

FICTION

Just a Temporary Marriage

RAHAD ABIR

It was Friday. It was the decision day whether the marriage was still valid or not.

It had been raining lightly since morning. During the monsoon, the North-Eastern Bengal *Haor* wetland areas would go under deep water, the water remaining for half of the year. Boats would become the prime mode of transportation.

The submerged areas simply looked like a sea. It wasn't flooding, just the nature of the *Haor* basin. The fresh and clean water also brought new life to its people. Huts stood here and there raising their heads within the high portions.

Today all the villagers congregated at the local primary school. Many women along with their kids had gotten there long before. Only the bedridden elderly people remained at home. The school had three tin-roofed structures with open verandas at the front. In the central one, the imam of the mosque sat on a chair in the middle, a local council member next to him, and on both sides sat the four revered village elders.

"All women move to the left-hand side corner," a voice bellowed.

The crowd swiftly filled the porch—most of them squatting on the ground. Those who could not squeeze in stood in the open air holding umbrellas over their heads. Quite a lot of people didn't carry umbrellas. Instead, they used banana or arum leaves to shield themselves from the rain.

The council member motioned for them to be quiet. An uneasy silence settled over the place. He cleared his throat, and ran his fingers through his goatee for a moment.

Until then, Sonavan couldn't fathom what was waiting for her. Following a nasty row and beating yesterday afternoon, her husband had uttered the word "talaq" (divorce) to her. The news journeyed through the village in no time. By the evening, it turned out to be a real fear; a neighborhood woman informed her that a *salish*, a village arbitration, would be held the next day after the noon prayer over this divorce matter.

The fear ended up becoming a ghastly worry at the school ground when the *salish* finally reached a verdict. The imam declared that Ali and Sonavan's marriage was over. Therefore, any sort of attempt of contact with her, even unnecessary talking, would be considered unlawful for him. Since his now-ex-wife and children had no other place to live, he must find an

alternative abode for himself. However, if he wanted to resume his marriage she had to enter into a *hilla*, an interim, a marriage with another man beforehand, according to the Islamic laws.

Sonavan, standing in the women's corner, couldn't help bursting into tears having heard the *fatwa*. Ali squatted before the arbitrators with his eyes fixed on the ground, dug deep into the soft soil with his thirty-five-year-old gnarled toes. He immediately tried to uplift his voice in protest through his two front upper missing teeth that he literally did not utter *talaq* three times. How could that be counted as divorce? Also, he pronounced the word out of

difficulty. People began making fun of them and embarrassing their two children.

Last year, her husband, on his way home at night, happened to catch a man with a young girl bracing for making love near a paddy field. Ali, proud to have prevented something immoral from happening, reported this incident to the imam without delay. Next day a *salish* was held in the mosque-yard. The imam ordered the pair to be flogged fifty times for adultery. Ali came up a few days later and told Sonavan that he naively believed it would be a sin if they continued living together without her having had a *hilla* marriage. Then he

they could be back together and everything would be normal.

Her eyes narrowed, face wrinkled up into a grimace of disgust, imagining herself sleeping next to another man. But she knew Amin was a good man and sort of led a simple private life. His first wife died from a long-time illness, his second wife eloped with another man. He had no children.

Minutes later when Ali headed off, the youngest boy gave Sonavan a hug. "Ma," he said gently, "I want to marry you. Don't listen to Baba. Marry me." She wiped her tears away and ruffled his hair.

Two months passed. Ali appeared one day and let her know that he had arranged the whole thing. The marriage would be secretly carried out by the imam.

"It'll never happen," she declared, "I'll hang myself before doing that."

"How long you want to live like this?" he snarled, "You do what I say. And that's final!" he stomped off.

As "that's final" kept ringing in her ears, she cooked a big meal for her two sons. Jahan was eight years old and Jaber was five. After dinner she got them to sleep, lovingly stroking their hair. She felt for Ali at that moment. She wondered what life would be like later in this same place. Why should she go through all these ridiculous things? What's the point of worrying if he didn't care about her?

The next week, the imam performed the marriage. Sonavan seemed gravely indifferent and loyal. Her ex-husband tried to keep the affair quiet, discreet. The newlyweds remained in Ali's house, and the kids, too.

The night was dark, long and dreary. The air was heavy. Sonavan knew Ali would walk towards his place with his nervous nimble movements, drift off into a fitful sleep, and wake up late with a headache.

In the morning, Sonavan saw Ali creep into the house. An eerie feeling came over her. She couldn't even look at his face. As if remembering something, she pulled up the free end of her sari to cover her head, which she always did in front of strangers. "Where is he?" he muttered, "I'll go get...the imam then."

She realized what he meant instantly, but took time to answer. She told him that since she'd gotten her period she needed a few days to be ready to have the marriage consummated. A few seconds passed. Without looking at his eyes she knew

he was dumbfounded, as if he had the thunder-strokes of a whip on his back.

