

#MUSING

Sleepless *in* Dhaka

At three in the morning, my neighbourhood is so desolate that it can make you feel empty at heart. The little nightlife it offers dies down by then. Main roads around that area are also eerily quiet -- no traffic, except the occasional car or two from time to time and some rickshaws. Most of the shops and eateries have their shutters down. High-rise office buildings appear wearisome after the corporate grind of the day. But a few neon signs and electronic billboards relentlessly show ads, throwing out different lights and hues in the air.

It was in those odd circumstances that I met her. Clad in a black-and-white striped dress, she was standing under one of those large TVs or electronic billboards which lit up her face and accentuated her contours and gorgeous eyes and the red roses which were tucked in her hair.

"Hi, I don't mean to intrude, but did your car break down?" I offered to help.

She paused -- probably trying to judge this stranger -- before nervously answering, "Yes, and my phone is out of juice too."

She was at an after-party that stretched late. Her car stopped midway when going home, and despite trying for a long time, she could not make it run again.

In a few minutes, we were walking down the empty streets, with me giving her company on the way to her apartment some blocks away. She said she would send her chauffeur to deal with the car at dawn in a couple of hours.

"What are you doing here at this time of night?" she enquired as we turned into an alley.

"Nothing, I just like to walk."

"At 3 AM?"

she was startled.

It was a fair question. I explained, "I am a writer. When I am stuck or out of ideas, be it for my novel or for a literary piece in the magazine where I work, I come down to the streets. Late night walks and empty roads give me a lot of interesting experiences that I can convert to stories."

"Like this one tonight?" she teased.

May be! I looked at her closely: a petite woman, not more than 30. A finance specialist in some corporation, as she had mentioned. Seductive red lips and red nails. Red roses on her head.

"Are you checking me out?"

Taken aback by her frankness, I quickly rummaged for a harmless answer. "The

roses look nice on your hair."

It was a lie. I never liked flowers on hair or in a vase or anywhere except where they belong: plants and trees. I cherish the water lilies floating about at a pond in my ancestral home in Munshiganj. I get mesmerised by the blazing Krishnochuras along Chandrima Udyan in Dhaka. I miss the tulips at the Alexandra Gardens in Cardiff, which I took pictures of and sent to my mother when I was there as a student. And of course, I love

the sight of roses in any park.

But when taken out of their natural habitats, I have no interest in them whatsoever. I also lie whenever someone gives me flowers, pretending to be pleased, while in reality, I would rather prefer a book, an Xbox, a lamp, a shirt, or anything else as a gift.

"There were more roses earlier tonight," she continued, mingling with a couple of petals shyly. "I took a few of them off."

While she was toying with her hair, my eyes caught a tattoo of a single rose just under her wrist.

Roses must be her favourite.

"When I am married, I want my husband to present me flowers. On every occasion! Anniversary or birthday or Valentine's Day," she opened up.

"I never celebrated Valentine's when I was dating. Everything about the day seems so cliché and cringey!"

"I thought writers were romantic?"

Perhaps, I am not a good writer after all. But, in that late hour, this strange girl meant the world to me. The city was asleep and had disappeared into the darkness. It was only her.

When we reached her apartment, she took out the roses from her hair, letting her locks cascade down. "Here, I give you these. Something to remember me with."

That was the first time I felt nice about getting flowers. After I reached home, I carefully placed them on my desk and then opened my laptop. I had a story to write.

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