



Where they all disappear

ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

At 2:35, Raman finds himself drooling over the metal grille, in search of bird feathers, outside his window frame. On another dozy summer noon, the world around him slows down a little, and the ceiling fan continues to rattle above his head like it would crack down any second.

PUNOMI RAHMAN TITIR

He draws the colour-stained window curtain across the wooden pelmet and allows the heat to brew under layers of his bruised skin.

Birdwatching.

Pairs of hazel-eyed house sparrows perch between narrow ventilation spaces of several high-rise apartments. A few plump grey pigeons coo on satellite dishes under the half-hidden sky. If he is fortunate enough, he might even catch sight of a blackbird or two, preening through its dirt-filled feathers beside a household waste dump. On the days that he's out of luck, he might as well not spot anything at all.

"I have nothing better to do and certainly nowhere better to be," he sighs and turns from the window just in time to hear the sound of fluttering wings land on concrete.

It is Raman's lucky day.

A smile stretches across his sun-chapped face as he tiptoes towards the balcony. Now the flapping has stopped. The bird poses still near the edge of the terrace, its neck slightly crooked to one side. It carefully waddles its way through the door to gulp the solid ball of boiled yolk tied to a cotton string. The moment it tugs, the string loosens, and the gate shuts behind it with a quick thud.

"At last!"

Raman had waited way too long for this moment to unfold. The 26-year-old man rushes down the ladder with the enthusiasm of a ten-year-old child. While the bird desperately seeks a way out, releasing a volley of indignant caws, flapping ceaselessly in fright, and nodding left and right in search of escape, Raman picks up the cage and leans straight into the charcoal black eyes of his feathered rival. He had crafted it himself over the weeks: drilling leftover plywood boards and screwing them together, leaving space for a wide entrance.

It resembled more of a sturdy vegetable crate than a cage. Raman had previously tested it with an old metal birdcage he bought from Katabon, worth 50 taka. However, he finds it easier to deceive them using handmade traps.

"Where are you off to, Raman?"

"Salam, *chacha*. Nowhere, just around the block."

"Ya Allah!" Shohel *chacha* bends slightly as he exclaims, peering into Raman's hands.

"Is that a-a crow?"

Raman nods and extends a polite smile through the corner of his mouth.

"They are extremely smart. This one here, it took me quite a while to get a hold of," he says as he raises the cage above his elbow.

"What on earth are you going to do with this?"

"Oh, I sell these all the time. There is a steady market for all sorts of birds around Katabon. They offer quite hefty prices, too."

He pauses for a moment and then asks without looking at Raman, "This is legal? I have never heard of such peculiar things in my entire life."

"Oh no, it doesn't—"

"The other day, I read somewhere that many of the common birds in Dhaka are disappearing in large numbers. You know, Dhaka used to be the city of crows and pedal-run rickshaws. Now you see neither."

He chuckles loudly and looks back at Raman. "Don't get yourself into any trouble, *baba*. With the way things are these days, you never know."

"Since when do you care about birds, *chacha*?"

Raman picks up on the laughter a little late. The midday heat presses down his throat. He wipes the sweat gathering under his collar with the back of his hand and looks down at the crow, pecking violently at the wooden board. The bird jerks its head up, caws again — louder this time.

Raman shuts his eyes. He isn't listening anymore. The sound of his breath drops, his landlord rambling nonstop, two dogs barking in the background — none of it reaches his ears. All he hears is the weight of his right-hand trembling as the frantic sound of beak against wooden board grows louder and louder, and with even more force than before.

Raman had known his dark, feathered friends ever since he moved into this neighbourhood. There were two of them; he had caught the other a few weeks ago. They used to live together on one of the gigantic old mango trees covering the face of Raman's apartment building. The trees were cut down last month. The branches spread out too far and too wide, restricting the path of the electricity wires — and more importantly — interfering with the landlord's balcony view.

Raman shifts the cage against his side and begins to walk. He likes to abide by his rules, and so, once all the birds disappear, he disappears with them. Onto the next neighbourhood, and in time, the next city. And he does, of course, take all his friends with him. Raman knows very well that this city doesn't find them. Nor anything that strives to live.