

# **The Banal Pleas**

*Written by Hasan Abir*

Both feet sank and cloaked in the ground. The coolness of the mud sent signals of tranquility. But the encompassing transformation of liquid mud into solid concrete, brought panic. Only a few steps away, from what looked like a barn. In the shed, in the shade. In it and in the center, plenty of figures moved about in plenty of limbs, obscured in the bloom of the sun. Warm hearts. In eagerness to inch closer, a leg plopped a step. Then the other. Fence gates that looked open two feet away, were then chained on approach. Not a thing to have done about that. But from there, it was clear that there were goats in the center. Speckled with whites, the black and the brown mammals could only wander so far before being pulled back by the rope and the pole that they were tied to. A sudden clench felt at the floor. Surrounding, it was only concrete then. No way of an escape if one considered. From one of the corners of the barn, an unknown man in silhouette entered with pulsating boiling blood; heavy in his presence with a freshly sharpened machete in his hand. Vigorous too, told by his wicked stomps. He walked towards the gullible beings with all his attention. They were seemingly unchanged for the most part, until the man placed his feet right against theirs. Then he raised his blade high aloft rather slowly. Took a deep breath that he let out with the slow descent of his weapon.

—Quick! Heart can't contain to see it all happen! Turn around, shut your eyes and sit on the ground, words that never came to mouth but orderly followed.

Oh, that wailing! What a miserable way of going out! The sounds of squishy meat split by sharp edges only brought squeamishness. Then one after another, age old memories revealed themselves. Just like the passing train, the falling rain, all very faint. Wrathful visions of the unsought came, leaving a great taint.

Fast-paced, relentless drumming of the heart eventually ended the half-night and half-day of fragile sleep. Tough pressure felt on the chest resting on the concrete of a sidewalk. And just down below, a funny wet feeling. That happened every now and then, but never checked on. The surreal screams of the mass killings could still be heard, sustaining the real world. Farid Arabinda, recognized by face and never by name, unbent and picked himself up.

—One for ten! Look at all these colors! Get a balloon and have yourself a good day for God's sake! said yearning for some cash, Fatema Arabinda, Farid's thirteen-year-old girl.

Then she proceeded to walk next to a couple carried away in the flush of newborn love. Love and/or lust between a very young girl wearing the badge of her school on her chest and a man with a hanging, lush beard that showed a few whites. Fatema's presence brought their romance-tipsiness down to a minimum as she nagged them constantly about money, almost hanging off of their clothes. That went on for a few blocks until the couple retaliated in frustration with minimal physical contact. Monsoon noon for Fatema's balloon business, which popped before it ever left her reach. She came back halfheartedly to where her father had just awakened. Farid looked askew at her, but she didn't care enough to notice him. Then she sat, maintaining her distance from him, on the same sidewalk. Farid's attention drifted towards a little boy, shorter than Fatema, carrying a large multi-colored toy gun on one hand and the other, held securely by his mother. And the gun could bawl, and it did, excruciatingly. The boy loosely swung his sound weapon around, almost hitting his mother, and when he missed, he gave his mother a smug look. He found his joy in imagining the most gruesome moments of mankind. But gruesome only from up close, only on naked eyes, only with an opened nose. The distorted noise that the gun made reminded Farid of his dream. That boy's toy sounded just like the goats dying in agony. His interpretation of it went nowhere other than that.

The blazing sun kept Farid from shutting his eyes, but not enough to fully wake him up. Very little saliva left in his mouth too. His

heart desired relief and called for an early-morning-turned-noon cup of tea to get going. Cigarettes fit too. He had only a spare, as he remembered, in one of the many pockets of his paper-thin, dust-catching, olive-colored coat. So, he rummaged through his pockets—pockets that you could put your hand inside out—only to find that lonely piece of cigarette slightly wet. He didn't complain. There was a stall near him that sold some mediocre snacks and fresh cups of tea. Farid finally got up as clumsily as possible and went to the stall, took the lighter that was hanging, lit his piece, and let out his first smoke of the day, in liberty. That was good going for a good minute until he started feeling his weight again. A lovely aroma came oozing out of the brewing pot.

—There must be some change left somewhere, he wondered. Enough already. Who am I kidding? I just checked everywhere. Forget it. The guy brewing has his pupils skidding in all directions for money like he always does, and he has been seeing me here for ten—no, it must be eleven years. Was that just thunder? Peculiar grumbling. The sky is as bland as always. It must've been the Belly of a Thin Man. I did leave on my own, but fix me a-something, mama. You said you'd watch over me.

