

THE DEFINITIVE
YOUTH
MAGAZINE

SHOUT

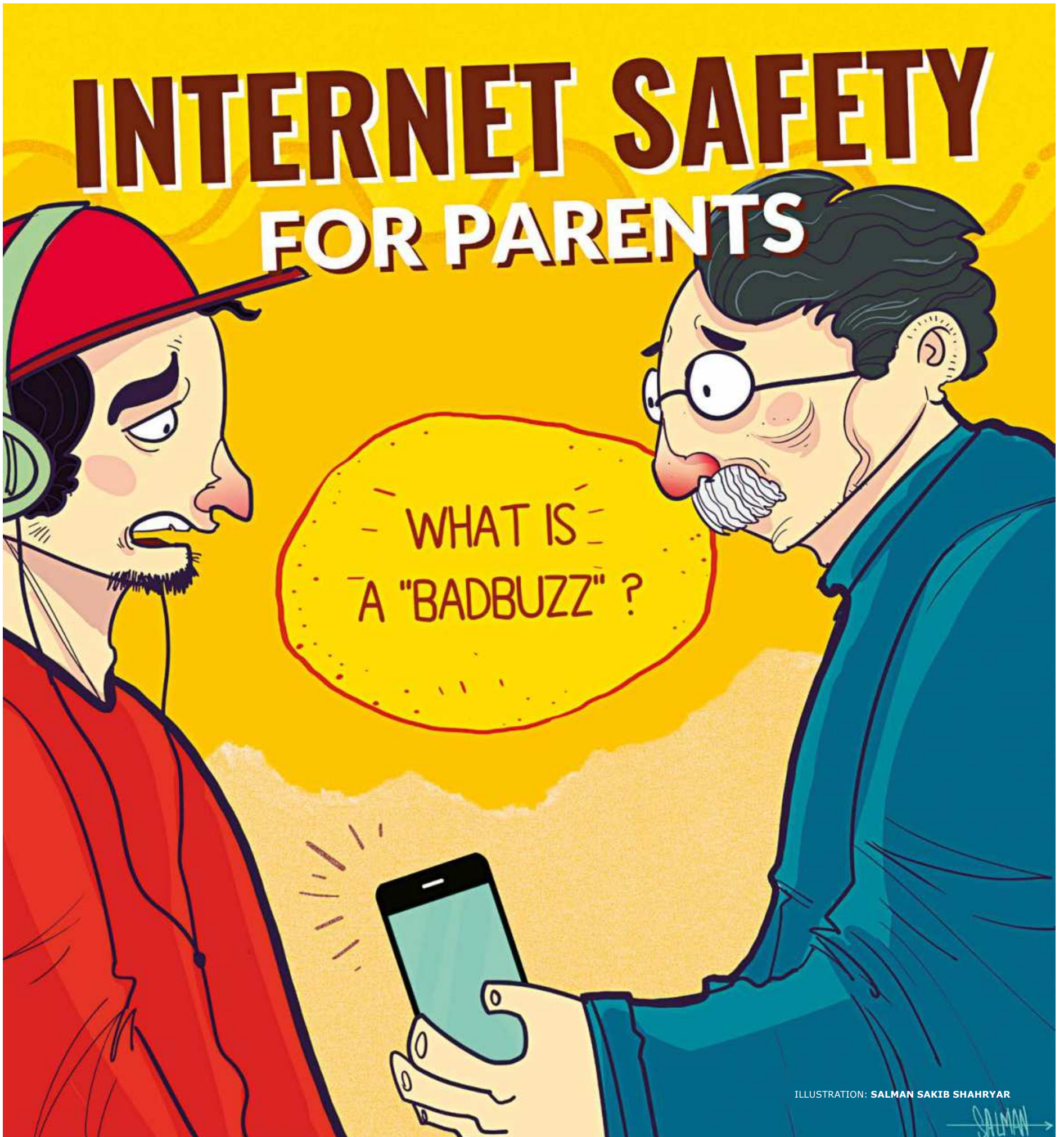
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A PUBLICATION OF *The Daily Star*



OUR OBSESSION
WITH FAIR SKIN
PG 3

YOU HAVE 99 PROBLEMS,
BUT A BREAKUP ISN'T ONE
PG 6



EDITORIAL

I like to believe my parents are rational, logical beings which they (mostly) are. They haven't tried making us do breathing exercises, or sitting outside in the sun to fight corona, although my mom did try making us drink ginger tea.

No matter how many times I tell her, citing credible news reports, that the virus won't spread from objects brought into the house several days ago, she refuses to agree. This all culminated in me, in a frenzy of washing everything I brought back home from a shopping trip, letting loose my inner Gopi Bahu and furiously washing packs of sticky note pads. That was an intellectual low point.

I have since recovered but sadly the stacks of paper have not.

On a more serious note, while we blame our parents for not having enough digital literacy, it is time schools too teach kids how to process and filter information in the digital age. The kind of information we are presented with in the real world has changed, but somehow education regarding it has not.

— **Mrittika Anan Rahman**, Sub-editor, SHOUT



PLAYWATCH

TV SHOW REVIEW



Murder, Mystery and Girl Power

MRITTIKA ANAN RAHMAN

If you're looking for a good murder mystery, this is it. *The Flight Attendant* (2020) is the story of Cassie Bowden who, after a work flight to Bangkok, wakes up with a passenger in his hotel room. The man is now dead and while Cassie knows she didn't do it, she has no recollection of the past night.

Terrified, stuck in a foreign land with foreign laws and guilty of meeting a passenger personally in the first place, Cassie has to piece together the previous night and clear her name to the FBI agents breathing down her neck, all while hopping across borders as part of her job.

Kaley Cuoco can *act*. As Cassie Bowden, Kaley embodies a troubled woman doing everything possible to keep her sanity and life together. The story never leaves Cassie -- each day and each night in her life is recounted. The series spans only a few days and the audience rarely parts with Cassie for a moment throughout.

