

FICTION

FREE AT LAST

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HASIB UR RASHIDIFTI
"If my father had any unpaid debt to anyone, please contact me or my younger brother Hamza," Omar said to the congregation at the funeral, trying to sound soft and loud at the same time. "And if my father ever hurt any of you unintentionally, please forgive his soul and pray for him. Thank you."

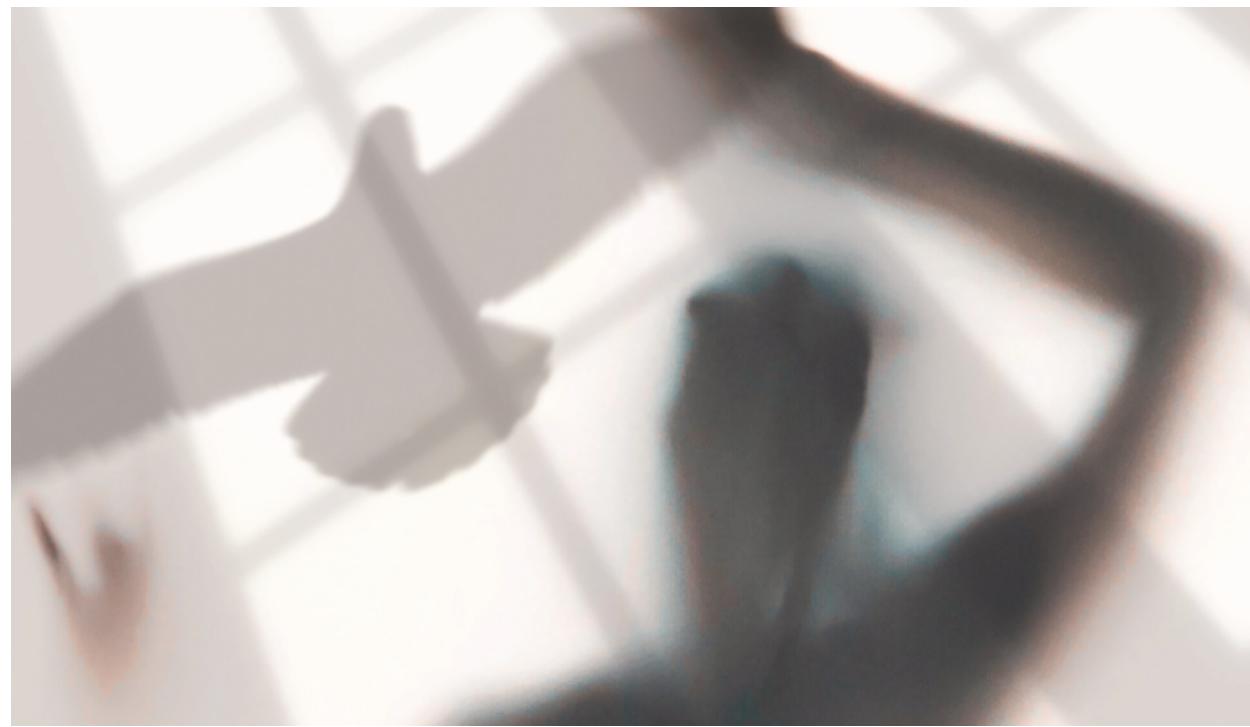
There were murmurs of acknowledgement from the crowd. People in the back stood on their toes, trying to take a peek at the late Dr Yusuf's two sons. Dr Yusuf was known as a stern and honest man to his entire village of Sundarpur. Sure, he was a bit short-tempered but he helped his people more than anyone else in the entire district. He funded the construction of the bridge above the river, built the dams and the roads, and even had a madrasa to his name. It seemed like everything he earned back in Dhaka, he spent for his people back home.

So, after his stroke and the consequent death last night, Omar and Hamza found themselves having to fill some big shoes. The people in Sundarpur expected the two brothers to look after the village the way their father did—which Dr Yusuf reminded them of constantly. Omar had to discard his plans of moving abroad and settled down as a Senior Engineer at a private firm. Hamza was preparing for the Civil Services Exam after graduation.

On their way to Dhaka, Omar was sitting in the front seat with his wife, daughter and mother behind him and Hamza all the way in the back. Omar stared at Hamza through the rearview mirror, trying to find an ounce of emotion in those dead eyes. When Hamza looked at the mirror, his brother didn't look away, perhaps for the first time in years. Hamza noticed a text pop up on his phone. It was Omar:

Do you want to go back to the old house? I spoke to the caretaker. It's vacant now and the new tenants don't arrive until next month.

