

ASMAN

# THE SKY

A Story Larger Than Life

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“The heart is the house of Allah. The human heart is designed so that only Allah can reside there. Your worldly unrest will begin as soon as anything other than Allah enters that house,” spoke Maulana Ishaq Abdur Rahman, the elderly Imam of the central mosque located on Road Number 8 in Dhanmondi neighbourhood, in a calm and gentle voice. The formal call to the late afternoon prayer, the Adhan for Asr, would soon be made. Sitting in his *Hujra*, the Imam awaited the announcement of the Adhan so that he could lead the prayer. His eyes were fixed on an Arabic book, skimming through its pages. The old electric fan whirled overhead, causing his long beard to sway like white catkins in the breeze. It was a late September afternoon in Dhaka.

As a pedalled rickshaw lazily made its way through the quiet Dhanmondi road, ringing its bell intermittently, a sultry silence descended upon the room, making Omar Rizwan restless. Finally, unable to bear the silence any longer, Omar broke it by asking a question.

“How do you know that turmoil is brewing in my mind?”

The elderly Imam’s eyes lit up with an affectionate smile in response to the question.

“I have been observing you walking around this mosque for

quite some time now, but I have never seen you get inside and join the congregational prayers.”

“And based on that, you concluded that my mind is filled with turmoil and commotion?”

Imam Sahib seemed to have developed an affinity for this seemingly audacious young man as he engaged in conversation with him. The young man never addressed him as ‘Huzur,’ the honorific term used to address the Imam. With a hint of amusement in his voice, he replied, “Mosques are usually frequented by three types of people: beggars, shoe burglars, and those in a frenzy. You belong to the frenzied class.”

This Imam made no attempt to project his spirituality or assume holiness. Instead, he spoke like an ordinary yet wise man, devoid of the traditional orthodox seriousness seen on the faces of other Imams. Omar found himself drawn to this quality. A sweet fragrance filled the small room of the Imam, catching Omar’s attention. The mosque was surrounded by lush greenery along the shores of Dhanmondi Lake. Imam Sahib’s room was attached to the mosque pulpit but separated from the main building. It contained three large wooden cubbies filled with books, a neatly arranged bed next to them, three chairs, and a table, giving it the ambiance of a corporate office. Visitors sat in the chairs placed in front of the table. In Bangladesh, it was uncommon for Imams to have a personal room beside the mosque. Omar sat on a chair facing the Imam.

Imam Ishaq Abdur Rahman briefly diverted his gaze from

Omar and looked out of the window to his right. The fading afternoon sun's rays glistened on the lake's water through the gaps between the trees on the other side of the window. Lost in thought, he stared pensively in that direction, perhaps contemplating the silvery reflections dancing on the waves. Seizing the opportunity, Omar closely observed Imam Sahib with his piercing eyes. The ageing Imam, nearing the final chapter of his life, attempted to hide a sigh, but it did not escape Omar's notice. Without dwelling on the loneliness of that afternoon any further, Omar asked his next question.

"Tell me, please, why do you believe I belong to the frenzied class?" While the Imam continued to gaze out the window, Omar detected a divine smile and saw the light return to the Imam's face. Turning his head, the Imam affectionately looked at Omar for a few moments before speaking.

"The frenzied one has long hair, dark circles around his eyes, and wears tattered clothes."

Omar, wearing a contemptuous smile to refute the Imam's judgment, responded,

"The current fashion trend involves having long hair and wearing ripped jeans. How does that make one frenzied?"

At that moment, they heard tapping sounds coming from the mosque's loudspeaker. The Muazzin was perhaps testing the sound system before making the call to prayer. He tapped the mouthpiece three times, followed by a puff of air and a clearing

of his throat. Both Omar and the Imam understood that the Adhan for Asr prayer would soon be announced. Imam Sahib concluded his words by saying, “Throughout the ages, all frenzied individuals meet the same fate; it is challenging to conceal the pain of separation.”

The *Muazzin*’s voice resounded loudly through the almost empty Dhanmondi neighbourhood, calling for prayer, “Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar” (Allah is the Greatest, Allah is the Greatest).

