

Daridro

Officer Mahmud only had curiosity to blame for bringing about a premature end to his fledgling career in the police force.

The incident occurred on the night Mahmud set out on his hourly check on the detainees in the station's lock-up wing. The heels of his boots clacked with authority as he strode through the corridor, stopping each time to take a cursory glance through the peephole of the cells that were occupied. His eye paused to take a closer look at the occupant in cell number six.

He saw the detainee perched on the rollmat of the pallet, staring at his feet. The points of his elbows were pressing down on his lap. His hands were clasped together so tightly that the knot of his two-handed fist betrayed a slight tremor. It looked like the man was praying desperately to a displeased deity. Considering the fierce cries Mahmud had heard from afar when the arresting officers dragged the man in an hour ago (which were peppered with a volley of Bengali expletives), he was expecting to see someone as broad as a bison – perhaps a drunken brawler picked up from the night's mean streets and thrown in the cell to sleep off his stupidity. But he was wrong. In fact his gaze fell on a scrawny figure whose body appeared even more shrunken by the view served by the fish-eyed lens. Momentarily, Mahmud wondered whether the wrong emergency department had picked up the man.

Mahmud slid the metal cap back over the peephole. He tugged his shirtsleeve to look at the time on his watch. The minute hand was past 10pm. Shift over. Noticing a

smear on the glass he immediately polished the face with a boyish frenzy, licking his thumb and rubbing the surface vigorously. The watch was a gift from his parents, presented to him on the day of his passing-out parade when the hundreds of bright-eyed recruits stood in file on the training ground and pledged allegiance to the British Crown. The timepiece wasn't particularly expensive, but the engraving on the back gave it sentimental worth, the message brimming with his parent's pride and faith that he would make a steadfast enforcer of the law.

Mahmud made towards the locker room to remove his tie and grab his coat. But he was stopped by the voice of his conscience. It implored that he turn back. He glanced at the old pair of dirty Converse All Stars trainers left by the door. They were removed from the man before he was thrown into the cell. The laces were heavily soiled and the soles worn diagonal on the outsides. Mahmud imagined the pair once belonged to someone much younger and were probably handed down to the man, or perhaps he bought them from a charity store. Several years ago they were all the rage. Now they were laughable to any fashion-conscious youth.

Pity softened Mahmud's heart. There was no doubt the man was frightened, but perhaps he was hurt. He couldn't tell for sure. Mahmud went to see the jailer in the surveillance suite. He found the man with his feet up and his eyes rolling casually over the six screens; he was settled comfortably into his nightly vigil. Mahmud smiled.

"What is it, *Mumood*?"

"Can you let me into cell number six please?"

"What?"

"The man looks slightly on edge. I just want to make sure he understands his rights."

"Why?"

"It might calm him down. I'll only be two minutes."

“A CPS lawyer’s been called. It’s a formality with this one. We’ve even got his passport. He arrived on a work visa, which is now three years out of date. He made a bogus claim for asylum which was also turned down by the Home Office. Bit of an eel this one. He’s been on the run for a while, got caught once before and managed to slip away. This time it’s gonna be an open-shut case.”

“Fine, but let me explain the situation to him. I speak his language.”

The jailer, a hefty man with hangdog jowls, who had spent his younger days in khaki fighting foreigners with firearms, arched a puzzled brow.

“Isn’t your shift over? Doyle’s taking over, right?”

“Yeah, but he’s going to be a few more minutes. He’s getting changed.”

There was a pause.

“Only two minutes,” Mahmud reiterated.

The jailer thought nothing more of it, irritated only by the fact that he had to leave his padded seat at the request of a rookie. After an exasperated huff, he hoisted his bulk off the chair and led the way clutching the gluttony of keys attached to his belt.

With a heavy clonk the metal door came away from the jaws of its frame. The jailer stood back and crossed his hefty arms intimating that he would remain standing on the spot while Mahmud did what the jailer had described en route as his *Mother Teresa bit*.

The hinges creaked when Mahmud pushed the door open. He stepped inside. The confined space was already suffused with the man’s odour – the pungent smell of sweat from that final tussle for freedom before the door had clanged shut on him. The man peered up from his pensive state. Though ill-lit, his eyes flecked with optimism at the sight of the dark-skinned officer, whose sudden appearance must have carried an angelic aura in an environment where everything else was white and bare, the air cold and dank, the ambience ostracising. Besides, for the last hour, all the man had for

company was a fly, which had been darting from one corner of the cell to the other, as though it were underlining his inescapable plight.

