

After page 12

The Duty Manager is slumped on his desk, napping. Faisal watches TV in the telephone operator's office. Jamil stands alone at the Reception and reads his book, Sunil Ganguli's *"Moner Manush"*. It's such a good read! He regrets not watching Goutam Ghose's movie which was based on this book.

Joya: The Unending Night

She reflects, so many times she has walked past this hotel, but never seen what it's like inside. Well, she had entered it but only been up to the foyer and the ballroom to visit the various trade fairs taking place there. She is mesmerised by the splendour this evening, when she walks in with Mirza and their two friends. They come to the hotel straight from the Marriage Bureau to dine at the restaurant here. She feels as though a movie scene is unfolding in front of her... the doorman's suave welcome, the glittering lobby strikingly beautiful, people speaking in hushed tones. The hostess at the restaurant looks far lovelier than some of our top models, she observes, highly impressed. She is, however, taken aback by the sky-high price of the buffet meal – four thousand per person, excluding TAX and VAT! But she does not stop Mirza. Let him spend as he wishes tonight, she feels, even though he can hardly spare such a huge amount. It is, after all, their wedding day! It's true they did not have a proper wedding with grand arrangements, but it is and will always remain, very special in their memories...

Time flies while they chat and laugh and share jokes, and before long it's past 10pm. Their friends leave as they had left their baby with his grandparents. Mirza's phone rings as soon as they leave and he walks away from the table to answer the call. Joya wonders who he is speaking with, but she can't hear anything from so far. Joya goes back to enjoying her dessert. Such delicious ice cream they have here! The feeling resembles something like falling in love for the first time! Why can't we get ice cream like this in shops? Or maybe I've never been to shops that sell it, Joya thinks.

Mirza pays the bill and hurries back to the table. "Joya, I need to go right now, there has been a huge crisis.....".

Even before he can finish speaking Joya says "What do you mean, what's happened? Why are you so worried?"

Mirza: "I don't have time to explain anything now. I'll be back really soon. You can sit in the lobby or somewhere. Please don't be mad, I won't take long." Mirza rushes off without saying anything more. The other diners turn and stare at Joya as she calls out after him "Mirza wait, Mirza.....!" Joya composes herself; even in this state of mind she realises one is not supposed to be so loud in a posh place like this.

So many terrifying thoughts go through her mind as she waits in the lobby. She cannot stop worrying. It's almost midnight and Mirza is still not back. She keeps calling him but there is no reply on his cell phone. Maybe he has lost his phone in his hurry. She informs the friends who had had dinner with them. They try to contact

Mirza too, but to no avail. He is nowhere to be found.

Meanwhile, two men decked up in suits come and ask Joya if she needs any help. Oh, what a nuisance at a time like this! How on earth could they help her in such a situation? Is she supposed to say, "Yes, please help me find the man whom I got married to a few hours ago, who has left me here, disappeared, and is nowhere to be found?" Her eyes tear up in frustration and fear. She rushes toward the Reception and gathers enough courage to ask about the room rates. She might as well get a room for the night. As soon as she hears the reply her confidence crumbles. There is no way she can afford such an expensive room! She wonders if they will ask her to leave the hotel and instantly tears run down her cheeks. She rummages through her bag and finds she has around 8,000 taka and a few small gold jewelry. She is not sure they will keep the cash and

temperature at night or is it cooler because there is hardly anyone in the lobby?"

Her thoughts are jumbled: What is she doing here? Where is Mirza right now and what is happening there? She looks all around her in search of a clock. How come there is no clock here? How will she tell the time? Then she remembers she can always check her phone for the time. But she doesn't feel like looking at her phone, or the time. It's not as if anyone is waiting for her. Strange thing, time. When you need it most, you can't find any. And when you have plenty of time to kill, it just doesn't seem to pass.