When the call to prayer ended, Imam Ishaq stood up with his cane in hand and recited a *rubaiyat*-

*In finite bounds, your love finds its devotion,*

*Enslaved to love, with unwavering emotion.*

*But your eternal mind solely belongs,*

*To the infinite Lord, where it thrives and prolongs.*

Omar remained seated in the chair as Imam Sahib preached and stood beside him. In a gentle voice, he said, “My boy, join the congregational Asr prayer after performing ablution.”

Omar pushed the chair back slightly and stood up.

“Is it permissible to offer prayers while one is in a frenzied and intoxicated state?”

Instead of directly answering Omar’s question, the Imam responded obliquely, almost in a whisper, “It is the intoxication that draws me towards the mosque.” With that, he left for the prayer hall.



The banyan tree on the west bank of the lake, in a straight line with the mosque, was now in its late teens. Banyan trees have a long lifespan, some living up to two or three centuries. In ancient times, the banyan tree was considered the natural umbrella of humanity. Generations of the same community would grow up under the shade of the same banyan tree. The child who played under its shade would grow old, give birth to another child, and eventually pass away. The banyan tree was often regarded as the saddest tree among them all. Its life paralleled that of humans. As it aged, the twigs descended from its branches, gradually transforming into the main roots, while the initial root withered away. It enjoyed a long life, but not without experiencing some loss. A long life meant a prolonged journey of mourning.

Omar sat beneath the shade of that banyan tree on the lake's shore, feeling the gentle breeze. He looked up at the banyan tree above, almost absentmindedly, and realized it was the first time he had truly observed a banyan tree with such attention. A soft sound, resembling raindrops, emanated from within the trunk of the young tree. This serene place held great significance for Omar, who had grown up in Dhanmondi. He had spent his entire school life at Dhanmondi Boys and now, in his second year at Dhaka University studying Economics, he and his friends regularly gathered here to chat. Omar had never paid such close attention to the banyan tree before. As evening approached, his friends started arriving from different parts of the city. They would chat until eleven o'clock at night. Lately, crime had increased in the

area, prompting Kawsar, the second officer of Dhanmondi police station, to make regular visits. Around eleven o'clock, they would disperse and end their conversation, albeit reluctantly. Leaving the Imam's room in the afternoon, Omar suddenly realized he had nowhere to go in the city.

Sitting under the banyan tree, Omar felt an internal storm of emotions. He pondered his thoughts, his mind calm yet turbulent. Was this the horror of phensedyl? Omar had never imagined that drinking cough syrup could result in such intoxication. Initially, he didn't believe Rousseau, the lead guitarist friend from The Window Band. They were the first customers to enter the Shantinagar local shopping centre at 7 a.m. Gradually consuming half a bottle of cough syrup, the familiar taste and scent failed to evoke any intoxicating sensation. With a smirk, Rousseau remarked, "You'll see, my friend. Just wait for the next course." He winked at the waiter and ordered tea. After a while, two cups of tea arrived, accompanied by a cup of sugar. Rousseau reduced the tea in each cup by taking sips, added six or seven teaspoons of sugar to each, and handed one cup to Omar. Within ten minutes of drinking that tea, everything changed. A frozen stillness gripped Omar's eyes, ears, and mouth, while his mind swirled with a fluttering sensation.

"We have one more course left to make the 'highs' better. Let's go," Rousseau suggested.

They rented a rickshaw for thirty taka per hour. Near the Taj Restaurant, there were always a few rickshaw pullers casually



waiting to cater to specific customers. The rickshaw swiftly sped away like a storm. The faster the wind blew against their faces, the more the ‘highs’ felt exhilarating. The rickshaw puller took them from Maghbazar to Dhanmondi Shankar. The streets of Dhaka passed by in a blur as the wind whipped through Omar’s hair. He could feel the effects of the cough syrup intensifying, distorting his perception of time and space. The world around him seemed to morph and twist, and he found it difficult to focus on anything for too long.

As they reached Dhanmondi Shankar, Omar and Rousseau stepped off the rickshaw, their legs wobbling slightly under the influence of the concoction they had consumed. The bustling marketplace was a vibrant mix of colours, sounds, and smells. Street vendors shouted out their offers, enticing passers-by with their wares. Omar’s senses were heightened, every sight and sound more vivid and intense than ever before.

Rousseau led the way, weaving through the crowd with ease. He seemed to have done this many times before, navigating the maze of narrow alleyways with a practiced familiarity. Omar stumbled along behind him, trying to keep up. The world around him was a kaleidoscope of swirling colours and hazy images, making it challenging to distinguish reality from the effects of the drug. Omar was not sure if the next episodes of things happening to them had actually occurred in real life or if he had imagined them.

They eventually arrived at a small, dimly lit shop tucked away in a corner. The sign above the entrance read “The Enchanted Garden.” As they stepped inside, the atmosphere shifted. Soft

music played in the background, creating an otherworldly ambiance. The walls were adorned with tapestries depicting mystical creatures and enchanted forests. Aromatic incense filled the air, mingling with the scent of exotic herbs.

Omar felt a mixture of fascination and trepidation as he looked around. He had entered a different realm, a place where reality and fantasy intertwined. The shopkeeper, an elderly man with a long white beard, greeted them with a knowing smile. His eyes seemed to hold ancient wisdom, and Omar couldn't help but feel a sense of reverence in his presence.

Rousseau approached the shopkeeper, engaging in a hushed conversation. Omar watched, his senses heightened, as the two exchanged words. He caught snippets of their conversation—mentions of “elixirs,” “visions,” and “spiritual journeys.” The shopkeeper nodded, reaching behind the counter to retrieve a small vial filled with a golden liquid.

“This is what you seek,” the shopkeeper said, his voice carrying an air of mystery. “But remember, it is not for the faint of heart. It will open doors to realms unknown, but the path it leads you on may not be what you expect.”

Omar's heart raced with a mixture of anticipation and uncertainty. He had embarked on this adventure with curiosity, but now he hesitated. The effects of the cough syrup were already overwhelming, and he questioned whether he was prepared for what lay ahead.

Rousseau turned to Omar, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Come on, my friend,” he said. “We’ve come this far. Let’s embrace the unknown together.”

Omar took a deep breath, the weight of his decision pressing upon him. He knew that stepping into the unknown carried risks and consequences, but he also felt a deep yearning for something beyond the ordinary. With a nod, he accepted the vial from the shopkeeper, his fingers trembling slightly.

As he held the vial in his hand, Omar couldn’t help but wonder how this night would shape his life. Little did he know that his journey was about to take an unexpected turn, leading him down a path that would challenge his perceptions, test his limits, and ultimately reveal truths he never thought possible.

With a mixture of fear and excitement coursing through his veins, Omar prepared himself to drink the elixir and step into the realms of the unknown, ready to confront whatever lay ahead.

Omar unscrewed the cap of the vial and brought it to his lips. He hesitated for a moment, his heart pounding in his chest, before tilting his head back and swallowing the golden elixir in one swift motion. The taste was bitter, sending a shiver down his spine, but he felt a surge of energy coursing through his body.

Almost instantly, the world around him began to transform. Colours became more vibrant, sounds more resonant, and the air felt charged with an otherworldly presence. The walls of the Enchanted Garden seemed to come alive, pulsating with a gentle glow, as if they were breathing in harmony with Omar’s own heartbeat.

Rousseau's eyes widened, a mix of awe and excitement dancing in his gaze. He extended his hand towards Omar, a silent invitation to join him on this extraordinary journey. Omar reached out and clasped Rousseau's hand, their connection grounding him amidst the swirling currents of sensation and perception.

Together, they stepped forward, crossing an invisible threshold that separated the mundane from the mystical. Instantly, their surroundings shifted, and they found themselves standing in a vast, ethereal forest. Trees with luminescent leaves towered above them, casting a gentle glow that illuminated the path ahead.

As they ventured deeper into the enchanted forest, Omar felt a sense of interconnectedness with every living thing around him. He could hear the whispers of the wind, the faint rustling of leaves, and the melodic chirping of birds. It was as if he had awakened a dormant part of himself, a deeper connection to the natural world.

Rousseau, who seemed to be more attuned to this realm, guided Omar through the forest, leading him to a tranquil clearing bathed in a soft, iridescent light. They settled onto the moss-covered ground, surrounded by a symphony of unseen creatures.

As they sat in silence, the elixir continued to work its magic, opening doors within Omar's mind and soul. Visions and memories, both familiar and forgotten, surged to the surface. He witnessed fragments of his past, moments of joy, sorrow, and everything in between, unfolding like a tapestry before his eyes.