This also allows for a deep dive into her psyche. The show explores why people grow up to be who they become. As the story unravels, so does Cassie's relationship with her family members. It's not cheesy or forced; it's rather a satisfying feeling of filling in the blanks. Excerpts from her childhood explain her life choices as an adult.

A particular scene of Cassie sprawled on a hotel floor trying her best to pull herself together, then crawling to the

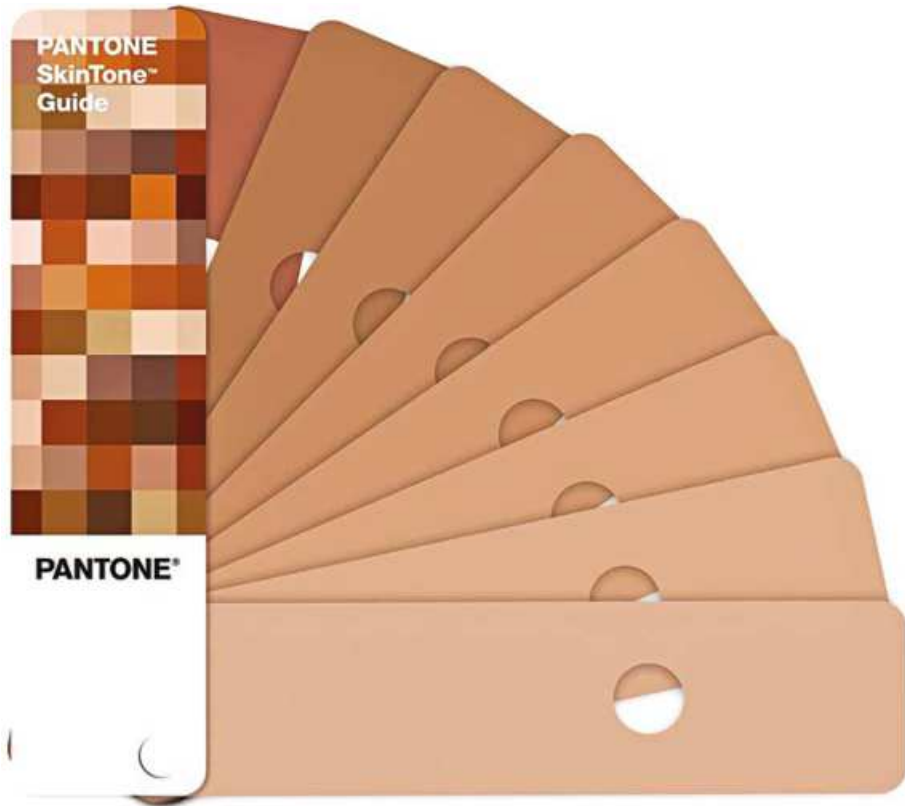
mirror in front of her to roll herself up to the hotel bed with the effort and hurt pride of a wounded animal, will forever remain etched in my brain as an example of fine acting.

Cassie has what can be best described as a *Sherlock*-style mind palace which the dead passenger himself inhabits to help her solve his death. It's visually pleasing to see this mind palace be decorated with whatever Cassie is struggling with at the moment, from heaps of shredded paper to funeral flowers.

The show never explicitly pushes any agenda. It took me a moment to realise how subtly moving the series was. Zosia Mamet as Cassie's best friend and tough lawyer Annie, Michelle Gomez as the villain Miranda and Merle Dandridge as FBI agent Kim Hammond are all women who excel at their jobs and women who you do not want to mess with.

When Kim's male work partner plays things unsafe and follows leads based on hunches, Kim, over lunch from a hot dog cart by the side of the road, schools him on how he's too "male, pale and Yale" (read: male, white and socially privileged) to be able to afford risks in his career she never can. As a black woman, she can simply never get away with the same things. Cuoco, also an executive producer on the show, said in an interview that she pursued the rights to the novel by Chris Bohjalian as soon as she started reading it. I'm really glad she did. The story becomes a little predictable by the end but it's still a good journey throughout.





Our Obsession With Fair Skin

NABIHA NUSAIBA

I was three when I had my first encounter with the “fair skin police”. I was playing with my grandmother when a distant relative visited our house and purposefully commented on my skin tone, “Oh, so light you’ve become! You were dirt-skinned like your grandmother when you were born.”

At four, I looked on as kids from my neighbourhood shot down my friend’s advances to befriending them. “You’re too dark, we cannot be friends with you!” one of them said before tossing out all the candies Sameeha Fyrooz – my friend – had given them as a token of a prospective friendship.

At six, I asked my father to buy me fairness cream. I thought it would make me more desirable to people who refused to play with Sameeha and me. And as soon as I understood the basics of makeup, I realised that my mother was wearing makeup that was much lighter than her skin. “It does not look good if you do not appear a little whiter,” was all she had to say.

When I was thirteen, I took part in my first-ever school play as a dancer. The professional makeup artist had only five shades of foundation for the extremely diverse cast, all in different hues of beige. We all got on stage, looking identical to one another, forgoing what made us, us.

Since ancient times, herds of people have settled on our land. Hundreds of wars have broken out over territory, and wars highlight differences. And what better way to differentiate than what is easily seen? Throughout time, we find instances where the colour of one’s skin is the only deciding factor in whether a person will rise to rule or be reduced to nothing. It wouldn’t be a shocker if our ancestors consciously, or subconsciously, believed that the only way to get rid of their sufferings was to somehow resemble their “blue blooded” counterparts. They married people with fairer skin, applied and fed various concoctions to their families and avoided the sun as best as they could. But 73 years after the end of the British rule, why do we still adhere to this mentality?

Every day, a large chunk of the population is taunted and bullied for their skin tone without a single thought on how it wrecks their self-confidence. Sameeha, now 21, says, “I get comments on how I should use certain products or avoid going out in the sun, or else no one would marry me. At this point, I really couldn’t care less but people make it seem like it’s my fault. I feel as if my own people actually disapprove of the fact that I am comfortable in my own skin.”

