

Only The Vultures

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

"I'm not ready for a world without you, Sabrina," Fatima sobbed as she held her sister's hands trembling in debility and fear. Fear of dying and leaving her sister behind in this sordid place called home.

"We're never ready, Fatima," muttered Sabrina, staring at the soot on the ceiling. She was supposed to mop the ceiling last week. If Habib's mother notices, she'll make sure Habib hears about it when he comes home. About how Sabrina's not been working as much lately, how she forgot to bring Maa her medicine yesterday and how she's using her sickness as an excuse. Habib's going to make sure Sabrina remembers, if not for the curses, then for the scars he's going to leave behind. On her chest, her breasts and her thighs. But never on her face.

"My little dove, I won't leave you

behind," smiled Sabrina as she turned towards her sister, "I have a secret I want to share with you."

Fatima noticed a crackling flame in Sabrina's glittering eyes. Scared, she sat on her knees, "What is it?"

"I've been taking it all in, Fatima. Every night for the past 13 years. The howls, the scars, the filth. This was before Abba Amma died and I brought you here. The first few months – I would scream, fight and cry while the world turned deaf. I could see Abba and Amma stare at me while Habib gnawed my flesh out," Sabrina sobbed, "And they'd smile, Fatima! They'd stand in a corner and smile. That's when I stopped screaming and crying. I just kept my eyes closed until their smiles disappeared."

"I can't leave you here, my Jaan," Sabrina cupped Fatima's cheek, "When they're done with my janaza, I want you to come

back to my room. Right under this bed behind the blankets, you'll find a black jar with a yellow flower painted on the lid. Open it and promise me Fatima, you won't close the lid no matter."

"I promise, Apa," Fatima sobbed.

Sabrina's Janaza was completed in secret after Maghrib. Habib's mother didn't want a commotion.

Fatima went to Sabrina's room later that night. She found the black jar with a yellow flower on the lid. Fatima stepped back as the jar dropped off of her hand, wobbling unsteadily on its own. Hesitantly, Fatima knelt down and tried to open the jar. Branches and leaves from the flower grabbed Fatima's hand and wrapped her wrist all around. As the thorns on the branches pierced through her flesh, Fatima clenched her teeth and forced open the lid.

A sharp screech pushed her across

the room. Smoke gushed out of the jar as Fatima could see her sister's rotten corpse, shrieking as it kept disintegrating. Fatima could see cracks on the walls as the roof started collapsing. The branches and leaves on her hands kept spreading out across Fatima's entire body until they wrapped her around like cocoon wraps a moth and Fatima could see no more.

Covered in debris, Fatima woke up. The entire neighbourhood collapsed to rubble. As far as her eyes could see, it was annihilation. Rising from the ruins, Fatima saw her sister standing in the distance.

"Is everyone dead, Apa?" Fatima's voice quavered.

"Only the vultures, my Jaan," Sabrina smiled back.