About a week later her answer was still "not ready." She saw his face redden and fingers clenched into a fist. Without any further word he turned around and headed off. She heard that he ended up marooned in his tiny room, because every time he went out people mocked at him. But one day, she was cooking and he walked into the kitchen.

"Are you just trying to piss me off?" he said, looking heatedly into her eyes. "Tell me. What is it?"

In a cold but strong voice she replied that he was not her husband anymore, and she was sickened by his pestering. If he did not stop coming over she would have no choice but to take action against him.

For an instant, he looked taken aback—nearly demented. The very next moment, his eyes blazed with anger. His brown face went all wild. He lunged at her, grabbed a bamboo stick, pulled her head back by her hair, and started to lash her. Hearing her scream, some neighbors ran up forward and tried to stop Ali. He broke away. "You bitch!" he yelled and walked away with heavy steps.

Later that evening, a small *salish* was held in Ali's house. Initially, the imam scolded him for the heinous act of grabbing and beating another man's wife, which is completely sinful in Islam. Afterwards, the arbitrators asked Amin if he was fine with divorcing Sonavan now.

There was a silence. "We want to live together," his voice sounded soft albeit confident, "Sonavan is happy with me."

She was asked for her opinion in which she sternly disagreed with the idea of going back to Ali. People began whispering. What would happen now? The imam opened his mouth, elucidated that, according to Islam, if the second husband doesn't divorce the wife willingly, the first husband cannot force him and remarry his ex-wife. He rendered a decision allowing Amin and Sonavan to continue their conjugal life, advising Ali not to trouble them anymore. In addition, since the children were still young, they were permitted to stay with their mother.

The next day, moving into Amin's house with the kids, Sonavan heard that Ali had left for Dhaka.

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anger, but he didn't mean it. A handful of people supported him.

"How many times have you read the Quran?" the imam blustered, his voice dripping with condemnation. "How much Hadith and Shariah do you know?" He then scornfully granted the *talaq*.

Everybody knew Ali, a day-laborer, was prone to be idle. If he worked for a day, he would like to relax the next two days. Sonavan sewed homemade quilts. Her small, hardworking twenty-six-year-old vivid face looked confident, intelligent. Her pleasant manner impressed other women, and they never imagined such a thing could happen to her.

Sonavan managed to get Ali to relocate to a neighbor's tiny room which was used for storing straw and firewood. She sent him three meals a day there. But things were getting

unveiled the plan.

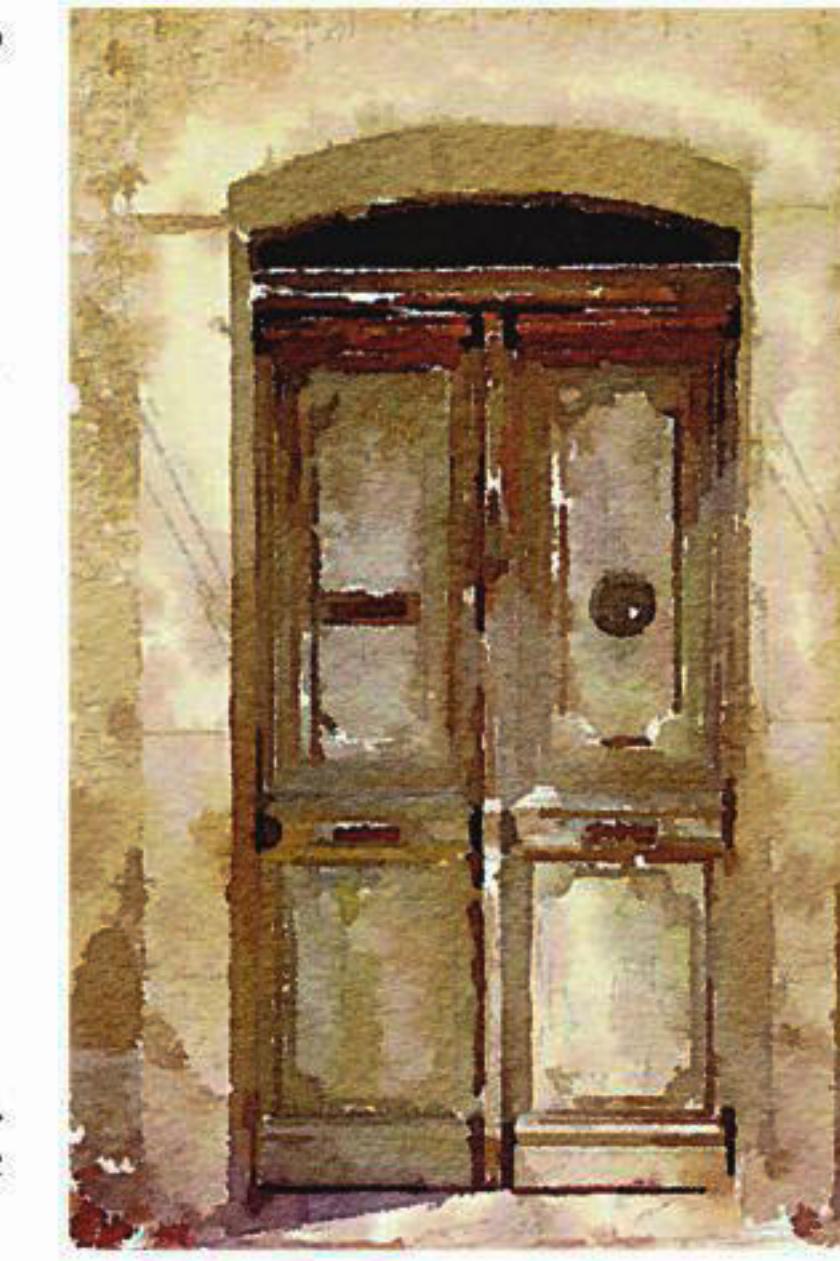
Learning of his scheme, she shuddered, and a wavy feeling of nausea ran through her body. "A *hilla* marriage? You want me to sleep with Amin? Another man?" she exploded. Ali asked her to forgive him and to understand the reality. "It's all your fault!" the words choked in her throat, "I can't make it!"

