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Mystery be Thy NAME

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#CHECK IT OUT

Essential skincare steps most people skip after turning 40

If your mirror shows growing dryness and sagging despite trying every moisturiser, you might be missing the true culprit. Rebuilding your skin's natural barrier — not buying ten different serums — is the missing key to youthful radiance.





WHAT CHANGES AFTER 40

Your skin often becomes drier, thinner, and more sensitive as you age. This change occurs because your skin retains less moisture. A decrease in collagen production makes fine lines, sagging, and wrinkles more noticeable. Additionally, years of exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays can lead to uneven pigmentation, a rough texture, and an increased risk of skin cancer.

These changes are a normal part of ageing and do not warrant a harsh routine. In fact, mature skin typically benefits from less irritation and more consistency in care.



SUNSCREEN, EVERY DAY

This has turned into a cliché. Yet, people forget it every time they step out in the sun, or casually skip it because winter is coming. But to slow the ageing process and reduce the appearance of dark patches, it is essential to use a broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher on all exposed areas.

Apply sunscreen before going outside and reapply about every two hours while outdoors, or after heavy sweating. Additionally, seeking shade, sunglasses, and protective clothing can provide extra protection.

A GENTLE CLEANSER

To cleanse your face, use lukewarm water and a mild, fragrance-free cleanser. It is important to wash your face at night to remove sunscreen, makeup, sweat, and pollution. In the morning, a simple water rinse or a gentle cleanser is usually sufficient, especially for those with dry or sensitive skin.

Avoid harsh soaps and deodorant bars, as they can dry out your face.

A BARRIER-SUPPORTING MOISTURISER

If you are the one who picks up any cream from the supershop or sneaks moisturiser from your spouse's vanity, "barrier-supporting moisturiser" might seem like a Hebrew word to you. It is more like a moisturiser that not only hydrates your outer layer, but also protects and rebuilds it — something essential after 40.

Apply it soon after washing, while skin is still slightly damp. Look for fragrance-free formulas with glycerine, hyaluronic acid, ceramides, or peptides.

RETINOIDS AND RETINOL

Over-the-counter retinol is a milder option that can help improve uneven tone, texture, pigmentation, and fine lines. Start at night with the lowest-strength product available. Apply a pea-sized amount to completely dry skin two nights a week for several weeks.

Avoid the eyelids and the corners of the nose and mouth. It is also crucial to wear sunscreen every morning. Retinoids can increase sun sensitivity, and irritation may worsen discolouration.

By K T Humaira
Photo: Collected

#ON THE COVER

SILENT SPECTRE

This week, from folklore to psychology, we explore the many ways the supernatural inhabits our lives.

In our collective imagination, ghosts and spirits have long occupied a special place. The supernatural is deeply rooted in Bengali folk culture and through this special issue of Star Lifestyle we venture into the many dimensions of the paranormal and try to see why they fascinate, frighten, and intrigue us still.

We look at the superstitions that shape everyday life, and meet the person behind Bhoot FM, the radio show that brought listeners closer to chilling tales of the unexplained. We revisit Misir Ali, the iconic fictional character whose rational mind seeks to unravel the mysteries of human behaviour and the paranormal.

Alongside these explorations, we ask why horror holds such a powerful appeal, drawing us towards the very things we fear, and add a seasonal touch with Halloween-inspired recipes.

And on the cover, we bring to life our own interpretation of a Bengali ghost, reimagining a figure rooted in folklore through a contemporary lens.

-- LS Desk



#NOSTALGIA



BHOOT FM:

Defining late-night Friday nostalgia for a generation

For thousands of listeners across Bangladesh, turning off the lights on Friday at midnight was a cherished ritual. The terrifying tales told on Bhoot FM left a lasting mark on pop culture and childhood memories.

Launched in 2010, the show brought alleged paranormal encounters from across the country to the airwaves, with Md Asraful Alam, better known as RJ Russell, lending his voice to stories that made listeners question what might be lurking just beyond the darkness.

AN UNUSUAL IDEA AT MIDNIGHT

Bhoot FM began with a simple idea: radio did not always have to follow the usual format of short segments interrupted by advertisements and music. Alam and his colleagues wanted something that could run continuously, giving listeners time to settle into a story without interruption.

"We selected the time of Friday 11:59 pm, as there were no ads then, and we could hold it live for a long period of time," Alam recalls.

The format was unusual, particularly for a horror show. Yet, the timing soon became part of the experience. With the show beginning just before midnight, listeners were already "experiencing the dark" when the stories began. And once an episode ended, the fear did not necessarily end with it.

"The same story might not have the same effect on you if you listen to it in daytime," Alam says. "At night, you listen; after listening, you have to sleep alone, or you might have to go to the washroom alone. The fright kicks off at that time."

What began as a practical decision



about scheduling turned into a defining feature of the show. For many, Friday nights became synonymous with Bhoot FM, and the anticipation was as much a part of the experience as the stories themselves.

THE STORIES, AND THE VOICE THAT TOLD THEM

Alam admits that the team did not expect Bhoot FM to become as popular as it did. The format was new, and the response surprised them. Listeners began sending in their experiences, while others tuned in week after week to hear what would come next.

For Alam, the appeal went beyond the subject of ghosts. He had always been interested in storytelling and horror, and he believes that genuine enthusiasm made a difference in how the programme connected with its audience.

"People resonate with that kind of originality," he says. "They sense when someone is doing it only for the profession and when someone is genuinely interested."

Among the experiences he remembers, one stands out even after nearly a decade. A man once came to the studio before the show began to share his story. He claimed that after feeding a beggar on the street at night, he had developed an unusual ability to sense what other people were thinking and knew things about them without understanding how.

It was the sort of encounter that stayed with Alam long after the broadcast. "It's been almost a decade since that, and I still haven't forgotten it," he says.

Stories like these gave Bhoot FM a steady stream of material, but the show's appeal also depended on how they were presented. Alam was not simply reading accounts into a microphone. He was guiding listeners through them, building anticipation and allowing the details to do their work.

WHEN A RADIO SHOW BECAME A CULTURAL MEMORY

The popularity of Bhoot FM eventually followed Alam beyond the studio. Yet, as he points out, radio presenters often work in the background, recognised by their voices rather than their faces. His experience with Bhoot FM was different.

One night, on his way to the studio, Alam stopped at a grocery shop. A man pushed past him and urged the shopkeeper to serve him first because he needed to get home quickly to listen to Bhoot FM.

The encounter stayed with Alam. It was an unexpected reminder that people were not merely familiar with the programme. They were organising parts of their lives around it.

Bhoot FM went off air in 2019, leaving behind years of stories and a loyal audience. Alam says he initially wondered what he would do next after such a large part of his life came to an end. He eventually decided to leave mainstream radio and begin a new chapter rather than return to the same platform.

BEYOND BHOOT FM

The end of Bhoot FM did not mean the end of Alam's interest in horror storytelling. He now hosts Bhoot.com.bd, continuing to share stories through a different platform. He is also preparing to launch an app that will allow people from around the world to submit their experiences.

For Alam, the medium matters less than the person and the idea behind it. Asked whether a show like Bhoot FM could achieve similar popularity today, in an era of podcasts, YouTube and social media, he returns to the same principle that guided him from the beginning.

"No matter the platform, it needs to be original, and the person doing it needs to be passionate about it," he says.

Perhaps that is part of what made Bhoot FM last in people's memories. The show gave listeners a reason to stay awake, a reason to be frightened and, often, a story to share the next morning. Alam supplied the voice that brought those experiences into their homes.

Years later, the show may no longer occupy the Friday midnight slot, but for those who grew up listening, the memory of that voice is still there.

By Mehdi Islam Mahi
Photo: Courtesy/Collected

#PERSPECTIVE

The Bengali ghosts we see in ourselves

In Bengali ghost stories, even the dead have preferences. The Mechho Bhoot wants a share of your fish. The Shakchunni cannot quite give up her attachment to domestic life. The Gechho Bhoot has settled into a tree, and so, everyone else has to take the longer route home.

Their habits are part of what makes them memorable. Look past the frightening appearances, and you might recognise the relative who plans every visit around lunch, the friend who struggles to let go of the past, or yourself refusing to leave your favourite corner of the house.

With a little imagination, these familiar spirits make an entertaining guide to our own personalities. So, which Bengali ghost sounds most like you?

MECHHO BHOOT KNOWS WHAT IS FOR LUNCH

The Mechho Bhoot pesters fishermen and people carrying fish until they surrender a share. Here is a creature that has crossed into the afterlife without losing interest in dinner.

You might recognise yourself if a family lunch becomes more exciting at the mention of ilish. You have a preferred piece, notice when fish has been overcooked and find "all fish tastes the same" personally upsetting.

Food keeps you connected to people and places. Just remember that someone beside you may also have an emotional attachment to the largest piece.

SHAKCHUNNI IS THE ASSERTIVE VOICE



Recognised by the shankha bangles or traditional jewellery associated with married South Asian women, the Shakchunni remains attached to domestic life. In some stories, she takes another woman's place in a household. Often described as a woman who died unmarried or with unfulfilled wishes, the Shakchunni may have loose hair, a dark green skin tone, luring features and backwards-facing feet. Her story varies, but she rarely seems interested in pleasing anyone.

Perhaps you understand the feeling. A relative asks when you will marry, then explains why your answer is wrong. Someone comments on your weight before saying hello. Once, you smiled. Now, you have a follow-up question.

Your Shakchunni tendencies emerge when you stop submitting every decision for family approval. Some call it attitude. You call it having answered this already. The challenge is deciding which arguments deserve your afternoon.



BRAHMADAITYA WOULD LIKE TO ADD SOME CONTEXT

Commonly portrayed as a Brahmin spirit wearing a dhoti and sacred thread, the Brahmadaitya is often learned, helpful or protective. You suspect he would contribute enthusiastically to an adda.

You may recognise yourself if friends come to you for explanations and book recommendations. You enjoy being useful, although a passing remark sometimes activates everything you know. Someone mentions a film and receives its production history. Lunch takes a detour through agricultural policy. Meanwhile, somebody has quietly gone to make tea. Your curiosity is a strength. Knowing when everyone has enough information would make you even better company.

GECHHO BHOOT HAS FOUND A COMFORTABLE SPOT

The tree-dwelling Gechho Bhoot has chosen its address and settled in. You understand this if you have a particular chair that other people are technically allowed to use.

You enjoy company, preferably on your balcony, where everything is already comfortable. Friends say you are difficult to bring out. You wonder why they cannot come over. Your ideal village holiday involves sitting under a tree while relatives ask what you plan to do all day. You have already begun doing it.

There is much to admire in being content where you are. Still, after declining six invitations, it may be time to leave your branch.

However, you may discover that your inner ghost changes with the occasion. The Mechho Bhoot appears when someone reaches for the last piece of ilish, or the Petni takes over when a relative asks about marriage for the third time. Perhaps that is why these ghosts may feel so familiar. Their habits are ours, exaggerated just enough to make a good story.

Nevertheless, keep that in mind the next time you call someone a Petni, they might have a convincing case for what you are.

By Ayman Anika
Photo: Silvia Mahjabin
Model: Shababa Rashid
Makeup: Anew Makeover by Shababa Rashid
Mrinmoyee by Samia Rashid Hai

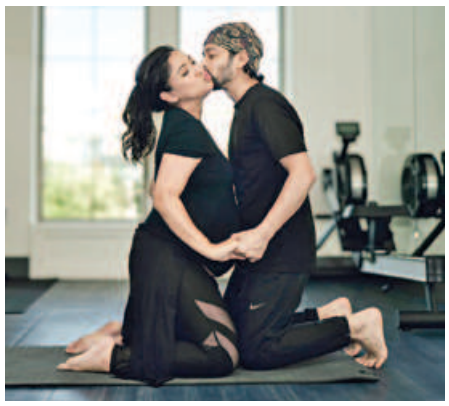


#PERSPECTIVE

How actress Sonia Hossain redefined pregnancy and motherhood at 40

When she became pregnant at 40, Sonia Hossain refused to let rigid labels define her experience. Instead of giving in to fear, she embraced an active, joyful path that redefined what midlife motherhood can look like.







She feels that her decision to become a mother and her experience of pregnancy were not defined by her age. She had food aversions in her first trimester, including a strong aversion to meat. "But those are your body's natural reactions to hormonal changes, and not connected to the mother's age at all!" she said.

Other than these, Hossain remembers no complications. Her energy levels improved in the second trimester, and she continued to dance and swim until the very end.

"I have always been an energetic person, and I wanted to be honest to my daughter as well," she said.

Hossain thought of the baby as an extension of herself, as the ultrasounds began to suspiciously look like her baby was trying to emulate yoga asanas!

"It's also got a lot to do with the people around you," noted the actress. "Everyone was trying to keep me happy. My husband was being a rock for me to lean on, ensuring that I am the happiest home for my Imaan. There seemed to be no reason to stress about anything."

Hossain mentioned that ever since she was in her 20s, she had lived by a mindset that allowed her to receive, rather than to chase. "I was a little fearful about bearing children and I shared my story with Hansa Yogendra, founder of the Yoga Institute, during a podcast."

She also shared that she was close to her 40s and apprehensive about her ageing body.

Hansa Maa encouraged her to think beyond age alone, saying that a healthy 40-year-old can have a good pregnancy just as an unhealthy 25-year-old can have a difficult one. Sonia remembers having been told that she would be entrusted with this blessing when the Almighty thought she was ready for it.

"And that is exactly what happened. Even after moving to the States, I was not ready to have a baby. But it happened naturally, and I accepted it," she said.

Sonia Hossain never went for IVF treatments or for egg freezing as she believed in the divine plan and had long tried to approach life with trust rather than fixation. "I felt that it would happen if it was meant to happen, and if not, I would accept that as part of the bigger plan."

During the pregnancy, Hossain not only drew inspiration from regular recitations of the Holy book, but her spiritual and mental preparation also included Garbh Sanskar classes. The classes helped her think of the child as a person in their own right, with Sonia Hossain serving as a beloved vessel, caretaker and mentor.

"This sort of a mindset allowed me to shake off undue pressure about the birth or my role as a mother, and view pregnancy as a rite of passage for my daughter's arrival," Hossain said.

When asked whether choosing to breastfeed her child had made her a healthier eater, Sonia Hossain said she had not consciously changed her habits after the baby.

"It was my child who was changing me for her own needs," she mused. She remembered a teaching from class: the baby had "built her home" before coming into her.

She remembers that while not specifically for pregnancy, she had made a lot of steady, positive changes to her lifestyle over the last three years. "I dropped unhealthy habits, got into dance, fitness, yoga, good food, deep sleep, and mindful thoughts. I did it for myself, and for my health, and I believe that these changes helped me a lot to get pregnant at 40 as I was already on track."

Sonia Hossain's story is personal, not a prescription. Pregnancy after 35 can involve additional considerations, and people's health and circumstances do differ. This article in no way tries to invalidate the struggles of those who are facing trouble in their personal journeys of family life, pregnancy and childbirth. However, Sonia Hossain's message is really for those who are scared to try, who are worried before there is a reason to be. It is an effort to demystify pregnancies above 35 and usher in positivity in place of anxiety.

"Prepare yourself, prepare your future baby's home with good food, sleep, happy thoughts and good people. And above all, trust the divine. The beauty of surrendering to the will of the Almighty is that there is no scope to be worried," Sonia Hossain concluded.



By Munira Fidai
Photo: Sanjaya Das Joy
Inframe: Sonia Hossain and Shamim Ahmed Steve

Misir Ali

The man who solved mysteries but remained one

#LITERATURE

When we think of fictional detectives, characters such as Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot usually come to mind. Their sharp intelligence, remarkable observational skills, and ability to solve seemingly impossible mysteries have shaped how we imagine a detective novel. But, Humayun Ahmed's Misir Ali breaks away from this familiar image. He is neither physically impressive nor particularly charismatic. Instead, we meet a thin, sickly, somewhat absent-minded psychology teacher who appears to be an ordinary man. His intelligence is extraordinary, but his everyday life is filled with rather ordinary difficulties. For someone who spends much of his life trying to understand the human mind, Misir Ali himself remains a difficult person to understand.