Remind Ifti to be quieter at hasiburrashidifti@gmail.com

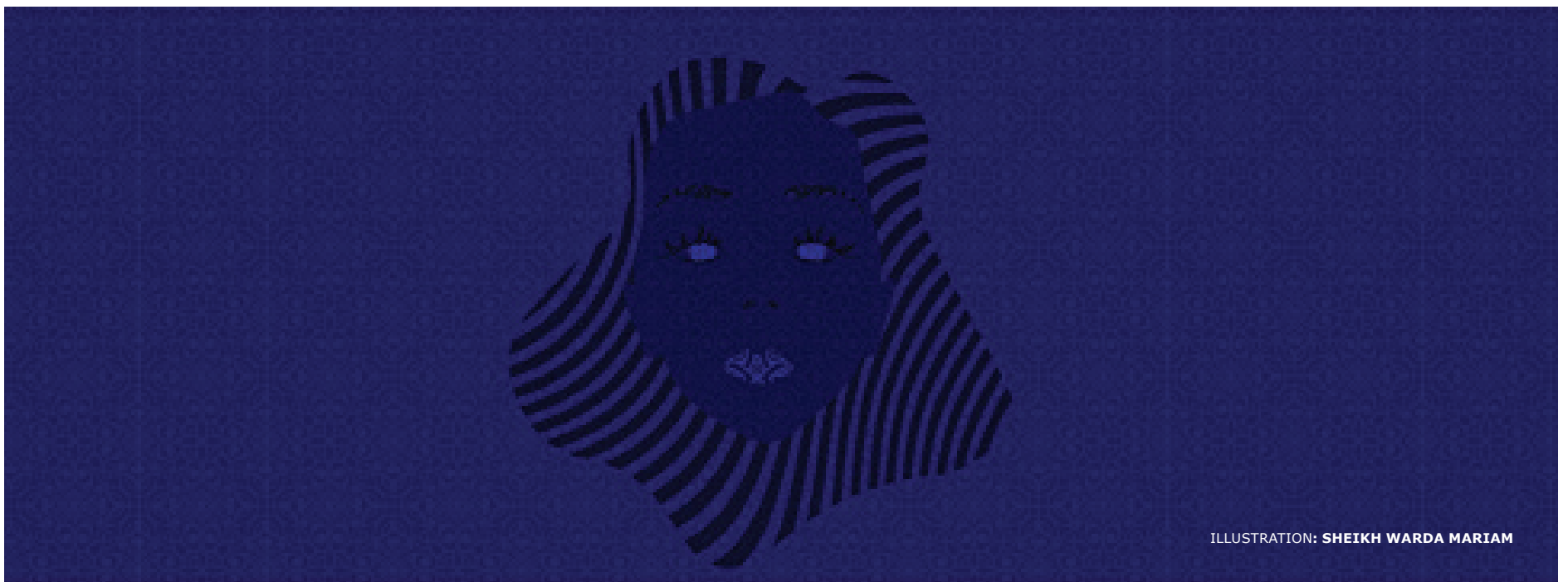


ILLUSTRATION: SHEIKH WARDA MARIAM

Product Placement Gone Wrong

ADHORA AHMED

Strip malls might lure someone in with those giant signs and billboards that glow neon after dark. But under the guise of various consumer goods, they offer nothing but the utmost form of blandness. Their air is choked thick with the diesel from all the parked cars crammed in the parking lot. People flock in and out of the automatic doors, carrying groceries or takeout or whatever. I myself have had to stop at one of these capitalist wastelands hundreds of times to grab something or the other. Strip malls are such an intrinsic part of mundane life here, but even after all these years, the sight of one never fails to depress me.

The strange twisting and turning of the car wakes me from my slumber. It's only Rina trying to find a spot to park at yet another strip mall. This might be our eighth or seventy-sixth stop since the beginning

of our road trip. By now, even she understands why I feel a bout of nothingness when it comes to these places.

"I get it," she said on only the third day. "They all look the same. Like suburbs."

"We didn't run out of gas, did we?" I ask Rina once we're parked.

"Not yet, we still have plenty to last the rest of the night. I just wanted a break."

She points her chin forward. "Do you want to go to that McDonald's?"

That big, yellow M is instantly recognisable, but something is odd.

"But that's not McDonald's. It's Mac-Donwald's. Must be a knock-off."

"What?" Rina chuckles, gets out of the car. "Come on, let's get you a coffee."

Maybe she's right. I'm too sleep-addled to think straight. McDonald's wouldn't let just anyone set up a knock-off without suing them for millions of dollars.

I get myself a black coffee because I promised to take the wheel after midnight, so I have to stay awake. Rina orders a Big Mac. She asks if I'm sure I don't want anything, even a small pack of fries. I'm not hungry, so I decline. My tastebuds have deteriorated to the point where I can't differentiate the taste of a fried chicken from a pizza, not even when my stomach growls. The brand names might be different, but all fast food tastes the same to me.

When Rina brings the tray to our table, however, my brain gets muddled further. My coffee cup does not bear the McDonald's logo, but that of "Munchkin Go-nuts". The typeface and colour scheme is the same as that of Dunkin' Donuts. I look at Rina, who appears completely nonplussed as she takes out her burger from a "Clubday" wrapper, which has Subway's exact green, yellow, and white lettering.

My gaze drifts to the cashier at the counter. He wears a red uniform. Everything seems fine for a moment, until I spot the logo on the menu display board above him. A long-haired mermaid with a crown, smiling down at us. Starbucks. But wait, the writing underneath the logo says Barf.

"Hey, your coffee's running cold."

I look back at Rina and consider asking if she can see what I see. Just then, a grinning waitress appears at our table, asking if everything is alright.

"Yes, b-but isn't this a McDonald's?"

"Sir, this is a Bhendy's."

Please do not contact Adhora Ahmed. Even better, do not perceive her. For practical purposes, Adhora does not exist.