A little later her eyes brightened as she spoke about her cousin who had been working for a garment factory in the capital and earning good money. What if they floated the *fatwa* and moved to Dhaka instead? They had nothing worth anything here apart from the house. When Sonavan told Ali her idea, his face clouded. He told her that would be a terribly uncertain life and obviously sinful too. If she agreed to a *hilla* marriage, on the other hand, it would be only for a day or so. Then

FICTION

The Door (Part 2)

TIASHA IDRAK



members, added a kick when it came to Aru. They searched for something that might have caught fire but there was nothing. But the smell kept increasing so they rushed out of the household. It was then noticed the flames that engulfed the portion of their home was their uncle's side.

"SAVE ME!"
"MOM!"

Aru heard muffled screams and coughs coming from the fire.

What was worse was that the flames engulfed the exit, leaving no room for an escape. By then there was a crowd gathered around them, hollering each other to bring water. Aru's mother with trembling hands, called the fire brigade.

But there was a problem, by the time they get there, it might be too late.

However the fire still didn't spread to Aru's side.

"The door!" Aru whispered. "We can get them out through the place where the door was!" she suddenly yelled. Aru's mother was the first person to react. "The large hammer under the bed... we can use it!"

A few minutes later some of the people from the neighbourhood, armed with hammers dashed inside. They gathered in front of the concrete grave of the door that once united the family, encompassed by Aru's makeshift door frame. The people on the other side had already gathered

The smoke became thicker...

The siren of the fire brigade could be heard in the distance.

Dribbling sweat and screeches...

Then finally there was an opening and she thought she could see an eye through it. The opening became bigger and bigger, so did the face become more visible. They hammered away until there was a large hole in the middle of the concrete wall. With the biggest smile, Aru outstretched her bruised hand towards them.

"Come, we are waiting!"

Year 20xx

In the middle of the ruins of the civil war, there is a strange sight in this small town. In the place where there once existed a house, among the debris and wreckage there stood a strange wall. Even though it was made of concrete, someone had painted door frames around it. Even stranger was the fact that there was this gaping hole in the middle of that wall, which didn't seem like the air raids did it.

No one will ever know that this concrete door ended up connecting a family, bringing peace in the face of death.

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It was a common story. A campus that was under the tyrannical rule of a leading political party. Students kneeling down to conformity. A few rebellious ones that refused to obey. Aru was among this group. After the brutal murder of a fellow student was buried as an "accident," Aru decided to do something about it. So she painted a picture, completed a graffiti along with others in the dead of night - one that mocked the hierarchy, the whole corrupt system. It went viral soon after. Her identity was hidden, of course.

Not for long though, somehow it got leaked out. Fear was a powerful force, after all.

Long story short, she was beaten up in broad daylight. The assailants were clever, they targeted her dominant hand. She was lucky that they didn't chop it off. Her knack for painting tends to invite trouble, it seems.

So, here she was hiding in her native village at her mother's house.

"Fine, you say! You were lucky that you didn't die, you FOOL!" Nifa retorted. Aru didn't disagree. She went back to staring at the door or the cavity of it. It was funny how people tend to tolerate any atrocity as long as it didn't affect them. But what if there was a threat that affected all of them? Would they still remain divided? Or unified, no matter how short lived it was?

"What are you talking of?"

"I'm wondering what would happen when the scales finally tip," Aru replied.

It was warm. Too warm.

The stench of smoke tickled Nifa's nostrils as she woke up with a jolt. It was supposed to be a cold night in December, but here she was waking up in the dead of night thanks to the smell of something burning.

... Burning?

Nifa quickly woke her family