

MONSUR

NABIHA NUSAIBA

“Only three today, Monsur *Bhai*.”

Three? The number of orders had decreased from eleven to three overnight, the highest decrease he had faced today, or ever. *Ostaad will not be happy*, worries Monsur, as he climbs down his time-worn bicycle and walks towards the bearer of bad news. Supreme gatekeeper of the finest of apartments, Imam stands between Monsur and all of the world’s finest luxuries with a toothbrush in one hand and a list of newspaper subscriptions in the other. His shirt is untucked, with a white t-shirt peeking out from under his asymmetric collars. *He must’ve spent all night at the gate*, Monsur sympathises as he takes the list and returns to his cycle to sort out the ordered papers. He hands Imam the order before ticking it off his list, the last for the day.

Monsur absentmindedly pedals back to the distribution house while calculating the total number of newspapers sold today, a disappointing 2384 out of 7200. He knows that it is not his fault and yet he is afraid of what *Ostaad* might say. *Ostaad* is usually a man of mild temperament but he does get very angry at times. When he gets angry, he is difficult to look at – his pupils slide a little to the sides and his nostrils flare, making him look like an unfocused, angry bull. Monsur laughs at the illustration he creates in his head before colliding tire-first into the trunk of a mahogany tree on the side of the street. He falls, with the cycle and all the leftover newspapers atop and around him. Thankfully, there’s no one to see him in this embarrassing state in the early hours of the morning. Monsur pushes the cycle from on top of him and clambers to his feet. He brushes the dirt from his clothes, starts collecting the papers. Unfortunately, the newspapers did not make it out as unscathed as Monsur. Most of them fell on the mud, making them filthy and the writing on them illegible. Now, he was scared. The angry bull he imagined might as well chase him around town today. Scraping up whatever unscathed paper there was left and piling them on his backseat, Monsur climbs up and rides on. This time, a little more carefully.

Upon reaching the house, Monsur tip toes in carefully, his mind buzzing with a bucket load of excuses, all of them containing great danger in the form of transportation. Turns out, he does not have to use them at all, *Ostaad* hadn’t come in yet, he wouldn’t be the one taking the updates today. Relieved, Monsur sits on a bench, calculating his calculations of the day.

After finishing his calculations, Monsur usually picks at the damp, green wall on his left to curb his boredom. Today however, Habib *Ostaad*, *Ostaad Ostaad’s* second-in-line has called them all to his desk, as if just to help break the monotony.

The entire office is one open hall with a booth at the farthest end, reserved for

Ostaad. Everyone else, including Habib *Ostaad* sits outside, on desks divided into two columns. Sitting in front of a universe of his own calculations, Habib *Ostaad* adjusts his spectacles further down his nose before looking up at his employees. Having spent all of his youth and middle ages working at the house, Habib *Ostaad* had never gotten the chance to get married and start his own family. To him, the boys were his family. Sadly, this is what made the current

scared of. This is only temporary, just until the lockdown is lifted and the orders go back to normal. Here, take these,” Habib *Ostaad* hands envelopes to four of the seven boys; Monsur is part of the unlucky majority. “This is your salary for the month. I’ll call you once the situation subsides. Why don’t you go home now?”

Monsur doesn’t know what to think. He’s hopeless. He wanted to protest and stay, instead he said nothing. Not a word.

tell his family? He is the sole bread earner in his house of five. If this virus situation persists for longer than a month, how were they going to afford all the bills? There was *Abba’s* medicine to think of, and—*oh no!* In a swift second, his focus was brought down to the present as he steps on soft, round ground. He looks down and recoils immediately. Wincing and barking in pain is a little, white puppy. Soaked in guilt in seconds, Monsur kneels down to help take



ILLUSTRATION: **RIDWAN NOOR NAFIS**

situation worse. He clears his throat before saying, “Listen, over the last few years, our house has only taken hits when people preferred to get their news from phones instead of newspapers. But now, times are really bad. I never thought I would have to see such a day. To be honest with you boys, I don’t see how we can even manage to stay open but, we must. For as long as we can.” He stops, lifts the lid on his glass of water, takes a sip and then continues, “We have to let some of you go.” His face softens as he acknowledges the looks of shock on the others faces. “No, no, there’s nothing to be

What use will words be against reality? He takes his envelope and returns to his area to pack his belongings. He looks at his *dibba* and feels melancholy. There’s nothing quite as sad as packing food for a long day and then having to take it back home.

Walking as slowly as is humanly possible, Monsur reaches the spot where all the cycles are parked before realising that they are work cycles. Work cycle. Work. He sighs and begins walking on the sidewalk in the direction of his house, determined to make the walk as long as possible. A new worry now surrounds Monsur. What was he to

away its pain, but he doesn’t know how. He sticks to patting it, probably more for his consolation than the poor animal’s. He sits there for a few minutes, hoping for time to heal the mutt’s wounds like they say it does. Taking out his *dibba*, Monsur pours its humble contents onto the ground. This seems to do the job; the little puppy was no longer focused on its pain and dives headfirst into the mound of rice and curry. Monsur smiles and stands before dusting the dirt off his hands and pants. With one last look, he walks on. This time, a little more carefully.