You Cannot Go Away after Overstaying in Sylhet

MALIHA AKHTER

Every once in a while,
Like needles, rain crashes on my windows.
But today, the city is slowly dropping off her misty cardigan.
You may ask what season runs in my heart,
But please don't ask about the season in my city right now.
Because nobody knows, and those who know won't tell.
Why isn't it raining already?

In the distance,
I can see the lights of Shillong, on top of its hills.
Their houses, bazaars and city lights,
Seem so close that I always feel like,
I'm living in two cities, two countries.

You know, my city sleeps early, wakes up late.
There's no rush to catch a breath.
Peace follows so much like a shadow in my city that,
Sometimes, one dreams of chaos and it aches.
It's the kind of peace that makes you feel guilty,
And you wish to run away.

But can you really leave?

The writer is a student of English Literature at Metropolitan University, Sylhet.

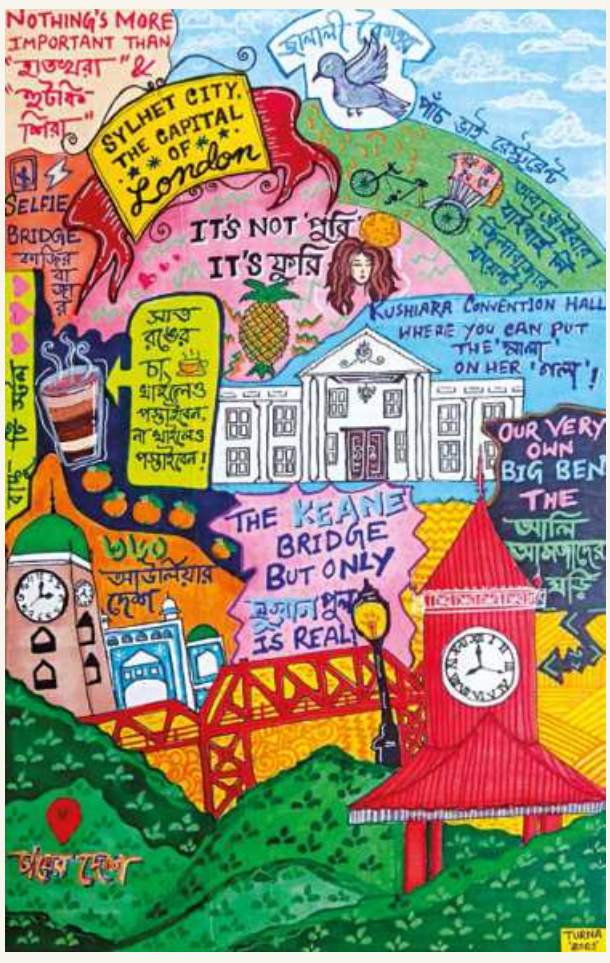

ILLUSTRATION: **TURNA NISHITA SINHA**

ILLUSTRATION: **SYEDA RUAIDA ISLAM**

RAJA MANSION

FAEEJA HUMAIRA MEEM

I snuck out of school again today. If my parents found out, I would probably be grounded for life, but it was worth it. I had to see him.

I took a brief glance at my wristwatch, it was almost noon but one wouldn't be able to tell looking at the overcast sky. To my left, a boy of about my ageran past a van on which a middle-aged man in a typical worn-out checked shirt was selling fruits. To my right, two girls in matching black burqas walked out of a shopping mall holding hands and suddenly came to a standstill and burst into giggles, as a motorcycle carrying a man and a little boy in pre-school uniform passed in front of them, probably on their way home. As I moved through the road on a rickshaw towards the old run-down building ahead, I was suddenly overcome by a strange sadness, and as if on cue, the sky thundered and a downpour began. I asked the rickshaw puller to stop, paid him 20 taka and dashed through the narrow entrance into *Raja Mansion*.

"Come inside Apu, take a look at our collection!"

"What are you looking for?"

I lowered my head and started walking, ignoring the calls from the store owners. Climbing up the stairs carefully that were now damp from the rain, I reached the floor where I most wanted to go.

"Mamoni, do you want to look at these new books?"

Ah, here we go again, I thought, but it was somehow slightly better than the level below. The entire floor consisted of only bookstores, one of my favourites was the first one, *Bondhu Library and Publications*. Even the calls from the store owners were far more decent up here. I pondered the reason for a minute, then remembered why I was there in the first place. I rushed past all the stores and read out their names as if committing them to memory – *Bismillah Library and Stationery*, *Icon Library*, and spotted *Maloncho Library* and *Nahar Library* in the distance, and while I really wanted to visit all of them and check their latest book collections, I had my priority straight. The place I needed to go was *Boipotro*, and there it was, with its distinct large blue frame and its name boldly written above, in all its glory.

I came here for the first time with my elder brother last month, who was the only one that took me out at times to show me around the city. I took off my shoes and entered.

It had a serene atmosphere, as expected, and there was only the receptionist behind the counter reading *Iliad*, and my brother, sitting on the floor with his back against the shelves, with his head buried inside a book. I beamed at the sight and tiptoed towards him, pulled out a book from the shelves – *Percy Jackson and the Battle of the Labyrinth* – and sat beside him.

"Hey, you!"he looked startled but had a grin. I took a quick look at the receptionist, who seemed to have not heard my brother, then hushed at him.

"Bhaiya! Sshh!"

"You're not supposed to be here!"he exclaimed.

"I know! Ma warned me not to come back here after I skipped school last time but I couldn't help it,"I whispered. I caught a glimpse of the woman behind the counter shooting a glance at us once again. My brother seemed sad, but did not say anything else and went back to his book, and reluctant to argue, I started reading too.

I had not realised how much time had passed until...

"Maisha! There you are!"It was my father.

I forced myself to look up and saw both my parents gasping for air. The clock read 4:38 PM and I realised I was supposed to be home over three hours ago. My father was in his raincoat and mother had an umbrella and they were both dripping with water; *they must've been searching for me in the rain*. I should have been worried about being scolded, but oddly, I was seething.

Why are they here? They're making the floor wet. Why do ma and baba have to be so worried even when I am with bhaiya? I turned back to my brother, who was gazing at me, and cried, "Please ask them to leave!"My brother smiled with his sad eyes and nodded at me with reassurance.

Before he could say anything though, my father tugged hard at my arm and started pulling me out of the room. I yelled something unintelligible and tried to break myself out of his clutch but my mother got hold of me. She was crying, her tears streaming down her cheeks and making my shoulders wet. I heard my father trying to explain the situation to the woman at the counter, "My son passed away in a road accident last month. She is still in shock so please underst-"

"NO!"I cut him off and started sobbing, howling, "He's right here!"I pointed at the corner.

There was no trace of my brother.

Traitor.

The ringing in my ears and the lump at my throat felt too heavy for me. I was still bawling my eyes out and I barely made out what the receptionist was saying; an apology and something about *bereavement hallucination* and *psychiatrist*.

"You think I am crazy!"I snapped, trying to pull myself out of my mother's embrace. My father immediately came towards us and patted my head. Ugh!I looked at my mother and shouted through my tears, "I met him! He was here! Don't you believe me?"Both my parents then urged in unison, "We do. We believe you."

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