

# Borderline

*I draw a small, perfect circle with a stub of a white chalk and place my cat, Scimp (whom I had found as a stray here) inside it.*

## MAISHA NAZIFA KAMAL

Scimp looks skeptically at me, gracing the air with a quiet mewl but keeps on sitting in her place.

A wash of unidentified sadness is all it needs for me to take my eyes off the white, ominous circle with Scimp inside and walk to the edge. Above, the stars have breathed into the sky in a dust of colors and grains. I feel lost just staring up at them as I always do, like my soul detaches itself from my body and flies up to the world above. Except after racing and twirling in the sky above, it plunges deep down into the world below.

The world underwater which I can never see from up here, the world in mid-sky.

It's been years since the people of the earth were divided, where they were given the choice to live either quite literally underwater, called Marina or in the floating world in the sky called, Ciela. The word "choice" was an overstatement, however. Some were given the choice, others were forced. I, as a citizen of a country that was taken onboard among the last ones, was faced with the latter. I was stationed at Ciela, a huge floating bubble-like world in mid-sky that had its customized oxygen in the air.

And my wife was stationed at the Marina, the twin world of Ciela but only under water.

The world leaders had for long fought hard to have one world where we would take refuge in when everyone realized that our planet is definitely going through changes that we won't be able to survive. But after a lot of debate about where to escape, above or below, someone had finally laid out the cunning plan of having both. There would be lesser accommodation problems, more advantages. The leaders spun this into an idea of "revolutionizing", "futuristic living" and the media ate it up as "the perfect plan". Except it would cost a lot.

And it did. And they are now trying to compensate that with our labour, forced into work in equality in both worlds. *Marina and Ciela would have equal number of children* – the leaders crooned. But they didn't tell us what kind of mothers separated their children into two polar opposite worlds where they could never meet.

However, amidst Marina and Ciela, was another world as my soul flitted past it. The earth. The middle ground. The world we left behind.

It was barren there. After constant episodes of wildfire, tsunamis and earthquakes, the earth swallowed itself up until there were no trees, no stable ground without a fissure, no air that wasn't heavy with smoke and toxins. And of course, no humans.

My wife and I wrote to each other at first, breezy and hopeful, pretending it was just some work that took us apart for the time being. But two years in, the wounds and dents settled in. Couples from richer, more powerful countries had not been separated, it was just people like us who had to work like this. Not that

there was no rule to meet. There was a sparing rule to meet once every year or so but we never made to the cut.

I re-read my wife's latest text that I got a while ago:

*"Hi. You know, my brain's quite infested with this amusing thought every time I have*

*version of the sky we see. It's just rippling reflections, honestly. Sigh. Take care of yourself and Scimp. Love you."*

She sent a picture of herself holding up a plate of shrimp and scrunching her nose at it. Because they live underwater, they are constantly bathed in this blue hue that seeps in no matter how many artificial



ILLUSTRATION: MUHTASIM HAQUE NAHIAN

*some seafood: now that I am living in this curious world of water, I feel like a cannibal every time I have one. Because I feel more like a marine creature and less like a human these days. Haha. Isn't it weird? Anyway, how are you holding up? Spotted any new nebula? I have been briefly missing the sky, really. Here, I'm very much annoyed by the watered-down*

lights they've installed there. Today, it's bluer. It's like this blue has invaded her too. And that makes my soul return inside me and shrink in agony too.

I take pictures of the sky for my wife since she misses them and glance at Scimp again, who's nestled in deep sleep inside the circle I drew. She doesn't even

have a fur on the borders. What a wicked cat – I find myself thinking. The sirens go off and before I can dwell on the circle any longer, I drag myself back to work again.

But at work today, it's different.

There's something else in the air today beside the ever-present sterile scent. Something delicious and not as suffocating like the always-being-diffused disinfectants:

*Excitement.*

People are huddled here together as they most probably are going through the same thing in their phones. I open mine too and find it.

A small blue dot of the most recent news:

It has been found through concrete evidences that there are still some humans surviving on the land. The Middle Ground – people called.

I gasp. *But how?* – I wonder. From up here in Ciela, the land looks so haunted, like part of some dystopia and not the other way around. How did they manage to survive there or not be forced into either Marina or Ciela there?

The leaders bring up this news in their speeches, stating that fools do live in this thriving age of intelligence. They try to paint these humans as some outlaws (which they technically are), evil aliens who are serving punishment there and not defying the higher powers.

But I and the rest see it for what it is. The bones of Marina and Ciela were rattled with the news, the powers that be were challenged. This was historical.

And I somehow think of our old life there. Images of a small but cosy house, white walls, sugar quills and large open windows, cobblestoned roads and beautiful green plants that my wife loved, flash through my mind.

*I feel more like a marine creature and less like a human these days. But she wasn't.*

And neither was I a bird in a sky.

I stare down at the floor. Our floors are quite transparent and you can see everything that's below. The world looks too small from up here and maybe it's my imagination but it seems today a bit more liveable than I last saw. It suddenly occurs to me that those humans on the land are the ones surviving, living even and we are the ones out here who escaped.

Not a marine creature, not an aerial one, we're just humans.

I think of my wife, how she loved our life before; her eyes always full of some sort of emotion all the time. But without the Marina and Ciela where would we have gone?

The answer is quite simple as Scimp suddenly with a loud purr, steps out of her circle. Elaborately she walked out and stood in between the circle and me.

The borderlines have been smudged off.

