

**UPOMA AZIZ**

"What's the largest sum of money you've seen at a time?"

I don't remember who asked this. Could have been him, could have been me. What I remember are the important details; the stars burning in our palms, leaving stardust all over our shoes. Our clothes damp, our eyes dry as we stare into the startling nowhere, beyond the racecourse of vehicles. There was no home in sight, so we would walk aimlessly before hanging like a mocking half moon from the foot-over bridge. I remember the darkness where his canine was supposed to be when he smiled.

Asad was a brother to me. Fifteen minutes prior to the schedule, we would trail down the gap-toothed stairs, waiting for the last bus. There was something haunting in the fog that spun itself around the bus, like a craftily placed curse. Half in sleep and another half in daze, we reached our destination. We lived the same day over and over again. But we played dress up and so did the world, to make it seem like one day was different from the other. It was not. That is, till the day of the reckoning. How much money had I seen; pinched through my thumb and index at a time?

We worked the same job, in the same place. The low ceilings of the shop and the bitter sin of not having been enough bent my neck permanently in an odd angle. He was a foot shorter than I was, the ceiling

could not corrupt him. "Hello, sir. Hello, ma'am," one of us would say, "What are you in need of today? We have excellent quality non-stick fry pans, yes, in all three sizes." He would be up in the front more often than me, though we both used the same phrases we were taught, he said them with conviction, like he too had been using iron skillet all his life. "Won't rust in your lifetime, have you looked at this finishing?" "That one is a heavy bottomed pan ma'am, that steel is stainless." He kept a handkerchief stuffed in his chest pocket to wipe away the froth in the corner of his mouth that bubbled up when he had too much to say. Books were irrelevant but back then, I could read him.

This was not what I envisioned my life to be, but once I was knee deep in the stream, letting the wave push me through life was simply easier. I never had a muse and my imagination too had abandoned me, so in the future in my head, I would keep repeating the same routine, till one day gravity pulled the last grain of sand down, and then we'd drown. In my ignorance about the changing nature of life, I had committed hubris. And till that point the largest sum of money I had seen, held or felt was eight thousand takas. Then he asked me the question. He didn't look at me; he craned his neck out and spoke to the horizon, to the setting sun. "It's a big word. If I were good with big words, I wouldn't be working this job," he contin-

ued on with his monologue, explaining that he was about to die.

"No, he isn't," the thought came to me as a reflex. That was the only time that I heard him talk about his ailment. I made copies of the diagnosis reports; I learned to pronounce the name of the disease which he refused to give power to by calling it out. The retail workers from the neighbouring shops came and went, and a few stayed. The ones who stayed went out with the copies of the report and shoved them into the chests of whoever they found on the road. Between the cardboard boxes with incisions and money orders, the highest amount of money I'd ever cradled began to rise.

There must be a specific number of times that one has to repeat a lie before it becomes the truth. I do not know that number. But as my daughter asks about my friend, the Prince Asad, every night, I tell her the only truth I know.

"You two were very good friends," she states. "Yes," I confirm. She has heard the story enough times to be able to reproduce it on her own.

"Tell me about how you were there for him, baba," she says, and I tell her the story where her father was a knight in armour – the story where I dumped all the money, well above eight thousand, on the hospital desk and begged them to save Asad. I stood with my dying friend's hand in mine as he

peacefully passed away.

It must have been in some other universe, or in some other life that I never went back to him. Both of us were barely surviving, were we ever alive anyway? If playing with possibilities or mere percentages on my fingertips, pitted against stoic certainty was something I knew how to do, I'd be an entrepreneur instead of a retail worker. With the same conviction he had while educating a possible customer about the vices of buying cutlery from peddlers, Asad had told me that he was about to die. "He must have known," I thought to myself as I double stuffed the corners of my tattered bag with the money enough to save one person. I chose to save myself.

I didn't have an enviable lifestyle, but I lived on better than before. I never forgot the friend I was indebted to – in life and in death. When my child pointed pointlessly at the sky in a ritual I never taught her, to compare the dead to the stars, sometimes I couldn't help thinking that while Asad had metamorphosed into a celestial luminary, I was the stardust under our soles. And once in a while during a serein, when the rain would descend from the cloudless sky right after the first stars emerged, the fine mist of water on my skin felt like a wrathful spit.

Upoma Aziz is a slouching, crouching, grouchy time bomb too tired to go off. Tell her to declutter her room and her mind at fb.com/upoma.aziz