

NIGHT, BEFORE

DAWN

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Jamil: Just Another Night

Every time Jamil has a night shift, he feels like quitting his job. Staying up all night, two nights in a week! Sleeping during the day is just not the same thing. But this is his own doing. When he studied Hotel Management, he knew night shifts were common in hotel jobs. He is like a woman who elopes with her lover, his thoughts echo ironically. When the passion gets depleted, she can neither put up with the burdens of the relationship, nor go back to her parents with grievances about her husband and in-laws.

A little before eleven Jamil starts his shift. He glances at the PC and sighs, relieved to see there are no new arrivals that night. It will not be a busy night.

It is twenty minutes after midnight. The lobby of the five-star hotel is quiet tonight, more so than other nights. Then Jamil remembers it is Friday night. The bar is closed on Fridays. No wonder there are hardly any people. Only six

people scattered throughout the vast lobby. Jamil and Faisal are at the Front Desk.

A little further away is the Duty Manager Nasir's desk; Night Porter Rosario is at the Concierge desk; the Security

with a silver ream. She sits huddled on a corner sofa. She is not particularly striking, but well dressed and personable. She has a purse and a carry-on case. It is difficult to say how old she is. But then, Jamil can never gauge a girl's age! Perhaps she is in her mid-twenties? Jamil had noticed her when he came on duty, so she must have been sitting here for a long time. She keeps fiddling with her mobile phone, keeps calling someone intermittently. She speaks in a subdued voice; at times she looks agitated, at times vexed; and then for long moments she is silent. After a long break, she dials a number again, but she does not seem to be speaking to anyone anymore. Perhaps no one wants to answer their phone so late at night!

Time crawls, but does not halt the proceedings of the night. Jamil and Faisal complete their tasks for the night. Just when it's time to take a tea break, the girl walks up to the Reception. "Excuse me, can you please look after my bag? I'll be right back." Without waiting for a reply, she walks off towards the Ladies', fixing the creases of her sari.

The Duty Manager looks at her from the corner of his eyes. He picks up the phone on his desk and calls Faisal to enquire about the girl.

Faisal: She asked us to keep an eye on her bag; she's gone to the washroom. There aren't even any arrivals tonight. Nasir Bhai, will you see what's going on with this girl...she has been sitting here for ages...

After a few minutes the girl returns to her former seat. Nasir summons the Security Officer on his walkie-talkie. As soon as he

appears, Nasir approaches the girl. Nasir: Excuse me, Madam! Are you waiting for someone? The girl looks annoyed and turns the other way.

Nasir: Madam, are you listening to me? I'm the Duty Manager, Nasir. Actually, one can't just keep sitting here in the lobby indefinitely. Can I help you in any way?

No reply comes from the girl. Security Officer: Madam, can you

hear us?

Girl: Why are you all bothering me? I haven't done.....

She starts to weep mid-sentence and startles both Nasir and the Security Officer. She calms down in a bit and walks towards the Reception.

Girl: Excuse me Bhai, what is the room tariff for one night?

Jamil: \$170 for a deluxe room. It comes to \$195 including VAT, service charge, etc.

Girl: That seems like a lot of money. How much does that come to in Taka? Is that your cheapest room?

Jamil starts to press the buttons of his calculator and says: Yes, Madam, it is. It comes to about 16,000 Taka.

Girl: That much?!

She stops to think something and bursts out in tears again. Nasir comes up to the Reception.

Jamil: Madam, please sit. Let me see what I can do.

The girl walks back towards the sofa and rummages through her purse, looking for something. Perhaps she is checking to see how much money she has!

Jamil: Nasir Bhai, what do we do? It's obvious that she can't afford to take a room. And I can see that she is not lying.

Nasir: This is the problem with you young people! You get swayed easily by a woman's tears!

Jamil: What rubbish! Think positive for a minute, will you? The question is, what do we do now? After all, there is something called humanity.

Nasir: Yes, yes, I know. But what can I do if she cannot afford a room? I can give a discount of maximum \$45, but I doubt that will help matters.

Jamil: At least we can let her sit here until morning, can't we? We can't just ask her to leave in the middle of the night!

Nasir gives Jamil a wary glance. He asks the Security Officer to keep an eye on the girl and returns to his own desk. Jamil walks up to where the girl sits. He doesn't mention the \$45 discount.

Jamil: Madam, if you wish, you can sit here until light. No one will bother you anymore.

The girl looks up at Jamil. The look of gratitude is clear through her tears. Jamil is amazed by how vividly one's expressions can portray one's emotions.

The night is dark and still, not only outside the hotel, but inside too. Time trudges on in its own pace. The Concierge is mumbling incoherently about something or the other while newspapers are being sorted by the Security Officer and Rosario.

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