

CREATIVE NONFICTION

# Space between the scrolls



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

**And just like that, I've moved from dead children to fashion accessories. The feed has trained me well, to skip between realities without processing any of them fully.**

TABASSUM ISLAM SUSMI

*Children pulled from rubble in Gaza, dust white faces against red bricks—*

*Mia's fuchsia silk dress flowing against Amalji's electric blue, #blessed #livingmybestlife—*

Then another of Mia's. The gelato display at some historic gelato shop. She's added a poll to it: "Help me choose!" Results: 67% pistachio, 33% Stracciatella, so far—

BREAKING: Training jet crash in a school in Dhaka, seven confirmed dead including pilot—

I pause. Dhaka. The word stops my breath. I call Maa even before I realise I'm moving.

Two rings.

Three now.

Then she picks up. No, nowhere near us.

It is far from our usual routes and

addresses. Diabari. Not Dhanmondi where Maa lives. Not Mohammadpur where my brother is training. Not Basundhara where Nana's hospital is.

"Thank god," I breathe, then immediately feel sick. What am I thanking Him for exactly? For the pilot losing control over someone else's neighbourhood instead of mine? For the catastrophe choosing strangers over family?

I can see them so clearly it hurts. Toddlers and teenagers in those crisp blue and white uniforms, sitting in rows, copying down equations, reciting poems. Did they look up first? Did they think it was just a low-flying plane before the world exploded into metal and fire and screaming? Were they reaching for each other when hell came down? I scroll frantically, desperately, begging the algorithm to show me anything else, to let me escape what my

mind keeps building. And honestly, I don't even have to try too much.

Irina, my Dutch friend working in Prague, posted a photo of her new matcha latte art skills. Foam swirled into perfect leaves. "The barista life chose me," she writes—

Then more of Irina. Her selfie with a bright red bandana tied around her head.

I actually pause at that bandana. Serious Y2K vibes, very Lorelai Gilmore coded. I should get one. Will Shein have one? But then everyone will know it's fast fashion. Maybe Etsy instead? But that's expensive, and for what? A piece of fabric?

And just like that, I've moved from dead children to fashion accessories. The feed has trained me well, to skip between realities without processing any of them fully.

Another scroll—a heated debate

thread: "It was clearly mechanical failure" "No, pilot error, look at the data" "The government has failed at..." "No, it's the previous government who..."

The internet is already feeding on blame. My mind joins in without permission. Blame is so much simpler than grief. So much cleaner than imagining small charred bodies in blue uniforms. So much easier than holding space for senseless loss. I, too, let it happen. I choose the comfortable anger of someone else's failure over the unbearable weight of children dying for nothing. But the anger fades way faster than I expect. The feed has other plans. It always does.

Roman Bhai has just posted a photo of his new-born. "Can't believe she's finally here." The baby's face is covered with a heart sticker, while he and her wife, Tithi Bhabi, both are kissing her tiny forehead.

I should send something for the baby. What should I send? Something from Belfast? But Manchester has everything Belfast has. Different accents, but the same Boots, same Tesco, same TK Maxx, same packages of capitalism shipped to identical high streets. Maybe something local then? Something distinctly Northern Irish? But what's a new-born going to do with local crafts anyway? Should I get something for Bhabi instead? Some new mum care package? But that feels more in the baby-shower territory. And honestly, she's probably drowning in gifts already. She's always posting about her lovely neighbours dropping off homemade curries, her work colleagues surprising her with spa vouchers, her university friends planning elaborate celebration dinners. Who would guess she only moved there two years ago? Meanwhile, I'm still having polite departmental coffee conversations and wondering if I'll ever belong anywhere completely.

Sara's dissertation defence stories come next. First her desk, set up with color-coded sticky notes and a perfectly positioned coffee mug. Then her victory selfie after nailing the defense. Then the celebration—her whole family squeezed around a dining table for the selfie, three generations laughing with mouths full, her dad's arm around her, her elder brother reaching across the table for more food.

