

FICTION

The u-turn

ALI TAREQUE

Is he eyeing me?

That young man with the receding hairline, flipping through a paperback on a discount table. No, revise that. He is not so young really, as my second take reconsiders. A freshness in his eyes made him look more youthful. If not for his thinning scalp, that little paunch under the draping T-shirt, that bulge around the jaw, and the almost palpable discomfort in his posture, which manifests an assortment of ailments, what—raging forties? Then, I am not in the noon of my spring either, not even close. Admittedly, I still possess some of the charm from my salad days, carried over to the stage where I struggle hard to keep balance between what I see in the mirror and in the eyes of onlookers. Or, as Brent is wont to say—my youth didn't need to be generous and send over its leftover attraction to my current older self. It's the charm of my very present self. Maybe he cajoles me into antagonizing my own past just because he wasn't a part of it?

So, is the not-so-young man eyeing the not-so-much-older me?

How long would a sideways glance away from flipping through a discount paperback have to be to qualify as eyeing? OK, it's not a discount table after all; "Notable Paperbacks", the steel-framed rectangular sign protests

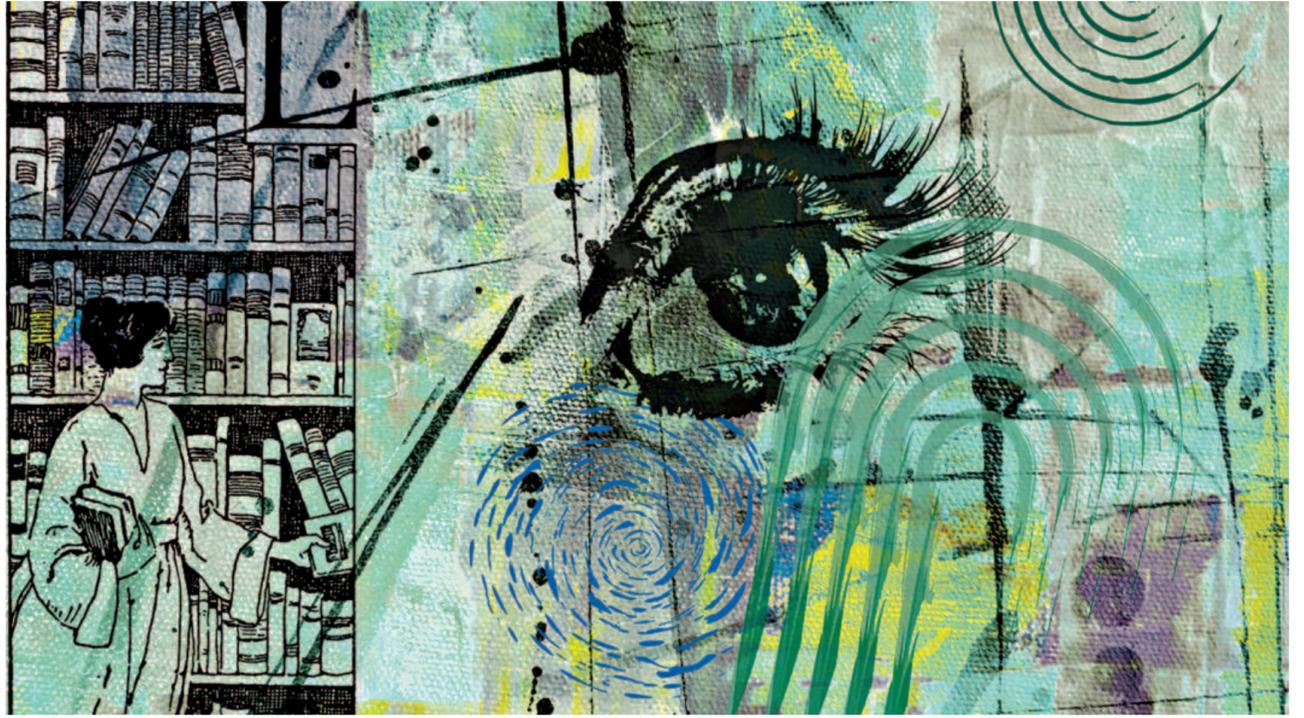


ILLUSTRATION: EMDAD MAHMUD

Cruising beyond the unwelcome half of the century, the ends of my lips have now started to over-straighten. But it has hardly been three months (OK, maybe a bit longer; six months tops. Was it Christmas or Thanksgiving Eve?), when Brent's beer buddy Douglas attempted to sweet-talk me, rather obviously. "Your smile... the sweetest thing I've ever seen," was his slightly inebriated flattery. Did he add, "for your age"? I don't remember, and neither do I care to.

from behind the table. Neither is he "flipping through" the pages. Not with one hand hooked in his jeans pocket and the other pressing the pages open. His stocky fingers splay delicately—almost feminine.

How long did his eyes linger on me before tearing away? How does one distinguish between gawking, staring, and a mere impulsive look?

He didn't really go back to the line he was reading before his little distraction, now did he? He has started to seem a bit stiff, a little un-relaxed—the flap of his shirt stopped flapping on his tummy.

So, now he is looking back. That's how it appears at the moment anyway, turning his head in this direction. A quick inventory of my outfit: a long,

white, half-sleeve blouse on top of a knee-length black skirt. Too little time to recollect the shoes, even though from the feel of them on my feet, I would think some kind of sandals. Overall, pretty spartan. That's a shame! Though I can't remember the exact amount, the white XCVI did cost me a small fortune. There's no way he would know that.

