

SPOTLIGHT

Propping up a hood against a mild December chill, a lone figure strides forward along the train platform. To his left stands an awning which houses a metal bench, the steel wrapped in torn blue plastic and bears the markings of a structure that has been newly constructed but already shows signs of heavy use. Feet weary and mind addled by wandering thoughts, our lonely protagonist sits on the bench and looks out over the deserted platform.

With no immediate calling and no charge left on his phone, he is left pondering the circumstances that now leave him at a train station, with tracks that lead to nowhere discernible. He's a distinguished reporter for a reputed entertainment news portal, with many an exposé and a steady string of juicy celebrity gossip to his name. He's a slick talker—as smooth as they get—regularly rubbing shoulders with social elites and power figures. But this is not an ordinary night for him; far from home and with no dignified way of getting there, he's forced to contemplate using other means of transportation.

Glancing down, he notices a coating of mud on his Oxfords. As he tries to dislodge the caked mud, he notices a tattered news clipping on the ground—**“Apu Biswas finally accepted by Sakib Khan”**. He picks up the fraying piece of paper, but as he does, the words shift and blend right in front of his eyes, before finally settling down into **“Gaibandha MP shot dead at home”**. The hair on his arms stand on end as a shiver runs down his spine. Glancing around the deserted platform for a split second and wondering if he's going insane, he reads on. **“Four men stormed the MP's home in Bamondanga area around 6 pm and shot him... a group of locals set fire to the home of a Jamaat leader Abdul Gaffar at Sundarganj municipality... Talking to *The Daily Star*, MP Azad said MP Liton was always vocal against Jamaat leaders.”** His eyes wander to the date—January 1, 2017. Oh. It's a year-old news report. Not to mention boring. Why do these newspapers even bother with that stuff anymore?

Uninterested, he drops the news clipping, which clings to his leg as a gust of wind buffets against the side of the bench.

Above the soft rustling of leaves in the wind, he hears a faint shriek. A dog howls somewhere in the distance, but the shrill noise builds into a towering crescendo as our nameless protagonist stands, reflexively taking a few steps back from what he perceives to be the source of the shriek. The sky seems to grow dark with storm clouds, the air somehow feels thicker all around him, and his eyes struggle to make out the shape of a figure in the distance as it moves across the platform. Draped in a billowy garment with some sort of illegible writing on it, the figure

walks... no, *floats* towards him, face contorted into a terrifying O.

What is that thing?

Drenched in a perceptible layer of sweat, he turns and starts running away from the monstrous vision. Glancing over his shoulder as he pants and stumbles forward, he sees the being

“Year of decline in terrorism and radicalism, operations against militant groups ongoing”

“Banking sector in turmoil as Chittagong-based S Alam Group assumed charge of Islami Bank as part of the bank's 'de-Jamaatisation'”

“Devastation in the wake of floods”

national curriculum textbook changes”

“Work starts on coal-fired Rampal Power Plant in the Sundarbans”

“Cases of enforced disappearances continue to dominate”

Confused, scared and out of breath, he keeps running, charging through the scraps of paper and disentangling

back at the bench, awaking from a fitful sleep. He must have dozed off, he says to himself. He's had trouble sleeping properly, but that dream was stranger than usual. Looking to his right, he sees the inter-city train pulling into the station, and he breathes a sigh of relief. Finally.

liberties and allowed Islamists free rein to intimidate, it might have won.”

As usual, the cover pages contained only what he considered serious drivels for people who want to be miserable. At least they had decent feature sections that he could at least browse. Peeling off the cover pages, he chucks them out the

what his peers in print media think amounts to “entertainment”.

He nearly jumps out of his seat in shock when a shrill noise breaks the monotony of the train's *chug-chug*. He frantically looks around him for signs of a papered ghost, but then realises he's in a train, and that the sound was a

away from the train as it launches itself into the air. The other passengers seem to have vanished into thin air, leaving him alone as the train flies along on invisible tracks in the air.

What the hell is going on? He runs towards the front of the compartment, screaming, as the windows slam shut and turn into newspapers, headlines floating out of them in big black fonts.

