



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

One hundred years of madness

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

Day 1

Many hours later as he faced the only open window in his room, Shafiq was to remember that distant afternoon when he took his first born to see the undulating sand dunes of the vast desert. Sitting in that room, his eyes glanced upon the CCTV camera screening footage of his days and nights inside this enclosure to the outside world.

He gave no thought to it. His mind was elsewhere, thinking back to a distant past, when things were happy. His wife—timid yet strangely fierce when he had married her. He remembered their first child, born at the last hour of the night. He also remembered two more daughters, the middle one just like his own sister—a sister he only had for a short two years—and the youngest, a splitting image of his wife.

In that room, the morning refused to go by quicker. He looked out the window but could not recognise the street. In the dead of the night, it was hard to tell where those crazy people had driven him to. They must have pushed a tranquiliser, something very potent. He had not been

able to fight the men for too long as they dragged him out of his house and shoved him into the car. Screams had formed at the base of his throat, but they refused to materialise. He had wanted to call his children, ask them to keep him home.

In that moment, he felt he would miss them.

In his semi-dazed state, he walked around the room as pangs of hunger cleared away all the other thoughts trying to flash through his mind—his old mother, his three little sisters, his village by the rolling hills bordering Assam and Habiganj.

Lunch was a humble spread. He was served in the room, on a table which could be propped against the bed. Knees popping just loud enough for him to hear, Shafiq sat down for lunch, but soon found himself grossly disappointed. The daal reminded him of the muddy-brown water that flowed through the river that separated two countries. The chicken, scrawny, to him appeared skinnier than his own fingers. Unwillingly he gulped down the meal in slow, decisive bites.

Day 12

By now, Shafiq was moving between moments of acceptance, confusion and disbelief. Was this place not the jail he thinks it is? Why do those jail wardens keep assuring him they are actually ward boys?

After the first few days, his wife would come visit him regularly. He did not get to meet her, but they brought him a meal that she always carried for him—*chicken akhnipulao, tok doi* and her special *kali jeerar bhorta*.

The rice was sticky and warm, soft enough to be rolled into a ball in his hands. The meal always ended long before he would have preferred it to.

Day 13

Moni—and she suspected, her three daughters, too—were torn between feeling relieved at Shafiq being hospitalised and also worried about him being hospitalised. On one side they were enjoying this time with Shafiq away and on the other, there was the financial toll that this hospital stay would take on them as a family. They knew he would be back soon. They merely had a month before the doctors would manage to control his rage and his symptoms. His hallucinations too would be more in control, the new doctor had promised this time. In the meantime, while Shafiq was away, all three would spend long hours in front of the TV, tap away on their phones, make dinner and usually end up eating the leftover chicken and rice dish that Moni took for her husband in the hospital the day before.

She enjoyed a sense of freedom during this time. By now, these nightly episodes, chock full of drama, fear and trepidation over what would, what could go wrong, had become a yearly occurrence. This was the fourth time in a span of eight years that her husband had one of his episodes of nervous breakdowns. Ones that escalated so quickly that he would need to be hospitalised. As he lost his mind, he would sometimes try to lock them all in a room, scream profanities, throw water all over the house and chant prayers before eventually threatening to kill himself or one of the family members. This was the usual trajectory of each episode.

Sometimes, she wondered, how everything had come to this. Only 16 when she was married off, Moni had spent the first 15 years of her marriage deeply fearful of her husband and his erratic temper.

Just a year after her marriage, she came to know of all the strange happenings at her in-laws' place. There was a lot of hush-hush in the family about their history, their lineage. It took years for her to find out how her father-in-law, Syed, was possessed by the spirits of the past. The only way to cure his annual episodes was to tie him up in iron shackles. They would lock him up in a room of the mud-house which was also home to her husband and his eight siblings, and her mother-in-law.

On really bad days, the spirits talked for hours at end through her father-in-law. And he would talk about his own father who walked hundreds of miles, spreading Islam from one land to another. Syed also talked of his ancestors doing the same in Iraq, Afghanistan and farther away, conducting business and settling down in different areas by the hills in Sylhet. Syed's father came to this

Continued to page 11