

# Outside Inside

By Amani Islam

“Khobis furi kunano? Where’s that filthy girl? The bins are overflowing and the girl never wants to take it out so stuffs it down to fit more crap instead. I swear to God that stupid filthy girl needs to be slapped, scorned Hori.”

Sabrina came down for a late breakfast since she had lectures, that morning. She heard clanking and clanging of pans while she was taking a bite of her fried egg and toast. Her ears pricked up tense. When she was finished, she slowly rose and emerged into the kitchen to clear the dirty dishes. She rolls her eyes inadvertently, and mutters “Oh, for God’s sake here she’s at it again.” Hori starts blabbering on as she throws vegetable peels into the brimming bin.

Sabrina questions her “Who are you talking to?” as she walks by the garbage and recoiled at the sight. She gritted her teeth and began taking the trash out aggressively. Hori in a raised voice says, “I am a mother, so I am just talking out loud.”

Sabrina responds curtly “I see. You know I know you’re talking to me since no one else is around.”

Hori explodes in disbelief, “you don’t know what you’re talking about. Who do you think you are speaking to me like this? I can speak how and when I want. I could give you a tight slap around that face of yours.

Sabrina sneers, “Go on then, do it”. Do it.”

Hori retorts “Nah, I’m not going to do that”.

“Exactly”.

“No one else would tolerate you. If you were in another Bengali household, you would have been kicked out by now. We are kind and generous allowing you to stay here”.

Sabrina storms off upstairs when her husband emerges.

“What’s happened? What was that about?”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. I couldn’t help it. I was bursting from the bullshit. This time, I didn’t have the energy to regulate myself. She was doing too much, and it was just really triggering”.

“Ah, I wish you could have held off for a little longer. We don’t have long left living

here!”

“I was thinking the same as soon as it happened. It was just tough today”. I said sorry for the tone anyway.

Jamil comes back up and informs Sabrina that his mum was asking for an apology.

Sabrina exclaims “Are you being serious? I have already apologised! And if I say sorry again it would have been for nothing. It’ll only show that we could both be manipulated and prove she was right all along. You know she has never once apologised for anything she’s started. I am holding on to the little bit of integrity that is left. No apology can be coerced out of me. Not after everything.”

“Yeh, it’s true, it’s fine so don’t worry about it. Not long now.

Sabrina replies “I have nothing to worry about. The way she’s blown it all out of proportion you’d think I laid a hand on her!”.

Sabrina felt a bit miffed that it was always on her to be the bigger person. How is it that the victim is the one who is held responsible and accountable? The perpetrators are left doing what they’re doing without any consequences. The blame falls on the victim for not being patient enough or not doing the right thing each time. Daughter in laws can’t be humans with flaws. Always held to a higher standard. The sins of these people are barely considered, with endless excuses provided repeatedly to keep them sinless.

The following evening, Sabrina’s phone rings. She looks at the screen puzzled. Dad is calling. Why on earth would he be calling? It slowly occurred to her exactly what it would be about.

“Oh, my goodness. Is this for real? Wow. These lot don’t know any bounds. Hahahahaha the joke’s on them. They’re making themselves look ridiculous as heck. How deluded can they get? I’m not even surprised to be honest.” This situation is absolutely hilarious.”

## **It's All Over**

The months towering over the laptop with strained, twitching eyes and cans of red bull had passed. As a token of gratitude, she bought sweet treats for the house to enjoy. No one from the household had touched them except her and Jamil. She sniggered “more for us!” Then took it upstairs to devour in delight.

Sabrina felt astonished at how the days flowed by. At the time, she was on autopilot. Study, work, chill and sleep were all done within the four walls of her room. During the period looming over the dissertation deadline, she had begun eating her meals in there too.

Now that Sabrina’s mind wasn’t occupied with the next deadline a reoccurring thought took over—the friendship group chat. She noticed earlier but didn’t have the capacity to dwell on the fact that without her it was inactive. The pits of her stomach tightened and sunk. Her shoulders drooped and she slumped against the headboard. On her ‘friend’s’ stories it showed meet ups with people who bullied her in school. A putrid taste was left in her mouth. Making plans don’t happen by coincidence. Nowhere in those situations did they think of Sabrina. The decision was never left up to her to go down South. Maybe that’s where the issue lay? Did they feel left behind by her, or had they really not given her a single thought? She was giving them way too much grace and surely they did not have the self awareness for this.

She pierced the purple walls then frowned at the group chat. The frowning lines disappeared leaving her face expressionless. She rested in this position until the courage to leave surfaced. She clicked the icon and left. Done in an instant. No sounds. No long process. Just left. Not a single person realised. Well, she wasn’t missing out on much was she? It ran across her mind how she barely left a mark on people she had considered very close friends. The bar was below the bloody ground. It dawned on her; how much and for how long she had been holding on.

