

Sociolinguistic Incompetence

By

Muhaiminul Islam Neon
17303020

A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in English

Bachelor of Arts in English
Brac University
May 2021

© 2021. Brac University
All rights reserved.

Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, though of course inspiration has been taken from a variety of sources.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I/We have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

Muhaiminul Islam Neon

17303020

Approval

The thesis/project titled “Sociolinguistic Incompetence: A Novel” submitted by

Muhaiminul Islam Neon (17303020)

of Summer, 2021 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English on May 27, 2021.

Examining Committee:

Supervisor:

(Member)

Full Name

Designation, Department

Institution

Departmental Head:

(Chair)

Full Name

Designation, Department

Institution

Ethics Statement

This is my original work. Inspiration for this novel has come largely from my own life, but this is not an autobiography. In other words, though there are many similarities, the main character and narrator, Iman, is not me, and I have consciously made changes to his character so that he also does not subconsciously parallel my own line of thought. As such, I claim responsibility for no potentially controversial philosophy Iman espouses or appears to espouse. As for the other major characters like SHE, Sarin, Yaseen, and Minthan, they also resemble my personal friends or relatives (some are combinations of different friends' traits), but I have similarly consciously made necessary changes to their character so that they do not represent the true people they are based on. In any case, I have acquired consent from the major characters before including them in the novel. When writing this novel, I have not based my writing style on any model text or model writer. However, I have read some books and articles related to writing one's first novel, such as Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*.

Dedication

To my parents

To my friends and relatives my major characters are based on

To the SHE of my life!

Acknowledgement

As I write this acknowledgement section, it is the Night of Power, Laytatul Qadr. On this night which is greater than a thousand nights, I want to thank Almighty Allah because everything happens when He says, “Be,” and for sure, I hardly thought this project would “Be,” because who is lucky enough to write a novel as their thesis?! I also thank my supervisor for letting me take the reins of this ambitious project. She has also helped me fine-tune the finer novel writing aspects after rigorous read-throughs. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank all my well-wishers and those who expressed keen interest in reading this book.

Contents

Declaration	2
Approval	3
Ethics Statement	4
Dedication	5
Acknowledgement	6
Part 1	8
Chapter 1: Sociolinguistic Competence	8
Chapter 2: Belief in Belief	16
Chapter 3: To Speak or Not to Speak	25
Chapter 4: Think, But Don't Concern	31
Chapter 5: Miasma Descends	38
Chapter 6: Angel on My Shoulder	45
Part 2	55
Chapter 1: Something Unreachable, Something Unobtainable	55
Chapter 2: Firsts OR Flower of Heaven	62
Chapter 3: You'll Understand Someday, Dear!	69
Chapter 4: Shopping Competence	77
Chapter 5: Means and Ends	85
Chapter 6: Aura	95
Part 3	106
Chapter 1: Journey	106
Chapter 2: I Think, Therefore I Can't Feel ...?	117
Chapter 3: Not So Social Media	124
Chapter 4: The Center Doesn't Need To Hold	133
Chapter 5: Controlled Frenzy	143
Chapter 6: Abstinence / Tabooification	150
Chapter 7: Believe In The Me That Believes In You	166
Chapter 8: Iman and Besties	172

Part 1

Chapter 1: Sociolinguistic Competence

Raising eyebrows, looking askance, somewhere up and to the right – I could not help but look away from faces while thinking. Despite it being a Messenger group audio call, I still felt some pressure when teaching my friends. It is as if expressions of expectation or confusion or even a hidden agenda to challenge the teacher’s authority – it could be many other things as well, like just speaking up for the sake of speaking up, since I always ask them to participate in the discussion, and pick and ask individuals to comment otherwise – ... where was I? Oh, it is as if such expressions on people’s faces make for stress that inhibits calm thoughts.

Not now, brain. You are supposed to be thinking of examples. Philosophize later.

“In German, the sun is actually female, and the moon male.” My mind had focused now. “Contrast that with how we view the sun as strong, bright, *lightbringer*, if you will – masculine. On the other hand, the moon only *reflects* the light.”

“Oh, let me!” Yaseen’s enthusiasm was clear. “Whereas the sun connotes manliness and overwhelming power, the moon is very passive and gentle and ... and female-like!”

“Yes, yes,” I nodded. “The moon is feminine, at least as seen in our culture. We use words like *beautiful* to describe it, also feminine. And ...”

“Does that mean German people think of the sun in a different light? Hehe, light!” Minthan chimed in. I could imagine her face glowing up at this remark. Minthan was silly that way at times, the kind of way which takes away the seriousness of the situation and trivializes it – a very light-hearted and underrated friendship quality.

“Interesting, right?” I said, grinning. I genuinely love it when they are interested enough in the lesson to interrupt me to contribute to the discussion. “I think there is a great significance, too! For example, besides gender there are a lot of other things...”

Things like, I continued, even the sense of time! You see, not many languages are as developed as English or even Bangla. Especially tribal languages are very limited. One such language called Hopi does not have phrases like *yesterday* and *six hours afterwards*. But there is debate whether just because they don’t have, you know, words in their language to describe them, that doesn’t necessarily mean

they are unable to think that way. There are debates about that. Isn't that fascinating? We'll study more about this later, I told them, near the end of the semester, when we study the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

"Wait a minute, a baby does not have words to describe what it feels, but it still tries to communicate to the mother," SHE said.

"That's a very good point," I am also extremely happy when my friends offer arguments, and SHE does that quite a lot. "Yes, in linguistics it is now generally agreed that language does not shape thoughts *completely*. Still, there is likely a strong correlation between language and thought. For instance, two years ago we didn't know the term *catharsis*. Now we use it all the time!"

"Yessss!" SHE said, laughing. "Also *sublimation* and *projection* are very useful terms. I use them so much now!"

I nodded. "Okay, now let's turn back to our topic at hand. Minthan must be wishing that she didn't have pizza and pasta in her vocabulary, so that she wouldn't be drooling over them."

"Ahhh Iman!" Minthan laughed aloud. "I really *was* craving pizza. But it's okay. It will take 30 minutes for it to arrive."

"Oh, you already ordered it on Foodpanda!" Sarin laughed. It was amazing how Minthan was such a foodie and yet had such a great figure. Even Sarin could never gain weight, but in a different manner: she's been a toothpick all her life, though in a cute way.

The realization dawned on me that all five of us were different in basically all aspects. Apart from SHE, the others were struggling students, not so much due to their lack of talent but for their laziness and Bangla medium background. Yaseen was not lazy at all, but he made a lot of elementary mistakes grammar-wise. He is even enthusiastic at studies and possesses the ultimate work ethic. At first, he was actually at an English medium school, but then had to shift to Bangla version due to family reasons. The new institute was well-known and all, but the shift did not go smoothly for young Yaseen, and despite completing college with all A's, his English proficiency is ...

But can society be solely at fault?

“Baba, please consider!” my parents had urged. They would never force their decisions onto me, but they sure did push. They pushed and pushed and even organized meetings with Nanabhai¹ and maternal uncles to make me reconsider.

Nearly all members of my extended family (cousins and all) were scholarship-holders, and one of them is extremely proficient in English – he got 8.5 overall in IELTS. I remembered that even I had not been a standout student before my university life. I only used to top at English; in the other subjects, I got B’s and even C’s. The bump in my English grades was also sudden. Back in class four, I was an average student in every subject. But after a particularly revelatory moment transpired, I have always – always – topped the class at English, and now at university, I am good enough to confidently mentor my friends on English. Somehow the expectation to do good and live up to it had struck me so hard that before every Literature class, I would sit with the novel or short story and the dictionary and note down all unfamiliar words from the portion that was to be read in class. There was even a rumor that “Iman has memorized the entire dictionary, and in a year!”

Anyway, back to the point, instead of giving my close friends a push in the right direction – which gradually turned into quite regularly scheduled full-scale study sessions – I would probably still be getting mediocre grades had I not insisted on taking English, and English alone, at university.

What else would have happened if I had gone for a “lucrative” career choice like IT or Computer Science instead of following my dreams? Is it really such an immature move to blame societal barriers or luck for one’s success? What if Lady Luck smiles on you like on Minthan who can gobble up a bowl of French fries every day and still look gorgeous, whereas if you are like SHE you would eat healthy and work out and still look chubby? What if you did not know the Bayes’ Theorem of Probability and thus never even consider that there could be a measly 5% chance of suffering from a disease even if the test result is a positive?² What if the language you speak does not contain, say, directions like *up* and *right*? You would be ... lost, right?

“See if I understand,” Yaseen took a strained breath. Today was especially hard on him. We stayed extra hours at university to submit a project. Despite this, we scheduled a study session over Messenger in the evening, and Yaseen, his home being far from the university, must not even have had time to eat properly – just a shower and some snacks on the way home were all he must have managed, I would wager.

¹ This is what I call my Grandpa. Simply calling him grandfather or Grandpa wouldn’t do justice to the love that the name *Nanabhai* has.

² Say, a particular disease has a 95% chance of being diagnosed successfully, and a 10% chance of being wrongly diagnosed when it is not actually there (a false positive). It is also given that 0.5% of the population suffers from the disease. What is the probability of a person, who has tested positive for the disease, to actually have the disease? Most people would say 95%, but according to the Bayes’ Theorem, it is actually 4.56%!

“Communicative competence is goal of current language teachers. And communicative competence have four parts: grammatical or linguistic competence, discourse competence, sociological competence, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence refers to grammar skills. Discourse ...”

“Yes,” I nodded, happy with there being fewer than usual grammar mistakes and also because of the smooth sentence structure. “It’s *sociolinguistic* competence, by the way. Now, Sarin, can you explain discourse competence?”

“Um ... discourse means speech, right?” Sarin asked.

“True. That is one meaning. But here, discourse competence refers to the links we use to ... umm ... beautify the language. It is an ornamental skill, and it also helps both readers or listeners as well as the writers or speakers. For example, we add transitions like *moreover*, *furthermore*, *in conclusion*, *on the other hand*. These make our language have a nice flow. In particular, coherence and cohesion are the words you need to focus on in the exams. Still, what you said about discourse meaning speech is also very relevant. For example, there is a whole branch of linguistics called Discourse Analysis. There, we ...”

“I have read about this!” SHE smiled, and proceeded to explain the term. A bookworm, SHE had extensive knowledge about a lot of things, with far more range than I had. SHE was an excellent student as well, but had her share of personal problems, like having computer sickness – yup, that’s a real diagnosed sickness, where people get migraines from looking at a computer screen for as little as half an hour straight. There’s dumb Luck again, sabotaging talent. Fortunately, the problem did not extend to mobile phones, and so SHE could use her phone to read, though that did not solve the matter of writing academic papers which required typing on a computer. That would drain the life out of her ...

“But,” Yaseen said, confused after SHE’s elaboration on discourse analysis. “If discourse analysis focus on ways how society influence language, like someone’s social class standing and ... and how someone follow manners or not ... then isn’t that sociolinguistic competence?”

“Fine observation, Yaseen!” I enjoyed how they were all paying so much attention today, though Yaseen always does. “You see, there’s no hard and fast rule that separates these components from one another. Even the four components of communicative competence that we are studying now – heck, even the term communicative competence – is just a social construct. Humans came up with these terms so as to easily make use of them in communication. What are terms, really? They are made for the benefit and convenience of us, *by* us, and *for* us!”

I enjoyed getting carried away with my lectures like this. It made me feel alive and vibrant – this sense of being able to philosophize and come up with my own way of explaining things must be one of my favorite perks of teaching.

But what also crosses my mind at times is whether I'm being *too* imposing. What? No, that's not a word I would use to describe myself. In my mind, I am easy-going and open-minded. Not only do I want other opinions, but I openly ask around to get people's opinions on my philosophies, on whether they are on the right track, on whether I am mistaken in some way. As for my passionate outbursts, I consider them an appealing trait. But how do others, how does society, perceive this?

Because of the limits of a telephonic conversation, I did not see my friends' faces, but they did respond with wonder at my last speech. I continued: "Well, we are just learning the theory of communicative competence put forward by Canale and Swain in 1980. There were other theories of the term before them, and there have been others after them. Well, this isn't in the syllabus, but just know this much. For example, another scholar, Douglas Brown, feels that linguistic competence and discourse competence are similar, since discourse competence also deals with word and sentence linkages, which can be considered grammatical. On the other hand, Schachter ... I don't know how it's pronounced ... Schachter said that discourse competence and sociolinguistic competence are the same. Why? Because discourse analysis is almost entirely affected by all things social. Okay, can anyone tell me what the last component, strategic competence, is?"

"Strategic must mean strategies, right?" Minthan said. "So, someone with strategic competence must know when to say things and how – properly, I mean."

"Exactly! Nice, Minthan," I exclaimed. "Just now I talked of some researchers' views on the interrelationships among the components. Can anyone tell me if strategic competence is related to the others?"

"I think it related to linguistic competence," Yaseen said. "If you know how to write and speak with good grammar, you can use strategies to use correct language. Also, it give you confidence. Like, I don't have much confidence to speak public because of my English."

This was not the answer I was expecting. But I was impressed. You learn a lot of things from your students! "I really like your point about linguistic competence boosting confidence! There are other similarities. For example, why is strategy needed in conversation anyway? It's because conversations can break down and you have to maneuver your way around it ... like, say, you are speaking with your aunt, and you're not really that close. Now, for whatever reason, she says something that rubs you the wrong way, like asking when you are going to get married. But you can't, or rather you shouldn't, show

anger or disrespect. So it's up to you how to respond. Do you keep silent? That will be a tad disrespectful as well. You have to learn to laugh it off."

"Hmm ... I do it so often." Sarin's cheerful and bubbly voice gave way to sadness.

"I know, right? These aunts and neighbors are the worst." Minthan's, however, had become aggressive.

"So, this is actually something you have to learn from the society," I continued. "It's sociolinguistic competence, and at the same time it's strategic competence. The strategies we use to skirt trouble in daily conversation, to laugh insensitivity off, to use a euphemism to hide an ugly truth or taboo, to manage conversation breakdowns, to in a word keep to societal norms – all these come from sociolinguistic competence, and yet also are related to the strategic component. Thus, my point is, we can say that it is *sociolinguistic competence* which is the most important of all competences, as it subsumes most of the other elements of the other communicative competences."

"Hey, if you look at it this way," SHE remarked, "then even grammatical competence is sociolinguistic competence. We conform to grammar because society accepts this of us. We can easily decide to not follow grammar and write in chat lingo on our scripts. They will still be recognizable, right? What's wrong with writing *u* instead of *y-o-u*? Hasn't it become an unnecessary formality that we *have* to write in perfect grammar with correct sentence structure? I believe when writing fiction or even analytical papers, grammar acts as a barrier to our thoughts. I feel like if we write like we think, non-linearly, in a stream of consciousness! With full stops and commas and ... and other demarcations out of the way! With not having to write a full line before moving on to the next! Sometimes intentionally making designs with the line structure just like some poems are designed with short and long lines intentionally to create an outline! Isn't that ... isn't that *freedom*?"

Whoa

That ... was incredible

I mean i did think of something along the same lines as

what SHE was saying yes it makes total sense but why *dont* other

peoplethink this way oh and come to think of it why didnt i myself

think more of it why didnt i ponder about the

matter enoughnotlet herwords righnow rattleme

oh was this what SHE was talkingabout

is this something of a *poetic* structure design

Maybe this is what happens when you truly let imagination take you over
when your mental faculties are at their peak is during
such moments of
epiphany

“Don’t you agree, Iman?” SHE was smiling on the phone. I could tell. SHE is as passionate as Yaseen is hardworking.

“Absolutely,” I regained my voice. “That was an amazing observation. Who’s to say there won’t come a time in the future when we write abbreviations and non-sentences and even emojis?”

“How can we write emojis? Do we draw them?” Yaseen asked.

“Oh, we just write the symbol for them, like :D is a smiley and <3 is heart or love.” I smiled, looking forward to such a future with colorful emojis in dissertations. “But for now, know that grammatical competence is good grammar, and the other three competences largely call for an understanding of society.”

“Okay, I’ve been wondering something,” Minthan said. “Today all the things you said about sociolinguistic competence and strategic and discourse ... I mean everything related to society ... and even about linguistic competence too about the language freedom thing. Umm ... isn’t that something that has to do with manners? Are English teachers supposed to teach manners to students? Isn’t it the job of their family? And even if teachers try to teach it, is it really teaching *language*?”

“Very nice, Minthan,” I said, quite impressed. She normally does not ***cling cling*** critically think and relate studies to real life. “Yes, I agree with you completely. Teaching communicative competence, outside of grammar largely, has little to do with teaching concrete language skills, and more to do with teaching *life* skills.”

“Hmm. Iman, I have to go. My pizza just arrived! You guys can carry on. Bye!”

“No, it’s okay. Let’s wrap up for today. Bye guys.”

“When are we meeting next?” Yaseen asked, yawning. He must have held that yawn in for some time, so as to not make me feel like the discussion was boring him. He was dead tired.

“Let’s sit tomorrow after class, at university,” Sarin suggested. “The day after tomorrow I have a club function.” We agreed and hung up.

Chapter 2: Belief in Belief

Unable to keep my eyebrows from being raised, I was still thinking about Minthan's question as I got ready to hit the bed. I wasn't satisfied with my answer, and probably neither was she. She is not the type to mince words and hide her feelings. In that way, are her manners crude? Not necessarily. She is very adept at civilly talking with elders – parents and aunts. She had at times talked to Mom, and I sensed no lack of social skills in the slightest. Minthan is an adult when it comes to showing public manners. But at heart, she is an introvert and openly says she despises human communication.

Despises human communication? That must be an overstatement, for she loves chattering about topics she enjoys. I have chatted for hours with her over anime. Sometimes she is so passionate about it, though, that I hesitate to cut in and add my own views before she pauses. I know interruptions between friends and especially close friends are widely accepted, something I also learnt from sociolinguistics, but I guess it's not in my nature to interrupt people. Or nurture? I am a teacher, after all, who likes as much class participation as possible, and so I hesitate to cut in.

She also says she does not care what people think of her. Her dress code reflects this as she is not afraid to wear culturally frowned upon designer-made Western clothes. However, she also enjoys the Bangla tradition just as much: her mega-closet is stacked with clothes she's worn just one time and many which she has already bought and planning to wear for the next cultural festival: yellow-orange for the upcoming Falgun³, black and white for Pohela Boishakh⁴, and even the two Eid dresses (of the two Eids, not just two dresses) have already been bought (what color I don't know – *surprise*, she had said, *but expect those long heavy polygon earrings you are always so amazed at, ahahaha*).

As I was saying, this incredible trait of Minthan's to take what-would-society-say in one ear and filter it out of the other must have been cultivated through hardships in life. Is life then the best teacher of social manners, and so of sociolinguistic competence? I remember when I was at VASSAR – Venue of Academic and Social Skills Adaptation Residence, which is a mandatory residential semester at our university – my roommates and dorm mates ... wait, see how the word roommates is together and dorm mates aren't ... is this because of the extra space and distance that dorm mates never bridge quite like roommates do? ... As I was saying, my VASSAR friends had more than on one occasion praised my kind and helpful character, but all the while warned that innocence and naivety are still present in me which would make for a sudden paradigm shift very soon, perhaps in my stay at the residence.

“Iman, you are a very, very special person,” once Mujammel had said. “You are so innocent that you should be kept at a museum. But buddy, I hope you don't have to change. Life is a mother*****.”

³ The eleventh month of the Bangla year. Also the start of Spring. And also a festival.

⁴ The first day of the first month of the Bangla year. Also a festival.

The bed made and the lights turned off, I embraced my pillow and smiled at this reminiscence. I for one always took such praise-warning positively. I knew I was dependent on my parents – I still am to a large extent. I don't do dishes, I don't wash my clothes, I don't make the bed, I don't set up the mosquito net, I don't read newspapers or watch the news, I don't talk about family matters, disputes, I mean, with my family, dotdotdot. Notice that all these are in present tense, as in what I normally do (not). But that doesn't mean I have never done these chores. I *have* done dishes – I would say, less than 10 times. I *have* washed my clothes – when I was small, Mom used to encourage me to wash my school clothes during showers. I *have* made the bed at times – umm, the number of times also something I could count on my hands. As for setting the mosquito net, I have helped Mom and Dad with it, by handing them the strings so they would not have to get up and down the bed. Newspapers I have never read – as in *really reading*, not just looking at the cover page from a distance – and TV news I never watched except for rare occasions of Mom calling me to watch particular pieces of news.

Oh, and I have never ever cooked something, not even tea. But I did at times, especially recently, ask Mom to show me how to cook basic food like omelet and coffee. I sometimes aid Mom in the kitchen by turning off the stove or lowering the flame, or even (very rarely) stir the pot.

I remember the day I embarked for VASSAR: somehow carrying five bags – let me tell you, those weren't convenient to carry like shopping bags which you can stack comfortably to carry five or so in each hand ... the five bags I was yanking around contained two luggages (none of them wheel-based), a polythene-wrapped large cylindrical canoe-with-a-large-protruding-head-like bag which I could only imagine what onlookers would have thought to be ... it was actually a pair of pillows, one the normal kind and the other a *kolbalish*⁵ ... and thank Allah Mom did think of packing these in (oh yeah, I didn't do the packing – it was Mom and Dad and my two maternal uncles and even *Nanabhai*) because the rooms at VASSAR, at least our dormitory, did not have soft pillows at all, and of course no *kolbalish* ... oh of the other two bags, one was a schoolbag which was flung on my shoulders (flung delicately because it contained a 10-kg dumbbell – of course I had to bring *that*) and another was the container of a table fan (ah, the table fan served us – my roommates too and even sometimes dorm mates loaned it – daily in the first month, but lay tattered in the dusty corner at the foot of the study table for the rest of the stay, since the cold struck us by early October) ... somehow managing to hurl around (really! I was literally dragging the two luggages across the recently rained ground, though I had to make sure the fan container did not get muddy) the five bags a hundred yards from the bus stop where I had mistakenly expected help in carrying our baggage, I could finally go on no longer ...

I remember battling my pride as a bodybuilder by attempting to limit my huffing and puffing when Afifa flashed me an understanding grin (she had already found her dormitory building), as if apologizing for the not-so-warm reception though of course she was in that residential semester's batch just like me. As I took a moment to catch my breath, I looked around and saw a large field in the distance, and a beige colored building at the far end. That must be my dorm, I thought. Compared to the massive dormitories I had passed – all had been on the opposite side of the field – this one was

⁵ A cylindrical shaped body pillow which some say you use to cuddle with when single.

small, though not shabby-looking, if I should say so. We had to draw lots to randomly get assigned room numbers, and of course which dorm we would live in. Unfortunately, I had drawn the shortest end of the straw – not really, it’s just a figure of speech; there were lottery lots, nothing made of straws ... and where did the phrase actually come from? Was it a tug of war with a straw-rope instead of a regular rope? – by being assigned to live in *BoshontoRaj 101*.

“May this be the *boshonto* of your life, Iman!” one of my roommates, Bannu, had said.

“But this isn’t spring. It’s not even winter.”

“*Phul futuk na futuk aaj boshonto*⁶,” Bannu mused.

I got his point of me growing up and maturing. I also hoped VASSAR would be a turning point in my life. Having to live alone ... well, not really, as I had roommates and a somewhat strict pattern of residential semester activities.

But, I do have to do these:

1. Making my own bed
2. Setting my own alarm
3. Picking & choosing my own attire to wear every day before shower...

Oops, that was embarrassing!

Most importantly, I had to co-exist with strangers for the entire three months, which is wholly different from regular classes where I had only needed to socialize for a few hours four-to-five days a week, and I could make do with minimal conversation outside academics (as I spend much of my free time teaching my friends).

Yes, I was – *was* – even uneasy at normal non-academic conversation with others, fearing that I would face situations where I didn’t know things enough to communicate, like I know nothing of politics and music – yup, even music. Life at VASSAR finally pushed me to communicate on a daily basis with strangers, and I quickly found that not knowing certain things didn’t matter at all. What mattered was how to deal with not knowing things.

⁶ This is a well-known Bangla saying which means, “Whether flowers bloom or not, it’s Spring today.”

“Ah, I don’t have a clue; tell me about it!” quickly became to me, from a conversation disruptor, a rather jolly and “cute” response to make, and it actually helped me make quite a few friends who thought I am very mellow and friendly. Wow, things you learn about yourself from friends!

The matter about me missing out on such socializations earlier in my life is a complicated one. In high school, I hung around with my school friends and coaching-going mates, but only when going from one coaching center to another. There was sometimes an hour or 90-minute break in between coaching classes, and in that time we ate out. Besides that phase in my life when I hung out with my friends outside of home ... well, there’s no “besides that.”

Why, you may ask? Yes, you may. I ask myself too, not *why* but rather *why still*. Growing up, I have always loved home – even now I would put homesweethome over everything. As a child, home meant a haven for playing video games and watching TV shows and cartoons. A decade and a half ago, when the internet was not so widely available, the only platform to watch weekly programming was TV. Back in those days, as any millennial will tell you, one of life’s worst fears was load shedding during your favorite TV program. At the age of 10, watching recasts at 11 pm sounded as challenging as pulling an all-nighter today. Therefore, I never went outside in the evening – oh, those glory days of Toonami from 5 pm! – because I would then miss *Pokémon* and *Beyblade* and *Dragon Ball Z*. It was a shame, because in earlier years I had looked forward to my Nanabhai taking me out sightseeing in the evening – on rickshaw and boat rides around the city, stopping by at a certain shop for a Huang Coffee which Nanabhai always intentionally mispronounced as Huang-Fu to get me to laugh.

Homesweethome also meant a safe and bug-free bathroom to defecate – urinating is fine enough in public restrooms, even those grimy ones at the gas station. Oh boy do bugs bug me. Once, for a visit to the village, I had gone three days (add another half day for the travel back) without doing the big one. To this day my single happiest moment in my *life* was when I finally reached home and dashed straight to the toilet.

Why still? Now we have a high speed broadband connection, and I can watch my favorite TV programs whenever I want instead of having to cancel social outings. Now I am more comfortable in using public restrooms, and though I am still disturbed by cockroaches and spiders, I can handle them better than my pre-teen years when I would undergo life-threatening torture (oh, trust me, it *is* life-threatening; just try and hold in your poop for three and a half days!) just to not chance meeting those critters when I have my pants down.

Again, *why still* did I not become a more sociable person as I grew up and had those social barriers removed? Well, I am not certain but it must have to do with habits. I believe humans have a tendency to live up to what people expect of them. One of my friends in school – he is a prodigy and has secured

numerous world highest marks in his O and A Levels – used to be a real troublemaker in class 4 till ... umm, 10, I guess. So, in class 4, the teacher who taught us Geography and History had developed a good impression of him. She did not see the younger-than-his-classmates-but-rowdier-than-them skinny kid stand on chairs at recess and dance, whistling and yelling obscenities about the Art professor who punished boys by grasping hard at their hair (yup, in those days, corporal punishment had not yet become frowned upon by most of the society). The Social Studies teacher did not see that, and instead what she saw was a kid who, though younger than the average classroom by 2 years, was smarter than everyone in it.

“You see, class? This is a good boy! He knows his stuff because he reads everything. Whereas you others don’t even bring your textbooks to class!”

Like this she praised him nearly every class. Incidentally, the boy’s parents were sociologists, and so family dinner was essentially him sitting under the learning trees of two bona fide scientists, and so he didn’t quite have to “read everything.”

Still, in the teacher’s mind, he was the ideal student, and so the ideal student he became. Whenever the Social Studies teacher’s class period came, Mr. Prodigy’s demeanor changed remarkably. In the other five class period breaks (in between one class ending to another one’s beginning), he would mess around like crazy, but before that specific class, he always morphed into an uncannily disciplined student waiting for the teacher to enter, one book already open, a pen placed in the middle of the open book so as to keep the lesson material (the part of the book to be studied in that particular class) ready. I must not have been the only one who realized the sudden shift in character of Mr. Mayhem to Teacher’s Pet. But I didn’t see anyone calling out on this behavior change in class. I of course did not say anything to him regarding it.

What exactly was it that changed Mr. Mayhem’s character so drastically and made him showcase his disciplined genius? By the way, a disciplined genius is exactly what he grew up to become, and his past devilish traits were dismissively described as “growing pains, you know, a childhood phase.” So what exactly was it that made a simple Social Studies teacher’s opinion drastically alter a budding child’s entire nature? Could it simply be an ego thing, to crave praise and attention? Perhaps all his life (until then), he had always been called “the scientists’ child – yes, scientists, plural.” Maybe he did not believe he had it in him to step away from his parents’ shadow, and thus forged an external appearance of the “hip and crazy kid” to get attention. Suddenly to have a teacher – also in the same field as his parents – praise him on his genius and work ethic must have made him realize that negative attention was nothing like positive reinforcement.

Who am I to speak for Mr. Prodigy’s psychological change? Maybe it wasn’t as elaborate and fancy an issue like him manifesting the appearance of a ruffian – maybe he actually was unruly as a child and then gradually learnt to take things seriously and focus on his mental faculties. Or maybe ... here’s

another thought: The Social Studies teacher actually knew about his chaotic attitude, and so devised a shrewd plan to effectively change him by stroking his ego!

My eyelids were still not drooping, which was out of the ordinary since I normally fall asleep within 10 minutes of lying down with the lights off. Anyway, I can't speak for anyone else, but I do have a personal revelatory moment which had an enormous impact on the person I am today.

"Iman, your exam script was excellent. You did really well. Congratulations!" Only when I saw the rare smile of Rebecca Miss at me did I grasp that she was talking about me. All of us were scared of the big hulking English Miss. At that age, we actually took her threats of school expulsion – at the slightest side talk and undisciplined behavior – at face value. And *the* Miss Rebecca was praising *me*?

This was the one single most inspiring moment in my life, one which made me pour over the dictionary night after night and dissecting every single full stop and comma and semi-colon – oh, the semi-colon's quite important – and sentence structure that writers used, which I would then try to emulate myself in my own writing. But memorization? What about the rumor at school that I had memorized the whole dictionary?

Of course I did nothing of the sort, but even that ridiculous rumor spurred me on a not-so-unconscious-level to live up to that expectation and recite the meaning of any difficult word asked of me. You would think that this was a huge burden, for which I would be on edge every time someone walked towards me, smirking, or even when someone genuinely approached me for help. Well, I wouldn't say there was zero pressure, but for the vast majority of the time, I faced little to no difficulty. Yes! It seemed as if any word or "difficult" phrase someone would ask me to explain generated a miraculously fast brain reaction for me – explanatory words coming out of my mouth without even me (for the most part) having to think at all! Could Miss Rebecca have devised this plan just like the Social Studies teacher did so for Mr. Prodigy?

I have a theory to explain that paradigm shift. It's called Belief in Belief. I understand it's not easy at all to summon belief for yourself. Especially if you haven't had experiences of success. But if someone, in any which way, makes you believe in *their* belief in you, by some happy coincidence Lady Luck smiles on you so as to build up momentum of success, then that momentum can carry you to unbelievable heights. It's not even 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. That motto can be quite off-putting for most people groveling in inertia. Instead, it's rather 99% inspiration and 1% perspiration, because the moment you become inspired, a new you emerges, a you who is liberated from the shackles of inertia and instead propelled forward by expectations of success.

Maybe I just needed that extra push in the right direction to believe in belief, and as simple as one instance of positive reinforcement was enough to jolt the English nerd in me. And since then, after

succeeding time and time again to deliver at that peak level, and also by continued motivation – I was almost always the English teacher’s favorite student, all the way from class 4 to my O Level – acing at English became not only an expected result but also something I felt I was really good at. But it’s not that I had developed my English skills only gradually throughout the years after Miss Rebecca’s praise. Rather, it felt like that incident was a light bulb going off, and instantaneously I had morphed from an average student to the best English student in class. In fact, I had submitted a 100-page novel to my sixth-grade English teacher, though she never found time to check it – a shame ... Again, it wasn't a gradual progression in the way that many believe expertise is cultivated. Instead, it’s all mental. If you believe in it, and then you put honest effort in it, the results will shock you – the improvement will seem almost instantaneous, especially if you are lucky to experience success along the way. Once your confidence pays off, you will truly be elite.

I remember in a seminar at VASSAR, the speaker had told us a story which deeply resonates with my philosophy of the power of belief. Here is how the story – it’s real – goes:

It was once decided that a death convict (someone sentenced to be hanged soon) would be a guinea pig for a particular type of poison for the purposes of an experiment. The convict was blindfolded and told that a deadly snake would be set at him, and upon being bitten by it, he would die. A snake was brought inside the cell too for the sake of realism. Upon seeing it and hearing what he supposed were the last words he would ever hear, the convict accepted death whole-heartedly. However, the snake was never set upon him. What happened was that a doctor, with a sort of needle, made some prick marks on the convict’s body, so as to mimic the sensation of a snakebite. Lo and behold, the man died! Even though it was simply a pin prick with no poison! And you know what’s even *more* unbelievable? The post-mortem revealed that there was *actually* poison in the man’s bloodstream! Yes, somehow by believing it whole-heartedly and imagining the snakebite (which was actually a needle prick) exude poison in his body, chemical reactions from the brain manifested, literally, venom in his veins, leading to his death. (Kartik, 2017)

Unbelievable though it was, I believed it. I *wanted* to believe it. I know people tend to see things from their own lens, but Mr. Kartik was adamant it was a genuine occurrence. I did google it and found the story on some sites, but not in any major authentic journal. For now, I am satisfied with that. Even if the story is folklore, I will make it my reality, for what really *is* reality if not our own beliefs?

But let’s still deconstruct the story – my brain tends to philosophize on things even which I do not want to analyze as I might only find it harder to believe afterwards. But my critical mental faculties win this time. So, let’s go.

Was only one deathconvict selected tobeexperimented?

Whyonlyone?

Don't normal experiments require a lot of subjects to be reliable?

Unless of course someone knew a sensational result would yield

like you know like poison manifesting inside the blood

what are the odds of that

how could the scientist have known that not only would the convict die

but that he would die in such a newsworthy manner

how did Kartik confidently say that the convict believed wholeheartedly

Yes, he used the word wholeheartedly!