The day's events catch up with Joya and she dozes off, exhausted. She has no idea how much time has passed but suddenly she can hear the Muazzin's voice carrying the Azaan to her ears, and she wakes up with a start. She goes to the Ladies' and freshens up a bit. She is startled to see her reflection in the mirror – her features look distorted;



the gold and let her take a room, and she doesn't feel like asking either. She has an inkling things don't work like that here. Dejected, she returns to the sofa.

She finds herself going numb with worry. She feels helpless and lost, doesn't know what to do now. She presses her mouth with her hands to keep herself from sobbing out loud. She didn't know she had so many tears stored inside her. A little while later the young Receptionist comes up to her and informs her that she can sit in the lobby until sunrise. "No one will bother you." Joya is jolted back into reality. His words bring immense relief to her and she wants to thank him with a smile, but she is still in a daze. He, too, doesn't give her a chance to speak and walks back towards the Front Desk. She puts her phone in her purse and huddles in a corner of the sofa. She is curious and thinks to herself, "Do they lower the

puffy eyes and face from crying and fatigue, she guesses. She hurries out and goes to the reception. The young Receptionist is still there, reading something. She walks out of the hotel's glass doors. It's still dark outside but she can hear the birds waking up, chirping. There is a cool breeze blowing, and Joya shivers, not so much from the cold as from apprehension – where will she go from here?! She has no parents; she used to live with her uncle, but yesterday she had left a note to them saying she was leaving for good and would not return to their house. Mirza used to live with a couple of colleagues in a flat in Kalabagan, but she doesn't know the address as she has never been there! Last night they were supposed to move into a small two-room apartment. Mirza had wanted to surprise her on their wedding night, so he had not taken her there before. She knows the area but again, doesn't have the exact address.

Joya takes out her mobile phone from her purse; no missed calls. Should she try calling Mirza again?

Dawn is breaking. She starts to feel a new confidence being born inside her. Without knowing where she is headed, she starts walking. In this huge big world full of billions of people, is there not even a small space for her?

Mirza: The Last Night

It is almost four in the afternoon. Mirza realizes he must hurry and step into the shower if he is to reach the Marriage Bureau by six. He glances at the room one last time to check if everything looks alright; but he doesn't know himself what it is supposed to look like! Yes, his new bride will be coming here today, but he has made no great arrangements. He has just moved into a small white-walled two-room apartment. The curtains are off-white coloured, the bed sheets a brilliant white with a few red roses in one corner of the bed. He has downloaded some of Joya's favorite songs on his laptop.

His mobile starts to ring in the next room – who could that be now? Yes, he knew it. It's Ahona. His only close friend. Since their first days at university together, they have been friends. So many things have happened since then, so many things have changed. Even their friendship has changed. It is as deep now as it was casual then. There is just one problem – Joya does not like Ahona at all! Strange, considering it was Ahona who had introduced Joya and Mirza to each other.

Ahona: Hi! Why did it take you so long to pick up the phone? Has my driver reached your place?

Mirza: You've already sent him? But I won't start until five or quarter past.

Ahona: I know, but have you forgotten that you are bringing your new bride home today? What if she is hungry or thirsty in the middle of the night?

Mirza says nothing, knowing she will continue talking.

Ahona: Listen, I've sent the maid with my driver. She has some fruits, sweets and dry food that she will keep in your fridge. The driver can drop her back home and then go pick you up around five.

Mirza: But Ahona, why did you have to.....

Ahona doesn't let him finish: And I hope you've visited the pharmacy. You don't want to do anything stupid and become a daddy the first night!

Laughing loudly, she hangs up without waiting for Mirza's reply.

Mirza feels slightly melancholic. His best friend will not be present on his big day. She is in the third trimester of her pregnancy. Two years ago she had had a miscarriage and was being extra cautious this time. On top of that her husband Shabbir is not in town; his office has sent him to Bangalore for some training.

Mirza is pulled from his thoughts at the sound of the doorbell. It must be the driver and the maid.

There is hardly any traffic as it is a Friday. Everything goes smoothly, uninterrupted, starting from the signing at the Marriage Bureau to dinner at the hotel with friends.

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