Bodily blues came flowing down as sweat transmitted all over Fatema's skin. Amidst her situational sunbathing, suddenly, she found herself transfixed. A fair seductress, styled in a masterful, short hairdo with no strands flying free, walked in acute steps in the fashion of a nimble, white cat. Eyes, darkened by TV shades, held a certain mystery about the mistress. And her much-longed-for thin figure was covered in a baby blue striped shirt, tucked in and sleeves folded; her bottom had no room to breathe in her skin-tight indigo jeans; her toes were squeezed together in her stabbing red heels that were also meant to be flung if or when needed. She passed by much too quickly for Fatema to fully admire all her facial details. When she finally caught herself dazzled, out of curiosity, she put her attention on her own looks that, in her head, she imagined to be somewhat high-fashioned. It didn't take her too long to be knocked down in sheer disappointment. Her skin: dark and

reflective. Apparel: torso-ridden and punched holes all over her shorts. Punched holes punched her guts to the point where, she kept looping these two things in her head until she hit herself hard enough to feel the pain. Then her eyes fell on a car passing by with black-tinted glasses, on which her reflection stretched slightly.

—Nothing I ever eat yet this? questioned herself and added it to her list of weaknesses.

Just shortly after, a couple of her girlfriends came running at her with high spirits, looking forward to some fun. Fatema felt relieved, not because of their arrival, but rather because seeing them made her realize that she wasn't alone in how she looked.

The group held hands and went for a stroll. They headed to the local lakeside park, walking against the high wind that blew them rhythmically. On their way, a little bridge arched over the sunshine-reflecting lake, where they stopped for a breather. Stood leaned back on the bridge fencing and watched cars go. The constant clanking made by the cars around the bridge junction had them feeling chirpy. Although the ordinary buzzing of the streets hadn't toned down to any degree, Fatema felt she had almost lost her hearing. Her half then hung over the fence. Leaves decayed, gently swung to and fro, and eventually came into contact with the water and its stillness. She was in an oasis of serenity, looking through her tunnel vision, where her heartbeats could almost be heard, only if not for all the cars passing by. Eyes then fixated on her rippling reflection on the olive water below—the reflection of her hair blowing high. The foul smell of the water spiraling into her nose broke her self-absorption. Nothing could be seen through the gunk, and no wild aquatic life peeked. But naturally, for all, the lake was a mirror of silhouettes that cared not much for details. She contemplated for a while.

—Who am I really? Does anyone care? I'm small and petty now but this must go away someday I believe. Or does it not?

—Never, answered Farid clearly, for he had lost his faith in God, love, and himself many years ago. Most of the finite life runs out dreaming of all the potentials of the future, present and the bygones. Kicking a plastic cup out of the way, he continued. Any and all authority would accept, love, and put you above the rest, just below them, if you could get down on your knees and start learning to fear the worst. Open a present to find a present to open a present to find a present. Then look back to discover a mound of once-wrapped-in-foil empty boxes colonized by spiders and their uncles and aunts. I'm unforgivably nil and still, unlike these who pass by me regularly and I detest each. A subdued boiling pot. Claws of sheer exhaustion clasp my mouth. Now where did the pest go?

Bewildered and bathed in repentance, he found himself shedding tears. He settled down to walk in an attempt to feel lighter. Both the street and the sidewalk were heavily crowded at that time of the day. He watched cars go. His eyes met the eyes of a passenger, a stranger who looked about Farid's age. Being embarrassed, he made haste to wipe his tears. Waited for the vignette to clear off. Then, as he continued his stroll, he quickly came to a stop beside an electrical pole at the end of the same sidewalk where he had awakened that morning. The urge to cross the street rose every second, and he was perplexed as to what for. The traffic had been reckless, as it usually is on the first day of the week. Kids, adolescents, and their parents all looked forward to going home from school. Some students seemed merrily tired, while others were beaten to pulp for their grades right then. Among the chaos of people arguing and cars honking, there stood a large blue bus that had both of those elements but was much louder. The sounds of the humming engines intertwined with the fryers in the restaurants, irritatingly. Farid thought of waiting at the pole until the mass in front of him sorted itself out of his way.

—Time is fabricated for the rich. I can wait, he thought, taking a seat on the ground in a lotus position.

The sun wasn't setting any time soon, and his eyes couldn't keep up with the spinning wheels for too long. Inevitably, they shut, and he dreamt of the buzz fainting away.

