

The Banal Pleas

Written by Hasan Abir

Both feet sank in, cloaked in the ground. The coolness of the mud sent signals of tranquility. But the encompassing transformation of liquid mud to solid concrete brought panic. Only a few steps away from what looked like a barn. Shade in the shed. At its center, plenty of figures moved about in plenty of limbs, obscured by the bloom of the sun. Warm hearts. In eagerness to inch closer to the warmth, a leg plopped a step, then the other. Open shed gates, two feet away, suddenly closed with chains on approach. Not a thing to have done about that. But from there, it was clear that the moving figures were goats. Speckled with whites, the black and brown mammals could only wander so far before being pulled back by the pole they were tied to. Felt a sudden clench on the floor. Surrounded, it was only concrete then. No way of escape to consider. Then, from one of the corners of the barn, the silhouette of a manly stranger, heavy in his presence with a freshly sharpened machete, entered with pulsating, boiling blood. Vigorous too, as told by his wicked stomps. He walked towards the gullible beings with all his attention. And the goats remained unchanged for the most part until the man placed his feet right against theirs. Frenzying them more, he raised his blade aloft slowly with patience, along with taking a deep breath, which he let out, likewise, with the slow descent of his weapon.

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

Oh, those wailing! What a miserable way of going out! The sounds of squishy meat split by the 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. Following, wrathful visions of the unsought came, leaving to linger a great taint.

Fast-paced, relentless drumming of the heart eventually broke off to end the half-night and half-day of fragile sleep. Felt tough pressure on the chest, resting on the concrete of a sidewalk. And just down below: a funny wet feeling. That happened every now and then, although it was never checked on. Heard still the surreal screams, sustained in the real world, of the mass killings. Farid Arabinda, recognized never by name and only by face, 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 along with a couple carried away in the flush of newborn love: love and or lust between a very young girl wearing on her chest the badge of her school and a man with a hanging, lush beard showing 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, frustrated, retaliated with minimal physical contact. What a monsoon noon for Fatema's balloon business, popping before it ever left her reach. She came back halfheartedly to where her father had just awakened. Farid looked at her asquint, 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 in one hand and the other held securely by his mother. The gun could bawl, and oh, how it did, excruciatingly. The boy loosely swung his sound weapon around, almost hitting his mother sometimes, 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 up close, only to naked eyes, only with an open nose. The distorted noise that the gun made reminded Farid of his dream. He figured

that the boy's toy sounded just like the goats dying in agony, though 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 a relief, a call 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, clumsily balancing himself, first went to the stall, took the lighter that was hanging, lit his piece, and lastly let out his first smoke of the day with 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 brewing guy has his pupils skidding in all directions for money, as 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. Yes, I did leave on my own, but fix me something, Ma. You said you'd watch over me.

Bodily blues came flowing down Fatema's insides as sweat transmitted all over her skin. Amidst her incidental sunbathing, suddenly, she found herself transfixed. A fair seductress in a masterfully done, no strands flying free, short hairstyle walked by in acute steps, fashionably like a nimble, white cat. Her eyes, under the darkness of her TV shades, held a certain mystery about the mistress. And her much-envied thin figure, covered in a baby blue striped shirt, tucked in and sleeves folded; her bottom, with no room to breathe in her skin-tight indigo jeans; her toes, squeezed together in her red heels, 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 steered her attention to her own looks that she always believed to be somewhat high-fashion, at least in her head. That didn't take too long to knock her down in sheer disappointment; her skin: dark and reflective; apparel: bare torso and holes-punched-all-over shorts. The punched holes punched her guts to the point where she kept looping these two things in her head until she punched herself hard enough to feel the pain outwardly. Then, even worse, 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 girls, her friends, 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. They stood, leaning back on the bridge fencing, and watched cars go by. The constant clanks that the cars made 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 loudly. Her eyes then fixated on her rippling reflection on the olive water below—the reflection of her hair blowing high, although the foul smell of the water spiraling into her nose broke her self-absorption. Nothing to see through the gunk, and no wild aquatic life peeked. But naturally, for all, the lake was a mirror of silhouettes, caring 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 this finite life runs out dreaming, dreaming all the potentials of the future, present, and the bygones. Kicking a plastic cup out of the way, he continued. Anyone of authority would accept, love, and put you above the rest, just below themselves, only 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, I detest each and every one. A subdued boiling pot is all I am, as the 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 to walk in an attempt to feel lighter. Both the street and the sidewalk were heavily crowded at that time of the day. Like daughter, he watched cars go. His eyes then met the eyes of a passenger, a stranger who looked about Farid's age. Embarrassed, he made haste to wipe his tears and 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 with every second, and he was perplexed as to why. 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, 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 a fabrication 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 friends, Neha and Dipa, were about the same age as Fatema, though Dipa was a few inches taller and Neha, 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 woman, almost done with sweeping the path, craved her lunch, and right then, the hooligans came and kicked her pile of dead leaves, scattering them everywhere, after which the girls ran off, laughing loudly, with the worker cursing at them from behind in agony. The woman had not an ounce of willpower to have gone after them. The girls ran past a dozen trees before realizing that there was no one chasing. 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 was almost four in the afternoon, and gradually more and more young faces entered the park. Dipa knew what to do. The usual: coerce a passerby into giving money for a living. And the target? The first couple that passed through the turnstile gates. From a distance, Dipa could hear the faint laughter of her friends as she 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, even with the clothes that you all wear. What is up 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 it.