Introduced in Debi (1985), Misir Ali is physically frail, with a thin face, sharp eyes, and unusually long fingers. In Brihonnola, Humayun Ahmed describes him as exceptionally thin and tall, with thick glasses, an untidy beard, and dishevelled clothes. His appearance changes slightly across the novels, but the impression remains much the same: an unremarkable man who hardly resembles a conventional detective. His health is equally troublesome.

Yet his fascination with understanding people reveals only one side of his personality. His childhood, relationships, fears, and emotional responses offer a more complicated picture.

In Sinduk, we encounter important details about Misir Ali's early life. His mother died when he was two, leaving him to grow up under the care of his deeply religious father. One of his childhood memories involves a mysterious chest belonging to his father, from which he believed a woman's voice could be heard. When the chest was eventually opened following his father's death, nothing was found inside.

The incident is significant because it introduces uncertainty into his life long before he becomes an investigator. One might wonder whether his later fascination with unexplained events has something to do with this early experience. The unanswered mystery becomes part of his personal history, suggesting that his intellectual curiosity may be connected to experiences he could never fully understand.

His relationship with Durga, the wife of a mathematics teacher who sheltered him after his father's death, reveals another important dimension. Although she initially treats him with prejudice because of his Muslim identity, Misir Ali gradually becomes attached to her and begins regarding her as a mother. He later honours her final wishes by participating in her funeral rites.

This relationship complicates the image of Misir Ali as an emotionally detached intellectual. Having lost his biological mother so early, he develops a meaningful attachment to someone who initially offers him little affection. From the perspective of attachment psychology, his relationship with Durga may suggest a desire for maternal security and belonging. However, his actions also demonstrate something simpler: he is capable of recognising affection beyond the social and religious divisions surrounding him.

His relationship with solitude is similarly complicated. In Nishad, Misir Ali acknowledges the conflicting desires within himself, particularly his wish for companionship and his preference for being alone. This distinction matters because solitude and loneliness are not necessarily the same. While solitude can be comforting, loneliness emerges when the desire for meaningful connection remains unfulfilled.

Misir Ali seems to occupy a space between these conditions. He values his independence but is not entirely free from the need for affection. His solitary lifestyle therefore appears less like an absence of emotion than an ongoing negotiation between personal freedom and emotional attachment.

His compassion becomes particularly evident in Misir Ali! Apni Kothay?. During a classroom exercise, he asks students questions about their economic circumstances and everyday habits, apparently to investigate the relationship between financial conditions and patterns of thinking. The exercise, however, has another purpose. He uses it to identify three financially disadvantaged students whose educational expenses he intends to support.

The incident reveals how Misir Ali often expresses care indirectly. Instead of openly displaying sympathy, he approaches the problem through observation and analysis.



His intelligence becomes a means of helping others. It also suggests that his emotional restraint should not be confused with indifference.

A similar sense of responsibility appears in Nishithini. While working with Firoz, a young man experiencing severe psychological disturbances, Misir Ali receives an invitation to attend an international psychology conference in Sweden. He refuses because he does not want to abandon Firoz's case.

For someone whose life revolves around intellectual pursuits, declining such an opportunity is revealing. His commitment to another person's well-being outweighs professional recognition. Although curiosity initially draws him towards unusual cases, his involvement often develops into a personal responsibility that he takes seriously.

Nevertheless, this commitment has its limitations. Misir Ali is neither infallible nor immune to fear. In Nishithini, Firoz eventually attacks him with an iron rod, leaving him seriously injured. During his suffering, Misir Ali experiences the appearance of a mysterious goddess and asks her to relieve his pain.

The encounter exposes an important contradiction in his personality. Throughout his investigations, Misir Ali relies on rational explanations, but when faced with unbearable physical suffering, he appeals to a presence whose existence he continues to question. This need not indicate the collapse of his rationalism. Rather, it demonstrates how intellectual convictions and immediate emotional needs can coexist, even when they appear contradictory.

The relationship between reason and uncertainty remains central to Misir Ali's character. In Debi, he carefully investigates Ranu's unusual experiences, searching her childhood for possible psychological explanations. He examines her memories, questions witnesses, and attempts to understand the relationship between trauma and perception. Yet the novel does not allow every mystery to be comfortably resolved.

His investigations in Misir Ali! Apni Kothay? similarly demonstrate his willingness to consider competing explanations. Faced with the strange experiences surrounding Ayna and her husband Faruk, he develops several hypotheses rather than immediately accepting a single interpretation.

These examples suggest that his rationality is better understood as a method of inquiry than an absolute certainty about the world.

There is, however, a contradiction between Misir Ali's capacity to understand others and his limited ability to resolve the uncertainties of his own life. He can recognise psychological patterns in strangers, yet his own emotional needs remain comparatively unexplored. His intellectual pursuits provide purpose, but they cannot entirely replace companionship or protect him from suffering.

Humayun Ahmed thus constructs a character whose humanity lies in his imperfections. Misir Ali can be stubborn, curious to the point of recklessness, emotionally reserved, and unexpectedly affectionate. He is capable of extraordinary patience but not extraordinary control over his circumstances.

Perhaps this explains why Misir Ali remains compelling beyond the mysteries surrounding him. His intelligence does not eliminate his vulnerability, and his commitment to reason does not free him from the contradictions of ordinary human experience. He spends his life searching for explanations, while his own thoughts, feelings, and desires resist any single interpretation.

The psychologist who understands so much about others remains, in the end, as complicated as the people he investigates.

By Mahmuda Emdad
Illustration: Maisha Syeda
The writer is a sub-editor at Star Books and Literature.



