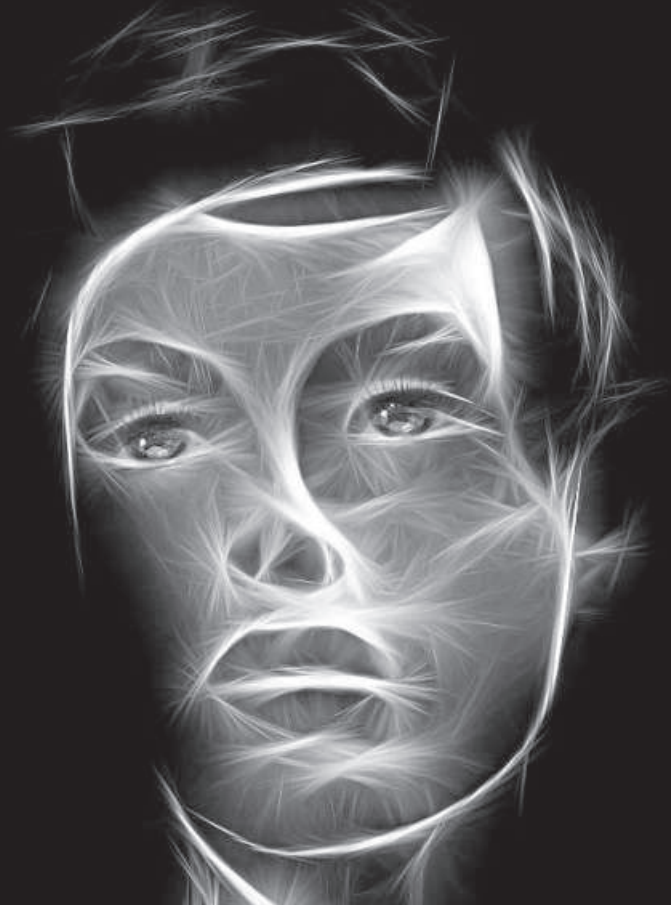


LOST AND NEVER FOUND



MAISHA NAZIFA KAMAL

Bright, yellow skies gave away nothing about how awful Yana's week is going to be. She was just living her ordinary, mundane life when she lost her Childhood Capsule.

If you're someone who's living in the Present World, you'd know what the Childhood Capsule is. One of the most prized possessions of humans, it was a small, floating capsule of the size of an egg of a dinosaur that contained a variety of souvenirs from one of the best parts of the past, the childhood. Everyone was given their Childhood Capsules when they reached a certain age. The human attention span and memory capacity had decreased to such an extent that to cope up with everything, humans came up with capsules that stored trinkets that would trigger memories (only when you looked at them) that were ritually erased at a definite age to make space for new information. The brain was in fact, periodically manipulated to be erased and then filled up to be erased again.

As paradoxical as it might seem, not a lot of people were at odds with this. Everyone had accepted that the human race is fashionably falling behind and they were always coming up with ways to compensate for it. Nobody even knew what year they were living in. Humans had decided that anything tagged with numbers was unnecessary and so each year was just called the Present World. History therefore was pretty much extinct.

Yana was baffled at first. The capsule was just with her and it vanished into thin air when she left it for a while. Lately she had been checking the capsules quite fre-

quently. Everyone could choose the items to be stored in their capsules. And Yana was coming back to the capsule more often than usual. The capsule helped her to forget her daily stress a bit and she had been carrying it everywhere.

She was in the neighbourhood gym when she lost it. The security cameras were checked and Yana put up digital posters on every platform she knew. People patted her back, told her she'd find it soon. But they never meant it. They knew that once you lost your childhood capsule it was gone forever. Because it was the beacon of light that kept people going. People now couldn't dial to a warm memory whenever they wanted. They now never felt any wave of nostalgia, they lived bleak lives which they combatted with capsules that worked like happy pills whenever they felt disturbed or stressed. Marriages were taped in and continued whenever the couples had a fight and went back to the In Love capsule that made them remember momentarily how it felt to be in love. Friends had those capsules as mementos that kept them bonded. Every human relationship depended on the numerous capsules they were given time to time. So losing one meant you're permanently deprived of those memories. For nobody else knew or could remember what were inside those capsules including yourself. Yana had been looking inside her Childhood Capsule quite frequently for a while yet when she lost it, she couldn't remember anything, even when she tried to. Her desperate attempts were only met with hazy, fleeting images. Her frustration was building but she was adamant in finding it.

She even poured her savings in putting

up digital check-posts on all social platforms.

But it was all futile. Slowly, Yana's face lost its radiance. Her hair was unruly when she showed up at her commitments, her nails chipped. At every gathering, she lost her appetite. She couldn't connect with anyone because she felt like a piece of her soul is missing, the most crucial one that was summoned whenever she had a breakdown. But now there was a huge void there. It was her only capsule and without it, she didn't know how to tune into all her beautiful memories whenever she had a bad day. Her eyes were growing to be hollow and red all the time, her sleep more restless even when she took medications. People saw the pallor and gauntness in her face yet everyone kept quiet. They didn't know how to console her. They didn't have the capacity to think about her.

Yana had been walking back to her home one day when the battery of her phone died. People relied on the maps on their phones and Yana was not an exception to it. But lately, she even forgot to take her essentials with her just like her power bank and so was left to find her way back home herself. She cursed the human race whenever she felt vulnerable like this. There were digital maps at the sidewalks but Yana decided that she simply didn't care at this point and started walking straight.

The roads were all heavily lit with stark white bubble-like lights. They were so blinding that you couldn't even see the sky overhead. There was an array of paraphernalia – machines that beeped whenever you threw something on the ground, bite-sized traffic lights panel, a

giant umbrella like structure that spritzed air fresheners across the streets. Everything was so developed and polished that Yana, who had been travelling these roads since birth, suddenly felt eerily foreign here.

She moved to the next alley and stopped in her tracks.

The alley was a vivid contrast to the road she walked few seconds ago. It looked as if it had passed the test of time and looked stubbornly ancient. There were no lights, except some broken lamp posts where flies buzzed. Tin cans lay littered around, packets were strewn on the ground and there was a huddle of people sitting on the bare street.

The people looked appropriate in this setting, unlike Yana. But what was alien were their heartfelt smiles. They were all talking among themselves, ladling soup to dirty bowls and passing them on.

These were the people who couldn't afford to get capsules and so The System simply decided they weren't fit for anything. They were called the Discards, the ones who were deemed to be not fit for the strategic information gaining process. None of their memories were erased, they learned nothing new. They didn't have access to capsules like the one Yana lost. They only knew how to survive in the cold streets, barren lands and lightless scapes unlike Yana and the people she grew up with.

Yet, Yana wasn't the one smiling. But they definitely, quite broadly, were.

Maisha Nazifa Kamal has lost track of time and is living in a world where she never existed. Break her reverie at 01shreshtha7@gmail.com