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—an executive, a husband, a father, and a seventy-two-year-old mister—Gulam Mahmud, jogged along the lakeside, trying to hold a conversation. Between their breaths, they chatted, but it was heavily one-sided. On the quieter side, Abrar's head felt heavy with stacking, dizzying thoughts. Each and every 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 (didn't get to choose). A month in as a jogging partner, 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, for loneliness had him terribly; he never thought he would come to terms with it. At the office, in his executive room, he occupied himself with some paperwork and 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. Mrs. and Mr. Mahmud couldn't live without each other, for reasons too superficial for them to ever openly discuss. The accomplished man was always proud to talk about his daughters, especially when it came to the families that he married them off to, families with enough dough to feed several generations to come. He always told his employees his daughters were happy, blissfully gifted by their housewife roles (with an 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, no matter what his boss said. Meanwhile, two very young schoolgirls walked by them, and one of them 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.

Then he chuckled, as if the girl lifted off all his worries. His bought companion 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. With Abrar beside him as an observer, he thought of being charitable. After calling (with a single "Oy") the girls, he took out his wallet and, hardly caring, handed a bill of a hundred to each girl; then finally, he tapped on Abrar's shoulders to get going.

The 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. Still on this occasion, 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, she stirred in her head. Yes, I know, 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? Fatema 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. To them, age didn't matter, but height did. So, Dipa played the older sister and took them to a store. Without doing much math, she told their list to the shopkeeper, which led them to cut it slightly short, but nonetheless, they were satisfied with what they could afford. As they headed back to the park, the sky above illuminated in orange. Jolly sounds of polybags between the three: together, they sat under a tree. Ice cream tongues made loud licks; meanwhile, Fatema wondered this time 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 vacations. Later, they'll go back to their mothers and tell them the stories of their day, while 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 became empty of daylight visitors. Only a few friend-finding phone callers, skin-tight jeans wearers, nervous walkers, and smooth talkers remained. After eating and drinking, the girls littered their polybags at the tree roots, washed their hands in the leafy lake, and left the park through the other exit, in the same slant formation as before.

Bid farewell: lush branches that sprouted high above on the tall-standing trees years ago; a gang of skin-reaped, thirsty, drooling dogs sitting in an assembly; pink lilies, unbothered by ripples, floating. Isolated, it was then time for their routine slumber, free of noise, to shine once again as they do at dawn. On to the city: blind spots all over, with breaks of sparks of colorless fluorescents, flies buzzing around them; streaks of glass doors on

either side of the four-lane road, with breaks of fruit stands, hospitals, and facilities that the girls didn't care to understand. Not one person noticed the trifles wandering about, not even in the light. Most people just 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 all they wanted for a brief moment was to pretend to be shopping. They looked around, learned of and judged current fashion, stood at kebab corners for the smell, and in a natural sequence, ran out of words to say to each other. After a while, their long-lived walk had reached the limits of the shops and had taken them to an unknown neighborhood, short of street lamps 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 nervously.

