

THE GREAT GRIDLOCK

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SHOUT
FICTION

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Being hired as airport staff for aiding passengers on arrivals and departures, Rashed basically had the job of a fancy porter. Regardless, Rashed took pride in his job, and hadn't misspelled any of his clients' names in a while now. He was used to pompous, arrogant businessmen since they made up most of his clientele. Still, one Mr. Chowdhury was doing a splendid job at reaching the top of Rashed's worst passenger list. He was insulting everyone around him audibly while they waited for the luggage to arrive.

Rashed tried to remain as courteous as possible, and looked for the man's bags.

After only five minutes in the crowd, Mr. Chowdhury yelled, "Ridiculous! I'll wait in the executive lounge for first class passengers. You let me know after the luggage is here and you have called my cars."

At this Rashed breathed a sigh of relief. Good riddance, he thought.

However, after two hours had passed, he had to accept that he would have to face his client with some bad news. He walked up to the lounge, and located Mr. Chowdhury. The man almost jumped on him the moment he spotted Rashed.

"Where have you been? Where is my car? I knew I shouldn't have trusted you with my luggage. You must have stolen something!"

Rashed, fuming on the inside, still replied calmly, "Sir, I have not stolen anything. Your car cannot make it to the gate. It's stuck in the line. Apparently whole portions of the surrounding area have been grid-locked in traffic."

After forty-five minutes of loud incredulity about the state of affairs, Mr. Chowdhury was convinced to walk towards his car. He barked a quick order at Rashed to load his excess luggage in the other car behind him, "And mind you, be careful, there are some very expensive objects!"

Rashed didn't really see the point in waiting in the car. From the alleviation of Terminal 2 of the airport, there were only stuck cars for as far as his eyes could see.

At this point a bearded man with a tote bag approached Rashed.

"Bhai, do you know how far this traffic goes?" he asked. "I don't know. Some crazy drivers have been saying it's blocked all the way till Mirpur. But what do they know? I think they just thought they could fool me," replies Rashed with a scoff.

The man just nods slowly, and then walks off. Rashed watches as he weaves through the cars and disappears out of sight.

12 HOURS INTO THE GRIDLOCK

At Mirpur, Esha was sickened by the traffic at the intersection. Her mother had been feeling unwell these last few days and she had finally made time to take her for a check-up. She had so much work left at the office. How was she supposed to get back to the office if she couldn't even reach the hospital?

Annoyed, Esha got out of the car to see what was going on. Just as she opened the door, she hit a girl on the bike next to her. Her irritated reaction pissed off Esha even more. She looked ahead; there were countless cars in front of her with barely any space to move. Something felt wrong. Esha's mother was already feeling unwell and she couldn't stay like this for long.

"Excuse me? Your mom doesn't look okay. Does she want something to eat? My mum packed some tangerines for me. Maybe she'll feel better if she eats," the girl on the bike said to her.

"Erm, yes she isn't feeling well. Thank you so much," Esha said as she took the box. Despite her being bothered

by the girl's cotton candy like hair, she actually started to like this girl. She looked like she was in her mid-twenties. Maybe if she was interested, Esha could talk to her about her son Apurba?

Two hours had gone by and they had barely moved an inch. At this point, even their car was running out of fuel from the AC being turned on for so long. Esha had to do something. Barely able to move in the crowded street, she asked a CNG autorickshaw driver what was going on.

"There is traffic everywhere, *apa*. Cars have jammed up to Bijoy Sarani."

Esha could not believe it. She had heard about the traffic issue around Uttara that very morning, but it was supposed to be fixed by now. After three hours of being stuck in the same place, Esha finally realised this was more than just "Mirpur traffic".

Before she could say anything else, a tall, thin, bearded man approached the CNG driver and began talking to him.

"Bhai, I was told in the morning that the traffic extended till here. Now it seems it goes further. Do you have any idea how far I will have to walk to get empty roads?"

The CNG driver shrugged and then said, "Gabtoli probably has empty roads now."

Even though Esha was appalled by this horrific information which meant her mother's treatment would have to wait, and also irritated by how the CNG driver had blatantly just lied to either her or this man, the bearded man didn't seem very disturbed at all. He just nodded and walked away.

24 HOURS INTO THE GRIDLOCK

Nothing seemed to be going right for Ashik this semester. He was hoping it would end with some good news, but no. It was the day of his final project submission and he had completely lost track of time. And now that he finally got out and found a rickshaw, he had been stuck in the same place for an hour now. Dehydrated and boiling under the scorching heat, he just hoped this day would end soon.

"*Bhaiya*," he heard a squeaky voice saying next to him.

"Do you want lemonade? I have some in my bag," said a small boy watching something on his phone in the car next to Ashik. Despite feeling embarrassed about the fact that this ten year old had a better phone than him, Ashik was grateful.

