money he would be able to save on the tour.

Sadat had to wait for some time outside Immigration for Iqbal.

Sadat was cleared straight away as he had visited the US multiple times before. Iqbal, on the other hand, was being interrogated carefully. Apparently, there was this old

ground.

That very afternoon, of the 20 people from 10 countries, 19 had paid for their tickets to the Natural History Museum. But there was no way Iqbal was paying  $22 \times 78 = 1716$  takas. But before word could spread that the only one who wouldn't be going with them was the same Bangladeshi guy from breakfast, Sadat stepped up and paid for Iqbal's as well.

Iqbal was extremely confused on why someone would give away almost 2000 bucks like that. But he made a mental note that he'd be inviting Sadat to his house for a *dawat* once they went back to Dhaka.

During dinner, Sadat was relieved when Iqbal paid his part of the bill. But it did not last long as Iqbal asked the waiter to pack the leftovers after they finished eating. To compensate, Sadat bought desert for the six people who were sitting with them. At least they'd know not every Bangladeshi was as cheap. The first day summarized the whole trip.

By the day they had returned, with a swift goodbye, Sadat got into his car the moment they got out of the airport.

No one was waiting for Iqbal. He had asked his wife not to come. It'd only cause more trouble. He went to his bank straight away. He only kept \$1000 of the 6000\$ he had with him. On his way home, he bought a pink bicycle for his daughter and a Walton LED TV for his wife. The two had been longing for these for ages.

Sadat was wide awake at 1AM that day. He hated jet lag. He decided to binge watch the new season of his favourite TV show. He'd sleep the whole day tomorrow.

On the opposite end of Dhaka city, Iqbal was also wide awake, watching his daughter sleep clutching her new bicycle-helmet. He smiled and thought the 5000\$ he had kept for her education would be very well-spent.

The cheapest man on earth was also the happiest man on earth at the moment.

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