How would someone else know

what another person was thinking before dying

there's also no mention of how long it took

how long it took for the man to die

poison should take some time to spread in blood

Did the convict suffer?

There are a lot of other salient points missing in the story, like which part of the body of the man the snake bit. I was right. Breaking down the story makes it seem less likely to be true than before. However, I was proud that I was brave enough to analyze it. I have learnt that it's always good to question yourself – well, barring some exceptions, which I'll talk about another time. More often than not, questioning my fundamental beliefs only serves to strengthen them. I also aim to be a preacher, so putting myself into others' shoes to try and think from their perspectives will serve me well to counter their arguments.

Obviously, the power of belief isn't as powerful as to give you wings, or grow an extra limb, or turn invisible, or shoot *kamehameha* like Goku. It wouldn't be shocking to me if the tale about the venom manifestation through sheer will was just that – a tale. Wait, why would the convict will his own death? He just accepted it, and acceptance should not be as powerful as willpower, right?

I yawned. Finally. Reaching out for my phone in the dark, I tapped the screen to light it, and saw it was 2:48 am. Wow, it had been well over half an hour that I had stayed up after hitting the bed.

Drifting off to sleep, one of the last thoughts I remember was a memory of my younger maternal uncle saying to me, "By your age, I had travelled from Comilla to Dhaka alone. Of course, your grandparents were mad at me, but they knew I could fend for myself out in the open." This memory brought me back

to my original question which I never quite answered in my train of thought: *Why still?* Perhaps I had retained my childhood introverted nature because I had been accustomed to being treated like an introvert? Maybe I was so affected by the expectation of everyone for me to be someone who never steps outside and “idly wastes his time” with friends – many of whom “secretly” smoke and talk about girls ... maybe I was so affected by it that I subconsciously tended to live up to that expectation of an innocent and naïve boy who is too good and should be kept in a museum. Maybe I didn’t quite mind the impression, just as I didn’t really mind when Mujammel said it. Could it be that I have *accepted* my place in society from these expectations, and that this acceptance is stronger and more viable to control me than all the willpower I can muster for, say, turning Super Saiyan?

Chapter 3: To Speak or Not to Speak

Eyebrows not only raised but twitching, arms crossed across the chest as if to stifle movement, and yet feet tapping on the floor in impatience, I weighed the pros and cons of speaking up.

“I have spoken up twice in the span of 40 minutes,” I reasoned with myself. “There’s still that much time left before class ends. If I speak now, this makes it the third time. And for the rest of the class, if I only speak up one more time, will that be too much?”

Yes, I believe that *will* be a lot. Speaking up in class a total of four times would probably be a tad too much, and so I remained silent while the teacher carried on to another topic. Recently I have noticed that some people take issue with me disrupting the class flow by speaking up and asking questions or adding input into the discussion.

“I didn’t tell you this,” Minthan recently told me. “But Tasnuva was once like, ‘how can you hang around with him? He is too much.’ I think, Iman, some people don’t take it well that you know so much.”

“Don’t be sad,” Yaseen had tried to cheer me up. “They don’t know you personally. That’s why they jealous.”

Even before I got to know about this, I was self-conscious about the matter. It was never ever my intention to disrupt the class and throw off the lecture. Rather, I want to add in my ever-wondering thoughts about the lecture, which I believe should only enhance it to us students. In other words, aside from clarifying my own doubts, I often added in examples to make the topic even more understandable to the rest of the class.

I remember as a freshman I was naïve to the idea of helping my peers *too* much. No, I’m not talking about plagiarism. I don’t write my friends’ papers for them, though I do give them ideas and explain concepts. What I mean by helping too much was that during class readings of literary pieces, I used to whisper to my friends sitting beside me the key points of the dialogue just read.

“You see,” I had once whispered as low as possible after nudging Bhoumik. “Jerry doesn’t really have a mother in Mannville. He is lying for a good cause.” Bhoumik would nod, but I would see that it caught him by surprise. He wasn’t really able to follow the class reading. In fact, none of my class friends at that time could. I felt really bad for them. They had taken English at university for a variety of reasons: for some it was the only subject offered after their admission test, and for others they thought

English would be easy because they hated Math and Finance, which in turn ruled out Business and Computer Studies as department choices.

But the fact that they were in over their heads when it came to studying English was abundantly clear to me. Not only were most of them lazy and not proactive students who would read class readings ahead of time, but they were also not capable of comprehending abstract texts by themselves – heck, they were so weak in English that they made subject-verb-object errors and the commonest of spelling mistakes in every other sentence. Believing they needed hands-on guidance for them to survive the next four years, I took it upon myself to help tutor them. Thus began my unofficial teaching job which I still do today.

The problem in an open-credit university such as ours is that we don't have the same class schedules. Some of us have classes from 8 am while others only come at noon or even the afternoon. My class routine fortunately matches those of my friends to some extent, and we shared a 90-minute break when I could tutor them. Of course, the full 90 minutes were never used productively – we ate, we chatted (you know how study sessions between friends go), we waited in the elevator line for 15 minutes (sometimes more, no kidding!). The elevator queue issue is especially maddening. Due to the massive influx of students every semester, the problem has only exacerbated, and sometimes I have had to wait three elevator journeys to get in. Of course, being the impressionistic bodybuilder I am, I often run up the stairs – I only manage to run halfway through though when it's a 13th floor class, by that time abandoning my tough guy attitude and using the staircase railing to keep a 45-degree position that my torso makes with my waist to will through the remaining floors. As harrowing as this tower climb sounds, it sometimes seems more appealing than waiting 20 minutes only to be squashed by 30 people in 2 meters of space, with the liftman yelling, "Bags in your hands, please!" There must be something wrong with the maximum-weight-limit-allowed sensor, because I've twice been in one of the university elevators for it to fall down a floor – no kidding!

Still, we tried to get a good 45 minutes of studies in. That was nowhere enough, of course, as we had literature subjects with a full-length novel and several short stories.

And thus I also began nudging them in class and circling key ideas on their printed handouts and sometimes also whispering. The whispering part was apparently not silent enough for Miss Nadia's tastes, and so she once told me to stay after class to have a word with her.

This is how the conversation went:

Miss Nadia: Iman, I'm very disappointed. Why are you disturbing the class?

Me, surprised: Miss!

Miss Nadia: Please don't talk in between the lecture.

Me: I'm sorry, Miss ... I thought it wasn't audible.

Miss Nadia: I can hear it and it's a disturbance!

Me: Oh ... I was just helping my friends. They can't follow the class, so I was helping them.

Miss Nadia: Well, if they can't understand, they will ask me. I am the teacher in the classroom. If you want to help, help them outside of class hours!

Me: Okay, Ma'am ... Sorry ...

I was naïve,
but I wasn't naïve enough to carry on the conversation after this.
I had a lot of things to say
firstly my whispering could in no way have disrupted the class lecture
I did not even sit at the front of the class.
Miss could have only noticed my nudging and hand gestures
was that enough to tell me off like this?
secondly
she could have said she would take better care of struggling students hereafter
and appreciated my efforts as they came from the goodness of the heart

“Why do you think Hamlet is acting crazy? Is it an act, or has he really gone crazy? Anyone?”

Startled back into the present, I spoke up: “It can go both ways, Miss. We can interpret him to be crazy from the start. For example, he is the only person to hear the ghost of his father. Although some others also see it, only Hamlet hears it. On the other hand, Hamlet's character may be like that. He rambles on and on but he is overly charismatic. He shrewdly makes fun of characters without being direct, and it would not be surprising if he really has hatched a plan and is intentionally acting crazy.”

I smiled as Miss thanked me and proceeded to give some more examples. That was three down. This was the sort of speaking up I wanted to do: the teacher asking for input and I responding. But even that scenario is not foolproof a hundred percent of the time. For if I answer the teacher all the time, or at least the times when I know the answer or anything to add (which is almost always), then other people won't get a chance. Of course, the teacher sometimes picks and chooses students to answer, and at times asks if anyone else would like to add. But even beyond these Iman-filtered classroom discussions, I often intentionally keep from stepping into the conversational floor. How come? Because I don't want to *always* be the one to know *everything* asked by the teacher.

And so I have devised a formula so as to not come across as a show-off and simultaneously also not disappoint the teacher and make him or her awkward at minimal student participation. Here are the ground rules:

1. Never, ever, speak up in class more than 5 times *maximum!*
2. If you can't resist the urge to add something to the class discussion, and for doing so you have to cut the teacher off in mid-sentence, do so only *once* every two classes.
3. Feel free to respond when called by name and asked to do so.
4. If the teacher says, "Anyone but Iman, please answer," then *refrain from speaking up for the rest of the class!*
5. If the question is *super basic* like "What is the full form of CLT?" then stay silent; focus on the hard questions to step in and take the floor – otherwise, the floor is lava! Tread carefully!

Indeed the conversational floor in the classroom is lava, and the classroom a volcano waiting to erupt at me with judgements and negative impressions. Sometimes the lava bubbles are too big and numerous, and it's judicious for me to not speak up at all, as when the teacher does not pause in between topics to ask students if they understood or ask for their opinion, and rather keeps on talking and talking and giving no scope for one to chime in without interrupting him in mid-sentence. And sometimes there are no bubbles, but rather a safe and smooth platform manifests to make way for me to walk on, like in those classes where the teacher constantly asks the students to join in. For the latter scenario, the manifested footpath may break away if the teacher has not created a friendly environment, but is instead pressurizing students to jump in the lava and get singed.

But another part of me feels that people shouldn't approach life tormented by such paranoia. Sometimes it's okay to make a fool of yourself and get laughed at by your peers. And it's not like I let these thoughts affect me all that much. Well, if you don't count the ground rules I made for class participation and all ...

True, I'm no Minthan. She can't care less for what others think of her. Genuine and unapologetic, she is, however, often too brutally honest, to the point of insensitivity. On the other end of the spectrum is Yaseen, who is too anxious. He suffers from legitimate anxiety and depression, largely because of a traumatic experience his Mom had been in when pregnant with him. It's too sad that such a hard worker always feels like the world is out to get him, for his every word, for his every move, or for that matter even if he doesn't make a move. Many a time Yaseen takes a screenshot of the mail he is to send to a teacher so that I can proofread it. I am happy to help him, but he is too insecure about his own abilities and often requires others to help him in the most trivial of matters, such as the time he felt the need to ask me if he should say "Welcome, sir!" to an email where the teacher thanked him.

"No, no! He isn't even thanking you in the sense of ... thanking you!" I explained, typing. "He just thanked you sending in ur paper within the deadline, to let u know he received it. In the end he wrote

thank you as a matter of formality. like we write yours faithfully or yours sincerely or regards at the end of an email and a letter.”

“But he doesn’t write this things,” Yaseen wrote back on Messenger. “Will it be wrong if I say welcome ??”

“Ya he didnt write those things ... yeah ok u can send him a mail saying welcome. it cant hurt.”

“Why you say it will hurt? Is this offensive ?? if I send the mail ??”

“No, no! I just mean it wont be a prob if u send a mail saying welcome.” I felt bad for his lack of communicative competence. He was working so hard and still it felt like he had a long way to go. I have noticed that especially when he is tensed, he makes even more mistakes, like in a timed exam he makes sentence structure and grammar mistakes in almost every single line. However, when I interrogate him about the mistakes and tell him to discretely identify them, he somehow identifies the vast majority of them.

“Who has time to think during exam?” he would say. “I praise Allah that I remember the content even.” It was true. As far as content goes, he outdoes even me at times, producing publication-worthy research papers, at least after I am through proofreading them haha. But, even though he has always been hardworking, he knows he used to depend on me too much. Nowadays he tries to tackle most of his activities himself, and only comes to me – aside from our study sessions – when his nerves can’t take it anymore – yes, in those times of nervous breakdown even to send a mail or not is the question.

“Think, but don’t be concerned,” I would often try to boost his spirits. “Try to be like me. You can always think of scenarios, every possible way things can turn out. If you have thought of all possibilities, you can never be surprised. And if you aren’t surprised, a large part of anxiety ought to go away.”

“I’m nothing,” Yaseen was always humble. No, I would always say, and then afterwards praise him by calling him my star student, that he is my longest tenured student, and has improved a lot. Yes, he did improve by leaps and bounds, and he always credits me for it, though of course I merely served as a facilitator. Nowadays, he can write a complete research paper by himself, and if he has time to proofread, I find that there are scarcely three mistakes a page. However, the problem remains that the number is tenfold if he doesn’t give a read through after writing, which significantly affects his grades. Fortunately, our department hardly penalizes grammar and sentence structure mistakes, but of course there is such a thing as clarity and structure of writing.

Those higher-order language skills aside, I just hoped he would get enough confidence to do two things. The first is to be cognizant of his writing during the process of writing (not only grammar and syntax, but also cohesion and coherence would follow). The other is to speak up in class. While he shows his talkative nature when studying with me, clarifying most matters of confusion and also adding his own valuable input, in class he stays stone cold silent.

“Hey, Yaseen!” I whispered, nudging him. The flashback of being told off by Nadia Ma’am resurfaced. But this teacher didn’t see me. As for Yaseen, he pretended not to do so. His face taut and statuesque – as if having been frozen from almost not even twitching a muscle in the last hour of class except to respond to his attendance, something which also felt uneasy for him, I bet – I wondered if he had drifted off to sleep by keeping his eyes open. But no, he would never doze off in class. Not Yaseen. The poor guy must be scared to respond to me in case the teacher would reprimand him.

“Among the seven soliloquys in *Hamlet*, which one is considered the most famous?” The teacher asked.

Oh, come on! She cannot be doing this! Of course it’s *to be or not to be*! Everyone should know that, even if it’s the first class on the play and even if no one in class had read a word yet, right? Should I answer? That would be the fourth time. But it’s too easy! It goes against my ground rules, dammit! To speak up, or not to do so?

“Iman, I believe you know the answer?”

Ya Allah, yes! But, looking back, oh no ... I was so taken aback in surprise that the teacher would invite me to answer that instead of just saying, “Miss, it’s the fourth of the seven soliloquys of the play” ... or even adding “It’s the To Be or Not to Be speech by Hamlet himself, where he contemplates suicide!” ... *or even mentioning that it took place in act 3, scene 1* ... instead what I did was recite the whole damn soliloquy.

Chapter 4: Think, But Don't Concern

Raised eyebrows, the muscles of the lips twitching to the left and eyes looking up to meet those of SHE, as my head was tilted down, I waited for the rest of my friends to come and sit down at the study room table (Sarin and Minthan had gone to the washroom to freshen up after class ended, and Yaseen was on the phone).

“I am not upset. It happens.” I said, meaning it.

“I know you aren't,” SHE said, grinning, inching closer and placing a hand on my arm. “There's no reason to get upset. I'm sure Miss Shay was amused, all in a positive way. And the others took it lightly too. The Iman I know always thinks, but doesn't concern himself. Isn't that right?”

I knew SHE was consoling me and pretending I wasn't much affected. But I actually wasn't that rattled. At the time, I had felt like a fool, at least hoping that nobody took that outburst to be me showing off. Wait, was I actually doing that? Am I subconsciously a validation-seeking junkie who can't help but be the center of attention?

“If I am, at least it's not intentional and conscious,” I tried to pacify myself. However, soon I had calmed down. I had looked to my left, scanning for Tasnuva's face as soon as I had realized what I was doing (which was damn near at the end of the soliloquy). There was a twinkle in her eye, and she was laughing whole-heartedly with the rest of the class. Somehow, I suddenly became convinced that she didn't mind this, but rather enjoyed this hilarious stunt. And soon afterwards, the great big lump in my chest had given way to a great big sigh of relief.

“Thank you!” I mouthed in the present, as if Tasnuva could hear me. My eyes must have glistened, for SHE patted my shoulder and took out her *Introductory Sociolinguistics*.

“Hey guys!” Sarin took her seat. “That was wonderful, Iman! Great performance!”

I didn't notice any sarcasm in her voice. She really was sweet. Moments later, Minthan came and we started our lesson.

“Before we start,” SHE said, pushing the opened page 48 to the center of the table. “I want to go over the last session. You talked about sociolinguistic competence basically encapsulating all other competences, at least excluding grammatical competence. But isn't what you talked about ... isn't that

pragmatics? As it says here, ‘pragmatics is a branch of linguistics which studies context.’ So, basically, social context comes here and so does everything you said. Is there a difference between pragmatics and sociolinguistics?”


“That’s a great point,” I wasn’t surprised SHE did some self-study on her own. “Yes, you are exactly right. We can call everything we discussed last time, or at least most things ... all of them fall under pragmatics. So why did I say it was sociolinguistics instead? Because we were learning about the multiple competences. And so I thought that talking about sociolinguistic competence and linking it to sociolinguistics would be *much simpler* than bringing in a term which is probably foreign for most of you, as we haven’t studied pragmatics separately yet. But yes, sociolinguistics and pragmatics are basically very very similar, but sociolinguistics is more specifically related to the differences that *social relations* and *social norms*, you know, play in conversation.”

“Okay! Thanks,” SHE replied, her beam broadening. It almost seemed like SHE didn’t really have this question, but simply asked this for me to clarify for the others. But why? I don’t think the others knew enough to compare the matter to pragmatics. So who did SHE want me to clarify for? Hehe it’s as if all these will be written in a book for the whole world to read or something!

“Guys, do you have any questions about the four competences? If you do, discuss among yourselves and then tell me if you can’t figure it out. Yaseen hasn’t come yet, so we can start the new chapter after a little while. While you discuss ... Sarin, did you do the homework I gave you?”

“Yeah, I have but I didn’t write in paragraph. I write ... I wrote in bullet points. Here you go.” Sarin handed me her blue Pokémon notebook. Her handwriting was captivating: a slant cursive style she had developed way back in Primary School. The content too was well-organized and colorful to boot, replete with many an annotation and underline.

Communicative competence are of 4 types:

1. *Grammartical competence*
 2. *Discourse competence*
 3. *Stratagic Competence*
 4. *Sociolinguistic competence* 
- Most important competence*

Grammartical competence:

- ❖ *Relates to grammar*
- ❖ *Also called Linguistic competence*

- ❖ “Mastering grammatical competence has a direct connection to mastering the other competences as well.” (Salazar, 2019, p. 148)

Discourse Competence:

- ❖ Relates to cohesion and coherence
- ❖ “Discourse competence refers to organizing the language elements i.e. sounds and words in oral and written forms respectively – basically, it is the organizational skills of putting discrete knowledge of grammar together to make an orderly whole.” (Phaire, 2009, p. 126)

Strategic Competence:

- ❖ Relates to strategies, tactics in communication
- ❖ Relates also to communication breakdown
- ❖ “To be a strategically competent learner is to develop conversational techniques that we pick up naturally throughout our life – from student-teacher, child-mother, friend-friend, husband-wife, interviewee-interviewer, employee-employer discourse.” (Grecian, 1997, p. 24)

Sociolinguistic Competence:

- ❖ Relates to society in general
- ❖ Encompasses the other 3 communicative competences
- ❖ “In order to develop sociolinguistic competence in English, one has to develop social awareness of not only of his society but also of the Japanese, the Indians, the Lebanese, the Phillipino, the Africans, the Aborigines – for only when one develops a truly worldwide sociological awareness that he can truly appreciate the sociolinguistic nature of the particular language he is learning.” (Gajeel, 2014, p. 248)

References:-

- Gajeel, H. (2014). “Developing Sociolinguistic Competence.” *The New Age of Linguistics: A Sociolinguistic Revolution*, p. 245-59.
- Grecian, A. (1997). “Stratagems for Success: A Linguistic Analysis.” *The Grammar Nerd*, p. 20-38.

Phaire, C. (2009). "Crisis in Discourse." Modern SLA Theories, p. 123-38.

Salazar, S. (2019). "Back to Grammar, Yet Again." Linguistic Revolutions, p. 140-56.

A litany of things raced in my mind

Sarindid work hard to collect all the references

her ample annotations & neat colorful writing further

display her patience & discipline.

BUT

should i ignore her massive mistakes?

where to start

umm there's the conspicuous grammatical spelling

& where did strategic come from did she confuse it with stratagems

enkepsulates hahaha but to her credit she wrote it as it sounds

the strategies parts understandable it was a slip

Think, but don't concern

interestingly she made no mistakes within quotations

she must have copied those carefully

but if she was really careful

she should have noticed her spelling mistakes after seeing the ones in quotes

and don't get me started on the citation errors

well i suppose it's still considerable improvement

Think, but don't concern

How much should i point out?

i don't want her to be sad she is so sweet

i don't want her to be overwhelmed by so many corrective feedback comments

elt⁷ too teaches about not overwhelming the learner by pointing out all errors

⁷ ELT stands for English Language Teaching. It's what I am majoring in, you know, plus Applied Linguistics.

but rather to focus on selected errors at a time
again I want her to improve as well

Think, but don't concern

WAIT

I'm only thinking of what *i* want ... I want this I want that
I'm worried too much about my impression becoming bad

instead of really worrying about her state of mind

"Hey Sarin, you've worked hard!" I began, still weighing how much corrective feedback I was willing to give. "Thank you. I thought you wouldn't be able to finish."

"Yes, I had club activities. That's why I couldn't write in paragraph. Sorry for that."

"No, no. It's fine. I basically wanted you to research about them and give one citation for each. And you did that. Okay ... first of all ... oh and the others, you guys listen too. Didn't Yaseen come yet?"

"I think she's still on the phone outside," Minthan said. She had been getting some of her confusion cleared from SHE while I was looking over Sarin's homework.

"I'll go and take a look," SHE said. I nodded. SHE didn't really need to listen to Sarin's feedback anyway since SHE was adept at citations.

"Okay, first of all," I decided to not call Sarin out on the silly grammatical errors she made in front of everyone. "Sarin has made a note for us about communicative competences. We can all take pictures of the note for last minute exam revision. Sarin you jumbled up MLA and APA here. Always stick to one. Also, there are some things you missed, like we have to remember Canale and Swain. They came up with the four different competences we are studying. Oh, and the year is 1980, ok? You have to write the year in brackets after you mention them. In APA. However, if you write the in-text citation at the end, then you have to put a comma after the name, and only give the last names, ok? Sarin did it here correctly. This is good, Sarin! But if you wrote in paragraphs, you would also get some practice on how to write in signal phrases. Giving citations in signal phrases is to write something like ... *Canale and Swain* and then the year in brackets. Minthan, can you give a demo?"

I always only proceed when I have made sure all my students are following the fundamentals, though of course I know some of the references in my explanation escape most of them but SHE.

“Yeah, Minthan, you are correct. Just remember to give some space after *Swain*, ok? It will matter most when you type. In pen and paper, spacing is more volatile. Oh, and give a comma before you start the quote, unless you *embed* the quote. Can either of you remember what I said embedded quotations are? I had explained it last sem-”

“Iman ...,” Yaseen said from the doorway, beckoning to me. I nearly called for him to come sit down before I noticed his blank stare. Something was wrong.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I said after I joined Yaseen and SHE outside the room.

“... I ...,” Yaseen hesitated. “I ... can’t join the study session today. I have to go home. My dad is almost here with car. I was on the call with him ...”

“Ya Allah!” I was alarmed. “What happened? Is everyone okay? Is it Aunty’s illness?”

“Oh, no. Nobody’s hurt. Dad was outside for business purpose. Now he’s going home. He knows my classes ends now. That’s why he call to pick me up. He doesn’t wants me to go home by bus since he can pick me up with car. I- I told him I am gonna study after class, but he ...”

“Wait, let me get this straight. You are so upset because he is insisting you leave for home now? Because you will then miss our study session? Is that why you were on the phone so long, trying to argue with him?”

“There is quiz day after tomorrow, Iman, and I have function tomorrow. Family function. Can’t miss.”

I was speechless. SHE then offered to help Yaseen, saying that SHE will make notes and send him on Messenger or WhatsApp.

“Umm ...,” Yaseen still had the blank stare, as if he had just received some horrific news. “I actually want you to record today’s class ... Can you do that? In that way I won’t miss anything. I can then listens to the recording in the car ride to family function tomorrow.”

“Come on, Yaseen,” I said. “You are overreacting. You already know this chapter. I know because I have tested you and you already have half the book chapter memorized. There’s no reason to panic like this. Seeing your face I thought something had happened to Aunty! Ok, ok, I will record myself summarizing the key points of the chapter and send the recording to you. Or I can simply list the main points. And by main points I mean everything that may come on the exam. Does that work? Sarin has already made a list. I will proof it and make some additions and send you.”

Yaseen’s eyes got back their glow at these words, and after some frantic thanking, he made off down the stairs, saying that his father must have already arrived, and so he didn’t have the time to wait for the elevator.

Chapter 5: Miasma Descends

“Hey, is everything ok?” Minthan asked when SHE and I came back to the study room. I struggled to answer, and sensing this, SHE came to my rescue yet again: “Oh, Yaseen has had to leave. His father came to pick him up, and we are a bit late because Iman had some calls. Nihan ... you know, that tall guy with the mustache ... Nihan wants to study ... umm ... Statistics with Iman. He called if he is free now.”

“Ye- Yes,” I stammered. It wasn’t a lie. Nihan really had called after class ended. I was reeling so much over the soliloquy fiasco that I had forgotten. Such veiling of truths by another truth which is not so relevant is called equivocation. “So Nihan is going to join us after around ... ***tapping at the phone screen to see the clock*** ... after 20 minutes. He is munching on some snacks ... yup, he doesn’t have lunch at university ... and afterwards he is gonna bring one of his friends too.”

“We can get done in 20 minutes. It’s ok.” Minthan said, her tone suddenly became cold and distant.

“No, no. You guys can stay. I can tend to all of you at the same time. I will give them maths to do and then I’ll shift my focus to you guys.”

“I’m fine with it,” Sarin said.

“Okay, let’s start. So yesterday we discussed the four competences. Today we will talk about how each of the four competences can be developed. Now, I have to remind you that when we talk about teaching and helping ESL⁸ learners develop, you have to *pretend that you are a teacher too!* Yes, think of yourself as a teacher. I remember last semester Minthan wrote *the teacher the teacher* in her lesson plan and even in the presentation.”

“But why do you always have to empathize in order to, um, play a role?” SHE asked. “Well, I can’t explain it, ‘cuz the way I said it now, it seems as if it’s obvious that to play a role well you have to step into someone’s shoes, which is essentially empathizing. But what I mean is that you don’t *always* have to look at yourself from another’s perspective. Like, you know, some people say *treat everyone like you want to be treated yourself*. But isn’t that, um, kinda selfish? Like, not totally selfish, but still doing things for *your* gain, your profit. If someone only acts kind so that the other person repays kindness, then there is a selfish desire that acts as the, um, incentive for that good act. It’s like a give and take relationship.”

⁸ English as a Second Language

I thought for a moment before answering. I did not expect SHE to talk so negatively about something. Minthan was nodding throughout SHE's speech, though.

"I agree with you, actually," I said. "I think the best reason for kindness is not a, um, return in kindness and generosity, but for kindness' sake. Like, we should not be good to people merely for them to reciprocate the kindness to us. But then again, that's sheer idealism, to think that everyone *should* be kind without any, um, underlying motives. I think the vast majority of people don't think critically and challenge the, ah, grand narratives at play in society. They are content in conforming to these principles as long as they can live peacefully. That's why we only see mass, um, mass upheaval only when, you know, a large event happens. It's only when there is a, a, a significant enough blow dealt to society that it wakes up and, um, triggers riots! But again, coming back to the point, I think we should accept that. We should accept that most people in the world won't go against the trend even if they are aware of these things. The best we can do is to hope they will follow. That's why a preacher doesn't expect other Muslims, or Christians or people of whatever religion they are preaching, you get the point ... um, that's why a preacher doesn't expect the converts to start preaching as well. The best he can hope for is for others to follow, to conform. I don't want to use the analogy of, um, most people being sheep. But like sheep, most are followers, and I think there's nothing wrong with that. Similarly, you and I, we can try to be kind for others' sake. But if other people are only displaying kindness as a show, to, um, make their own images better, like an employee tries to always be respectful to his boss even if this respect and formality do not come from his heart, still we should not condemn him, I believe. But again, what you said I completely agree with. For example, I've seen this on a Facebook post, that, um, a pious Muslim lady was running down the streets and screaming that she is going to close the gates of Heaven and Hell."

"Yes!" SHE exclaimed. SHE was grinning from ear to ear. Again, I got the uncanny feeling that SHE intentionally led me down the path of arguing in favor of something positive like kindness, no matter its roots. It's as if SHE made an argument *only* to get me to stand my ground, *only* to make me confident in something I can speak about for a while, which in turn will better my mood.

"I know about this story," SHE continued. "This Muslima was tired of people worshipping Allah only for the, um, allure of Heaven and the, uh, consequences of Hell. This woman wanted people to worship Allah out of pure love, and pure love only. A very beautiful gesture, right? But of course we cannot expect everyone to be good Muslims without their main motivation being to go to Heaven. Even if someone does a good deed by feeling burdened, like, you know, praying Fajr in the cold winter after breaking their sleep, which means they may not actually be doing that deed out of love. They may be doing it for primarily fear of punishment. You may say love for Allah may still be the reason. But, I'm saying *even* if not, still it's a virtue! Isn't it awesome?!"

"Yes," Sarin said. "Subhan'Allah! But, guys! We got so far away from the topic, haha. Let's hurry, now. I also have to go soon."

Ah, I had digressed so much that I forgot what I was talking about. But I love such detours, for it is only when passion takes over and overwhelms that true heartfelt discourse can happen. For the next ten or so minutes we had a smooth, fruitful study session. Sarin showed a lot of progress. The homework I gave her must have worked. But I noticed that Minthan was in a bad mood, I think ever since I came back after speaking with Yaseen. You can tell pretty easily when she has something on her mind.

“Are you following, Minthan?” I asked.

“Hmm ... Iman, do you know this new guy who’s coming with your friend?”

“You mean the friend Nihan is going to bring? No, I haven’t met him. Nihan says he is just like him – *all chillz and no studiez*. That is a horrible rhyme, if you ask me.”

“So, you don’t know him?” Sarin asked. I could detect the tone of surprise in her voice.

“No. Why? What’s the problem? Do you guys know him? Is he trouble?”

Minthan made no response. It looked like she was disappointed. Why? Looking over to Sarin, I saw that she tried to smile, but then turned away and nodded after the failed attempt.

“It’s ok!” SHE said. “I’m sure it will be fine. Iman can handle it.”

I was about to say something when my phone rang. ***Think, but don’t concern***

“Hello, Nihan? Yes, come. We are on the 13th floor ... Oh you guys are already on the 12th? ... Yeah, got it.”

“Good luck,” Minthan said, getting up. “Washroom.”

Nihan and his “bro” came within a minute. For all the forty minutes they stayed, I never learned “bro’s” name. How do you ask someone his or her name in the midst of something? Like, what is a good time

to ask one's name if you missed it during introductions? Suddenly springing "Um, what was your name again?" while explaining conditional probability sounded too awkward in my head. I decided to just ask Nihan afterwards. Yup, that'll be the best way to go about this.

Bro wasn't actually as bad a student as I had anticipated. He really was "all chillz and no studies" as Nihan said, but he caught on to concepts quick. He was older than us, being in his second last semester, which is why Nihan kept calling him Bro, I guess. After going through the basics of probability, Bro said he had to go and set up a meeting next week. But he wouldn't leave without thanking me no less than a dozen times and then shaking my hand with both of his. It looked like he was wondering whether or not to go for a hug, but then decided that it can wait until a second or third meeting for it not to make him come across as overly friendly.

I loved such acts of gratitude. I wouldn't say this is why I teach people – again, doing good deeds not for self-gratification – but still this was the cherry on top for sure. By the end of VASSAR, I remember the sudden realization I had that everyone that got to know me and spend time with me appreciated me. I had taught over forty people in my stay there, out of whom fifteen I taught regularly – weekly at least once, I would say, and on average twice daily. Yup, I worked all day every day. From waking up to going to sleep at VASSAR, I peaked at eighteen hours of studies a day ... um, it might be nineteen (barely 2 hours of class time and the rest on teaching). I would sometimes even wake up early in the cold days of November to teach. I would teach while eating, with my note copy open on a dining table, me paying no attention to stares from the others. Once the Vice Chancellor had caught me teaching at dinner and patted my head from behind, and I had not even noticed, and would not ever have known it was the VC sir, if Afifa had not afterwards told me, "Wow, Iman, that was badass of you. The VC sir was impressed and patted you on the head and you didn't even turn around and show you got startled!"

"Are you leaving?" I asked SHE. Everyone else had left. Sarin had left ten minutes after Nihan and Bro came, and Minthan actually never came back after she said she was going to the washroom, instead leaving a text that she was not feeling ok and so was going home.

"Yes, I am. Unless you want to talk some more?" Her smile was soothing as always, but something hung over my head, something heavy, pressing my head down to lose eye contact with her.

"No, I'm gonna go too. Let's talk while we wait for the lift. Um ... I know why Minthan and Sarin were upset, especially Minthan."

"Yeah, Sarin was just surprised," SHE's voice was steady, but stronger. I tried to look up at her but the force field was unyielding.

“Weren’t you surprised, too? Come on. Admit it.” My head felt like it was spinning, but somehow my balance wasn’t affected.

“I was not. I know you can’t say no. I think it’s a very admirable quality!”

“Thanks a lot. But there should be a limit, I know. In VASSAR, I taught so so many people. They all appreciated me a lot, and I was over the moon. But how many of them have contact with me now? Yes, I know. In this digital world, very few of us keep in contact with most of our friends. But leave that, how many of them *only* ever talked to me regarding studies? Yes, even in VASSAR! Even now, how many people *only* ever knock me or call me a day or two before exams?”

The force field was fading. Ah, my head feels so much better now! Take some rest now, brain.

“Iman, I think you are thinking aloud. You don’t normally talk this way.”

“Yes, I know! But it’s you! I can share anything with *you*! Shouldn’t I pour my heart out to someone with whom I am the closest?”

