



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

FICTION

Showtime

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

Trigger warning: self harm, sexual and physical abuse

“For a hundred million, Omar, are you ready?” said the host, with his everlasting grin.

Omar didn’t know if he was. The past two hours had been excruciating, and he already knew the question he was going to face for a hundred million bucks. Before signing the contract, he was certain that he wouldn’t hesitate.

Omar had registered for the gameshow Lucid Verdict a few months back. Just in its first season, the show had broken all the TRP charts. The audience hadn’t seen a game show this intriguing ever before.

The show was based on a machine that could extract a certain memory from the contestant’s brain and verify whether that lucid memory was based on true events or was merely a fabrication. Dr Sandeep Chatterjee, the man behind the machine, was a psychiatrist by profession. He came up with the idea when he realised that many of his patients had willingly suppressed certain traumatising memories of their past, and their brains had automatically registered them as nightmares. In an attempt to protect themselves from the past, the brain had found a way to lie to itself. Dr Sandeep coined this phenomenon REM-Reality Conversion, or RRC.

Others had fabricated memories out of nightmares—the opposite of RRC. These patients had been through the same nightmare so often that they couldn’t separate it from the real world. It was a psychological state where the nightmare became so vivid and frequent that it was misremembered as real. Dr Sandeep termed it Persistent Nightmare Internalisation Disorder (PNID).

When Dr Sandeep fully grasped the actual number of patients with RRC and PNID, he came up with the idea of the machine. And with it, the idea of monetising it. What better than a game show out of it?

The initial contestants were chosen from Dr Sandeep’s personal patients, those with enough distress to fill an entire episode. But after a few episodes, people began applying from all over the country. Turns out, a lot of people were willing to face their fears if you threw a bundle of cash at them. The participants were put through an initial audition where a psychiatrist assessed whether they had enough trauma to milk an entire episode out of them.

The show was an instant sensation among younger audiences. Apparently, people loved watching a miserable man get his memories stripped bare in front of live television. “Addictive, fun, and rewatchable” is how *The Dhaka Times* described the show after its first season.

Omar knew he was the perfect contestant the first time he saw the show. He had never been to therapy—nor could he afford it—which meant he had a lot of psychological injuries left unattended. Growing up, he never thought he would make it to 34, and he had been contemplating ending it before he hit 35. But this gameshow changed his plans. He wanted a few answers before he ended it all. And perhaps, make some money in the process.

Money didn’t mean much to Omar. He had no grand plans that needed funding. But his parents did. For the past 34 years, all he’d heard was his parents complaining about never having enough of it. For the past eight years, those complaints had been targeted at him. His salary as a medical representative wasn’t enough to support a family of four—nor enough for anyone to consider giving their daughter to him in marriage.

When he registered for Lucid Verdict, Omar went to the audition with a smirk, knowing he was the perfect cash cow for these pathological exploiters. He had a vault of nightmares trapped in his grey matter, and he had lived all

these years too afraid to face them. But now, with death pre-planned, he had nothing to fear. Even if all of his nightmares turned out to be real, he had nothing to lose. He was a dead man playing the game.

His first lucid memory was of being choked in a bucket of water by a kid at school. Omar was almost sure that it was a fact and not a nightmare because he had feared swimming ever since.

The second was watching his cousin’s body hanging from the ceiling of their house in Chandpur. Omar wasn’t entirely sure about that one either, but it turned out to be true. *Huh, that explains why Amma was always quiet about Ashfaq bhai*, Omar thought. He still remembered Ashfaq bhai picking him up as a child and hanging him upside down by his legs. Omar called it ‘The Rollercoaster’. Sad that Omar had been unknowingly planning for the same fate as Ashfaq bhai.

Another memory, of his father beating up his mother, actually turned out to be a nightmare. Omar’s father looked awfully ashamed that his son would dream of such a thing.

As the game progressed, the questions dug

there in the dark. And the next day, your aunts were gone.”

“No. Stop!” Omar screamed.

“This is just how your brain registered it, Omar,” said the host. “I’m just reading out the transcript we received scanning your brain. It’s just a simple question—nightmare or reality?”

Seeing Omar tremble, the host continued gently, “Omar, you can always choose to quit. The machine will make you forget about this memory permanently and bury it back in the deepest core of your brain, where you can never find it again.”

“I want to quit, right now,” said Omar as he got down from the chair.

Before the host could stop him, his father shouted from the audience, “Omar! Don’t quit! Answer the question, son!”

Omar looked at his parents in disbelief. They knew. He could tell. His brain didn’t make it up. Oh, how badly Omar wished his brain had made it all up.

As the show cut to commercial break, Omar walked up to his parents. His mother grabbed his hands.

“Omar, answer it. It’s just a question, son. We know how much you’ve been through



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deeper into his brain—into places he hadn’t explored in a long time. Sexual perversions, self-harming thoughts, deepest insecurities, and hidden embarrassments—the machine made it extremely difficult for Omar to continue. *Dead man walking, Omar*, he whispered to himself, pushing forward to the final question.

“I must say, Omar, you’re perhaps the most confident contestant we’ve had this season,” said the host. “But this last question is bound to challenge you. Remember, if you fail to answer or choose to walk away, you’ll lose all the money you’ve earned.”

Omar smiled and looked at the computer screen, ready for the final battle. The machine had already gone through all of his memories, even the darkest one he could think of. Nothing could stop him.

Or so he thought.

As the last question popped up on the screen, his heart stopped.

“Omar, something happened when you were six,” said the host, his voice heavy with implication. “Your aunts visited that Eid. Your house was too small for all the guests, and you had to share the same bed as your cousin, Ashfaq.”

“Stop,” Omar said—though not out loud.

“Something happened the night after Eid, Omar,” continued the host. “Ashfaq was making you do something. You didn’t know what it meant. And suddenly, you heard bashes on the locked door. Your parents came barging in. You were taken away to another room. Your mother was sobbing, wailing, as you stood

mentally. Just 10 more minutes and it’ll settle our lives forever.”

“Amma,” cried Omar, “I’ll find a new job. I’ll make it up to you. Please make me forget, Amma. Just this once, I beg you.”

“How can you be so selfish!” his father shouted. “You’re a dead man walking anyway. Can’t you give us something in life before you leave us forever?”

With bloodshot eyes, Omar stared at his father, flinching in fury.

“We know about your plan, Omar,” said his father. “We found your note—the one you’ve been writing for over a month now.”

Omar stood there as the commercial break ended and the crew brought him back on stage. He saw his mother trying to say something to him, but he couldn’t hear her. Back on stage, Omar couldn’t hear the host or the audience. When the question popped back up on the screen, he answered:

“Reality.”

The crowd burst into a loud scream. He had won the hundred million.

Omar waited two months after that—hoping, praying that his parents would confront him about the note. They didn’t.

He never finished writing it.

Omar’s contemplation came true. The night before his 35th birthday, Omar made sure he never made it to 35.

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POETRY

The whirring

SHAIKH SABIK KAMAL

“What will come out of all this?”
The day starts with the devil flying overhead,
the whirring of its wings piercing the light,
Burning my ears;
A sky not so still,
Look out for the death coming out of the black clouds
The heat thickens,
The blood irrigation sickens the soil
The farmers’ plants grow over his body as the ants take shelter
In the holes of his torso carved out by the metal shards
What are we now, if not the person we see in still water?
What do you see in the floating redness? Beyond the murk?
Anger?
Hatred?
Fear.
My hands won’t even move when the tap water scalds it
My eyes aren’t fixed anywhere in this fluctuating blur
My foot is over a flower I’ve planted. What will come out of all of this? This night that ends with the clockwork of a disposable pillow,
And the restless turning of the diseased for a change of temperature
Something to quicken the way the wheel in my mind spins
Something to forget the way the night swallows our sweat
Someone gets muffled when the owls take flight in silence
When the world eats another cold body. The night ends
Eventually, but this turbulence is constant. So constant.
I’m looking straight at the blooming sun
From the corner of my house, all while I feel a monster
Outside my door. I’m looking at the light that brightens a prison.
Something faint, yet warm. Resilient. Brave.
Something that catches onto me and tells me to believe
Something to lie to, lies that await to emerge from the next dawn, uncountable in number, Undefeatable
Something,
Anything,
That makes us feel safer in our body than we are.

Shaikh Sabik Kamal exists. Ask him stuff at wolvesandwalls77@gmail.com.



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POETRY

Silence, our witness

NUBISHA RABYA TOPOTE

This cracked, restless earth beneath our feet—
granules of memory grinding,
pulling us down, step by step,
until the skin of the world splits open,
and we bleed into its soil—
not as strangers, but as something waiting.
When the bones turn brittle, and names fade like smoke,
maybe then we’ll grasp
that this dirt was all we ever owned—
no other universe, no second chances.
But by then, silence will be the only witness,
and understanding will come as dust—
too late to hold,
too late to speak.

Nubisha Rabya Topote, a class 10 student at Viqarunnisa Noon School and College, is a budding poet who finds inspiration in every opportunity to write. Find more of her work @nubishawrites.



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