Sometimes, colourism is traced back to educational years. Rasha Jameel, 21, says, “In school, I used to be called out to the front for photographs while my friends with darker skin were sent to the back.”

Most of the time, colourism does not stay limited to bullying but extends to the point where it affects one’s condition of life. Often, people are denied jobs where appearances are linked closely to requirements, such as in the hospitality or entertainment sector. The latter, especially, fails to uphold the diversity in our subcontinent. Roles for actors with darker complexions are rare. In fact, actors with fairer skin tones are more likely to take on dark-skin roles instead of people casting actual actors with dark complexions.

In a web interview, model Azra Mahmood recalls, “Initially when I started, I was young, I brought an open and fresh mind to work in the industry. They called me short, but I was okay with it. I chose an industry where being tall is a requirement... In the next stage, when I heard that I’m dark in complexion, I was like, ‘Is this a problem?’... People have it in their heads that when you’re dusky, you’re ugly, you’re not worthy.”

If you take some time to think about it, you’ll realise how trivial skin really is. It shouldn’t be a divider for relationships or a silent requirement for jobs. It shouldn’t be the difference between respectful treatment or unfair lynching. It’s an organ that is meant to protect our bodies, let’s start by treating it as such.

The writer often forgets to write down her contact details. Remind her at n.nusaibaah@gmail.com

GASLIGHTING

A Guide to Understanding an Abusive Phenomenon

RASHA JAMEEL

What I’m about to discuss isn’t anything particularly foreign, just widely unacknowledged or downplayed. I suggest this time you pay attention.

The term “gaslight” was first popularised by dramatist Patrick Hamilton whose 1938 play *Gas Light* gave meaning to the word in the psychiatric discipline.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as such: *To manipulate (a person) by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity.*

Simply put, gaslighting is a deceptive act which involves lying in order to distort a person’s sense of reality and confidence. The victim ends up torn between multiple perspectives on a matter and begins to question their own state of mind. The outcome isn’t just mere confusion, it’s a complete loss of faith in oneself that can eventually assume terrifying proportions stemming from self-doubt.

People often misunderstand how gaslighting works, partly due to the reasons given above, and partly because it’s easier to just blame a scapegoat – the person on the receiving end of this form of emotional abuse. It’s quite common for cases of gaslighting to go undetected, with the victim’s psyche enduring varying degrees of trauma that can either dissipate in a short amount of time or continue to plague the mind indefinitely. There’s no such thing as “coming out unscathed” from a gaslighting incident.

Victims often fail to recover from the trauma they experience at the hands of their bullies. This is due to victims being subjected to further scrutiny and contempt exhibited by people who attribute the matter of “gaslighting” as fantasies. Thus, victims’ lives become marred with damages suffered within the walls of their own houses, classrooms, workspaces, and every other place infested by these bullies. The gaslighting goes undetected.

This ignorance, when sustained through years within a group of people, be it family or community, can gradually become ingrained into their faith, paving the way for an abusive cycle. The abuse might not always be a product of malicious intent, but rather, part of someone’s inheritance. Soon enough, the abuse becomes the norm since nobody else knows any better.

The following are possible signs of gaslighting to watch out for:

1. Frequent usage of words and phrases such as, “you’re overreacting”, “you don’t know what you’re talking about”, “you’re being too uptight”, “you’re not in the right state of mind”
2. Instigating unnecessary comparison by repeatedly saying how “someone else has it worse” or how the situation “could’ve been worse”
3. Trying to deviate from the issue by shifting the blame
4. Your emotional state being belittled
5. Withholding of information related to the matter at hand.

To the victims of gaslighting, your sanity has not failed you.

To the acquaintances, friends, and family of the victims, it’s important to treat an incident of gaslighting with sensitivity considering the emotional stress it can exert on the victims. All it takes is the willingness to properly acknowledge and understand it. Offer emotional support, not unwarranted criticism.

Rasha Jameel is your neighborhood feminist-who-writes-big-esays. Remind her to also finish writing her bioinformatics research paper at rasha.jameel@outlook.com

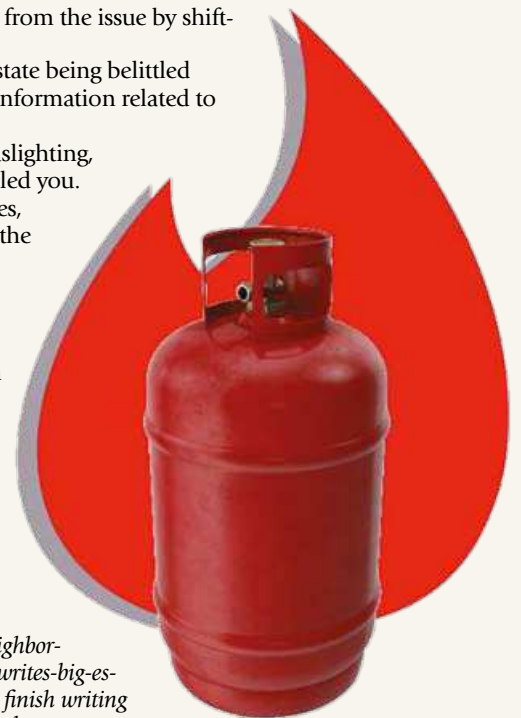


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Maximise the Value of Your New Career

SHAHRIKH IKHTEAR

So you just donned your shiny new shoes and you are ready to kick-start your career after the gruelling years of university. Let's go through a few things you'll need to keep in mind.

INTERACTION IS KEY

When you join a new company, your objective should be to make as many meaningful relationships with your co-workers as possible, especially your important stakeholders. The best way to go about this is to engage with your immediate team members and ask them questions about their regular day-to-day activities in between your own work. Don't restrict your conversations to just work topics, though. Find common grounds to build a proper rapport with them. This goes for other people in your organisation as well. Chances are, you'll be working with multiple departments for your own work, so knowing someone on a deeper level can allow you access to seeking help from them whenever you need it without having to go through an awkward formal process. Ask questions all the time, even "stupid" ones. It's better to admit that you don't know something rather than facing the embarrassment of being put on the spot.

