

FABLE FACTORY

Tick-tock.

Despite the invigilator's best efforts, the exam hall was far from pin drop silent. Yet, I could hear the ticking sound of the single analogue clock hanging on the wall, signifying that the exam time was over.

Or maybe I'd imagined it. I had a flair for the dramatic, I was often told.

The transaction of handing in my paper and signing the attendance sheet was almost mechanical. The clamours of examinees seemed distant, though I was right amidst them. Everything was muffled, save for the accursed ticking.

I stepped out of the exam hall, realising, not for the first time, how suffocating sounds can be when you want to shut them out. The roads are no less loud, but there is a certain comfort in noises when they're not ricocheting off of walls. Especially when the walls belong to an exam hall.

A few more minutes would have sufficed for a passing grade, and yet... I was out of time.

Someone very dear to me once told me there was no such thing as luck, fate, destiny, or whatever else there was. She learned it the hard way herself, she said. The only reality for her was time, and its scarcity.

She was a writer. Better than most, but not extraordinary enough to be more known than she was.

That would change, she used to say, after she published the novel she had yet to complete. If she could complete it— was something she always added afterwards. She was ageing, after all.

Her shaky, wrinkled fingers danced ungracefully on her typewriter as she desperately tried to finish her legacy. It would be her masterpiece, she claimed, if she didn't run out of time.

The clouds accumulated over the years watered and hazed her sight little by little, and her limbs started getting heavier and heavier, until she could lift them no more.

Time was not kind to her unfinished manuscript that lay on my desk, and neither was I. Still, I perfectly remembered all her instructions. Or warnings, depending on how you were to interpret them.

I was to make up for her lost time. I was to finish the legacy of someone who took upon the futile battle against time and lost. She wasn't the first thing time had taken from me, and she would be far from the last.

That was obvious, of course. The last thing you lost to time was always yourself.

Throughout history, humans worshipped their gods for their benevolence, or to be spared from their cruelty. Yet, it was no use praying to, or for, time. Time was never fair; it was uniform in its motion.

Others called it an old woman's drivel. Someone who couldn't pass on without regrets, passing her burdens onto someone else. In other words, I was to finish her novel. Not that she had any use for recognition or royalty after death, but there was something melancholic about an unfinished novel. She believed I would want to write on her behalf for that reason alone. And she knew me well.

A half-finished sculpture was still pleasing to the eye, a canvas with splashes of



paint that hadn't quite managed to create a complete picture was still aesthetic. But when it came to novels, one without closure only left the reader with an ache to know more.

That was part of the torturous beauty of open endings, but even an open end was an ending. A story that ended in the middle of a dialogue was far less acceptable.

Probably.

The reader base in current times could find beauty in a dialogue comprising a single word of affirmation, reflected by another. Maybe they would appreciate the abrupt end. Or maybe not.

I realised how far my thoughts had digressed from the characteristic sound pollution of Dhaka. Perhaps not too far off, twenty-four hours a day was very limited in this city. It was reflected in the fact everyone around me appeared to be pressed for time. Someone bumped into me, and mumbled a barely audible "sorry" before rushing away.

Any other day, I'd have been annoyed. Maybe I would have furrowed my brows and glared. But today, I hoped they could reach their destination before running out of time.

It was on days like this that I found words when I sat in front of her old typewriter. Days that reminded me I could run out of time at any given moment, myself. On those days I spent hours in the traffic jam of Bijoy Sarani, a rarely taken route of mine. The anniversary of her death, or her birth. On the days I miss her ever so dearly.

That old machine, and the ongoing struggle against the ticking seconds were my only connection to her, despite the lack of urgency in me.

I hoped to finish the story when I last sat down to write. She had made my job easy for me, had told me the ending she had in mind. I was the only one allowed to know, everyone else had to find out on print.

I left it off a little before I could finish it. Something more important came up, and somehow I never got back to it. I was capable of operating a computer, I didn't need to use her old typewriter. I had ages before my limbs would succumb to old age. My lifetime was far from being over.

I knew fully well today would have been the last of that writing.

Just a couple pages till the end. Just a matter of thirty minutes. Forty, if you considered the time it would take me to cross the road and walk two more blocks to get to my apartment. That was all I needed to immortalise a work that deserved immortality, but couldn't attain it in two lifetimes.

Because it was really no use praying to time for twenty-four hundred more seconds when I was out of time for the second time that day. The truck rushing towards me needed no more than one.