



FICTION

THE THIEF

ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

While waiting for Abha, Farid Shaheb picks up the Bangla and English newspapers on his table. Reading through the Bangla paper, even for a few moments, puts him in a foul mood. Filled with news of theft, robbery, and rape, it's as if the country is being overrun by criminals.

MD RIZWANUL ISLAM

Farid Shaheb earned a fair bit at the office today. These days, because of the Anti Corruption Commission and newspaper journalists' incessant pestering, he can no longer directly take the money offered to him. But it isn't as if Farid Shaheb forces anyone to give him this money— people who come to the office hand it over rather gladly, as a token of appreciation for his work. Still, he refrains from accepting any money himself anymore; Kuddus Mia, the office clerk, takes care of whatever needs to be done. There's no predicting when some scoundrel might record one of his transactions on a phone or hidden camera and leak it on Facebook or YouTube. Although he would much prefer handling these dealings himself—there would be no risk of theft that way—he doesn't mind having his clerk deal with the money either. He keeps a record of the work he does throughout the day, so the clerk would not be able to pocket anything from the day's earnings even if he wanted to—Farid Shaheb would catch him immediately.

If people are so willing to give him the money, he doesn't understand why he would be wrong to take it. The newspaper lot are content with simply writing their reports and moving on; what would they know about the torment he had to suffer through to get this job? They didn't give him this job for nothing. He had to compete with thousands and thousands of candidates to earn his position. And it's because of such an excellent job that his relatives turn to him for every occasion—be it at weddings or other celebrations, he can never take small presents; even when it comes to donating to schools and colleges or mosques in the vicinity, his name is put forth first. Only the other day, Boro Chacha sent him a letter about how the mosque in their village was falling to pieces and in need of immediate repair. How could he turn Chacha down, especially when

he was working such a great job? Of course he would have to send the man some money. And where was this money supposed to come from? The two-paisa salary he earns pays for nothing.

Farid Shaheb asks his wife to take the bag from him and carefully keep it in the almirah. His wife, Abha, has always been a clever woman, and meticulous too. Farid Shaheb brings home bags like these on most days, so Abha knows that they must be set aside with care. There are never any oversights in such matters. Abha is busy cooking teriyaki chicken for her husband when he calls, but comes along swiftly to take the bag from him with a smile, and puts it away in the almirah.

Abha says, "Listen, Boro Apa's daughter is turning seven on the fifth of next month. Apa's arranging a grand celebration, so we have to get them something just as lovely. You can't say no."

He responds, returning her smile, "Of course. Shoma Apa's daughter's birthday means it's our daughter's birthday—we'll certainly get her something nice. Have I ever given your relatives something that embarrassed you?" Assured, Abha cheerfully heads back to the kitchen.

Farid Shaheb changes out of his clothes and heads to the shower. Being particularly susceptible to colds, he switches the geyser on even in November. He had had a new geyser installed only a few days ago. What would the point of such hard-earned money be if he didn't reap the benefits? After the shower, he turns the TV on and retires with a leisurely cup of coffee. He doesn't like watching TV unless it's on a big screen, so he bought a stunning 48-inch digital Samsung LED TV. As a film enthusiast, he made sure to get himself a Netflix plan, too. Farid Shaheb detests Bangladeshi channels—there are nothing but ads. As he relaxes and starts his movie, he calls out to his wife, "Abha, Abha, how far along are you with cooking? You know

I can't watch movies without you." Abha tells him she is nearly done.

Not only does Farid Shaheb not watch Bangla channels, he dislikes Bangla cinema, too. Dull, bland storylines and the same tired flip-flop. Even renowned, award-winning films are strangely static, with plots that don't seem to want to move forward. It's as if the audience is made to do a thesis, being forced to dig deep to understand the movie in its entirety. He can't seem to comprehend how insipid films like Ashani Sanket and Heerak Rajar Deshe are so widely celebrated. When it comes to Hollywood, it feels like every film is a brand new spectacle. Brilliant stories, and such breakneck pacing! Although, even with some Hollywood movies, he can't get himself to watch to the end, especially when the plot doesn't seem to be going anywhere. Either way, Netflix is a lifesaver. He can flip from one movie to the other whenever he wants.

While waiting for Abha, Farid Shaheb picks up the Bangla and English newspapers on his table. Reading through the Bangla paper, even for a few moments, puts him in a foul mood. Filled with news of theft, robbery, and rape, it's as if the country is being overrun by criminals. The engineers are stealing, the politicians are stealing, the contractors are stealing, and even the teachers are stealing—everyone's a thief. If everyone goes on looting, how is the country supposed to function? And if these innumerable murders and rapes continue, where can anyone be safe? With crime running rampant, there is no rule of law in place, and no police force either. How are good, honest men like him supposed to keep living in a country like this?