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. However, where that place was, she wasn't too sure. Neither did it imply a house or a home to her. Regardless, 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, purposefully falling back. 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 such a cold relationship, where both 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 first abandon her friends and then to trace her steps, by traversing through the dark and empty streets, back to her father. Dipa and Neha felt something was off with

Fatema, but 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 as if 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's pace.

It was solely Fatema's alert, jittery mind that carried her energy-depleted, young body through the city. 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, one after another, began closing down as she ran, as if the world revolved around her. The streetlights were also beginning to fade to black. Because she knew no other way, the next logical direction was to re-enter the park, which had rather turned into a forest this time around. But the sight of that dark forest 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 other than fear before eventually going in. Upon entering, the initial steep downward slope of the guiding brick path strongly pulled her down into the depths of the park. Once she had achieved a stable running speed, suddenly, the local poor-skin dogs confronted her, as they took issue with her being around so late. They chased; they came close, but never quite enough. And in the meantime, they kept painfully blowing her ears with their hoofs and woofs. Altogether, the darkness took her vision and their barks, her hearing, away from her. While running in total numbness, she fell, frazzled, to the floor inside 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 that 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 and did 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 dare 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! Go to hell—you, him, and everybody else. Oh, I cannot—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 once the glaring light—the headlights of the cars in the street—from a distance fell on her face. The howling dogs had edged very close to her, but before they could take a bite, she managed to get out of her forest of hysteria safely. The territorial animals stood at the gates, watched her leave, and exclaimed (howled) in defeat. She had no forethoughts but a sense of direction from the park. She feared every wrong step, and every right one felt wrong after a while. In the blindness of the night, all the familiar places had turned into foreign lands. 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 them before! she said to herself, mesmerized by Victorian-style lamps on bridge railings. One, two, skip, four—no. Three, right. One, two... she 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 had found her home under the warm lights: a phase that lasted around twenty minutes until she stopped

feeling safe on the bridge. She followed her phase with a graceful walk away from the lights, like a Victorian queen.

Awfully troubled had been Fatema. Her entire life up to that point had been nowhere else but the city. Yet she found every street, every corner, and every man hard to distinguish from the next. Dead ends everywhere, unendingly. For a while, the city kept offering her empty, narrow streets, chilling 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 to her surprise, he was nowhere to be seen. Some dirty polybags flew across the lanes, devoid of life, with a gentle night breeze.

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

She waited and waited for him to come back to their familiar spot. When the waiting began to make her nervous, she got up and started walking along the sidewalk in a certain direction—walking and thinking of all the uncertainties, which all instead ended up making her more and more anxious. Then, she came to a point where her mind just went blank; luckily, with all her other senses working, those of which took her as far as the intersection-less sidewalk went, eventually leading her astray to two young men sitting on their knees in front of a shutter, smoking, and getting lost in their eternal-youth dream. Fatema stood and stared long at them, assessing the situation, and just when she thought of a way out, the pair noticed her back. Their faces grinned and broadly, smugly smiled; asserting power with their height, they edged closer and closer to her, preparing for their great pounce. Before they got the chance to do so, Fatema fled at a stray cat's pace straight in the other direction, which brought her right where she started. Then she tried the other way, away from where she came, as her only hope. Early and abruptly, her quick steps came to a stop as soon as she caught a glimpse of a spread man in baggy clothes, lying on the sidewalk near an electric pole. Shocked and flabbergasted, Fatema, with baby steps, approached the man. With him at her feet, she sat down beside

the man and judged every fine detail on his skin with much affection: dusty eyelashes, veiny hands, a scrubby beard, a saliva-dripping mouth, and hair, cloudy white. Putting an arm around him, she wrapped him closer to her heart. Her tired eyes gave up at last. She held him tight, but not a vein of his throbbed. Her comforting pillow then put her in a deep sleep. And a flow of high current fused a lamp nearby.

Fatema Arabinda woke up with a shaven head and a dry mouth, her limbs spreading on one of the corners of a staircase to a bakery shop a few feet away from the glass door, fifteen years later. Resting her head on an arm that rested on the staircase, she stared at everything and nothing at the same time. Then, 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 that. She gets so worked up on these petty matters.

Although the image of Fatema made her birthday a little sour, the cake her father bought easily made up for it.

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