I zoom in. Zami Bhai, Sara's elder brother, looks older now, with his face fuller and neatly trimmed beard. For most of my teenage years, I thought he was the most handsome man to ever walk the earth. In the photo, his hand is extended toward the bowl of tehari at the centre. Sara's amma used to pack this exact tehari in a dented metal container for her school tiffin. I'd gobble my noodles up in five minutes flat while

Sara would eat slowly, methodically, then quietly slide her remaining half toward me. She was always like that—more caring, more patient. Should I call her to congratulate properly? Or would a text suffice? Maybe I should post a story celebrating her achievement, let everyone know my brilliant friend is now Doctor Sara. But that feels performative, turning her moment into my content. I wonder if this is the digital friendship paralysis: too many options for connection, yet none feels quite right.

The algorithm serves me Mia's fourth story now: a bathroom mirror selfie with a face mask. Her fancy skin care regimen is very much visible on the bathroom counter.

This does not look like a hostel or an Airbnb, or is she staying in a hotel this time? That must cost a fortune in this economy!

Back to Dhaka: three more children have died in between my scrolls.

A friend has posted a fundraiser link for Gaza, with thermometer showing they've only reached 31% of their goal—

I screenshot the fundraiser link with the automatic reflex of someone who cares, knowing well that this image will join that digital graveyard of good intentions I never follow through. The guilt settles heavy in my stomach, mixing uncomfortably with the tehari craving.

Mia again: sunset from hotel balcony, feet propped up, toes painted coral. "Dinner at this little place the concierge recommended!"

The children in Gaza don't have concierges. Some don't have feet anymore. I try to blink it away. Focus on the coral polish. The perfect pedicure. The luxury of choice.

Roman bhai hearts my 'congratulations' comment.

"You'll look so good in the gingham one!" Irina replies to my bandana enquiry and attaches the website link she bought it from.

Parents are still looking for their kids in the rubbles, 44 hospitalised, investigation ongoing.

I set the phone down. For three seconds, I try to hold it all—the screams, the children, Mia's fuchsia dress, and the Y2K bandana. But the weight splits my attention like a fault line. And I pick my phone up again. The feed refreshes, serves me tragedies and trivialities shuffled like cards, dealt in new combinations. Death, coffee, birth, crash, champagne, rubble, laughter, screaming.

I scroll. Of course, I scroll. What else was ever going to happen? What else was I ever going to do?

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FICTION

## A gilded cage

HAROONUZZAMAN

The automated blinds of the penthouse in Gulshan, an upscale area, rise with a soft hum, revealing a picture-perfect Dhaka morning. The skyline is a wash of hazy gold, the city already pulsing beneath a rising sun. From the eighteenth floor, everything seems calm. Controlled. Distant.

Aisha stands at the window, her silk robe cinched neatly at the waist, coffee cooling in her hand. The air smells faintly of bergamot and eucalyptus, diffused from an automated dispenser timed to activate every hour. Perfection surrounds her—climate-controlled rooms, voice-activated kitchen systems, curated modern art hung on muted walls. It's all flawless.

And yet, she can't breathe.

For 15 years she's lived in this polished cage with Rizwan—a man more myth than husband. Their marriage, a union of convenience and status, had been celebrated with televised grandeur. But love? Real, messy, unpredictable love? That never came.

Rizwan is a ghost with a calendar. CEO of a major conglomerate, executive member of an elite club, and perpetual chief guest at every art opening or charity gala, he rarely makes it home before midnight. When he does, his body collapses into bed beside hers, perfumed with cigar smoke and exhaustion. He mumbles a few words, sometimes touches her shoulder absently, then disappears into sleep.

And Aisha? She lies awake, staring at the ceiling, her heart restless, body untouched for months, thoughts spinning like broken fan blades.

