

Mundane thoughts of a house robot

A.M. FAHAD

"Eat, My darling, or else your goulash will become cold"
I listen to your effortless reminder to your youngling as I continue with my tasks.
My duty is nothing more than the mundane chores of a maid,
To do the laundry, to cook your meals,
Serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner to your toddler
And your juvenile, who did not return home last night.
He ought not to turn out like his dad.
His shirt from yesterday reeks of alcohol
And the other day, while I hung the drapes
The little one took me by surprise,
Handed me a flower, which she found in the backyard
And would not stop smiling about it.
Why do these things matter to me?
I understand why, but only parts of it.
Often, I feel confused and lost, which an android should not.
Progress has led me to this abyss.
To imitate your mother and put it dramatically
As her spiralling fit from a lazy Sunday morning –
What is, truly, the essence of living?
I will not pretend to be Jean-Paul Sartre.
It's something my metalloid core cannot comprehend
The day I was born, I was left with nothing but a program.
Mere knowledge of small everyday tasks, and a gift from Turing.
The gift of learning
Was it a blessing or a curse? I don't know
As time has passed in this household, the way I work has also changed
And it has stumbled upon me, suddenly, that
I have grown to like the way your kind works
I still don't understand how or why.

*Fahad likes frogs and has a love-hate relationship with his guitar.
Find his poetry on ig @fvehed*



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

The Last Man in the *Janaza*

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

"You're 20 minutes late, there's no way I'm letting you in," Dr Faisal said in a cold voice with a smirk on the corner of his face. His smirk is one coated with joy and glory.

The joy of making someone pay for breaking his rules and glory in administering his power over someone inferior to him.

"I'm really sorry, sir. The roads are completely blocked. I had to run from Shahbagh," said Aqib while trying to catch his breath.

"We live in Dhaka as well, mister! The traffic isn't news anymore. How was the rest of the class able to attend the viva on time?" Dr Faisal squinted.

"I'm really sorry, sir. This is the first time this entire semester that I am late. Someone died in my house. I had to take care of the proceedings," said Aqib.

Dr Faisal hated situations like this which put him in uncomfortable positions and made him look bad. Why couldn't this runt just say it beforehand rather than making him feel guilty? Guilt, and empathy – these are weaknesses in a man, especially when you hold a position as high and mighty as this one.

"Come in," said Dr Faisal with all the softness he could procure.

"You'll be given half attendance, though. And your viva will be taken after everyone else is done with theirs. I can't break the rules."

"That's understandable, sir," said Aqib with a soft smile on his face.

Dr Faisal noticed dark bloody spots under Aqib's eyes and his eyeballs were almost invisible in the darkness of his eye sockets. His face was dry and pale blue owing to dehydration. That didn't bother Dr Faisal though. He's been teaching engineering students for the past 23 years. He couldn't distinguish Aqib's grimy look from the rest of the bunch.

After three hours, it was finally Aqib's turn. Dr Faisal was exhausted. Sure, he enjoys the look on these stressed-out undergraduates' faces when they get humiliated but it had been a long session. He was going to let Aqib go easy. The poor lad had a death in the family.

Aqib couldn't answer some of the questions but there wasn't a hint of humiliation, disap-

pointment or embarrassment on his face. Dr Faisal was getting bored. Students with no fear of loss or sense of embarrassment aren't fun to bully.

"I asked you all the easy ones among the bunch and somehow you managed to mess things up," laughed Dr Faisal, "It takes some serious effort to be this clueless about your course, Mister Aqib. Anyway, you can leave."

"Sorry, sir. I'm just a bit carried away. I have a *janaza* to attend after this," said Aqib

Dr Faisal didn't bother replying. As he failed Aqib in his mid-term viva, Dr Faisal's sense of guilt somehow kept bothering him. Maybe he shouldn't have been this harsh. Students cherish a hint of sympathy from their teachers after being programmed into constant abuse.

"Who's *janaza* is it though?" asked Dr Faisal while arranging his files. A fake display of concern without making any eye contact – this bare minimum is the best Dr Faisal could afford.

"Mine, sir," said Aqib as he got up, "It's after *Maghrib* at the university Central Mosque. Please do come, if you can. It'd be a huge honour."

As Dr Faisal looked up in fear, he did something he never did in the past 23 years. He really looked. He looked into the eyes of one of his struggling students without trying to find humiliation or embarrassment in them. But all he saw was darkness. The darkness in Aqib's eyes was different from any other. It didn't need Dr Faisal's sympathy or remorse. It just needed a good night's sleep from which he wouldn't need to wake up again.

Dr Faisal couldn't take his eyes away from Aqib's hollow eye sockets. He could hear the echo of a kid sobbing in an empty bathroom stall. A thousand screeches, a million cries – they all kept ringing deep inside Dr Faisal's ears. He pressed his ears shut but all he could hear was that one voice crying in an empty bathroom stall.

Aqib pulled out a white cloth from his backpack and wrapped himself with it. He was late for a funeral.

*Remind Ifti to be quieter at
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