

MOHAMMED WAHAJUDDIN SIDDIQUI

The Visiting Card

"This is a long day. I want to just rest." Ishtiaq moaned at the glare above. His eyes were set upwards but to no particular direction. Ishtiaq soaked in the glare until he faced a familiar carmine symphony of shapes. This disconnect between intention and action increased every passing minute.

"This free?"

Ishtiaq nods his head as the contents of the basket is dumped on his belt. He picks each article and swipes it against a bar-scanner. Beap! The screen blurts out the name and the price of the article in green. The name is atrophied to a random array of numerals and letters. The price is seen at the bottom corner of the screen. As the customer glances at the screen, mentally calculating the total amount purchased, Ishtiaq extends his arm and places the article on the other end of his workstation.

The article slides on a gentle slope and rests with its companions as they wait to be placed in sterilized, white bags.

"71.50."

Ishtiaq feeds the plastic card into a machine and enters the relevant details. The purchase is made.

Ishtiaq is now free to do what he wants. The time afforded to him however is short, he grimaces as another customer makes his way to the now vacant workstation. Sometimes, there are no voids of activity. Lines longer than dozen people, connected to each other like a carriage passes through him for a large part of his day.

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eISSN 2394-6075

His day ends when the last nocturnal couple, usually draped in crucial garb, exit the establishment.

Ishtiaq puppeteers his elongated fingers on the cash register to review and tabulate his efforts. As the brightness trickles down, his cohorts leave their workstation and head for the company bus. A few coveted seats for a large bunch of people, not so different from Ishtiaq, are duly occupied. Not to compound his workplace confinement with the inconvenience of standing throughout a lengthy bus ride, Ishtiaq raced ahead of them. A day of his uprooted living was completed.

Occasionally, his monochrome activities caught up with him and he would avoid this race altogether.

His preferred haunt was a small stretch of jagged rock. The rocks bled sand as the winds brushed past them. The cigarette box was adorned by the invisible man's warning and somebody's cancerous lung. Ishtiaq picked one of its contents, felt his pockets for a box whose outline he felt a few moments later, lighted the cigarette. He would roll the cigarette to feel the contours of the budded end.

Unbeknownst to him, his companion pulled up from the highway, the driver of a beige sedan with blue decals near its windows. Kazi was of a wheatish complexion and long-faced, with eyes infused with a lighter shade of viridian which rested between a pair of groggy and darkened sockets. He left the car and approached the pensive man in blue.

"Had a long day?"

Ishtiaq simply nodded in agreement. He was occupied. His tensions were released by yet another nicotine rush.

"Same, same." Kazi inferred the nod. "My shift beckons in a quarter of an hour. Night-shifts."

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

He spoke in an Urdu shaped by his time and place. Urdu and Bengali had a similar visual palette of tapered, wafting letters. They couldn't sound more different though, and his inflection had pronounced dab of his rooted Bengali.

"You'd like this to change?"

"Perhaps." Kazi gazed unto the dying embers of the cigarette. "We are the water-carriers of the night. And the night? We both know the city could not live without it." Now, Ishtiaq's wandering mind was drawn to the conversation. "That's why we are here, I suppose, sacrifice ourselves under the sun while they revel under the moonlight.

"I'd think this occupation of critical importance would give me reason to withstand those Westerners reeking of liquor and piss." Both laughed. The hands of the Clock Tower crept closer to each other.

"How is the new job?"

"It bores me. Sit on that chair and swivel 100 times a day. The bloody beeps testing my patience."

"You'll quit this too?" He laughed.

"I'll stick. I'll stick. People need money back home."

"So do we all. But that didn't stop you from..." He wasn't allowed to finish.

"I won't quit."

"Unless you fancy staying without papers."

"Go, drive." Ishtiaq retorted. However, Kazi's train of thought seemed to ignore the growing unease.

"Think sitting for hours moving that dreaded wheel is easy. I feel my body harden every passing hour. Like a statue or a robot. With the kind of money they throw these days, they will replace

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people like us with some machine or software. Heh, what am I thinking? Because computer can work more efficiently at a less charge. We sell ourselves way too easily."

