

ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

FICTION

The feed and the filter

After school, she waits at the gate. It's not that she hates Mira. She misses the old version of her—barefoot in a nightie, dancing to Lata Mangeshkar, cooking shorshe ilish in their Rajshahi kitchen, hugging her close when the power went out and the dark felt alive.

HAROONUZZAMAN

Mira presses her thumb on the cracked power button of her phone. The screen flickers: 2% battery. She exhales sharply, then lunges for her charger, knocking over the mess on her bedside table: a lipstick stub, a greasy Cheez Puffs wrapper, and a candle labeled Monsoon Breeze that hasn't smelled like anything in weeks.

Outside her third-floor apartment in Uttara, life moves: the jingle of rickshaw bells, the Asr azaan echoing through thick, humid air, and a street vendor's call—"Dim paratha, gorom gorom!"—rising from the street. But Mira doesn't really hear it. Her mind drifts elsewhere—somewhere curated. Somewhere filtered. A place where her skin glows, her smile radiates calm, and her loneliness stays out of frame.

She steps onto the small, sunlit balcony. Light catches on the iron grillwork. With careful fingers, she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, lifts her phone, and tilts her face. Swipe. The "Lagos" filter warms everything. Her lips part slightly, her eyes angled upward—as if caught in a thought.

"Sun-kissed and healing," she murmurs. Click. Post. In the quiet corners of solitude, I bloom. #SelfLove #DivorceDiaries #DhakaGlowUp She doesn't mention the unpaid WiFi bill on the fridge. Or the breakfast argument with her daughter, Anya. Or the fact she hasn't called her parents in weeks.

Later, the apartment door slams behind Anya, loud and final.

Mira wipes toast crumbs off the counter. "Anya, this is how things work now. I'm building something."

Anya doesn't look up. "No, you're building something fake."

Before Mira can respond, Anya walks away. The toast sits untouched. Mira doesn't notice. She's still scrolling, watching her digital self unfold like a flower that only blooms online.

At school, Anya stares out the window. A crow flies low, dips, then disappears. Algebra hums in the background like a distant machine.

Jisha leans over. "I saw your mom's post. You guys look like you live in a magazine."

Anya forces a smile. "Yeah. A magazine where no one eats and everything's pretend."

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Now there are ring lights. Not real lights. At dinner, Mira scrolls under the table. "I know when you're posting," Anya says. "Even when I'm talking."

"It's part of the job, darling."

"I thought you were my mom. Not a brand."

"I'm both," Mira replies. "I need you to understand that."

Anya doesn't answer. The rice tastes like chalk. She gets up, leaves her plate in the sink, the grains clinging like stubborn little lies.

In her bedroom, Mira lays out her off-white kurti and chunky silver earrings beside a copy of Atomic Habits. She plans to quote it in her story.

"Purbachal's going to be divine," she says to her phone. "Healing weekend with my girls."

Hearts and comments pour in: "Queen energy! Slay, ma'am!"

She breathes it in like medicine. But something aches beneath it all—a hollow she can't quite name.

She packs her ring light, false lashes, the herbal tea she never drinks. Leaves behind a rejection email. A message from her sister: "You've changed. I don't know if I like it."

Makes sense, Mira tells herself: "People hate growth. Especially when they're stuck."

Rupa Khala's house smells of cinnamon and something older. The fan squeaks. Cushions sag with stories. No filters here. Just chipped mugs and quiet.

"Want to bake?" Khala asks, holding two blackened bananas. "They're begging to be something."

Anya grins. "Okay."

They mash, spill sugar, and laugh when the batter overflows. Later, they sit on the roof with mismatched mugs. The sky over Purbachal glows dusty orange.

Anya checks her phone. A new video—her mother again, swirling dupattas, laughing for the camera. Caption: "Healing looks good on us."

Her stomach drops. One frame shows her journal—blurred, but unmistakable. She switches off her phone. Slides it under her pillow.

Mira wakes early. Her head aches. Her friends scroll silently beside her. No one talks.

"You're always so curated," Lata says. "Even your sadness matches your aesthetic."

"It's what people want," Mira shrugs. "Light. Not shadows."

"But it's heavy," Rekha murmurs. "Pretending all the time."

Mira checks her latest reel—likes slowing, comments dying. She scrolls through her gallery and stops at a photo. Not planned. Not edited.

Anya, asleep. Rain streaks the window behind her. No filters. Just her. She stares at it. Later, she tries to record something raw—"Breaking cycles"—but the words sound hollow, like someone else speaking through her.

A comment appears: "You're so fake. Your daughter deserves better." She doesn't delete it.

In the school library, dust floats in warm shafts of sunlight. Anya breathes in the quiet—the paper, the pencil shavings, the stillness. She doesn't check her phone.

She writes in her journal: "When the camera's off, I breathe differently. I stretch wider. I disappear less."

She speaks to the counselor: "She uses my life like wallpaper," Anya says. "I want to be the foreground."

"Do you love her?" the counselor asks. "I do. But I hate her new version the world claps for."

Outside, boys shout across the field. The sun hangs low and unforgiving.

That night, Anya deletes the app. She opens a new page in her journal. Stop cropping me.

I'm not a backdoor. I am the frame. She doesn't show it to anyone. Not yet.

Mira stands outside Anya's room. No phone. Just her.

"Can I come in?" Anya looks up. Nods.

Mira sits on the edge of the bed, staring at the old cartoon sticker on the wardrobe. "I deleted the reels," she says.

"Which ones?" "All the ones with you. I never asked."

Silence. "I got scared," Mira admits. "After your father left, I didn't know who I was. So I tried proving I existed."

"But you disappeared from me," Anya whispers.

Mira's voice breaks. "I know. I'm sorry."

