

FOG BENEATH THE WINTER SKYLINE

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"Winter evenings have always had something special, don't you think?" Zuhayer asks a preoccupied Azyan.

"How so?" responds Azyan.

It is 7 PM. But the neighbourhood is quiet. It's been almost three hours since the electricity went out. The city is rarely a quiet place. The two friends started a fire on the roof of their three-storey building. Borrowing ingredients from their mothers' kitchen, they carefully organised the ingredients and equipment to their convenience.

A pot full of powdered rice grains, a small block of date palm jaggery, a plate of shredded coconut, a net, a pot, and some water. Azyan learned this simple and ordinary recipe from his late grandmother, who was always insistent on teaching him things every now and then. Of course, they know how to do it. They have been more independent than most other kids since a young age due to both of their parents working taxing jobs.

"Well, I always thought that every winter brought the same sense of familiarity. The seasons come and go and the seconds pass me by before I can get myself to blink, but winter, I think, has some kind of an inexplicable residual effect," says Zuhayer.

"What are you jabbering about? Come, I think the first *bhapa pitha* is done. Looks like an oddball, doesn't it? Should have used less jaggery, I think. The first one always comes out a little odd. You will have to devour a small saccharine sun, for now, Zuhayer," says Azyan.

"Don't worry. I'm sure it will be alright," says Zuhayer.

The two friends grew up together playing cricket in the garage, watching *Pokémon* routinely at 6 PM on Cartoon Network at Zuhayer's flat, and chasing stringless kites – occasionally getting yelled at for toppling over vendors in the streets of Dhaka. Winter has always meant drawing badminton courts in empty places, buying tube lights and stealing electricity lines, pies, foggy mornings under a kind sun, and hazy evenings as the sun quietly goes down. As winter draws nearer, the two friends reminisce about simpler times.

"Life will only get faster from here, right? We will have to sit for university exams eventually. After university starts, everyone will get more and more busy with their lives. After university, there's work-life and the ceaseless pressure from everywhere to create meaning out of the years you've passed. To make some sense out of your life, don't you find it difficult?" Zuhayer asks.

Azyan lifts a small plate from the net above the pot. The steam is hot enough to cook the next few batches conveniently. Zuhayer gazes into the fire, its dancing flames casting shadows against the evening sky. The steam from the pot consists of a nostalgic blend of memory and anticipation.

"You are right. Life will get faster from here. And that change feels difficult when we perceive it from the outside. But we are already a part of it, aren't we?" Azyan responds.

"I suppose you are right when I think of it that way," Zuhayer adds.

"Yeah. Winter will always return. But we will surround ourselves with warmth. *Bhapa pithas* will continue to exist.

The fire will always feel like some sort of a mystery you can stare at for hours. You will continue to find yourself stuck at the Bijoy Sarani signal regardless of the season or the weather. I feel the same. I also think that change is scary but that doesn't mean everything is moving while we remain stationary. I think it means, everything is moving, and we are moving too. We just can't see it from up so close," says Azyan.

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"Winter does have residual effects. Some are so strong that it leaves you with the longing for a cold breeze brushing against your face almost every other bad day," he adds.

"The electricity is back. Let's go downstairs and eat while it's hot," Zuhayer says.

They begin packing their things as the night gets colder. For some reason, the city feels noisier with all the lights turned on.

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ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN