

A Marked Grave

WAZIHA AZIZ

"Where the hell is Manzur?" Taher crouched near a slight bend, peeking over some dying shrubbery. "I said high noon."

They were half a dozen young boys, gathered on a hillside overlooking the graveyard near Battoli. Rays of light feasted on their charcoal skin as the sun splintered a clear sky in ways only winter could spawn. Green became a cool grey as plants succumbed to the heat. But the boys stood their ground, all awkward knees and elbows, as vigorous as ever in the world dying around them.

"You're one to talk," said Shahid, his cracked voice testing the waters of puberty. "Always skipping class for a puff... or worse."

A sudden chill crept up the boys' spines as a sharp smack cut through the air.

"Don't you dare talk back to me!" Taher's face grew red with anger.

"Damn you all! I just want to say a proper goodbye!" Shahid braced himself for a punch.

"Wait, guys!" the sight of their friend interrupted an otherwise inevitable brawl.

Manzur's slight frame running up the dirt path sent a sigh of relief through the group. He would not miss the burial after all.

"What's going on?" His voice tore through the violent haze.

"What's that?" asked Rakib, the only one not taken in by the fighting.

"This? I found it on Rahim mama," answered Manzur, gesturing to the leather-bound book he'd been carrying. "Hid it right before they took him away. And thank God I did."

"Why? What's in it?"

"No idea. We need our best reader."

"Sure, just hand it over."

This statement from Rakib sent another flare up Taher's cheeks.

"As the eldest, I get to read it," Taher claimed. Another fight was ensuing.

"Guys, I see people with shovels down there!"

"You're sure it's him?" asked Manzur, quietly handing Rakib the book.

"Yeah, Antor bhai said so. He's in there handling it right now." Taher's unrelenting eyes followed the exchange, but he said no more.

Rakib squinted at what looked like a messy scribble of diary entries. Placing his palm against the cracked spine, ran his fingers over the breaking edges of the crusty paper, the first of which seemed to be missing. The cover read in bold letters, "This Diary Belongs to *Rahim Chowdhury*"

The group fell into an uneven circle abandoning Taher's initial plan, as Rakib cleared his throat, slipping into a confident composure, just as his mama had taught him all those months ago.

The words spilled out of him like poetry. The others desperately held onto each syllable rolling off his tongue, cringing as each sound brushed past their earlobes, afraid of their mama's final breaths absorbing into everything. Turning into nothing.