Hamza didn't reply. The entire journey, Omar kept looking at Hamza but Hamza didn't look back. When the car took the turn into the alleyway in front of their home, Hamza told his mother, "Amma, all of you go up and rest. Omar bhai and I have somewhere we want to go. We'll be back in an hour."



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

His mother looked at the two of them and let the brothers have their moment, hoping it'd reconnect them. Ever since Omar decided to give up on moving out of the country, Hamza had been awfully quiet. Omar's departure was Hamza's ticket out of the house. It was always the deal between the two brothers and when Omar broke the pact, Hamza knew he was stuck along with his brother.

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Hamza broke the lock on the front door with a brick he found nearby. They didn't bring the key with them and it was 2 in the night anyways, so no one would really notice. They slowly stepped into the house, in between the sooty walls and underneath the cobwebs hanging from the walls. Even in between the dust, sludge and rats, Omar could smell the ditch behind the house. It smelled of stool and garbage but it always reminded Omar of his childhood. Even

now, when he walks back home from Banglamotor, the ditch behind the Sonargaon Hotel reminds him of their old house.

"Omar, look," Hamza said as he sprinted across the hallway. He stopped near the staircase, looked back and broke into laughter, "No one to stop us now!"

Omar stared at Hamza for a while and grinned. The scar on his back suddenly started tingling. As he touched the scar and stared at the wall cabinet near the staircase, it all flashed in front of him. Right on the edge of the staircase was where his father had thrown Omar and slashed his back all red with his belt. All Hamza could do was stand behind his mother and try his best to not make a sound as he wept. Omar had broken an expensive vase while chasing Hamza, so Hamza thought it was him who deserved to get whipped and was spared simply because he was too young to survive such a thrashing.

Omar told Hamza to follow him as he walked past the stairs and onto the study. He ran a quick lap across the room and shouted, "Hamza!"

"I'm right here!" Hamza replied with a grin.

"No, that's not the point," Omar stood on the old table which his father used as a desk and screamed at the top of his lungs, "H-A-M-Z-A!"

Hamza started laughing and shouted back, "O-M-A-R!"

The two brothers ran across the whole house and shouted everything that came to their mind. They went to the old office that their father used as a chamber, to the spare bedroom that was off-limits to the both of them and to the roof that was off-limits for them at night.

No running in the hallway, no speaking when guests are at home, no entering Abba's study or chamber, no loud music in the house—they broke all the rules that night. Even after all these years and even with their father six feet under, it still felt like his ghost could appear right behind them and give them a beating, but it didn't. They spent the entire night running around, swearing, kicking the old furniture and wreaking havoc across the house.

Right before Fazr, the two of them were lying down in their old bedroom, smoking cigarettes—one last act of hooliganism. With the azaan starting in the distance, Hamza replied, "I still

remember the azaan from that night as well. It was the same mosque."

Omar got up and stared at Hamza. They had broken all the rules that night but Omar didn't realise it'd take Hamza that far. He thought they'd never mention it to each other, ever again.

"Omar, we don't need to pretend anymore," Hamza said, "We can let go. Amma will be just fine. Abba's left enough for all of them."

"I've got a family now, Hamza. I just can't do it," said Omar, "It's not the same for me. I've got responsibilities now."

"They're just kids Omar!" Hamza shouted, "Kids, alone all these years! No one even knows they're just lying there. No one's visited them all these years, not even Amma! If you won't, I will."

The dawn was darker than usual that day. It was going to rain in half an hour, and possibly throughout the entire day. As the Fajr azaan played through the speakers of the nearby mosques, the two brothers started digging the ground behind their house, right underneath the jackfruit tree.

It took some 20 minutes of continuous digging before they found the two bodies. In the last 23 years, the bodies hadn't decomposed one bit. They couldn't, not with their souls hovering around the earth. The back of Omar's body still had those scars, but the face was untouched, unbruised. Hamza's body had marks of suffocation on his throat, but his face looked so much at peace.

Sitting on the grave, Omar hugged the two bodies and broke down into tears. "We need to find someone to bury us back, Omar," Hamza said, staring at the two bodies.

Mrs Yusuf had been sitting by the phone the entire night. After her husband's stroke, they knew it'd be the first thing the two brothers would do. So, when Hamza called his mother, she picked it up on the first ring.

Omar and Hamza didn't know Mrs Yusuf's body was just 14 feet to the west of theirs. It'd take another 20 years before Omar's daughter would get married and Mrs Yusuf could return to her body like their sons did.

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REFLECTIONS

Autumnal offerings for seasonal readers

FARAH GHUZNavi

As summer draws to an end in the Northern hemisphere, a certain kind of booklover prepares to shift to the next set of items on their TBR (To Be Read) list. Because whether or not you are a fan of spooky stories, the arrival of autumn—and with it, Halloween—evokes in many a sense of seasonal creepiness.

This fits perfectly with the desire to curl up with a hot drink of choice and indulge in the cosy comfort of some undisturbed reading time. Even though serious bookworms are ready to do that at any hour of the day or night, regardless of the weather, the season, or the demands of work.

Those who love horror stories especially come into their own at this time of year, with everyone from booksellers to Buzzfeed articles vying to provide them with lists of essential books to add to the incorrigible book addict's never-ending TBR list (IFYKYK).

Personally, I'm not a fan of straight-up horror stories, not since Stephen King traumatised me with his 1983 novel *Pet Sematary*, but I do sometimes like dipping into stories that explore the hidden sides of human nature, the complexity of human behaviour being endlessly fascinating to me. Reading about it has the added benefit