"Thanks, kid. I guess you're already late for school, huh? What are you watching there?"

"I'm watching the old Pokémon movies. My *boro apu* is a huge fan."

Whoa. A girl who loves Pokémon? She must be super cool. He started daydreaming for the fifth time this week over a girl he barely knew when he heard a ping. It was Arani.

"Dude! I just heard about the traffic thing. So glad I get to stay home today... Really needed a break."

"What traffic thing?"

With every message he received, he got more and more frustrated. Apparently, transport had been jamming up in certain areas, so much so that they hadn't moved in hours. And by the looks of it, the same seemed to be happening

here. Although this was bad news, Ashik breathed a sigh of relief. This meant he wouldn't have to go all the way to New Market, and then university. He could just walk home.

But what would he do about his project and all his tools? He couldn't just abandon them. Desperate, he talked to his rickshawala mama to see if there was a way. He, in turn, talked to the one in front of them.

"*Bhaiya* has to go through that alley. Ask the cars on that side so we can move closer."

Before Ashik could tell them it is a dead end, he noticed the alley fill up with cars that could barely fit. And within a few minutes, it was filled with vehicles. What had he done? There was barely any space for a person to walk there, let alone his gigantic project and tools.

Ashik was trapped on the streets. Again.

As he sat in despair, he saw a bearded man talk to the driver of the Pokémon kid's car. The man first claimed that the traffic had spread from Uttara to Gabtoli. Then Ashik heard him ask how far the traffic could be now. Ashik extended his head to hear the driver's response.

"Whoever told you the traffic was only till Gabtoli doesn't know the real story. Traffic is till Dhanmondi now for sure."

Dhanmondi! That is almost all of Dhaka! Ashik was left sitting and holding his model as he saw the bearded man's green *fotua* threading through the traffic.

36 HOURS INTO THE GRIDLOCK

Sohel was sweating. He had heard that traffic today seemed particularly bad, and would definitely have stayed at home if he could have, but the endeavour that he was heading to was not one that could be postponed at a days notice. Therefore, he had decided to start out as early as possible. For someone travelling with a host of thirty other family members and fifteen cars in tow, he had thought it a miracle that he managed to set out by 7 o' clock.

However, as he continued to perspire in his too-heavy *sherwani*, he knew he had underestimated his struggle today. Random ridiculous thoughts kept passing through his head.

Would the fat in the kacchi get cold if he was too late?

Could he stop by a store to buy some deodorant now, or should he wait till after the programme?

Maybe it would be good if he stank. Then his fiancée might refuse to take those irksome posed "intimate" pictures with him.

His distracted thoughts were interrupted when his chauffeur's phone suddenly started ringing with the "Pirates of the Caribbean" theme. The man picked up, and then inexplicably handed the phone to Sohel, while saying the very last words Sohel wanted to hear at the moment.

"There is something wrong with the elephant."

Oh, God. The elephant. A ludicrous request on his fiancée's part, if the elephant was stuck in this traffic, it was definitely not pleased. And if Sohel's instincts were right, it was making its displeasure apparent in very some extreme fashion.

"Hello. It's me, Sohel. What's going on?"

"Sir, the elephant... Well... There has been an accident."

"Accident? Is it hurt?!"

"Oh no sir, the elephant's fine. But it was stuck in traffic right in front of your hall. There were cars surrounding it on all four sides. One of the cars from behind decided to employ their horn. The elephant—he got agitated. He started going out of our control."

"But what happened?!"

"No one was hurt, but he trampled over the car in front of us. Its trunk is totally damaged."

Sohel breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh that's not too much of a problem. Tell the owner we will pay their repair charges."

"Sir, actually, the owner of the car was your eldest uncle-in-law."

Of course, thought Sohel as he looked through his windshield to the sea of red taillights ahead of him. Of course it was.

Suddenly there was a tap on his chauffeur's window. A bearded man in glasses leaned his head into the window, and began asking his chauffeur how far he would have to walk to see empty streets.

His chauffeur looked at back at Sohel furtively, and then whispered his reply in a way that sounded like he didn't want Sohel to hear, "Bhai, the traffic has probably crossed all of Dhaka now. You'll find empty roads after Kamalapur Railway Station."

Sohel's eyes widened at the news his chauffeur had kept hidden from him. As he watched the bearded man walk away, they got into a yelling match.

48 HOURS INTO THE GRIDLOCK

The bearded man had climbed up the stairs of a tower near Kamalapur Railway Station. He wanted a glimpse of how far the traffic extended from the highest vantage point he could find. He had been erratically walking a twisted path through Dhaka for the last two days. Now, as he looked in all four directions he saw only gridlocked roads in all directions. He would need to ask someone where he should walk towards next.

This traffic couldn't go on forever, could it?

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