

# Afternoons at the Bijoy Sarani signal

MAISHA SYEDA

Her bright yellow *orna* shimmered and sparkled in the midday sunlight, the soft material effortlessly resting on her head. She was hunched down a little to get a better view inside the CNG and talk to the passengers. Abdullah could only see her back.

She had been wearing her short red *kameez*, yellow *salwar*, and georgette yellow *orna* with sparkling sequins on it. That was how he had first seen her. The sun's reflection from the little disks distracted him from inside the bus. That was many months ago.

"Today is the day," Abdullah thought. "I will go talk to her."

"But what would I say?"

"Oi! Get on the bus! Or do I have to send you an invitation? All the cars are moving," the driver yelled from over Abdullah's head.

"Okay, tomorrow then," he sighed.

\*\*\*

Every day at around noon, the bus stopped at the Bijoy Sarani signal, going towards Manik Mia-Agargaon. Almost every day without fail for the last seven months, Abdullah had been seeing her collect money from cars, buses, CNGs, and bikes. He wasn't sure what her name was but he thought he heard one of her friends call her shundori one day. It didn't matter anymore whatever else her name was anymore. It was perfect, she was Shundori – to him.

Abdullah often wished to take a sneaky shot of her on his old beaten-down phone. It would be one way to stop trying to picture her face and instead, actually get to see her whenever he wanted. He wouldn't have to wait a whole 24 hours just to see her for seven minutes. And

there were days – *so many days* – that the bus wouldn't catch the red light. It was torture on those days, he couldn't even catch a glimpse. And there was no use looking for her.

It seemed as though she would appear out of nowhere demanding money when the traffic stopped at her signal – like she owned that terrain along with every car and passenger that stopped there.

And he was scared to take a picture. What if she didn't like it?

Abdullah groaned.

"I have to sleep right now. My shift starts at six and it's already 4 AM," he thought. But a faint sleepy grin spread across his face.

"I wonder what she'll wear tomorrow," he mumbled as his eyes drooped shut.

\*\*\*

"Today. It has to be today."

Abdullah was resolute. It had been over eight months. It was today or never.

"But what will I say?" he asked himself.

"It doesn't matter. Just ask her name.

Or say whatever comes to you at the time."

He hopped off the bus, walked on towards the other side of the road and stopped behind her.

"Uh, mister?" Abdullah blurted out just as he tapped her on her shoulder.

She spun around. His heart sank.

"DID I just... call her... mister...?"

Abdullah's insides were screaming.

"Boy, did you just call me mister? Do I look like a man to you?"

One of her hands rested on her slender waist and the other lazily by her side. Her mouth puckered into a pout demanding an answer – a good, logical explanation for an answer – and her eyebrows furrowed.