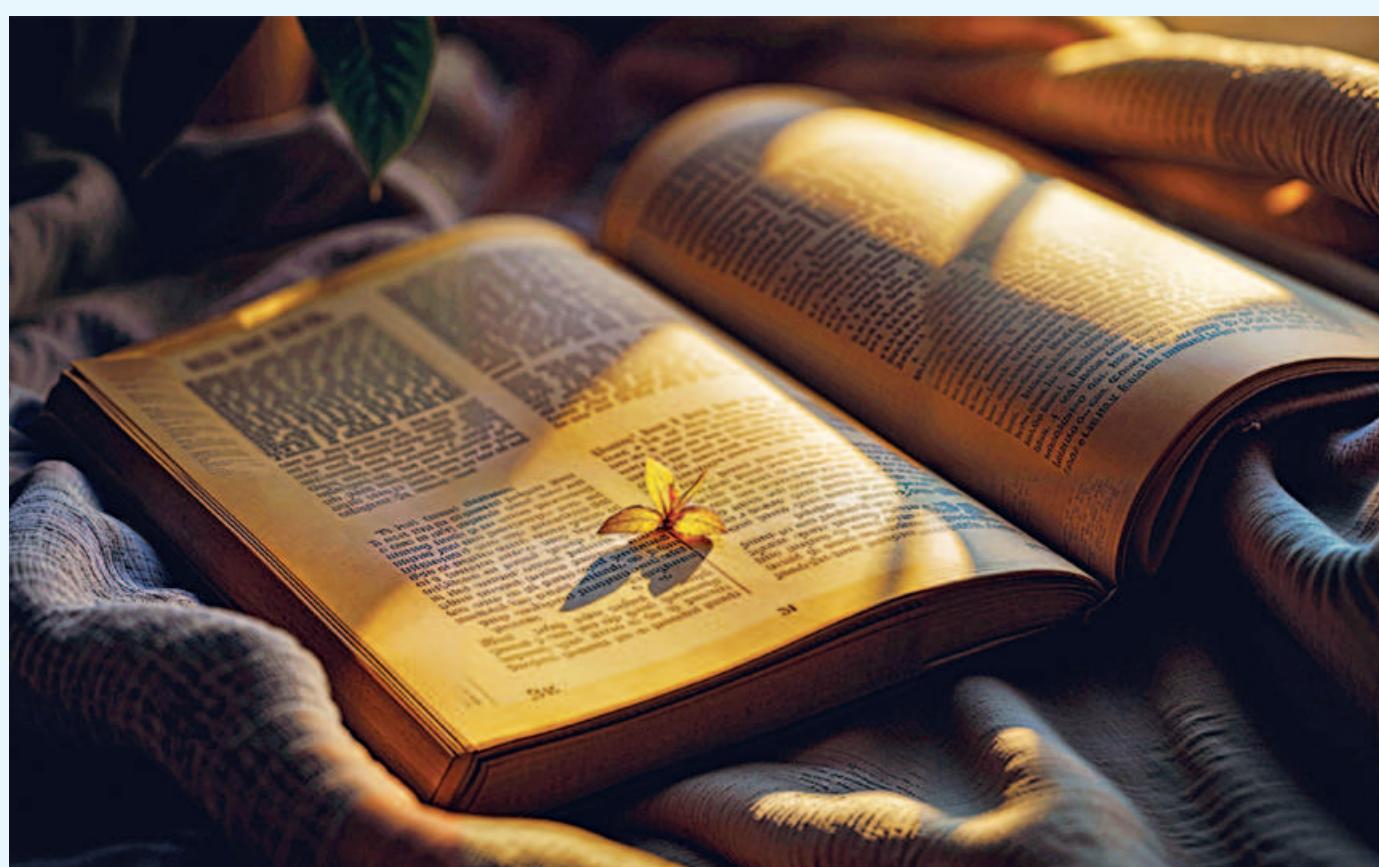


PHOTO: COLLECTED

that it's far safer to keep odd people and encounters firmly at a distance within the pages of a book.

In this regard, the premise of Steve Cavanagh's book *Witness 8* is an intriguing one. What happens when the secret observer of a murder is not only an unreliable witness, but also one with an agenda of her own?

Strap in for storytelling that effortlessly weaves multiple strands together to reveal an intricate pattern. Though, as any writer can tell you, "effortless" is really not an accurate way to characterise writing of this calibre, because as someone once put it, so-called "easy reading" invariably involves difficult writing!

Working as a nanny to rich families, Ruby Johnson knows many of the secrets that her employers would rather keep hidden. What nobody else knows is that Ruby has dark

secrets of her own.

As the only witness to a killing where she recognises both the killer and the victim, Ruby finds herself in possession of a valuable secret. So, when she tips off the police about the identity of the murderer, why does she give them the wrong information? What is Ruby's motivation to point the finger at her blameless employer, John Jackson, a gifted surgeon and a well-liked man? And why does the sinister painting of the Red Priest in the Jacksons' home seem to influence Ruby's behaviour in such bizarre ways?

Ruby's actions have several consequences—both intended and unintended—in this gripping thriller, packed with memorable characters and multiple plot twists.

Caroline Mitchell is another writer who delivers compelling stories, often with a strong focus on relationships. In

The Survivors, she describes the fallout when two vehicles collide on a treacherous mountain road. The women driving each car are travelling alone, but both are accompanied by their infant daughters. Only one baby survives the accident. But whose is it?

Reeling from the death of her mother, Finn was on her way to meet her aunt Maura, her late mother's estranged twin, when the accident occurred. Although she has never met her aunt before, the young woman is eager for family support for herself and her baby. Maura's mountaintop refuge is isolated and fairly basic, but Finn's desperation to fill the void created by her mother's death renders that unimportant.

The real question here is whether the surviving baby is actually hers. Kathryn, the woman in the other car, who is from an infamous Dublin crime family, thinks

otherwise. And she is determined to retrieve her child. Meanwhile, the more time Finn spends with Maura, the more she realises that her aunt is unstable. Plus, Maura clearly has many secrets—and some of them could be dangerous.

Finally, there is *Probable Son* by Cindy Jibin, a debut novel that is more of a mystery than a thriller, which explores the undercurrents that fester beneath the surface of family life.

Elsa Vargas has experienced two major traumas in adulthood. And to her dismay, in the second case, nobody believed her. After Elsa's first child was a stillborn baby girl, everyone assumed that she was still traumatised when she insisted that the hospital had wrongly placed her second baby with another family shortly after his birth.

Because Elsa was utterly convinced that the baby she took home did not look like the newborn boy she had briefly held. And as the years passed, much as she loved her son Bird, Elsa could not disregard the nagging feeling that this child was nothing like the rest of her family. So, when Thomas, a boy with the same birthday as Bird, who also bears an uncanny resemblance to Elsa's younger son shows up in the class she teaches at school, Elsa struggles to convince herself that Thomas is not her biological son.

Unsurprisingly, things get complicated fast, and ensuing events take the reader on a fascinating journey through Elsa's personal life, her experiences of motherhood, and the eternal question of whether nurture or nature is more important when it comes to child-rearing.

This last story is quite different from the other two, in that its dilemmas are very human, and not even remotely sinister. So, if you are seeking an excellent read to curl up with to enjoy the forthcoming change of season, one of these will probably do the trick!

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator, and development worker. She published a short story collection titled *Fragments of Riversong* (Daily Star Books, 2013), and edited the *Lifelines* anthology (Zubaan Books, 2012). Reach her on Instagram @ farahghuznavi.