“Yes, you can. I’m here for you. But you know what’s even better than sublimation? Don’t think of me as a crutch. Don’t worry too much. You are becoming dependent on overthinking. Just think, don’t concern yourself about it!”

“I can’t believe you said that! I’m gonna ignore that and continue ... You know, even the fifteen ‘friends’ that I taught, even from them, besides Yaseen and Sarin and Minthan of course ... how many of them still talk to me? I sometimes react to their stories and I almost always wish them on special holidays. The majority just react on the wish without wishing back; some wish; and some even ask about how it’s going. After I heartily reply, do you know what happens? Somehow *all* of them take a long twenty minutes (at least) to reply, and this delay in replies sticks like glue to every strained attempt of mine to continue the conversation. Am I to believe *all* of them has bad internet *all* the time?”

“I know. I understand. Perhaps a call would hel-”

“Do you know how much I did for Afifa? One day I took permission from Mahboob sir to get out of the class for ‘an emergency.’ ‘Will you be coming back?’ he had said. After I said yes, he allowed me to leave the classroom. Do you know what that emergency was? Afifa’s laptop had hung, so I went to

my dorm, took mine and lent it to her. But then she was feeling faint out of exhaustion – she has a sickly constitution, you know. So, you know what I did, I made the presentation for her. Well, I didn't want to break the rules – you know how strict our university is against plagiarism – so I just copied the points she had made in her note copy and organized them in slides. The point is, I was there for her in her tough times. And now where is she? She hasn't seen my message from last month even."

"Iman ..."

"Do you know the night before mid-terms, I had fourteen friends in our room till 1 am? Yup, *that* is against the rules, but since it was the night before exam, I believe our dorm tutor turned a blind eye. So, one friend even stayed the night in the room, going to sleep after 4 am with the *Ethics and Morality* book on his lap. The exam was at nine o'clock, so I barely had 4 hours of sleep. Do you know what happened in the exam? I ended up missing a *five-mark question altogether!* Despite this how I got an A is Allah's grace."

"Yes, Iman. Allah saw all these, and so Allah blessed you. Don't take these things negatively. You have worked hard and you have your scholarship to prove it. And most importantly, you have all our blessings!"

"What blessings? Weren't you listening? I said 95% of them don't care – no, never cared for me outside of their own benefit. You should go. I think that's your car waiting for you."

"No, I'm not going. Listen, this isn't you. The Iman I know only thinks, but doesn't concern himself with so much. You said it yourself, Iman. You said that you and I don't care about self-gratification. Good deeds we do for others, not for us!"

Sometimes people regain their composure after they are left alone to cool off

but somehow at that instance

i suddenly became aware

of what I was actually doing.

Did I say all that, to SHE?

Its true i looked at her as my safe spot

to vent if i need be

but not like this.

Never ever like this

i had antagonized her

people say you speak the truth when in anger

Think, but don't concern

But was that the real me?

Does thereal iman actuallydisbelieve in what hepreaches

am i a false messenger

spouting big and pithy lines & passing it off as philosophy

while only hiding behind the grandeur of the words

the self-gratifying effect they produce

Think, but don't concern

Think, but don't concern?

that isn't even good grammar

and that probably isn't the way SHE said it

Isn't it fascinating how certain chunks of sayings & songs play out in ur head

never in a coherent whole

sometimes not grammatically accurate

does the mind engrain certain chunks of memory and play them on repeat

Think, but don't concern

hmm lets focus on the positives

SHE is still here

There's still time

time to apologize

No, there wasn't. SHE had gone. But somehow I remember her face softening and retaining her bubbly glow after I was deep in thought. Did SHE read my mind again? That's good! The apology reached her, then!

Chapter 6: Angel on My Shoulder

You have ur eyebrows raised right now right

ehehehe

i can imagine it ... but dont do that too much ok? I dont mind ur face lines, but u do

hey!!

you came online yayy

im soo so sorry

i dont know what over me

what came* over me

hey its ok!

so whn did u arrive home

it rained right after I got in the car. u didnt walk home as always, did u?

did u have an umbrella

ah never mind that

are u sure its ok?

no

no it cant be

ive been thinking aboutit what i said

it was completely contradictory of my beliefs you were rught

I mean contradictory to

i need to actually listen and follow the things i say

like

mom here. Im comin in a bit

i literally was just talking about

doing good deeds for its own sake. not for pleasing others or for self gratification

not for any of that

and yet

and yet

and yet

dammit

sorry, im getting worked up again

anyway as i was saying

ive been realizing that i am not really living up to ur expectations

my expectations too

of thinking a lot minus the stressing over it part

hey. u there?

oh aunty called

lemme check my inbox before u come back

Message from Yaseen. Asked if I recorded the lesson. Haven't. Gonna do after dinner, InshaAllah.

Message from Nihan too. Apparently that Bro guy's name is Tamzid. Said Tamzid loved the study session. Asks if I want his FB ID link. Sure.

Oh, Bro already sent a friend request probably. Is it him? FB name Tamzid Alam Shihab. Yup, that's him. Man, he's a tree!

Oh Minthan messaged too. Said sorry for today, wasn't in a good mood. Ah, sorry am I, Minthan. Sorry am I.

hey im back!

hi!

read my messages

so mum was pestering me to have dinner first
i told her I just sat on my laptop. that im gonna study a bit
you know cuz i cant sit on lappy for more than 30 mins without migraine
but i bet mom is gonna come every 2-3 mins and yell IS IT TIME YET?
THE RICE IS GETTING COLD

but its not even 9:30

HOW MUCH LONGER?

COME QUICKLY

uff

damn ... 😞

and if u wanna study now then ok
i'll prepare to send Yaseen a lecture recording

yeah its just 9:24. i dont wanna eat till 10
and listen
mom is exaggerating
the rice isnt getting cold. she just prepared it a few mins ago
and and and
i cant believe she is hungry

wow

no she CANT be hungry
dad too
they ate a hefty snack after Maghrib

yes hefty is right

there was grilled chicken and naan, and soup, and dessert too

no less than Iftar after a day of fasting!

whoa

then u mean that aunty is just pestering u cuz she wants u to keep on schedule? wth
cuz she wants u to be even more organized than u are? but u are already very organized

theres more to that

not only for disciplining me

already u know she always has me doing things by the clock

praying right after azan

shower before 1

lunch right at 2. yes, 2 sharp. Not 5 mins earlier or later

yes yes i know

but isnt dinner at 10

i mean i dont need her to remind me to pray and take shower and all thst

u know i myself do that

yes yes u urself are very tidy

u dont need aunty to pester u

yes dinner's supposed to be at 10 as always

but yesterday we missed Taleem

you know, that Islamic discussion we have every day. where we read hadith and discuss

so today mom is like we cant miss it tonight. so we gotta start early in case

in case something comes up like last night's sudden phone call from Bogura

tell me Iman does that make sense
she isnt even saying that we will spend more time today in Taleem than usual
to make up for yesterday's missed session
i dont even think she is gonna take more time anyway

wow

so she really is anxious that you guys are gonna get another call at night?
which will disrupt ur Taleem? but but what are the chances that it will happen two nights in a row
is she that paranoid
or could it just be an excuse for her to push you around?

you know Iman i wouldnt be surprised actually
btw isnt it funny? isnt it funny how when someone keeps saying not to do something
or even to do something
we then tend to actually disobey that order
like u know ... how many children will disobey the very thing they are said to do or not to do ... u get
me? similarly when mom keeps ordering me around, i feel the desire to not do it anymore

yeah. i feel ya

like even if i was going to pray now or recite the Quran
if mom keeps yanking her head towards me from the door
or yells if i am doing what she just told me to do, without even bothering to look and see before
raising her voice
...
then i lose incentive
i feel like not listening to her instead of hurrying to do what she said
it may sound bad now cuz its related to religious practices
but its just an example you know

no no i totally get it
you are very Islamic MashaAllah
you recite by urself and u even do Wazeefa

yes thank u! so u see? isnt it funny how language works
you would think that asking people to hurry up would make them hasten
but it often makes them want to do the exact opposite
if someone does something without being told, its like there is a greater reward for them.
a personal reward. like u are proving to urself that u are handling things ok
but if someone pushes u towards something, u feel empty and
and even a bit disappointed with urself ... that u werent able to do it without being prompted
does that make sense

oh totally
i agree
i also feel some pressure to pray as soon as Maghrib azan happens

or is this sounding childish? that i am being childish here

no i don't think its about being childish
maybe children handle it worse than adults, but i think everyone feels slighted if they are pushed to
do something, even something or maybe especially something which they were going to do by
themselves
like as I was saying
when the Maghrib azan is called, and if i am doing something like proofreading
i feel like finishing the paragraph before going to pray
however
i dread the possibility that mom will see me and tell me to pray
i am a bit wary of that
i cant explain exactly why

Alhamdulillah my parents arent as strict as urs
and they do believe in me
Alhamdulillah
and i wud like to believe that they know they dont need to remind me of prayer
still it gnaws at me for the possibility of them seeing me delaying the prayer
its almost as if being told to pray takes away a lot of my self-esteem
even though its my mom!
crazy right?

Hehehehe

Iman when azan is called u arent supposed to delay hehe
u ideally shudnt. but I get what u meant
hihihihi

hehehe bad example i gave, then
hey did u read my messages when u were gone?

its 9:48

i shud go. mom came thrice while i was talking to u

ya sure
bye. i'll send you the recording too which i'm gonna make for Yaseen
though u wont need it hehe. still u can take a look

take a look at a recording? or take a listen? hehehe

hehe
have a listen*

hihihi i hope you remember this convo! I loved it! bye

I loved the conversation too. But I noticed that SHE was purposefully dodging my attempts at apologizing. Whenever I brought it up, like when I asked her to read my messages or if SHE had read them, SHE tactically evaded, and SHE made it hard to tell whether SHE had actually missed the messages or not. But I would wager SHE saw, and sidestepped them because of my own sake, so as not to make me wallow in sadness.

But what did SHE mean at the end? I should remember this conversation? Did SHE mean the way her Mom always pesters her and acts paranoid? But I have long since known that. Was it the detail about her missed Taleem that SHE wanted me to remember? That her Mom gets especially anxious at the prospect of two missed Islamic discussions? Highly doubtful.

Then what? The way SHE acted tonight was highly out of character, for sure. I have seen it a handful of times before, but always when something nasty – *very nasty* like her Mom slapping her in public just because SHE couldn't make up her mind about what clothes to buy (yup, Aunty is *that impulsive*) – occurred. Was tonight's constant pestering enough cause for her to have an outburst like that? Well, who knows? Maybe SHE released some pent-up frustration since I yelled at her. Or it could just be a girl-thing. Perhaps it's that time of the month for SHE.

No, that can't be it. Why would SHE tell me to remember it then? And her outburst wasn't that long, come to think of it. It actually calmed down by the end, and SHE was suddenly back to her bubbly self, *hihihi'ing* and *hehehe'ing*.

Wait.

Waitjustamminute.

Could ... could it be what I think it is?

Maybe it was *all* a ploy from her!

yeseverything thewholeconversation

SHE designedeverything

from theway theconvowent to howiwud react

SHE calculateditall

well perhapsnoteverything

likewhen hermom called

and aunty being on edge
her outburst maybe an imitation of my own
a taste of my own medicine

But why would SHE purposefully make me go through it?

SHE wouldn't make me suffer as SHE did
nope

Think, but don't concern

then perhaps SHE did it to make me feel at ease

that it's nothing childish & nothing to be ashamed of

which is why SHE talked about disobeying due to force

No, no, then why was SHE upset when I yelled at her?

SHE spoke & always speaks against the mom's angst

could it mean that SHE was indirectly criticizing my own overthinking?

that making mountains out of molehills

that the likelihood of my irrational fears are absurd

as aunt's paranoia of two phone calls from the village in a row

Think, but don't concern

It's incredible how SHE managed to make me aware of these so subtly

without having to say the words & address the issues directly to my face

by feigning or at least exaggerating her own anxious disposition

Think, but don't concern

come to think of it

SHE never once mentioned this in the convo

Didn't tell me now to think without concerning myself

Why?

Because sometimes some things are better left unsaid?

Because sometimes language serves a deterrent effect?

But a lack of it, or an ingenious sidestepping of it,
with such elaborate analogies and anecdotes and allegories,

with fictionalization or narrativization,
suddenly that moral is much more impactful,
much more memorable.

Yes.

The fact that I came upon the solution, of thinking but not stressing, on my own makes this epiphany
all the more rewarding!

Part 2

Chapter 1: Something Unreachable, Something Unobtainable

“I’ll be there at the big gate,” Nanabhai said in Bangla after we crossed the main road. “The one where I picked you up from last time, alright?”

I nodded. I had a very special relationship with Nanabhai. Nanabhai used to live in Chittagong a decade ago. He used to come for days at a time every three or four months. No, not for business, for his work did not require travelling. Nanabhai came to Dhaka for the sole purpose of seeing us. Not only for big family events – by big I mean birthdays even – but just for seeing us every once in a while.

Whenever he came, I would spend most of my time with him and even sleep the night with him, though besides him I could never sleep anywhere else and with anyone else but with my parents. I remember once when I stayed over at my cousin’s place when I was nine. I had felt so accomplished that I could sleep outside of home that I admitted to Dad on the phone the next day that I had to get out of bed at night seven times to pee.

“Iman dear, were you able to sleep?” Dad had asked.

“Yes! It was fine, Abbu⁹!”

“Did you make sure to pee before you went to bed?”

I was hesitant to answer. Is it embarrassing to talk of this topic when your cousin and aunt are there in the room? But I never lied. So I said, “... yeah, Abbu. I went seven times! There was even a cockroach, so I was very brave!”

Yes, Iman. It really *was* embarrassing to talk about this in front of others. Somehow child me had thought that not mentioning the word “bathroom” was enough to hide the fact that I was talking of going to pee. Seven times! Whoa, either I had drunk a whole lot of water since I had recently read a magazine on the healthy amount of water to drink every day, or my bladder was as nervous as me at the prospect of getting through an entire night in a foreign bed.

⁹ Abbu is a term of endearment for Dad. For Mom, it’s Ammu. Bangla is nice, eh?

“Ei, khali¹⁰!” Nanabhai yelled. He always had a strong voice. Sometimes I felt awkward around him, especially when he yells into the phone. “The university! Ah ... the ... Iman dear, what’s the university name, again?”

I told him, and he repeated it loudly to the rickshawala. “What?” Nanabhai yelled. “Did you say 30 taka? Do you think I’m new to Dhaka city? Just because I haven’t come here? What, you’re sorry now? If you want 5 or 10 taka extra, request so at the end. Don’t just up and demand such crazy fares from the start! That’s not the way to do things! Ok, Iman, get on.”

A surge of inferiority swept over me. Am I so spoiled that I can’t even talk to the rickshawala myself? Why did Nanabhai have to repeat it to the rickshawala? Well, maybe it’s his hearing problem. That would explain why he always spoke loudly, especially over the phone. Maybe he hears himself speaking in a reasonable pitch and the rest of the world in a hushed voice.

As the rickshaw sped on, twisting and edging its way dangerously across the Mohakhali traffic, I realized that Nanabhai was silent. Normally, he’s talkative, asking me about stuff like my appetite, my gastric, if I want something he can buy me, how I’m feeling about the upcoming whatever’s-going-on-in-my-life, etcetera etcetera. You would think that he would have a lot to say when it’s my first ever day at university, hmm? But no, he had barely talked to me from the moment we started our way from the house. But his tone was caring and all – yes, *loud*, but that was his normal.

I should break the silence, I thought. I find rides very awkward. When you sit with family members and if silence stretches, then what do you do? Do others feel obligated as well to break the “tension” or boredom in the air by taking the floor? If there are a lot of people on the ride, then I don’t feel as much pressure. It’s not just me, I would reason with myself. It’s not wholly up to me. There are other people too who opt for quietude over small talk. But when it’s just me one-one-one with someone, it really gets to me.

Damn. I can’t think of anything to say. But why so? This is Nanabhai! The human being I used to be the closest to outside of my parents! Shall I ask him what he had for breakfast? No ... I know what he had. He always has ruti with vegetables unless it’s a special occasion. Oh, but isn’t today, my inaugural university class, a special occasion?! But no, I smell veggies, and I’m sure I smelt it when he yelled at the rickshawala. Um, I can ask him about Nanu¹¹! Oh, right. I was on the phone with her in the morning.

¹⁰ “khali” is an amusing term to call out to empty vehicles, whether it be a CNG or a taxi cab or a rickshaw. The literal meaning of the word is “empty.” It begs the question, then, that if without passengers a ride is empty, then what about the driver? Why are we disregarding him? But *are* we disregarding them? Well, we are speaking *to* him, though ...

¹¹ Nanu is my maternal grandmother, Nanabhai’s wife. I noticed a few years ago that I don’t actually put a “moni” after “Nanu.” Why is that? I do say “Dadumoni.” And I am much closer to my Nanu than to my Dadumoni (paternal grandmother). Oh, “moni” is another endearing term, the feminine equivalent to the supplementary “bhai” that I attach as a suffix to Nanabhai. Again, this is odd, since “bhai” literally means brother (I know, it doesn’t make sense in the

She had called to wish me luck for my first day, saying she wanted to wish me before Nanabhai. Ah, dear Nanu!

But what else can I say? Actually, what do I *normally* talk about with Nanabhai? Umm, now that I think of it, it's almost always Nanabhai who invites me to join the conversation. It's always Nanabhai who asks about me, or about some other topic to which I then latch onto and carry the conversation forward. Yes, there have been periods of silence before when the two of us are together, of course, like when he massages me to sleep. But that's completely different, and I can't recall another time when we were on a ride, just the two of us together to suffer the doom of silence. Am I so sociolinguistically incompetent that I can't strike up a conversation, that too with my Nanabhai?! Then what use is there of studying English at university?

"Na-Nanabhai, what do-"

"Oh, Iman dear," Nanabhai said, all in Bangla, mind you.¹² "Sorry, I was lost in thought. Were you saying something?"

Oh thank God. He must not have felt awkward, then, of the silence. It was all in my head. "No, nothing important, Nanabhai. So, what are you going to do in the meantime? I mean, I have two classes today and there is a 90-minute break in between. Will you go home and come back?"

"Oh, no. I am going to roam around Mohakhali. Haven't been here much." Nanabhai likes to go sight-seeing. Wherever he goes, even for once, he likes to get a good bearing of his location in his head.

"Why not simply use the net?" I sometimes ask him. "There's this thing called Google Maps which pinpoints your exact location. Not only that, you can even *sightsee* other areas on the map. You can zoom in and out ... that means you can make the picture bigger or smaller. Yes, yes. As you wish, yes. You can travel from your phone."

"Ah, dear," Nanabhai would say, his face distorted as if disgusted by this prospect technology has brought. "That's not travelling at all. You keep saying you *see* this, you *see* that, but that's not how you see things. You need to, ah, *experience* things. You need to take it in, you know. I haven't travelled

context of the relationship with a grandfather), whereas "moni" I would define as "gold." No, it's more like "pupil," as in "the pupil (apple) of one's eye."

¹² All of the conversations I have with my parents and Nanabhai are in Bangla, even "dear," which Nanabhai appropriates as "manik" or "Nanabhai" in an endearing tone. Yes, Nanabhai calls me "Nanabhai" sometimes. Is this baby talk?

much. I haven't even gone to another country. But where I go, I like to *really go* there, you know? Instead of looking at a screen."

I agreed with him. Of course, peering over Google Maps and even Google Photos and YouTube videos on tourist sites aren't obviously the same as being there in person. I mean, I would surely think so, but I can't speak for myself since I haven't also been abroad. Hell, going to university for the first time (technically, third since I have had to give the admission test and viva and pay; well, I needn't have gone on the payment date since Mom and Dad went, but there was a confusion about whether or not I would have to give a signature on the pay slip) itself was uncharted territory for me, a veritable plunge into a new life at a new country.

Aura

That's the word that relates to my reflections of Nanabhai's philosophy of being boldly in the present. And that's the word that, in the very first class, one overly excited fresher asked Miss Kawkab about.

"Aura ... Well, this is a term you will get familiar with in your third or fourth year. If you major in literature or media. But, I can talk about it a bit." Miss Kawkab's gush made it clear, though, that she was actually stoked to discuss aura.

"Aura is something difficult to define," Miss Kawkab said. When something escapes easy classification, then one of two things can happen. Either that term is completely ignored, not intentionally but rather because by not having a well-known definition or synonym it also averts thought itself. Like, if you are too young to not know how to, say, read an analogue clock, then you wouldn't know that you can use the method of reading the time to talk of direction, like *5 o'clock, incoming*. Oh, wait, even adults who haven't been exposed to this sort of direction-telling won't also be able to use such a convenient trick. On the other hand, if something is difficult to classify, it can also be extensively talked about. At least by scholars. They seem to take great joy in writing pages upon pages on something covered in mystique, never coming to a conclusion, but on the contrary actually being ecstatic that they have struck upon something other-worldly, something ephemeral and so, might I say, divine. Like in the distant past when men ascribed supernatural power to natural phenomena. They deified the Sun, the Moon, and many other heavenly bodies – why? Because these things were out of their reach, they had aura. Perhaps our ancestors *wanted* to believe in something(s) that escape(s) their comprehension, as if the prospect of fathoming everything itself was, paradoxically, unfathomable, or at least extremely disturbing.

"... in other words, aura is fleeting," Miss Kawkab continued. "Something or someone can have aura and, uh, mystique at some point but then lose this intangible quality later. What? Intangible? Oh, that means something that's abstract, that cannot be defined, that you can, um, you also call it the IT factor.

The IT factor. I and T. Never heard of it? Leave it, you're just freshers. Do you guys know what mystique is? No? It's ..."

Yes, so what I was thinking is true. But why is it that we hold something unreachable, something unobtainable, to such high esteem? What sense does it make when we applaud and celebrate when we are unable to conquer something through language? Yes, there's lots of stuff out there we have a hard time expressing. But what if we know of the concept, what if the matter we are talking of is something completely mundane and regularly talked about, what then? What if we, as we often do, fail to bring the appropriate words or phrases to mind? What if, after groping at our language repertoire for an otherwise "common" lexical item, what results is the underwhelming spewing of the vaguest of words like "things" or "good" or "bad," and that too after some bulky series of "umm's" and "ah's." Imagine racking your brain for a simple word, one that you have used just the day before, like "nausea": *I have this, um, ah, um, this bad ... bad thing when you feel like you're gonna throw up.*

What then? Do we still hold such unreachable and unobtainable experience (at least for the time being) on a pedestal? No, I dare say we don't. Then aura must only imbue itself around *special* things ... Wow, did I say *things*? Ah, the irony. But maybe not. Maybe this fits, since aura is vague as well, just as *things* is, but the paradox is that *things* will never have aura. It has to be something special. Something outside ordinary discourse. Something perhaps esoteric. It has to be IT.

"... is society. Yes, it's very interesting. It's very interesting but also scary how society holds the power to manifest aura in something, and then also take it away at the drop of a hat. What? No, that was just an idiom, Bilal. I meant society can suddenly disintegrate aura and it can shroud something in aura also, simultaneously. Ah, sorry. Shroud means ..."

Wow, she must be talking for at least five minutes – no, more – about something she said she would not elaborate on. She must also be someone scholarly who loves to flirt with meaning – no, I should say *signifier* – beating around the bush only to get a sense of its absolute tyranny over the signifieds – yes, plural – poking the bush with a stick, very gently and tentatively, but making sure to move away before giving an honest effort at probing the grassy terrain. What there needs to be done is for someone to not only feel out some of the leaves, but to look over *every* leaf, both sides, and even take a shovel to dig underground for inspecting the roots if need be. Leave no stones unturned, and ...

"Excuse me, you with the big round spectacles. Hello, the one in the green polo tee!"

Yikes. She was talking to me! "Ye-yes, Ma'am!"

“I saw you deep in thought, your eyebrows arched and all. I feel it wasn’t that you weren’t paying attention, but maybe you were thinking of this topic. Would you like to share your thoughts with us?”

“O-Ok! So, um, you were talking about societal changes that can have either a, ah, constructive or destructive effect.” Even by this point, Miss Kawkab broke into a smile. I gained my confidence, and was somewhat resolved to prove it to her that I wasn’t like the majority in the class for whom she had to stop and define simple words. “I would like to provide an example. The Hajj today has lost some of its aura, you can say. Well, of course it’s still the mecca, if you will, pun intended.” Miss Kawkab’s smile broadened. “But in the past, people even had to *walk* across continents and cross deserts to reach Makkah. Now, all it takes is money to buy a plane ticket. So luxurious, isn’t it? Of course, the rituals aren’t easy, but there are even facilities for old people to perform the Hajj in wheelchairs. So, you get the point. Whereas before it took almost herculean effort and a stronger mental, um, mental prowess to perform pilgrimage to the Holy Ka’bah, now due to technological advancement, people don’t, um, I wouldn’t say they take it for granted. It’s still a big journey and big decision, but still of course it can’t measure up to the old days.”

“So, are you saying Hajj has no aura now?”

“Allah forbid! Of course it’s still full of aura even now. But I would say it had more aura before. And one reason why it still has strong aura ... one sociological reason, besides the obvious timeless religious reason ... is that the Hajj is broadcast live. Many people see it, and they join not only in spirit, but also with the intention of being there in person themselves, sometime in the future. So, in this way, aura is transmitted through TV screens! Isn’t that wonderful?”

“Yes, thank you, ah ... what’s your name? Iman. Thanks a lot, Iman. You gave an excellent example of how sociological reasons not only manifest or disrupt aura, but sometimes do *both* concurrently. Oh ... ok, manifest means creating. Oh, you guys know disrupt? Nice! Concurrently means ...”

I felt like *I* had aura flowing off of me, an energy field emanating from my body! Not so bad, Iman! First day of university, and already made a lasting impression on the teacher! I had been debating whether or not to speak up in class. Even though I am introverted in public, at school it was different. I talked a lot with teachers, especially English teachers. But there *is* such a thing as starting over anew, right? How did I want my new surroundings to view me? What would the Iman at university be like?

Well, why fix what’s not broken? But eyebrows raised, huh? Is that what I look like when I think for long? I raised my right hand to my forehead. Nope, smooth enough. I then took my phone from my pocket and turned on the front camera. Nope, straight eyebrows – a bit on the bushy side, but definitely not arched. Oh, you fool! Of course they won’t be raised when I’m looking down at my phone. But then again, I had never noticed this before. Was it something unconscious, then? Something

unreachable, something unobtainable intentionally? Ah, aura! No wonder people get interested to know about you!

Chapter 2: Firsts OR Flower of Heaven

“That was sick, dude!” said Nihan after class. “You the man! Miss wanted to embarrass you and pretend that she this strict, um, no-nonsense teacher who don’t let people sleep in class. But look who got egg in face at the end! But again, she not really that type ’a teacher.”

I laughed, nodding. I had met Nihan on the day of the viva. We were in the waiting room together with about twelve others. All sullen faces, some veering towards panicky, and some chanting mouths – muttering du’a, I reckon. All except the shorter-than-average-clad-in-neon-green-sneakers-matching-with-wristbands-on-both-forearms-but-sharply-contrasting-with-the-caramel-pajamas-and-black-cap applicant who was walking around the room, sometimes taking a seat, if there be any spare ones, next to other applicants, and then getting up after a while and repeating.

I had an empty seat on both sides, so it wasn’t long when Nihan said, “Excuse me, may I sit?”

“Yes, yes,” I smiled.

“Nihan,” he said, extending his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

I shook hands after introducing myself. Nihan must be an expert on communicating with strangers. I noticed that he refrained from sitting down before shaking my hand. It was a firm handshake too, and he actually *shook* my hand up and down before letting go, unlike most other handshakes I’ve received which were the slightest of hand grasps – not even that, more like making contact with the palm only, with no pressure from the fingers. What’s more, him abstaining from sitting down before seeking permission and shaking hands indicate his sociological mastery: even someone of timid and/or introverted personality would be bound to pay undivided attention to a person standing still and offering his hand, and only after establishing a friendly atmosphere by a solid handshake and exchanging of names would he sit down, thereby already dissolving the need for the awkward icebreaking inertia of communicating with strangers. On the other hand, if someone gave a half-hearted reply to his “Excuse me, may I sit?” then he could easily backtrack on his comments and go elsewhere, saying, “Oh, right! I didn’t notice I had a friend here. Sorry for disturbing you.”

“Nervous?” Nihan had asked.

“Nah. I’m okay. Cool and calm like a cucumber.”

“Ahahaha! That’s good, man! That something you made up? It makes sense. Now that I think of it, cucumbers always manage to stay so cool. As a matter of fact, cucumbers from now are my spirit fruit! Wow!”

No, I had told him, I did not make it up, but that it was an idiom. And there are no such things as spirit fruits, but that the phrase was “spirit animal.” Ah, he had said, he can never keep track of English words and phrases, that he wasn’t much good at English, but that he always tries to learn as much as he can about them (and yes, it had largely been him in the first class who was halting Miss Kawkab for word meanings). Wow you gonna take English too, he had exclaimed, and even more “wow’s” had been dropped when I mentioned that I had “only put English, and English only,” on my preferred-departments-to-study-in list when I enrolled at university. He had put English, Business, and Law, he had said, and that English was his first choice, but that he had never thought of putting “just one – wow! – one damn sub” on his list.

Back to the present, Nihan proposed to roam the campus and then afterwards grab a bite to eat. Like me, he also had a break before his next class, but our next class doesn’t match. At the thought of *roaming*, I remembered Nanabhai. Should I call him to let him know my first class is done? Well, why not? I should also call my parents and let them know I was having a good day. Come to think of it, I would have expected them to call to check up on me by now.

Crap. Nope, not in the other pocket either. Perhaps it could be inside my bag, suggested Nihan. I shook my head, but I still placed my bag on the stairs and foraged through all the six compartments.

“Let’s go back to last class,” Nihan suggested. “Maybe you left it there on desk.”

“Yes, could be. But the lift just left. Since we are on the ground floor, why don’t we go to the Lost and Found? Do you know where it is?”

“Iman dost¹³, calm down. How Lost and Found gonna have it so soon? We just finished class. You did have it in class, did you?”

I nodded. Yikes. That was so foolish of me. Hopefully, Nihan won’t get weirded out ...

¹³ “Dost” is an endearing term – my, a whole lot of endearing terms we have in Bangla! (though it’s not a pure Bangla word, rather a borrowing from Persian) – for “friend.” It’s basically like “buddy.”

“Let’s head back to class,” Nihan suggested. “What room was it, again?”

UB11103

Our university’s perimeter covered a large area close to an entire town, if you ask me. It had 7 separate buildings, and the average building consisted of around 10 floors. The first “1” in UB11103 corresponds to the building number, the next two digits to the floor number (1 through 14-15), and the last two digits signified the room numbers. In other words, UB11103 situated my first university class in the building which got attributed the number “one,” the floor of said building being eleventh (the *lift’s eleventh* floor, not the Bangladeshi *actual* eleventh floor)¹⁴, and the designated room number being “3.”

A sucker for symbolism, I was ecstatic that my first class on my first day at university took place on the eleventh floor in the first building of my university, though the room number didn’t comply. Well, no one cares about room numbers. When someone asks for someone’s address, not always do they enquire for the flat unit (A or B or C or D). Even if they do, it’s not as important as the building in the street (of course) and the floor number (the question of “lift floor or actual floor” still remains, though). Again, when a student looks at his routine, he can’t care less for the last two digits: his sense of space accounts for a rough estimate of the fixed point (whether it is UB 1 or 5) and the vertical axis only (what button in the lift he will have to press, and if the vertical point is low enough, say 3 or less, whether he should climb up, and if he has a class afterwards or had one beforehand, whether he can simply climb up or down a few flights of stairs instead of waiting 10 minutes minimum for the elevator). A sense of the horizontal is entirely redundant once he has pinpointed the building. Indeed, who thinks twice of a 5 second-farther walking distance when the room number is 08 instead of 01?

“Here we are, Iman. As I thought, there another class happening now.”

Oh, of course. It’s not like UB11103 is *only* for our class. Of course, the room holds different classes every 90 minutes. Why didn’t I think of that? Why did I waste the last 15 minutes thinking of the meaningless meaningfulness of how architects assign arbitrary room numbers ... why preoccupy my head with that instead of rehearsing lines for limiting the awkwardness level of disrupting a class in session to search for a phone?

Nihan seemed to sense my social anxiety. “I can go! I pretend it’s my phone which missing.”

¹⁴ It’s a hassle to explain the vertical coordinates of a building to Bangladeshis. When you tell them it’s the 11th floor, they will ask if it’s *Lift 11th* or *actual 11th*. Fun fact, there is no ground floor in non-specialist Bangla lingo. To them, the first floor is the ground floor.

No, no. I could never let that happen. I dragged myself towards the room. 5 seconds walking distance? I ate my words. Assalamu Alaikum, Miss, I may have left my phone here. May I check? No. No. No. What is walking distance really? Should and can a person's width pace variance be generalized? Excuse me, Ma'am – oh it could be a sir – I had a class here a little while ago. Can I check if I left my phone here? No. That's two whole sentences. I've got to make it quicker, or else I won't get through it without stuttering. Yup, think more concise, Iman! You can't say that in stride. Not with thirty pairs of eyes staring at you. But then again, I should make it clear why I'm seeking permission to enter. What if the teacher doesn't catch my words and starts telling me off for, as far as she's concerned, intruding in her class? 5 seconds walking distance, seriously, Iman? I hear the horizontal axis laughing.

"Iman, was it?" a girl's voice called from my right before I worked up my nerve to slide the door open into UB11103. She must have seen me snail-walking my way to the door only to stand still.

"Yes," I turned around. She was extremely thin and yet had not a wrinkle on her face. And very short too, must be less than 5 feet tall.

"Is this your phone?" And sure enough, she shows me my Xiaomi Redmi Note 9S. Whoa. Why didn't I notice this before I noticed her undersized appearance?

"Yes! Yes! That's my phone! Ya Allah! Tha-Thank you! H-How ... Wh-Where ..."

"Yay! I knew it was yours!" She beamed. "I *thought* I remembered where you sitting. I mean, you're memorable, for sure! When I was packing my bag, I saw a phone two benches in front of me. I was wondering if it was yours. I was going deliver to Department Coordinator's room. It's on 13th floor. But since I am hungry, I was eating sitting there on sofa. That's when I saw you going to that room."

"Ah! Thanks so much! Thank you!"

"My pleasure! Are you fresher?"

"Yeah. What semester are you in?"

"Oh, I'm in 2nd semester. I would love to chat, but I have club work. Oh, my name? Call me Sarin!"

Sarin. That's a cute name. And she was very friendly and adorable too. But more so than her jolly demeanor, and surprisingly even more so than finding my phone without much hassle, I was pleasantly surprised more at myself. Wow, Iman! You didn't hesitate one bit. No "umm's" and no "err's" after the initial surprise – nothing. And she remembered my name and said I was memorable! She must have thought of my first impression at the expense of Miss Kawkab as nothing less than a riot!

This was really the first time I had a friendly conversation with a girl my age. Back in coaching days, it wasn't uncommon for me to have zero interactions with girls in an entire year – zero interactions, that is, aside from sharing the class together and occasionally having to say, "Excuse me" and "Can you pass me the sheet, please?" And as for my school, boys and girls had different buildings.

"Yup, not only have I never had any girlfriends, but I've also never had friends who were girls," I must have repeated it no less than four times to Nihan, but he caught the news with surprise every single time: his eyes lit up each time he asked the question as if with genuine interest, and each time his mouth widened and he flinched back, literally, a step or two. It never ceased to amaze me, and I guess it sort of became a running joke, but I was always impressed at the way he always acted surprised after the initial keenest of interests – I dug it so much that I sort of looked forward to him teasing me about it at times.

Minthan

I eat my words again. It was *not* fun the way Nihan teased me about Minthan. Apparently, there was this bombshell of a girl in my Prose class with Miss Kawkab. And apparently, this otherworldly beauty had been there in the first class as well and seen my stunt, though she misses a lot of classes because she is quote-unquote the laziest person in the world. Apparently further, this flower of Heaven and I had shared a whole month of classes together with me never having noticed her. Never, that is, until I had given my first ever presentation in my life (my Bangla medium friends say they had given presentations before at school and college, though).

"Hi!" the celestial entity called out to me after class wrapped up. "Nice presentation, you! Take me in your group for the next one!"

I could only mouth a quick shy word of thanks before hastily turning away, walking straight towards the staircase instead of waiting for the elevator.

"Iman, hey, wait up!" Nihan also quickened his pace and caught up to me outside. He thumped me, hard, on my back.

“Thanks. I needed that jolt,” I said, half meaning it.

“Hm-hmmm!” Nihan said, his face bobbing up and down, shoulders slightly slouched. “Hm-hmmm-hmmmm!” I knew exactly what he meant. As adept as he is in social interaction, he sometimes chooses to forego his eloquence of speech and lets his intonation and body language do the teasing.

“Nooo!” I snorted. “I don’t even know her. Who is she?”

“Awww, mate. Says don’t know her lol.”

“No, seriously! What’s her name? Is she in our class?”

“Wow. You seriously don’t know her? It’s Minthan. She’s a friend of Sarin, so I thought she was your friend too.”

“Sarin’s friend?”

“How come you ask if she in our class? She been doing class with us all month, Iman. Don’t tell me that beauty’s, err, radiance! – yes, that’s the word – don’t tell me her radiance didn’t hit you before?”

That’s the point. How come I never noticed such a gorgeous classmate? Back in the days of coaching, I *had* noticed some pretty girls, but I was shy of *all* girls at that time. And it’s very possible that I won’t be able to recognize most of them today. But was I shy enough not to even notice everyone in class? Well, in my childhood, I was heavily influenced by Orthodox Islam, to such an extent that I took particular care not to look at girls’ faces. Now, I’m still deeply religious, and I even want to preach. But the Islam I want to preach is not so stringent and inflexible. The intention is what matters, and looking at girls’ faces is nothing inherently reprehensible. Anyway, I was extremely proud of how my first university month had been going till then: I was consistently able to impress my teachers, and no social interactions till now had been particularly awkward. *Till now.*

“You like her?” Nihan asked a week later when he caught me staring at Minthan.

“No, I am just awed. She looks so perfect.” I replied honestly.

“Awww! Iman, you do like her! Want me to set you guys up?”

Do I like her? How am I to know? How am I, someone who has not only never had a relationship before, but also never “liked” someone – how am I to know what infatuation means without experiencing it prior?

“Well, do you?” Nihan asked in a serious tone.

“No, I don’t think so. I’m probably just, ah, fascinated. She’s the most beautiful girl I ever saw. Why do you have to *like* someone, um, just because they are girls? I think plenty of boys are handsome too, but I don’t *like* them – well, I do like Hrithik Roshan as a fan, and I admire his physique – but, you know, you know what I’m saying.”

“Sounds fair, dude. But if you are interested, you should know she had breakup recently. Yeah, I know. It doesn’t look that way when you see her smile all the time. She’s so, ah, bubbly, right? A lot like Sarin. So cheerful. But her boyfriend of seven years ... seven years! ... they broke up is all I know. I think the boy cheated ... Yup, very sad. That’s why she very untrusting nowadays. She hates all kinds of bulls***, all kinds of – what’s the word? – pre-pretentiousness. And you ain’t that. But still. I don’t want you get hurt, man. It’s good you say you not interested in that way. I was afraid you interested.”

It was from this point that my curiosity and awe towards Minthan’s beauty gave way to unadulterated respect – respect and wonder towards the way she tackled life after heartbreak. Wow. Someone had been in a relationship for seven whole years and then cheated! And cheated too on Minthan of all people! And then after all that she still has the courage to laugh whole-heartedly and be so vibrant on the outside. She might be the most untrusting and wary person on the planet, but she certainly isn’t the laziest as she claims. She is too proud to let her tragic past drag her through the mud. No, her head is not in the mud; she has extracted herself from wallowing in misery long ago. Her apotheosis to the Heavens is not due to the aesthetic vessel Allah blessed her with. The radiance of her beauty lies not in her bodily and facial features, but rather from the smiles she heroically summons – smiles not only her own but also of others around her.

Chapter 3: You'll Understand Someday, Dear!

😂😂 with 😂😂

ahahaha ya really i didn't notice u before u praised my presie

Well actually I can relate

Yes totally

People at uni remember me and call out hi Minthan and then I just stare lol

Uff Allah I'm so bad at faces lol 😂

hahaha wow

you look like youre good at English

MashaAllah

Ahaha lol 😂

I mean here u are using correct punctuations

my other friends are unfortunately very bad at English. Especially grammar

These are just basic things 😂 I was in English version

No I don't study at all

I'm the laziest person u will ever know haha

And maybe u didn't notice me cuz I was absent half the time lol

😂😂

At school I was so much worse though lol. I used to skip school just cuz I felt like

😂

hehe wow

aunty allowed?

She didn't have a choice 😂

I have understanding parents

MashaAllah

But if I were my mom I would be so mad 😂

Yeah Alhamdulillah

Iman do you watch anime

omg yes!

big anime fan

Yayyy 😊

how come u asked?

I ask this to everyone 😊



Code Geass is my fav

Oh yes. I love Lelouch

Death note awesome too 😊

Yes omg I watched all 37 epi in 1 day

Have you watched One Piece? It's the besstt

The Messenger chat went on for twenty more minutes, almost entirely composed of the two of us geeking out over anime, and me giving her some tips on how to tackle *Great Expectations* without reading the novel – heck, Minthan hadn't even bought the book. I got to know that she exaggerates her faults and downplays her strengths: she would go on and on about how much lazy and anti-social she is, but the fact that she can comfortably strike up a conversation with me – someone who had been a stranger a few days ago – shows her free-spirited nature. Wasn't it amazing how, for instance, she was Othering, *them'ifying*, faces she knew but names she'd forgotten, and ironically laughing about it with me, someone who's such a new friend himself?

I was also particularly interested about her parents being so accepting. My parents are awesome, but I doubt they would have let me bunk school. Looking back, the concept of bunking classes didn't even occur to me until class 10 when most of my friends used to solely come to school for lab classes.

But why did she claim to be so anti-social, though? Isn't that an awkward thing to say to a new acquaintance, a veritable bad impression garner? Maybe she's unique that way, easily being able to belittle herself. And yet, I had a feeling that she wasn't lying when she says she keeps her friends circle small; she hangs out with Sarin and two or three others at university, but I've never seen her talking with any others. Perhaps that's why she asked if I watch anime. To gauge me as a potential person to talk with. Over a common topic to bond over. Now that I think of it, it's the same way how lots of friendships come to be. Similar choice of music, favorite sports team, or even a mutual disgust of someone or something to complain about – whatever the shared tendency is, once identified it paves a hinge to open the door to continual correspondences, perhaps even flourishing over into friendships. This is how society creates human bonds.

But,

What if I wasn't an anime fan? Only a year ago did someone who I worked for push me – scratch that, *force* me – to watch *Tokyo Ghoul*. Although that's not in my favorite anime list, it did make me watch more anime afterwards, and soon I was hooked. To date, I have watched 48 anime shows – yes, I tally them – though that's nothing for Minthan who has been watching from class 3. “I can't tell the number lol,” she had said, “But it's definitely over 100. And you've only mostly watched the short ones. 12 and 24 epi ones lol. I watched 300-400 epi anime hehe.”

So, I wasn't an expert on anime. My fandom level would be intermediate at best, though certainly over the casual viewer level. Maybe if I had ticked off a hundred anime or watched the big ones like *One Piece*, *Naruto*, and *Bleach*, then maybe Minthan would be even more excited to have a fellow connoisseur to discuss with.

But what if I wasn't a fan at all? Or what if, instead of asking if I watched anime, she had asked me if I watched Korean Drama? Or if I listen to heavy metal? Whether I prefer rock over pop? What if someone who would potentially be one of my closest friends is interested in politics, and here I am who can't even remember the name of the Education Minister or the Health Minister?

"Hey, man. It's alright. You don't got to know everything, man," Nihan said when I told him about some of these insecurities.

"But do you think I am only good at studies?"

"Nah, man. You good at a lot of things. Ok, lemme give a short list off the top of my head. Hey, did I get that idiom right?"

"Yeah bro. MashaAllah you've been trying hard. Miss Kawkab by now has come to know your tendency to stop her in the middle of class, so she sends you a handwritten vocabulary list of common to, um, semi-difficult words and phrases every week, right? I've talked to her!"

"Wow. You know about that. Yeah, man ... Anyway, here's a few examples of your good characteristics. You are extremely helpful, man. I dunno what I would do without you, man. You help me so much. You set ... set ... set aside! ... you set aside so much time at least once every week, man. I tell about you to Mom too. She tells me to bring you home someday. We'll play WWE wrestling, ok?"

"Wow. Aunty knows about me too."

"Of course, man. Lemme say more. Um, you're totally brave, man. You sometimes help during class time even. I also hear you got into a bit of trouble in Miss Nadia's class. Hahaha, you're badass, man."

"Oh wow you've heard of that. But it's hardly a good thing, man. I felt embarrassed."

"Ah, no way, man. It shows your, ah, compassion for your friends. For me. For others' sake you risk scolding by Miss. You a great man, man!"

"Wow. Thanks so much, Nihan."

“By the way, you realize something? You been wowbombing like me lol.”

“Hehe, I know right? It’s become a habit.”

“Hehe I’ll miss you, Iman.”

“Miss me? Why? What happened? Aren’t we going to VASSAR together next semester?”

“Yeah ... That we are. But afterwards I thinking of changing my department ...”

“...”

“English not for me, bro. I tried. I really tried. You know that. And-”

“And you’re doing well! Why are you gonna change? Wasn’t this your first choice?”

“... Yes. Yes, it was. But you know me. Always wanting to jump into the thick of things. Hehe yeah, I know this idiom. So I’m always trying to, err, face challenging things, you know? I always try talk to CNG driver and rickshawala instead of being silent for whole ride and looking at phone. I always get pride from this, y’know? You must have noticed ... I sometimes try talk to a stranger to test my interaction skills. You know, to test how long I can keep conversation going. So, I thought I give literature a try. I always, ah, en ... envied people who read page after page without opening dictionary. So in university I decided to try my level best ... I decided to clarify every question in my mind, whether from teacher or from friends ... and Allah gave me you! Thanks so much for this.”

“Nihan ... I- I don’t know what to say ...”

“Bro, try as my might ... or was it as I might? ... try as I my whatever might, I am facing so much problems. I can’t expect you help me in every steps. You won’t be able to help every time, and sometimes you can’t be. Like can you sit down and read whole novel to me? Who will do your studies?”

“But you’re improving! Soon you won’t need much help from me ... though I’ll always be there for you. And you’re even not that bad! You’re better than a lot of my friends like Sarin and Bhoumik and Ani-”

“Yes, Alhamdulillah I’m improving. But I gave a lot of thought to this. Even talked to Mom and Dad. They agree it’s better if I shift to Business. My Introductory Business Studies course going great, Alhamdulillah. I got second highest in class. And I not even giving half as much effort there as in Prose. I think this is the best, ah, course of, best course of action.”

“Now, Nihan, listen. If you expect me to ... if you expect me to say I’m happy whatever you do ... if you expect me to say something cliché like that, you’re wrong! I don’t want you to go.”

“Hehehe I know, man. I wouldn’t expect any less from the great Iman. This shows your heart. Shows how much you care for your friends. Still, have Iman in me, Iman. Ok? And we can still study together in future. Courses outside department, you know? Help me in Statistics. That mandatory in Business department ... Man, I hate math! That a big reason why I came to English lol.”

“Hehehe.”

I had actually noticed Nihan’s frustrations on Prose before while tutoring him. He would understand the bulk of what I said, but in literature it’s impossible, as he said, to walk someone through entire stories. Novels were out of the question entirely, and even short stories took a long, long time to intensively read. On average, an intensive reading session of Charles Lamb’s “Dream Children: A Reverie” took 48 minutes to explain. Guess the number of pages the story consists of. A mere four pages, and the fourth too not filled. Yup, just to read out to someone a short 1600-word short story took over three quarters of an hour.

“Hey, Iman,” Bhoumik had said a week ago. “Can I bring a friend too? She desperately need you. She was in the hospital last two weeks and so now she completely behind on everything.”

“Thank you so much, Iman! I heard lot about you. Bhoumik said you are savior of ENH. Please save me for tomorrow exam!” Thus said Bhoumik’s friend, who showed up within a minute after he called to let her know I agreed to help.

“Sure,” I said. “But why are you breathing so hard? Did you run up the stairs?”

She nodded. “I don’t have much time, actually. I have to go hospital in 30-40 minutes. Urgent thing. But I am completely clueless about syllabus. I don’t even know name of story, or stories. Don’t tell me there more than one?”

“No, fortunately, there’s only ‘Dream Children: A Reverie’. I’ll need 48 minutes to explain the whole story. And address possible questions that may come too.”

Her singular eyebrow raise, combined with her huffing and puffing, was hilarious. “Hehe, I know the exact time cuz I’ve explained it four, no, five times already,” I told her.

The first time had taken over an hour, and that too for just reading the story. The second time took merely 41 minutes, and this time, fueled by experience and unburdened by the learning curve (for it was the first time I had taught an intensive reading session), I was a lot more fluent. But I realized I had gone too fast, and so paced myself and repeated some of the main themes to make sure my friends-students understand.

Interestingly, no matter how many times I taught the same story, the iterations were distinctly different. I found myself pausing to extract different words and phrases at different times and relating them to the themes. I would say each session was better than the last, but the rest (except for the first) were by no means underwhelming. In fact, I felt that I was a much more suitable teacher than Miss Nadia and Miss Kawkab for these students – these students who didn’t know what use commas had and yet were reading Faulkner – these students who had jumped into the deep end in the shark infested waters of ENH. Through every fiber of my being did I believe they need hands-on help; they need to test the waters with a lifebuoy long before swimming with sharks in the ocean.

And so I started tutoring many of them myself. Friends, friends of friends, friends of friends of friends – I took in all comers and taught them how to read short stories word by word, pausing at every sentence – perhaps twice or thrice – and then coming again to the beginning after finishing each paragraph to trace the development of the plot, including the literary devices used by the author. I found it fun – exceedingly fun, to be honest. Partly because of the immense appreciation I got from almost everyone I helped in even one session, and partly because of my own self-gratification.

“Wow, do you know, Mom?” I said right after coming home from university. “I am helping many of my friends. I’m teaching them. And I like doing it!”

“Oh, that’s great, Iman!” Mom smiled, but only very briefly. “But do concentrate on your own studies, dear. Don’t overwork yourself. Only help if you have the time, ok?”

“Why?” I said, a bit disappointed. I thought she would like that I was socializing well and making new friends. “Why only think for myself?”

Mom smiled, but in a different, reflective way. “You’ll understand someday, dear! But I’m proud of you.”

I was even more confused. But I didn’t let it ruin my happiness. Finally, I had found something after so long that I was good at. The first paradigm shift was in class four when I suddenly realized I had a knack for English, though I’d like to say I worked tirelessly to live up to my teachers’, as well as my, expectations – the expectations of success, and of continual success. But as far as career prospects go, I had never seriously considered English. I liked literature and grammar, and I was good at the subject, but I had never put thought into being a teacher. Why would I? I had never had the taste. But boy what a validating taste it is! To realize how smoothly I could speak when I was passionate – barely a stutter or pause to extract words – to trace my own train of thought afterwards and see them as nothing less than impassioned outbursts of raw, vigorous emotion. Raw and unrefined though they were, they weren’t crude; I was shocked at the universal appreciation of my teaching skills. Even Miss Nadia, who had reprimanded me once for helping too much, told me last class to help out two struggling students “if at all possible.”

Even though I will most likely lose best friend status with Nihan soon – this is inevitable in the all-consuming university life where one can’t even keep track of friends in the same department (but knowing Nihan, he will still be a good friend) – I’m not worried of being alone in the future. There are bound to be more friends I can make. No, not only for being good at studies but also because I am a good friend? Well, I didn’t know that before, but Nihan thinks so, and Sarin and Minthan and Bhoumik – they all think so! Just like Nihan had come to a life-changing decision to change departments, I too have spawned my future plan of being a teacher, something bound to be a great boon for my preaching lifestyle as well. Yes, preaching lifestyle, not job. For one can preach in any medium he wants to. It matters less whether he roams the streets and goes from door to door or whether he preaches by his very action of living – a good preacher is invariably a good teacher, and a good teacher not only imparts academic lessons but also values behind the lessons – whether it be the practical values and techniques of studying (teach a man to fish instead of catching one for him) or spiritual, fundamental values – a good teacher preaches.

Chapter 4: Shopping Competence

“Iman, are you free tomorrow? Let’s go shopping,” Mom said in Bangla, refilling my mug of water after dinner, something Dad always does so that I don’t have to go out of the room in the dead of night if I get thirsty (why, you ask? Cuz cockroaches love the dark, duh!).

“Oww,” I muttered. “Yes, ok. The next and last final exam is three days away, and I only need to revise. So there’s no problem.”

I’m not a shopaholic by any stretch of the imagination, but I can never say no to such things. (“Why,” Nihan had once said. “She’s your Mom! Aren’t you free with her?” “Yes, of course,” I had replied. “It is *because* she’s Mom that I can’t refuse something she is looking forward to do.”) I mean, I don’t *dislike* shopping, but I would much rather stay at home. Homesweethome meant video games and cartoons as a child, TV shows and anime a few months ago, and studying today. (What did it matter if I didn’t need to do much prep for the finals? I could always study extra-curriculum stuff, like these days I’m reading teacher techniques books.) Yup, it’s weird that every day I now wake up looking forward to studying. I was never a nerd before; yes, I did excellent at English but I actually didn’t spend more than a few hours a day studying.

“Let’s list what we’ve got to buy,” Mom said once we entered the Uber. “Bed cover. Blanket. Pillow. Pillow cover. Kolba- no, you can take your pillow and Kolbalish, right?”

“Yeah, Ammu, no problem.”

“But let’s buy the covers. Pillow cover. Bed cover. Shaving cream, a new one’s needed, right? Let’s buy one for now. If you need more, Nanabhai will bring. Shaving razor you’ll also need one new. Um, there’s also shampoo, soap. Do you prefer the Sunsilk packet shampoos? Or do you want like a bottle? And maybe a shower gel will be better than soap, right? If there’s only a common bathroom, then using soap will be a problem. Let’s buy a shower gel. So, do you want shampoo packs? Or a bottle?”

“I don’t know. Your wish, Ammu.”

“Let’s go for the small packs of shampoo. Use the complete pack every time you use, ok? You don’t need to use half for being economic. Storing a cut shampoo pack will be messy.”

“Ok, Ammu.”

“Now let’s talk about clothes. I know you like t-shirts, but don’t wear them when you go outside, ok? Only wear the golgola¹⁵ t-shirts when inside the room, ok Iman? That goes for pajamas too, of course.”

“Ok, Ammu.”

“Let’s buy some sets of shirts and jeans. Do you need formal shirts and pants for presentations? You’ve already got two. Remember we got them made before your presentation last semester? ***“Yes, Ammu”*** Haha before that you’ve never worn a formal shirt, right? ***I nod*** Let’s still buy one more formal shirt for good measure. Do you need a tie? ***I shrug – “I don’t know, Ammu”*** Tell a friend to tie it for you, ok? ***“Alright, Ammu”*** Now about shoes. I don’t think you need formal shoes? Well, if you still need, if you need *anything*, you call us, ok dear? ***I nod*** And of course we will be calling you too. Every night at least once. And call us anytime in the day or afternoon or evening or whatever. Please call us anytime if there’s *any* sort of need, alright? ***“Yes, Ammu”*** Actually, it’s better if you call us when you are free at night or in between breaks, ok? Because we don’t know your routine. We don’t know when you will be free. It’s best if you set aside a time every day and call. It’s best if you call at night, then Abbu will be able to talk too. ***“Sure, Ammu”*** And be sure to shower every day, ok? I can’t be there to remind you to put down your books or to get out from your computer. I can’t remind you to do the essentials, alright? ***I nod*** I don’t want to have to call all the time to check. Don’t want to disturb a grown boy, you know? So, you have to take care of yourself. Drink plenty of water always. Always keep your flask filled. Oh, we have to buy a flask too. Let’s buy two. And if there’s a laundry, then that’s fine. If there’s not, then you have to wash your own clothes. Maybe I’ll tell Nanabhai to wash your clothes when he goes sometimes. ***“No, Ammu. Not necessary”*** Yes, Iman, you can do it. You used to do when you were at school for a while, remember? Oh, and underwear. Don’t wear the torn ones. Let’s buy many new ones today. What size do you wear aga-”

“Ammu ... VASSAR is still more than a week away. There’s even a final exam left in this semester.”

“Yes, dear. But a week’s no time at all. Packing will take many days. But before we start packing, we need to buy stuff first, right? Come to think of it, we need to buy a luggage too. Aww dear, I’m sorry. Are you tensed? Ammu Abbu will miss you much more ...”

Yeah, I was pretty tense. However, I expected to be even more shaken up. Me, Iman, going to live with strangers for three months? The same Iman who went to pee seven times the one and only night he stayed under another ceiling? The Iman whose mother still treats him so much like a helpless child, like a spoilt princess? If you’d asked me the same question three and a half months ago, then I’d probably have been stupefied in fear. In fact, when I learnt about VASSAR being an absolutely

¹⁵ A cute word, eh? “Gol” is round and “gola” is throat. So a golgola t-shirt is actually the common type of t-shirt with a rounded neckline.

mandatory requirement for passing at this university, I instantly started complaining – something I rarely do with my parents.

“No, Abbu Ammu ... I have to *stay* in a hostel, *live* there for 90 whole days! And there’s only like four or five parents meeting days. I don’t want to go to this university.”

“Ah, dear,” Dad had said. “Well, if you don’t want to, then let’s look for another university. But think about it, ok? This is a very reputed university. It’s the best fit for you, we believe.”

“Yes, dear,” Mom had chimed in. “We scoured all nearby private universities, and this is by far the most perfect fit. What’s more, we have a good feeling about it.”

I did think about it. And I decided to comply with my parents’ wishes. First of all, I felt supremely guilty for pushing to take English instead of another subject which would afford me “a brighter future.” They had pushed back with matching rigor, something they’ve never ever done in my life. But in the end they had respected my wish.

Secondly, if I could have gone to USA, or *can* go there in the future to fulfill my dreams, then I would have to live either completely alone or in the university campus – and that would be a whole two years (at least), and in comparison to that, a three month’s stay at VASSAR, between which I could see my parents or at least Nanabhai a handful of times, was a walk in the park.

Thirdly, Mom and Dad must be terrified of letting me live there. It’s a strange relationship I have with them. Not that I can compare in any sort of depth, though – how can someone compare parent-child relationships without being well versed in the latest sociology literature? – and even then, human relationships can’t be generalized and predicted (one thing I learnt from Introductory Sociology classes). But from the little I can say from my experience (listening to friends’ anecdotes and from personal observations), the typical parent doesn’t provide everything possible to the child without ever chastising him for being so dependent; the typical parent doesn’t go above and beyond by voluntarily filling and refilling and then filling again the mug of water for the child so that he can drink water anytime and not have to get up and fill the mug himself, and this is not only after midnight when cockroaches prowl beyond the locked door; the typical parent doesn’t request the child to sleep beyond 11 am and still suggest an afternoon spell, just so that the child can have happiness beyond his desires, just like how the child is provided with a plate of food (containing cut-up fruits, veggies – all the healthy stuff for a growing body – and dessert – *not* healthy, but smiles over flat tummies) – every hour or two at most so the child never knows hunger.

Now all of a sudden for the child to not only fill his own glass of water and plate full of food but also to do a litany of other things like going to the shower after choosing his own clothes and making the bed and setting his own alarm – no doubt Mom and Dad are super worried. Why aren't they letting this show? So as not to discourage me and show their lack of faith in my incompetence, I suppose. But there must be more to this. They wouldn't encourage me to enroll in this university otherwise. Our university truly is among the top private universities in Bangladesh, but one of its most well-known facilities is its residential semester. VASSAR is heralded by our university alumni and existing students to be a dream scenario, the single most influential semester of most of their academic life. "The best fit," "The most perfect fit" – Mom and Dad had said. And they "have a good feeling about it." Hmm. Maybe they want me to finally grow up and be independent. A whole semester without their direct supervision will surely go a long way towards that daunting transition.

Except that it wasn't as daunting to me anymore! Little do my parents know how well I am faring in my university life! I mean, yes they know I am getting the highest marks and have made a lot of friends, and even that I was helping a lot of my friends in studies. But they can't possibly know exactly how much of a confidence boost I have got. They can in no way fathom the immense relief I feel when time after time again I am able to speak up in class without significant hesitation – the dreaded "um's" and "err's" and "ah's" – and even more so when I can quite successfully explain entire topics to struggling students in a single session. Little by little my confidence had grown, and now it feels like I can conquer anything life throws my way!

... except ensuring Mom right now that she has nothing to worry about. Very strange. I am bursting with positivity and even somewhat looking forward to VASSAR, to prove that I, Iman, can indeed stay at a residential semester. But for some reason, I am unable to relieve Mom's fears right now in the Uber. Why is it? Do I not subconsciously believe I can? Is my confidence just a charade?

Something hit me like déjà vu, but I can't quite pinpoint what. It's strange. Strange how you know you're on the cusp of remembering something eerily similar that happened before, but can't quite put a finger on it. Is it about the way we were going? That can't be it: we've gone to Gulshan DCC Market so many times before, and it's also on the way to Dad's office. Then is it about this strange resistance to speak my mind to Mom?

I didn't have time to explore this thought as we had reached our destination by then.

"What? 125 taka?" Mom's voice didn't match her calm demeanor. "Wasn't it showing less than 100 before, Iman?"

"Hmm. It was 96 point something."

“There was some traffic jam,” the driver said, craning his neck back. “And, Apa¹⁶, I have nothing to do with this. The fare comes from the system. The server controls everything.”

“Hmm,” Mom said, her voice still a bit strained. “But it’s very unfair. What if the passenger doesn’t have the inflated amount? Many times I just have some change, and that’s it. Like, I shop while keeping in mind that the rickshaw fare is 20 taka, and not a taka more is often left.”

“Apa, if you don’t have the extra amount, then it’s ok. Just give the original fare, then.”

Mom took out a hundred taka note and a 50 taka one and said to charge the new amount. After we stepped out, she told me there’s no use lying in a bargain. “What’s 20-30 taka?” she said. “We *just* came for shopping. Making an excuse like we don’t have money would be a blatant lie.”

Almost an hour later we still had our hands empty. We did buy some groceries on the ground floor – two packs of tang (packs, not jars, since the jars cost more), one jar of coffee mate (this doesn’t come in packs) and one of Classic Nescafe (the foreign brands cost more), facewash for me (I don’t remember which brand because Mom always chooses for me), toiletries (you know which ones – we’ve talked about these in the Uber), a dozen Safari chocolates (I have grown somewhat sick of Safari because that’s become a family staple) and 4 KitKats (KitKats I still dig, but why can’t Mom choose more *bideshi*¹⁷ ones like Maltesers and Hersheys? – I have yet to taste Heryshey’s Kisses – I mean, Dairy Milk and KitKats are alright, but why not experiment with the others?).

We did buy these and some more things which I can’t quite remember at the moment, but one of the reasons why we are still empty-handed is because Mom had convinced the shopkeeper to keep our bought goods in the shop for now, to which the shopkeeper agreed, of course, since we had paid and all, though it was a few hundred taka less than he had initially wanted.

“Is it ok if we leave the stuff here?” Mom had said. “We just arrived. We’ll come back for them when we are done shopping upstairs. What’s the shop number? Hmm, ‘Jashim’s Best Values’ ... Will you remember, Iman?” I had nodded, though I knew for sure it would be Mom who would be the one to remember. She remembers everything. She remembers everyone’s birthdays and telephone numbers – yes, literally everyone’s – of all my cousins and uncles and aunts and my close friends’ even (not their

¹⁶ Literally meaning sister, it is also a polite way to address an elder or upper-class female, kind of like “Ma’am.” Interestingly, “Apa” is a more respectable yet more distant honorific than “Apu.”

¹⁷ A literal translation would give “foreign.” But *bideshi* is more than foreign products; it is anything unknown or exotic, or even less available, less mainstream. Interestingly, we tend to focus more on the metaphorical sense when we say *bideshi* than its English equivalent.

phone numbers; she doesn't have those). A week ago she had reminded me, "Isn't Afifa's birthday tomorrow? What will you give her? Will a box of Lexus biscuits do?" To which I had said yes, but I guess I had nodded yes not specifically for the choice of the gift, but upon the reminder that oh yes my Mom is a Vidyasagar¹⁸.

The Art of Bargaining

There was another reason why almost an hour had elapsed and we were still carrying no bags. The downstairs shopping didn't take more than 16 minutes. The rest of the time was spent by Mom's tireless bargaining sessions with salesmen. Even though none of the bargains were successful yet (which is why our hands are empty), I never cease to be amazed by Mom's negotiation skills. The way she casually asks for half the price – sometimes less – without even feeling the least bit of embarrassment was sheer incredible. I was going to say it's sheer inspirational, but it's way beyond my capacity to aim for such mastery. I have never bargained at a shop in my life, though to be fair the number of times I bought something by myself has not hit double digits. I wouldn't know how much to ask for something – I don't know enough to hazard a guess. But it's experience that matters. Mom was born and brought up in the village, and yet she is the smoothest talker I know, and most certainly the best negotiator.

"Don't want to waste our time, nor yours," Mom said, tracing her hands on a black shirt with turquoise stripes. "For the sake of brevity, please say the price first."

"Apa, price is an afterthought. What matters first is choice. Apa, first make a choice, then we shall negotiate."

"Price is always first. Say a good price and that will influence my choice."

"Apa, the one you are holding is 1500."

"What about 700?" Mom said. I couldn't help noticing that her expression remained unchanged after the price reveal. That of the shopkeeper, though, was picturesque, his crestfallen face more to do with the wariness of this dangerous customer than for the ridiculous asking price.

"No, Apa. We didn't even buy it at that price. Take it for 1250, Apa."

¹⁸ Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is considered the father of Bangla prose. His last name is actually an epithet awarded to him. It means "Ocean of Knowledge" – *Vidya* meaning knowledge and *Sagar* meaning ocean.

“800. Take it or leave it.”

Isn't that, I thought, something that the seller is supposed to say? Well, no way would the shopkeeper yield the shirt at that price. Right? A minute later, I had the first shopping bag in my hand. Turns out that Mom didn't budge a single digit after the initial 100 taka bump. The shopkeeper too was relentless. He had dropped the bar to 1000 and said it was his buying cost, but when we turned to leave, he called out to us, “Apa, take it!”

Mom asked me if I saw how much of a cheat people are. She said she was planning on returning to the shop if the shopkeeper hadn't called back, and that she wouldn't even have bumped the negotiation price from 700 to 800 if she didn't like the shirt. But she didn't really need to tell me all that. I knew. I knew exactly that this is the reason why we hadn't bought anything (aside from the grocery shopping downstairs) yet. By this time, Mom had scoured most of the stalls from the places she normally goes to in this market in order to get an overall gauge of the new items for sale, stopping here and there to check the prices of some which caught her eye. Some of the items – like an abaya, a three piece, and a City Jewellers imitation ring, basically things for her – I thought Mom will buy, but she never bumped up her willing price, and for some she didn't even bother to reveal that, saying she doesn't want to indulge in *mukh noshto kora*¹⁹.