*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*

# LOS

## UPOMA AZIZ

When Naf woke up, he didn't have much expectations from the day. He never did, and secretly hoped that the day didn't have anything to ask from him either, so they'd be even.

He looked at his un-watered, shrivelling plants on the windowsill, at the dust settling on his untouched books, on the apple from three months ago, which surprisingly, looked pretty much the same.

"What a beautiful day," he said out to himself.

He rolled out of his bed, on his way to have a very productive least of the day. He loitered into the kitchen and peeked into the fridge which was pretty empty last night, and clearly hadn't acquired any new food by itself overnight.

He then decided that the best way to be productive would be to cook something for himself. He pulled up a few recipes that claimed to be two-ingredient, then quickly realized he didn't have truffle oil or Worcestershire sauce.

"Khichuri it is," he declared to himself.

After he washed and put the rice in the water, an ungodly amount of turmeric, and whatever spices he found around the house, he discovered there was no lentil either. Just as he was torn between giving up altogether and giving himself a pep talk on how some cultures genuinely had yellow rice in their cuisine, the bell rang.

After he was glad at this distraction from his ongoing culinary crisis, and he opened the door without peeking. It was the most beautiful man he'd ever seen, in the most dreadfully coloured uniform.

"Hello! I am here to check on the pipes?" the man smiled. His teeth gleamed like pearls, and Naf stood bedazzled for a while, before inviting the man in.

The man showed himself to the washroom. Strangely, Naf could faintly hear a flute melody. He felt soporific, till he smelt something burnt, and dashed to the kitchen to salvage his now yellow and black rice.

"Are you done?" he asked the man who was in the living room now, "Do I have to pay you or will the landlord do it?"

When the man looked back at Naf, his eyes were a faint grey. Naf was perplexed, he was sure they weren't the same half an hour ago.

"Sit down," the man told him calmly,

but with such authority, Naf didn't even question why he was being ordered around in his own house.

"So," the man intertwined his long, ivory fingers, "I have an offer for you."

"What? I thought you were here to check the pipes?" Naf managed to croak.

"Oh yes, that," the man took a small instrument from his pocket, a number of reeds of different sizes bound together. "The pipes work fine, I checked, see?" the man blew on the instrument and produced a cheery melody.

The man leaned back in Naf's chair designated for his clothes too dirty to wear, too clean to wash. The heap of clothes was nowhere to be seen. "How would you like to be immortal?"

He snapped out of his trance and asked, "Sorry, what?"

The man stared at Naf and he felt himself breaking into a cold sweat – he felt as if he had no secrets any more, that the man had travelled to the space between his cells and through his bloodstream. All his insecurities, his failures, his make-believe cheery disposition were all known to the him. Naf had never felt so bare in his life.

The man was the one to break eye contact first. Naf shifted in his seat uncomfortably. Who was this man? He felt cold chills in the Mid-July inferno.

"Never mind, how—" the man produced a grey ball of wool out of thin air, "Would you like to have a new roommate?"

Naf stared. The grey ball of wool meowed.

"Look, I don't know who you are or what you want, and why you want me to keep a cat, I'm not a cat person," the grey kitten peeked through the man's fingers, it had huge blue eyes that shone like lapis lazuli. "I'm barely even an animal person. I can't take care of myself, I don't know what I'm doing with my life, or where I'm

headed. It all just is too much for me, and—" Naf didn't know why he was telling all of this to the fake plumber, but he did feel better as he did, "I don't know if I'm capable of taking care of another life form."

"Oh, don't worry. It's only for a week.

This creature doesn't have very long to live," the man opened his palm and the kitten jumped onto the floor. Naf couldn't take its eyes off the cat at it continued to do regular cat things. "My initial offer still stands. I'll be here to collect the cat a week later, so, you can tell me if you've changed your mind then. Oh, and, the cat's name is Los."

And with that, the man was gone. \* \* \*

Naf couldn't stop pacing. The door was left wide open. Los snuggled up against his leg. Naf picked him up and kissed the top of his head.

It had been a week and Naf was utterly, and completely in love with this cat. He would fight the strange man if needed, but he couldn't let Los go.

"I see you have grown quite fond of him," Naf jumped, and saw the man standing in the doorway.

Naf could feel his throat closing in, "You can't have him."

The man's smile didn't falter, "Why?" he asked.

"What if—" Naf wet his lips, "What if I choose to pass on your offer to Los?"

"I'm afraid that's not possible. Unless you choose to accept, then the immortal and the mortal can share on the unending life. But," the man held up a finger, "The price is half of your soul. You and the cat will share your immortality, and a soul."

"I'm not so sure I want the immortality, I'm not the most optimistic person out there. I'm not even sure I want to live forever," Naf shrugged.

"Would you prefer that your companion walks the earth alone after you pass away?" the man asked.

The thought of Los mewling around the streets all alone had Naf devastated. "No," he said flatly.

"Then, do you accept?" the man asked.

"I accept," Naf said.

"Great then, it is done." The man rose from his seat. Naf didn't feel too different. "Though it wasn't much of a choice for you—" the man said walking out of the door.

"Why do you say that?" Naf asked.

The man turned to face Naf. "You didn't choose Los. Los chose you to be his companion for eternity. The immortality has been exchanged between the mortal, and the immortal," the man pointed at Los. "I was here only to make the offer on behalf of the ancient deity. Los meowed loudly. "The deity wants treats" the man pointed helpfully, and disappeared.

*Upoma Aziz is a slouching, crouching, grouchy Goblin with a hoarding problem. Tell her to declutter her desk and her mind at upoma.aziz@gmail.com*



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR