

Bilal TANWEER

To Live

I was sweating inside my mother's car in that freak lane, saying to myself, "Come on, come on," while glancing in my rear view mirror searching for her female figure to hurry along in my direction. All I saw was a man of densely hirsute armpits uncomfortably seated on a chair too small for his awesome behind and poking a scratching stick in the back of his vest. Right opposite to him, a little left-over fire nibbled at the heap of burned garbage, excreting a rancid smell I knew well from memory.

It had been three minutes now and nothing had emerged from the corner of the lane. I hated every second of it. I tightly clasped the ignition key. You had to be prepared when waiting for a girl you've never really met before. I was in an old, clunky Suzuki FX, matchbox of a car—but I could've been off with it in less than three seconds, and on a bet, out of the lane in the next five, pedestrians and the incoming traffic notwithstanding. The car, if you want to call it that, was impossible to accelerate. But I had mastered that art as well—if you simply floored the gas pedal, no matter your timing with the gears and all, it steadied out at around 58 km/h mark, often dwindling to 55. I knew how to jack it up to 77-type and keep it there.

All this was beyond my mother's maddest dream, of course, this car being her lifeline. She had put her four-year savings into this. She treated it like her ringdove; I thought it my fighting dog. I wasn't allowed to touch this car, except in extraordinary circumstances. She was sleeping when I pushed the car to the end of the lane before igniting it and getting away with it. I had been waiting a long time to see this girl, Sapna, I had worked hard on. I called her before leaving the house; she said she was ready. Planning inside my mother's sleep schedule, I gave myself an hour to get back.

It took me fifteen minutes to reach the spot where she was supposed to meet me. She had explained her location with the crookedness of someone who did not venture out of the house much. "It is the second lane on your right, from the roundabout," she had said. Wrong. It was the third. I was saved the frustration because she had mentioned, just as a by-the-way, "Oh and you will see a metal-shiner's pushcart. You will see pots and pans. He just stands at the corner of my lane. Hehe. That's how I remember it myself." That's how anyone remembers anything in this city, where most streets don't have names.

I turned into the lane with the pushcart which was neatly heaped with black pots, along with another, smaller dump of gray, polished metalware. A man squatted on the pushcart, scrubbing a little pan. Her house was the third one on the left, the tiny white construction that occupied the tight space between two houses. For some reason, the house was named *Patang*, i.e. Kite. I spotted it without trouble. I slowed down the car to notice any suggestions of her through the windows. I didn't see anything, except maybe a curtain move on the top room. But that could have been anything. I was supposed to take the first left into the first lane and wait outside an old yellow house with the black gate. She would come, she'd said, when she sees my battered blue FX pass by her house. That was the farthest she had come in showing her interest in meeting me in our one month of phone conversations—and I was happy for it. Well, girls are like that. At least at first. They need to taste blood for them to discover their hungers. She was a shy one and I was actually quite thrilled to meet her. Finally.

Frankly, no matter how many times you did it, it was always nerve wracking to meet a girl for the first time, especially if you've already had intimate conversations on the phone. She was

convinced I was madly in love with her. I was seeking to cement that impression, among other, better things. She'd seen me, of course—and probably liked what she saw too. We went to the same place for our after-college private tuitions that I had quit after two classes because I'd much rather spend that money on something more useful.

I fancied her from the moment I walked into that drab tuition center—dark, dusty, windowless room, lit with fifteen tubelights and furnished with secondhand chairs and desks from which nails poked out, and worse yet: full of mostly boys who spent their school time working their off asses and still came to tuitions for extra-practice. Girls were too few, and perhaps, that was the real reason why I left that place. She was pretty though. Wore a half-sleeved yellow kameez, had short hair that fell around her face when she bent forward to read, and she smiled all the time. Her deep square necklines made quite an impression on me and I studied her intently for the two sessions I was in the tuition center. The second day she wore a khaadi-brown and even shorter sleeves, and I scrutinized the back of her taut, fine neck for the whole hour and a half, and was left with no doubts I was going to try her. She was small and beautiful and perfectly packaged to be taken home and played with.

I found it a little difficult to find her number, but I managed after bribing the registration handlers of that tuition center. I called her. "I know you, and like you too. I just want to talk. Make friends." Probably she was confused. Most boys don't approach girls like that. They wait around, do idiotic things like passing snide remarks or acting loud and brash. She was suspicious at first, understandably, but then I gave her time, let her make the choices (at least that's how I made it look to her), left my number and told her she could call me if she wanted to. She did, of course. And the rest, as they say, is history of one month ago. She had many questions for me, many sadnesses of her own to report. She lived with her mother and a dying father (cancer, something like that) and her brother, who paid for both of them, routinely threatened to turn them or himself out of the house. Anyway, after a point, I didn't care much about it. There wasn't much I could do. I was her only male contact and I broke her loneliness in a way that was new to her. In less than a month, she had fallen in love with me, she believed. And I with her. As I said, the latter was her own subjective judgment with which I did not interfere.

Well, that's what it's really all about if one thinks about it. Conversations. You want to be understood the way you see yourself. Boys think girls are looking for something that they could worship—and they go on adding weight to their six packs and nine biceps and so on and all they ever end up doing is stand posing in busy markets. Jerks.

I took my eyes off the rearview mirror—I'd had enough of the man in the lungi who seemed to have located the spot of his itch and was resolutely scraping it out—and was checking the fuel tank indicator when the door opened abruptly. I was in shock for a second when a figure wrapped in a shawl jumped inside. "Let's go, let's go!" For a second, I couldn't move. But the next moment I was assured with the invasion of a perfume. Ah, she was prepared for it, I was happy to note. The car screeched a little and in less than five seconds, we were out of her freak lane and on the main road.

She sat diagonally on the passenger seat facing me. My first thought was: "Do I look all right? I hope I'm not sweating." Well, I was sweating. But so what, she loved me—and it was all right for a lover to sweat. She took off her shawl. I got a chance to look at her—and ah, that yawning neckline. She saw me looking at her and smiled. I smiled too.

My plan was to take her to an ice-cream parlor with an empty second floor at that time of the afternoon. We could improvise something there. And besides, I had little money and that was all I could afford. But then, I was a little nervous myself, and didn't want to appear abrupt, so I waited on the suggestions. She didn't say anything and we drove quietly. Finally, after a while, I broke the silence, "So, where should we go?" I asked.

She didn't reply for a few seconds. I was about to navigate her to my preferred spot, when she said, "I don't know... I want to go somewhere far where we could talk." Ah, yes. Talk.

At that moment, we had reached Shahrah-e Faisal, the jugular vein of the city, and I was still thinking of something funny to tell her to break up this tension. I put my FX in the fast lane and pumped the pedal to top up the speed. I could feel the exertions of the engine. She sat with her hands folded and I felt happy that she was wholly concentrated on looking at me. Suddenly she blurted, "Why not go to the sea?"

Well, not a bad place to be but I knew it would be impossible if I were to get back in an hour. After being kicked out of school, I had been my parents' prime cause of insomnia for the past two years. My communication with them had collapsed when I was expelled from the school for bunking. Things had improved lately since I had enrolled in an accounting degree diploma and we even laughed a couple of times but there was no way I could explain this running away with my mother's car to them. I had already broken the excuse-bank of friendly accidents and flying donkeys trampling me in their descent from heavens. I found it difficult to imagine how much further I could shatter them and what that would look like—"Yes, that's what I was thinking as well," I said to her. "Okay, let's go. You have time right?" I was shocking myself. This girl had unanticipated effects on me.

"Haha!" I heard her crackle. "Yes, yes. I can be out for another two hours. But not more, okay?"

I smiled but with a tightening in the chest. I had noticed the man intently staring at us from the car next to us. I didn't know what the hell was up with everyone in this city. Why must you face distrusting stares and smiles from everyone if you have a girl next to you in the car? But again, that depends upon your car: if you have a shiny, sexy four-wheel drive, you may well be screwing her in there and no one would dare take any notice—well, that's an exaggeration, but really. If you are in a little broken car, well, everyone will screw you as you cruise. I stared back at the man who was staring at Sapna from the bus window on my right.

Actually what really scared me about being on the road with a girl next to me were my own memories. When I was at school, we swiped ink from our van window at passersby. We especially targeted old men, and young couples we suspected doing wrong by meeting each other in private. You jerked off your ink pen when you were close enough—and pha! You stunned them if your ink-lasso caught them on their faces. They usually broke into curses. Young couples were most fun to target because they showed most reaction and could do least harm in return because they were tied with each other and would never come after you. There are exceptions, of course. In that sense, I was afraid someone like me from my own past would leap out and do what I did, or something like it, like fling an egg at the windscreen.

I looked around and told Sapna, "Turn up the window and lock the door."

She seemed surprised, "Why, what happened?" she paused for a reply.

"Well, because it's my car," I said, suddenly irritated.

"I'm feeling hot," she retorted and rolled it up by an inch.

I realized I probably sounded patronizing the way I ordered her. That act of hers of running away with me on a sore afternoon and the risk she took could have resulted in her limbs broken by her parents if they found out. I knew she did this because, as she said, "I want to do what I want to do—not what they want me to." I had offended her sense of freedom. That act of being with a man (she loved) in a strange place was what she wanted to do. And I was happy for her, for my own reasons, of course. But I should've been more careful.

That little disagreement caused silence. I already felt a little annoyed watching everyone gawk at her—the beggars, newspaper boys, flower-sellers on traffic signals—and then the horrible traffic. I hated the rickshaws and motorcycles. And I had to get back home too.

At the Cantt Station stop, where the traffic was crawling because the buses clogged the turning and bus drivers took their pissing-breaks, I spotted Comrade Sukhansaz descending from a bus, almost falling out, actually. It scared the life out of me. He knew my father and would report me, I had no doubt. There was nowhere I could have gone—I was parked between the behind of a shiny black Civic and the front of another sexy car I didn't give a fuck about, and we were all standing there honking our heads off at each other. Comrade Sukhansaz stood in an aggressive posture, his fists clenched, looking at the bus that had dropped him off.

“Damn,” I said, craning my head out of the window to block at least some view of it.

“What happened?”

“I think he's seen me.”

“Who has seen you?”

“That guy in the red cap. He's an old friend of my father. Oh damn me. Don't look, don't look.”

“So?”

Well, there went my first impressions of being a brave, brave boy from a good family.

He had seen me, for sure, but I pretended I did not see him. We were moving inches. You fight for inches on this city's roads. From afar and up close, you train your eyes to scour them and the rest of yourself to devour them. Drive and survive.

Fortunately, Comrade stood at a point after which the traffic smoothed out, and I raced past him. He had seen me for sure because he had his hand up, not as in stopping me, but waving to me.

We must have gone a couple hundred meters and we were just starting to ascend the bridge on the left as soon as you cross the Cantt signal, when the blast occurred. Almost instantaneously something flew and smacked solidly into the back windscreen. The strength of the explosion was so terrible that for a second it shook the bridge we were on, and the car, which was already whining from its ascent up the bridge, lost power. Sapna's hands trembled and she turned around to watch the unforgiving spectacle unfolding behind us. “Don't look,” I told her, as I pulled the handbrake to keep the car from sliding down the bridge.

The next few moments were vague and my hand fumbled with the keys and instead of turning it in the ignition, it seemed to be trying to understand it. I turned the key hard and almost shoving it inside the ignition. I anticipated the bridge would blow up next. My hands felt too weak and I was seething with anger. Why me? Why us? Why now? Why here? “Duck!” I shouted at her. “Hunh?” her eyes were stunned and glued behind us. The car came to life finally, but after what felt a long time. I dropped the hand break and pumped the gas pedal so brutally the car squealed as it raced up the bridge.

Cars raced toward me from the other end of the bridge, wrong way. No one seemed to have any idea about the location of the blast and those idiots were just madly tearing toward the site itself. A Land Cruiser almost rammed into the car from the side. Bastard. One thing was clear: no one was going to stop. From there on drivers drove with their hands on their horns, cutting through the traffic lights, and the traffic—everyone wanted to rush out from that centre of fire and hell behind them. Or toward it. They didn't care. Everyone wanted to be out of there.

I don't know how and at what speed I drove, but I drove it probably faster than I ever did and it was not fast enough. Nothing felt safe or far enough. And when we emerged onto the sea, it was sudden, almost out of nowhere, as if I had been driving in insanity without registering anything at all.

The sea was deserted at that hour. It was on my right, but I was looking to my left, suspiciously at the apartments that stood stolidly, their dirty-yellow paint dependably crumbling as always.

I parked the car, there was no one around. We kept sitting in there. I pulled down my window, and the breeze rushed in as if from another world, our hearts pounded like kicks in our chests, and the whole stretch of the sea seemed something new. It was not the desert it always seemed, not the deserted last bit of earth, where I made out with other girls in the backseat of the car without being under the watch of anyone... We heard the sea breeze as if it was haggling for attention.

“Who was that man?” she asked. That was the first thing she had said.

“Comrade Sukhansaz.”

“What? Sukhan what? Is that even a name?”

“Well, he made it. Sukhansaz is an Urdu word for poet. Comrade is what the reds call each other. Like, brother. This guy gave up his name for the cause, apparently. Spent nine years hiding, underground. He was one of those few who didn’t relent unlike my father and his friends—didn’t start an NGO or something like it. He had been coming to our house a lot for the past few months; he needed money for the treatment of his arthritis patient. He wanted to get new knees.” I paused. “I remember a few lines from one of his poems,” I said

“My lopped head will shout

My ripped tongue will roar

“Kill me, O bandits,

My death will be my beginning

“Heh. You know just before he recited this poem, he said to my father, ‘Jaani, when I am gone, and you want to think of me, smoke a pack of Kingston, or read this poem. I want to be remembered by this one.’”

“You think he died there?” she asked, coldly.

I did not reply. I was still quite deaf with the sound of the blast, and my hands were still trembling. I was thinking if I should tell her what flew to hit onto the back windscreen.

“Shall we get out?” I asked her.

We got off and leaned against the hot bonnet to face the sea. We did not make eye contact. Our hearts still pulsated with fear and our eyes were fiercely set on the sea. I felt her come close to me, the length of her arm touched the back of mine. Absurdly, there was a pink moon over the sky, looking like a faint dabble in broad sunlight. The migratory birds crisscrossed and flapped like a film reel in the air. We stood like that for a long time, breathing, and then, suddenly, she slid her cold hand into mine and held it tightly.

It wasn’t until that moment I realized that I needed comforting.

For the first time, in all my years of running here, I felt the sea in a new way. It did not seem like the end of the city.

Before setting off for home again, I went to examine the rear windscreen and found it as I feared: splattered with tiny bits of blood. I had clearly seen what it was that hit us. I wished I hadn’t. I fought with my memory and tried to imagine it to be something else, but there was no time for that.

I cleaned the blood with a rag dipped in the car’s radiator water. I found more splatters on the backlights, on the roof, the bumper. Sapna identified a couple on the door. I disposed of the bloodied cloth by flinging it on the road.

As always, we couldn’t afford to have anyone find out.