"Maybe we should exchange our jobs for a bit. Checking out items is quite bearable, no added pressure to capture more customers, fixed wages, a bonus too if t..."

"Interesting."

Ishtiaq stared onto the black space above, the embers of dying cigarette were getting to him. He was an admirer of the night. Hailing from a place where light was a valued commodity after dusk, he adored the ubiquitous interplay between light and the surrounding darkness in the city. Here, they wait for nightfall, as if they loathed the sun for gorging the city with its radiance. Perhaps, the night gave the city's architects a chance to display their own expressions of light; light with a ranged variance of hues, shapes and luminescence. 'The sun isn't enough for them.', he thought to himself.

Ishtiaq wanted to see this diversity. He wanted to wear the beige overalls of a cab-driver, stained by the rigours of confined and tedious driving along with a few drops of cardamom tea. The man was a drifter in essence; he had a pronounced inability to drop anchors if the lightest waves crunched his hull. There existed restrictions on transferring employment, perhaps to discourage 'free spirits' like these from flashing into different jobs. Becoming a ghost was an option but an ill-advised one. The circuitry of the society Ishtiaq resided had been demarcated and distinguished to extinguish anybody who wished to exist on the fringes of its sections. Everyone had to be accounted for, greys ceased to be and everyone was to be on one side of the line.

Ishtiaq tossed away the burnt remnants of his cigarette and rose to bid his interlocutor farewell. 'In a few days, another pack?' Ishtiaq asked. 'What else remains common between us?', replied Kazi.

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

His day began before dawn, woken up not by his own volition but by an alarm clock on the other end of his quarters. The alarm seemed to ignore his bedfellows and he felt it was beamed straight at him. Perhaps his sleep was so fragile that the slightest jolt could knock it off. Each day was like cold, slow and ridden with anxiety. He felt himself sinking into the abyss generated by his loath and inaction, felt himself sinking into his bed, he was awake, but, he was drowning. In an instant, his half-awake body jerked out of bed, as if in shock. He could sense the rusted mesh bulging against him but he couldn't do much. Someone overhead turned over the side undisturbed. Ishtiaq planted his foot on the grime tiptoed around his companions to trickles of muffled abuse, and made his way towards the shared bathroom stalls. The sanitation of these facilities do not concern this story and evidently, our protagonists.

As he uses whatever remains of the lavatory, let us discuss something that is widespread across this part of the city like the plague: the business of visiting cards - exchange or distribution. An arguably murky endeavour in this part of the city, where the stature of its occupants precludes the possession of these cards. The Harvard Business Review insists these visiting cards are a means to promote oneself in the corporate world, a pamphlet of sorts. This advice is not lost on prospective business owners of the area who treat these cards as mini-posters; it beats paying for advertisement spaces.

The message can be made specific too, usually in the form of 2x4 inched card fitted in the slit between the window and its rubber seal. Its prime attraction however, is the visiting card's ability to hover over the purview of the law.

An unaccounted man, nothing is seen of him except his unremarkable moustache drifts between cars. He places these cards on each one of these sedans like a bird placating her famished chicks.

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

His movements were methodical as he ghosted from one car to another. Experienced as he was, he couldn't help but admire the subtle curves of a car, single-digit number-plated and Italian.

'huuh.'

The shadow passed away in silence while the footsteps still lingered. The profession of this 'advertiser' is quite different to the morally ambiguous jobs you and I have, he is, however, beyond the line of civil, respectable livelihoods and he knows it.

'Tak' and a 'tuk', maybe another 'thak'. The steps were measured and consistent with someone of relative inexperience creeping up to his car. A baby-beard sprouts off his face. It appears that the his naivety extends to the location of his vehicle. He unsuccessfully tugs at the curved door-handles of a few cars. We, for the purpose of continuing this story cannot let this ignoramus transport passengers on foot now, can we? After a few frantic attempts and an anti-theft alarm, our man in beige does find his car.

He steps in the car and spends a minute or two adjusting himself to the contours of his seat. He has to, of course, as he would spend the rest of the day with the synthetic leather skins stuck to those beige overalls that have already begun their journey to a more brownish hue. There was something, the little jarring anomaly in the foreground that would make anyone question something amiss - or perhaps something surplus.

A card had caused the visual discord, sticking its head out of one of the corners of the windshield.

The 'taxi-driver' left the car and picked up the card. As unremarkable and staid it was, its typeface had an undue dosage of vibrant fuchsia. It was written in English and was littered with large, flashy numbers; always in the hundreds. Ishtiaq squinted at the letters; the discordant train of words and letters always

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

seemed to elude him, despite his attempts to gain an intuitive fluency in the language.

The Bengali language had a sense of continuity about it, letters would diffuse into words and words would coalesce into sentences.

'Extella Moon Massage Center'.

His internal monologue salvaged the remains of the contents of the visiting card. His back had been troubling him. The undue stress on the basal sections of his spine, an unfortunate peculiarity of a cashier's body had conferred on him a sense of inevitable helplessness, it was there, not visible, but it was there. He couldn't call it pain. Pain, he thought, was a that sharp prick on the epidermises or a small sludge of heat or discomfort somewhere on his body. This just stuck out like stepping on a smooth, curved stone - the one that would not look out of place in the bottom of a household aquarium.

'This is costly, but not out of my reach. Perhaps, I would have to cut down by pack to even out.' His wallet was not wide, neither were his savings deep. There was hesitation, he acknowledged, but that was a hesitation that accompanied his every purchase — a feeling familiar to a person of his finances.

Perhaps, squeezing out the back pain outweighed a forced abstinence from maybe a dozen packs of cigarettes; Ishtiaq decided to get rid of his pain.

'Good Afternoon, this is Extella Moon Massage Services. How may I help you sir?'

'Hello madam, back pain madam.' Ishtiaq was a little nervy. He was in conversation with someone on the same footing, a position where he had no prior experience. His days as a checker and a daylong career in a taxi always left him on an unequal stance in any conversation, for he was rendering a service to his customers. 'Madam', 'Please', 'Thank You', were words he

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

exhausted in his vocabulary in the opening few minutes of any conversation.

'Yes, sir.' She said that with an undue stress on the last letter. There was hesitation, like the drops that trickled through a thatched rooftop. Both sensed it. The woman too was not at ease dealing with someone of a subcontinental descent using tattered sentences. In this city, one would be wise to keep away from such people.

The lure of another customer outweighed her apprehensions. 'We have varieties of massages sir, Indian massage, Sri Lankan massage, Philipino massage, Thai massage.'

Ishtiaq was impressed. He had only heard of the cosmopolitanism of this city, now he would get to experience it.

'Madam', he asked. 'What about American back massage?'

'British massage?'

'Sorry sir, we only have Asian massages.'

'Okay', he conceded, 'I will have the Indian massage'

'200 sir.'

'For a massage?'

'Sir, she is one of our best.'

'Your price too high, I can only pay 150.'

'Sir, we can only offer that for repeat customers'.

Ishtiaq felt a pang in his back. His faltering concentration could not balance a negotiation and scouting a potential fare. He was in pain, not the pain that pierces through your every thought and action, this is its sedentary and dormant cousin, but every bit as meddlesome.

'I shall complain.'

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

She sensed a fallout she was not prepared to handle, 'Sir, 40 is a price we can give. Not more.'

For someone wanted a whiff of the multi-culture, it seemed strange that he would find solace in the familiar.

They agreed on a time-slot and exchanged numbers. She inquired whether he was in need of something extra, for she declared her parlour accomplished in 'forcing out knots' in the lower body. 'You are going to charge extra, right?' She hummed a yes. 'No, this price is fine by me. Not more.'

The day was long and the heat made the day bloat, not unlike the rail-tracks that cut through the homelands of these workers. The shifts of many are undefined, this 'many' shifts would ripple across a neighbourhood, painting a picture of red-eyed despair tinged with hope and an occasional glimmer of relief when the salary was received, part of which was promptly sent to their families back home.

