



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

FICTION

After the rain

I finished *The Marionette*, my last film, and fully devoted myself to making Bindu's career. With great delight and excitement, I chased her auditions and shootings, hiding behind film crews and curious bystanders.

MIR ARIF

Perhaps I should have met that girl. What if I was wrong and imagined an ordinary girl so fantastically that I couldn't even recognise her in real life? I would regret it later as things wouldn't turn out in my favour. I missed my chance to be happy, as moderate as it was, being with this false girl and not letting her know that she was the wrong person. Didn't they look somewhat identical, in their outfit and look? And the idea of standing her up on a fine day, waiting as eagerly as I was to meet with her. But I eschewed any conflicting thoughts and focused on my stagnant life. There was something that people sending me letters saw in my advertisement: publicity, gossip, fun. I received many similar claims and resisted the temptation of meeting them in person. Beneath their claims and long, florid sentences were lonely, depressed souls. They wrote in a desperate state of mind to find meaning and purpose in life. I was on the verge of losing my patience, though. I did away with other necessities—money, temptation, fame, friendship, waiting only for a genuine reply from the girl of my dreams who had changed my life with a kiss. I received another letter after a month—perfect timing at that moment, for I, with the devotion of a hermit, had already decided to wander on earth and empty my mind from pursuing a foolish dream.

I opened the letter quickly, my heart in my mouth. The letter contained a single question, no greetings or signing off. "Why are you so stupid?" It was a blow, an antidote to the fantasies I lived in. I was sure it was the girl I had been looking for so long that I didn't open any other letters from strangers. The sender was Bindu, so that was the name of my beloved, who apparently was a student, writing from the university dorm as the address revealed. I had no clue, no idea, what I could write back. First, I thought the very nature of her question was argumentative. It was a question to mildly rebuke me while at the same time congratulating me for my grandiose love and my efforts. In other words, she was also in love with me and couldn't say it another way. She had to be simple and fiery in her response. My reply was long and persuasive, asking her repetitively to meet me anywhere on earth. But never for once, did it occur to me why I wanted to meet her or why she would meet me. I still thought that my attempts to find someone through a newspaper advertisement were enough to show my desperation and genuineness.

It was evident, after several exchanges of letters, that she was more interested in my acting career than the feeling I had been nourishing for her. I was surprised to see that she didn't know my name and inquired about my siblings, my upbringing, my career. I was still the most sought-after face on screen. To show my prowess I offered her what many would have done for consent and validation. I told her she could be an actress, her uniquely beautiful face being the weapon. The audition would be easy. The pay was good, and the opportunity to travel to different locations in the country and abroad and the fun and excitement of attending social programs and being in the papers and magazines constantly were the added bonus. "It's a life with never-ending progress, profit, and entertainment. You get to discover yourself through the lives you play. You embody the whole nation." I wrote to her, asking her to meet with me but she refused this time. "I'm not going to be stood up again." To my horror, I realised who I had seen at the museum and what I had done, killing the possibility of something extraordinary had I not been so infatuated with my own ideals of love. Now more than anything, I wanted to remedy my mistakes. To secure her audition, I wrote to Mr. Debnath, one of my directors, who promised to assess her acting skills once I finished the shooting of *The Marionette*, a social realism of middle-class struggle in East Pakistan, which Mr. Debnath hoped would bring him much coveted international fame, something akin to Satyajit Roy. But it was one thing to satisfy the domestic audience with your vociferous dialogues, which in those times was uttered by a flesh and blood prompter on set, quite another to deceive foreign film critics and judges who could see the actor wasn't simply focused on the evolving story but rather on the voice dictating his gestures and movements.

