



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

FICTION

The burden of words

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

I shouldn't have written that on top, I was just trying to be dramatic. I figured I should have a hardcopy of my writings on the off-chance something happens. Who would be checking my hard-drive or emails, you know? Sometimes you only get discovered through a friend after death. Like Kafka.

It was not often that I received odd parcels. True, my job at the paper did occasionally warrant a few peculiar hate-mail or rebuttals, but this was nothing of that sort. It was a large brown envelope, which held a few rims of paper. Manuscripts. Stories and novels, with some underlined red lines and infrequent comments on the margins. The note "If I die" had been scrawled on top with a black marker and had alarmed my wife.

"Who is it by, does it say?" She asked.

I checked the address. "Akbar," I said. A writer I had befriended earlier this year. He was older than me, in his mid 40s, but carried himself as if he were still a university student. Enthusiastic. Full of life. He wore lightly faded jeans with white Keds and dress shirts with colourful prints.

Akbar had begun to drop by my desk almost weekly, sometimes every other day to excitedly talk about a writer or a story he was writing. I had never been the literary type. I worked the longest on the business beat. Only last year I was promoted to handle the supplements sections, which came out on certain anniversary days. This was how I ended up editing one or two of Akbar's pieces. But what was this "If I die" business?

I called him up.

"I will be travelling next week," he explained. "I want you to have my literary oeuvre, in case anything happens."

"In case what happens?"

"...If I die, you know," he said. He seemed unsure.

"Meet me today, Akbar," I said. "How about Purnima's for tea? 5pm-ish. Don't be late."

I had to know where exactly he was headed off. A safari that posed real, physical danger? Oh, how I often wished for a vacation like this! Just a few months ago Akbar and I had made some preliminary plans for a tour of the islands down south. He wanted to see the ramshackle buildings that people lived in over there. But now he was going off alone somewhere, leaving me with his life's work. Why could he not just email this, either? I had to understand this: Why me? I wouldn't lie, a little part of me was flattered. To be trusted with someone's dream. All Akbar ever wanted was to be a successful writer. Every time he visited me, this desperation had clung to his face. He had boxed as a teenager. Perhaps, that is where he had gotten the discipline. But writing was not a matter of putting in the hours. There was, he had told me, a certain weight the words had to carry. He suspected his did not. His words, he once told me, were light, airy. He longed to write sentences that weighed an anvil. "I don't know if I can make it today," he mouthed, "I have lots to pack still."

"Come for a few minutes," I insisted.

It turned out I was the one late. I shrugged an apology. Akbar had already ordered. I sat down to the familiar smell of milk-tea boiling in Purnima's. We sat in the back row of a corner. I could see towers of glasses on a counter being snatched by fours (on each hand) onto other tables.

I asked, "Akbar, why are you sending me your manuscripts?"

He looked like he now regretted doing this. "I shouldn't have written that on top, I was just trying to be dramatic. I figured I should have a hardcopy of my writings on the off-chance something happens. Who would be checking my hard-drive or emails, you know? Sometimes you only get discovered through a friend after death. Like Kafka." He shrugged.

I shot him a long look. "Are you Kafka now?"

"I'm just saying," he said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to burden you with anything. It's nothing really. You just keep it inside a drawer at your home and you can return it to me once I'm back. I have so many things I've written that no one ever bothered to publish but I still keep all of them because god knows what might just work. You never know. It's more to do with me feeling safe. No one would understand its

worth if it was just stacked up at my place."

My tea had arrived. Akbar seemed too interested in dying suddenly. It was crowded in Purnima's now. I forgot how much I missed idling away my time here with college friends, how all those friends had gone abroad or become bankers, with no time left for old friends.

"Where are you even going that you're so worried?" I asked.

"To my in-laws," he said.

"Akbar," I said, wondering if I should laugh, "Are you being serious? You're never so cheeky in your writing..."

He looked at me straight. "Oh no, I'm serious. They hate me, Mina's father, her brothers... They all do."

"Well, obviously they aren't plotting your murder!" I said.

"I tried to divorce her so many times! Then I realised I need her money, so I can't even do that. Without her job, we'd be starving," Akbar said.

"Akbar, you're overthinking," I said, finishing my tea.

The waiter flipped over our empty tea cups and gave the table a quick swipe with a towel before leaving. A sign that we had to make room for new customers.

"Calm down, really," I said to him, "Your father-in-law isn't waiting in the village with a machete. Go get some fresh air. You might

not care? Akbar would say everything was up to me, that it was my decision, but I have a feeling they want you to run around to get them discovered. They want through their deaths for something to happen. I hope Akbar does not end up doing something stupid, I don't want him to harm himself. I have a hard time as it is getting his work printed while he is alive. I don't think death would do him any good. Not every writer's words become gospel after their demise. Not everyone gets discovered. As I often looked over my desk at Akbar's parcel those three days, I came to the realisation that not everyone should get discovered, either. I would be, I knew now, a vile literary executioner. At the very least, just lazy enough to forget about the parcel altogether.

When Monday arrived, I patiently waited for Akbar to waltz into the office and take away his stuff. The commute that day to the office had been different, I felt my haversack to be heavier than usual and I clutched my bag tightly, hoping nothing would get stolen in the bus. Work kept me preoccupied most of the day and at the end of my shift, when I saw the package still at my desk, I felt a trepidation. He had just returned to town, I surmised. He was probably sleeping the day off. He will be back soon. I did not want to call him, for that would look like I couldn't wait to get rid of this! I just had to be off of Akbar's burden. I left the package at the office. My wife would think the

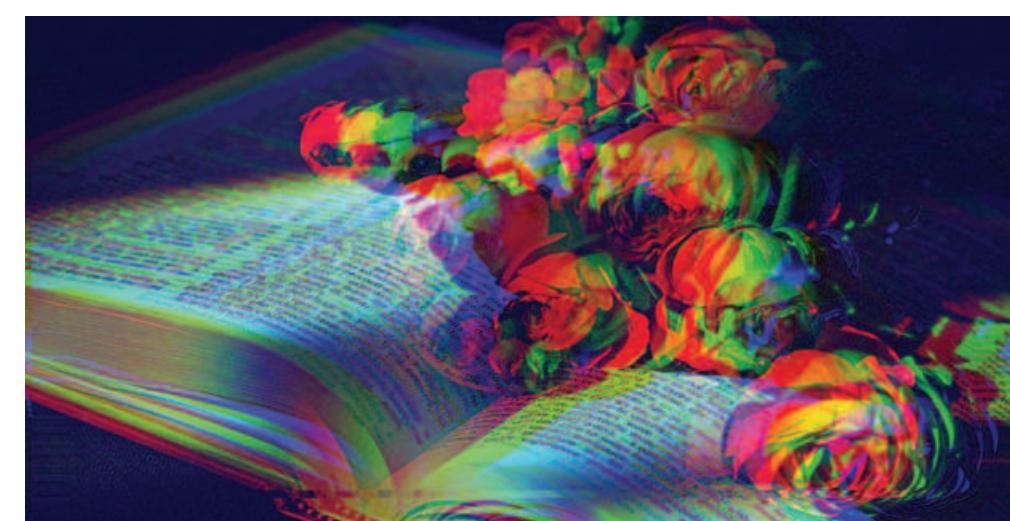


PHOTO: COLLECTED

even feel inspired to write a story. Don't worry about the package. I'll keep it safe with me, until you're back. When are you back?"

"Mina has to be back at work by Monday, so in three days...that is, if everything goes alright," he said, getting up.

I gave him a strong pat on the shoulder. I said, "Don't worry so much. Enjoy yourself. Give me a call on Monday, or better, come by the office. I'll have your life's work in pristine condition for safe return."

My wife and I stared at the manuscripts that night. "Does he want you to read them?" she asked.

I did not know the etiquette here. Appointed literary executioner all of a sudden, how was I to handle this? "He probably just feels at ease, knowing someone else has his work, you know?"

A strange thought came into my mind. What if I just burned all this? How would Akbar react? He wasn't crazy enough to not have softcopies of all this, so I would not be ruining his life. He did, after all, grant me the powers. I wondered if his being alive, still, had any effect on this. I knew Akbar would not mind if I read his manuscripts. On the contrary, he would be the happiest. Like all writers I had seen, he begged around people to read his work. He would take out his phone and read from the blog sites where he had published a piece, hoping to impress and inspire a reader on the spot. Really, I should not even be thinking so much. He would soon return and take what belongs to him, and the off-chance he doesn't—God!—do I have to, then, run around looking for publishers for my dead writer? What if I just

matter to be closed. What's a day or two, here and there? It would all be over soon.

Monday turned to Tuesday and then Wednesday. By Friday, I was close to panicking. Not just about the package, about Akbar himself. He said he would call and he had not been in communication at all. I decided to phone in myself, dialing up his number and waiting patiently.

The call did not go through the first couple of times and I let it be. He must still be stuck there in the village. It had to be a network issue. I wasn't exactly family either, or his closest friend that he would need to keep me posted on him. But something about how I merited the safeguarding of his dream, made me uneasy. I was in a position I could not describe. Back home in the evening, I called again. This time the call went through, and the spaced ringing made my heart beat take a jump. A lady answered. "Hello? Hello?" I said, but her words to me were incoherent. I could make out a long wail in the background. "Hello? I want to talk to Akbar," I said, loud enough for my wife to come over to the room. I asked, "Is he there?" But the woman didn't know how to answer. Amidst the patchy network, she seemed finally to be crying too in glitchy bursts. I fell down to the sofa, my thoughts taking me to the worst possibility. What did Akbar do? I looked at my wife and she only held me for she could see the panic in my face was severe enough. Where was the package? Back at the office? Where was Akbar? Dead?

Shahriar Shaams has written for The Business Standard, Dhaka Tribune, and The Daily Star. Find him on Instagram @shahriar.shaams.

POETRY

Mould

NUBISHA RABYA TOPOTE

Love wears different shades,
Not like the rainbow, not like the sky,
But like the strawberry high up in the tree
Far enough that I can't reach it,
But close enough that I can see it,
The colors, the softness, the way it glows.
First, it's white, and light pink
So calm, almost like it knows it's growing, it's
settling in,
Like it's sure of where it's going.
A quiet, seniority in its touch,
A tenderness that feels like it's meant to last.
But then
It starts to turn,
Deep red, full of fire,
Passionate, alive,
Until it isn't just love,
But something else, something that hurts,
Something in between,
And when it's not from both sides,
You see it—the mould,
It starts to grow,
Spreading like poison through the sweetness,
Slowly, quietly, destroying
Everything that was once good,
Everything that could have been.
It never helps.
It never feels right.
It never ends in a way
That doesn't leave you broken.
Love wears its colors,
And sometimes,
It's the wrong shade
At the wrong time.

Nubisha Rabya Topote, a class 10 student at Nigarunnisa Noon School and College, is a budding poet who finds inspiration in every opportunity to write.



PHOTO: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY

ESCAPE

KASHFIA NAHREEN

You tried to run, didn't you?
Tried to get as far away from everything
As you could.
You crossed thousands of miles,
Made yourself a home
In a land
So strange, so foreign
That you always felt out of place.
You thought you had escaped, didn't you?
Outran everything that weighed you down.
You swore allegiance to a nation
That tore yours apart,
Adopted the tongue of your conquerors,
Only to realise,
You can't escape you.

Kashfia Nahreen, an aspiring poet and writer, is pursuing a Master's in Creative Writing at the University of Liberal Arts. Vocal and loud, she is a steadfast intersectional feminist. Other works are available at the.k.atelier.



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