A lot of us shy away from small talk or simply dismiss it as "unproductive". Remember, no one likes a person who only talks about work. We're social beings and genuine interactions are key to building proper connections with your co-workers.

If you manage to stumble upon an Excel wizard, become their apprentice. Their magical formulas and quick macros will end up saving your life more often than not.

SET A WEEKLY CATCH-UP SESSION WITH YOUR MANAGER

Your immediate environment will always nudge you towards a vicious cycle of avoiding your manager as if it's the right thing to do. It is absolutely NOT the right thing to do. Rather, your manager should have a complete view of your activities and what you are doing.

This is why you should approach your manager and ask them for weekly catch-up sessions.

When you first interact with them, make sure you properly outline your expectations and development plan. If you're working in a Marketing role, maybe you want to slowly get to grips with how the company develops brand guidelines and initiates processes for marketing content to be created before you move on to actually managing a sub-brand of the company. Keep open lines of communication and express these interests and wishes to your manager.

Something that many people don't do is that



they don't ask their manager what they expect from them. They sit idly by waiting for orders. Your approach to your career and job description should always be proactive. Figure out what they want from you in terms of your work and impact, then align your goals to reach a middle ground. This will ensure a healthy dynamic between you two and allow minimal room for misunderstandings.

During subsequent catch-ups, outline your activities for the week and what you will do in the following week. Ask for feedback and guidance all the time.

LEARN TO ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES

What I'm about to say is bound to furl some eyebrows but it is for your own good. You should always set boundaries regarding your work. You will have to tactfully allocate your time and effort towards the myriad activities you will be engaged in.

A lot of us are taught to be submissive and follow orders. This can lead to extremely unhealthy habits in your work. Contrary to popular belief, a non-existent work-life balance is not a flex. It can literally cripple your career before you even start running.

Burnout is not a myth. You will lose your intrinsic motivation, your energy levels will be down, and your creativity will fizzle as you enter the world of stress and depression. This will have severe ramifications in your work quality and if you are an ambitious person, this will perpetuate your frustration with yourself.

Address problematic concerns and be stringent about maintaining a balance. Many trainers/coaches will tell you to keep taking up work until you can't anymore. Don't give in to ruining what should be a rewarding and mutually beneficial experience between you and your employer. This is why keeping open lines of communication with your manager is so important. If they understand what you are going through, they will be more willing to address your concerns.

Of course, there will be days when you'll have to stay late or work on weekends but make sure they are for

projects that are worth it, which brings me to my next point.

BECOME FUTURE-ORIENTED

Being in a company, especially a successful one, nets you access to one of the richest learning opportunities you will ever get. When you start off, make yearly goals for yourself to serve as loose guidelines to navigate yourself through the rungs of the corporate ladder.

Always ask yourself if a big project is worth your time and if it's sellable when you transition to a new or upgraded role. I've seen so many people taking up irrelevant projects that added no value to their growth within the organisation, it's not even funny. However, if you do actively search for them, opportunities will present themselves. It will then be up to you to capitalise on it. If you find a good project that is relevant for you, make sure you soak everything up like a sponge. Do not just do the bare minimum, go beyond to truly understand and pick up new skills along the way.

Find skills that are needed in your desired future roles and ask the company to teach you those skills. Good organisations have employee learning opportunities just waiting to be availed. Don't skip out on these as they will truly increase your value as an employee in the future.

A new career can be a daunting prospect, but it really does not have to be. If your work is aligned with your goals and you create a healthy environment for yourself, you will be able to excel and maintain a proper balance.

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INTERNET SAFETY FOR PARENTS

FAISAL BIN IQBAL

April 2020. The whole world is struggling to deal with the Covid-19 and the pandemic that resulted from it. Nationwide lockdowns are in session to prevent the spread of the virus. Flights have been grounded, the streets are empty, and the global economy is collapsing fast. At the same time, scientists and researchers are working day and night to learn more about the Covid-19, and find a possible cure for it.

It's a worldwide effort; people are collaborating across borders to find a solution to the problem at hand. No one knows how long it will take to find one. And yet, while scientists, researchers, doctors, and other experts of the field are struggling to provide an answer, my respected father, a commercial manager in his late fifties, is confident of a certain "medicine" for the disease. How did he learn about it? From the internet, of course. More specifically, he came across a post on Facebook talking about this particular medicine and how it's a guaranteed lifesaver.

But this isn't anything new. Many parents have fallen prey to online advertisements, scams, chain mails, fake news posts and more for quite some time now. And this will go on until they're made aware of the dangers of the internet, and how they can keep themselves safe from them.

HOW ARE OUR PARENTS BEING EXPOSED TO THESE ADS, SCAMS, AND FAKE NEWS?

Unlike our parents, our generation grew up with the internet. It may have existed before we were born, but it became more accessible as we were growing up. We, therefore,

emails. She even replied to a few of those, in one of which she very clearly explained to the sender that she couldn't take a prince's money without a reason."

Thankfully, Taqbirul was able to handle the situation before it caused any severe damage. But this is indeed a problem. The sudden exposure to the features of the internet can be quite overwhelming for our parents. After all, not all of them are aware of how many websites and platforms work, and how they're able to manipulate people through scams.

SHOULDN'T PARENTS KNOW BETTER THAN TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING ON THE INTERNET?

The internet does a pretty good job of making fake news seem legitimate. The real problem, however, starts when these posts are shared by people you actually trust. Take the case of Rameesa Jameel, a senior at North South University, for example. Her father became obsessed with the idea that *kalo jeera* (black cumin) oil can work as a cure for the coronavirus after this was shared with him by one of his siblings. "He started to believe that this was the *only* cure for the disease," says Rameesa. "He even refused to get vaccinated until I intervened and convinced him into doing so."