Or would he? Unless, of course, there is evidence that he has effortlessly resumed the stream of thought that the line on that page was tying up for him. That is something he certainly hasn't done. His stare clearly hovers somewhere beyond the surface of the pages, even if just around the top of the discount table.

Okay, my self-indulgence is swiftly getting out of hand. XCVI or not, it is certainly not my couture that has made a rubberneck out of him. Especially with the horde of younger girls flaunting their assets in fancier and skimpier outfits.

Then what did? What about the appeal of the old? As a starter, the angelic charm of my eyes, whose only corruption is the knowledge of its being incorruptible—graciously attested by an acquaintance from the sizable clique of my admirers. I say sizable, because it is my prerogative to qualify it as such.

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So, he is looking back, as I am almost trotting out of the "J" aisle to make a U-turn into the next aisle, "K"? Or perhaps "I" instead? Would I browse backward? What am I looking for anyway, on the second floor of Barnes & Noble? A mild digression is catching up with me... Not that I mind; we digress all the time. The reality will come back in a matter of seconds. Or I will go back to it. Either way. In the meantime, what really makes him look back at me? Whatever it is, I prepare to wear the "angelic" smile that I am famous for, even if only within the sizable coterie of my *gli innamorati*.

Here he comes. His brows raised a bit with the strain of acting nonchalant. His right arm stressed, as his fingers pressed slightly harder on the pages, flattening the poor book flush on the table.

On this front, nervousness is brewing, overflowing into my smile. But that's okay, it just adds to my middle-age charm; that lack of corruption, again, except for the knowledge of being incorruptible. That is okay, too.

Not much to do about it. Not now anyway. I am about to turn the corner in my haste to move on to the next aisle.

Now that I think about it, Brent is practically following me, also wearing a white shirt, and—wait a minute—isn't he wearing a pair of black shorts too? That's a bad oversight, very bad! I should have noticed it, before stepping into the car at least. Too late now. Besides, this is probably not even a valid concern. This person here is not going to identify him as my husband, not that fast. But no telling; it isn't so easy to cloak the little giveaways that a couple can create around them in the years of getting along with each other.

So, what if he identifies us as married? Doesn't it make the whole encounter even more interesting?

