

FLUX

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His mind itched to remember something, something lost down the back of a sofa, a copper penny just out of his reach.

"Shahed? Shahed, we need to bring Abba to Dhaka—Shahed, are you listening to me?"

In her eyes, Shahed never listened. Or maybe he did. It was hard to tell when his eyes were shut. When the taste of guilt got too heavy on his tongue, he would step out for air.

Abba had been brought to Dhaka. It had been 40 hours since a doctor had forgotten to check for bubbles in the IV, and 37 since he had had another stroke, 12,387 since Shahed had last seen him, countless since they had last spoken.

Waiting room. Then the dressing. Then the ICU.

"Salam, baba."

Beep.

Will he be okay? What do I talk to my father about? Does he still like gulabjamun? Does he care about the local election? What would he want to listen to?

How do I eulogise the essence of a stranger?

That's ridiculous. He's my father. He isn't a stranger.

Nilu watched Shahed leave, blindly reaching at a paper cup warming the seat next to her. It was hardly the first one; the intertwined sienna rings lay in lieu of their tangible forms.

Was she trying too hard? For what, though? Forgiveness?

This time, it was different. They both knew it. She sensed a certain guilt chewing on Shahed's psyche, stemming from a chasm inordinately old. An apology was out of the question. Grudges ran deep in this family.

"Ammu?"

She knew her daughter hadn't called out of filial piety. The gravity of the chasm had dragged many a bond into nullity.

"I'll be late today. We might head to Crimson after class. I won't have dinner at—"

"Shouldn't you be asking about your dada? You know exactly what's going on. You should come see him."

How could she even think of hanging out with friends when, when—

Beep.

I'll drop by tomorrow.

She knew she wouldn't be able to express her frustration through the monotones of printed text. Another coffee it is, then. To drown the anger.

When did I last meet dada?

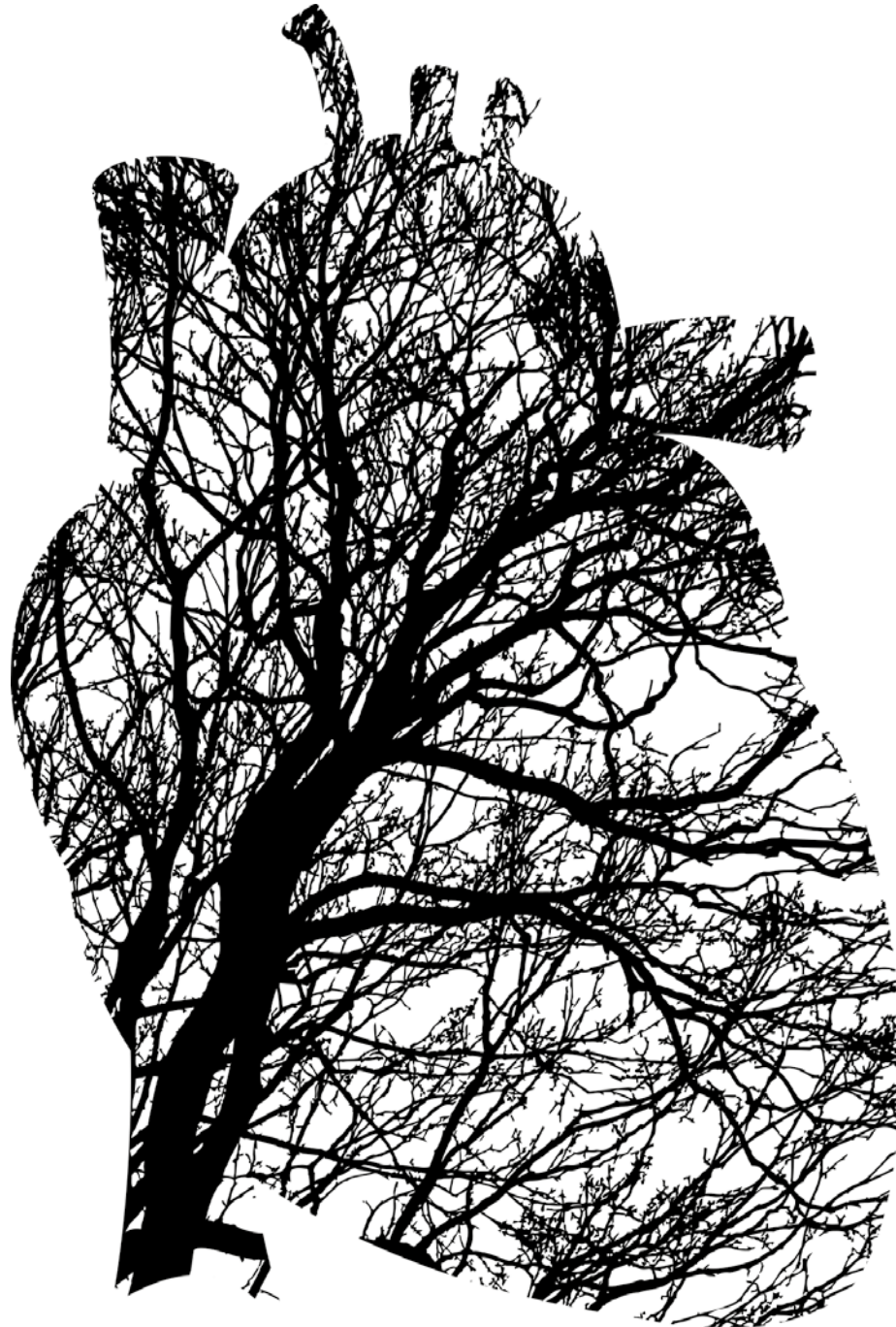
She glanced at her fingers. Skin stretched over supple bones. No frailty, no wrinkles.

Do I mourn him, a person I don't know, or do I just mourn, in general?

A sudden shove broke her out of this stupor. Professor was back in class, slides were to be read, work to be done. No time to age.

Damn. She needed a coffee.

Shahed took a day off. The sun set as he pretended to sleep, ears following Nilu as



she came back with empty tiffin-carriers, a vacancy reverberating through her bones. She hasn't been sleeping either. It's like she's carrying two, three times her quota of worry.

Why?

"You should go meet him."

Shahed shut the door behind him.

He heard Nilu sigh. She insisted, at every *dawat* she could, that he was no fun to argue with.

But where's the fun in arguing?

Uff, you won't understand.

Dressed in the stark gown, he could hardly recognise his father. Where has his frown gone? The lines into his nose, the ones into his wrists, stabbed into his chest, translating the soul into a metric of graphs and digits; is this my father?

He lifted the wrist, afraid to wake him up, but it was too thin. This wasn't the wrist that hurled rocks at him, screaming he didn't need a son like him. This wasn't the wrist of someone who took a life.

"Salam, Abba. How have you been?"

He felt closed eyes on him, expecting

more. He left.

"I'm afraid his situation is far worse than we initially thought. You see, the scan here shows that this region, the pressure..."

He is strong. He must pull through.

"This is as far as we can go. The rest is not in our hands."

"Is he in pain?"

Pause.

"Shahed, I've known your father for long. I think you should—"

"No."

There was hatred in him, boiled down to the last dregs of bitter sorrow. He couldn't forgive. The man lying on the bed was the sole reason he did not have a mother now. His mother, his dear sweet mother; she hadn't even seen his wife properly. She never got to see her grandkid. No blessings, no sweet shadow for him to rest under. A rock, a soul, and brute force. One had to go.

Was he wrong to marry Nilu? Why did his mother pay for it with her life? Why did she have to take the hit for him?

Nilu seethed as her daughter flailed and

moved to some song playing in her ears. This generation, really. No worries to spare for the old. Pathetic. Plain pathetic.

She heard the keys turn at the main door, and made no move. She was tired of this. The father-daughter duo. Apathetic towards death. Why was she the one running?

Shahed crossed the room, reeking of disinfectant and smoke.

"It's your fault she is like that. Never taught her any manners, no respect—"

A teacup shattered at his feet.

Nerves grated into nothings, they both screamed. Profanities laced with blame until they ran out of anger. Finding himself in the wake of such vehemence, Shahed could only pinpoint fear among the myriad of emotions. So potent was this fear that he broke down, right in front of his family, shaking like walls housing a storm.

That night, a phone call came. Dinners abandoned; no one knew how to drive. For two minutes, after the blind panic dissipated, they both froze and mulled over what they might see. A baby-taxi was called.

There had been a sharp drop in the BP, but it had been pulled back up.

No need to come over. It's late. Oh, you're here?

His eyes were burning.

The following day, Shahed found himself dragging a nurse's chair to the bedside.

"You know, she wouldn't have died if you hadn't, just hadn't... I can't even curse you."

He saw the lines forcing air into lungs far too unwilling to expand. The face looked bloated. This wasn't his father.

"I hadn't even given her my first salary, you know. I had been saving up for three months, thinking I would give her the entire thing. It wasn't much. I... Nilu and I just wanted your blessings. How is that even too much to ask for?"

He saw how waxen the skin looked. There was hardly any life left.

"Doctor."

He didn't look up. His voice was saturated enough.

"Is he in too much pain?"

He felt tears scratching the insides of his eyes.

"Can we end the pain? I can't bear it anymore."

He came back home on a bitter note.

Think it through.

It was when he was eighteen. Home for holidays. An earthquake, and blind panic rippling through him. The branch had just missed him. Grounded only by two arms. Were they wrapped around him?

Who was it? He did not remember. His mother had been away. Oh.

That night, Shahed slept. It was 4:12 AM when Nilu got the call. She knew. Shahed knew too.

His father had been smiling in his dream.

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