

sion, before it outgrows you—like my netting roots. If I want to be free from them, I will die.”

The insomniac tried digging holes with two hands around the captive tree, hoping to unwind its trunk from the jumbled roots that spread from one corner of the garden to the end of horizon’s end. But the tree cringed at the touch of ten cold fingers. When something is dead, trees know it first. The obsession had to end, the insomniac muttered. In this world, in order to win any battle, one must surrender to one’s darkness.

### III

Michigan Lake was frozen solid. The roads swirled around it like layers of icing and the endless buildings stood like lines marked with crayon—vertical, colorful, but pointless. Looking up, one could see a dull winter sky covered in skyscrapers. Each build-

ing had at least forty floors, with countless homes in each floor—homes that are filled with consciousness: moving, living, thinking, eating, fucking, sleeping consciousness. But from the Michigan Avenue Bridge, each of those hanging homes looked like a box framed by a window, neatly packed, as if ready to ship home. All those living creatures! After so much toil and so much hassle, all they do is crawl into those boxes and wait for the sun to give them the signal to crawl out again.

A flake of snow softly landed on her shoulder, brushing against her nose, which caused Kheya to twitch her nose and sneeze. She looked at her phone. Professor Hamid should be here any minute now. Last night, he had expressed his desire to revisit Picasso before flying back home, to Bangladesh. Even though Picasso was not her type, Kheya promised to accompany him. The three days long conference had

turned her head into a frozen SanDisk, in a dire need of a reboot and a visit to the museum might help. The wind pierced through her skin like needles of ice. She tried to save her face by covering it with her gloved hands, but it was of no avail. By the time Professor Hamid arrived, Kheya’s nose had turned blue. He was caught in the middle of some old acquaintances that wanted to pull him at the direction of the bar for the sake of bygone Bangladeshi days. He chuckled. But he had promised to return to them after their museum visit.

“Should we call an Uber?” Kheya tapped her phone.

“Yours is a lazy generation,” said the old professor. “It’s only a few blocks away, right on Michigan Avenue, and you’re already fidgeting!”

“Point taken,” Kheya interrupted. “Let me turn on the Google map.”

“Just follow me, you, lazy woman with no sense of direction.”

Kheya let the old man lead the way. Professor Hamid, being a mentor from her college days back home, and a respected man, took the role of an experienced guide that day. He made sure Kheya did not jaywalk on a busy road, or did not walk slow when the ‘walk’ signal turned yellow before they crossed the street.

“The first time I came here, I was a young doctorate student,” he said as they entered the museum. “Ihab Hassan brought me. Ihab said, ‘Hamid, to see a little of Picasso, you should visit Chicago,’ and we drove here all the way from Wisconsin. What a wonderful experience it was, strolling through the rooms filled with wondrous pieces: Renoir, Gauguin, Monet, Matisse, Sisley, Van Gogh, Braque, and Picasso! And then we dedicated the rest of our night to drinking.”

“You mean, the post-modernist Ihab Hassan?” Kheya asked.

“Yup, that very one.”

“Next please!” Shouted the Lady from the Coat-drop section.

“Give me your coat,” Professor Hamid snatched her jacket away and rushed to the line. Kheya waited in a corner and watched the old man, standing in line, holding their jackets, then paying for them and handing them to the lady. He came back with two tokens and kept them in his pocket. “You know they won’t allow water bottles inside the museum. Finish it now!” He ordered.

Kheya obeyed him as if she was a little girl, and he, her father. Suddenly, she felt a pang inside her—a pang that turned into a clump of pain and clogged her throat. She missed her dead father. It had been twenty years since anyone had spoken to her in a father’s voice.

“Where do you want to start?” Professor Hamid was looking at the map trying to locate a starting point.

“In any museum, I always start with Monet and Van Gogh.”

“Good strategy,” he said. “Let’s go! It’s on the third floor.”

“If we get lost, I’ll come back to Gogh,” Kheya said.

“And I’ll be with Picasso,” answered the spirited man as he jumped up the stairs with her, but then slowed down a little and held on to the railing.

“Are you grown old, Professor Hamid?” Kheya became concerned, “Why didn’t you tell me? We could’ve taken the elevator.”

“Just limping my way toward the olden



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