#FOOD & RECIPES

Taste of the supernatural

A Halloween feast for the senses





For me, this creation is my interpretation of Halloween: a celebration of imagination, atmosphere, and the art of turning a simple dining experience into a memorable sensory journey.

My inspiration stems from two different things I observed as a chef. One was the dominant colours of the occasion, and the second was the shapes of food. Together, these formed the base of my idea, which is to create food in the shapes and colours of Halloween! With these, we can tell a story, create an atmosphere, and evoke emotions. Naturally, the relevant themes provide a rich canvas full of dark, supernatural elements that were perfect for my ideas.

I envisioned an intimate, candlelit setting where shadows, warm golden light, pumpkins, and carefully curated food presentations would come together to create an experience that feels both haunting and elegant. I wanted to balance the eerie spirit of Halloween with a sense of sophistication, allowing the spread to reflect culinary creativity, with surprising flavours, visual presentation and storytelling. A world where darkness becomes beautiful and ordinary dining transforms into something extraordinary.

SOFT BREAD
Ingredients
500 g all-purpose flour or bread flour
7 g instant yeast
30g sugar
Salt
280–300 ml lukewarm milk
1 egg
50g softened butter



Extra milk or egg wash for brushing

Method
Combine the flour, yeast, sugar, and salt in a mixing bowl. Add the lukewarm milk and egg, then mix until a dough forms. Knead for 8–10 minutes until smooth and elastic. Gradually incorporate the softened butter and continue kneading until the dough becomes soft and stretchy. Place the dough in a lightly greased bowl, cover, and leave in a warm place for approximately 60–90 minutes, or until doubled in size.



Gently deflate the dough and divide it into 8–10 equal portions. Shape each portion into a smooth ball and arrange on a lined baking tray. Cover and leave for 30–45 minutes, until the rolls look puffy. Brush with milk or egg wash. Bake in a preheated oven at 180°C for 20–25 minutes, until golden brown. Brush the hot rolls lightly with butter and cover with a clean cloth for a few minutes to keep the crust soft.

GUACAMOLE
Ingredients
2 ripe avocados
2 tbsp finely chopped onion
1 small tomato, deseeded and diced
1 tbsp fresh lime juice
1 tbsp chopped coriander leaves
1 small green chilli, finely chopped (optional)
Salt and black pepper

Method
Cut the avocados in half, remove the stones, and scoop the flesh into a bowl. Mash with a fork until creamy but still slightly chunky. Add the onions, tomato, coriander, lime juice, and green chillies. Season with salt and black pepper. Mix gently and adjust the lime juice and seasoning to taste.

BROWNIES
Ingredients
150 g dark chocolate
120 g unsalted butter
180 g sugar
2 large eggs
1 tsp vanilla extract
75 g all-purpose flour
25 g unsweetened cocoa powder
¼ tsp salt
50 g chopped walnuts or chocolate chips (optional)

Method
Preheat the oven to 170°C. Line a 20 cm square baking tin with parchment paper. Melt the chocolate: Melt the dark chocolate and butter together over a bain-marie or in short microwave intervals. Stir until smooth and allow to cool slightly. Whisk the eggs and sugar for 1–2 minutes until combined and slightly thickened. Stir in the vanilla extract.



Gradually mix the melted chocolate mixture into the egg mixture. Sift in the flour, cocoa powder, and salt. Fold gently until just combined. Add walnuts or chocolate chips, if desired.

Pour the batter into the prepared tin and bake for 22–28 minutes. The edges should be set, and a skewer inserted in the centre comes out with a few moist crumbs. Allow the brownies to cool completely before cutting into squares.

BEETROOT DRINK
Ingredients
1 beetroot
Mint
Orange
½ tsp salt
3 tbsp sugar
1.5 litres soda water
Method
Mix all together. Serve chilled.

Food, Recipes & Plating: Infiter Islam
Photo: Silvia Mahjabin

#HUMOUR

Of mechho bhoots, burnt matches, and other family superstitions

Superstitions were my Nanu bari's forte; my clan had a unique knack for instilling fear in us about everything under the sun, not only from the unknown but even from the ordinary. They kept planting shadows of dread in every order or rule we disobeyed.

I do not know if, in essence, superstition in my maternal family was less about irrational belief and more about social schooling — a storytelling strategy for how we were supposed to live, abiding by family norms.

My Nanu was an encyclopaedia of old wives' tales. I might be called out for saying so, but to me her every single fragment of folk wisdom was hilariously irritating: A lizard or crow's call before a journey, the sight of a broom, or an upturned slipper before leaving the house in the morning were all interpreted as signs of bad luck and impending danger.

Let me recount a few more of the rituals we endured to appease the spirits of our grandparent's vivid imagination, in case you think I am exaggerating.

For example, if you smelled someone frying fish, especially hilsa, you had to spit on your left hand; otherwise, the mythical "mechho bhoot", the infamous fish-loving ghost of Bengali folklore, would come and get you. And if you sent fish to someone's house, you had to stick a burnt match inside, so the smell of the doused fire kept the spirits away.

And there's my personal favourite: If you let your hair down and went on the rooftop at the exact strike of noon or dusk, you were most likely attracting bad spirits, because the timing coincides with their happy hour break. They would sit on your shoulder and take you for a spin!

I'm sure some of you have seen the Hindi movie Paheli, where a spirit falls in love with a beautiful new bride and takes the form of her husband. My family believed in such tales. So, if you were newly married, you had to carry garlic and a piece of iron to ward off these Shahrukh Khan lookalike spirits, totally disregarding the fact that the smell of garlic might shoo away the new husband too.