So, he looks this way. But don't his eyes wander a little too much? They hover on my smile—check, rest a bit on the designer collar flanking my majestic neckline—check, but then they dilate to focus on something else, or rather someone else, behind me. Not on Brent, who is maddeningly maintaining a conjugal closeness. Something says that something voluptuous, something skimpy and youthful, even doxy, is lurking behind me. A body that I had barely noticed on my left a second or so ago when I was coming out of the "J" aisle and before I spotted the rubbernecking young man.

He holds his stare for a fraction of a second longer, in which time a sense of

guilt clouds his gaze, borne out of the momentary and momentous liaison with me.

For the umpteenth time, that is OK, because, despite his new distraction, he took a second look at me.

Or... what if he isn't looking at me at all? Not even the first time around?

I pirouette on the short heel of my right sandal (it's the pair with five onyx stones on the thongs and the black bases with raised edges—the feel of its traction reminds me now) and I turn right at the next aisle that begins with "I". Or "K".

Or maybe I just carry on my pretend rush to pick a book for myself, or for a friend, that was intercepted by a sudden wave of thoughts, as I hear the clack-clack of high heels under the swarthy, sweet, and insolent body in scanty red of someone whose age could be less than the difference between that of mine and the young man's. He has gone back to his page flipping. Or line flipping.

It's all the same.

Ali Tareque is a Bangladeshi-born writer based in Houston, Texas. He is the author of the English novel Echo of the Silence (Arrow Books/Penguin Random House, 2023) and the Bangla short story collection Sontan o Sonketer Upokotha (Roots, 2022). Alongside fiction, he writes poetry, directs plays and films, and performs elocution.

FLASH FICTION

Side notes to everything I have ever known

ATIQA TANJEEM

I take my tea with two teaspoons of brown sugar, but some fine mornings, I betray my routine and chase the jolt in my fingers as I put the spoon down after just one or when I reach for another after the second. Even if for a fleeting moment, I love not recognising myself, not knowing where I will lead myself towards, not knowing what words my lips will form.

Truth is, I do know myself. I know myself the way one knows their childhood bedroom: walls that feel crumbly to the touch, a lightbulb that dims on and off, stuffed toys strewn about, cute posters that have yellowed out over the years. Maybe an oddly placed closet that has heard vile curses from people who stub their toes against it, maybe a pristine vase of plastic bouquets that sits atop a shelf—meant to be admired from afar, but never touched lest it become dirty. You stand at the door's threshold and take a mental snapshot, clamouring to savour the nostalgia that washes over you at the mere sight of what was once dear and familiar. It never stays still, though. The bedframe moves from the corner of the room to the middle, innocuous scratches and ink blots appear on the walls, the posters get ripped off. Taking a closer look at what remains is terrifying. You can now see the blotches of dirt on your vase, bugs crawling out of it as



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

you never cared to clean it; after all, why would you, when it always looked so very perfect from afar? A long-lost friendship

bracelet, the one you cried over for weeks, sits abandoned in your closet drawer.

I see myself: sometimes so hazy that I

cannot see a person at all, sometimes so brilliantly vibrant that I fail to fully comprehend the colors. I turn the pages

of a book I've read a thousand times, yet the words keep shifting, hiding, and simmering each time my eyes fall upon them. I see the little notes phasing in and out around the margins—begging me to notice them but, at the same time, too shy to be read. I have always loved the side notes; I love the cold, spiked dread that churns in my stomach once they appear, I love the way my knees tremble as I begin to piece together what they say.

Sometimes, they write themselves in languages I will never be able to learn, sometimes I know without even looking. The ink plays peekaboo from the margins, daring me to look away and pretend it never existed. If I ignore it for too long, it threatens to crush my windpipe under its claws.

Sometimes, I can barely read within the margins as my vision clouds and breath hitches; that doesn't matter much to me anyways, the side notes write who I am. They write the exceptions, the surprises, the unexpected, the unplanned. They write me unadulterated, undiluted. I run my frenzied gaze on their prophecies every ticking second of the day, in the hopes that I might just be able to read between the lines.

Atiqa Tanjeem is an 18-year-old student who likes to occasionally translate her inner world into readable words.