But it wasn't just his own memories that surfaced. Omar found

himself connected to a collective consciousness, experiencing snippets of the stories and experiences of countless others. He witnessed the pain of a mother's loss, the triumph of a warrior's victory, and the tenderness of a lover's embrace. Each fragment painted a vivid picture of the human experience, reminding him of the interconnectedness of all beings.

Time lost its meaning in this mystical realm. Omar couldn't tell if he had been sitting in the clearing for moments or hours. But as the elixir's effects began to wane, a sense of clarity settled within him. He realized that this journey had been about more than just seeking answers or escaping the confines of his mundane existence. It was a profound reminder of the beauty and complexity of life itself, and the importance of embracing both its light and its shadows.

From that moment onwards, Omar started experiencing "highs" with Rousseau. It wasn't just about phensedyl; it was also about the journey they embarked on after consuming it. Rousseau had elevated the act of consuming phensedyl to an art form. Omar had been staying at Rousseau's place for the past two months. Throughout the night, Rousseau would passionately play his newly acquired Ibanez electric guitar, and Omar would be enchanted by his friend's madness. In these two months, their families had come to accept that Rousseau's home was Omar's second home, and vice versa. Rousseau, a skilled guitarist, had transformed his bedroom into a soundproof practice space.

Rousseau had been Omar's classmate since their Dhaka College days. After completing his Higher secondary certificate exam,

Rousseau declared that he would no longer pursue academic studies. His decision not to return to classes was so resolute that his father, a businessman, eventually bowed down and allowed him to take care of the family business by shadowing him in the office and learning the ropes. Rousseau's father was a prominent merchant of aluminium potteries in old Dhaka. Following the tradition of old Dhaka businessmen, their grown-up sons would occupy managerial positions and oversee business transactions in their absence. Rousseau followed in his father's footsteps and quickly learned the art of discreetly pilfering a few large bills from the cash box under the watchful eyes of the cashier, one of his father's employees. Rousseau would use that money to treat his group of twenty-one friends. He had learned to play the guitar while still in school, and it had become his greatest passion, one he was willing to die for. He fervently believed that the spirit of famous rock artist Jim Morrison, which had resided in the late musician, now dwelled within him.

Rousseau almost worshipped Jim Morrison, and he formed his own psychedelic rock band called "The Window," following in the footsteps of Jim's band, "The Doors." Rousseau's drug addiction was a result of blindly imitating Jim Morrison's lifestyle. Until now, he had only consumed cannabis, but recently he had added Phensedyl to his repertoire. Omar had no interest in cannabis as he couldn't tolerate inhaling smoke. Throughout the night, Rousseau would captivate Omar with his music, singing Jim Morrison's "Light My Fire," "Waiting for the Sun," and by reciting his poem "An American Prayer." As soon as morning arrived, the duo would rush to the local Shanti Nagar Centre. They would buy a

bottle of phensedyl for only 150 Taka, share it between themselves, then drink sweetened tea from Taj Restaurant before heading to the bank of the Buriganga river in a rickshaw. This daily routine provided Omar with temporary relief from his mental restlessness and instability.

Omar had always feared loneliness, as it unleashed a torrent of anguish within him. It was like a secret army, with hundreds of sharp knives piercing him, dragging him into the abyss, leaving him gasping for breath, desperately trying to stay afloat. This was the first time in his life that he had experienced such profound pain. Today, almost two months later, he found himself alone again. He was supposed to be with Rousseau this time, but Rousseau had decided to go to bed early. Rousseau no longer adhered to a regular sleep schedule. How could a boy who stayed up all night and slept all day be expected to be punctual? Irregularity had become the norm. Rousseau's father had given up on this talented boy as well. Now that the money had run out, Rousseau only went to lay on the mattress. He had already developed a secret system with the cashier. Rousseau seemed to be a blessing in disguise during this difficult time in Omar's life. However, Rousseau was difficult to bear for extended periods. In the eyes of everyone, he was the son of a wealthy man who enjoyed being aggressive and bossy. It was challenging to avoid him because he was very generous in spending money for friends. The whole group's friendship revolved around Rousseau, the latter forming the centre of their solar system.

Despite Rousseau's notoriety, Omar understood him for who he was. Rousseau was filled with passion. Only someone who was