

#8E1600

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Patterns of light are captured

It was 7:40, and he's been waiting on the other side of the glass, waiting for a certain routine to fall into place, a disassembled camera long forgotten on the counter: a minute till his father came in for his daily dose of my-son-is-a-disappointment tirade, 3 till the next door shutters locked halfway up, and 5 till his tea cooled down. It was 7:40, the beginning of a torrid day, the kind that flowed like sepia through the reels of film negatives, and he sat and sipped his *n*th cup of tea, hoping to see a familiar face. There was work to be done, and any more tea would start to replace whatever was in his veins. Yet he sat, staving off moving to the dark room in favour of wasting another second searching for a familiar kurta, a familiar silhouette.

She, his clock said, is running very late.

Film is exposed to the light coming in

There was disappointment swirling in *am-mu's* eyes, she noted through the reflection.

What's wrong with wearing red to the first day of class? How many first days will I even have?

Her mother tutted at her seemingly blatant display of insolence.

Breakfast is ready.

Besides, she thought with a mouthful of toast, I already have a friend. Thankfully I won't have to be a loner.

Red is happy. Hopeful. There were poems scratched inside her throat she had to note down, and classes couldn't start sooner.

She searched for the weight of a familiar stare as the professor walked in, thinking of how it wasn't nice to be late to the first day, and much more not *nice* that the seat beside her was empty.

He better run in any moment now.

Sensitive layers of colour react to the light

So you and that DU girl, huh? He asked, voice cutting into his breakfast reverie. *Where's my tea? Ifti'r ma, where'd my tea go? It's late -*

He eyed the rust along the edges of the salt jar, choosing to answer with silence.

Cha without sugar, my life should've ended before this, he griped. I heard she got into English too...what a waste of money. Good thing I didn't let you enroll.

He bit back a retort. That's all he did these days, it seemed: biting back retorts until they rolled around his mouth, gums bloodied and bitter with resentment. He didn't know what he hated more; himself for thinking too high of his intellect, or himself for not trying harder. Maybe if he had gone through the formulas once more -

This wouldn't happen if you got into engineering... you're here wasting a year, spending money, doing nothing.

There goes the breakfast. A half-eaten paratha and two bites of a sweet.

Ifti'r ma, do I not buy enough sugar for tea? This is disgusting.

The sugar is within his reach.

The problem of pain is I cannot feel my fa-



*thers and he cannot feel mine. This, I suppose, is also the essential mercy of pain.**

Dye couplets react to the colour layers

"You know, for starters, you'd think people majoring in English would be, I don't know, more *mature*. I mean, they still giggle when they see Shakespeare written in Bangla. How much more childish can they get?"

He's tempted to say he finds it funny too, but refrains from earning her scorn.

"I see."

(Blue tastes like Vicks. Don't ask me how I know.)

There's just another order left, passport size, 6 pieces, US visa, and he's unspooling the film to process. The dark room is there, and she's on the other side of the door, but nothing bars her words from flowing in. No sense of space. She talks too much sometimes, in a panicked haze, out of boredom, whatever. Almost like she'll forget the shape of the words on her tongue.

(Yellow is like getting hit on the nose. Or like school on Sundays.)

He sees like a camera, sepia and brown, green like boiled tea leaves, and blue like, well, *blue*.

What does red look like?

"Why... why did you choose English?" *Why don't your parents mind?*

"It was more like I had stories to tell and no one to listen to me. So a degree and get-

ting to write *and read and critique?* That's a lot of birds with a single stone." *They mind but I don't care.*

I listen... I waited hours for your call until ma shooed me away from the landline.

"Why did you not enroll?" *I think I missed you.*

"I can't write well." *Besides, how do I write about a world I cannot see the colours of? If I need to tell stories, I have a camera.*

That's all I need.

(Red is um... I don't know the word. Deep? Red is an emotion of its own. I think it's happy.)

The negative image is created

She was wrong, she realises; a bit too late. Wrong to take a rickshaw that day. Wrong to skip breakfast daily. But most of all, wrong to describe red as happy.

Red webs out in front of her eyes, rivulets petrified by her grasping hands. Maybe she's trying to lock them all back in where they belong, *in her*, not staining the gravel.

(Run, the witch is after us)

Red is terrifying. And it hurts.

The picture is printed

You can't see colours? Just red, actually.

Shake well

It isn't until three hours later that his father finds him trying to get an old lighter to work. He never liked the taste, so he doesn't

know why he's trying to do this other than the fact that he doesn't know what to do.

Grief is viscous, he unwillingly finds. Weighing down his tongue as words refuse to form, bones aching to wake up from this nightmare. He is grieving, under strict parental supervision, as the din across the shop fades into his consciousness, and his father is quick to his feet. No words spoken, no harshness. He is given space, he doesn't know what to do with it.

Can you print these today? Today's the last date for form submission. B unit. I'm such a fool. Did you sign up for it too? Great, I've found a friend already.

He grieves silently. Burning the shreds of longing deep underground so no fumes seep out of his facade.

There's no funeral held for the death of a friendship. Or whatever they had. He is left mourning the what ifs, if only and whys.

Should I wait beside the landline again? Will you call?

But the dial tone is all he hears. The dull red of her wake is all he feels.

*Biss, Eula (2007). *The Pain Scale*

Sarah Wasifa sees life as a math equation: problematic, perhaps with a solution, and maybe sometimes with a sign to tear off a page and start over again. Help her find 'y' at sarah-wf77@gmail.com