

THE HOUSE OF MAD

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The House of Mad is the third instalment in a fiction series about a family navigating the woes of immigrant life. It is the story of a father who suffers from psychotic breakdowns and a woman navigating different identities—that of a wife, a mother, a woman who wants to be set free, who wants to know what it is like to hold liberty in the palm of her hand. It is a story of magic and ghosts and of a village by the hills. And a story of a young woman who is gifted with an unwanted family heirloom that threatens her sanity—yet she chooses to carry it with her, allowing it to flourish, till it consumes her too.

The child came just as dawn was about to crack. The earth had almost completed one rotation and was getting ready to light up again and along she came as the darkest hour of the night came to an end. She brought with her good luck and her family heirloom held firmly in her hands. The good luck she delivered to her father, who had just returned from a war in the Middle East to welcome her into the world. She was named Nauroze.

Minu held the child in her bony arms and wondered what the future held for this daughter of hers. She had come after many prayers, many sacrifices and many medical treatments. Minu had even sat through a snake charmer's magic chant and a circle of snakes for Nauroze.

And once she came, she brought along a chance at freedom for Minu. Nauroze would get an education, grow up to be self-sufficient, be free to go wherever she wanted. She would not suffer the same way as her Ma. She would not get married off to a stranger because her father suddenly decided her destiny one fine day.

Mother and daughter did not know it then but they were fated to be caged. Freedom would be fleeting for them, trampled by Shafiq's rage, by the lack of money and education, and the heirloom carrying madness and magic that had arrived with Nauroze.

After nearly four years of living in the village by the wispy-green round hills, the two would take the train to Dhaka and eventually board a flight to the Middle-east to meet Shafiq, Nauroze's father.

It was their first time travelling any farther than the vicinity of the village and the main town square. On the first days of September mother and daughter boarded the plane. What a wondrous affair for both pairs of eyes. None of them had seen anything of such huge proportions. It appeared like a metallic bird. Minu and Nauroze watched in awe and took in the strange technology of chairs reclining up and down, people hurrying through the aisles with trays full of hot buns, coffee, small packets of Lurpak butter and fruit jam.

Nauroze felt sudden pangs of fear. She was leaving everything familiar in her life—her grandmother, her cousin brother with whom she played endless hours of hide-and-seek using the old mango tree as

a hiding spot, the huge sprawling house that is her *dadubari* and everything that was known and so dear, all to take a leap into the vast unknown with her young mother.

The journey did not take long. Those first few moments after they landed in the new country was surreal.

They tugged at their luggage and tried to make it down the stairs as Minu refused to take the "moving stairs" at any cost. Shafiq was late, and this upset Minu, but she refused to express it once he did show up.

Nauroze remembers her father being unabashed and unapologetic for leaving his daughter and wife standing in the desert heat, completely stranded in a new country.

He piled their luggage into the trunk of the humble 1980 red Toyota Corolla before zooming them away from the airport. Shafiq was an immigrant in this nation, but not a seasoned one like most of their neighbours would be. Shafiq came here after his father's death to try and support his family in Bangladesh. He started out as a carpenter at a factory.

It was a good thing, because he had always had a way with his hands, designing and carving out tiny mementos. He worked up the ladder very quickly, slowly starting to mingle with the top business people of the country, getting better and better at his work.

By the time his wife and daughter arrived, he could already afford a nice apartment in a small residential block full of other immigrant families, mostly from South India and Sri Lanka. It allowed his family to associate with the kind of people they would otherwise have very little reason to befriend.

Minu and Nauroze found it hard to settle down at first. Both of them were bitterly lonely, in a new country where neither child nor mother understood the language, the currency, the roads or the food.

Still, like all other immigrants, they persisted. Over time, even thrived. They managed to co-exist with other immigrants, most of whom were either academics with well-paying jobs at different schools, or nurses, doctors and engineers. It was only Nauroze's family that did not truly fit into the social circle they were pretending to be a part of.