Moving on to pregnancy cautions, the list of dos and don'ts is endless — an eclipse, whether the sun or the moon casting its shadow, was said to be disastrous for your unborn child unless you stood straight and idle. If you cut fish at that hour, your child would be born with a cleft lip. If you threaded a needle, people said your child would be born with pierced ears. If you ate certain foods, some misfortune was bound to follow!

In essence, unless you lay completely flat on the bed or stand motionless, you were believed to be in danger.

Once the child is born, another round of make-believe rituals begins. The baby had to have a black kohl mark on its face so that the bad fairies would not cast a spell. Dimples, however, were said to be the imprints of fairies' touch on the baby's cheeks when they visited a beautiful child.

Walking under a tamarind tree was another danger. The number of evil spirits said to live there was uncountable. Why this lovely tree carries such a reputation still baffles me, yet people insist that beneath the tamarind's shade lurks either a cobra, or worse, a spirit disguised as a beautiful girl.

Then there was the "najar uthano" — a ritual of warding off the evil eye. When you looked too good for your own good, or when misfortune clung to you like a shadow, mothers believed that a sigh or a jealous gaze could curse you.

To ward it off, you had to gather a few perfectly straight dry red chillies, wrap them neatly in a betel leaf, perform some mumbo-jumbo ritual, and set the bundle on fire. But according to the superstition, if the smell drifted out, it meant a curse had already been cast upon you. If no smell emerged, you were considered safe.

How convenient. Now imagine burning a dry red chilli!

I always wondered why so many spirits were supposedly hanging around us. Didn't they have anything better to do?

I asked my mother about it many times, but she only shrugged and said she had seen her own father and mother do it. So now she did it too and expected me to carry it forward. But I think the family's bizarre, eccentric chain of inherited rituals snapped at my threshold, and I refused to pass them on.

And yet, in spite of that defiance, I remain superstitious too at some level, knocking on wood for luck, clinging to small charms as if they might tip fate in my favour, though I don't think it's working. Still, I keep at it.

And when I cook fish for my friends and send it over, I never forget to tuck in that burnt match, because somewhere deep inside, I'm still appeasing the ghosts of my childhood stories.

By RBR
Photo: Collected

#PERSPECTIVE

The fascinating science behind why we love horror stories

Getting scared out of your mind might sound unpleasant, but scientists call it recreational fear. Discover how your brain safely trickles feel-good chemicals like dopamine every time you read a haunting supernatural tale or watch a horror film.

Perhaps the elementary drive that makes the paranormal so popular amongst the masses is the fear factor itself. While ghost stories instil that feeling in people, it also comes with a fun factor, and this combination is what makes them so popular. Research even suggests that frightening experiences might help us prepare for how to deal with scary situations and unpleasant emotions while being in a safe environment.

Think about the ghost stories and horror movie experiences from your own life. You were at your home; you were safe. Your brain knew it was safe; at the same time, you were experiencing the terror. This safety of the environment is what makes it appealing to your brain.

IT'S IN OUR NATURE

There have been many studies regarding fear, both from neurological and sociological perspectives. One study found that the central amygdala of the brain harbours neurons that fuel pleasure-inducing behaviour. The central amygdala is also linked to fear. Which means getting scared and feeling good about it might be just biology: we are supposed to like the supernatural!

Good horror stories successfully trigger our fight-or-flight response, followed by a flood of adrenaline, endorphins, and



dopamine. Think of your most intense or scary memories. Remember how the hairs stood on end all over your body? Or that unique feeling of a chill running down your spine. While those are not ideally the best experiences, they can be quite enjoyable when you feel them for just a few seconds.

The brain can process your surroundings and conclude that the experience is not a genuine threat. Naturally, the accelerated heart rate, heavy breathing, and other physical reactions wear off very soon, and we enjoy a sense of intense relief.

In short, horror gives us a concoction of "feel-good chemicals".

There are a lot of people who enjoy gothic literature but hate scary movies as they rely heavily on gore, jump-scares and disturbing images. The use of imagination from literature itself is a great and enjoyable experience.

Besides, many people enjoy the feeling of accomplishment that comes from experiencing and overcoming that frightened feeling, not the fear itself. It's essentially the same emotion that drives people to climb mountains or take on risky adventures. Sure, the task itself is terrifying, but the feeling of accomplishment that comes afterwards makes it worth it.

THE CULTURE OF GHOST STORIES

It's not just the brain chemicals that drive our love for fear. Our nostalgia and culture also play a part. Think of your earliest memory surrounding the supernatural. What were you doing? You were probably in your childhood home, surrounded by siblings and cousins, and your parents or grandparents were narrating a story.

That's a precious childhood memory. When we think of ghost stories, these nostalgic memories make them more appealing.

Besides, many ghost stories had some sort of moral lesson to them, and the stories have been passed down from generation to generation. They are so embedded in our culture that we might as well call them traditions.

To make things more interesting, the curiosity of human beings in general also plays a great part in it. In some people, that curiosity is so strong that they will go to extreme lengths. Many people actually go to so-called "haunted houses" out of sheer curiosity. Ghost stories might just be a warm-up to them!

Of course, not everyone likes to be scared. Some people enjoy the cosy feeling of being wrapped in a blanket with a warm cup of coffee without any shred of the paranormal. But most people enjoy the thrill of ghost stories, even unwittingly.

So, which one are you?