“600,000 Rohingya refugees flee to Bangladesh!”

“Highest number of migrant deaths this year”

“Chief Justice Sinha forced to resign from abroad”

“Corruption!”

“Rape!”

“Murder!”

Why is this happening to him? Is this real or is he having another nightmare? He runs through to the next compartment, which seems to be made entirely out of newsprint, with ugly Titillium and Helvetica fonts, images of distraught refugees and families of rape victims, and numbers that put misery and despair into context. Frantically, he runs to one of the exits, only to find it shut. He tries the lever to open the door, but curses under his breath to find it won't budge.

A blood curdling scream makes him turn around and immediately fall back. As he slumps against the door, the nightmarish creature from his earlier dream bears down on him, that terrifying O-face inching closer and closer to him. He screams out in fear, and again asks, “Why me?”

“Why not you?” the creature howls at him. “What makes you so special? What gives you the right? To be so naïve, so innocent? To think that nothing bad will ever happen to you? Why do YOU get to get away?”

As it towers over the hapless reporter, the creature seems to fill the entire compartment. Cowering in fear and shame, the last strength of our protagonist ebbs away and he blacks out.

When he comes around, he finds himself slumped on his desk, drool hanging out of the corner of his mouth. His head feels like it's made of lead and it takes all of his energy to keep his eyes open.

The graphics guy stands over him, holding a broadsheet printout, staring at him quizzically.

“You all right? You look like you just woke up from a crazy nightmare. Pretty sure you were muttering in your sleep as well.”

“I'm fine,” he replies. “Is that the second edition?”

“Yeah. Made the changes you requested before you took your little nap. Sign off once you're done proofing?”

“Yeah.”

Left feeling groggy and a little bewildered, he scans the page.

“Entertainment reporter admitted to mental health institution after breakdown inside moving train.”

Shaer Reaz is in-charge of Shift, the automotive publication of The Daily Star.

SHAER REAZ



ILLUSTRATION: RAFIUZZAMAN RHYTHOM

He notices a tattered news clipping on the ground—“Apu Biswas finally accepted by Sakib Khan”. He picks up the fraying piece of paper, but as he does, the words shift and blend right in front of his eyes, before finally settling down into “Gaibandha MP shot dead at home”.

unravel, parts of it tearing after him in pursuit with terrifying speed. His heart thumps in his chest as the scraps chasing him come into focus and he's able to make out the words.

“Living costs rise 6.47 percent!”

“Seven-murder case convicts including RAB personnel condemned to death in hearing”

“Child marriage allowed under special circumstances”

“Hefazat allegedly demanded

himself from the newspaper clippings that keep trying to pull at his limbs. The terrible shriek follows, growing louder and louder as its source seems to draw nearer. He grits his teeth and powers forward. The rail tracks to his right seem to come alive in front of his blurred vision as he runs alongside, metal screeching and twisting into grotesque shapes ahead of him, joining the rest of his hellish nightmare in an effort to prevent his escape. Still running, still hoping that this is just a nightmare, he shuts his eyes in the frantic hope that it's all a dream.

When he opens his eyes again, he's

His compartment is nearly empty, save for a small child selling peanuts, another with a stack of newspapers slung over her shoulder, and an elderly man at a corner window seat. He settles into his own window seat, barely containing his distaste at the betel leaf stains on the floor of the train and the scribbled numbers on the backs of the seats.

With nothing else to do for the half-hour journey ahead, he decides buying a newspaper might be a good idea.

“Country of the Year: Bangladesh was seriously considered by *The Economist*. Had it not crushed civil

Is this real or is he having another nightmare? He runs through to the next compartment, which seems to be made entirely out of newsprint, with ugly Titillium and Helvetica fonts, images of distraught refugees and families of rape victims, and numbers that put misery and despair into context.

window and dives into the entertainment section as the train picks up speed. Good. He'll be close to home by the time he's done catching up on

horn at the crossing. His beating heart nearly jumps to his mouth as he sits back down and looks out the window—the ground seeming to fall