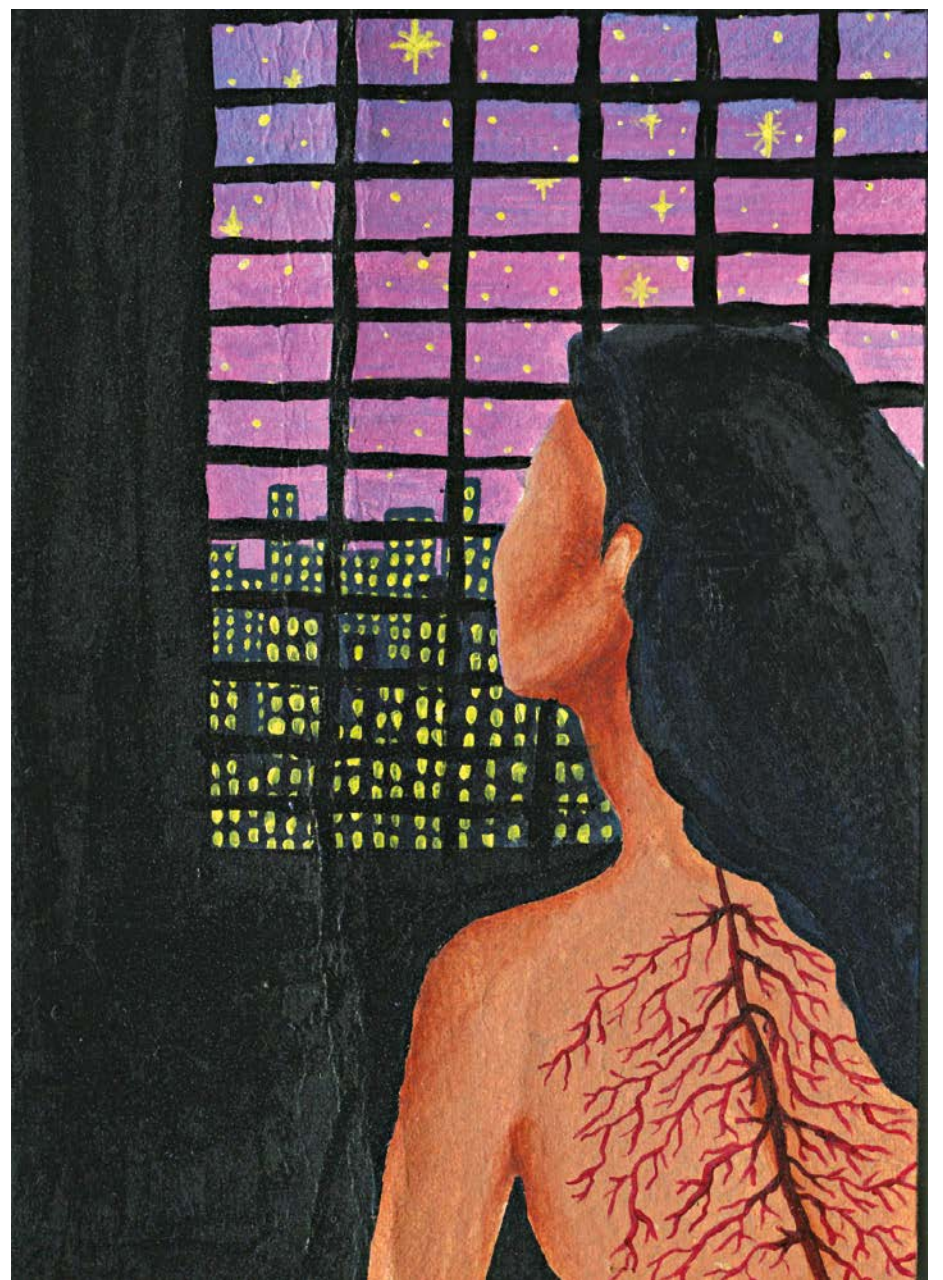


ILLUSTRATION: ZAINAB RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

Nauroze was admitted to a school in her neighbourhood with the help of one of her father's business partners, someone who understood English and penned a small application for the child, urging them to enroll her into the kindergarten in the middle of the school year.

On school days, her mother parted her hair in the middle in a very straight line and tied it up into two very tight braids.

She packed her a lunch of 'Bombay toast' wrapped in the same polythene bag in which the bread came. Nauroze and two of her next-door neighbours from Bangalore and Kerala all piled up into her father's car to be driven to school. She sat quietly, seat belt securing her tightly to the front seat, and stared outside trying to trace back the path to her home from school.