Tall shadows stretched over the brick path along the lakeside, and the path kept Fatema and her friends' sense of direction in place. Her girlfriends, Neha and Dipa, were about the same age as Fatema, although Dipa was a few inches taller and Neha was shorter. When they walked together with Fatema in the middle, their heads aligned at a slant. They didn't talk very much, but as a band, they loved giggling at the long faces of working adults. A sweeper, almost done sweeping, craved for her lunch, and right then, the hooligans came in and kicked the pile of dead leaves to scatter, and then ran off laughing loudly with the worker cursing them from behind in agony. There was not an ounce of willpower left in her to have gone after them. They ran past a dozen trees before realizing they hadn't been chased. Breathing heavily, sighing, and grinning, they patted each other's backs in triumph. Dipa then disbanded, gesturing with her hand that she'd be back in a moment. It had been almost four in the afternoon, and gradually more and more young faces entered the park. Dipa knew what to do. The usual: coerce a passer-by into giving money for a living. And the target? The first couple passed through the turnstile gates. From a distance, the faint laughter of her friends could be heard as Dipa followed and unintentionally chased the couple out of the park. Sore hearts left no money for her.

—Walk along, yes, but you two have my curse. God will take care of you sinners in my favor. Grunting in disgust, she continued. Utterly shameless and even in the clothes that you all wear. And what's with the shirt and the pants? Whore! Where's your tradition, woman? As Dipa's words faded away, the couple started talking again.

—Did she just call you a whore? The nerve!

—Oh, she's just a kid. Forget about it.

There had been a forever silence between the lines.

—Yeah, well, anyway, I have a feeling I might lose my job.

—Jeez, don't say that! You won't. This time, things are different. Have a little faith!

Abrar Hossain and his boss at work, an executive, a husband, a father, and a seventy-two-year-old mister, Golam Mahmud, jogged along the lakeside, trying to hold a conversation. Between their breaths, they chatted, but heavily one-sided. On the quieter side, Abrar's head felt heavy with stacking, dizzying thoughts. Each day, his wife's due date came closer, and he found himself more and more physically, existentially, and mostly financially unprepared. His boss requested his time as a companion, and he gladly accepted (he didn't get to choose). A month in, and it had gone nowhere, diminishing his hopes of a higher salary. Mr. Mahmud really considered him a friend—a bright and obedient one that he could rely on. Loneliness had him terribly; he didn't think to ever come to terms with it. At the office, he was occupied with some paperwork in his executive room but mostly stayed in solitude. At home, he had the company of his wife, who always stayed at home because of her authoritarian husband. Her God and His books were her only company. She and Golam Mahmud couldn't live without each other, for superficial reasons. The accomplished man had always been proud to talk about his daughters when it came to the families they were married off to. Families with enough dough to feed several generations in the future. He always told his employees his daughters were happy, blissfully gifted by their housewife roles (injected with inferiority complex, therefore didn't get to choose), but neither had called each other in years. Golam couldn't contain his thoughts to himself any longer, so he loosened.

—It's cruel to cage a bird, true, but what other way is there to keep them in sight? Women, I tell you, fly away easily. I learned my lesson back in college, and I haven't taken a chance with them since. Don't you think that's just being sensible, Mr. Hossain?

Abrar had been nodding his head in agreement the whole time. Meanwhile, two very young school girls went by their sight, and one

of them had accidentally brushed an arm against Golam's waist. To that, he swiftly turned his head towards Abrar, twitched both of his brows a few times, and smirked.

—Oh my! The fairer one was pretty, he said in a whispering tone.

He then chuckled, like he had been lifted off all worries. Bought company laughed along as usual but felt guilty for not having noticed the girls. Moving on, jogging along the brick path, Golam came to a halt all of a sudden when he saw an opportunity with three poorly dressed girls leisurely stone-skipping. Keeping Abrar as the observer, he thought to be charitable. Calling the girls with a single "Oy", he took out his wallet, hardly caring, handed a bill of hundred to each, and finally tapped on Abrar's shoulders to get going.

Frantic souls screeched, raved about the papers, pinched each other, confirming their consciousness, and thanked their God endlessly. The wind came back strongly, and their heads of hair hid their smiles underneath. Fatema couldn't help but stop and wonder.

—Money is straight and a waste to not spend. It's all I think about, and I really can't live without, it stirred in her internally. So, this money is for me to dine out! She deliriously decided looking up above at the growing dusk.

—What good place will let us in, Fatema? said the other two. Think of something cheaper.