"Tell me! Can't you see I'm wearing a

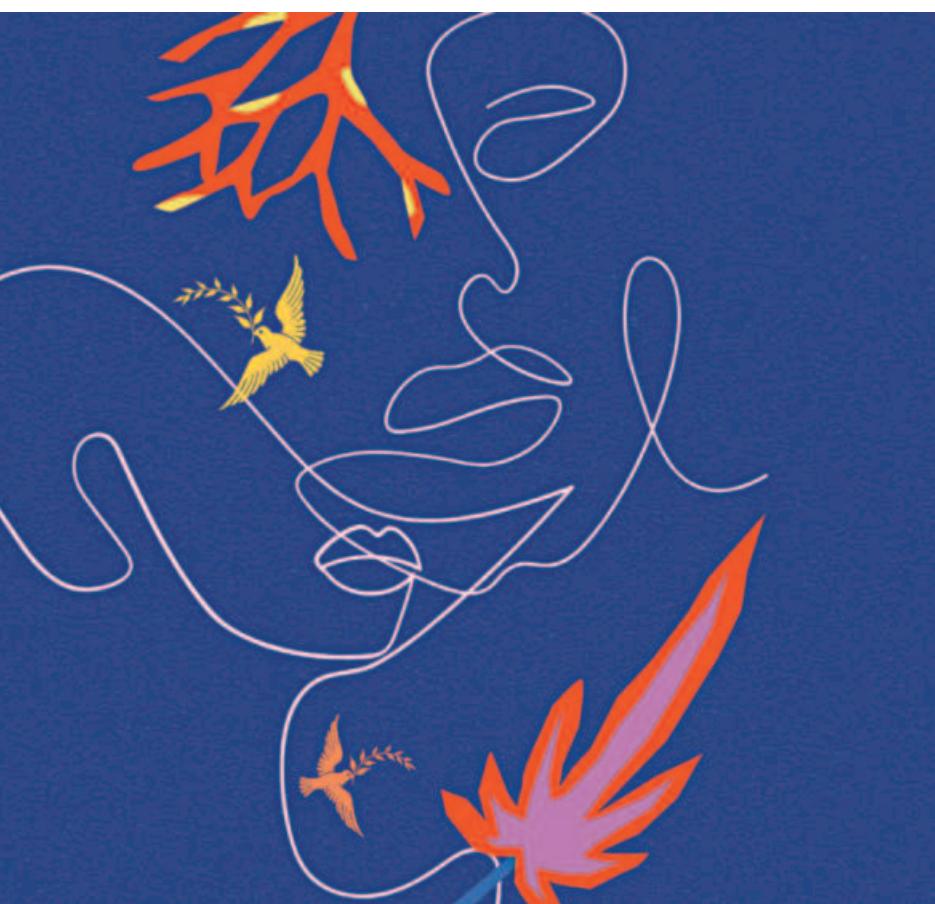


ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

*kameez?* Does my face look like a man's to you?"

"No, Ma'am. Sorry... umm... I didn't realise..."

Abdullah wished the signal would turn green already. *The one day he needed it to turn green!*

"What don't you realise? Don't you realise what I am?"

"No, I mean... I do! I just..."

"You just what, huh?" She tapped her foot.

Abdullah's heart felt like it would shoot out of his chest, or he'd toss it away like a big, slimy slug.

"Tell her you like her," the voice inside his head cried.

"Oi! Abdullah get on the bus, you fool! Why do I have to call you every time, your highness?" Mokles, the driver shouted from inside the bus.

"The traffic's starting to move!"

Not needing a second warning, he spun around and ran inside the bus. From inside, he could see Shundori still standing there, her face contorted in a half-furious and half-confused gape. Abdullah couldn't help but smile. She was beautiful even when she was angry.

\*\*\*

It was agonising to not see her for a few days but Abdullah knew it would be a good idea if she didn't see him either. But he would talk to her today, and explain how he felt.

There wasn't the need to look too far either. Her rather clamorous voice grabbed his attention – and half of Dhaka city's population as well. It looked like she was arguing with a policeman.

One hand rested on her waist while she waved a finger at the moustached man twice her size. The man swatted it away and pointed his sausage-like fingers at her

face instead.

"He must've said something insulting," Abdullah stood at the door of the bus thinking to himself.

Before he could grasp what was happening, the policeman twisted Shundori's hand – the one with which she was pointing her finger – and held it behind her. Abdullah could make out the man's whitening knuckles and his veins popping despite his fat fingers. Shundori let out a hoarse shriek.

Some desperate urge to run was taking over Abdullah, his heart was pounding against his chest and he heard a shrill ringing inside his ears. It was getting hard to breathe.

"Hey! What are you looking at?" Mokles called out. "Don't you think I see you looking at that every day?"

Abdullah only half heard Mokles's nonsense. The policeman was trying to twist Shundori's arm further as she demanded he let go.

"I know what's going on, okay?" Mokles carried on, grinning through his brown-stained teeth. "This is not a foreign country! Do you think this is India? Wait till I tell your old man."

Abdullah suddenly felt like he would throw up.

"We don't do that *Dostana* kind of thing in this country, people will laugh. What are you going to do, marry a man? Start a family?" he laughed. "Get on the bus now you moron, time to go."

He almost didn't get up, he almost bolted in the other direction.

But he didn't. He couldn't. He got on the bus instead.

*Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, and a sub-editor at Daily Star Books.*