Thoughts kept racing around in her mind explaining the actions of others. Life is busy and everyone is preoccupied with their own lives and those near them so without proximity, nothing was keeping them together. Despite all this she still thought of them and they hadn’t.

Typically, Sabrina would have been in London for the summer but with the move it was out of the question. This was her first time not going and no one seemed to notice. She accepted people didn’t have the time to feel let alone miss anything and understood this

reality really and truly well. That didn't stop her chest constricting and her stomach tightening. She felt awful and wished she could stop feeling this way. She may have been the one to officially sever the relationship. Only, she knew she was alone amongst the group to be feeling bad and longed for it to be severed from her body and mind completely.

Not too long ago Sabrina had been ecstatic about inviting them to stay over. The only sleepovers she ever had was at Nanu's house with cousins she didn't like much. She hadn't gotten around to telling them she was moving when all these issues unravelled. Inviting them now would be receiving the lower end of the stick once again as for sure the labour will fall solely on her. Forget that! In all these years have they ever entertained the idea of meeting half way? They don't deserve anything.

Memories during Covid surged all the way back up. Sabrina scanned over the years, and many scenes looped over. Whenever she mentioned anything, they didn't respond adequately. In 2020 she told them she's rushed to London after hearing her Nanu was laying by a thread in hospital. Sabrina didn't get the chance to see her for one last time due to a change in the restrictions. She held on to the last phone call a month prior asking of her wellbeing. Suddenly she remembered the December assignment due following the funeral. Months went by. Those months became years, and not a single time did they ask about what happened. She stayed on long after the funeral for her mum. To this day, they don't know she passed a few days after her arrival. Hindsight is an interesting phenomenon. Where were they?

Perhaps the problem rested with Sabrina? They were young themselves and didn't grasp the depths of grief like she had over the course of her life time. She knew they would disappoint her before she allowed them to. In its place she let them dissatisfy her in other ways. Her memories tainted with cynicism.

Sabrina WhatsApp messaged another friend, *"Heyy Farhana! I am sooo excited about your new brand! I have seen your pieces on Insta and they look absolutely stunning. Guurrrll, you are doing amazing and I pray your business goes super well. Can't wait to get a personalised piece! What are your prices like and approximately how long do they take, by the way? xx"*.

Sabrina held up her phone to watch YouTube when a notification appeared displaying a voice note. She squinted in surprise and confusion then placed her air pods to listen. She curled her lips then pointed at the screen to her husband and scoffed "I wish it was a message to skim quickly. I got my air pods out for this." Consequently, she flinched at the voice and scowled in contempt. "At this rate a no response would have been better because what the actual heck is the audacity of this ludicrous reply? The audaciousness of sending a

voice note waffling nonsense after more than 3 months had passed is insane”. Bearing in mind, on Insta Sabrina had been liking and replying to the stories posted, sharing them to her socials to help with promotion, asking about pieces and being met with no replies on any of the platforms. Initially, it made some sense as working full time with a side hustle on top is tough. She imagined how swamped Farhana was, so she didn’t take it personally. It slipped her mind that she hadn’t seen Farhana’s snaps in a while. Examining it altogether, the situation didn’t seem too innocent.

Previously, Sabrina enjoyed Farhana’s content on all social media platforms. But after many rejections collating over the past 2-3 years she began minimising how often she would consume her content. She never ever wanted to become a monitoring spirit. It wasn’t part of her ethos to consume without engagement. Afterwards, she began avoiding anything and everything. Some months went by and Sabrina decided to go on Farhana’s socials and block her while sitting comfortably on the sofa. The sense of relief and gratification was immediate. She then scrolled over her Insta list and unfollowed or blocked whoever she thought was necessary. She looked over her phone contacts and deleted all numbers she hadn’t had contact with in over a year.

She thought, man the social media situation is dire out there. The endless doomscrolling and 24 access to content reduced real life relationships. If you miss someone’s stories, you won’t personally update. If an engagement or pregnancy announcement happens to be made and God forbid you didn’t catch it, chances are your ‘friend’ would have had the baby, or gotten married and you wouldn’t even know unless per chance you were informed by a third party. If you don’t post or consume their content, you can guarantee that’s the end. You don’t exist. Who are you again? Sorry, I don’t remember you.

## Recollections

Sabrina recollected the snarky comments she received on her hobbies. Reading downstairs was sneered at. Apparently she read nonsense and her priorities in life were wrong. Using her phone made her a zombie and going to the gym was too self aggrandising. On the other hand, her brother in laws would game all the way into the night where no word would be uttered in admonition. They're just boys though. There was always something to nitpick when it came to her. She could do nothing right.