—Chips, chocolates, ice cream, and coke? She laid out the plan for them.

—Oh yes! Alright, let's get to it.

Fatema then wished she had thought twice but went along anyway. Age didn't matter, but height did. So, Dipa played the older sister and took them to the store. She told their list to the shopkeeper without doing much of the math and had to slightly cut it short, but they were satisfied with what they could afford. The sky,



illuminated in orange. Jolly sounds of polys among the three, together they sat under a tree. Ice cream tongues made loud licks, and amidst them, Fatema wondered why she never pondered; why was it always after the matter that she thought relentlessly?

—I could have saved the money for something else, but for what? I don't know. There's no love; nobody tells me what to do. No education, no vacation. Later, they'll go back to their mothers and tell them the stories of their day. And all I can do is chew my night away, like I chewed my day.

Evening rushed in quicker than they could finish their snacks. In moments, the park was empty of daylight visitors. Only a few friend-finding phone callers, skin-tight jeans wearers, nervous walkers, and smooth talkers remained. The girls littered their poly bags at the tree roots, washed their hands in the leafy lake, and left the park from the other entrance in the same slant formation as before.

Farewells from: lush branches that sprouted high above on the tall standing trees years ago; a gang of skin-reaped thirsty drooling dogs sat in assembly; and floating pink lilies that floated unbothered by ripples. Isolated, it had been time for their routinely slumber, free of noise, to shine once again as they do at dawn. On to the city: blinding spots all over with breaks of sparks of colorless fluorescents. Flies buzzed around them. Streak of glass doors on both sides of the four lanes with breaks of fruit stands, hospitals, and facilities, the girls didn't care to understand. No one noticed the trifles wandering, not even in the light. Most mostly swung glass doors in and out, carrying heaps of their purchases. Nothing much came to the girls. They were tired of all the running around and just wanted to briefly pretend to be shoppers. They looked around, learned of and judged current fashion, stood at kebab corners for the smell, and sequentially, ran out of words to say to each other. Their long-lived walk had reached the limits of the shops and had taken them to an unknown neighborhood, short of streetlamps and people out on the streets.

—They must have all gone to bed, Fatema assured herself aloud.

—Yes, but this early? It must be around nine o’ clock or something. Well, perhaps they’re all morning people. Very early morning, that is, responded Neha fearfully.

Roaring streams of fear fouled Fatema’s soul, head to toe. Not out of the usual vulnerabilities of a young girl in the dark but rather the sense of drifting away, far from her safe and quiet place. Where that had been, she wasn’t too sure. It didn’t imply a house or a home for her, naturally. But she kept it all to herself, shielding her inner turmoil from her dearest friends. As they still walked intact as a band, Fatema gradually began to slow her pace to fall back purposefully. The purpose she found after a while of shrinking her head and finally calming her throbbing heart was to run back to her not-so-dear father. She couldn’t stand the idea of opening herself to a cold and distant father-daughter relationship where each thought they were worth nothing and better left to themselves. But as she came to terms with what she had, which wasn’t much, she mellowed. To avoid ripening and eventually rotting, she gathered all her courage to leave her friends to be and to trace her steps, traversing through the dark and empty streets, back to her father. Dipa and Neha felt something was up with Fatema, and before they turned, they could already hear her slippers flip-flopping in the other direction.

—Ay, what happened to you? yelled both together, but Fatema ran like she had taken an oath to never look back.

Having decided it was best to head back to their parents at that hour, they both walked in the same direction as Fatema but at a snail pace.

Energy-depleted, Fatema’s young body had been carried solely by her alert, jittery mind. What once felt like a long walk went by in a flash as she ran through the shopping district, constantly bumping into people. The shops she left behind had been closing down one after another, as if the world revolved around her. Streetlamps had also been fading into the dark. The next logical direction was to re-

enter the park (she knew no other way). Which had turned into a forest, rather. The sight of that made her hesitant to go in. To her, the entrance seemed like two giant hands ready to pull her into its darkness. She looked around a few times for no apparent reason before eventually going in. Upon entering, the brick path to guide her began with a steep downward slope, really pulling her down into the depths of the park. Once she had stabilized her running speed, she was confronted by the poor-skin dogs that took issue with her being around late at night. They chased; they came close, but never quite enough. And meanwhile, they blew her ears with their hoofs and woofs. The darkness took her vision, and the barks took her hearing away from her. While running in total numbness of the situation, she dropped frazzled on the floor of her head. Tears rolled down her disabled face.