The cabbie-cartel had, to our novice driver's relief, a very accommodating 10-hour shift. The relief was premeditated by a lengthy period of meandering through the concocted veins of the city. He had to refuse fares whose destination he did not have the slightest inkling about. Those which he did accept, the journey was dotted with apologies and extended explanations of his ignorance.

He returned to a spot not so different from whence he had met Kazi Mohammed, a landscape corroded by the wind.

'Assalaam-u-alaikum brother', Kazi chirped. Ishtiaq had reckoned the first the exchange would have dulled his spirits. He offered a cigarette which he thought would establish a semblance of parity between their experiences.

'No thank you, you know what they say about cigarettes. Harms the lungs.'

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

'They keep saying and I shall continue smoking.' Ishtiaq tittered.

Both gazed into each other's dun overalls and the invitation lay open on both sides.

'How was the day?'

Ishtiaq nodded. His day, he said was a flash of cars and horns and tricoloured lights that caught him in some sort of a daze. The passengers were few and the ones he baited preferred to be driven to locations that either did not exist or were eaten up by the developing city. The intercom blared his ineptitude by incessantly suggesting passengers in his proximity waiting to be picked. Kazi was a little perturbed.

'You did not pick any of the passengers the computer suggested?' His eyes widened.

'I was getting close to picking one up when that computer started blabbering.'

Kazi was reddish, his mind regurgitated a few choice words in Urdu, stopping a moment before they transmuted into words.' The fallacy of cabbing in this city is your assumption that every 'stranded' passenger waving his hand will be sitting behind you in a minute or so. That never happens.'

The crimsons complemented his irises in a strange manner. 'You can cross three lanes in a tenth of a kilometer and by God's grace, you survive that; there will be another cab who would pick up that customer.'

Ishtiaq remained mum.

'These companies flood the streets with cars. These days, it is like leaving a cleaned-up carcass to a pack of wild dogs.', he rambled on. 'That bloody screen keeps tracking my performance.' He gesticulated the last word with disdain. 'And it will track yours. 'Kazi's eyebrows approached a syncline.

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

'Pass me that cigarette.'

The cigarette still had a long way to go and its filter was dry. Ishtiaq was still for a moment. Kazi's gaze was unshaken. His lips let go and the nicotine tube fell in place between Kazi's fingers.

He was of the belief that Ishtiaq was a transient; his day in the hypermarket made him reconsider this, he said in his typically altered tobacco inflection. The smoke dithered about between them. The entire day was a sedentary trance to Kazi: multitudes of barcodes, the endless glares of white light, an unrelenting procession of people with faces undistinguishable. 'I could feel my body calcify as I scanned each item.'

'A day in the car would have made your back ache?' Ishtiaq asked.

'It does on occasion.'

'How do you work with that?'

'What do you mean. How I work? I work. That's it. That's all that can be done.'

There was an inkling that something was wrong, an itch. Something was amiss. It was an altered state brought upon by relentless exhaustion that brought upon him this perception that something was not what it seemed. Against his better judgement, Kazi decided to keep these pervasive thoughts to himself.

His languid curiosity nudged him on, 'What is the name of this wo, sorry, place?'

'Extella Moon Massage Services.'

'And how many cigarettes would you give up for this massage?' Ishtiaq smirked. He suckled on to the bud of the dying cigarette, only letting go when the last whiff of tobacco was replaced by ash.

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

The two returned to their usual avatars of members of a faceless fraternity that maintain the city, imported from beyond the sea. A staple in any city, the lower section of the pyramid that props the upper parts. They take up any activity that the privileged wouldn't bother dirtying their hands on.

The commandments that govern this city operate in a crude system of binaries. The establishment is many things to different people; but it has overarching commitment towards a notion of omnipresence, like that overbearing parent that has not yet found out that full extent of his or her transgressions. It is bearish at most and Orwellian at its worst. Everyone noticed these cameras enclosed in zaffre, translucent bulbs that stick to the ceilings and walls like pimples on prepubescent cheeks.