No camera records the moment. Just something small and real beginning again—like roti rising on a pan. Quiet. Alive.

That night, they burn the onions trying to cook daal. They laugh anyway, and eat cross-legged on the floor, licking lentils off their fingers.

No hashtags. No posts. Just presence.

Two weeks later, Mira knocks. A notebook in her hand.

"I saw your poem on the fridge."

"You weren't supposed to—"

"I didn't take a photo. I just read it."

A pause. "Can I read more? If that's okay?"

Anya pulls out her journal—the one Mira once used for a flat lay. She hands it over.

"No stories. No sharing."

"No hashtags," Mira promises. She flips a page. Her eyes mist over.

Anya waits, listening for a shutter that never clicks.

"Want to go for a walk?" Mira asks. "No phones?" "No phones."

Anya smiles. "Let's walk." And they do—past honking rickshaws, sizzling chhola carts, under a Dhaka sky that glows without needing a filter.

Haroonuzzaman is a translator, novelist, poet, researcher, and essayist. Besides teaching English in Libya and Qatar for about 12 years, he has had 20 years of teaching experience in English Language and Literature at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).

POETRY

Maturing

AHMAD SALEH ABDULLAH

for SAP
Always the same whining about the distances, always the same muscles flinching at the thought. The shortest distance covered is displacement, you say; it is physics. I say I know without knowing anything about desperation. I am not a walker: who became wiser anyways by rising early for walks? You say I am just a baby, wrapping your hands around me—an amniotic memory. I say this is magic; you are, you say. I learnt to love walking like blood learns a narcotic. Love is the shortest distance to you. This is geometry. Half the circumference of a day the sun's iridescence no longer a nuisance. You see, you scorched me into life.

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POETRY

The lost rhythm

AYESHA AMEN, SOBIT BASNET

Summer has imprinted crow's feet under my eyes, Yet I have aged only a quarter. That's was when I dunked myself—starting with the crown of my head—into the ocean where The southern sun resides, to imprint upon my face its sheen, rhythm of miracles, and to honour it with my palms pressed together, placed on my pineal gland. The wind has braided my hair last fall, When my fingers failed to even tuck it behind my ear. By winter, a wildfire blazed down the forest of my heart— All its leaves' weary veins' rhythm now beats with No soul. To live, I now move with rain, To float on the water's vastness, To become one with its rhythm, As the whole of the low-shuttering world among burnt honeysuckle trees blurs above me. The tides' rhythm floats me back to land Where I tumble upon the scattered pebbles beneath my feet and then wander With crooked steps To untangle my soul's rhythm by spring.

Ayesha Amen and Sobit Basnet are occasional contributors to Star Literature.

POETRY

Ashen bloom

SENSEI

The air tasted of burnt sugar and broken vows—sweetness clinging to the char. It began with a whisper, then the slow, inevitable searing of what we believed was solid ground.

Every word left unsaid became a cinder lodged in the throat. Every passing slight, a lick of fire on the skin; unseen, but deeply felt. A quiet simmer beneath smiles that had long since turned brittle.

Even the city seemed to hold its breath, exhaling only the dust of old fires. The asphalt didn't shimmer with heat alone, but with the ghosts of promises it could no longer carry. Cracks split the pavement like fault lines fracturing through concrete, through the brittle shell of old friendships, through the silent treaties we signed



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with ourselves and then forgot.

And still, a lone jasmine bloomed—defiant. Its petals were singed at the edges, its perfume stubborn, as if unaware of the ruin around it. The scent carried something else now too,

the metallic tang of what had burned.

They say the rot has teeth. But sometimes the fire begins within, a slow, private combustion born of silence and self denial.

And then, one day, the mirror

cracked yet not from impact, but from the unbearable heat of honesty. The reflection showed a face carved by restraint, eyes smoldering with a thousand unvoiced grievances.

The silence finally broke, not with a scream, but with the crackle of everything that had been consumed.

Now, only the scent of smoke remains, clinging to the skin like a memory that refuses to cool. We call it dust. We learn to live with the ash. But the bloom, once white, now bears the unmistakable mark of its scorching.

Tousif Rishat explores themes of memory, silence and emotional turmoil through reflective prose. He occasionally writes under the name SENSEI and can be reached at: tousifrishat135@gmail.com.

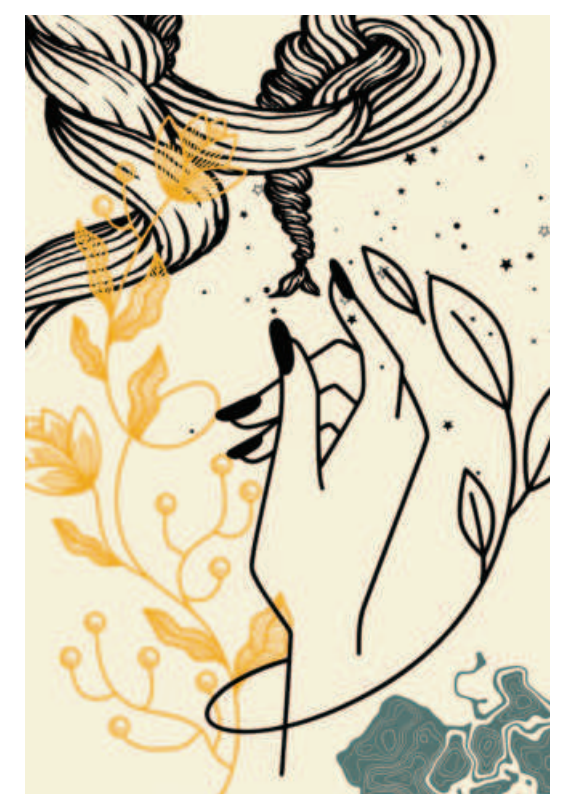


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