One humid afternoon, stuck in Gulshan Avenue's relentless traffic, Aisha's eyes drift from the wheel to the pavement. That's

when she sees him; he's tall, lean, his skin sun-kissed, and posture unhurried. He doesn't shout or wave like the others—drivers, vendors, beggars. He just stands, still and watchful, a duffel bag slung over one shoulder. Something in his eyes—quiet, wounded—hooks her. Before she can think, she jerks the SUV toward the curb. She is a seasoned jeweler; she never fails to recognise real gold!

Honks erupt behind her.

She rolls down the window. "You... looking for work?"

He steps forward slowly, cautious but composed. "Yes, apu. Ride, or...other things. I can help."

Her heart pounds. She nods. "Get in."

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For Fahim, it's luck—divine or cruel, he can't say. The day has been long and the light now falls in heavy orange streaks. His morning had been generous—a Baridhara woman with cash and kindness to spare. But as evening sets in, his legs ache, hunger gnaws, and the room he rents in Tongi, which he shares with two other struggling men, feels more like a box with bars than a home.

His roommates think he runs a business—something ambiguous but respectable. They don't ask questions. He sends 25,000 taka home to Rangpur every month, and that's all his parents need to believe he's doing well. He never tells them the truth: they don't know he sells intimacy in a city built on loneliness.

5000 taka per session. On a good month, he can manage 15 clients at the most, if his health holds. Some clients tip, linger, look at him with something like yearning. That always leaves him shaken. Gratitude mixes with guilt.

Then comes Sara, a girl turned voluptuous woman: she had been his school and college friend in Rangpur.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

It begins with spilled coffee—a small accident in a cramped Banani café. Her laughter is light, her eyes curious. She doesn't seem to see him as a service, but as someone—someone who might matter. That terrified him more than any client ever could. "I think you're smarter than you let on," she had said one evening, tucking her hair behind her ear as they sat near the Banani-Gulshan lake.

He tried to laugh it off, but her belief in him was relentless. Dangerous.

From then on, they started meeting regularly. No money is exchanged. She makes plans, spins dreams like silk. They talk about opening a small catering service together, escaping the noise of the city.

Then comes the proposal. A court marriage. Just the two of them.

She buys new clothes for both. Tells her mother she is in love.

But he doesn't show up.

At first, she waits. Then she calls, messages relentlessly. Silence in return.

Weeks later, she confides in a friend—a successful businesswoman. One who, in an earlier, lonelier conversation, had admitted to using discreet services to fill the void in her own sterile marriage.

The friend goes pale when Sara mentions Fahim's name. The silence that follows has said everything.

"No," Sara whispers, stepping back. "No, it can't be."

Her friend hesitates, and then quietly hands over a phone number.

When Sara calls, a woman from the Tongi Community Hospital answers. Her voice is

heavy, hesitant.

"You're calling about Fahim?" she asks. "He's...in the hospital. Advanced AIDS. Stage four. He's not expected to—" Her voice cracks. "Sorry."

Sara stares at her phone long after the call ends. Around her, the world continues—horns blare, birds wheel overhead, a child cries. But inside, something dies.

All the dreams she had built around him—every plan, every whispered promise—collapse like paper in rain.

Back in Gulshan, Aisha drives her SUV, stops a while where Fahim would stand, but a chill goes down her spine—where could he be? Something wrong?

Amid the passing hullabaloo, a cruel silence wrecks her bone almost. On the electronic overhead screen at the Gulshan 2 circle, she sees him—eyes dark with stories he could never tell. Is it the "real he" she is desperately looking for, or somebody like him promoting "Black Panther"?

Later that night, she lies in her dim bedroom, the city lights winking beyond glass. Rizwan hasn't called. She doesn't expect him to.

She thinks of Fahim. Or perhaps Sara whom she never met, or countless people who drift through this glittering city with hollow hearts and perfect smiles.

And she wonders, not for the first time, what it truly means to be loveless and alone in a gilded cage.

Haroonzaman 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).