



WHEN THEY LOOK AWAY

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

HASIB UR RASHIDIFTI

It took two and a half hours to get to the stadium. From the car, one could see the lines stretching two to three kilometres all the way from the entrance. The girls in the backseat were worried about how they'd have to wait at least another half an hour to get in – and that too in the April heat. The one driving the car, Asgar, was worried about finding parking after dropping them off.

Asgar didn't have time for lunch today. He had arrived a bit late for duty that afternoon, and he could see how enraged Iva was from the frown above her eyes, the puff in her cheeks, and her flaring nostrils. Asgar's employers are usually pretty well-mannered and courteous when it comes to hiding their rage and disgust in front of others – but Asgar doesn't really count as 'others'. They don't pay him fifteen thousand a month, lunch included, just to have to show decency to their driver.

"It's okay, ma'am," Asgar lied, hoping Iva wouldn't start shouting at him. "I had my lunch at home, so we can start right now!"

When Asgar dropped Iva and her friends off at the concert, she handed him a 100-taka note and told him to get some dinner, in case the concert ran late. Asgar took the money and nodded gratefully, hoping Iva would forget about him arriving late today and not complain to her father.

Asgar drove around the stadium complex, trying to find parking under some shade. Then he could sit in the car with the windows open and get some sleep. Without shade, the heat was too much to bear, and opening the windows only brought in hot, dusty air. During the heatwave last May, Iva's mother got furious when she caught Asgar inside the car all by himself with the air conditioner on. He'd been extra careful in finding the right parking spot since then – preferably under a tree, but not too far from the exit, since Iva hated waiting for the car to come pick her up.

Asgar finally found one, under an extended balcony on the second floor of the stadium building. He could see a group of drivers a few feet away.

"Bhai, do you know a restaura somewhere around?" Asgar asked.

The five of them laughed together.

"That's what we were just talking about! There isn't a single one in the entire area. Jobbar here had the audacity to go ask one of the stalls what a single egg sandwich cost. Tell him, Jobbar!" one of them laughed, slapping Jobbar on the back.

Jobbar looked gravely embarrassed by his foolishness. "Three hundred fifty taka," he said quietly.

The others broke into wheezing laughter, clapping as they did.

"How much did your one give you?" one of them asked Asgar.

Asgar searched his pocket and showed them the hundred-taka note.

"Not bad. Rokib here got fifty."

"What can you even get for fifty? Chih!" one of them consoled Rokib.

"I know their habits very well," said Rokib. "That's why I had two plates of rice during lunch – way more than I had appetite for. This will have to do till tomorrow morning."

Tomorrow morning felt like days away in this heat. But at least it would be a new day – and one day less than sixty-two. That's how far he was from his next vacation. He gets two a year, on the two Eids. That's when he gets to see his wife and son. No child should have to see his father only twice a year, but asking for extra time off two years ago had earned him a final warning from Iva's mother, before she threatened to fire him. So, he saved up his emergency leave and used it when his mother passed away.

When the headliners took the stage, Asgar and the others could hear screams from inside the stadium. Rokib recognised some of the songs, but it was too hot out in the parking lot for him to enjoy them.

"8:03 PM," said Jobbar. "It'll go on till at least eleven. Then another hour to get out of the area and cross the traffic."

"Do you think they think about us?" Asgar muttered.

The deafening noise from inside the stadium slowly dulled. Asgar knew all five of them had heard the question

– because they'd all asked it themselves at some point. The people inside the stadium, the ones in the restaurants, in the theatres, at the shopping malls, at the weddings – do they ever ask themselves: Where do they really go during those long hours?

"Is this your first time waiting this long?" Jobbar asked.

"I think so," replied Asgar.

"It'll come soon," said Jobbar. "It's hot enough out here."

"What do you mean?" Asgar asked, as Jobbar raised a hand and shushed him.

As they sat quietly, Asgar saw the soil beneath them getting wet with drops of water. He looked up, searching for rain but the sky didn't have a hint of cloud. When he looked at the others, he saw them all staring down at the ground as drops of sweat fell and formed a stream. In no time, it pooled into a transparent sheet of water.

Asgar could see his reflection in the pool. His face, his shirt drenched in sweat – it all looked the same. But in the reflection, the sky above their heads was pitch-dark, like the minutes before Kalboishakhi. From the other end, he could smell petrichor.

As he knelt down to breathe in the scent and the cool air, he slipped and fell face-first into the pool.

Jobbar laughed and helped him up.

"You see, Asgar," he said, "the world needs someone to drive the brats around. But if the drivers, the rickshawalas, and the security guards keep dying from heat strokes – who'll open the car doors for them? This world, it finds a way to keep the rats alive, you see. And so, when the heat becomes too unbearable, and when the pigs aren't looking – the portal opens up."

The five of them lay down on the concrete floor, looking up at the thunders crackling between the clouds. In the distance, Asgar could see some other drivers lying on the grass. The band inside the stadium had started their final song. The drums, the cheers from the crowd – none of it reached Asgar as he closed his eyes and listened to the hush before the storm.

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