By Ashif Ahmed Rudro
Photo: Collected

Millennials and the most sought-after Mexican restaurant in Dhaka

FOOD TALK

TASKIN RAHMAN
Founder, Food Talk – Food Critic





For those of us who grew up in Dhaka in the 1990s, it is more than just a Mexican restaurant. It is a window to somewhere else — a world that exists somewhere between the movies we watch, the places we imagine visiting, and the lives we think we will eventually lead.

This is Dhaka before the internet takes over our lives. Before Instagram tells us where to eat, before Google Maps makes finding a restaurant a matter of seconds, and before every meal needs to be photographed, reviewed and shared.

Going out to eat is an event. Finding a restaurant is an adventure. And sometimes, the restaurant itself becomes part of our personal history. Tucked away in Gulshan 1, El Toro is one such place.

University life is a curious mix of ambition, youthful rebellion, and the discovery of things we have never experienced before. Food is a big part of that discovery. Mexican food feels exotic. Tacos and nachos aren't things we grow up eating at home. They belong to another world; one we are only beginning to understand.

And then there is the piña colada.

There is something wonderfully grown-up about ordering a drink whose name sounds as though it belongs on a beach somewhere far away. Even if we aren't quite sure what the world outside Dhaka looks like, we can, for a little while, imagine ourselves somewhere else.



El Toro becomes the setting for university dates, conversations that seem capable of going on forever, and evenings that feel significant simply because we are young enough to believe everything is significant.

It is also a time when eating out means discovering more than just new dishes. It is about testing boundaries, trying things our parents might not have ordered, and finding little pockets of the world within a city that is still figuring out what it wants to become.

That is what El Toro represents for me.

It isn't simply about the food, or whether the tacos meet today's standards of authenticity. It isn't about comparing the restaurant with places we visit now, armed with years of travel, better information and more sophisticated palates.

It is about what the place means at the time.

It is about being young in a city that is changing, discovering new tastes, falling in and out of love, and believing the world is waiting for us to figure it out.

Perhaps nostalgia is a generous editor. It softens the edges, makes the ordinary extraordinary, and allows us to remember not just what happens but how it feels to be there.

But perhaps that is precisely the point.

The places we remember most fondly aren't always the ones that serve the best food. Sometimes they are the ones that happen to be there when we are becoming who we are.

A restaurant can be a time capsule. Its tables, its menu and even the familiar journey to get there can bring back a version of ourselves we haven't thought about in years. We may return with different tastes, different expectations and a few more miles behind us, but a part of us remains exactly where it was.

El Toro is one of those places.

And somewhere between the tacos, the nachos, the piña coladas and those university dates, a little bit of our story is written.

For many of us, that is where the miles begin.

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#HEALTH & FITNESS



Why imaginary friends are important for healthy child brain development

Seeing your child interact with an empty room might raise immediate concerns about their mental health. Yet child psychiatrists confirm that invisible companions actively boost language skills, emotional intelligence, and cognitive development.

Picture a three-year-old pulling out a chair at the dining table. Nobody is sitting there, yet she insists you leave it alone. "That's Tutul's seat," she says, and hands him an empty spoon.

For many parents, this is where the worrying begins. Is this normal? Should we play along? Is something wrong? According to Dr Helal Uddin Ahmed, Professor of Child, Adolescent and Family Psychiatry at Faridpur Medical College, the answer is usually reassuring.

A SIGN OF A GROWING MIND

"Having imaginary friends is an important part of a child's development, and we should see it positively," says Dr Ahmed.

Imagining means holding in your mind something that is not in front of you. He explains that this process is a core part of cognitive development, the way a child's thinking and understanding grow. It usually starts around the age of three and is most common between three and seven.

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, whose work on child development remains a staple in education, provided an excellent description of this stage. In simple terms, young children learn about the world by pretending. A cushion becomes a boat, a spoon becomes a microphone, and a friend nobody else can see becomes someone to talk to.

The benefits go beyond fun. Imaginary play builds communication skills, Dr Ahmed confirms, and helps children learn to read other people's feelings. When doctors assess a child for developmental concerns, they ask parents whether the child plays imaginary games. "If they can, we consider it normal," Dr Ahmed says, expressing relief. "If they cannot, it may point to a neurodevelopmental disorder."

Millennials and the most sought-after Mexican restaurant in Dhaka

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HOW PARENTS CAN RESPOND

Many working parents drop their child at school and come home in the evening eager to hear about the day. Instead of answers, they get, "My friend knows everything."

Dr Ahmed emphasises that this situation is not a big problem. "Parents must not forbid it. They have to listen to the child, with full attention. If the child says the friend was talking to them today, ask what the friend said, what game they played, where the friend is now, and whether the friend has rested or slept."

There are things to avoid, too. Do not insist the friend is real, and do not make fun of the child either. "Don't say, 'Stop this nonsense,' or 'You have no friend; there is nobody in this room,'" he warns. Parents should also resist adding new characters, inventing scary events or cross-examining the child. And if the child has cousins or classmates to play with, real relationships should not be pushed aside for the imaginary one.

Laughing about the friend in front of relatives is another mistake. Dr Ahmed points out that it can embarrass the child, which can be a very bad experience for them.

GHOSTS AT THE WINDOW

Many of us grew up hearing, "Go to sleep, or a ghost will come through the window." Dr Ahmed has no objection to imaginary characters, but not when they are used as a threat.

"Say something positive instead," he suggests.

Childhood lessons stick, he asserts. Telling a child that the doctor will give an injection if they refuse medicine can plant a lasting fear of doctors. Warning that a cat will bite can grow into fear of animals, and he alerts us by mentioning that some adults who hurt animals are carrying a bad early lesson, as they were taught negative things in their childhood.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

Only in a small number of cases does imaginary play become a real problem. Dr Ahmed indicates a few clear signs.