My interpretation of Mom first getting a feeling of the place and then picking and choosing her fight turned out to be right, as within the span of 19 minutes I could barely hold the bags – seven in number, as I later counted – in my hands. Mom kept wanting to relieve me with some of the weight, but I insisted that I was fine. Indeed I am a muscle man, having great ambition in bodybuilding from age 7 when I watched Goku yell *kamehameha* and yelled in unison with the fictional character on the TV screen. But really the reason I pushed to carry the bags was to make myself feel useful enough to be here with Mom. I hadn't chosen one single thing; whenever she asked which of the two, three, four items I like, I said, “Your wish, Ammu,” and whenever Mom asked if I like something she thinks will suit me well, regardless of my actual answer, I would always say, “Your wish, Ammu. Yeah, it's good. But no need to spend so much for me.”

But why did I find it so paralyzing to do so little as to voice my choice? It's partly because Mom's choices are always good and I don't have any complaints, except for her choice of repeatedly buying the same chocolates every single time. Another reason is that I don't want to make a fool of myself by having an outlandish choice. I remember once, way back in class 1 or 2, we had our first Pizza Hut experience. Strange taste buds must I have had in age 9, as I blurted out that I actually enjoyed our school pizza which cost 20 taka (crazy how low prices were a decade ago) more than the “bland” Pizza Hut pizza which cost 400 taka (wow it was that much even then?). I also never play those guessing

¹⁹ Translation won't do it justice, and effectively ruins the saying. Literally, it means to ruin one's mouth, but a more apt translation would be to ruin one's mood by saying the words.

games of estimating the price tag of a product after seeing it. A bag which I had thought was worth 200 taka was actually over a thousand, shocking indeed as it was bought by Mom. (Mom had looked disappointed after I made the guess, though I guess it was not directed at me as much as it was towards herself for having spent so much on her stuff.) A third reason behind my resistance to engage in shopping transactions springs from the very sincere fact that I don't want to burden Mom into buying something she didn't plan on buying, and out of fear that perhaps by the act of choosing one item over the other, I would actually overrule Mom's original choice – which she might in all likelihood have kept at bay for the formality of asking for my opinion, which she took for granted she wouldn't receive.

And therein lies the fourth and most important reason: the sociological one. I have got used to not saying anything during such shopping trips, and Mom has got used to my passivity as well. In consequence, both of us, consciously or not, tended to not disturb the inertia by remaining in our set places, our set characteristics as fixed by habits. What are habits, really? And why are they so difficult to get over? Man is slave to habit: this may be a common saying, but I doubt people truly grasp the sway past experiences hold over them – especially when the past experiences become definitive, and finally defining. It's weird how people say the first step to working towards an issue is to acknowledge the existence of that issue. In other words, the issue has to become definitive in order to be noticed, if not by the person afflicted, then by his acquaintances. Once acknowledged and accepted by the afflictee, does the path towards solution really manifest? Cannot the opposite happen? Can't it be the case that the person, upon realization of his faults, then fall slave to habit, a trap he might not have been ensnared in otherwise, and then truly have an issue which his subconscious isn't willing to deal with?

Well, addiction doesn't work like that, though. Come on, Iman. Snap out of it. You're thinking wrong. Addicts may not realize they are alcoholics, or that they are smokers, or that they bite nails. Acknowledgement does not precede bad habits. At least not always. Perhaps there was also some truth in how acknowledgement leads to a vicious cycle, spurring the definitive traits and thrusting them in orbit, making those traits defining, to haunt the social character in perpetuity. Just like that prodigy classmate had turned over a new leaf for the better due to a cajoled habit of being disciplined, perhaps the same works on the opposite side. Come on, Iman. Snap out of it. This topic's pointless.

It was a few seconds before I realized it wasn't me telling myself to snap out of it, but actually Mom. She looked slightly worried, but she didn't let it show for long. She burst out into a laugh and said, "Oh, I know the one thing that's left to buy. You thought I would forget about it, huh? An extra power bank, right? So that you can use your phone to watch WWE and those cartoons you watch nowadays. As for internet package, Abbu is going to give his other SIM to you. It's post-paid, so you can buy many GB internet data at once."

I grinned, genuinely. "Thank you, Ammu!" Well, if there is one thing I won't like to change about myself, something which makes me different from others, it's being a WWE fan. *While most people buy MB, I buy GB* – hmm, that'll be one boast I can do.

Chapter 5: Means and Ends

“Wow,” Saif said as his eyes flickered all around *BoshontoRaj 101*. “Wow.”

I smiled. “Hello! Good to- good to meet you! I hope you didn’t mind me touching your stuff! I just tidied things up a bit. I’m Iman. ENH. 2nd semester.”

“I’m Saif. Nah, man. Thanks a lot. I never was tidy and clean. Thank God I’ve got a roomie like you. Thanks again, man. Especially the study table. Man, I’m a lazy-ass when it comes to that, God help me. But you didn’t hafta fix my bed sheet too. Wow.”

I grinned, not only for the compliments but also because his “wow’s” reminded me of Nihan. I had last heard from him just last night when he promised to meet every day at the recreation hall to play carrom and table tennis. Sadly, something had told me those were empty promises, similar to how grownups always conjure fake smiles at letting guests leave, always saying, “Please stay the night! No ...? Well, promise to come again soon!” even though the moment they leave, a sigh, not of disappointment but of relief, is expelled at the prospect of finally being stress-free in the house. Would Nihan and I grow distant like this, dreading a once-in-a-month phone call which we both would have to drag through with an impassioned tone to give justice to our past best friend status? Would we also pretentiously and even more disingenuously chide each other for failing to check up on one another more often, and then half-heartedly resolve to do so from then on?

I wouldn’t know. I have never had a best friend growing up; the ones I considered best friends didn’t hang out with me for hours every weekday, at least. But even if we do grow apart, I was hoping that VASSAR would be a fertile ground to make long-lasting friends. And by the looks of how my VASSAR journey started – me having to drag around a mountain of baggage on my way to *BoshontoRaj*, the furthest dorm from the gate – I was worried more bad omens would come my way. Praying and hoping to make a good impression on my roommates, I had tidied up the room after setting up my stuff (which took a long, long time, considering I had to unpack my table fan too and search for a plug, which unfortunately wasn’t next to my bed, so in the end having to set it up in an awkward position). I had debated whether or not to touch my yet-stranger roommates’ property. Wouldn’t such unsolicited service rather serve counter to my hopes of a good first impression?

Thanks Almighty Allah that Saif appreciated my gesture. Bannu, my other roommate, was similarly pleased. But he had a smile plastered on his face not completely from gratefulness, but also from, I gather, amusement.

“Thank you, Iman,” he had said. “You did a good job.”

However, it wasn't a good job at all, as I found out fifteen minutes later. I had left for the washroom only to come back to see that the bed was completely remade, the tables almost completely reorganized, and my table fan propped up on top of my study table.

Bannu saw my surprise, and, still smiling, said, "See? That's a *much* better spot, much better position, for your table fan. I guess you study a lot, but even when you are lying ... on bed ... even then you can, um, tilt the head of the fan a bit down. To suit you. I also have a multiplug, so tell me if you want the fan set anywhere else."

I was about to say something but Bannu shook his head and gave me a thumbs up. I smiled too. He was showing appreciation for my effort, for that is what matters. Saif too gave me an okay-signal, though I'm not sure what he was okay'ing. My gesture, perhaps? Getting up, he suggested for the three of us to go for a walk. It would be a "bonding experience," he said. Bannu laughed and muttered something like "Saif, you not tired after that journey from the gate to the dorm?" I laughed too, and began talking about how much of a hard time I had dragging around my luggages. Yes, I told them, *luggages* – plural. But then halfway through recounting my experience, I started hesitating. How much should I divulge to two people I just met? Bannu and Saif appeared to sense my sudden communication-block. Bannu shook my shoulders from behind and gave me a strong jerk.

"Man! Those muscles really are *something*! But what you gonna do in these three months? Your muscles gonna shrink!"

"Gains, they call them," piped in Saif. "I used to go to the gym too, Iman. But boy oh boy I could never dream to have such big guns as you! Wow!"

"I ..." I said, looking down at the floor. "I brought my dumbbell too ..." Waiting for more laughter but not getting it, I looked up in horror. They were genuinely taken aback. A hard pat on the back then followed, and then Saif too began to feel my biceps, saying something like "why man do you gotta wear long sleeved and loose tees to cover those big boys? You gotta let them breathe, y'know." I then started laughing, more so at relief that I was getting along right away with the two people I would spend most of my time with over the next 90 days.

Ethics and Society

PHI 102, or *Ethics and Society*, as the course was called, became my undisputed favorite course not only of my VASSAR life but of my entire life, period. The teacher himself was a PhD holder, and so I

was stoked to engage in philosophical debates with him. Having always been fascinated by philosophical arguments and dilemmas, anime like *Death Note* and *PsychoPass* and *Code Geass* really hooked me more so for their philosophical overtones than the thriller component. I had even considered studying Philosophy in my Honors program, but there being no scope for doing so at my university, I went for English.

But not everyone in the class thought PHI 102 was a cinch.

“Hello, Iman!” Nihan called me after dinner. “Help in Ethics course, man! I’m not getting heads or tails of it.”

“Hehe, it’s *making* heads or tails. Good to hear from you, bro. What’s up?”

“Come, on, man. Don’t treat me like casual friend, saying good to hear from you and stuff. Anyway, let’s study Friday afternoon, aight?”

“Yeah, sure. But I’m teaching some of my friends too. Ok? Oh, and hear this! One of my roomies says ‘Wow’ a lot haha!”

“Hey, man. That’s gimmick fringement! I gonna suit him!”

“Hahaha I sometimes wonder if you do that to crack me up. Nihan, it’s *infringement*, and it’s *sue*. ‘Suit’ is the noun, as in lawsuit.”

That Friday afternoon Nihan could not make it to the study session, having been caught up in some rather serious Dare consequence in Truth or Dare. However, I met a new student of mine who came in wearing a panjabi and a Muslim cap of all things. Apparently, he had had no time to go to his dorm and change. So panicked was he about the upcoming PHI 102 quiz that he occupied a study hall chair more than an hour before I came, in case seats would be filled afterwards. That poor guy’s name is Yaseen.

Catcher in the Rye

AGR 101, or *Mushroom Cultivation*, was another of my VASSAR courses. It was a complete 180 from PHI 102. Nope, you’re not good at *everything*, Iman, I told myself. Not everything new is to be aced, I

knew, but it still stung. My university life had been mostly all highs, but I knew ebb and flow is the nature of all things everywhere not named Heaven. Still, I wasn't *terrible* at it: I had got 8/10 in the quiz, not a good mark at all but one that showed I wasn't hopeless at it.

As part of our course requirement, we were going to go outside the campus for a field trip to an actual mushroom farm. Bannu and Saif were excited to get outside this "cage after a month of captivity."

"Why? Aren't you liking VASSAR, guys?" I asked, genuinely surprised at their remark.

"Ah, of course," Saif said. "I'm having the best time of my life."

"Me too, man," Bannu said, coming over to me and grabbing my biceps, trying to see if he could touch the fingers of one hand with the other by cupping them. "Just because we like or even love something, you know. Just because we love it don't mean we don't wanna go out. Not everyone can handle being, ah, stuck in one place for long, you know."

I nodded. I knew it, of course, that not everyone prefers being cooped up in one place like me. But sometimes some things are so alien to some people that they question them even though they know them to be true.

"I'm not only looking forward to get out of VASSAR for some cold air," Saif said. "I'm also pumped about the mushroom trip!"

"Oh, yes," Bannu laughed. "Mushroom Mushroom!" He sang *mushroom mushroom* as if it were part of a song. When I asked what it was, the two of them laughed some more.

"One does not need to know *everything*, Iman. Actually, it's important *not* to know everything," Bannu said, and then burst into a fit of laughter again. Scratching my head, I dropped the topic and called Sarin to ask if she was assigned to be on the same bus as me.

She wasn't, and as it turned out, none of my friends were except for Sifat. Sifat wasn't really a *friend* friend, but I did talk with him at times. If I were to describe him, I would say he is a mix of Yaseen and Sarin. Umm, no, I take back the analogy. He may be as sweet as Sarin but doesn't have friends who are drawn to his appreciative attitude. He also isn't *as* uptight as Yaseen, but he really is very anxious and self-conscious nonetheless. When I say self-conscious, I also don't mean the type who is oversensitive

and acts like a drama queen, in constant search of self-gratification. Sifat is self-conscious in the sense that he incessantly apologizes and thanks and praises and says all the greetings known to mankind from “Nice to meet you” to “It was a pleasure talking to you” and “Thanks for giving me so much time” and so on. I feel sorry for him every time I see him, and I always make sure to ask how he is doing (he has depression and anxiety) and how he is coping with study pressure (somehow he always ends up missing deadlines even though he is hardworking). And so today seeing the seat beside him unoccupied, I sat next to him.

“Assalamu Alaikum, Iman! How are you?!”

“Wa Alaikum Assalam. Alhamdulillah I’m fine. How are you doing?”

“Good, good. Alhamdulillah. I was just reading this book. It’s called *The Catcher in the Rye*, written by J. D. Salinger.”

“Oh, catcher in the rye. Um, I’ve heard of it but never read. What’s it about? No, don’t tell me. I don’t want spoilers. Just tell me about the title. What is rye?”

“Good question, Iman. I think a rye is one kind of plant. Yeah, yeah, I remember. It’s a grain. Like a cereal.”

“Ah. How is it related? Does someone catch the rye, like is someone doing rye cultivation? Similarly, we are also going to see mushroom cultivation now haha.”

“That’s a good point, Iman. I haven’t thought of it that way. But the novel is about someone wishing to change the world but failing. Basically, the morale is that no single man can change the world. Similarly, now you mention it, rye is also a very flexible grain. It makes bread, animal food, and even beer and whisky. So, in that sense, it is, um, very dependable. But still in pH of, ah, less than 4.5 and more than 8? Yes, more than 8 and less than 4.5 pH value will damage rye. Between 4.5 and 8 is very good, actually. But still it’s not, um-”

“Infallible?”

“Yes, it’s not infallible. Not invincible. It isn’t all-powerful. Similarly, one single person, um, can only do so much. He or she cannot, ah, change the whole world on their own.”

“Whoa, I love it! Makes a lot of sense. So, catching rye means to be flexible and have multifaceted skills. But still even if we catch rye, we cannot solve all of the world’s problems alone. We need various people with various, uh, specializations to have the most effect.”

“Yes! There is also another, um, metaphor meaning. I’m sorry, metaphorical meaning. The catcher of the rye means someone, ah, someone who is holding onto their childhood. It ... Oh! I’m so sorry, Iman. You said no spoilers! Oh, silly me, going on and on! I hope you forgive me!”

“Ahha, no, Sifat. Haha it’s nothing. You actually made me interested to read the book. Thanks, man. I love the concept! I also see you’ve been doing a lot of research and reading beyond the text! So tell me about yourself now. Are you behind schedule again? Want some help in Ethics? Mind you, I don’t know much about this mushroom course!”

“Oh, thank you for asking, Iman. Well, I *am* trying to study. Whenever I open a book, I take lots of notes, but then ... then all my time run out before I even finish half ... half my work. So unfortunately, I’m a bit, um, bit behind. Thank you for asking, Iman!”

“No, no, seriously. What’s wrong? Tell me. Let me help if I can. Is it the concepts? Or too much information? I don’t see you outside much. In the recreation hall or the field. So I thought you’re mostly studying.”

“Yes ... I try to study. But when I see that, ah, that I am not making much progress, I feel more down. For example, I am not just reading this book for, for, for time pass. It’s the book I took for the mandatory reading for pleasure activity. You know, we have to finish at least one book this semester.”

“Oh, but that’s not a problem. You *should* focus on your mandatory readings. Only read other things if you have time, man. How about the mandatory responses in the online terminal? I didn’t see your responses there, maybe.”

“I haven’t written them yet.”

“But why? It contains 5 percent of our total marks! It’s important and really easy! If you don’t know the answers, then you can always see the other students’ responses and then paraphrase them. Or just google them.”

“I ... I don't want to do that. I want to write when I have finished studying the chapter. Not before. Not by seeing other responses ... Sorry ...”

“What are you apologizing for, man? Well, this is very noble of you. I'm quite impressed. But, you see, it's not cheating. You can simply read others' answers to get an idea. Then write whatever you understand. Also, the responses are there on the post. If the authority thought it was cheating like you do, then they wouldn't let it be a public post where we can see others' comments. There are strict deadlines for these, you know.”

“Yes. Thank you so much, Iman. It means a lot. Really! Thank you.”

The rest of the ride was spent by me – aside from brushing away his continual words of thanks (which I bet went to double digits) – trying to convince him to put aside his brutal honesty in some cases. Back in my school days, I too was caught up in an extreme desire to *always* be 100% honest. No, I'm not just talking about passing on the opportunity to cheat during exams or copying homework. By brutal honesty I mean that whenever someone asked me how much time was left for the end of class (for I was among the few in class who used to wear a watch), I wouldn't simply say, “fifteen minutes” or “seventeen minutes,” but rather “seventeen minutes forty-eight seconds.” If I said to Mom that I would come to the dinner table in five minutes, then it was exactly that: five minutes zero seconds.

The realization that Sifat's obsession in always doing the right thing was all too similar to me from the past did not really make me happy. I had wondered what would happen if I, the antisocial spoilt brat, would meet a more antisocial, a more spoilt brat. Granted, Sifat was anything but spoilt; he had the utmost integrity. But he surely was much more awkward than I was. So, I used to wonder how finding such a person would make me feel. Actually, I was not at all happy for finding myself better off than at least some of my peers. Ah, poor Sifat! I wish I could really help that guy out.

I was thinking of that – how to help Sifat not only regarding studies but also in life – when we stepped out of the bus. It was a windy day. The breeze was colder than I had expected. Even though I had brought so many luggages, not even one set of winter clothes was considered. But winter in Dhaka could not compare to here at VASSAR. Normally, my high metabolism keeps the cold at bay, but something about today was off: even the day before I had enjoyed the wind so much that I kept the windows open – no window mesh net, even – despite my fear of bugs. Had I caught a cold?

Suddenly I saw that I was alone outside the bus. Everyone else must have moved on. Naturally, the whole thousand VASSAR students didn't arrive on the same bus and also not at the same time. So,

either I was going to have to wait for another bus to arrive, or I was going to have to move on my own to catch up with the other students or one of the two faculty members who came with us on the bus.

I was afraid. Yup, super weird. What's there to be afraid of? It wasn't dark, and it wasn't like I was stranded in this big place after it shut down. And there must be guards at the gate, right? I could just ask them. They are just a few meters behind me, near where our bus had parked. But for some reason ... well, I won't deny it ... it's probably my social awkwardness turned up to full volume. My body wouldn't comply with my mind to turn around and walk just a few paces to speak to the guards for directions. And so I walked on forward by myself, hoping to spot a student.

It was a big area. I don't know what I expected, but when I heard "farm," I had pictured a village farm where some plots of land are divided and ... that's it. Some greeneries, some wheat or corn or whatever is being cultivated ... those things barricaded in a rectangular perimeter, and perhaps some farmers tilling wheat or something. But of course, the mushroom farm was an institute, a factory of farms, if you will.

Still, I had not walked for more than a minute or two when I heard someone call me by name from behind. Whirling around, I saw a girl clad in a black abaya with bubbly print, a blue hijab with sea patterns, and a heart-shaped nose supporting big rimmed spectacles. Her hijab was also worn in such a way that she resembled a penguin.

"Iman, right?" the girl asked.

"Oh, yes!" I had forgotten that she had called my name before too, causing me to turn around in the first place. How did she know my name?

"Well, are you lost, Iman?"

"What, lost? No, haha. I- I- I just fell behind before I knew it. I- Well, you can say I was lost in thought, haha. In that sense, yes, I *was* lost."

The girl laughed. A loud, hearty laugh.

"What about you? You also ... you also fell behind? Lost in thought?"

“I wonder ...” the girl said, and true to her word, she fell into a trance-like state, as if truly now wondering about something. And then she regained her composure. “Oh, you got left behind, you said? Come, let me guide you to where the others are. I kind of know this place. Yes, really. My uncle works here. No, he’s not a farmer. Authority stuff, something like that.” And then she gave that loud, hearty laugh again. Though not knowing why, I was incredibly amused with this specimen.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Umm,” the girl again fell into that pensive state, as if she was trying to give a fake name because she was working undercover. “Who do I look like? Do I look like a Sophia? Or a Janet? Or a Rose, perhaps?”

“Huh?”

“Why don’t you tell me which name I look like?”

“I- I *don’t* know! But why did you choose all English names?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. Ok, do I look like a Krishna? Or an Achebe? That’s African, by the way. Or a Megumi? That’s Japanese.”

“Umm, why not Bangla names?”

“Ah, that would spoil the fun! Come on, try it! Use your imagination!”

“Umm, you look Saudi ...”

“Oohhhh! Yes! Hahaha!”

“I’ve read that Saudi girls wear their hijab in a distinct way, and it’s what instinctively came to my mind somehow.”

“That’s it! That is *it!*”

“Hm? What is what?”

“Using instinct, you know. People overthink way too much. Sometimes the proof is in the pudding, right there in front of you. Well, technically, inside you, not in front of you, as it’s in your mind. Ahahahaha! The human brain is a great thing. Trust it!”

“Wow. Well, I still didn’t get your name. What is it?”

“What do *you* want to call me?”

“... I don’t know ... I’ve never had to decide what to call someone before. Never gave anyone a nickname. Well, I call one of my roommates Bannu, which is obviously a nickname, but everyone calls him that ...”

“Hmm ... A nickname would be nice. But what’s nicer is to not even think of it. Think of me as a nameless person, why don’t you?”

“... Okay, haha. That’s unique! A name comes to represent the human being. Names themselves aren’t inherently of any value, other than of course convenience. It will be interesting to see how I think of a person I know without, ah, associating them with an arbitrary name. Yup, for a name is absolutely arbitrary until the person gives some weight to it.”

“Right, right! That’s exactly it! You’re a bookworm, aren’t you? Me too! Hey, we can see a group of students there. Let’s go.”

“Um ... we don’t have to. Well, if you don’t mind, of course! Since you know the place, you can show me around by yourself!”

SHE grinned and said something like “of course” or “for sure.” I forget. The important thing was that I had caught my rye.

Chapter 6: Aura

“So, then!” I exclaimed. “Then! Then I said *sir if equality is the end goal, then why equity? Some men, I’m not saying all, but some men may feel slighted that so-and-so percentage is reserved for women, that women are given special privilege in many cases like they are treated with more respect, um, more chivalry. And they get sympathy for mental illness while men are mocked for the same.*”

“Yes, yes,” SHE nodded. “That makes sense. I mean, your points do, not the unequal treatment.”

“I know, right. Sir appreciated my, uh, insight. But he tended to disagree. Said something like, um, historical discrimination of women which has left long-lasting scars. That they have been so trampled down throughout the ages, that they can’t compete with men on the same level if we don’t- if we don’t raise them up by providing equity. Like, it’s not an inherent flaw of women. Not a fault or lack of potential of their gender. But, you know, lots of things. I think the worst thing is social norms. You know, people are mostly conformers. For men, it’s socio-historically has been – has always been – *their* world, you know. I completely agree. But what I’m saying is that fighting inequality with *more* inequality ... that’s wrong! Like, when men – some men – see women being put up on a, a, pedestal, then don’t they feel it’s unfair? Doesn’t that create an *us vs. them* mindset?”

“Wow, Iman. You’ve thought these things through!”

“Um, well, yes and no. It’s true that I love philosophizing. But many times ... I’ve seen that many times what happens is that my mind works, um, rapid fast! When the teacher is saying something, thoughts burst in my mind. Many times it’s thoughts I’ve never had. And *all the time* I feel like I have things to say. Sometimes I feel I’m speaking too much. Well, I *do*, actually. It’s like I take the class alongside our PhD teacher! But still, if I were to give, um, give, ah, give free reign! If I were to give free reign and speak whatever’s on my mind! Well, let’s just say I don’t even get across half of what I’m thinking. No, even less!”

“Well, you can tell me that other half you’ve been holding onto! Hahaha!”

“Hehehe. Thank you! Well, I gotta go now. To teach my friends. Hey, why don’t you come too? Of course, I can’t teach *you*! You know better than me, haha. But you can just be there and we can teach together! Or you can help some of the students to learn. It’s difficult for me to teach more than seven or eight at a time.”

“Umm, I *will* come sometimes! Not today, though. But I wanna ask you one thing, Iman.”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

“You said they are your friends at first. But then you referred to them, um, as, as, students. No ... just leave it. You enjoy teaching, right? Just don’t overexert yourself!”

“Ah, did I call them students? Haha well, they’re my friends. Well, umm, actually only a few are good friends like Nihan and Minthan and Sarin. That Yaseen boy is really something, by the way. If anyone has you beat in study dedication, it’s him! But he’s too uptight and doesn’t talk of much else. And he’s got foundational problems in English. I feel bad for him, really. Ok, I should go. I think Nihan was calling me. I think I can see him across the field, haha. Bye!”

“Goodbye, Iman!”

Actually, there was more left unsaid to SHE about my friends-students. A week ago, I had messed up in my PHI 102 midterm exam, somehow skipping a 5-mark question unintentionally. The fact that I had stayed up the night prior, teaching almost till daybreak, must have had something to do with my groggy state.

“Sir, I’ve made a mistake!” I said to our course instructor an hour after the exam ended, five minutes after a topper from another section was discussing the answers with me over the phone, at which point I had found out that I somehow skipped over the very question that I just explained to him. “Sir, I unintentionally skipped over the (b) part of Question 2! I know the answer and I can tell you about it now. There’s even no need for that. That question asked about the differences between Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics. Yes, I didn’t answer that question. But the Case Study question at the end also asked for a critical analysis of the two theories and also required making a judgement call about the right answer. In that sense, I did show in the exam paper that I am perfectly aware of the differences between the two philosophical theories! Sir, can you not consider my marks for that?”

“Ah, that’s very unfortunate, Iman. I feel terrible for you. But no, I cannot consider that since the two questions were separate. Students had to answer both. If some people couldn’t answer both because of time issues, then I can’t consider that and give marks, right? And also even those people who *could* finish ... They have had to finish by thinking of the time constraints. It would be unfair to let someone answer only one question, then. Because the other students have had to answer both. If they knew answering only one would be ok, then they could have spent more time in writing just one answer. I’m sorry, Iman. But you’ll have to do your best in the rest of your course requirements. Don’t lose heart!”

As a matter of fact, I *didn't* lose heart. Even though this loss of 5 marks all but ensured that I would not be getting an A in this course. Even though people hardly get an A even as it is, as the university policy stresses teachers never to give full marks in theory questions. Even though my scholarship would be in jeopardy, and possibly go out the window altogether, for one simple unlucky incident. Even though I had spent my heart and soul on this course for the past two months and taught it to at least thirty people from seven sections.

Despite all of that, I didn't lose heart, and I think I know the one saving grace that let me have confidence to still aim for acing the course, despite now having a 95% threshold to reach. It was SHE. It was the confidence and the happiness and the calm and all the positive adjectives in the world that SHE inspires. Whenever I am with SHE, whether physically near her presence or over the phone, or even when I think of her, I am filled with this inner peace, this inexpressible feeling too strong to be held down and labelled, this feeling that I can take on the entire world and still come out the victor.

SHE had laughed when I said this to her. That loud, hearty laughter that my heart too now does when I am basking in her aura. "Really? Do I really, truly, in all actuality of the world inspire that much positivity in you?" SHE had asked. I had said *yes, truly, in all actuality of the world and in the Heavens as well*, which earned another divine laughter from SHE.

Then, though her aura retained her bubblyness, SHE's expression turned more serious: "Iman, this is actually my dream. I live my life loving it. And if that attitude inspires others to do the same, I couldn't ask for more. There are so many problems in the world, but the one thing that will do the world good ... the one thing I would say which everyone can adopt and make the world a better place for themselves and for others ... that's to be open-minded. To have an open mind and an open *heart*. Open to all kinds of people and all kinds of ideologies. At least willing to give everything a chance. But ... that's not it either. I don't support rebels who, you know, rebel for the heck of it. Like, there is always room for improvement. Always. But that doesn't mean you have to keep fighting for every little bad thing and then ruin the good things in trying to get that one little good thing, right? So, being open doesn't just mean, um, to always *look* for change. It means, at least to me, to be open *if* it's required. Umm, sorry, I don't have a way with words. I don't know if you're getting it."

"Wow. No, no, it makes perfect sense. That's awesome. You mean that you don't go out of your way to make *others* be open-minded. It's just that you yourself remain open to others. But if others are rigid ... if other people have a rigid way of thinking, you don't run into a frenzy to try to quote-unquote correct them. Or *better* them."

"Hahaha. Now you're making this sound bad. I also do wanna touch hearts, you know. Just like you wanna preach."

“Ohhh! I get it! You touch people’s hearts in your own way. Your jolly and happy-go-round attitude is infectious. It makes other people want to be this happy as well. And when people get to know you, they see your awesomely cheerful side! And then they get cheery too! Learning to love life! You always think openly, but never concern yourself about it when someone else doesn’t!”

SHE had laughed her signature laugh at this, but I noticed there was something more to this, something that shined her flashy, noisy laugh with even more luster. It was only hours later upon reflection, after I had just finished up a study session, that I realized that the glint was actually the light that caught her eye. Was SHE tearing up? For what? I was going to text her when I saw that SHE had already texted: “it’s all ENERGY! when someones surrounded by POSITIVE ENERGY then he/ she cant help but be positive. but remember! opposite is also true!!”

Negative Energy

It was the last week of VASSAR. We were given permission to stay an extra day after our last final exam ends, a declaration by the Chancellor which garnered loud, nearly unanimous screams of jubilation. It was all anyone could talk about for the entire day, about how it was the very first VASSAR batch given this privilege, and how they were gonna “turn VASSAR upside down” with a nocturnal party. Of course, an educational residential semester, even when the educational stuff is taken away for one day reserved for entertainment, would and could never allow rowdy and rambunctious behavior out of students. But still they arranged for a Cultural Fest on the last night of VASSAR, where couple dances would also be a feature.

I was among the few who did not share the enthusiasm of the thousand of us – among the few for whom an adverbial modifier – *nearly* – was used to tone down the adjective *unanimous* in the paragraph above.

“Imagine!” Bannu teased. “Imagine Iman dancing on the stage at culture fest!”

“Oh, he’ll have no problem with that,” Saif shot a smirk. “He’s with girls all the time. VASSAR has blossomed him rapidly. Isn’t that right, grown-man-who-teaches-five-six-girls-at-once?”

“Nah, man,” I said honestly. “I’m good. No couple dance for me haha.”

“Come on!” they both said in unison. Then Saif said something about me missing out on opportunities even when they knocked at my door. And Bannu said something like I was a blossomed flower but still a shy one, and that I would remain so until I got a taste of being ... Let’s just say it was an innuendo.

But something about the flower analogies got me thinking: if opportunity *did* knock at the door, then SHE would be open, but otherwise SHE would not go out knocking at people's doors. I was the same way, actually, now that I thought about it.

"If it happens, it happens," I thought aloud.

"Eh!" Bannu snickered. "You hear that, mushroom mushroom? *Mushroom mushroom!*"

"*Mushroom mushroom!*" Saif sang along.

I shook my head at them and said, "Cultural Fest's a week away. Come, let's finish up Communitarianism. Viva is only four days away, and you guys haven't even finished half the syllabus!"

"Hold your horse!" Saif said. "*Ethics and Society* viva is four days away as you said. But *mushroom viva! Mushroom mushroom* viva is day after tomorrow."

"Yup, seriously," Bannu nodded. "And Iman you should study AGR 101 yourself. You're on same boat as us. Will you get A in this course?"

"Ah, nevermind me," I said, shaking my head and dialing up Rafid's number. Rafid and I have recently become friends through Sarin. I had naturally told him he could come to me if he needs *any* kind of help regarding PHI 102. "Let's not go to the study hall now as my girl friends – hey, I said girl friends ... there's a space in between. As my *female* friends are studying AGR 101 tonight. So come to our room."

"And that gives you the right to terrorize us?" Saif pretended to cry.

"And they are doing the smart thing: studying for the closest exam," Bannu said, mimicking Saif.

"No excuses today, guys!" I said. "You two bailed out on the last two study sessions. If I, Iman, can't even help my own roommates, then ..."

In about ten minutes, Rafid came, and so too did two other dorm mates. When met with the astounded eyes of Bannu and Saif, one of them shrugged and said, “That mushroom course is nothing. We’ll stay awake the night before and just memorize the main points. Sir gave us hints of the three potential topics which may come. He said *potential*, so that’s really code for *will absolutely come*.”

“Ok, so communitarianism is-”

“Iman,” said Rafid. “I haven’t read single line after mid. Can ya please start from after mid syllabus?”

“Yeah, I know. The first chapter after the midterm is Communitarianism. Hehe, I knew you guys didn’t study or even if you did you didn’t understand most of it. Enough of it. So, ok, let’s start.”

An hour later, we were still at communitarianism, and my patience was running thin. They were mixing up the philosopher names, even though we were only talking about the most well-known ones like Aristotle and Hegel. But those things are okay – I expect my students to struggle with terms and concepts. But when they do not try enough – like Rafid is constantly picking up his phone to reply to texts, and while Bannu *is* taking notes, he is slouched on the bed with a heavy blanket on him while the rest of us are sitting on the floor – in times like these I suffer. Yes, I loved teaching, and I understood that it won’t always be having insightful discussions with students and also not seeing the light bulbs turning on in the heads of students after my explanations. I knew and expected struggles, but today I just was not feeling it.

What’s worse, I had no clue how to confront such slacking students. Yes, I can chide them, as I did just now, for slacking off when they miss study sessions, or when they don’t submit their homework to me. But I could not get myself to say anything when their attention lagged during the actual sessions. Why? Is that because I don’t want to face the fear that their lack of attention and effort may be due in part because of my incompetence as a teacher?