Sabrina and Jamil were lounging on the couch like teenagers they never had the chance to be, staying up all night watching movies, munching on snacks. Jamil squeezed Sabrina's hand and she snuggled up close to him inhaling the comfort. A moment later, they turned towards each other and guffawed. It was the first time in their marriage they could relish each other's company without hawk's eyes peering at them. The freedom to exist and enjoy the simple pleasures of life in the living room instead of the bedroom was exhilarating.

Though mornings had become a struggle. The perks of being a 'teenager' didn't last long. There was a time Sabrina and Jamil could go 35 hours without a wink of sleep and be fully functioning. The new luxury was sleeping and waking peacefully. The couple weren't jolted awake by hammering on the door at the crack of dawn. Sabrina's ears weren't forced to perk up noticing the sounds of specific footsteps. It was glorious.

Rather she woke up to birds chirping. She opened the bedroom door in a camisole and shorts without waiting for any treading steps. There was no need to throw on an overgarment and rub her eyes clear to look presentable.

Standing alone by the stove in serene silence, not engaging in small talk first thing was a pleasure she was denied for far too long. Pretentious pleasantries to unsmiling faces upon waking was her idea of a nightmare. An ongoing nightmare of 5 gruelling years. She shuddered in reminiscence.

Since moving up North, she was going to the gym every day of the week and hiked over the weekend. She hoped to make friends from the hiking club but being from a small town, everyone knew each other and were settled in their friendship groups. Some were friendly on the surface, but it didn't go deeper than that. It was obvious they didn't like new comers infiltrating their established circle. Whenever Sabrina approached them as they huddled together, they would stop talking about anything of interest. It seemed these women

hadn't gone beyond their school years. Singling out those considered outsiders. She witnessed this happening each time women from other areas came.

Sabrina stopped attending the group hikes after a while. She had enough of older women mocking her for carrying a furry blanket for the long cold journeys in the minibus. It was ironic, the same ladies would snatch and use it like they were the owners and Sabrina the mere borrower. In preparation for one of the arduous hikes, Sabrina had intended to get some shut eye to preserve energy. But it was just her luck that those sitting close to her would not leave her in peace. She was baffled and lost for words that grown women were capable of being this nasty. She avoided further conflict as the day had not started yet. Another 12 hours left with these same people and honestly, she didn't want the rest of it terror filled.

One time at the gym, she saw a local woman she met from the hikes. It seemed both were keen on avoiding each other. Unfortunately, paths had to be crossed and social greetings were exchanged. A little later unprompted the lady said, "I attended a hike after a long time, and everyone was a new face, I didn't recognise anyone at all. I was the only one from the area. I miss how it used to be with our locals. It was nice then."

Sabrina cringed at the revelation. This woman lacked such mindfulness and genuinely thought they could bond over a shared viewpoint. This couldn't be further from the truth. The enactment of this scenario validated how she felt during those walks. It was eerily funny how the fact that Sabrina wasn't originally from the area went over this woman's head entirely. This is exactly what she despised. The sameness they replicated and othering. Sabrina couldn't wait for the distasteful interaction to end. It's one thing being introverted and comfortable with familiarity but to actively exclude difference made her feel repulsed. Her own company was significantly far better than bad company.

Sabrina sighed heavily in exhaustion. When was Sabrina going to catch a break? She went out of her way to do different activities and meet various types of people. Yet, each time she met horrific individuals wherever she went. Was she a magnet for terrible humans? Something must be wrong for shit to keep happening. Did she look like she was a doormat? But is being defensive a scoring point for the perpetrators?

When she got home and sat beside Jamil to relax with dinner, various scenarios played out in her mind.

"What has happened to our generation? Our parents still have friends from their youth that are more family than actual family members like Latifa Aunty and Hammad Uncle. They're not the only ones either. It's true, we don't sacrifice for or maintain relationships like they did. But even if we wanted to, it's not reciprocated."

“Yeh like Shak doesn’t reply to messages at all, privately or on the group. If you to see him out, you can talk like nothing has happened. That’s just how it is. Most people don’t reply these days. Or if they do, it’ll be weeks or even months later. With some of my friends, you won’t know if they’re coming to the meet until they’ve arrived or once the motive is over, you’ll see they didn’t turn up. It’s just weird man but we get on with it.”

“Ah, I dunno how you lot go on like that. It’s too much for me. It’s kind of different for you as well because you’re from here. For me, I’m new so the only person I have is you. Who else is there? It’s not fair for you to be my everything.”

“That’s life. Nothing is perfect, otherwise this world would have been paradise.”