One is fear so strong that daily life suffers. The child stops sleeping, refuses to eat, avoids the washroom or trembles with fright. Another is a friend who gives harmful instructions. "I hit him because my friend told me to" or "I threw the phone out of the window because my friend said so" are the kinds of statements that should get a parent's attention. A sudden, major change in behaviour, with the child seeming overwhelmed or obsessed, is a third warning.

In such cases, the cause may be obsessive-compulsive disorder or panic attacks, and sometimes an intellectual disability, he says.

For most children, an imaginary friend is a healthy imagination at play. Listen with patience, and seek professional help only if daily life suffers.

By Tagabun Taharim Titun
Photo: Collected

HOROSCOPE



ARIES
(MAR. 21-APR. 20)

Trust your intuition. Embrace change this week. Find your inspiration and keep moving forward. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.



TAURUS
(APR. 21-MAY 21)

Reflect on relationship dynamics. Balance loyalty with personal boundaries. The weekend brings important decisions about existing partnerships. Your lucky day this week will be Friday.



GEMINI
(MAY 22-JUN. 21)

Review your daily routines. Drop habits that drain your energy. Prioritise practical steps to support your health and wellbeing. Your lucky day this week will be Wednesday.



CANCER
(JUN. 22-JUL. 22)

Explore creative solutions to financial challenges. Seek support from trusted family members. Make time for dancing, romance, and friends this weekend. Your lucky day this week will be Saturday.



LEO
(JUL. 23-AUG. 22)

Find comfort within yourself. Release emotional baggage. Check household repairs, bills, and essential systems to prevent future problems. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.



VIRGO
(AUG. 23-SEP. 23)

Speak honestly about your needs. Seek friends who accept your authentic self. Use your communication skills to strengthen trust and understanding. Your lucky day this week will be Thursday.



LIBRA
(SEP. 24-OCT. 23)

Prioritise restorative self-care. Review financial worries and spending habits. This week can bring clarity about money and personal confidence. Your lucky day this week will be Friday.



SCORPIO
(OCT. 24-NOV. 21)

Trust your instincts. Move forward despite uncertainty. Honest, courageous decisions can strengthen self-confidence and deepen trusted relationships. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.



SAGITTARIUS
(NOV. 22-DEC. 21)

Question your assumptions about truth. Make time for solitude. Use quiet reflection to understand your emotions before pursuing new adventures. Your lucky day this week will be Saturday.



CAPRICORN
(DEC. 22-JAN. 20)

Reassess your social circles. Connect your friendships with long-term ambitions. Keep your promises to protect the trust others place in you. Your lucky day this week will be Wednesday.



AQUARIUS
(JAN. 21-FEB. 19)

Handle criticism calmly. Clarify your professional ambitions. A career shift could help you pursue recognition and build a lasting legacy. Your lucky day this week will be Friday.



PISCES
(FEB. 20-MAR. 20)

Prioritise sleep, nourishment, and rest. Reconnect with your core values. Take extra care when organising travel plans and making arrangements. Your lucky day this week will be Monday.



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#FASHION & BEAUTY

Do young people still feel connected to traditional jewellery?





Traditional jewellery is more than an accessory; its designs reflect craftsmanship, aesthetics, and cultural identity. However, maintaining a connection with Bengali traditions does not necessarily require wearing heavy gold ornaments. It may also mean appreciating distinctive designs and adapting them to contemporary tastes.

Shulogna Barua, 26, expressed her love for deshi ornaments. "I love traditional jewellery because I feel Bangladeshi traditional pieces are unique. It stands apart even from that of other South Asian countries. But I would not wear heavy ornaments. I absolutely love the minimal versions, the smaller pieces with intricate detailing."

Barua added, "Take the mukut, for example. It used to be very popular, but hardly anyone wears it now. People no longer want to wear ornaments to make them the centre of attention."

For Raka Islam, 28, tradition has taken a different meaning. She loves gold ornaments but more as a financial asset than a piece of fashion accessory.

"I really like designs in muted, matte finishes rather than that bright, shiny gold colour. I want to have gold in my collection, but when it comes to wearing jewellery, I prefer something that can be matched with different outfits."

Many from this generation can relate to her preference immensely. The distinction between ownership and appreciation is worth exploring. Gold can be both an ornament and a financial asset, but the jewellery someone wants to own may differ from what they prefer to wear daily. With the metal becoming increasingly expensive, silver, copper-toned metals, and imitation jewellery offer accessible ways to enjoy traditional designs.

Sharmin Akhter, 24, shared a different perspective. Although she prefers simple jewellery for everyday wear, she believes elaborate ornaments have their place at weddings.

"I feel heavy jewellery looks best at weddings. For everyday wear, I prefer something simple. But I have no problem wearing heavy traditional jewellery at my wedding. Mantasha, haattana, haatpasha, kanpasha, kantana, and a large nose ring can all enhance the beauty of a bridal look."

The experiences of a few young people cannot represent an entire generation, but they raise an important question: Does cultural connection depend on how much traditional jewellery young people own, or can it also be expressed through the designs they appreciate and choose to wear?

Perhaps traditional jewellery is not losing its place among young people so much as finding new ways to remain relevant. For a tradition to survive, it does not always have to remain unchanged. Sometimes, it evolves with the people who carry it forward.

By Farhana Faiza
Photo: Silvia Mahjabin
Model: Shababa Rashid
Makeup: Anew Makeover by Shababa Rashid
Jewellery: Mrinmoyee by Samia Rashid Hai