As if in answer to my inner thoughts, Rafid texted later on at night:

Hey srry man. i got distrctd 2day

I’ll cme 2morrw too ok?

oh its ok bro

Sarin ws textng me. She in sum prob

tomorrow you sure? cuz mushroom viva the morning after that
why? what happened to sarin

Oh ya sriry. U read mushrm 2morrw
We cn stdy ethcs aftr viva

na bro its alright lets meet tomorrow for Confucianism
but nevermind that
what happened to sarin?

Bro u knw she alwys sweet n all

ya very. MashaAllah

But sum ppl dun alwys take tht gud
Dun take tht psitvly u knw

ah

Shes gt lotsa frnds u knw
Lotsa frnds n she alwys sweet to all
Bro thoug I knw u shrt tym i wnna say ths
I knw u also got lotsa frnds
I knckd u to let u knw tht
Tht if u try to pleas evry1 then
Then u r fghtng a lose lose batte
Cuz u nvr can pleas every1

ah ... thanku bro i appreciate it
but what happened to sarin? is she alright

She will be

She has 2 b

It turned out that I never got to know what really happened to Sarin. But I unfortunately faced a similar situation because of having too many friends. No, it didn't have anything to do with as grandiose a notion as an insecure girlfriend getting angry, suspecting my involvement with any of the fifteen around girls I taught. If it had been, I would have understood her point. But no, Afifa and I were not like that.

It happened a month ago, in midterm week. And at the time, I thought none of it was my fault. And so I was able to come to terms with it comparatively well. Afifa had been complaining – rather seriously, now that I think about it – that I was not making time for older friends, that I was instead making new ones left and right. To her, I was being a “bad, ungrateful friend.”

“I'm really sorry, Afifa,” I had tried to talk things through when I sensed her growing animosity towards me. “I admit I'm not being a good friend. Not being able to make much time to hang out like before. But you see I'm busy all day! And even so, how ... how does that make me ungrateful?”

“You owe your friends your time,” she had replied with a confidence that had made me feel pity for, rather than laugh at, her. “New friends will come and go. But your real friends who are there for you ... Your real friends who *have been there* for you from the start ... I don't understand, Iman. I had thought you different. I thought we would be close friends throughout uni life, if not beyond.”

“But I do tell you to study with us, Afifa. You only ever came once, you know. Whenever I see you, I ask if I can help. Don't I? Tell me.”

“You won't get it ...,” she had sighed. “Friends don't just help, Iman. And helping isn't what it means to be friends. If the two are same, then how can you ever know who are your real friends and who are just there to *take* your help? Don't tell me you've never thought of that. People take advantage of you, man.”

“Well, some will. I understand that! There will always be people like that ... But most people appreciate me a lot, actually. And, Afifa, why do you think I only teach to make friends? I already have many many friends, Alhamdulillah. I don’t go about offering help to, you know, increase my friendlist.”

“I’m talking about you, not them! Why do you gotta go out of your way to help so much! What kind of, of, of, *sick self-validating* habit is this?!”

“... Afifa ... I’ll just say this: why should I care about myself only? I wanna help people for their sake. Not for me. For them. If I can help many people at once by sacrificing ... by sacrificing some sleep and expending a whole lot of effort ... then why should I be selfish and think of myself?”

At that Afifa had shaken her head, whether more out of frustration or of disappointment I do not know, perhaps both. And her frustration had silently joined an unspoken agreement to never talk to me again, except for the socially obligatory “Fine, you?” when I ran into her and asked if she’s ok, though she never stuck around to hear my answer. But as I said, this incident didn’t bother me now. I wouldn’t sacrifice time I could spend on saving my friends’ grades, and those of some mutual friends, and also some completely unknown faces from completely different sections who found me from hearsay ...

Miasma Recedes

Cultural Fest. Minthan gonna be in a couple dance? No way! I see. Is just a handsome boy, not a boyfriend. She trying to enjoy the situation. Hmm. Good for her.

Yaseen in a frenzy. Poor guy did well in the final exam. But had messed up in PHI 102 viva. Sucks. He had memorized half the book and still ... He got nervous or something during the actual viva. Rumor has it he even said his name wrong at the start ...

Sarin dazzling in her Shakespeare cosplay. She gonna take part in a comedy gig. Her snake-thin body somehow makes the outfit that much more suited, as if she has created an entirely new standard of female-director-cosplaying-as-a-thespian.

Nihan also in a couple dance. Surprising for sure. Had expected him to be the host or something. But looking at him made it clear that it’s a challenge he took upon himself to conquer, just as he challenges himself to accomplish feats like conversing with strangers. A challenge indeed it was to wear neon green – dual wristbands, sneakers, a scarf over his suit instead of a tie – and dance with a beautiful lady in front of a thousand spectators.

Caught Afifa giggling with friends. Great. Great to see her happy even though we yet to patch up. Genuinely happy for her. Oh, did she just glance this way? Oh, she did! Hi Afifa. Looking great! Wow, she smiled and waved back!

SHE? Where SHE? Not on the left. No, not on the right and not on the twelve-hour clock faces. Huh? Have you seen where SHE is? Huh? You don't know her? It's SHE! *SHE!* What do you mean you haven't heard of her? Where are you, SHE?

Ahh! Yikes!

Why'd you sneak up from behind?

Hahaha, yeah, that *was* how we first met, didn't we? In that mushroom field. When I was lost. And then you called me from behind. Oh, that reminds me! How'd you know my name?

Hehe

What's in a name anyway?

What's so special about one?

Hehe. You say you're not a wordsmith. But you really know the best things to say! Hehehe.

Feeling better, Iman?

Are you?

Hmm? Why not? I'm feeling great! Why? Why're you worried? Did something happen?

Ah!

No, nothing's happened if it's not affecting you now!

Yayyy!

Hmm? No. I wanna know what happened. Tell me. Come on. Out with it, you! Hehehe.

It's so nice to see you all smiles.

You had a rough week.

The vivas and the extra stress.

But I wanted you to blossom yourself.

And quite a nice smell you exude now!

Hey! That's kinda embarrassing, you know ... Shouldn't say such things now with people here.

hahaha youre still a touch-me-not, I see

but I wasnt talking about *that* smell, silly

its energy
youre so full of energy now
and its all so so so fragrant
um sorry to say but before, you stunk
this past week the miasma reeked so bad
but now its receded!

Part 3

Chapter 1: Journey

In vain did I try to keep my hands from touching my face, tracing the fine wrinkles that had prematurely developed in my early teens, itching an irksome twitch at my forehead, rubbing at potentially accumulated eye mucus, and then slightly hovering, almost not making contact, over my raised eyebrows – oh good, the lines were not as deep as before!

I had ventured upon guided meditation recently. It was sort of like a thing you always wish you could make time for, but never going out of your way to make it. Somehow that inertia was overcome because of a YouTube ad, of all things. Amazing how you can get inspiration from the unlikeliest and most irritating of sources. But what wasn't amazing was a concurrent habit that developed with my introduction to meditation, the habit of me touching my face every so often to see how relaxed my face muscles are. It never ceases to amaze me to find my wrinkles to not be as thick as in my mind's eye, but that feeling of amazement itself became a nuisance, for I can't help but touch my face, sometimes over my mask to feel the outline, to feel that satisfaction of proving my own inferiority complex wrong.

“It's not as bad as it sounds, though,” I said. “It's not a *mudradosh* like I had in childhood where I, um, where I would not turn any corners without turning my head back and seeing if ... seeing if there's a spider or a roach or some other bug ... eww! You know, to see if some bug's there, latched onto the corner ready to pounce at me.”

“Ahahaha!” SHE laughed. “I can imagine! I can imagine a spider, um, perched on the corner of every wall, a big cockroach ... a big flying cockroach ... resting on the crack of the door, I mean on the hinges. And then when you pass a corner, the spider will use its silk to *glide* across your shoulder, missing you by inches, and land on the floor. And then, and then! And then when you see it you jump *high* before turning to run away, but by then the spider will use a string shot like that Pokémon move and then, and then! And *spiderman* its way by swinging at you holding the strings. *Tarzan* its way to you ahahaha! And then there's the flying cockroach which needs no description! ***wink***”

“Damn you got a heck of an imagination ...”

“*Don't* I? Ahahahaha!”

“Oh, I get it. You're trying to, um, um, trivialize the situation by making fun of it. So that I can laugh at it and not worry. That's ingenious!”

“Hey, Iman. It’s not like I do *everything* like a chess player, thinking back three-four moves. Ahahaha! But now that you mention it, I *shouldn’t* make fun of it. You *can’t* touch your face and mask. Never ever. Nuh uh. What’s the use of the mask, then? It’s like washing your hands before eating but then poking your nose before you eat.”

“Gah, that’s disgusting! But yeah I know, I know. If I touch my eyes and nose, then the virus can enter even though I’ve got a cloth wrapped over my face. And how do girls wear niqab? I didn’t imagine it to be so suffocating! And I suppose a niqab is worse than a mask.”

“Even the hijab is uncomfortable at first, you know.”

“Have you got used to it? Both hijab and niqab?”

“Completely. I got used to it in a couple of months, actually. I was in, um, class 7.”

“Wow.”

“Isn’t it crazy, though? About how the world’s turned inside out by the smallest of living cells in the world? I mean, I know viruses aren’t living cells unless they are inside a host ...”

“Hey, in one sense we humans are the same. While a virus isn’t called a living entity unless it infects someone, in the same way we also aren’t relevant unless we do something impactful. How many times are we on people’s minds? Not much unless we are directly in a place to impact something of them. Be it grades, business partnership, close friendship, a debt. Just like a virus isn’t acknowledged until it affects, we too are dead unless people remember us. That’s why they say some people are immortal. Some people will never die. Like the Prophet (S), the Shakespeares, the Bangabondhus, you know. They all gave the world something to remember them by. A legacy, you know?”

“Iman ...”

“Yes?”

“How’d we go from the virus to Shakespeare? Ahahahaha! Calm down with the analogies, ok? We don’t want to take inspiration from a *virus* to live in people’s hearts. Hahahaha! It’s the journey, Iman.

Hey, Mom's calling! I gotta go. The car must be near. Don't touch your face again, ok? And I noticed you don't raise your eyebrows much nowadays. That's great!"

I managed to get home, a journey of just 10 minutes, making contact with my face no fewer than four times. Some journey. Plus point = could barely feel my forehead creases.

Lockdown

University to remain closed from March 17 till March 31

Students are requested to stay indoors and prioritize their health

More details to be given via mail

Iman

you see mail?

hi yaseen

yes uni closed wow

you happy?

Yes yes

Otherwise long journey it

Long journey from my hme

home*

oh yes Alhamdulillah

but i was talking about finals

you scared about that?

I dont think university open at April

Situation in world very bad

i wonder how exams gonna be conducted

We should prepare to writing assignment

Research paper

I start today

huh?

you really gonna write a research paper without instructions??

Should I wait ??

How many days

What if suddenly instruction come to write 3k word 😞😞

ok ... which course u gonna write paper on

Thinking of writing Shakespear first

Shakespear today

Then day after tomorrow postcolonialism

After literature done I can relax

yeah true. youre great in linguistics and elt

thought about topics?

The next fifteen minutes went by with Yaseen shooting down all my topic suggestions and then constantly apologizing each time. *No, Iman! I can't write comparative study of Indian and African postcolonialism literature !! Sorry! No also not Shakespear sonnet personas! Too hard for me. So sorry, Iman. Plaese thinking something else !! Sorry again.* I wasn't becoming impatient. I knew how bad and panicked he was feeling. In fact, he isn't the only one who comes to me for help in choosing a topic. Sarin and Minthan are equally as helpless when it comes to these. And to this day they have not grasped the function of the literature review. Whenever I tell them to find the gap in literature, they say, *In which literature? Eliot? Dickens? Blake? Gap in which?* But needless to say, neither of them is as

proactive enough to panic over yet-to-be-given-which-might-never-be-given-anyway assignments and create mental deadlines of finishing each imagined assignment in two days.

Of course, I never help my friends in the actual assignments themselves by writing them down or anything as direct of a plagiarism act like that. Our university, like every other university as well, I would presume, has strict plagiarism policies. I had learnt my lesson on that the hard way at VASSAR. Then too I was obstinate about never allowing people to copy my work or cheat in exams. At school this honesty policy veered on the extreme side, as I was so stubborn when it came to cheating in exams, that I sometimes intentionally took the front desk to sit in during the exam, as close to the front table in the class as possible. At times when we were assigned seats based on our student ID and when my seat fell near the back or the middle of a row, in order to dodge helpless pleas of help, I would discretely request an invigilator to let me sit in a front seat (somehow two or three would invariably be unoccupied) with the excuse that I go to the washroom plenty of times during the exam (which was true, not because of a bad stomach, but because I had a habit of walking alone for a bit to relax my mind and my right hand). The excuse always worked.

Anyway, back to my VASSAR penalty, it was a simple 5-mark graded homework, with which my roommates had naturally slacked until the very last day. Actually, Saif had gone beyond that and forgotten to complete it on the night before – the night before is usually when he starts on any homework and assignments, barring research papers and group work for which he is surprisingly proactive. Thus, at the sight of a rare panic-stricken Yaseenification of Saif, I yielded my ENG 101 homework to him to look at and complete his homework within 7 minutes, the time left for the class to start. Miraculously, he finished the work with three minutes to spare, after which he jogged down to the class in a Vince McMahon strut, evidently celebrating the dodging of this bullet.

We didn't have long to celebrate, and we sure didn't dodge any bullets. In the finals²⁰ week, we received a text message. Our ENG 101 teacher was calling for us and three others to meet her after the final exam. At first, I was thinking it was a positive development.

“You know what it could be?” I had said, grinning. “It could be us getting the Chancellor's Certificate for academic and extra-curricular excellence! Hehehe. You're a good student too. And I know Masum and Afra are also good students. Though I wouldn't say Sneha is one.”

“Eh, you positivist. Well, man, it can be that. But I have a feeling it's something bad. I don't know what. Maybe it's plagiarism, hahaha. Imagine getting F in ENG 101!”

²⁰ Even though the autocorrection mechanism is reddening the word “finals,” it is not wrong. It's a noun adjective. “Final week” would have meant the last week of the course or semester, which also makes sense. But what is meant here is the week when the finals (plural, because there are many *final* exams in a semester) take place.

I had laughed at that, thinking it was some wild guess Saif had for amusement. But alas! When we went to Miss Farida and saw her crestfallen face, I somehow knew – knew without a shadow of a doubt – that it was plagiarism for sure. I will never forget the way Miss addressed me at that time:

Me: How are you, Ma'am?

Miss Farida, slowly shaking her head: How can I stay well with you guys in my class?

Me: ...

Saif, poking me: Sorry, Ma'am.

Sneha: Sorry, Ma'am. It won't happen again.

Masum: ...

Afra: Miss, what is it? What did we do?

Miss Farida, bringing out a bunch of sheets: See! See the red markings? This line here, and this here, and this in Masum's homework, this in Afra's quiz, all these are plagiarized, word for word even. And Iman and Saif? What do I do with you? Your entire homework is copied. One of you copied the other's one word for word. The entire two pages! Do you think getting A this way matters? I'm asking your conscience! Do you want to reach your destination that way?

In that moment I had felt two things.

One, the sudden realization of exactly how Saif had finished his homework in four minutes: he had not just "looked" at my homework for ideas, but had plagiarized it word for word, comma for comma – heck, he even used my signature semi-colons which he never uses! Saif later apologized and said he didn't know Miss Farida would compare our two sections (he was in Section 11 whereas I was in Section 25, and as luck would have it, Miss Farida took both sections).

Two, I would get an A minus for sure now. It wasn't like PHI 102 where half the questions are objective which gave room for solid marks. Me, Iman, getting an A minus in an English Fundamental course? Seriously?

Miss Farida had said if she reports this to the authority, we might face disciplinary actions beyond failing the course. Things didn't escalate to that extent, but we received a fat zero in that homework, making me get an A minus for the first time at university, and third time in total till now, in my fourth year. Saif had paid a steeper price, getting a B plus and losing his scholarship for two semesters in a row.

And so having learnt my lesson on plagiarism, I always make sure to never put myself as well as my friends in a situation to, at minimum, bump down a grade, and, at worst, get expelled. Many people had termed this resolution of mine to be a paranoia. *Come on, man. I won't copy. I'm not that dumb to risk the consequences.* But I was not a fan of the saying, *It ain't cheating if you don't get caught.* And it's not a teaching ideology that has become harvested by my teaching experience of three-plus years. I have always had this idealistic, almost Kantian, mindset of always doing the right thing. If anything, I hid behind the excuse of *I was once penalized for plagiarism and almost expelled* to keep from having to mail many a friend and coursemate my assignments.

The problem is I still haven't learned how to say no when the person insists.

“Come on iman,” Minthan texted. “U just say no directly. He won't hold grudge lol”

“idk man. last week i saw a post. a girl from eng324 posted an ss where she got rejected help from haider. u know? haider that guy who was in that girl's friend circle, u know?”

“No idk. Then?”

“haider and that circle not talking for many months and yet that girl out of the blue asked him to give his assignment to look at. haider refused. then this girl posted”

“Omg wth”

“u know the worst thing? worst thing is that all the people reacting haha in the post and angry too. and all commenting bad things about haider. well his name is edited out in the ss but still. imagine what haider thinking”

“Oh damn man. These ppl have no sense 😞. Oh and Iman its ok u dun have to say no to that guy. Lemme tell him. What's his name. tell”

“no no leave it. i am yet to see the message. i wudnt wanna leave him at seen. that wud be ... oh u know what yaseen did? day before yesterday he got a help message. and he mistakenly saw the message lol”

“Oh damn. Wait Iman call me. Typing is making my hands hurt lol 😊”

“Yes, as I was saying haha-”

“Ahahaha poor guy.”

“Yeah, damn. So after that! After that! Ehehe I feel bad for laughing. Poor guy. After that he deactivated FB.”

“Whaaat?!”

“Yeah, for real. So yesterday he sent me message from Wh-”

“Ahahaha so *that's* why I couldn't find him today. He gone from FB, that's why.”

“Yeah. So yesterday he messaged me from WhatsApp hehehe.”

Minthan then apologized for laughing and told me I shouldn't, either. Rather than humor, she said she feels pity over people like Yaseen who struggle so much to reach a destination that the end result doesn't really compensate for the hard work put behind. I agreed that Yaseen overexerts herself, but also pointed out that weighing things straightforwardly like input and output is a very problematic view, that doing so would take from the essence of being human. Minthan said that humans actually do think and act with profit in mind, thinking of both work needed and effort, that *this* was the essence of humanity. But then she retracted her comment, realizing that she herself is a non-rational person who does not work before the work pushes her to a wall, that she herself does not start assignments and even do the course readings before the deadline. She wished she had some of Yaseen's anxiety to make her proactive, but then said no, she wishes she were like me and SHE who are balanced in the scale of worry and action.

Think, but don't concern

I was surprised I brought out such a philosophical side of Minthan in the Messenger voice call. I have always taken her to be a *don't think and don't concern* type, at least after her tragedy. By *don't think* I don't mean she doesn't think matters through in many things she does, and by no means do I mean she

is incompetent at life because of thinking too less. It's just that she doesn't seem to be the type to overanalyze things, to indulge in habitual critical thinking.

SHE laughed when I brought this up in our chat the next day. (We don't talk over the phone because of her strict parents who would burst a blood vessel if they found out SHE has a male friend. And so all our correspondences in this quarantine have been done via online chat.)

what do you mean minthan doesnt think much lol

its not like only philosophers and scientists and big brains think

ehehe yesiklol

imean in academicthings uknow

iactually haveatheory

thatpeople dontreallythink much whenitcomesto studies

wow interesting!

tell me more!

so thetheory isthat theythinkofstudies

as aseparate thing

separate fromtheir reallife

so theycantconnect

cabtrelate totheir reallife

ykwim?

yes i know what u mean

i agree completely!

inlinguistics wehaveto relate manythingsfromlife

many practicalthings right

butinliterature theconnectionis moresubtle

yes!

ithink peopleactually subconsciouslyunderstand

like yaseeb uknow

he sayshimself thathenotasgood inlitterature

but the grasp of things so much better in elts & linguistics

MashaAllah

actually i've thought the same way!

hi-5!

i also thought that because people separate study life from real life

because of that

people struggle to understand lessons

studies aren't hard actually

it's not like we have bigger brains or we're more intelligent than sarin & minthan & fahim & others

of course not

academic intelligence is a different intelligence

as we read in Multiple Intelligence theory

Howard Gardner theory

straight A people are those with high academic intelligence

which is nothing special

it's just technical & strategic skill you know

these people know that studies are actually extensions of real life

you would think everyone would know that

but for most people it's something separate they put away from life until deadline comes

and then when exam knocks at their door they force themselves to study

posting depression & overwhelmed posts on fb

blaming teachers & the institute

even students who do well and are A grade

many of them keep studies apart from things they love to do

they keep a schedule of two hours or three hours

to study every day as if it's a chore

and boast about time management & commitment

as if not thinking of anything except those 2-3 hours is a credit

after which they will go back to their 'real life'

some even 'reward' themselves for the struggle

so u see

Minthan is that kind of person

she is adept at normal, social things

like knowing what to say to aunties

though she doesn't like to talk to strangers

lol

but she doesn't do critical thinking in class

doesn't do that even at home when writing papers

it's not that she isn't able to think critically

it's that she doesn't do it as she doesn't know the need

yes

even though you help her time and again in studies

and she goes like ohhhh i seeee

but then she *doesn't* see on her own

not because she's blind

no

but because she has been taught by society to view studies this way

because to her the academic journey is a grind she has to endure

an unfortunate price she has to pay to reach her destination

but how can a future destination with no guarantees compel people to grind in an unimpassioned
journey?

Chapter 2: I Think, Therefore I Can't Feel ...?

I've realized that when I do critical thinking – like, *really* do it – my thoughts are too fast to process, too elusive to pinpoint, too stuck together to make sense of without unnecessary difficulty. But one major plus point: my eyebrows don't arch as much anymore! Perhaps I subconsciously keep it restrained to stall the aging process.

Speaking of critical thinking, we just had a critical thinking webinar the other day. It was an inter university program, with around four-five private universities working in tandem, I think. The term “webinar” must have been in circulation long before the pandemic, but it was completely new to me. Our university at least has never had a webinar before, as it was distinctly mentioned it was the first. I understand some webinars require money to participate, but probably because it was a first and because online seminars don't require giving gifts to the speaker(s) and food to the audience, this one was free.

“yo minthan u gonna come?” I had texted.

“Where? Come where”

“oh u havent heard. the webinar. the online seminar we are all invited to go to”

“Oh. Is that mandatory 😊”

“no isnt. teachers didnt tell us specifically to come. we just got mail thats it. hehe 😊”

“Hehe I'm watching dr stone then 😊 Iman you should start. It's masterpiece”

“is that anime about a super smart sceintist trying to restore humanity back to modern technology after an apocalypse?”

“Yessss. Senky is sooo smart. Sengoku* Senku* 😊”

Yaseen joined even though he had a family program going on; even in this pandemic his family functions are still going strong, primarily because he lives in a joint family. Sarin was busy with club

work and told me to tell her a summary of it later on. SHE wouldn't miss it for the world; SHE loved attending seminars, though in pre-pandemic times her Mom wouldn't allow her most of the time to stay after classes ended.

The speakers' bios were given in the Facebook post. I remember one of them is a PhD holder and the other is doing community service. The two are husband and wife, and when I saw them huddled close together, not just for the camera to accommodate both of them but out of love, an arm on each other's shoulder, I had a feeling I cannot quite put to words. It was almost as if just like their side embrace, a warm peaceful sentiment was also holding me close, and though the feeling was initially on one side – I forget whether left or right – it suddenly felt like a girdle, a warm compression cleansing me of all worldly things and putting in place of them nothing but warmth – the sort of ball of warmth you sometimes feel in the depths of your soul, I'd like to say, at least in the middle of your chest, moving you beyond words. Trying to further put the feeling into words would take away from it.

Overall, I liked the event. It went on for around 90 minutes before the Q/A session which took around 20 minutes, but we the members of the audience interacted when the speech was going on as well. For it was not a traditional lecture but a fun, interactive discussion session where the husband-and-wife duo put forward a series of brainstorming activities for us to solve. I am ashamed to say I missed out on the first two which were the easiest. But therein remained the point: we tend to overanalyze something when the answer is right in front of us.

The two speakers, however, spoke entirely in favor of critical thinking, saying that we should train ourselves to think critically of every situation we have, however mundane and commonsensical it seems. They brought in ideologies and fallacies and taken-for-granted concepts that have, some still to this day, brainwashed us into unconditionally make *them* lead us. But for the most part, the speakers did not delve into political matters and instead talked of regular and academic critical thinking necessities.

Our ENH department chair took the floor quite a few times, saying that students of literature have to do a lot of critical thinking. I wanted to unmute myself and disagree, but to date I've only once or twice spoken up in public events like seminars, and thus bottled up my thoughts to share with SHE later on. Though I am from ELT and linguistics, a separate branch of ENH from literature, I have done more than a handful of literature courses, and I know that the maximum number of students don't critically think at all. It's not that they are incapable of critical thinking, but just that they don't bother. Heck, they don't even read the texts and instead just make do with online summaries, and that too on the night before exams. On the contrary, literature turns off many people because of its abstractness. Yaseen is the perfect example of someone who feels overwhelmed by literature because of an inability to easily relate to it, though he can easily apply linguistic knowledge to real life – of course because language we use every day.

I love literature. I love its abstraction and symbolism and foreshadowing and all else. Sometimes it is a much more effective method to teach people through stories rather than dryly lecturing them. Especially in dealing with ethics I believe literature is very important. It's so easy to say, for example, to never give up, that one plus one makes three, that forgiveness is better than taking an eye for an eye. However, when these ideals are inculcated cunningly by a masterful storyteller, the message truly hits home and leaves a lasting impact. It is only when these ethical norms are encouraged in a 200-page page-turner or a 2-hour movie flick that people actually *care*.

Anyway, back to critical thinking, I couldn't help myself from not speaking up in the Q/A session.

“My question is whether critical thinking can actually be a negative. Sometimes critical thinking actually makes us, um, a bit unempathetic. Like, I can personally speak from experience that, um, that I sometimes have a lot to say. And that ... that is sometimes causing some social problems. And it's not only about having many things to say. Many times I keep silent. The problem is inner. This habit of brainstorming on a regular basis ... brainstorming for any topic whether big or small ... I think that can sometimes become unhealthy. Like ... often when someone close has a depression episode, and when that person is, um, venting to you about some silly problems which shouldn't affect him or her. Then, then I sometimes think logically and look for mistakes that my friend is making ... that he or she shouldn't have done something, or maybe *should* have taken one course of action. Or at least what can be done now. You see, sorry I'm taking a long time, but I'm trying to get at the long term, um, accumulated lifestyle change that habitual critical thinking can do to us. That we take things too seriously all the time and have less empathy. Thanks.”

I couldn't express myself coherently, but I felt I was able to get across my thoughts on the matter. Unfortunately, they failed to understand the point. They, of course very respectfully, answered that apathy is not a necessary aftermath and consequence of critical thinking, that having an inquisitive mind has nothing to do with not being able to console a depressed friend. Two members of the audience – one was a faculty and another was an MA student – also chimed in and named some famous personalities – authors, from what I remember – who are known for their empathy and critical thinking both.

I was bummed out. I knew where they were coming from – of course, a golden mean exists in the scale of the two variables. However, my point was that for most people habitual critical thinking is a disease. It slowly erodes the empathy you can muster, making you question things from all angles and trying to come up with a definitive answer. Now, if you are a postmodernist who doesn't believe in absolute truths, I would still wager you know what I mean.

“I know what you mean buddy,” I know that's what SHE would text me.

“ikr,” I would write back. “regular brainstorming is a weather hazard for the brain. the brain too needs rest. just because it has capacity to endure storms all the time doesn't mean we shouldn't sometimes keep it indoors, right”

“Hehehe. But Iman listen. You're right. But don't count on everyone understanding that. Let them think critical thinking is all positive. Already as it is people don't do enough of that. Enough deep thinking. We want people to philosophize, right. So it's good if majority think like that!”

“ohh i see. but what if. what if they also start overthinking like me. what if they also face problems. like apathy. and. and. they become”

“Stop Iman. You know why they won't become whatever you're thinking? Because YOU haven't become anything like what you saying. No Iman. It's all in ur head. Trust me.”

Yup. SHE would say something like that – that the worst enemy of the overthinker is his own expectations of overthinking, that critical thinking comes easy to me and I am not to paint a black color on that term because of my imagination. Wait, could the speakers at the webinar also have thought from this angle? Could they have calculated the risks of justifying my fear of critical thinking's side effects so that I and the rest of the audience do not develop that fear upon having it acknowledged, and thus exacerbate our paranoia?

Paranoia! That's Yaseen! Strange how I did not think of him being the most affected until now. I went to call him on Messenger and couldn't find him. Then I realized he must still have his Facebook account deactivated, and so I called him on WhatsApp.

“Hey Iman how are you doing?”

“Alhamdulillah. How about you?”

“Fine, fine, Alhamdulillah. Do yo-”

“Let's talk about the critical thinking webinar. Oh, you were about to say something?”

“Umm, Iman, do you know email address of register office?”

“Email of registrar? Yeah. Wait, lemme text it to you.”

“Thanks ... Oh critical thinking seminar? I love it. I love specially the riddles. The brainstorm tests. I solve 2!”

“Oh, wow! That’s great. I also solved some. Isn’t it funny how after solving it seems so easy?”

“Hmm. And I don’t understand some questions. I mean some words ... unknown words.”

“Oh ... Ok, I was wondering what you felt about the, ah, overall topic. You know, critical thinking.”

“Hm? What about it? I don’t understanding.”

“Oh, sorry. I should be more clear. I mean I spoke up about it. I asked a question. That there’s a chance critical thinking can be bad, you know, can make you lose empathy.”

“Um ...”

“Yes?”

“I forgot what’s empathy.”

“Oh! That’s ok. Remember we read about it in Ethics at VASSAR. Empathy is feeling for another person. It’s feeling what they are feeling, being in their shoes, you know, all those metaphors which mean you are relating to them, relating to their sadness.”

“Oh yes. I remember. So you said that people who critical thinking, they feel less for others?”

“Well, sort of. Like, if someone develops a habit of thinking over-analytically, you know. If someone tends to use logic always, then they may become less emotional.”

“Iman, I don’t think you’re less emotional. You don’t overthinking much. And even if you overthinking, it doesn’t affect us negatively. I appreciate all you do for me. You’re my savior. Truly. And I never felt unempathy from you. You always empathy. MashaAllah.”

“Wow ... thanks a lot, Yaseen.”

“No, no, seriously. You always shows tolerate to my anxiety. You always shows patient to me. Thanks so much. But leaving this to aside, tell me one things. Do you think it’s possible to wear someone shoe? I mean metaphor. Metaphor shoe? Is it possible?”

“Um, no I don’t think people can ever truly know someone. Never 100%. We can’t read minds. What’s more, we don’t even know *our own minds* 100%. But that aside, we *can* empathize with people. This is what I believe.”

“Ok, good answer. Now say, when I tell you about panic attacks. About my anxiety. Do you feel my anxiety?”

“No ... I don’t understand exactly how you feel. Though sometimes I’m anxious myself. But not as much as you.”

“You don’t have depression, right? Can you understand empty feeling of depression when someone shares with you?”

“No. I have no idea.”

“Ok. Now, last question. You say you unable to fully feel them. That you can’t empathize completely. But have you ever make the depressed or anxiety person more worse? Make them feel more worse because you talked? You would have reason to worrying if that be the case. You don’t, right? Then no, you are not unempathy ... unempathic. You are Iman, a good friend.”

“Wow, thanks a lot, Yaseen. And oh! Why did you need the registrar mail for?”

“Oh, for nothing major. Don’t worry. Bye-Bye.”

SHE was amused after reading about this conversation. I could imagine her belly laughing from the other end of the screen. SHE texted something like *Ah that Yaseen's a smooth talker. I wish I could fix you up like he did in a series of questions lol.* I told SHE that I had actually simulated a conversation we would have about the webinar, and that in my imagination SHE had consoled me by saying I don't really overthink, but that it's all in my imagination that I do. SHE then belly-laughed again. I know this for sure because SHE sent a voice recording of five seconds in the Messenger chat. SHE does that sometimes, when her parents are nowhere near, because *we need to hybridize chat with as much living color as possible*, which includes occasional (daily, really) voice and video recordings of amusing things like her loud, hearty laugh and bugs SHE had squashed by herself. Anyway, then SHE asked whether my simulation was in chat form or face-to-face interaction. *What? You even imagine chat messages when simulating? Now that requires some more thinking. You don't overthink. You underthink!* I then used some laughter emojis, something which I've started doing recently. I'm surprised SHE doesn't do it almost at all, even though SHE says SHE wants to bring as much color to offline communication as possible. SHE then turned serious and wrote: *Iman listen. You imagined me consoling you. I like it. But what if I tell you you do overthink. What then? Will you be upset? Will you feel betrayed? The thing is, if you feel you think too much, then if you can't shake off that feeling, then accept it man. Accept it. Embrace it. Use it to your advantage. Be the overthinker who is also empathetic. Be the golden mean. Be the examples some people referenced in the webinar who have the perfect balance. Don't let a mere thought overwhelm you. Overthinking. Overthinking. Overthinking. It's such a dirty word, isn't it? Not really. It's what you ascribe to the word that gives it meaning. For me it's not a dirty word. People have different ways of using words. An extraordinary person to some will be an abnormal person to others. Or a freak. Or inhuman. Why let the signified have such power? You seize that power yourself and you dictate what the word overthink means to you. Because what really is overthinking really? Over means more, excessive. So it's just someone who thinks more than the ordinary people. Why's that such a bad thing? Isn't that just a synonym of deep thinking and philosophizing? Isn't that really just critical thinking? Just because you think, doesn't mean you overthink. And just because you overthink, doesn't mean you can't feel others. Because sometimes I feel you overfeel. Yes, you feel others' pain so much that you help them excessively, out of your way. But again, I feel it's a choice and I don't tell you to stop putting others' importance over yours. But still now you do know about it and have become more aware of the problems of over-helping. The point is, whatever you do, you should do it without prior judgment of it. To many or most or even everyone, it may be something problematic you are doing, but if you feel you are doing well, for example by helping fifty people, then it's ok. Even if no one could name authors or philosophers who are both empathetic and deep thinking in the webinar, still I would applaud your gesture and think you can pull it off. Society doesn't hold power over us Iman. It is we who give power to society to hold us hostage.*

Chapter 3: Not So Social Media

4 years ago

Iman

December 31, 2016

And so 2016 comes to an end. So many posts about how people did absolutely nothing except waste the whole year away. I disagree. Bad experiences teach us lessons so we might avoid them in the future. Look at me. Last year I had no idea of how horrible eggs without the yolk taste :-@ (Somehow just saying 'egg whites' here makes it seem like I only used to eat the yolk).