“You have a cigarette?” the man asked.

Officer Mahmud shook his head.

“Smoking’s not permitted.”

The man tilted his head a little and studied Mahmud’s face. He craned his neck trying to take in his features from several angles. He then sat back and scratched his nose. The pads of his fingers were stained dark yellow in what Mahmud guessed was a mixture of turmeric and tobacco.

“You Bengali?” he asked.

Mahmud nodded.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“*Amake chere dao!*” the man begged, the yellows of his eyes now wider, more lucid, flickering with hope.

“Please let me go,” he repeated.

“I can’t do that.”

The man exhaled loudly and dropped his hand onto his lap. Mahmud noticed the purple welts around his wrist.

“You shouldn’t have fought so hard.”

The man sneered at the officer.

“*Cheleta ki bolche!*” he muttered under his breath.

“Are you OK?”

“You call them policemen? Those were *ghundas* who treated me like dog.”

“They were carrying out orders,” Mahmud said. “You were kicking and screaming even as they brought you in. I heard you from the office even though the door was shut. They couldn’t take any chances.”

“They were hurting me. See for yourself.”

The man extended his wrists to show the marks to Mahmud, presenting them with his palms up as one does in the act of surrender.

“Do I look like someone who could have overpowered any one of them, never mind three?”

There was a pause.

“What’s your name?” Mahmud asked.

“Shafique.”

“You’re in this country illegally, Shafique. ”

The man clicked his tongue.

“Is that what you’ve come here to tell me?”

“The passport confiscated from your room proves that you’re an overstayer. Apparently your work permit expired over three years ago.”

“I don’t have to say anything.”

Mahmud raised his palm as way of an apology.

“Of course, you are absolutely right. A Bengali-speaking solicitor will be here soon to represent you.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s procedure when an immigration raid is carried out. It’s to make sure you get a fair hearing before a decision is made.”

Shafique pulled up the sleeves of the baggy fleece and began scratching his forearms. He was breathing heavily now as if the formality of the officer’s words had doused the flame of hope his entrance had ignited only moments before. Mahmud noticed that the

underside of the man's left arm was inflamed with eczema or some other kind of dermatitis. The skin was peeling.

"What's happened to your skin?"

"It's from washing dishes."

"From working in the restaurant?"

The man didn't answer. He looked down at his lap and began rocking in his seat. The light from the florescent bulb flared off the balding spot on the crown of his head. The hair surrounding it was lank and greasy, falling over his ears in unruly curls. He hunched his shoulders and hugged himself.

"Do you want a blanket?" Mahmud asked.

The man shook his head.

"If it's any consolation we're not allowed to keep you detained here for any longer than twenty-four hours."

"But you have my passport. "

Mahmud bit his lip.

"Whatever action they take should be quite swift."

Shafique's back stiffened and his rocking ceased. Mahmud's words made him feel as though he were a bull who was about to be slaughtered. He reached out in a gesture of appeal and glared at Officer Mahmud.

"You can't send me back."

Mahmud shrugged his shoulders, slightly discomforted by the suggestion that the decision was his to make.

"It's up to the immigration officers. I just came here to ask if you were OK, if you wanted a cup of tea or something to eat."

Shafique looked at him with cold eyes.

“I have a dozen mouths to feed in Bangladesh. The only thing I want is to get out of here and you have to help me.”

“But you’re in this country illegally.”

“Who am I hurting?”

“It’s against the law.”

“To work?”

Mahmud wanted to reach out and put his hand on the man’s shoulders. He wanted to intimate that beneath his black and white uniform there was indeed a heart beating with compassion. Truth be told, he was aware of a member of his own extended family who had paid a trafficker to reach these shores just to make a better life for himself. His mother often spoke about how hard this distant cousin of hers laboured in a kitchen for a paltry sum, earning less than minimum wage, and how little he kept for himself, using the black market to send most of his earnings back home. She had stressed that his was a life of sacrifice, an endeavour of virtue, not vice. But, right now, the hard call of duty dismissed the pathos of his mother’s voice.

“Listen! You don’t have the right to work in this country.”

“I’ve been here for over four years now. I’ve never stolen a thing. I’ve never hurt anyone. I’ve never broken a law. I’m a god-fearing man. I’m a good person. Can’t you see that? I’m no criminal. I live in a small room above the restaurant. If you take me there, I can show you. It has a mattress and a little television balanced on a milk crate. It’s by the small electric heater.”

“Please. Stop this.”