However, the city was not the realisation of the worst (or best) of Orwell. There was an innocuous degree of interconnectedness in the city. One could sense that everything he saw, touched, bought, paid was tethered to an all-encompassing ether. The establishment would sell this as the new advent of technology, though it's doubtful that they comprehended these unsaid sentiments. Few of the disenchanting would see as it as the gross perversion of privacy.

He latched on to the handle and propelled himself into the vacant backseat of the car, prone and on the verge of collapsing into the recess between the two seats. The car was bathed with the warm light of the lamp, giving its interiors a serene undertone. It was dreamlike for van Zeel, he had blinked from the hyper-saturated strobes to the sepia lightening inside the car. A robust man in black observed him, studied him almost, as van Zeel grappled the seats. The man had not uttered a word.

He stood there, eyes hinged at the man.

'Verdant Meadows, tell you the villa from there.'

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

The taxi gathered speed and veered out the street and the man's transfixed gaze. He returned to the bar.

Van Zeel took control of his discordance and shot a few furtive queries at Ishtiaq. The cab had entered the highway. Ishtiaq would gently coddle the accelerator and the machine, in buzzed tranquility would nudge itself ahead. Ishtiaq talked about himself, his home and how he had ended up there.

Van Zeel couldn't comprehend the tone of his words or the construction of his sentences, all he could ascertain were his fondness for fish and 'bhav'. He called him 'Ish' now. He blathered about leasing out his villa in solidarity. A sentiment grew in Ishtiaq that there was a certain irreverence shown towards his circumstances. van Zeel continued. He always had a firm interest in the workers, he had imagined that perhaps an interest in these lives would liberate himself from the insular, indulged life he had lead.

They were mere quantum in the circuitry of the city. Vehicles could cover hundreds of kilometres in an hour. They zipped past an unmoved eye. Crossing these highways was a death wish. The management knew this; they had erected grilled barriers, taller than the tallest being, its summits heated to incandescence.

Inside the car, there were whiffs of that familiar scent of the cooling system. The old air-conditioning units in the city gave off, along with a regulated airflow, a similar, wafting scent. It was not apparent, but its absence would be felt somewhere at the back of the mind. With forceful compression and expansion, the air chilled van Zeel's chest. He felt like menthol had enveloped his lungs.

'So where are you from again?'

'Bengal.'

'So you are an Indian?'

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

‘Yes.’

‘How long you here?’

‘Just 2 months. I have started driving last week.’ Ishtiaq was earnest at the prospect of a welcome ear.

‘And this shift is what, 6 hours long I would guess.’ van Zeel canted towards the vacant seat lateral to the driver, hovered back and returned to a compromise in the unidimensional path his head bobbed. Ultimately, it rested on the adjacent window.

‘10 hours sir. No breaks.’ He spoke in a manner that betrayed the sedentary drudgery of sitting almost motionless in the car. Technology has not yet advanced enough to counteract the creeping disorders of forced static inertia.

‘10 bloody hours? That’s a crime, shame. How’s that possible? Your back must be stiff like a breadstick.’

He uttered a litany of expletives, not directed at our protagonist but at the general scheme of affairs. It was a throwback of his days in university, where abstract notions like the universality of human rights were championed with all the vigour and pragmatism a fresh-faced undergraduate student could conjure. There was a unique juxtaposition in the city, a forced marriage of the postmodern and the archaic past. His words began to melt with one another, forming an incongruent, variegated mash of words which were slurred at a gentle pace. Ishtiaq was marginally acquainted with the language of his colonial forebears, but could not, for the life of him, comprehend this Afrikaner-coloured strand of English van Zeel spoke. He tried to grasp the few flashes of univocal words that his inebriated passenger uttered. There was a pause long enough to understand that perhaps the interlocutor had invited Ishtiaq to reply.