Rameesa's father fell victim to a WhatsApp chain message that was being spread around at that time; a common way of circulating misinformation. And we're not saying *kalo jeera* does not have healing properties. But perhaps this wouldn't have had such a big effect on her father had it not been shared by one of his close ones.

The chain message takes over the inter-

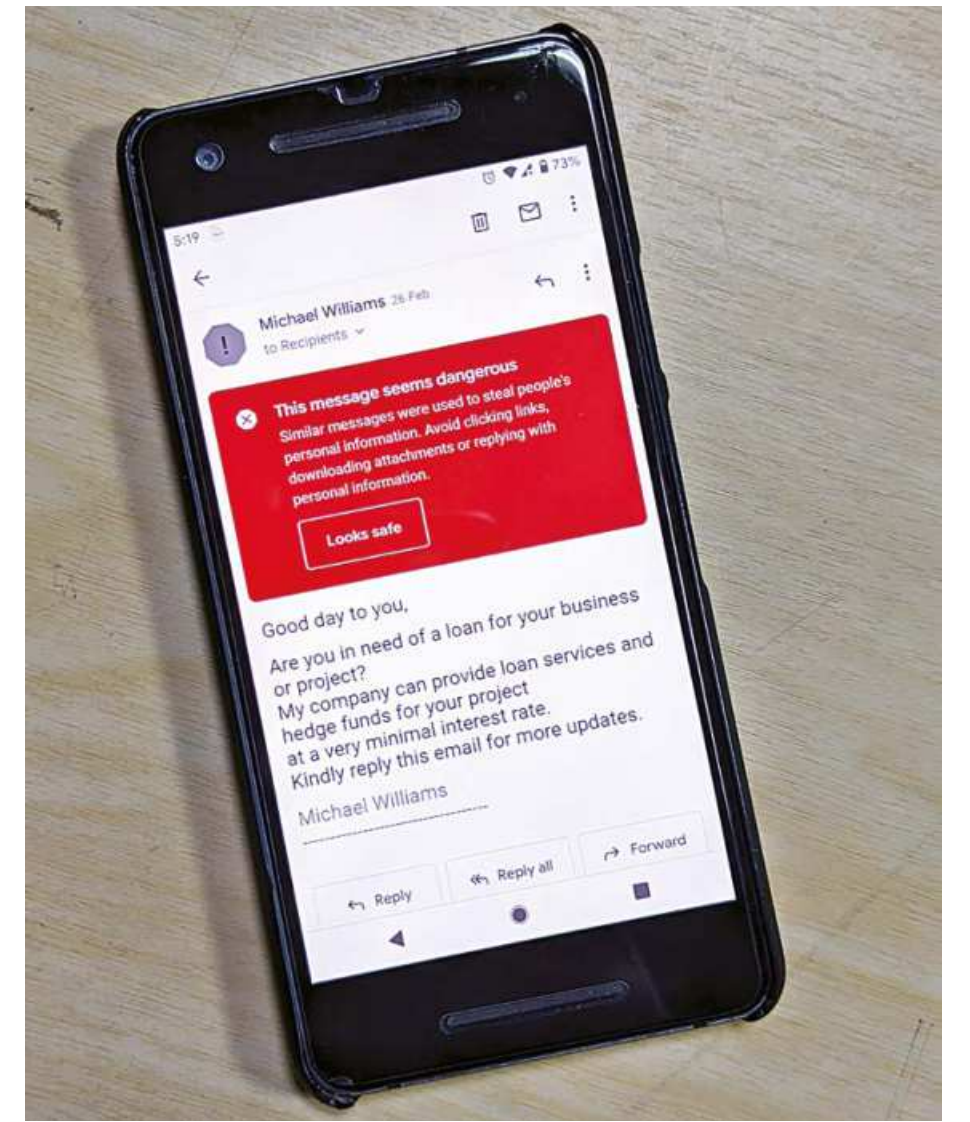


PHOTO: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

story they read online, ask them to cross-examine it with multiple and verified news sources.

Also, ask them not to judge a news piece by its headline. Tell them to read the whole article. Beyond satire, there are many articles out there intended to sound absurd but are in no way real. It's also mentioned in these articles that they're not to be taken seriously. Besides, many news stories are basically click baits. They have a weird title just to grab the attention of the general audience. Once you open the article though, it's an entirely different perspective.

In all fairness, there's only so much that concerned authorities can do in this regard. Facebook and Twitter use AI-driven algorithms to detect and alert users of fake news or scams. They're yet to implement this system in Bangladesh and for the Bangla language. As a result, the stories in our country, especially those written in Bangla, slip past these detection programmes and reach our feeds without being flagged in any way.

EDUCATING OUR PARENTS REGARDING SAFE USAGE OF THE INTERNET

Going back to my dad and his internet-inspired Covid-19 medicine. I was quick to realise that this is just one of the many things that he shouldn't put his faith in. Apart from fake science and medical posts, he would also devote a great deal of his time listening to people talk about their faiths, reading conspiracy theories, and "almost" buying things online. On top of that, he would download apps or software on his phone and computer from various third-party websites, and then complain to

me as to why he was seeing so many ads and pop-ups, and why a cloned version of Google Chrome was set as his default browser.

So, in a way, I knew what I was dealing with, and approached it accordingly.

Firstly, I asked him to unfollow news pages that were not trustworthy, and suggested he verified news outlets to get his daily news. Then, I taught him how to crosscheck facts by simply looking them up online. I also asked him to avoid clicking on any sponsored posts that popped up on his feed. I showed him how to install and uninstall software, and how he can avoid agreeing to certain terms and conditions by simply unchecking a couple of boxes. And I told him he shouldn't share personal information on messaging apps or forms.