“I work for ten hours every day washing pots, pans, and plates, peeling onions and potatoes. It’s hard work. I’m not relying on any handouts.”

Shafique put his hands together in supplication.

“Please let me go!”

“I can’t.”

“It’s a job that only someone in my position would be prepared to take,” the man declared jabbing his breastbone repeatedly with his forefinger.

“You’re being exploited.”

“I won’t be doing this forever. Once I’ve saved enough money I’ll go back to my *desh* and open my own business, become my own boss.”

“I can’t do anything for you.”

Shafique’s voice found an edge.

“Why not? You’re wearing a uniform. You have a name badge pinned to your chest. You have those stripes on your shoulders. You have some authority. If you didn’t, that door would not have opened and you wouldn’t be standing here. Please speak to them. Make them understand. I know you can help me.”

If only that was the case, Officer Mahmud thought. He had been drafted into the immigration unit for six months to provide administrative support to those of higher rank: the detectives and caseworkers who did the stakeouts, built up the case files, applied for the warrants, and raided the suspected businesses. He considered the transfer a blessing having spent fifteen rookie months beatbobbying the smoky, labyrinthine backstreets of the capital, marching nervously through the needle alleys, blowjob parlours, crack corners; the city was a confusing mosaic in which the senses were frequently assaulted by the dichotomy between the privileged and the impoverished – residential cul-de-sacs nestled up to rundown council estates, a crime-ridden car park backed onto a stretch of posh boutiques, two streets away from a glitzy five-star hotel stood a lowly soup kitchen where each night the down-and-outs convened for a hot brew and a hunk of stale bread.

And, of course, he had arrested miscreants whose misdemeanours were far worse than Shafique’s could ever be. Thieves, addicts, drunks, muggers, looters and beaters

who repeatedly broke the law and who took great pleasure in spitting in his face and calling his kind 'oinks' 'chimps' and 'cuntstubbles'. This man, in contrast, was little more than a battery farm hen in this country, chained to the kitchen sink of the restaurant, existing only to serve the needs of loved ones he'd left in a third world poverty trap in which even the hand-to-mouth maxim had the ring of prosperity. Officer Mahmud placed his hand gently on Shafique's shoulder.

"I urge you to calm down. This isn't helping anything."

The placating gesture appeared to have the opposite effect. Shafique's body started to shake. He raked his hair back and took big gulps of air.

"Allah, Allah, O Allah, O Allah, I have to get out of here!"

"What's the matter?"

"You don't understand."

"What?"

"My eldest daughter's got TB. She's lying in a hospital bed in Dhaka. Do you know how painful it is for me to be here and not at her bedside!"

"I'm sorry to hear that," officer Mahmud said.

"Every penny I'm earning is going towards her treatment. I need to keep sending money so that she can get better."

"Unless your life's in danger in your native country and you can prove this and demand asylum, any other plea will not work. You best speak to the lawyer."

The man's eyes narrowed and his lips curled downwards tightly, aggrieved by Mahmud's intransigence. He pushed the young man's hand off his shoulder. It yielded: limp and impotent.

"If I were in your position I would let you go. Do you know why? Because I would not have my head so far up the law's arse!"

"Hey, watch it!"

Shafique put his anger to one side and the curl of his lips became lax.

“I’m sorry, beta. Sorry, really sorry.”

“It’s OK.”

“But tell me beta, don’t you have a responsibility to a fellow Bengali? What would your mother and father think if they found out that you did nothing to help a poor man from their part of the world?”

“You should have returned when your visa expired. You could have then reapplied, got yourself another sponsor and kept everything official.”

“I sold a whole tract of land to pay a *dalaal* to get me here. I’m not a landowner’s son, or the son of a factory owner. I never had the privileges that your citizenship gives you. Keeping things official was never an option for me.”

Officer Mahmud wiped the light mustache of sweat that had begun to form on his upper lip. He heard the metal toecap of the jailer tapping the cell door.

“I have to go. Someone will be here soon to deal with your case.”

“Please come back. Please, I’ve something to tell you.”

Mahmud turned back on his heels. He looked at his watch.

“Make it quick.”

Shafique stared deeply into his eyes.

“*Daridro*. Have you heard of the word *Daridro*?”

Mahmud shook his head.

“It means the pain of poverty. Do you know anything about Bengali poetry?”

“What?”

“*Kazi Nazrul Islam*, our national poet? He who has the purest of Bengali hearts.”

“I’m bloody British!” Mahmud retorted. “I don’t know who or what you’re talking about.”