2016 has taught me about priorities. I haven't learnt how exactly to do that. To prioritise. Not yet. But I'm that kind of person now who says, "Dear sleep, I love you. And I'm sorry I neglected you when I was a kid." Except I'm still a kid (though sleep is love now). Hey! Maybe I don't want to grow up...

I love the Memories feature of Facebook. Even on my busiest day, I make a conscious effort to check back on Iman from the past, a year, two years, eight years ago – no further than that because 2012 was the start of my Facebook voyage.

I like how in this post four years ago, back when I was just an A Level student, before my university days, before VASSAR, before all of that, I was pretending to be mature. Kudos to nineteen-year-old Iman who, despite clearly knowing he's "still a kid," still publicly philosophized about the good in bad experiences and of learning from them.

I also like the touch of humor old (or young) me gave about the egg yolk. Surprisingly, I still remember how nasty eggs taste without the yolk. It was so bad that when once Mom dropped out of the habit of making them (she became sick for a while), I didn't tell her to make them for me again. Nowadays I eat them poached, though I'm not quite sure how much that helps towards my lean physique ideal.

What I don't like, though, is the impressionistic writing style. It's tough to put a finger on it, but ... No, actually, it's easy to point at the red flag which is most definitely the writing style. What is it about the tone of the post which makes out the author to come off as ...? What's the word? Haughty? Self-conscious and yet not seeing that he comes off as a know-it-all despite claiming to still be a "kid"?

Somehow, I am sure the me of four years ago was feeling cheerful. He intended to write a post where he would let his four thousand friends at the time (I'm now down to less than 500 after a handful of clean-ups) see the childish and vibrant part of him. In retrospect, it was rather brave of me to admit I was still a child. Even today I am struggling to be more reserved and keep to myself, showing my cheery side to only my good friends and close relatives.

Keeping to myself includes not sharing most kinds of posts. Though I do sometimes share Islamic motivational posts, and some occasional WWE and anime ones, for the most part my timeline is devoid of any post whatsoever. Now that I think of it, the ratio of my posts/shares and profile picture/cover picture change is 1:1. Yaseen's is on a completely other level, though. His profile pictures are locked, and not a post is visible on his timeline. Yeah, people *have* tagged him in some posts, but he must have set those to the "Only Me" privacy setting.

Oh, and memes are a total no-no. Many of my friends solely share memes. Two or three share over 10 a day. Yes, over 10! The content covers depression, dark humor, something called "dank" humor, sexual frustration, roasting celebrities, and politics. Of course, there are positives to memes, as many people use humor as a coping mechanism as an escape from, or at least a buffer against, the horrors of the pandemic, like Rakin Absar makes fun of the typical Bangladeshi. Coupled with memes, food bloggers like Khudalagse and Rafsan The ChotoBhai are also the rage, even in this pandemic when going outside is so restricted. Educational influencers like Ayman Sadiq are also going strong. But what's curious is that new faces and names are popping up seemingly every day on social media, with a different thing going viral at least every month. Most intriguingly, there's recently this TikTok sensation called Khaby Lame who is really turning heads. That guy is straight up hilarious with the way he nonchalantly does everyday things whereas others have tried to use the craftiest and most creative of ways others to do them. Ah, why do humankind take so much pleasure in deliberately overcomplicating things?

Anyway, back to meme culture, it feels like I know many of my Facebook friends – through these posts, mainly memes – whom I've only met a handful of times (if that), more than some of my pretty good friends. I wouldn't dream of putting myself out there like this now, getting bombarded with judgments entrenched in hundreds of people's minds but which will never come to the surface, and which will continue to simmer and boil until they unfollow or unfriend me. Or maybe even block me. But that probably won't happen for most cases, because if someone passionately despises you enough to block you, more often than not they will like to be around and keep backbiting, rather than cutting you off from their lives.

Once, at a time when I was oblivious to these far-reaching consequences, perhaps two years ago, I had shared a post which made fun of Bangla medium students' English proficiency through a *Tom and Jerry* scene. It was that scene where Tom torments Spike the dog with a bat. Tom is safe from the dog because he has measured the exact distance the dog can reach with the rope tying him by his collar. So, the joke was that Tom represents English medium students who can toy around with Spike, the representation of Bangla medium students who are metaphorically tied by a fundamental flaw in the education system. The me of two years ago had found the connection fascinating and had decided to share the post. Unfortunately, one friend had not taken kindly to the "discrimination" seemingly espoused by me just because I had just posted a meme. She wrote a paragraph as a comment on that post, saying I shouldn't judge people by their medium, and that she had not expected this from me. I, wounded, responded that I actually feel bad about those with a Bangla medium background, and that I

would know, having to deal with teaching them on a regular basis. Minthan then participated in the comments section and said I can share whatever I want, and that I had no obligation to explain my choice of what I share.

I actually disagree with Minthan in this, though I appreciate her coming to my defence. I feel I was in the wrong to post something so suggestive. While it was 100% true that I didn't mean any offence by it, still it is not my intention that counts. The world does not owe me an opportunity to explain my every move. Part of growing up is to take responsibility for your actions and also what is *suggested* by your actions, what perceptions people have by looking at your actions. Social media is undoubtedly a reflection of who we are, regardless of whether we share a meme because of sheer impulse or simply for the heck of it. Some people are offended by the notion of people judging others by looking at what they post. They find it laughable and meme-quality, even. For example, Minthan once shared a post (she shares a lot) which knocked on people who get triggered by someone's post. I find such criticism difficult to comprehend. Human beings are judgmental by nature. We evaluate people by their dress code, by their hairstyle, by the way they look at us, by the way they speak, by even their hometown at times. The problem starts when we externalize these judgments and say or do hurtful things because of them, like backbiting people simply because they strike us the wrong way.

Barring that kind of judgmental behavior, judgments are both natural and essential. Isn't it ironic how people tease one for being a bad judge of character and yet want non-judgmental mindsets? I mean, we feel it dangerous for children to be by themselves without adult supervision. We teach them to not speak to strangers and not take candies from them. We generalize and stereotype in giving such advice even though people in the street may just approach you for street directions. Or if there is a fight or argument, we – kids and young adults – are taught to not get involved. Imagine if everyone listened to this and not helped out in such street scuffles, or if everyone refrained from getting involved in public harassments, or if everyone antsed their way around a fallen body on the road and left it for dead ... These imagined scenarios aren't funny because they are true – many people actually *don't* get involved in helping victims of street accidents even.

I digress. Judgments are not only taught by family but institutionalized as well. In education, for example, we are taught to classify things. To organize concepts in hierarchies, in taxonomies. Even in higher studies like at university, generalization exists. Think of literature. We are taught to be on the lookout for foreshadowing, for subtle hints, for imageries. Red signifies danger, blood, death; white is pure and celestial; black is ruinous, heartless, devilish. Birds represent freedom; rain symbolizes grief; black clouds are harbingers of catastrophe. We look out for these things so as to judge the inner "truth," as if only through such deep analysis can we get at the root of it all, to get at the author's purpose. See where I'm going with this?

Social media is by far the clearest lens to see into someone's character. For by stalking someone, provided they are not like Yaseen with locked accounts, one gets an insightful view into the behavioral patterns of the account holder. It is scary how much businesses today "research" potential and current

employees by doing background checks on them – and what better and more convenient background check is there than to stalk their Facebook and Instagram?

“Ivebeen reading about it ever since u mentioned,” texted SHE. “And I’ve found that ovwr half of today’s companies check people’s social media accounts. Actually the % is close to 60. I would assume the % is much higher in top tier businesses. The smaller ones of course shuld be considered outliers”

“do you know that wwe suspended two promising stars last year. yes two rising stars on the way to te very top. both of them suspended without pay. indefniitely. one of them even gonna be released probably. fired”

These are common occurrences. In the WWE a developmental wrestler – or Superstar, as they call their wrestlers – was fired for simply posting a picture in a room with a Nazi symbol in the background. Yup, for a simple swastika, that too not on her clothes or bags or something, but in the *background* – and for that, the Superstar in the making was robbed of her lifelong dream of being in the WWE.

And why wouldn’t they? Why wouldn’t companies look into the social media presence of potential and existing employees? In the past background checks were limited to getting hold of a person’s past educational and employment history, and past criminal records too, of course, for the unlucky ones who had such history. However, it is quite easy to fabricate recommendation letters and talk (beg, bribe) yourself out of several punishments. Now that social media has entered the picture, we willingly put ourselves into the open. Not only the “About” details like relationship status and date of birth and work and academic history, but also the extremely nuanced information that memes and posts and number of followers and friends and tags provide – all these are on the checklist of background checkers.

Again, why shouldn’t businesses take advantage of such a convenient personality appraiser? Is social media, by dint of not being offline, thus not “real” enough for people to take seriously? *Should* people be allowed to get away with commenting and posting anything they want on Facebook? Are the emotional and sarcastic posts they share not indicative of their mindset just because the source – Facebook – isn’t authentic? Why does the boundary between online and offline world still so stubbornly exist when we now have virtual reality games and exclusively online global businesses? No doubt, social media marketing is a significant branch of business nowadays. Why would there be an imaginary honor code restricting people from making judgments from social media usage?

i dont like meme culture at all
what about u

Hm? Why not

i mean of course i not against humor
i do enjoy them. sometimes i share with u too
but im talking about the roasting culture
where people have developed habits of their social media persona

Ohhhh

Yesss

i mean
in real life these people arent all trolls
arent always looking to humiliate others for a laugh
like they do on fb
like
it has become a “haha” culture
many people in a joking mood
jokings ok i know
but not with strangers

Yesss I agree. Totally

if its with friends then ok
but people roast strangers
for appearance
for height
use mom jokes
“your mom” jokes, you know?

Oh oh

That's so sad

ikr

cyberbullying is such a big issue
it ruins my whole day when i see people ruthlessly bashing others
for what? for no reason but their amusement
you know a young wrestler recently committed suicide
she was 20
just 20!

Omg omg no way

she suicided for cyberbullying
and that too from fans
wrestling fans are so toxic dammit
they feel like just cuz they buy a ticket to the event
just cuz they paid
that they have the right to do whatever they want
they have sometimes hijacked shows
and they almost always try to sabotage 1-2 wrestlers they dont like for whatever reason
it makes me sick

Ah ...

whenever wwe posts something
the fb page i mean
more often than not haha is the most used
worst is that the few people who comment good things

they get haha'd and mean comments too
for what??
for supporting the program??
arent they also wrestling fans? the ones who bash wwe?
or are they critics and keyboard warriors whose sole purpose is to spread negativity?

Iman. Calm down. U don't have to be a critic of the critics

i'm fine thanks
really
i just wish there were a social media regulation
you know. some rule
banning hate speech
banning and if necessary further consequences to bullies
you know cuz people can always make fake ids

That's a good idea

But Idk if can be possible anytime soon

What with the ever increasing inclusionary ideology the world going through

You know. As if western ideologies are superior

ikr ikr
people feel its their choice to do whatever they want
that its the internet. that we shud get over it. grow up
my thing is that yes you and me and many people may in fact be able to
be able to grow a thick skin
but what about the others who CANT
what about the 20 year old wrestler who cudnt handle online harassment
can we blame her for being too sensitive

that in the name of sarcasm and freedom of speech people can push someone off a cliff
that in the name of the constitution people blaspheme
laugh at the religious

So what u r saying is
People grow accustomed to this meme culture
Of always having a laugh
Laughing not WITH others but rather laughing AT them
Yup I feel the same way
And yes Iman
Sometimes we need to raise our voice like this

wow!

i was wondering if u gonna discourage my rant

No it's ok to sometimes worry
I also concern myself about a lot of things
As long as that concern doesn't affect you in regular life u know

wow i love this

thank you! i feel better

As long as that concern doesn't become habitual
Same as humor itself is not bad
It's a fine thing. I love it
But when it takes on a life of its own
By becoming a habit and changing ur lifestyle and making u craving for it
Withdrawal u know
Habits = loops

The loops then become spirals. increasing in intensity
Make sure you form good habits Iman!
The bad ones stink. reeks of negativity
But the thing is that it's not a binary thing
Isn't good vs bad type of thing
Even thinking and worrying are just one thing actually
When it's bad it's called concern and when good then thinking
It's HOW we process our emotions
And sometimes getting angry is fine as long as u dont let it consume u
And I know it won't
The iman of Iman is unconditional!
No matter the problem you can deal with it without being affected by it
Monsterslayer without monsterification
Hihihhi

Chapter 4: The Center Doesn't Need To Hold

I'm not mean.

I'm just brutally honest.

It's not my fault that the truth hurts.

Here's some Kool-Aid for that burn.

Cool concept

Ryt?

imeanwhatswrongwithbeing

Honest! lol

A lots wrong with that
1st of all theres the chauvinistic tone
of the quote unquote morale
Is it cool to write cool as Kool?

Nah it's just a brand name

Still the point is that its a not so social media
Rather than bringing people together
it entraps people into its clutches and chokes them out
And then it offers some coolaid or koolaid or whatever to sarcastically heal that pain

Lay off the criticism train man

Why ya gotta be triggered at the negativity

doesnt that mean it's succeeding at affecting u too?

Good point but no, man
My mouth isn't gonna remain shut just cuz it hurts to flap my gums for so long

I pick my fights nowadays man
Anyway
1st of all the derogatory tone is the root of cyberbullying
its this kinda attitude
this kinda attitude that is always looking for the slightest of problems and looking to pick fights
this attitude of thinking it's cool
to find flaws and highlight them
yes it's definitely someones fault if he hurts peoples feelings

Yes ikwym bullying is nasty

But is it bullying to speak the truth though?

Lemme tell you why it's a problem
This is my second point actually
There are some people who take pride in being
brutally honest

Like

That type of honesty like telling to your face you're fat

Or

Mentioning in public your flaws and acting like
it came from a good place
for a good cause

No it's not like people shouldn't strive to improve or tell others to improve

It's that theres a socially acceptable way of doing this

Of giving suggestions in private

Of using a soft and an encouraging tone to better oneself

Like, say *I like your boldness in wearing that skin tight outfit*

But a bit more loose one would fit you much better

Love your spirit, though. Keep rocking!

Just like in Islam it is said to speak well of people
To praise openly
But to set aside corrective feedback for a more private time

Praise openly but criticise privately?

Hasnt the world become too sensitive?

Unable to take a constructive comment?

Ah the constructive-destructive argument

Im basically talking about
that actually

That in a sensitive world
such as ours

We should pick our fights
instead of fighting everything

Yes the world is overly
sensitive

But more harm comes in
belittling this sensitivity

than in being quote
unquote politically correct

much much more

Suicides dont occur cuz of being too polite does it

Society doesnt become laden with depression and
anxiety due to a too-polite environment does it

well yes in one sense people are overly apologetic like
Sifat and Yaseen cuz of too much insecurity

But too much politeness never caused anyone any harm

the problem is the toxic environment of always having to
have a tendency to refute and cause problems

it's when people go about haha'ing posts and haha'ing
people's choices and haha'ing the world and they justify
themselves by saying humor is a coping mechanism

Well it's a difficult topic to traverse

I wonder if you would have the guts to discuss this with Minthan

She cant stand disingenuousness

Actually I did text her about it once

though very indirectly

here is how the convo went:

Minthan: Man Bleach is sooo good omg 🤩🤩

Iman: yesss i loving it. im currently in the arrancar arc

Minthan: Omg arrancar 🤩 Best best best. Keep watching Iman. Omg the fights you'll love it

Iman: my fav are of course kenpachi zaraki and aizen

Minthan: Omg Kenpachi bessttt 🤩🤩

Iman: i also really like chad and orihime

Minthan: Orihime? Orihime?? Come on, Iman

Iman: what? i really like her character a lot

Minthan: Chii²¹ Iman! I didn't expect this from u. Orihime ur fav!

Iman: ya whats wrong. she is so sweet

Minthan: Fake! She is so fake man. And also so weak

I understand why Minthan would not like a *weak* character in an action anime

a veritable damsel in distress who needs to be saved from her castle

i disliked that too

but i dont feel Orihime is fake at all

yes she is overly sweet

some may say she is unrealistically sweet

²¹ This is an interjection which signals disgust and perhaps disappointment. An English equivalent would be eww.

cuz she never complains and never thinks of her pain but always tries to help others
of course it being an action show she sometimes gets in the way when villains capture her

I think Orihime's frailty is more pronounced

because of the presence of other female characters who are badass and mighty powerful

like Yoruichi

like Rukia even

Rukia who is the romantic rival of Orihime

Especially because Rukia is also the typical *tsundere*

You know

A character trope referring to a female character who
takes no crap and habitually shouts and yells

typically a hothead but a badass

and this *tsundere* in particular, this Miss Rukia, is
particularly a badass hothead and brutally honest character

Which is a nigh perfect character for an action anime actually

No doubt why Minthan likes her so much

But don't forget exactly why Minthan loves such
a character

It's because she's a Rukia too

She's a bit sweeter and more appreciative of her
emotions than Rukia

But like Rukia she's always looking for
something genuine

Something devoid of any pretensions

Do you think pretensions can ever be good, Iman?

Yes Iman sometimes they can
As I said sometimes it's better to hide the truth than seek to correct someone to their face

Wait wait what about the times when teachers correct students in front of the class

You too have corrected many of your friends-students this way

I have

I faced the dilemma of
whether to be polite about it or be
straight about it

even though Im doing it
for their own good and they know
that

but still many times I hold
myself off

I often address the issues and
particularities with them inbox

personal inbox instead of in front of
others

As for teachers I believe it's not their responsibility to
reach out to every single struggling student and provide them
feedback individually via mail for example

Of course that would be ideal and something I would try
to do as a teacher

But teachers are already super busy people

And anyway there is a way to give corrective feedback in a friendly way

The environment is what matters

There was a recent poll made in our official university Facebook group

The teacher asked to know our, the students', most favorable traits in teachers

Surprisingly "Knowledgeable" got only the fifth most votes

First vote?

Of course it was "Leniency"

But I like to think people dont only desire leniency in terms of grading

That of course is there

But the most important trait for a teacher to have is to create a friendly environment where students are never Yaseenified

For students to feel free to ask questions

For class participation to be a voluntary natural element rather than a forced endeavor

But man you were talking about pretensions

Dont tell me teachers being this way is relevant

Oh right Iman I started digressing again

But it's not completely irrelevant

Teachers have to pretend being impressed sometimes

Like

This may not be wholly disingenuous

But partly so because some people may have high expectations and so are hard to please

But a habit of focusing on the positives and suppressing the negatives is a real good trait to have

Then there are people who are neither pessimists nor optimists

The quote unquote realists

But what exactly is reality?

Perception is reality and a positive perception manifests a positive way to look at things

And yes sometimes this positive mindset downplays the unfair condition of the world

But positivists don't necessarily have to be blind believers you know

Yes Iman like you do talk a lot about the maddening world

Yes and the key thing is to not play fire with fire and monsterify yourself in the process

Yes we may get decentralized at some points it's just natural

And yes we will face negativity and succumb to it for a while but the key thing is to return to your faith

Hey man once again you go off with that preachy stuff

Why not argue rationally?

As I said some things can never be rationalized

And I think it's fun to take detours and walk around without a map

Still ok I'll bring in some more examples

Remember *My Teen Romantic Comedy*?

There the central characters are in a conflict relating to finding genuine feelings versus pretensions

My favorite character there is Yui but Yui doesn't have a happy ending

She tumbles down into despair at the realization
that her feelings will not be reciprocated

She still tries to be happy despite acknowledging her jealousy

But like Orihime she lets her kindness win out at the end

The male protagonist also strives to never confess his own feelings because he
is afraid of the result

But then he learns to love this journey which goes nowhere and relishes it

At the end things do fall into place and the love triangle dissolves

But there wasn't just the love triangle to speak of

There was also a term called co-dependence

The three main characters depended on each other to a fault

resulting in them losing a great deal of competence

But it wasn't actually co-dependence but love

The words connote so very different things

But co-dependence was just one negative side effect of attachment

Once the characters realized this they regained their competence

So you see the vastly positive positives of positivity!

Yeah that's mighty awesome and all

but once again youve missed the point lol

where is your justification for supporting pretensions?

Let's go back to *Bleach*

Once in a comedy scene Orihime is grabbed by the shoulder by a male character
the male character says if she minded then she would have told him to let her go

But she doesn't, even though she doesn't like him touching her

Does that mean she is a liar or something?

No, one of Orihime's friends herself says that Orihime
doesn't say anything because she is too nice

Now you tell me whether that is being fake

whether being real is lashing out at any perceived "problems"
and shouting and hitting like Rukia does

In *Attack on Titan*, Eren says Historia Reiss used to be fake in
the past when she was super nice and sweet to everyone

He said no one could be that positive in real life

and in the anime no refutation is shown

I guess some people may really be hiding what they feel and
acting all chummy chummy

But

Unless these are for ulterior intents like seduction or something
ykwim

Then it's all fine I think

Cuz think about it

All of us have our bad times

Times when we don't want to be bothered by anyone

Times when we are prone to lash out at the slightest disturbance

If at that time someone comes to you for help or for anything and then you snap instead of hiding
your feelings

Then that makes you genuine?

We all hide what we feel

We never voice the rage we feel to our teachers after we get an unexpectedly bad grade

We never insult an elder back

We never yell back at our boss

At least we shouldn't

Do you think others owe it to us to read our minds and assess whether it's a safe time to talk before doing so?

Even if that were true, what about texting?

How can you infer then

No, sociolinguistic competence won't help you to gauge the situation

Of course you can always ask whether that someone is ready to talk

Or if you're the one in the bad mood then you let others know that you don't want to talk

But do we always do that?

Do we expect everyone to do that?

So the key is to suppress your emotions and play pretend at times

As difficult and disingenuous as it sounds, it's what being an adult takes

People say we all wear masks

One mask we don at work and another at home and a different one with your loved ones

But that doesn't mean you aren't "yourself" unless you are with your loved ones

All these masks define you

The you that talks to SHE so openly

The me who faces the dilemma of speaking up more in class or not

The me that is often awkward with my own parents and Nanabhai

The me that thinks but doesn't concern and also concerns and also doesn't

All of these are me and all of these are genuine.

Chapter 5: Controlled Frenzy

“Hello, guys,” Bipu sir said. “Can you hear me?”

Silence.

“Guys? Sorry, maybe there’s some technical issues. Let me resta-”

“Assalamu Alaikum, sir” I said. I had a cough and so was waiting for someone else to answer.

“Ah, Iman. How are you doing?”

“Alhamdulillah, I’m doing well. Sir, what about you?”

“Umm, I’m well physically by God’s grace. Nobody in my immediate family has got the virus as of yet. Praise Allah!”

“Alhamdulillah.”

“So, how are your other courses going? Having any hiccups this time?”

“No, Alhamdulillah, no hiccups this time, sir. That’s what I think, at least. Because in one of my courses, and in many others as I’ve heard from my friends, even the midterm marks haven’t been announced yet. So ... but I’m hopeful.”

“Oh ... I see. Not yet even though finals are less than two weeks away ... Anyway, where are the others? How many of you are here today?”

Silence.

“Sir, in the participants tab it’s shown there are six of us. Five excluding you.”

“Oh yes I see. So, we have Sriti. We have Minhaj, Farzana, Nusrat, and ... Yasmeen Akter. Yasmeen where have you been? I’ve hardly ever seen you in class. Well, not that I *see* you guys now, but you’ve been absent mostly, right? Yes, Yasmeen? Are you there?”

“... Sir, she wrote something in the chat.”

“Oh, thanks, Iman. So, ‘sorry sir but I thought live class not mandatory’. Yes, it’s not mandatory, guys. And I’m not angry at you for missing classes. I’m asking if you’ve been following the recorded lecture videos. Are you caught up? We’ve kept live classes optional because of your sake. That some of you may have internet issues or something. But these live discussion sessions are for *you*. The purpose is to clear out any confusion you may have from watching the recorded lectures. If you need extra help, reach out to me, ok? Or tell Iman, at least. Your quiz scores aren’t that good, Yasmeen. Do you get me? Ok, what about the rest? Won’t anyone else be coming? Shall we wait for a few more minutes? So, Yasmeen has written in the chat, ‘ok sir will do’. Okay.”

Silence.

I am actually enjoying lockdown classes. I can wake up after 11 and watch recorded lecture videos while I work out. I find a whole lot more leg room now in this online university phase than going to physical classes. This is not the case for most of my friends. They feel as though the pressure level has risen exponentially after the exclusive online shift. I understand where they are coming from, as before there used to be student assessments (quizzes, assignments) every two weeks on average, and sometimes three weeks would go by without a test. However, in this online platform, our university has decreed a central policy of, at the least, one weekly assessment. But what was actually happening was much more brutal. Our department head even gave explicit orders for all course teachers to have at least one assessment every class (twice a week). I applaud this decision, being the harshest of critics of summative assessments myself. Rather than teaching students to cram, I believe progress should be made and assessed each class, or at least weekly.

Needless to say, the habitual crammers in our department (and I would assume in most departments at our university) did not take too kindly to such constant pressure. The unofficial university Facebook group was flooded with complaints and curses, literally loaded with over ten rants a day. Some of these are legit, like some teachers taking forever to return quiz and assignment marks even after two to three months. It seemed like the teachers finally got a taste of the load students carry on a regular basis, because the pandemic has shown them missing way more deadlines (in checking scripts) than students do (in submitting the scripts).

However, by no means can any limitation on the part of teachers justify them being ignored like how Bipu sir is being now. In physical classes, no one would dare to ignore even the nicest teacher, but in Zoom and Google Meet meetings, some get by not only whole classes but even the whole semester without speaking a word.

Let's get some statistics here. I can always think much more concretely when I've got some hard facts in front of me.

mean students per class = 35

mean attendance per class = 9

standard deviation of attendance = 4.8

mean students who respond = 4

standard deviation of students who respond = 0.4

It does not take a statistician to see exactly how pathetic the situation is. The maximum number of students that can be accommodated in one section is normally 40. But many people (a significant percentage) have dropped courses because of the sudden load, though the vast majority persevere, getting by through expletive-filled rants.

But the interesting statistic is the standard deviation. For the uninitiated, this statistical term gives a standard value of the variation of data values. Put simply, the mean score doesn't really do justice in this situation, because in normal classes the attendance is less than 5 or 6, but during live quizzes (if the course has live quizzes; many just have substitute assignments) the attendance is almost full. That's why the standard deviation of attendance is so high. On the other hand, that of students who respond is pitifully negligible – that is, a set of students respond in every class. The score wouldn't even be 0.4 if not for some rare instances when the teacher loses patience and starts calling for students by name to respond. By that point, most students unmute themselves, but of course some just remain muted and some just write in the chat like Yasmineen. Do the muted ones think we will give them the benefit of the doubt and feel they were not present close to their devices (perhaps for a bathroom break) and so missed their name being called?

I can't imagine being in the teachers' shoes. Nowadays I rarely teach as it is. The number of people who come to me for help aside from Sarin, Yaseen, and Minthan is barely five, and even those people only knock me before tests. Plus, I barely hold study sessions now. One would think that online study sessions would be much more flexible and frequent if you stay at home all day. Totally wrong. Just as there is the potential of people working out at home rather than in the gym – potential which remains almost entirely untapped – so too do group study sessions *theoretically* have scope but never quite pan out well most of the time. At first we – Yaseen, Sarin, Minthan (no SHE because of her Mom's constant

surveillance) – had a study session each week. Then suddenly one week – this happened when lockdown measures were not that stringent – was skipped due to Minthan’s night outs (her well-to-do family eats out occasionally, and sometimes she goes out with friends). After that we have had no more than three group calls over the last two months. Even during the times we did meet, someone invariably would come late, and Minthan would be hurrying to finish whereas Yaseen would be stalling the lecture to clarify every point. Moreover, since he took handwritten notes, he would tell me to pause and speak slow every once in a while. The others, having known Yaseen for over three years now, took these antics really well (at least on the surface) by never discouraging Yaseen’s stallings.

But I cant imagine being in teachers shoes

Being the only 1 to have to switch on the camera

the only 1 to speak for around an hour

Perhaps being blessed with a good student who responds to most questions

Who perhaps even carries the discussion forward

Lucky to even have 1 such student

most probably there no such student in most courses

Most probably there no such student but at least there other types

Other types who at least come with a question or 2

at least its better than not having students show up at all

heard a teacher just had 2 students in class the last week

its not even finals week & still people dont show up

“Iman, what do you think Godot symbolizes?” Bipu sir asked.

“... Oh! Godot may symbolize God. What with the spelling and all, you know. And there’s also the notion of the characters wanting to reach God, or capital letter Real, or capital letter Truth. They seek Heaven, but Heaven they will not get in this world. Perfection and the earth do not go together, and that’s why the, the characters keep *waiting for Godot*.”

“Excellent, excellent!”

i thought i had got surprised

but i was able to respond well!

wow the thoughts aren't jumbled up now!
ok lemme train this controlled thought frenzy state
people are posting left&right that the pandemic has wrought as under their lives

But
some also say it has shown them how to live & how to survive
they say war is the state of constant improvement

that in times of chaos is realized true collective power
Night w/o day = no days & no nights

Teachers w/o pandemic = less appreciation for my class participation

Thinking without concerning = Real, Truth, Heaven?

"Where is Sarin, Iman?" Bipu sir asked.

"I don't know, sir. I thought she would come to class."

Sarin had changed exceptionally in the pandemic era

Now with no club activities eating off her time

she's finally able to focus on her studies

in fact her dedication rivals SHE's

Sarin is not as crazy hardworking as yaseen

but she's a hustler

MashaAllah

I don't know why she's missing in class today

probably some genuine reason

will knock her later

have a good feeling it's nothing bad

As for minthan she's not in this course

and neither is SHE

“Should we wrap up class, then?” Bipu sir asked, though there’s still around fifteen minutes left. “If you guys don’t have any questions, let’s end the class here.”

“Sir!” a girl’s voice spoke up. I was as surprised as Bipu sir. The screen showed the voice belonged to Farzana Alam Riya. I don’t know her, and to my knowledge she had not spoken up all semester.

“Sir,” the girl repeated after Bipu sir said *yes*? “Sir, can you please reduce the syllabus for final quiz? We have so, so much pressure from all side! We cannot read whole play in two days!”

“Farzana, is it?” Bipu sir said, clearly irritated. “Can you please tell me the name of the play? Yes, name it. What is the play which you have for your quiz day after tomorrow?”

“Si- I- Sir, it’s Wa-Waiting for Godot, sir!”

“Oh at least you were here in today’s class, then. I was wondering if you even knew the name. But clearly you haven’t even touched the book, or softcopy of it, whatever. If you’d have touched it, you would know it’s a very short play. It’s not even 65 pages long! And why would you only have two days to read it, huh? The quiz date has been there from the very beginning of the semester! In the, the course outline. And I also reminded you guys last week. So, you had minimum 9 days to prepare! And now, now you come at the end of the class, heh? At the end of the class you say you have too much pressure? *Well that’s what happens when you leave things off until the very end!* Do you know that my, my eldest cousin brother has the virus and is hospitalized? Do you know that I stayed there last week and still prepared notes for class? For *class*? Or just for Iman who doesn’t actually need it? How can I take classes like this, staring at blank screens and wondering if anyone is even here listening to me? For all I know, you guys could be playing video games or chatting or sleeping while keeping your camera off and microphone muted! Do you know that I checked your scripts in the hospital waiting room? While my cousin sisters were crying I- I felt so helpless that I couldn’t do anything, then I thought at least I could sit in a corner and check you guys’ scripts! Dammit!”

Yikes!

Sir just went over the edge

wow surprisingly my thoughts are coherent

wonder what that farzana girls thinking

if she was quiet before she’ll be mute for sure now

and damn sir’s shoes are definitely unwearable by me

as for cams being off, shud i turnmine on now?

I used to turn it on at first

being the only1 to do so actually

so I gradually started keepingit off

Habits u know

habits die hard

perhaps the other students

are habituated to remain silent

and thats why they do

now allofasudden for them tobe vocal

wheneven in offline classes they used to be mute

now with there being a veritable mute button

can we blame them fortryingto maintain anonymity

when its so convenient tobe anonymous in online classes

Heck

Can we blame them for crumbling under pressure

when for their entire uni life they have crammed

when the education system has conditioned them this way

Yes we can

for dawdling is to be condemned

But can we not at least understand

empathize

just like therapy for smokers is gradual

should we not show them the road to recovery though a safe route

rather than throwing them in at the deep end to swim with the sharks?

Chapter 6: Abstinence / Tabooification

have u read the news
about the o level girl
rape and murder

It's so sad omg

How can someone be gangraped in front of her bf

yes omg im still shocked
apparently the bf called three of his friends and then gangraped her to death
wth
i dont get this at all
how is group sex a desirable thing in the first place
how is that mentality even manufactured

And it wasn't just group sex
it was rape

yes yes
but im saying the mentality
how does that form
not to mention the bf himself
omg i cant imagine how the girl must have felt
the shock at the betrayal

I even read somewhere that

A couple got married

Arranged

Then after few days the husband started to invite a lot of friends

Then one day he locked his wife n their friends in a room to rape her

but why
the guy already married her

He did it to earn money

he can satisfy himself legally and ethically
why ruin an entire marriage for money
not to mention ruining the wife with trauma

Like each one who 'uses' her has to pay a sum of money

...