—Dear Mother,

I don't know you. Have never. Mythical and distant you are. Perhaps in the stars, I'll find you. You stood sternly somewhere, I dream, with your open arms, laid out for me. I carry your memory—not of your face nor your name, but of your touch. You used to hold me with such tenderness in your chest, and there's nothing less I yearn for. But I remember more of you angrily walking out the door of our once lousy tin house. They had to crush it down, right in front of my eyes, for their own good. Now, food has become so scarce. I heard from the neighbors that you worked hard—real strength-exhausting work. He says you left us because he couldn't get work. That couldn't be it, could it? Does your dear daughter mean nothing to you? I'm not only his daughter, you know. Or was it because of how I looked? Oh, I can't take it. Know that I really despise you. And no, I still don't like him. How do you expect me to get along with a being as condescending as him? Why am I running to him then? Some choice I've got! Hell with you, him, and everybody else. Oh, I really shouldn't. I'm sorry. Your daughter is just confused and disarrayed. After all, I don't really know you.

Her vision and hearing came back from the glaring light in the distance—the headlights of the cars in the street. The howling dogs

had edged very close to her, but before they took a bite, she managed to get out of her forest of hysteria. The territorial animals stood at the gate, watched her leave, and exclaimed (howled) in defeat. Nothing aforethought, but a sense of direction from there, had been there. She feared every wrong step, and every right one felt wrong after a while. Familiar places had turned into foreign lands in the blindness of the night. Next in her way: the rattling, old lake bridge.

—It's even more peaceful here this time around. And these lights! I didn't notice them earlier! Never seen anything like these before! mesmerized by Victorian-style lamps on bridge fences. One, two, skip, four—no. Three, right. One, two... counted the lit ones needlessly.

Distracted from what she thought to be an act of a desperate kind, she no longer wished to go any further, for she found her home under the warm lights. A phase that lasted around fifteen minutes until she stopped feeling safe on the bridge. Followed by gracefully walking away from the lights, like a Victorian queen.

Awfully troubled Fatema had been. Her entire life up to that point had been nowhere else but in the city. Yet every street, every corner, and every man were indistinguishable. Dead ends everywhere, unendingly. The city had plenty of empty, narrow streets to offer, that chilled her to the bone. But after an hour of trial and error, she finally arrived at the sidewalk where her father had been that morning, and he was nowhere to be seen. Polybags flew across the lanes, devoid of life, through a gentle night breeze.

—Ah, I forgot to tell him where I was headed before I left. Where could he be, I wonder?

She waited and waited for him to come back to the spot. Nervously, she got up and started walking along the sidewalk in a certain direction—walking and thinking of all the uncertainties, which all ended up making her more and more anxious. Then she came to a point where her mind went blank, but with all her other senses working, unconsciously, taking her as far as the intersection-less

sidewalk could take her, which eventually led her astray to two smoking figures, lost in their fantasy of an eternal youth, sitting on their heels in front of shutters. Fatema stood and stared at them long, assessing the situation, and before she thought of a way out, the pair noticed her back. Their faces grinned and smiled broad, smugly; asserting power with their height, they edged closer and closer, preparing for their great pounce. Before they took a chance, Fatema fled at the pace of a stray cat, straight in the other direction. Which brought her right where she started. Then she tried out the other way as her only hope. Her quick steps came to a stop early, abruptly, to a glimpse of a man in baggy clothes, spread on the sidewalk near an electric pole. Shocked and flabbergasted, Fatema took baby steps towards the human. Then she sat beside the man and judged every fine detail on his skin with affection: dusty eyelashes, veiny hands, a scrubby beard, a saliva-dripping mouth, and cloudy, white hair. Putting her arm around him, she wrapped him closer to her heart. Her eyes gave up at last. She held him tight, but not a vein of his throbbed. Her comforting pillow then put her in deep sleep. A flow of high current fused a lamp nearby.

Fatema Arabinda woke up with a shaven head and a dry mouth, spread on one of the corners of a staircase to a bakery shop, just a few feet away from the glass door, fifteen years later. Then she rested her head on one arm that rested on the staircase, staring at everything and nothing at the same time. As a fairly young father and his adolescent daughter were walking up the stairs to the shop, the daughter noticed Fatema and turned her head back towards him.

—That poor thing! Why don't you ever give her any money?

—Believe me, I tried. She is a crazy person. She won't take any money and won't even acknowledge my kindness! Now, only if your mother believed me. She gets so worked up on these petty matters.

This made her birthday a little sour, but the cake they bought easily made up for it.

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