“It is poverty that has turned me insolent, made my eyes naked, sharpened my tongue. Its curse has turned my violin into a sword. So if I speak out of turn, it’s only because the pain of my plight forces me to—”

“Stop! I’ve had enough of this,” Mahmud snapped.

Mahmud’s curt dismissal dashed Shafique’s hope of making an ally of his fellow countryman. In these small hours all he could see was the noose closing around the future he had envisioned. Suddenly he felt nothing but the deepest hate for the Bengali officer.

“You’re handcuffed to your duty, someone else does your thinking for you, I might be a criminal in your eyes, but I’m willing to do anything for my family. You have no heart. You’re as cold as the country in which you were born. Go on, leave me alone!”

“I’m only doing my job.”

“Your parents must be really proud. They’ve sold their son’s soul to the West.”

“Shut up!” Mahmud snapped.

“Or else, what?” Shafique countered, his voice armoured in the spirit of mutiny.

“I said, shut up!”

With that Mahmud turned and left. As soon as Mahmud reached the door, Shafique’s face crumpled and the show of mutiny dissolved into despair. He lunged forward and threw his arms around Mahmud’s legs. To any bystander it would have looked like a rugby tackle, but all he was seeking to do was lay his head at Mahmud’s feet and beg for his freedom.

In that one fell swoop the ambience of order was reduced to chaos. Mahmud fell to the ground, stunned and stupefied. The wind was knocked out of his lungs. He felt a blow to his head causing a momentary blackout. Light quickly returned to his eyes but warped everything around him. Instinctively he reached out and slammed the emergency

button. An alarm sounded. A red light began flashing outside. The jailer rushed in, his keys jangling as he looked this way and that trying to make sense of things.

“What the F—“, he exclaimed, his jaw hardening in shock when he saw the two men tussling on the floor in a tangled heap. He quickly grabbed Shafique by the arm, wrenched it behind his back until the man started wailing in pain. The jailer lifted him up off the floor and pinned him down on the pallet, pushing the side of his head brutally against the mattress so that the skin of his face became stretched, and his top lip lifted in a snarl partially baring his yellow teeth.

“*Aaaah, amake chere dao, amake chere dao, aaaah,*” came Shafique’s muffled cries.

It took several seconds for Mahmud to realise what had happened. His head throbbed in pain. The shock of being overpowered precipitated a change, a sudden shedding of the uniform. He got up, leaving his responsibility to duty abandoned on the floor.

“Hold him down!”

“What?”

“I said hold him!”

Mahmud advanced towards the confused jailer and pushed him away from Shafique. He then pulled out his baton and raised it threateningly in the air, ready to strike the bedraggled figure.

“You piece of shit. And all I was doing was trying to be nice.”

“Hit me if you dare!” Shafique said.

Mahmud landed a couple of blows to Shafique’s back, hitting with a might that awoke the bones of his fingers. The man doubled over in a foetal position holding his head in his hands.

“You pig!” Shafique cried through his fingers. “You’ll never understand what *daridro* means. You haven’t the heart for it. ”

“Shut up!” Mahmud screamed.

“Whatchya doing rookie? You’re way outta line!” the jailer barked.

“You’re gonna get severely disciplined for this,” he added, pointing to the video camera hanging from the ceiling in the corner of the cell. His eyes juddered and colour had flushed into his pale cheeks. By now several officers had spilled into the cell, including a small man in a suit who was clutching a briefcase — the defense lawyer. Instinctively an officer threw the handcuffs on Shafique and another pinned Mahmud against the wall, forced his hand so that the stick fell from his grip and hit the floor with a clonk. The sergeant came in behind them and glared at Mahmud.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded to know.

“Chief, I, I ...”

“Did you strike the detainee?”

“Twice!” the jailer answered for him.

The sergeant picked Mahmud’s weapon off the floor.

“You’re in serious trouble. Get into my office now!”

Realising the god-awful nakedness of his impertinence, Mahmud dropped his head and left the cell. Walking through the windowless corridor he was aware of nothing beyond the pounding of his heels, the sharp ache in his skull, his harsh breathing, and an anger that had now subsided leaving a horrible emptiness into which shame poured in. In the sergeant’s office he glanced at his watch. The face was cracked. He tore the name badge off his shirt, dumped it in the wastebasket, collected his coat and left the station. And as he strode the cold streets he could feel the hot tears streaming from his eyes, not because the death knell had probably sounded on his career, but because he now understood the aching desperation of *daridro*.