

■ FICTION ■

SWEET IN THE PALM OF YOUR HANDS

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There is a certain category of person I tend to dislike. I refer to individuals who possess a notable inability to exist in a state of rest. They are precisely incapable of lying still for over half a second without the thought of some form of routine hanging in the corners of their minds at all times. In general, these are also the types of people who enjoy being dictators in every situation, and will usually go out of their way to do so.

My acquaintance with Parveen Apa was initiated almost five years ago. I was appointed as a private-duty nurse at Mrs Aleya Khatun's residence to look after her ill mother. She was a bedridden patient suffering from third-stage lung cancer and paralysis, and required 24-hour surveillance.

"How old are you? You look so young."

"Twenty-two."

"Ah! The age of my knee. How much are they paying you?"

"Twenty-one thousand. This is my first shift."

"That much? And you are new? They didn't pay us half that amount when we first started out," she said in a complaining tone. "I have been doing this for six years in a row now."

"Apa, my shift here is that of a junior nurse. I have almost completed my diploma. You are working as a general attendant. Payments are likewise."

I think I almost caught her rolling her eyebrows before she turned away.

This was my first interaction with Parveen Aktar, and I wouldn't necessarily say it had been the most pleasant of

and said she has a third-degree fever and cannot get out of bed. Meanwhile, this is the condition of the house. Look! Yesterday also, she left early with some excuse."

It was quite strange to me that Laizu had Apa's number, as she most certainly did not have mine. Frankly, that was the first time I had realised I hadn't really had a conversation with any of the several people coming and going around the house every day. Most of my time I would spend caring for my patient, and any spare time I got, I would utilise it to study or nap. Parveen Apa, though, was the opposite.

As days passed, certain things in my sight started to shift. I began to notice how she had spent the greater fraction of her time working in the kitchen and attending to visitors while I nursed Aleya Khatun's mother. Soon enough, major household decisions also fell under her authority. Matters such as what to serve for lunch, weekly grocery purchases, and even the allocation of household chores — responsibilities that had previously been overseen by the mistress of the house, who lived abroad and could only be reached by phone.

As I mentioned earlier, I was barely able to form a bond with anyone around, as I had thought it to be unnecessary. She, on the other hand, had sturdy relationships with everyone, starting from their driver Rafiq Uddin to the caretaker of the building. I think I even caught sight of her chatting with the gardener of one of the flat owners once or twice.

The cause of my annoyance was not solely directed by the fact that she was no longer attending to her patient as much, which meant that I had to do her part of the job on top of mine, but it was also because I repeatedly failed to make sense of the entire situation. My irritation grew to the point where I thought it would have been better if she had sat idle instead and not done anything at all. She had remained occupied with some chore or the other throughout the day, even beyond the ones assigned to her.

After a while, I resigned myself to the arrangement. By then, it became apparent that she had been successful in establishing herself as the indispensable intermediary of the household, and frequently positioned herself as the point of contact for various informal matters. Gradually, this resulted in a shift wherein others began to rely on her judgement or presence for major-to-minor decisions and assistance involving their personal lives.

Later, it became quite evident to me that she was getting tipped a greater amount outside of contract, which I was not. Surprisingly enough, I did not mind. Before the company had transferred me elsewhere, I often pondered whether she was previously involved in any form of managerial position, though I hadn't had the chance to ask her that question. I never saw Parveen Aktar again.



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

There, I worked alongside Parveen Aktar, who was my rotational caregiver.

Back then, I was a third-year nursing student studying at a lesser-known private college in Dhaka. When financial constraints at home took a grotesque turn after the death of my father, the sole income source of the household, I was bound to survive on my own. Initially, I had considered working part-time shifts as a patient caregiver, along with a handful of tuitions I was already running, so a distant relative of mine put me in contact with a service-providing agency. But they told me that part-time duties were more demanding. More people want them. As such, I had to perform full-time shifts for a couple of months to start with, before they handed me part-time duties.

starters. Nevertheless, we settled our belongings in a fairly empty guest room beside the patient's, where there were no beds, so both of us had to share a mattress on the floor. I remember the first two weeks had gone by more or less comfortably, and I was beginning to get a grasp of what I was doing rather well. Or so I had thought.

Perhaps it was on one of the weekends that the helping hand of the house, Laizu, was absent from work. I woke up slightly later than usual that morning, and as I came out of my room, Parveen Apa was already awake. In fact, she was mopping the dining area.

"What are you doing, Apa?" I asked in surprise.

"Oh, nothing. Laizu called a while ago