This news disgusted me so much

Made the wife a ride on the park

With everyone taking turns on her by buying tickets

U ask why? It's because people like that don't follow logic

Their conscience is blackened by negative energy

damn that really hits me hard
um what are ur thoughts on sex education?
people are petitioning for that all over social media
so i actually got a theory about this
wanna listen?

Ya sure

But mom here in the room

So u keep dropping if i go

ok ill drop
so i actually think
some things are better left taboo
like
taboofication isnt a bad thing in my minf

Wah interesting

cuz what really is a taboo?
its something which isnt mentioned by most people even though they know its existence
not giving acknowledgement to the existence
not letting the virus live by not letting it hostify you
by not letting it infect you

Hehehehe hostify!

i mean
do u remember in the course literary theories
we learnt about marxist criticism about ideologies and hegemony and stuff
and miss rahima gave us examples of ideologies as entirely bad stuff
remember?

Yes!

She was saying its an ideology or false belief to desire white skin
That it's been injected in our minds that it's inherently good
Inherently more pure
And lol I remember she said people buy smartphones to feel smarter
As if having a gadget can increase ur intelligence
Ahahahaha

yes lol i remember
but the point is
can we not think of blind beliefs being a good thing?
why should governments always be transparent
why should we always QUESTION everything instead of taking things for granted
if you dont take anything at all for granted, then youre in paranoia
if you question whether there's good or bad in the world, then how can you criticise murder and
world destruction even?
if there is no good and bad then why should we bother to fight crime and strive for justice
actually people DO think of black and white
of good and bad
binaries
yes even the so called intellectuals
they think individualism is good and terrorism is bad
like how many movies have we seen
where the lines between freedom fighters and terrorists are blurred
and yet nooo
individualism is always good they say
follow your dreams they say
do whatever it makes you happy they say
this selfish selfish selfish world always taking for granted that western ideals are ideal
even selfishness itself they shamelessly promote
thinking is good i agree
but theres also such a thing as OVERThinking
cuz the definition of religion is belief in something that CANNOT be comprehended
oops lol i digressed so much hehehe
you must be with aunty
no prob i gonna keep dropping
ok back to the main point

people actually intentionally hold back info sometimes u know
like, they dont want the public to panic
mass hysteria
u must have heard of this
so while theres obvious disadvantages of not having a transparent govt
there are times
when people shudnt actually have to know and stress over all the minute things
and sometimes not just the minute but also big things
u remember in literary theories course i wrote on the anime code geass
title was something like To Hegemonise or Not to Hegemonise: A Marxist Analysis on Code Geass
so i think since there is a taboo in Islamic culture about talking about sex and girlfriends and so on
this sexual repression
is actually the right path
cuz do u remember in the poem the wasteland
it was suggested that the way to ward off lust
was the buddhist doctrine of abstinence
that we shudnt battle against lust directly
but rather stay out of situations which provoke lust in the first place
in Islam its similar u know
we are taught to not even look at the opposite gender
to stay out of gender mixed parties
basically to avoid situations where we are in the presence of the other gender especially when alone
of course its not a sin to merely look at girls
its the LOOK iykwim
intentions
so lets talk about the pros and cons of sex edu
of course there are some pros like
awareness of STD
of knowing about birth control

periods
that kind of stuff
but do u really think people dont know about them
i mean
its not like there arent any ads whatsoever about
sanitary pads
id say most people are definitely OVERexposed to sex
sex and rape and murder people know they are bad
the prob is more subtle and more massive
in gendered ideologies
in perceived masculine and feminine traits
but how is sex edu gonna help in that

A thought suddenly hits me while I am writing these. This is one of the only times in my conversation with SHE that we are talking about sex. It appears that we were abstaining from this topic as well, though we often discussing controversial topics like politics and proselytization. Perhaps it's most likely because of SHE's Mom. What if SHE's Mom picks this moment to find that SHE not only has a male friend, that SHE not only has a male friend with whom SHE is chatting, that SHE not only has a male friend with whom SHE is chatting and from whom message after message keeps coming and lighting up the phone to draw her attention to it to read the messages ... not only all that but also that the content of the messages includes red flags like *sex, rape, lust, STD*? What will SHE's Mom think then? Somehow successfully brushing these alarming thoughts aside, I resume:

we obviously cant and mustnt blame the victim in any way
i suppose most people are triggered at this
that some people do victim blaming
my heart obviously goes out to the victim and ALL victims of molestation and rape
im saying that the way to cut at the root of rape culture isnt sex education
there is actually a netflix show called sex education u know
its highly touted by so many people
but when i checked it out i was so disgusted
its complete erotica

yes there is some consulting talk about safety and stuff
but its overly inclusive u know
like they totally endorse lgbt and all
so what is it people in our country want
what will really happen if sex talk is naturalized?
will normalization somehow instill ethical values in males?
no of course not
the way to go is for moral education and gender equality
and i dont want to say this
but what if sex edu backfires and people normalize these taboo subjects
what if they think just because sexuality is natural that we shud openly talk abot it
cuz i think that by suppressing it people at least fear sex and all that comes from it
bf gf all extramarital relationship is taboo
taboo doesnt mean they dont exist
oh I so wish it was the case
that we cud will away decadence and degeneracy from society
but at least making things taboo paints a social eye of disapproval on them
that eye is internalized by most
most who if not hide their sexuality outside marriage then at least they shudder before breaking that
taboo
one's shudder is another mans complete abstinence
and another mans conformity is the whole society's win
like think of the west
not only do they condone premarital relationships
where the parents talk freely with the childrens sexual partners
but the parents themselves date and drink
lol im saying parents
but the maximum families are single parents
such a terrible terrible terrible culture
which is seeping into our own culture

consent consent consent
all consent everything as if that alone validates sex

Yes sex edu isn't all good
In India I read there is sex edu

hey u back!

So
Besides some school
They started to sell condoms
And then it became a thing
That kids will go and buy condoms and have sex
Just because it is 'safe'

omg school children
damn thats so sad

Then u know
There's the slang culture too
People make so many adult jokes
When I was at school I got bullied for not knowing about 'adult' stuff

damn

And some people say fu... every chance they get
It's like saying it gives them some kind of satisfaction
Like we HAVE to drink water after eating
They too HAVE to drop in some f bombs here and there

omg i have this exact same opinion
i have actually written about it in an opinion piece
wait lemme show u

Taboo Words Should Remain Taboo for an Ethical Society

The act of venting by uttering taboo words – screaming swear words or expletives or slang slurs – can indeed serve as a form of catharsis. We all can relate to a desire to yell our guts out when enraged. Many people, though, turn to racial or sexual slurs in a fit of anger.

But the internet, particularly social media, has changed this dynamic. Words uttered in the heat of passion can, literally, follow you forever. With the world embracing more and more inclusiveness, [a homophobic rant can single-handedly ruin a career](#).

What if I were to say that taboo words in general should be avoided? Yes, not only blasphemous or politically controversial words, but also the occasional F-bomb here and there.

[Language shapes thought](#). Let's spend some time on this statement.

First, our brain reaches out to our existing vocabulary when processing something. Think of the word “comprehension.” What does it really mean to *comprehend* something? It means to *understand*, to successfully *process* the information.

Yes, the type of language we are accustomed to using gets embedded into our very thoughts. Next – and this is natural – those frequently occurring words become habitual utterings.

To cite an example, think of any friend or family member having a signature word or phrase they routinely stick to. Someone who always yells out some oft-used words like “awesome!” or “savage!” or “that sucks.” Got it? Odds are that they have uttered those particular strings of words so much that they go back to them subconsciously.

Now think of someone who compulsively swears. Someone who can't get two sentences in without a “harmless” four-letter word. Do you think his mind is void of nothing but filth? Not really. Science says that [people who swear more actually have a richer vocabulary](#).

But that's not the point. People who tend to utter taboo words are inclined to break more taboo. That's an issue in itself. The real trouble, however, stems from the fact that they are dependent on using taboo words.

Dependent how? Again, people tend to swear when agitated. And for many, it becomes a habit. Of course, most people would have the sense to limit using taboo words to their

friends. But since swearing has been habitualized, who's to say they will *never* slip in front of elders?

The most damage inflicted by swearing may very well be on the swearer himself. He depends on breaking taboo for the slightest of reasons – whether bad *or* good.

“What the hell did you say? F*** you!”

“Oh, that s*** rocks, dude!”

“F*** ... oh, sorry, professor, that was a slip ...”

It's almost as if someone who breaks taboo is childish, unable to control his state of excitement. Getting angry and lashing out is frowned upon in society. We are lectured to not give in to violent urges and instead to remain silent when angry. Why then have we let swearing become socially acceptable? Sure, parents try to prevent kids from breaking taboo, but they eventually give up soon.

Is there any harm in using swear words with positive connotations like “that s*** rocks!”? There is. These people are still subconsciously building up the habit of breaking taboo. They may be careful enough not to slip in front of elders, but they are gradually becoming more dependent on cussing.

The more you feed rage or excitement, the bigger its flames become. In time, more wood needs to act as fuel to satisfy each high. Every burn etches its mark on our spiritual life.

It is said that the first thing people learn in a new language is slang. Perhaps we ought to change that. No, merely the adage of “don't-swear-in-the-company-of-children” won't work. We need to start from the bottom-up to try to mitigate derogatory comments.

Indeed, four-letter expletives aren't as innocuous as widely believed. They, if nothing else, normalize the breaking of taboo for nothing but a cathartic high at the individual level. Left unchecked, societies – *all* societies since we are all connected in the digital world – will continue to manufacture the toxic swearing culture, deteriorating [“our most precious possession: our spiritual life.”](#)

Wow ok I'll read later

Iman there's also a great need to educate people about periods

yea that i agree

i didnt use to know at all

Especially for girls u know
When they come of age they shud know
Like
I remember at school
Some of my frens thought it was a disease
Some thought that area got cut somehow
And omg one of my friends
She got traumatised
She hid in her bedroom for days
2 days

whaaat
where were her parents
why didnt they tell her after she started hiding

Her parents were outside
Out of town
She was with her bro
Then that happened

didnt the bro help

Her bro came and knocked the door hard many times
She neither opened the door
Nor said what happened

imagine how it must have felt
omg

Bro tried to break the door
Couldn't
Then out of panic he called their parents
But they took 1 more day to come
So he called the emergency too
He was worried whether his sis committed suicide or not

omg what

Then the emergency service came and broke the door
They consoled
The bro was much older than her and so he was saying she could have told him about it
U see the danger in complete abstinence
The doc afterwards scolded the parents for not making her aware of it
She was prescribed anxiety meds and told to rest
When she told me all this she was laughing
Feeling silly
Silly that she thought she was dying just cuz of a natural monthly thing
But if u ask me then I say the thing that was silly was the unnaturalization of this natural thing

yes i agree with u
abnormalization is good at many things
but for girls its a must to make them aware
since they of course have to go through this thing
but u wont know what a taboo thing it is for boys
like ill give an example
4 years ago i wudnt have dreamt to talk to mom about friends who are female
but maybe thats cuz i never had any female friends
still i remember in my 1st sem i was so uneasy when mom asked who my friends are

i said nihan and sarin and afifa
idk how i managed to say it but after that mom was silent
it was so awkward
but then after a few days she started asking me about them
about their parents
where they lived
whens their bday
and yes lol she remembers their bdays and is the one who reminds me
thats why i always post on their wall at midnight
not cuz of my memory but my mom's

Hihihihhi

so idk
was it just in my head
that it was taboo for me to talk about girls
that if i just up and said it then it wud be fine in a few days?
but no even now i cant imagine talking of marriage and stuff
i never knew about periods because mom always hid
i never knew she didn't fast 5-6 days every Ramadan
i never questioned her "i am sick" comments for not keeping the fasts
and i damn sure never noticed her skipping prayers some days every month

Hihihhi u so silly

so because of the way i was socially brought up
never with female friends and never hanging out with friends and so also missing out on hanging out
with smoker friends and the tea stall chats
did those prime me to be extra sensitive to all things sex?
like, i hate sexuality

Umm

i feel that's something so peripheral
so worldly
so unspiritual

Then do u believe pure love is platonic love

that's a good question
i think pure love has room for more emotions as well
including libido
but that's of course within marriage

It's really a blessing u feel that way
U so lucky that not only are u adhering to Islam
But also that u love it that way

of course i wud be lying if i said
i dont have desires
i guess a very small percentage actually don't
like asexual people
but that's besides the point
i mean that the vast majority do have impulses
but if our culture can repress that for most people
again of course it does the opposite to some because they cant control their sexual frustration and turn
to molestation
but a quote unquote sexually free society is so degenerate
the notion of consent is so ignorant and vile
it is so western

we cant do everything we like
i mean we CAN
but theres a line between accepted social practices and unaccepted
like in wrestling many fans say
“fans” say
that buying a ticket gives them the freedom to crap on wrestlers and hijack wrestling shows
thats so entitled
as i said there are certain boundaries
like people say doing whatever u want is ok unless it hurts others
but people get hurt in so many ways other than physical violence
like bullying
like hate speech
like desecration of tradition by imposition of sex edu

Hehe I wouldn't go that far by saying desecration

And also the term hate speech is deceptive it monsterifies the freedom to express our dislike for anything and everything

But of course there's a line

ya ya u right there

But ikwym

Iman I'm proud of u

huh?

Yea really

U are all about breaking barriers

But sometimes u also serve as the aegis of old conventional barriers

I wouldn't say barriers because that's so negative

More like walls

yesss ikr

why be a rebel for rebelling's sake?

SHE replied *Hihihih* to this. But I know what SHE had in mind to say. SHE wanted to say *And also why go out of ur way to rebel, to change people's mindsets unless it becomes a personal or emergency problem?* But then again, that might not be true. Perhaps the problem *is* an emergency, and perhaps SHE, knowing my dream of becoming a preacher, acknowledges that some topics deserve to be spoken about before they deal irreparable damage. Whether it was the case or it wasn't, I was not shaking in emotion. My words weren't overflowing and going off the edge and superposing in a cascade of overthinking. My eyebrows were relaxed.

Chapter 7: Believe In The Me That Believes In You

Choose the correct form of verbs in the following sentences.

- 1) I /_____/ tennis every Friday evening.
 - a) play
 - b) plays
 - c) have playing
 - d) None of the above
- 2) I /_____/ my teeth every morning.
 - a) have brush
 - b) brushes
 - c) brushing
 - d) None of the above
- 3) I /_____/ from Dhaka, Bangladesh.
 - a) came
 - b) come
 - c) am coming
 - d) None of the above
- 4) The Prime Minister, together with his wife, /_____/ the press cordially.
 - a) greet
 - b) greets
 - c) have greeted
 - d) None of the above
- 5) Either my mother or my father /_____/ coming to the meeting.
 - a) is
 - b) are
 - c) were
 - d) None of the above
- 6) The man with all the birds /_____/ on my street.
 - a) live
 - b) is live
 - c) are living
 - d) None of the above
- 7) Eight dollars /_____/ the price of a movie these days.
 - a) is
 - b) are
 - c) were
 - d) None of the above
- 8) /_____/ the news on at five or six?
 - a) Is
 - b) Are
 - c) Will

- d) None of the above
- 9) The dog or the cat /____/ outside.
- a) is
- b) are
- c) were
- d) None of the above
- 10) We /____/ sleeping on the couch by the time the show ends.
- a) are
- b) have been
- c) will be
- d) None of the above

“answer these for now ok?” I texted in the group chat named “Iman and Besties.” The members of the chat are SHE, me, Minthan, Sarin, and Yaseen. The four of them have been constantly there for me from my freshman year of university. Growing up I had two “best” friends as well, but I talk to them barely two to three times a year now. But these four I consider my constants, and I have no doubt they will remain so even after our university chapter closes.

“Ok doing now,” texted back Sarin. The others haven’t seen the message yet. Minthan almost never sees unless I mention her. I guess she has muted notifications. SHE sometimes pops in and shares memes or some funny anecdote, unfortunately to little or no response or even reacts, exempting mine. Yaseen always sees messages, but seldom replies, let alone reacting to memes.

I routinely give them such grammatical exercises. I don’t mind that Minthan has only once or twice solved them; she is good enough at grammar. The exercises are mainly for Yaseen and Sarin. Before the pandemic, Sarin was not regular at solving these supplementary activities, but Yaseen has always been a mainstay. I’m surprised he hasn’t seen the message yet.

“Iman um done,” Sarin texted.

Wow. That was very quick. Hope she got in a sincere effort.

“lemme check on the phone. can i call,” I texted. But getting no reply, I started checking.

i play yes
 i have brush? no no
 haha did she think have brush means possessing toothbrushtobrush?
 i came no
 actually yes came makessense
 but i wanted presenttense
 together with his wife greets yes
 wow how did she get this 1 right
 i thought this1 was tough
 #5 are? No, wrong
 but this1 was difficult somewhat

either or = always singular
6 noneoftheabove right omg
this 1 hard for me even
i was wondering whether the subject is plural even though WITH
\$8 shud be is
she got it wrong
news she thought plural
well its fine doing mistakes will teach her
nononono i mean yesyesyesyes she got #9 correct
but how?
in another eitheror question she thought plural
then why this she considered singular?
if mistakes then mistakes shud be consistent
this what gets me
how can people learnfrommistakes if mistakes not consistent?
last one also wrong but this expected
it will be will be
because by the time the show ends is a future reference
well i cant say im happy with sarins performance
but i guess she did better than what yaseen will

And where *is* Yaseen? He has never not seen my messages within five minutes. The times when it took that long are when he is eating or in the bathroom, though normally when he eats he still texts me to wait. And when he goes out, he always has data turned on so he doesn't miss important messages. It has already been 15 minutes now. I'm growing worried. Should I call?

"Hey, Yaseen. Where are you? You ok?"

"Hi, Iman."

"Hey. Everything ok?"

"... Were you looking for me? Sorry, I forgot to on mobile data."

"Oh, you are outside, then."

"Hmm."

"Where are you going?"

"... Hospital. Dad's ... dad's sick. The vi- virus ..."

"Huh? He has the virus? When? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Pray for him, Iman. Please. I'll say more later. Bye."

Typical yaseen

of course he wudnt tell

guy wants to take all the pressure
 no wonder hes got anxiety
 actually is surprising he asks for help from me even
 let alone be in the iman and besties group

Actually my besties arent besties of each other
 its just me being the common thread
 i brought them together
 same group
 same group study sessions
 before they barely spoke to each other
 yes sarin and minthan were friends
 but only casual
 &
 only when they shared same courses
 outside these social connectors no communication at all
 no reacts on SHE's memes and no nothing
 funny how in the pandemic these divides become all too clear
 back during regular classes the indifference was so less visible
 Bonded through anime
 i remember minthan admitting us coming together cuz of 1 commonality
 Bonded through studies
 i remember forty people coming to me for help in vassar
 social bonds are so 1 dimensional
 so selfishly crafted
 held together by chance weavings of fate like similar courses
 & when the connecting strings give way
 the bonds too make way for another chanced jigsaw piece to attach
 yet
 and yet
 and yet social bonds are so intricately designed
 so subtle yet essential are Allah's plans for us
 for us to meet certain people at certain times
 without whom survival in hindsight seems impossible
 for us to pass through certain ordeals
 without which we do not become who we are today
 for us to reflect and marvel back at the past
 without which there would be no present and future
 The past which softens the harshness & zooms in to the bliss
 The past without which we could neither think nor concern
 The past which is never past but is the present and future too

“Iman bad news. My nanu collapse. Mommy crying I'm with her. Sidra crying too. – Sarin”

At the sound of this text message (phone message, not through Messenger or WhatsApp) and seeing Sarin's name on the notification box, I knew instinctively something was wrong. My hands shook as I swiped down at my phone to bring up the notification and read it. Having read it, somehow my shaking ceased. Was it her Nana or Nanu? Grandfather or grandmother? I couldn't decide. I was suddenly certain Sarin had always referred to her grandfather as *Nanubhai*. Was it then her grandfather? But she didn't use *bhai* here. Then it's her grandmother?

Oh stop it, you. Her family member dying and you thinking of something silly like that? Shouldn't you be worrying and praying to Allah rather than wondering about the gender of her grandparent? Would it make any difference to you whether it's her grandfather or grandmother? That's exactly the reason you were concerned about concern! About turning out to be a heartless apathetic monster who does critical thinking when people are dying!

No No No
Toxicity stay away
shoo shoo shoo
ill notbeaffected by dread
neither despair nor apathy
neither miasma nor toxic positivity
wait why I thinking about me
ok shud i call her
no she said she attending to her mom
ah poor sidra's crying
she's just 2 years old

Next day details. Sarin saying omg Iman she so shaken. Never saw Auntie bawling like that. Auntie thought her mother gone. Oh so it *was* Nanu – grandma. Apparently the whole family called 999 the national emergency number. Was their first time calling ambulance. Is surprising. I sometimes think what I wud do if faced with such situation. Like hospital visits. What to say to reception. How to buy tickets. Tickets for movies trains bus planes whatever. But seems like mostly everyone else also in the dark about many things. Hope my curiosity about experiencing solo ticket buying and hotel reservations not gonna extend to the misfortune of having to call 999.

Yaseen. He actually completed the grammar exercises. Lol. Had totally forgotten about that. Next day he up and messages me the answers in a word doc. Lol I thought he sent me doc prescription or report of his Dad. But no it was the grammar workouts. Actually he made lots of mistakes. More than Sarin. But no feedback from me today. Rang him up and asked about uncle. Says uncle has history of illnesses. Various. Diabetes there as well. On top of that he now got the virus. Most probably sugar got low and they rushed to the hosp. No they hadn't called 999. Though they have experience of that, they had their car ready. Why hadn't he told me earlier about uncle being infected? Topic change he says. Topic change to grammar exercise. That damn grammar exercise ...

Yaseen
Yes?
Are you sure uncle is fine?
Umm, he stable. Doc said it's nothing too serious. But he need rest

Alhamdulillah ok let's talk about your exercise then

Yes sir

Hehe

so I'll be honest

Iman you always honest

Hehe thank u

your grammar isn't good

u have improved much

a lot in a lot of areas

but not in grammar

do u understand that?

Yes sir I sucks

You do

Knowing that

knowing that u suck

do u give up?

do u accept ur weakness?

I ... I don't blame anyone but myself

Answer what I asked u

Do u have faith in urself or not

... honest answer no

I know thanks for being honest

now tell me

do u have faith in *me*?

Always. Always belief u. Always trust u.

Thank you

I won't tell u to believe in urself

It's not so easy at least not right away u won't

But since u put ur trust in me then do one thing

Believe In The Me That Believes In You!

Say it.

Say I Believe In The You That Believes In Me

I believe in you believe in me

Hehehe well close enough!

Try once more.

I Believe

I Believe

In The

In The

You!

you ...

That Believes In

that believes in me!

That's it!

Chapter 8: Iman and Besties

Eyebrows unraised, voice calm, earphones in place, I was ready to click the Call Now button when Sarin would say *should i call?* The others were already here. We have plans to surprise Sarin at midnight for her twenty-fourth birthday. It is now 11:48 pm. First we would call to check up on her Nanu and how her family is faring. Then when the clock strikes midnight, we would then turn our cameras on in the group call to reveal a birthday wish gift card from each of us. SHE had given the suggestion of all of us making a wish and then putting it in cardboard cut-out pieces, saying this small yet premeditated gesture would make her feel special: *It's the small things that count! And small things are magnified in pandemic u know!*

Minthan had mixed feelings about this. She felt giving Sarin a more concrete gift would matter more: *What meaning behind bday cards? We shud give her something she can touch. Or better yet to eat. Hahaha yes that's it we shud order her pizza. Order pizza for her? Can we do that at midnight? Yes yes foodpanda is 24 7. But shops mostly close at night. I'll just send special request 😊 iykwim 😊.* And so a family sized pizza was set to be delivered to Sarin's door on May 20, 2021 at midnight.

“Should I call?” Sarin texted. I hit the Call Now button.

“Hello!” SHE's voice was too cheerful, too upbeat. I hope Sarin didn't get any hints.

“Yo, Sarin, how are you?” Minthan said. Not her too! Have they forgotten that her Nanu is sick?

“Hey, guys! We're doing good, Alhamdulillah!” Wow, Sarin too was cheerful.

“How's your Nanu?” I asked.

“She's better. Is old age, you know. No virus symptoms, Alhamdulillah. Doc said we can take her tomorrow. Take her home, I mean.”

“Alhamdulillah,” Yaseen said. “Yesterday was so unbelievable. Both of us rush to hospital. Both of us face tragedy.”

“Actually,” said Minthan, “it's not that uncommon now. People are rushing to the hospital even through pandemic. It's the worst time. My family don't want to go out and instead makes excuses about the

lockdown for not doing their, um, health checkups. But actually, and it's all over the news, that hospitals are jam packed. No room for emergency patients even. We don't realize the situation unless we ourselves face, ah, calamity."

"Yes, yes, very true," I said. "Who is with her now, Sarin? Aunty?"

"Yes she doesn't stay anywhere else than near Nanu. Mom herself sick you know. Has a severe cold. We are worry that she may get virus. Allah forbid!"

"Allah forbid!" I said. "Ok so you alone at home? What about Sidra?"

"I was in hospital with them all day. Dad was at home to taking care Sidra. But for some reason maybe for keys, Dad is now there and I here. To take care of Sidra. You know, we can't get Sidra outside under any circumstance."

"Wow, Sidra is here with you now!" I said, excited. It's been a year that I haven't seen her except in pictures.

"Yes! Actually, I hold her in my arms now, haha!"

"Oh!" gasped SHE. "Should we cut the call? Take good care of her!" I saw that it was 11:58. Two more minutes. I couldn't have the surprise *not* happen!

"No, no, it's ok. Baby doesn't sleep before 1 am, haha. When I was baby I sleep at 9 pm hehehe! Sidra a bit surprised, maybe. That's why she in my arms. Because normally Mom and Dad here. Now suddenly it's just her big siso!"

"How much can she talk now?" SHE asked.

"Umm. She understands lot, MashaAllah. But cannot organize words together properly. 2 words, 3 words. Oh, do you know! I was wearing new home sandals tonight. Dad bought recently. She recognize

this tonight! She said *ooohh ohhh jutu*²² *ooohh*. Pointing my sandals she say that. I laugh so hard. I ask her *oh you want Daddy to buy new sandals for you?* And then you won't believe! She nodded head and said *Sid jutu Sid jutu* and then *Baba kin! Baba kin!*²³ Hahahaha!"

12 o'clock. We all switched on our videos, even SHE – her Mom had for some reason gone to bed early – and we then wished her in unison. Sarin was taken aback at our sudden stunt. She stammered something about not being ready to turn on her camera, but we wanted to see Sidra and Minthan said something like *no need to be shy if Iman and Yaseen see you hehehe*.

"Hiii, guys!" Sarin says. "Sidra, say hi!"

"Awww!" SHE melts. "OMG! Sidra, hiii! How are you, lil one!"

"Hahahaha!" Minthan puts a hand on her mouth. "The little girl is blushing! Aww!"

"Hehe!" Yaseen says. It's good to see him in good spirits. "Shy girl putting face away!"

"Come on, Sidra, say your name!" Sarin says. "What's your name, Sidra?"

"Ahahaha!" I snort. "You ask her name by addressing her by name!"

"Hihihihii!" giggles SHE. "So cute baby! I can't get enough of babies!"

Sidra cautiously picks up her head from Sarin's shoulder to steal a glance at us. So slow is her movement that she must think we won't notice it at all. After a second or two of looking, she again jerks her head away and places it on Sarin's shoulder, this time not slowly at all.

²² *Jutu* is a child-talk derivation of the Bangla-used (to hell with etymology!) word *juta* which means shoes or sandals. Actually, *juta* can refer to all sorts of footwear including boots too. Come to think of it, "footwear" is a better translation of *juta*.

²³ *Baba* is father, and *kin* is a derivation of the Bangla word, *kena* (the previous parenthesis applies here too), which is *buy*. So, it's like Sidra is saying *Daddy, buy sandals for me!* but by an ingenious condensation of the message in two words.

“Isn’t it surprising that babies also have shame?” I say. “I mean, is it like an ontological thing?”

“Onto ...?” Yaseen says.

“Umm, it *is* ontological,” SHE says. “I mean, of course you need social factors to bring this natural tendency out, like I’m sure Sidra has had positive and negative reinforcement to, um, condition her shame and whatnot. But yes, it’s natural for all of us to develop shame.”

“Hey! Look!” Sarin says as Sidra sits upright in her arms, apparently looking to argue that she isn’t shy. “Sidra! Count to 1 2 3. Come on! One! Two! ... and? Ahha, Sidra! Ok, say this. How are you, Sidra! Come on, you can do it! How are you? *goog* Hey! Guys! Did you hear that? She said it! Yay, good Sidra!”

“Awww, the way she said *goog* hahaha *goog*!” SHE laughs.

“Isn’t it fascinating,” I say, “how babies modify words and kind of build their own language? Like, I remember my little cousin brother used to say *kukka bhalo* instead of *onek bhalo*²⁴. I don’t know how *kukka* came from *onek*, but we all started saying *kukka* too. I love me some baby coinage!”

“Coin??” Yaseen asks.

“Hehehe *kukka*!” SHE laughs again. “I don’t know what kind of process that is. Of changing *onek* to *kukka*, maybe the /k/ sound. But changing *good* to *goog* is progressive assimilation, because the /g/ goes forward, *progresses*, and replaces the /d/ at the end. There’s also regressive assimilation when children say, um, *popping* instead of *shopping*. Hihihhi *popping*! There’s also other things like phonemic deletions and additions, where children will defy social norms and *creatively* make up their own words!”

“Hey, that’s calling bell,” Sarin says. “I don’t know who this in midnight. Is it Dad? But he didn’t call. Lemme check.”

“That’s the pizza!” Minthan says excitedly after Sarin gets up, as if Minthan herself is going to get to eat some slices too.

²⁴ *Onek bhalo* means “very good.”

“Dang,” I realize something. “We didn’t show her the cards ... How could we forget that?”

“Oh, I didn’t make them,” says Minthan. “I prepared a post with pictures to share on her wall. And I thought the pizza will be enough.”

“I- I have my card here,” Yaseen says. “I was wait for you to show your before I showing mine.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “Sidra stole our thunder but it’s actually perfect timing to surprise her with the cards. When she comes, we spring up the cards, ok?”

“Wow, guys, you got me a family size pizza? That also in midnight? OMG guys!” Sarin says as she puts the earphones on half a minute later. “Whoa, are these birthday cards? Oh my God! I’ve never receive birthday cards like this, guys! Thank you so much!”

“Sorry, Sarin,” Minthan says. “I couldn’t make the cards but I got you the pizza and I also have Facebook post ready. And ahahaha! Iman, is *that* your birthday card? It’s so huge!”

And huge it was. I actually never made birthday cards before, though now that I think of it, I’ve seen some and all of them were a sentence or less long. Mine was a short poem. It had taken two hours to prepare – most of it for cutting cardboard pieces than for the writing process itself.

“Aww, Iman! I will read it all. Thank you for taking so much time for the gift! I don’t care if it’s a card or a letter, ahahaha!”

The happiest of birthdays to the smallest of friends
The smallest of friends but with the biggest of hearts
But even the biggest of hearts need inspiration and belief
Need Imanspiration! (I mean belief and inspiration, hehe)
For inspiration is a fledgling flame in constant need of logs
Good thing you can find it anywhere if you know where to look
And I know where to look for mine to get my spirits rekindled

I can look at my first female friend in my life

And that is you, birthday girl

The happiest of birthdays to you!

I was a tiny bit worried that this would be a little too close and personal and intimate for a birthday wish. But I knew she would never say it aloud or text me about crossing the line. I knew she wouldn't *say or text it*, but I wanted to see her expression live. This was one reason I wanted the video chat to happen.

Honestly speaking, I wasn't actually tense. After all, Sarin and I have been best friends for almost four years now. Also, as I wrote, she was my first female friend. And I've always wanted to break the social stigma of boys and girls being super sweet with each other outside of flirtation or relationships. I really disliked the guy-talk of always looking out for romance and the huge amount of teasing that friends do to each other about the slightest of intergender conversations. Back when I was class 7, one classmate was saying in my hearing range that he doesn't have a girlfriend and doesn't go after girls because he fears the constant teasing he would receive from his friends circle.

Really? He wouldn't approach a girl because of what people he considered his friends would say? Even though our faith prohibits extramarital relationships, faith did not have anything to do with *his* fear. I suppose he was just saying that, but if he had half a chance or at least if a girl approached him, he would go for it, and any thought of social mockery would vanish. Still, the point is that the people we call our best friends should not inspire such fear to us.

Intergender mixing is ironically stymied by taboofication done by a constant social vigil on it – whether by criticizing it, laughing at it, or wishing it were themselves and gazing at it with the evil eye and blistering it with miasma. Thus, on the surface though it may appear that Bangladesh is a conservative country, the damage done by negativity is definite. Yes, people are discouraged by all sorts of social elements – especially family – to get involved in relationships, and this is good: chastity and moral sanctity are essential to us. However, also dragged in with the social disdain for illicit relationships are all the positive markers of romance as well – like chivalry, appreciation, open praise. These positive features are by no means limited to romantic relationships, and in current times they are rather missing in them. For someone to be ostracized and laughed at and ridiculed for being sweet with someone of the opposite gender is an extremely sad social reality in this country. Afifa's words came back to me then, of how she had said I don't understand what it takes to be friends. Perhaps I still don't know it today, but at least I know that I *have* friends now, and that I won't let them go for the world.

“Oh my! Iman!” says Sarin after reading the poem. She had a sparkle in her eye. “That means so much, Iman! That's the best gift I ever have!”

“Better than a family size pizza?” Minthan pretended to gasp, but then burst out laughing. We all laughed. Even Sidra, who was watching the proceedings with impressive attention, broke out a smile. Positive, infectious energy.