I finished *The Marionette*, my last film, and fully devoted myself to making Bindu's career. With great delight and excitement, I chased her auditions and shootings, hiding behind film crews and curious bystanders. I saw her from a distance: how she was working through her first shooting; how naturally she applied 'method acting' using depths and emotions from personal experiences, something that the likes of Marlon Brando or James Dean used in Hollywood; how versatile she was with the changing nature of the industry, switching from black and white to colour films, understanding how backlighting and keylighting worked to add depth and textures

to a scene. If she made any mistakes, especially when shooting under the hot, tropical sun, on a beach or mustard field or a dirt road, I would feel her frustrations. Things were the same with me—I too had to face such difficulties in the early years of my acting career. At that point, I felt Bindu and I were the same person. A time came when I could feel when she was around me, the warmth of her presence. Once I was sitting on a padded chair and realised somebody had just sat on it. It was still warm, and with the right temperature underneath me, I could feel her.

When Bindu's first film, *The Lost Tune*, came out, it created a great hubbub. The middle class saw in the story how talents could unfold years later even if they remained dormant in you for a long time. The film was applauded by critics for her debut performance and she signed contracts for two other films, one directed by Mr. Debnath himself, who now renewed his hopes of international fame with an adaptation of Manik Bandyopadhyay's story, *Prehistoric*. Needless to say, *The Marionette* was a flop, both commercially and artistically, and Mr. Debnath rarely responded to my letters nowadays. On a fine day I wrote to Bindu asking about the kiss we shared, which made me feel so fresh, so full of life. She responded: "I don't think we ever kissed each other, but if you want we can meet sometime." Oh, how I wished I rather received my death sentence from a judge! That kiss that altered my life to the point of madness didn't exist in the first place? My whole life was based on one single event, one single purpose: to recreate the right moments of that kiss, that after the rain effect I held so high in my memory. But I didn't reveal insecurities in the response. Besides, my vanity was still too strong to easily agree to meet with her. Wasn't I the most popular film star in the industry with Best Actor awards for my two best social realist works, *The Ribbon of Life* and *My Homeland*? Didn't I receive the Pakistan Film Awards, which rarely awarded East Pakistani films and actors? I simply replied, "I'm so busy these days, but if I get a free weekend, I shall let you know. Best, K."

This is part three of the short story "After the Rain", to be serialised here at Star Literature.

Mir Arif is a Bangladeshi author living in Ohio. He is working on his novel, *The Second Interpretation*, while awaiting the publication of his story collection, *Adrift*. Find him @mirarif.

POETRY

Bird's eye view

A.M. FAHAD

I often think of flying on a bird's eye view
Spread my nimble wings over
A mighty wind that will impel me above
fields of rioting green—
unseen from the cages—my flaps are
used to fidgeting in—a bird's eye view over
a golden sunset under a gentle breeze
with no flinging of sorts but the release of
all my earthly sorrows—does
a bird experience grief 500 above
the ground where no soil or
mud can be found,
to bury all the worms/ache I have swallowed
to live?
I often think of flying on a bird's eye view
I've given everything I could give
I do not want to go back
to see/look at the empty homes and broken nests
Just this once, I want to
breathe in the air to look
and to see
with my eyes (that don't reek of death)
to feel the tug in my throat
taking flight like the yearning
inside of me—
to live
and (not) watch the world set itself on fire
from the clear blue skies above

A.M. Fahad is an aspiring poet and writer from Dhaka. He uses vivid imagery and elements of nature to encapsulate his emotions with words, which often end up in a thought train rather than a conclusion. Find him at amfahad1747@gmail.com.



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POETRY BY MARZIA RAHMAN



DESIGN: AMREETA LETHE

Gaza

Gaza is not a city—any more it's a grave, grieving for the dead.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Hide, if you want to live

Three-year-old Maria asks her nine-year-old brother, Ibrahim. How long we hide, akhkh? As long as we are alive.

An optimistic talk

Dead dads tell their dead children
Don't worry, dear,
in another life—
we both will get the chance to live.

Marzia Rahman is a flash fiction writer and translator. Author of two books, *The Aftermath* and *Dot and Other Flashes*, she has been published widely in both print and online journals.



DESIGN: AMREETA LETHE