Last but not the least, I specifically explained to him why he shouldn't let the internet manipulate him into believing certain things, and that if he needed, he could ask me about the legitimacy of a story and I'd be happy to help him out. It's the least I can do from my end. And this is probably the only way right now to help them understand and deal with the dangers of the internet. Formal training isn't always the right way to go. They'll have to learn about some of these dangers to know and understand the consequences.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Faisal wants to be the very best, like no one ever was. To stay home is his real test, to survive the pandemic is the cause. Write to him at abir.afc@gmail.com

Look before you speak

BUSHRA ZAMAN

Sometimes, in an attempt to speak discreetly to someone else in a public place, we may try to speak in a language we assume others present will not understand.

Suppose you're on a flight going abroad with your family. You carefully eye the food cart coming towards you, but it pauses after reaching the row in front of you. You wait for what feels like hours to finally look at your parent and go, "Juice shesh hoye jachhe toh. Beshi kore chaile ki taka dite hobe? Ekhon bujhlam manush keno lukay khabar ante chay."

Little did you know, the flight attendant was a Bangladeshi too. To your bewilderment, she replies with "Apu, juice ta free. Taka diye juice flight e ante chaile bag check er shomoy fele dile toh abar loss," after which you melt down your seat, only to find out you don't have enough leg room to hide. Do planes offer pillows large enough to bury your whole face in so no one can see you throughout the remainder of your flight?

The potentially embarrassing situations pile up even after you reach your destination. You could be speaking in Bangla to a family member about how you plan to eat store-bought sandwiches as a dinner and not dine at the hotel. I mean, hotel dinners can be crazy expensive, so avoiding them would not be much of a stretch. What may, however, be an awkward surprise would be to discover that one of the hotel staff understood what you were saying.



How? Don't ask me.

As inconvenient as it is when people hear or understand what you are saying when you would rather they did not, the fault is not with the language barrier, but with us. Sure,

sometimes situations require you to talk to someone in confidence, but you can just as well speak to them later when you are alone with them. Not only is it sometimes considered rude to deliberately speak in a manner that is not understandable to others right in front of you, but sometimes people can misinterpret the general undertone of what you are saying as insulting.

For example, you work in customer service and have a native tongue different from that of the general population. You might be talking about how the weather is unpleasant but the customers you are serving may feel like you are talking about them. This may lead them to wonder if there is something wrong with them today, and could potentially make them feel belittled.

Similarly, in case you're on an international flight and there is an unruly child sitting in front of you, you might complain about this child to your friend or family member sitting next to you without others understanding. On the contrary, you could also just ask the flight attendant for a solution or very politely ask the person responsible for the child to help you out.

Communication can be hard, let us not complicate things further by bringing in unnecessary language barriers.

Bushra Zaman likes books, art, and only being contacted by email. Find her at bushrazaman31@yahoo.com

A BREAKUP SURVIVAL GUIDE

You Have 99 Problems, but a Breakup Isn't One

SYEDA TASNIM ISLAM

It finally happened. You, once a hopeless romantic and now simply hopeless, are now having to come to terms with your relationship ending. The butterflies in your stomach have died and the happy tune in your heart has been replaced by an orchestra consisting of only tiny violins playing.

Allow me to be annoying and remind you that there's still hope left. It may feel overwhelming right now, but there are ways you can heal that broken heart.

GIVE INTO THE CLICHÉ

Be as whiny, dramatic, and pessimistic you want to be. Cry a river, throw out the gifts, write angsty poems that your sleepless brain will definitely remind you of at exactly 3 in the morning a year from now. Remember, you don't have to seem strong for anyone. Let yourself *feel the feels*.

Bring out the big guns: Taylor Swift songs

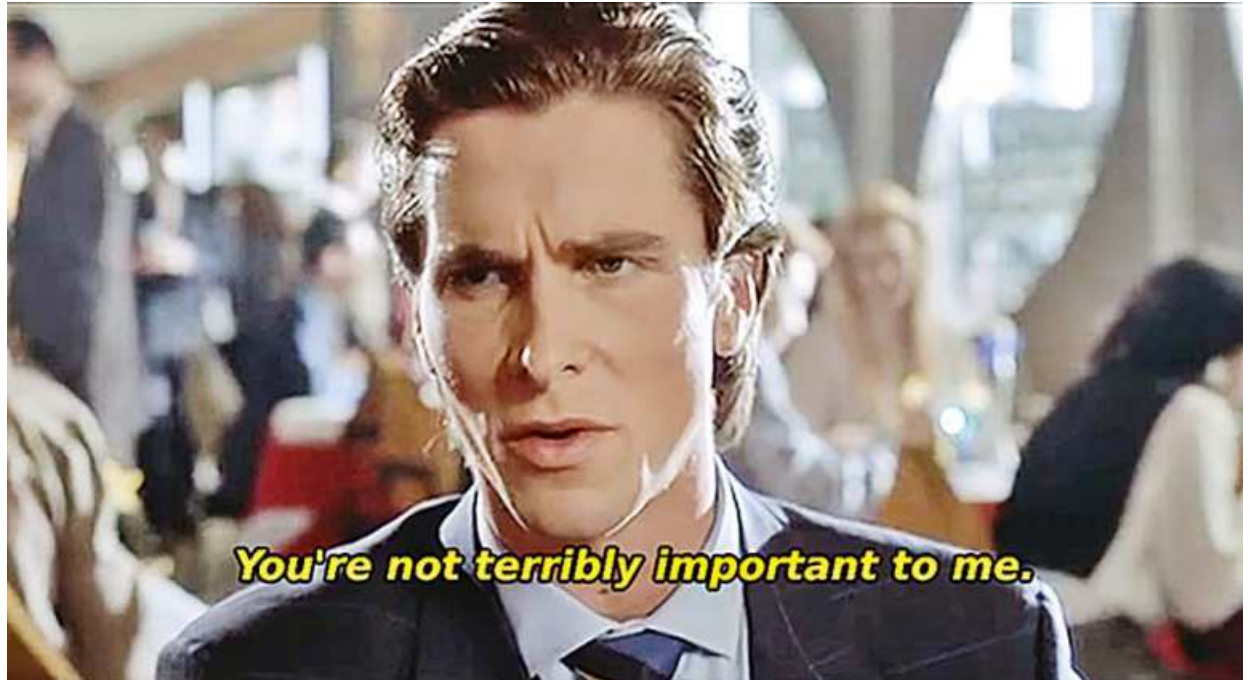
It's time. As much as we like to make fun of Taylor Swift's songs, we cannot deny that the woman just *gets it*. Go ahead and play "Blank Space" on repeat.

PHONE A FRIEND (OR TEN)

Surrounding yourself with people that love and care about you is the best remedy for loneliness. Sometimes all you need is to be reminded of how much more there is to you and your life, how your presence not only matters, but is appreciated. Knowing that there are people who are ready and willing to shower you with unconditional love and affection will help you realise that love not only exists in other forms, but that platonic love is just as beautiful.

USE YOUR TIME

Okay, this is exciting. Relationships are extremely time consuming, and sometimes we can lose ourselves while tending to someone else's needs. You'll quickly realise how much more time you have to yourself now, and even though it can feel lonely, it is an *opportunity*. Be as selfish



with your time as you want. Have your solo dance parties, binge watch all your favourite shows, learn a new skill, get back to old hobbies or just pick up a new one – the possibilities are endless!

PROCESS, AND FACE THE REALITY

Whether it was a good relationship, or a toxic one, it ended for a reason. Focus on that reason. Allow yourself to reflect back on the previous mistakes, and use it as a learning opportunity. A bond breaking with someone you care about is very hurtful, but it just means that you both have opened up a door to a better future. One where you find something

or someone who is truly suitable for you.

We often underestimate our own resilience and potential for growth. Remember that you are still whole and have a lot to offer. This is not the end, it's only the beginning for a newer version of you – one who is now more mature, has more experience, and has the perspective to choose better next time.

P.S. You could also just ignore all these steps and adopt a cat instead.

Tasnim is currently struggling to live, laugh, love. Send her tips at tasnim.upoma96@gmail.com

A SECRET EXCHANGE

AZMIN AZRAN

The darkness in the alley was complete and almost continuous, only punctuated once every three minutes or so by the headlights of a car when a midnight driver rushed along the big avenue from which the alley forked. A neutral observer could have commented that this playful back and forth between light and darkness, shrouded by the remnants of a winter fog, was a curiosity in and of itself, an interesting spectacle for the especially lazy. But then, the cat rummaging through the trash can and the dogs howling at either end of the alley suddenly seemed to notice something was off, a change in the intensity of the atmosphere. They all stopped, dead in their tracks, as a tall thin man in a large panjabi, wrapped in a black shawl of invisibility, emerged at the mouth of the road.

In the fleeting headlight of a white 2003 Corolla X, one could have noticed the gash running down the man's left cheek. The wound looked new, raw and fresh. The stitches looked rushed, but they held things together. For now.

"I am here, Pasha. Show yourself."

A voice responded from behind the same trashcan that the cat (which had vanished by now) was rummaging through minutes ago.

"Is there a password, *dulabhai*?"

"If there was a password, it would be that I am not married to your sister," replied the tall man.

The man called Pasha finally showed himself, and one look at him made it clear why he could blend in so easily in this filthy alleyway in the middle of nowhere. He was dressed in rags, his hair wispy, flying everywhere. A grey stubble framed a face that might have been young in a different universe, and the stink he carried made the other man take a step back.

"So you made it. It's a great place for a secret meeting. Wouldn't you say so, Saqlain?" asked Pasha. His voice betrayed relief, along with some unexpected elegance given his physical state.

"I would've gotten here quicker, but I got recognised at the check post in District 9. What a nightmare!" Saqlain's words left him in a flurry. His demeanour seemed to have eased, but he still looked stressed. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and suddenly leaned back onto a wall. A tired smile appeared on his wounded face. "Want to hear how I got away?"

"You know I can't say no to a good story. Shoot," Pasha leaned on the wall facing Saqlain, who had that glint in his eye that storytellers have when they have a good story to tell.

"Well, I took a motorcycle to District 1, right? It was all going well, until the bike is stopped at the check post in District 9. You know the one by the bridge, right? They start looking at the documents, and I'm trying my best to avoid suspicion, you know? Just whistling to myself and looking around. This trooper suddenly tells me to get off the bike and hand over

my bag, apparently they need to check it. Now that should be fine with me, I have nothing illegal in my bag, so I hand it over. The trooper is fishing through my bag, right, then I notice this other officer looking at me and talking into a walkie-talkie. That's when I realise I've been recognised. I look behind me to see if I can make a run for it, but they have me surrounded by now, I am well and truly screwed..."

"What the heck! How did you get out of that?" Pasha was engrossed by the story at this point. He leaned in towards Saqlain, and finally noticed the details on his face. "Hey! What happened to your face?"

"I'm getting to that," Saqlain pressed on. "So, they've got me surrounded. This

I let it hit me! The big one holding me is hit too, loses my hand, and I get thrown off and land on my face. That's when this happened," Saqlain finished, pointing to his face.

"Wait, no, you told me how you got hurt. But how did you get out of there?" Pasha asked, confused.

"Getting away was easy after that. Everyone was busy trying to stop the microbus and getting the troopers treated, right? I basically sprinted back towards the direction I came from, ran into a store, got changed into this panjabi and shawl, paid them in cash, got out, got onto a rickshaw, pulled the hood up, and got out of there."

"That easy, huh? Then you had your face stitched up?"

business, "I brought what you asked for, Pasha. Do you have the product for exchange?"

"Yeah yeah, it's right here. Let me go get it," Pasha went back behind the trashcan from which he had originally emerged.

Meanwhile, Saqlain fished inside his shawl and retrieved a thick envelope.

Pasha's face lit up as he held up a piece of paper to Saqlain's face. He used the flashlight on his ugly old phone to see what was on the paper, and as Saqlain scanned it, his face broke into a smile. Then he started laughing.

"This is brilliant! Oh, how I missed looking at these," Saqlain's eyes scanned the page again looking for details. "I'm glad you're still drawing cartoons, Pasha, no matter your living conditions." He



ILLUSTRATION: RIDWAN NOOR NAFIS

big mean looking one has my hands held together behind me, and another small one is trying to push me towards one of their armoured vehicles. You know it's all over if they get me inside that car, right? It's clear I need to get away before that happens."

"Did you do something stupid again?" Pasha asked, apprehension in his voice.

"Stupid doesn't begin to describe it, brother. So these two idiots need to get me to cross the street to get into the car, right? I don't resist, really, not until I get to the island in the middle of the road. First, I try to cross the road before them, and the big one holding my hands tries to follow. But then I stop, I pretend I'm scared of the microbus coming towards us, right? His right hand *juust* loses its grasp for a second, and that's when I run into the middle of the street. There's no way I can cross the road without the microbus hitting me, right? So guess what,

"Yep. I paid a dispenser to do it. I don't think they did a good job."

"You need to be more careful, Saqlain. You can't do the sort of things you do and get recognised by the troopers, it's dangerous!" Pasha implored with genuine concern.

"What's the alternative, then? Living on the streets like a rat so no one suspects me?" Saqlain said and exaggeratedly sniffed the air, as if to remind Pasha of his smell.

"I do what I need to do to stay alive. You could've also taken a side road, wore a disguise, or just taken a walk," Pasha didn't budge.

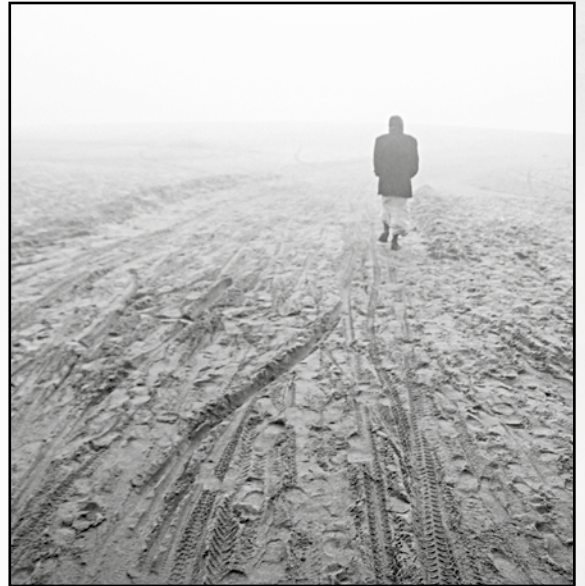
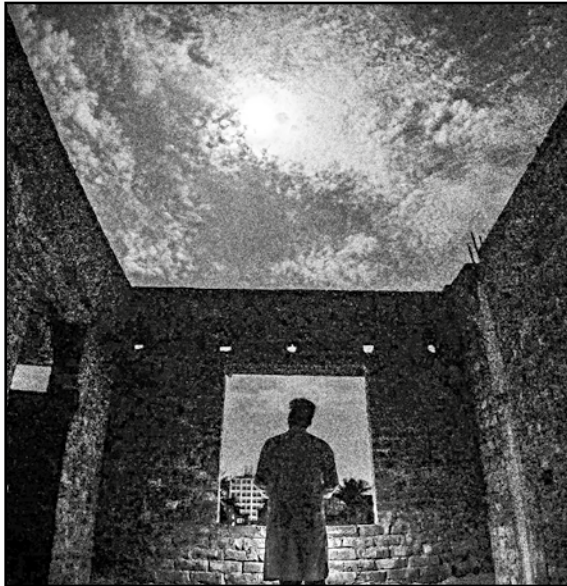
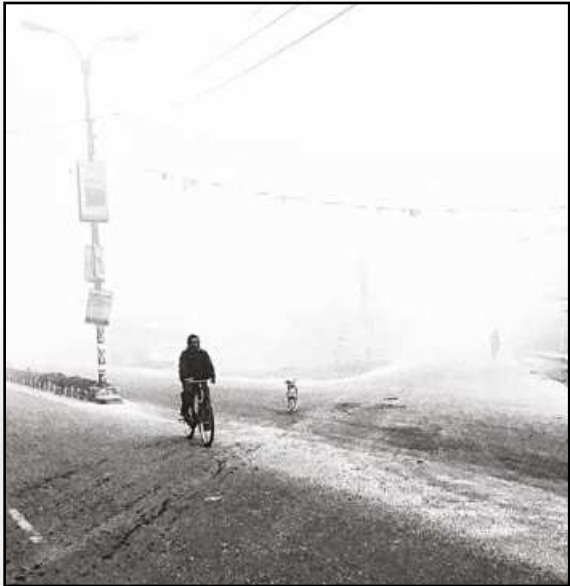
"I wanted to feel the air on my face, okay? I miss the roads. This is my city, is it not?" Saqlain asked, and the anger in his voice lingered in the air for a while. He finally pushed off the wall and stood up straight, indicating that the time for pleasantries was passed, it was time for

finally looked up, his eyes filled with warmth, and he passed the envelope he was holding to Pasha.

"Well, it's the least I can do if you're having to get gashes on your face to write some actual honest-to-god articles!" Pasha joked, waving the envelope at Saqlain's face. "I'll pass these along to someone else once I'm done reading, okay? You do the same with my cartoons."

"Of course," said Saqlain, getting ready to leave, wrapping the shawl tight around him and making the sheets of paper disappear within the folds. "Do you think they imagined when they discovered the internet that fools like us decades later would have to share our work like *this*?"

"There's a lot happening today that no one could have imagined, Saqlain. What's your point?" Pasha concluded, turning around and disappearing just as quickly as he had appeared, behind the trashcan, or maybe somewhere else.



GREY

How do you escape loneliness,
When it follows you everywhere?
Like sunshine on your face,
Or in the gleam of moonlight,
In a desolate place, or in the middle of a crowd,
Loneliness consumes you, loneliness is what you have.

PHOTOS & TEXT:
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