Ishtiaq’s terse manner of speaking was replaced by an ingenuous release of any reservations. ‘Sir, this won’t be problem any longer. I’ve got this appointment with this lady, massager, she

can removing this pain fast. I hope this will help drive better.’ There was silence. Nothing was said or heard. Neither made any attempt to continue. This inertia would bother Ishtiaq but he battled the urge to have a quick glance back, an untouched car was more important.

The silence continued as the taxi entered the community. After negotiating the meandering streets, it had reached the villa. Ishtiaq tapped the screen and stated the charge. He glanced at his passenger. van Zeel had passed out, his head rested on the window, cheeks holding on its side. His attempts, which ranged from mild exhortation to vigorous jerking could only help van Zeel utter some half eaten words. Ishtiaq could only make him stand on his own feet but bereft of any balance. A lamppost in spite of its ridged contours provided adequate cushioning to a drunk head. There was the ever-pertinent question of payment. Ishtiaq quickly and intuitively learnt that the drunk and the unconscious do not have the physical faculty to pay. He bridged this inability himself and charged van Zeel the entirety of his wallet.

The trip had enlightened Ishtiaq to a certain division of people in the city, their living quarters and a glimpse of their disposition. Of course, the ramblings of the drunk should not be taken as representative of their disposition but the tendencies of humans in the presence of the ‘other’ cannot be discounted.

His wallet, also, was enlightened.

It was the start of another shift. The sun was on course to make another day hot and miserable. With the windfall of yesterday’s adventure as insurance for today’s treatment, he made his way towards the other end of the city. The wide and cobbled and speckless streets of the Meadows made way to the Euclidean tortuosity of unkempt roads and byways. His back-pocket contained the visiting card whose almost-offensive colour scheme and a compact font rendered the address illegible. He

entered an array of blocks housing the parlour. The screen notified him of his inefficiency, he had to pick up a passenger. The pain was not letting up. He felt his back petrified. He tapped on the screen to log in a passenger. Technology, for all its complexity still required an input. His passenger? A sore back. He asked about the residents of these blocks, making sure to avoid the women and well-to-do. A delivery boy, holding back his curiosity told him the directions.

Soon the parlour was within view, its shop-board sparse, its contents: the name and minimalistic representation of two hands placed on a bulge which Ishtiaq made to be a posterior. There was a woman in a translucent white polo standing near the entrance. Her black satin hair tapering off to a bleached variant of blonde. Ishtiaq entered the complex. There was nothing remarkable, a faded chrome desk with a woman seated behind, sterile white lights emitted from a false ceiling. He went up to the desk and requested the massage. The woman unhooked from the touch-phone and with a hint of discomfiture, responded. He glanced at her and realised the existence of a uniform in the establishment.

He removed two creased notes and placed them on the desk.

Another woman walked into the cramped corridor-like room and invited Ishtiaq in. The sun had kissed the skyscrapers and continued downwards. It would not have been long since that woman had passed school, he thought. Her complexion was either dusky or burnt; the glints from the glossy environs didn't let him determine. Lying prone on the table clothed, he twisted his arm to point out the troublesome regions. The masseuse was disconcerted and laid the lotion bottle down. She ignored his gestures and continued the stipulated routine, her knuckles on his trapezoids which rippled across his back.

The kneading dissolved his pain, or so he thought, his masseuse seemed to now ignite wave upon wave of tingly, tangy agony.

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Ishtiaq contained himself by clenching his eyes shut. He shivered. The woman noticed this and paused.

‘On the sides, at the center!’ He contorted his arms to the site of the soreness.

She duly pressed on them, pressuring it via her palms. The embers in his back died out. He even derived a mild pleasure out of this massage.

10 minutes passed. The woman ceased the activity. Ishtiaq craned and could only see her from a corner. With a hint of indifference, she whispered ‘over’. Ishtiaq sat up, twined his back in a circular manner and made his way.

‘You need extra?’

‘What?’

‘Extra.’

‘What extra?’

She didn’t reply. There was a stillness in the room. The two had nothing to say, nothing left to disturb the stillness. Ishtiaq experienced a reflex that disobeyed the rest of his thoughts. In a coordinated rush of musculature and swift movement, he took leave of the woman.

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