"13th July 1986

Dear Diary,

I am a lost man, who finds himself

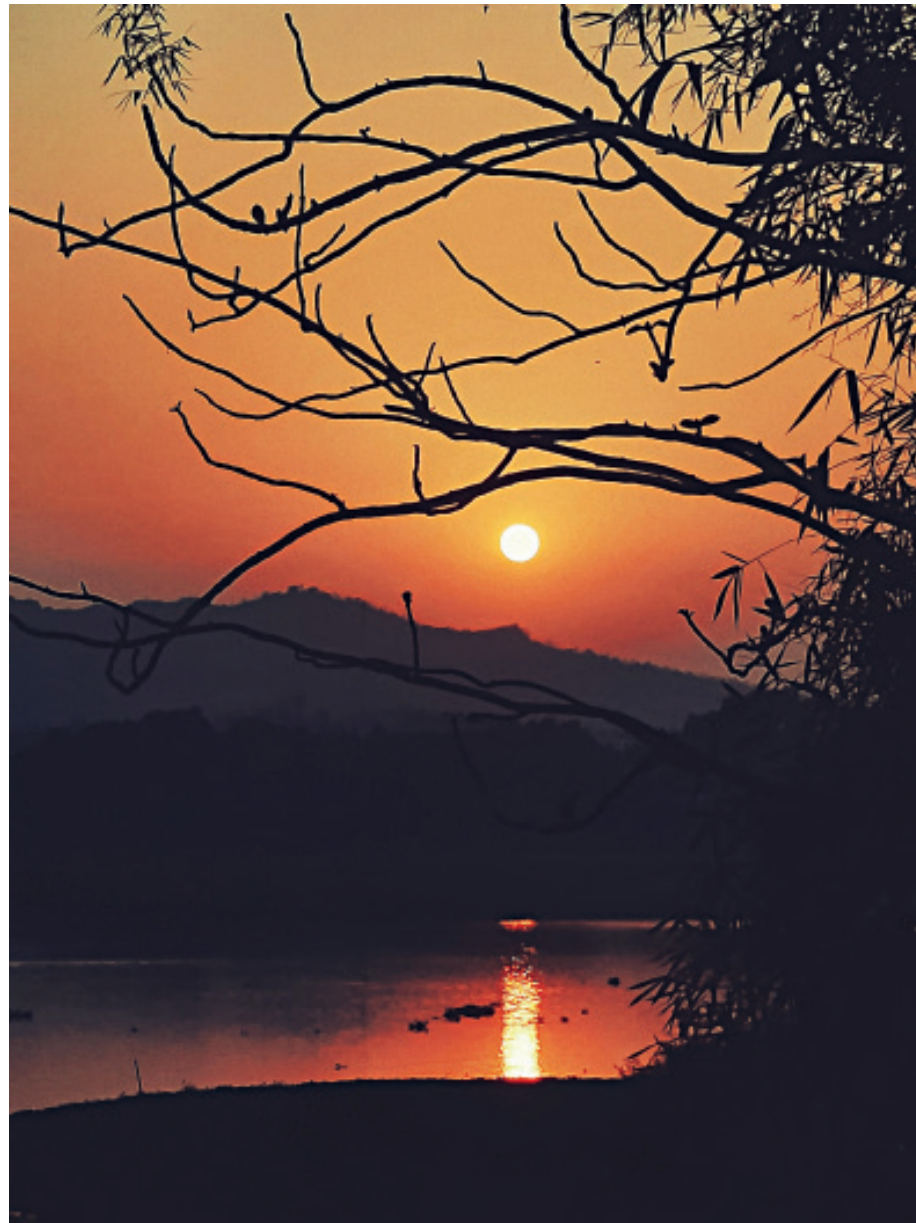


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coming in and out of consciousness, drifting in this dirt-poor station. It hasn't been long since I arrived here, yet already my back aches against the uneven pavement, my teeth stain from the persistent paan. I tried contacting my son in Tokyo but am still awaiting an answer.

20th July 1986

The running trains leave my head spinning. I watch people bid each other farewell, in a melee of waving hands and lost tears, the platform shakes like a shiver in the cold. Is it the train speeding away? Or is it me?

26th January 1987

Dear Diary,

Still no reply. I understand that he is busy with his family. I would send another message but am short on cash. Once the telegram reaches him, he can come get me. I'm not too old to at least help around the house.

30th September 1987 (approx.)

Dear Diary,

Who knew an eight-year-old could be so insufferable? I'd been noticing a few urchins recklessly boarding trains for a while now. Today, as was inevitable, one of the lot (named Morshed, I think, I can't be sure) got his wiry foot stuck between the steel steps, failing to somersault his way in. Thank the Lord I was nearby.

Grabbing him by the hips, I yanked him away from the edge. He looked up at me once I set him down and asked why he would take such risks.

"Arreh uncle," he answered in between chuckles bubbling over, "It was nothing!"

Fall 1989 (approx.)

Dear Diary,

I wonder what happened to the telegrams. Maybe my son changed his address.

Meanwhile, I've made myself a half-life here. Every morning I awake before sunrise, watch the first trains come by. Sleepy passengers make their way through the platform steering clear of my scattered belongings. Do they do it out of respect or disgust? Perhaps guilt.

The sun is up by the time Morshed and his friends are done ransacking compartments and selling their findings. That is when I gather the kids around, their notebooks in hand.

At first, it was tough without an adequate amount of interest on their part, much less pen and paper. But using their earnings for supplies has sped up our process. Now that the kids have discovered the power of words, they are well on their way to writing essays by themselves.

Rakib, the youngest of the lot, has grasped the patterns of this language sus-

piciously fast. But Manzur has a gift seen only in poets long dead. He finds meaning behind words that seemingly hide no secrets, writes as an artist to his muse, twists his words forming encryptions only those well versed in poetry can uncover.

I teach the kids letters, words, and sentences. They use them to tell vibrant stories born only from the free minds of children.

This I do twice a day. The rest of my time is spent watching, listening, and pondering. I now have a taste for jorda and solitude.

Winter, 1990 something, or maybe 2000

I have just scolded Taher for missing class again. It hurts to be so strict but I'm glad these boys agreed to learn the alphabet. They have become my responsibility. My lifeline.

I do not have much time left, I know. I can feel my frail bones breaking from the cold. But I have done more in this shallow unmarked grave, I have lived more in this half-life than ever before. Nobody will remember me. But as these kids write, my name is branded on the skin of this world, stitched into the tapestry of time itself.

They are my children. They will grow to achieve greatness and that will be my legacy.

Do not stand at my grave and weep.

I am not there.

I do not sleep."

At this point Rakib went quiet, staring glassy-eyed at the final entry.

"I want to give Rahim mama a proper burial," it was unclear who made this proposition, but the agreement was unanimous.

The sun set as six young boys – shirts tied over their heads, beads of sweat rolling down their pearlescent shoulder blades – gathered around a hole dug as deep as six young boys could manage. The youngest hugged a leather notebook to his bare chest.

Dense fog enveloped them as the hole was refilled, a makeshift tombstone placed at one end. "Here lies Rahim mama, a teacher and a father," the stone declared, an imposing interruption bathed in the glory of promise and possibility, resting on a doorway between worlds, on the otherwise barren hilltop.

A beacon home, a watered seed for Manzur, who would have his first published book by 20, Morshed who'd build a mini empire, using business savvy made obvious from his expert bartering of train goods and of course, Rakib, who would teach railway kids on weekends as his uncle had done long ago.

They headed back to the station, their home. Looking back at their mama's words absorbed into nothing, turned into everything one last time.

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