He puts the papers down and picks up a copy of Reader's Digest. He recalls how, as a university student, he would often walk to Purana Paltan to look for old Reader's Digest issues in second-hand bookstores. Having bought them for next to nothing, he would go back to the

hall and all but devour each issue. These days, Reader's Digest, The Economist, and other magazines all lie around his house, but he can't even find the time to flip through them. When he occasionally has the time, laziness gets the better of him. Soon, Abha arrives with a plate full of teriyaki chicken and the two sit down to watch a movie together.

Abha is more of an admirer of romantic films, while Farid Shaheb enjoys action or thrillers. With Netflix's endless options, quite a bit of time is wasted every day watching previews of this movie and that. And if it's not too late, they have their kindergartener to think about, too. Who knows when she'll barge into the room and start watching the movie with them? You can't always use a tab to keep children occupied. Just the other day, she asked, "Ma, why are their clothes so tiny? Do they feel really hot?"

As they switch from one film to the other, the Isha azaan drifts in from a nearby mosque. Abha drapes her orna over her head. Finally, the two of them decide on an action flick. The film progresses, its protagonist a detective of sorts. A serial killer is on the rampage in his vicinity, but no one can find any leads—just one flawless murder after the other. Abha isn't enjoying the film as much as her husband, but says nothing so as to not douse his excitement. She tries to watch more attentively. Now and then, she smiles at the screen so that her husband doesn't realise that she isn't really enjoying it. When Abha smiles, her supple cheeks dip into dimples. The sight melts Farid Shaheb's heart, and he believes himself to be a happy, contented man.

Suddenly, they hear someone shouting, "Thief, thief!" It's their watchman. Farid Shaheb flings the door open and runs downstairs immediately. He arrives to find a young boy who had been trying to make off with a few clothes from the garage. The watchman had spotted him just as he was coming

downstairs from the landlord's flat, and restrained him before calling out to alert the other residents. A few university students living on the ground floor were the first to show, with Farid Shaheb following close behind. Soon after, men from the other flats gather at the scene. It is agreed, unanimously, that such a thief can't simply be set free. They take him to the watchman's room and tie him up with rope. Then begins the assault. As the thrashing continues, someone from the crowd sneers, "This was bound to happen. How many times had I told the landlord, 'Bhai, if you can't afford proper security guards, at least get a CCTV camera.' In this day and age, that too in the city, is it even possible for one watchman to guard a building this big? The front gates are never locked either. What if some menace slips in? What then? I find it more surprising that something like this hasn't already happened."

Having heard the commotion, their daughter Eva whines to her mother, "Ma, I want to see the thief." Abha is reluctant to take her downstairs, not wanting to frighten her daughter or expose her to a sight that might affect her poorly. But her daughter is insistent, and she eventually gives in. She takes her daughter down the staircase to find the thief with his shirt torn to shreds, blood dripping down his cheek. Still, blows from the crowd remain unrelenting. Eva asks her mother, "Ma, where's the thief? He's just a person—why are they hurting him?"

Translation of Md Rizwanul Islam's Bangla short story "Chor" (originally appeared on *Rahasya Potrika* in 2022), by Amreeta Lethe.

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DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY Defeat

SHUCHI BINTE SHAHJALAL

standing at the bus stop with
my shoes full of water
this sense of guilt is leaving my
gut in a knot
i knew everything when i left
screamed at the sky and mocked
this is a wasteland, this is a
wasteland
no local newspaper will have
any headlines
everything in this town with
open arms
calling me
it's okay, it's okay
to come back brushed and
defeated

Shuchi Binte Shahjalal is an English Literature student with a passion for storytelling.

POETRY

Mother, why is our sky so different?

MD. SAJID HOSSAIN

Mother, why is our sky so different?
A sky blooming with a dark makeup, not
rainbows,
nor those winged beings that herald the onset
of peace.
Everywhere we look now,
Ashes cradle the fathers who paid the debt of
fatherhood with over-sympathies.
O my heavy-eyed mother!
The pale pink sky no longer brings me the joy,
As it does to the sunbirds to fill the air with
blissful melodies,
As it does to the seasoned foragers to take
pen and papers and
write certificates of vain treaties that declare
our gullible fate.
Morning, evening, night—
A daily ritual of trembling and burning
And withering with those tremors from a
hopeless belief—
That one day, our sky might adorn again,
with no gloomy flames.
I wonder if the bodies that lie,
Still have those puny sensations as they had in



PHOTO: COLLECTED

their mother's womb.
Did they die with having usual dreams,
Usual desires that could be left unburied?
Mother, having heard my borderless words,
hold my thumb as you used to,
When I bargained over four-wheelers with
you beneath
The unprotected roofs,

Before the anonymous neighbors,
We never hesitated to know.
Or, wait a while, let me come to you,
Trailing the breath of long sighs.

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