

FLASH FICTION BY FARAH GHUZNAVI



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Her last words

The slamming of the front door sounded an ominous note, warning of trouble to come.

Maria braced herself as 11-year-old Minou bounced in, trailed by the stullen footsteps of her teenage sister, Emilia.

A fragile peace prevailed as the girls freshened up after school. But once lunch was served, the battle well and truly commenced.

"What is this garbage?" Emilia sneered, eyeing the stuffed cabbage rolls on her plate, "Can't we just have hamburgers like everyone else?"

"The pandemic and the war in Ukraine caused worldwide food shortages, Viktor. It's wrong for rich kids in international schools to be throwing bread rolls around! What kind of message does that send to impressionable young minds?"

"Studying at the American School doesn't make you an American, Emilia! That holubtsi is your father's family recipe from Kiev, so stop complaining", Maria said, wishing Viktor was there to witness his daughter's disrespect.

"God, why are you always so mean? Allison's Mom lets her eat whatever she wants!" The practised sneer that graced Emilia's finely curled upper

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lip left no room for doubt that any mother who wasn't Maria would be a better choice in her opinion.

Maria knew this was her punishment for daring to protest the school's plans to organise a food fight for the children. Despite her reservations, she had felt unable to let such an obnoxious idea go unchallenged.

Viktor and Maria discussed it after both girls had brought home suggested lists from their teachers requesting donations of "suitable" items.

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"I'm sure the school thinks it's harmless fun for the kids—you know, like all those American high school

movies..." Viktor protested mildly.

"But do you think it's harmless?" his wife persisted. "For heaven's sake, you work for a global charity here in Nairobi! How does that fit with allowing your daughters to waste food? There are kids begging outside the gates of that school who don't get enough to eat.

"Meanwhile, Emilia refuses to listen to anything. She just storms out once she's had her say! And even Minou doesn't want to miss out on the so-called fun they're planning..."

But unfortunately for Maria, Viktor hated conflict. So, even though he didn't approve of food fights, he was unwilling to risk his 'favoured parent' status with his daughters by saying so.

And unlike Maria, he was endlessly patient with their teen queen's daily dramas. Perhaps because the length of Viktor's workday meant that he didn't have to deal with the fallout very often.

Now, as Emilia raged about how she wished that Allison's mother, or their homeroom teacher, or basically anyone but Maria had given birth to her, her usually stoic mother abruptly interrupted her tirade, shocking the teenager into pausing.

"Well, it's too bad I'm such an awful mother, Emilia! Because guess what? I'm. All. You've. Got!"

And this time, Maria got to stalk out of the room, leaving an outraged silence in her wake. How rare and delightful it felt to have the last word with a teenager!

Payback time

I'm not sure when I first realised that we'd met before. In the beginning, you were just the elderly man I often noticed pottering around our communal rooftop.

All the inhabitants of our building were encouraged to use the space up there to nourish our souls. The progressive architect who had designed our spacious, cleverly-ventilated apartments with their indoor waterfalls and cooling systems that did not require energy consumption also believed we should be outdoors and engage with nature as much as possible.

Perhaps he had a point. The benefits of "green exercise"—as gardening was now referred to by the wellness gurus—was clearly documented, with evidence showing that it improved mental health as well as providing much-needed physical activity for the "murgis" that the denizens of our mega-city had been reduced to.

But I had never responded positively to coercive measures, however well-meant, so gardening remained very much a spectator sport for me.

with an affectionate, if absent-minded, husband and three delightful teenage demons.

Perhaps I too would someday be reduced to relying on roses for company. I shuddered at the thought.

When I was finally able to place you, I lost no time in launching my campaign for casual interaction, ostentatiously displaying some potted plants that cried out for attention.

You resisted my overtures at first, averse to what you must have feared was pity on my part. But you realised soon enough that my plants were the ones deserving of my (and everyone else's) pity!

Why did I do it? Because one good turn deserves another.

And I remembered—eventually—a time when a heartbroken young girl on a river cruise encountered a kind middle-aged man.

College is meant to embody the best years of our lives, and quite often it does. But it is also a time when raw emotions hit the hardest. So it can seem impossible to get over a rejection from the person



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

I watched you lovingly curate your little kingdom, from the hydroponic vegetables you grew organically (which the innovative architect would undoubtedly approve of!), to the blossoms that flourished under the caresses and conversations you bestowed upon them.

You were less forthcoming with humans. I noticed that you rarely spoke to anyone else in the building.

The guard insisted you were a good soul, shaking his head sadly at your prolonged grief over your wife's passing.

"His children live abroad, you know. They didn't even visit their parents properly before she died. He looked after her all by himself for two years. But I never once heard him complain about it!"

I couldn't imagine your loneliness, living in my rambunctious household

you considered the love of your life.

"It's rarely as bad as it seems, Ma. Even this shall pass. If it makes you feel any better, it is sometimes easier to share your problems with a stranger. After all, it's not as if we'll ever meet again."

But we did.

Even though a quarter-century would pass before that happened...

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator and development worker. Her work has been published in 11 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe and the USA. Writer in Residence with Commonwealth Writers, she published a short story collection titled Fragments of Riversong (Daily Star Books, 2013), and edited the Lifelines anthology (Zubaan Books, 2012). She is currently working on her new short story collection and is on Instagram @farahghuznavi.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

SNATA BASU

I am put away impulsively like the totems on a modern altar on a parched, sweltering heath—suspended in the air in quiet refusal, I eat the apple with my broken teeth. Burnt like liquor, my hand in a fish bowl, I hang like fruit basking in the afternoon gold, sprawling redemption, in hindsight, seeks to remarry my spent head and I am sent into a maddening spiral of easy forgiveness; I itch to scald like rocks on a receding moonscape. I age like delicate gossamer that's tightly knitted, yet stripped bare like the dearth of gentle love—sleeping to survive the fever dreams. There is no water if I am on water, so I spade the sombre earth, in search of softness, oaring in the pool of decoys in a coupe. I have turned so foreign; I cannot reconnect the irregularities warped on the mirror, and the thinning shaft of daylight beneath the skin of my feet.

Snata Basu is an aspiring poet from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her work mostly centers on passionate, personal bindings. She is currently pursuing Bachelor of Arts in English Literature at North South University.

POETRY

The Last Day of a Red Tulip

DILRUBA Z. ARA

One early morning, before the sun's ascent,
Stood a red bud in my front lawn.
Tall and erect, illustrating kind of phallic
Arrogance. Like Lord Shiva in a temple.

As dawn unfurled, its light on the scene,
The tulip stepped out of its male disguise.
Unveiling itself like a brazen maiden
In a late-night nude show. In Copenhagen.

Throughout the day, it danced in solar bliss,
Paying no heed to the flame that charred
And chafed its skin, leaving it cringed.
Cringed, Redder & Wounded.

At dusk the sun's piercing shaft departed
To tease another red tulip far afield,
Whilst my tulip's blood oozed & dropped
On the grass. Scattered red petals.

And I remained at the window. Wondering
About the life of a tulip, and its dubious essence.

Written in 1982 at the F7 Airforce Base, Sweden.

Dilruba Z. Ara is the author of internationally acclaimed novels: A List of Offences and Blame in addition to a collection of stories titled Detached Belonging. Her novels, stories, translated work and poetry serve as touchstones for scholars worldwide while her visual art adds a multifaceted view into the depths of her creative soul. Raised on Greek mythology and international fairy tales, Ara's literary journey began at age eight. She is multilingual and adept in writing three languages, with her works published worldwide. Currently residing in Sweden, Ara imparts her expertise in both Swedish and English.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE