

Title: Sweet Sixteen

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Level: Adult Fiction

Genre: Fiction (Personal relationships, secrets, guilt and regret, Adult Themes, not suitable for young readers.)

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A dark street... half deserted. Scarcely, a *rickshaw** passes by. A little **grocery** shop can only just be seen at the start of the street. Nearby, a small common-looking building, only two floors high. Witnessing the end results of **abandoned** desires, the three rooms on its ground floor stand silent and still inside their damp walls. What kind of **hateful** place is this? What evil lies within?

Being the only child of my parents and endlessly spoiled, I had **finally** turned sixteen, “sweet sixteen” as they call it. My friends and almost all my **acquaintances** of my own age envied me for my striking beauty. Over time, I had become accustomed to the pointed looks of boys, while pretending not to have seen them at all. If I am honest, I enjoyed the attention. It didn't feel real, like playing a new **computer** game with a lot of **animated** characters.



My friends said, “God used the best of his skills when he made you.” All their **comments** made me think, “Why do boys look at me like that? What is beauty, anyway? Am I really beautiful?” The true meaning of beauty was an **alien concept** to me. I felt nothing at all when people praised me. What does all this really mean? I thought. My early **teen** years hadn't left me **mature**, I now realise. But then, suddenly, I was sixteen! A grown woman, or so I thought.

On that **fateful** day, the noise of the doorbell had suddenly disturbed my ‘beauty’ sleep. Though it was noon, I was still in bed. I was not expecting any visitors. “Who might be calling?” I wondered. Totally annoyed at being disturbed, I went to the door.



There, outside, stood a tall boy. He was quite nice-looking, I noticed. With a surprisingly confident **gesture**, he offered me a tiny piece of paper. On it, a phone number, carelessly written.

“Just call me, when you finally realise that you love me”, he said.

Surprised, I looked into his face. I did not even know who he was. Perhaps he knew me from school, or somewhere else, but I couldn’t place him at all. I was still too sleepy to take in what he was saying. I took the paper, and without saying a word, turned away, closing the door firmly behind me.

“Who was that?” my mother asked.

“Someone looking for a place to rent.” I said. There was no way I could let her know what had really taken place.

“But we haven’t advertised! And anyway, we don’t have any empty flats.” My mother said. “Who on earth is he?”

“I don’t know. He must have made a mistake, Maa,” I replied, and quickly crushed the slip of paper in my hand so she did not see it.

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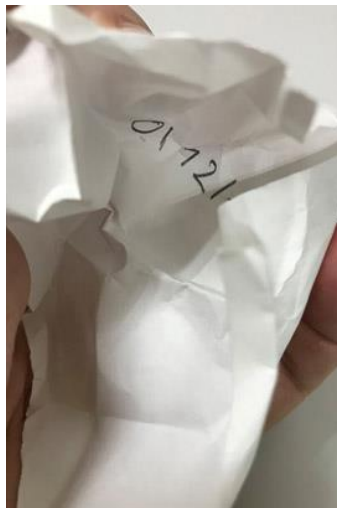
My S.S.C. **exam** was **finally** over.... My **leisure** time and I shared a generous relationship in the **relaxing** days that followed. Wherever I looked, the world felt like an endless **festival** full of colour.



The early philosopher's famous words, "*Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder*" came alive for me. As my age demanded, I loved everything I saw. Like a *tsunami**, a new feeling flooded all my senses... I thought often of that nice-looking boy. I thought of him a lot more than I should have... I began to imagine him to be everything I had dreamed of in a boy, and let my thoughts wander, unchecked. Gradually, they turned to love, my first love!

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"I've waited eight months for this call. It's been **hell!**" said the young man on the other end of the phone. I had finally called the number written on the secret piece of paper I had so carefully hidden away.



"How did you recognize my voice? How do you know me?" I asked.

"Oh, that? Don't you know? We belong together. We are **eternal** soulmates. And for your kind information, 'Your Highness'..." he joked, "...you gave me your number ages ago.

Don't you remember? It's saved in my mobile*," said he. I couldn't remember at all, but then, I was so used to receiving unwanted attention, I didn't really remember anyone who had shown an interest in me... Perhaps I had given him my number, or one of my friends had. Who knows?

"Then, why didn't you call me?" I said.

"Trust me, dear one. I always knew my love would draw you close to me."

On and on we spoke, words of increasing tenderness. His soft words were as **addictive** as *yaba**. How could I resist them? We arranged to meet.

A wild windy day welcomed us. As a mother who holds her child in her arms for the very first time, it drew us close. A storm came and blew the veil of distance away. We continued to meet whenever we could. Desire **infected** my entire being. It was as if I had an incurable disease. In such a short time, we **eventually** lost our way completely, as the careless hunger for love took hold of us.

Addiction! Endless addiction grew like a sickness within me. From meeting in open public places, soon, out of sight, behind closed doors we met.



Being together like that felt more real than life itself. It was true, we were eternal **soulmates**. I believed his words and I believed in him. A sense of **unbearable** pleasure took complete hold of my mind whenever I thought of him, no matter how hard I attempted to think **rationally**. Life was so complete with him. Life was him! Every moment with him, I felt as if I wanted to dance. Life became a mad **series of intense romantic encounters**. We shared! We cared! And we dared!

Now, I cannot believe how foolish I was. I cannot breathe. A terrible woodenness fills my senses. How dull the world has turned! It **stinks**. It really does. The worst possible thing I could imagine has happened. I am shocked to find that motherhood has chosen me as one on whom to pour her blessings. How can this be?

Time passes by so quickly. I become more and more afraid. I call him. He brushes me off with cruel words,

“I’m not one of your toys, you **spoil** rich **brat**. Don’t think, just because you have well-connected parents, that you can blame me for this. Anyway, how do you know for sure it was me? How many others have you been with?” he says. The ice in his voice is unmistakable. This new side of him **chills** me to the bone.

It hurts. It hurts like hell. A heavy cloud of **depression** descends upon me. I feel so helpless. I am shocked to realise that he has pulled away from me. His cruel **abandonment** in my time of need burns white hot within me. It is as if a **cancer** is has begun to spread through my body.

“Forget it.” I tell him. “You mean nothing to me anyway.” I lie. “Don’t **contact** me again.” I end the call hurriedly. My heart aches. It is not just that I have lost my ‘soulmate’, it feels as if I have lost my soul itself. I try to comfort myself, “It was nothing but a **casual** affair,” but my words sound false and hollow.

Time flies. My S.S.C. result gets **published**. I have won a place on the **merit** list and I get admitted into a notable college. But still, my terrible secret troubles me. Anxiety follows my every step. What can I do? What should I do?

An inner darkness fills me. I am lost in a thick cloud. I can’t **reveal** anything, not even to my closest friend. How can I share with anyone what I have done? How can I admit that I’m carrying another life within my body? How could a mother ever admit her **innocent** child is illegitimate*? Don’t I have to think of my parents’ reputation and social **status**? Such questions and worries take complete hold of my mind. I am so filled with anxiety, I cannot sleep.

I see an advertisement in the newspaper. A place of **salvation**. A place where the forbidden fruit of my foolish desire can be quietly **discarded**.



Despite the fact that I own an expensive car, a **symbol** of my wealthy status, I leave it at home. I cannot afford to let our driver know where I am going or what I plan to do. Instead, I take a *rickshaw* from outside my college during my class hours. On purpose, I choose one that is not highly decorated. I don't want anyone to notice me. I am determined that no-one will ever know where I am going, or why.

The *rickshaw* moves through the busy traffic, towards the given **destination**. It is far, and the driver soon tires. We move slowly now, through a much quieter area. It seems as if we are being pulled towards eternal darkness. I can't think. I taste drops of salty tears that pour from my eyes. Though my body sweats as if I am already in hell, I **shiver** with fear, and wrap my *orna** closer around myself in an attempt to cover my shame.



In a flooded street, at a distance I see the grocery shop and the damp little building. I recognize, from the description I have been given that this is the place I am **seeking**. From the outside, it looks so ordinary. Its small size and two simple floors show nothing of the life-changing events that take place within. I take care to stop the rickshaw outside another small store that sells cheap cotton *sarees**, well before we reach the building I am really planning

to visit. I do not want even the *rickshaw* driver to know where I am going. I pay him quickly and send him away before moving towards my real destination.



I enter the ground floor of the small dark building. They know why I am there without my having to say anything. They can see that I am wealthy, and demand double payment. I have no choice but to agree. I pay immediately for the thing to be done, right then and there.

They take me to a room. I am stripped of half of my clothing, and told to lie down on a narrow operating table. A ‘nurse’ arranges the **equipment** for my operation. I am filled with fear. I try to **concentrate** on the walls, but the damp, dark room only reminds me of the morgues* I have seen on ‘Bones’, my favourite **detective** series on TV. The ‘nurse’ **injects** me with something. I cry out with the sudden pain of the needle as it breaks through my skin. I pray that it is clean. Warmth begins to spread through my blood. I feel **dizzy**, as if my body is floating. Is this what it’s like to be **drugged** with **cocaine**? Somewhere, in the background, I hear the nurse laughing cruelly at me, saying, “Did you have fun when you did that?” I am too sleepy to defend myself, to explain...

I can’t move. As if from far away, it feels as if something is crushing me, crushing my **unborn** child! It is as if a **screwdriver** is twisting deep into my most inner being. In my drugged state I imagine that I can hear my child crying, over and over “Mummy, Mummy, Mummy!” The machine they are using doesn’t hear anything, doesn’t feel anything. It is just a machine with no heart. It does the **job** thoroughly. I drift into a restless sleep. Later, I wake and discover myself in another room, I feel heavy, half dead. Slowly, my consciousness returns. It is over.

Home again.

“What happened to you?” my mother asks.

“Nothing, Maa. I fell down the stairs at college. That’s all.” I said.

“What! You look terrible. Let me call the doctor,” my mother moves closer... her face anxious.

“Don’t worry Maa.” I say, and turn away from her. “It’s OK. I’m fine. I saw the college nurse. She told me to go home and rest. I’m just a bit shocked, that’s all. I’ll be fine.” I disappear quickly to my room, before she can bother me anymore. When she comes later, to check on me, I pretend to be fast asleep.

It’s been twenty long years since I abandoned my chance at motherhood. And, because of that, motherhood has abandoned me too. I still feel guilty for what I did. I have never been able to share those moments of my life with anyone. Those memories continue to **haunt** me, like the shadow of a hidden **stalker** secretly following me.

People still call me beautiful, even though I am now much older. I have earned an honourable name in society. I have married ‘well’. My husband is a much-admired public figure. I’m a busy person now. I run the family business that my father left to me; I take care of everyone in my family, including my aging mother. I perform all my duties with grace and charm. Yet, at the end of each day, darkness returns to me.

Kissing her **forehead**, I ask my mother, “Maa! How are you?” Getting up slowly from her bed, she holds me close, but I feel no comfort in her arms. My spirit still silently cries for my lost child, the one whom I left in the heart of darkness. No-one will ever call me ‘Maa.’ No child of mine will ever ask me how I feel as I grow older, or care for me when I am beyond being able to care for myself. When I am alone, and I think of this truth, I cry bitter tears.

At times my husband asks me tenderly, “What is wrong, my dear? Why are you so sad? He knows my sadness has something to do with our inability to have children. He tries to comfort me with gentle words, “Not everyone is lucky enough to have a child. But you do have me, and we are happy, are we not? Is that not enough?”

I have no words with which to answer him. And so I remain **speechless**, eternally...

Learning Activities

Vocabulary

Lists:

Learn all of the words you do not already know from *the first* list before learning the words from the second list. Words in the first list *are more common* in English than the words in the second list, so it is more important to know those well first.

List 1. Academic Word List (AWL) Words

abandoned/abandonment	detective	rationally
area	encounters	relaxing
comments	equipment	reveal
computer	eventually	seeking
concentrate	finally	series
concept	intense	status
contact	job	symbol
depression	despite	mature
published		

Off List words

Note: These words are **not** found on English high frequency word lists. They are not as commonly used as other words of higher frequency. Since this reading text is designed for advanced learners of English, those who have mastered at least 80% of the words on the AWL (Academic Word List) should go ahead and begin learning the words below. The entire AWL can be found at the following URL (The lists can be used in both PDF and Doc. format).

<https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/awl-headwords>

acquaintances	decorated	gesture
addiction/addictive	destination	grocery
alien	discarded	hateful
animated	dizzy	haunt
beholder	doorbell	hell
bother	drugged	illegitimate
brat	eternal/eternally	infected
cancer	exam	injects
casual	fateful	innocent
chills	festival	leisure
cocaine	forehead	merit
mobile	speechless	traffic
romantic	spoilt	unbearable

salvation
screwdriver
shiver
soulmates

stalker
stinks
teen
tiny

unborn
unchecked
woodenness

Glossary

Orna = A women's shawl – traditional piece of Bangladeshi clothing.

Morgue = A place, often attached to a hospital, where the bodies of people are kept after they have died. Bodies are usually examined there by a specialist doctor to check the cause of death, and later prepared for burial.

Rickshaw = A kind of three-wheeled cycle with a seat for passengers, used as a means of public transport.

Saree = A piece of womens' clothing formed with a long piece of fabric that wraps around the body.

"Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder" tells us that what one thinks of as being beautiful, depends on the person who is looking. The expression was first attributed to Plato, and a similar concept has been expressed by other famous writers and thinkers, such as Plato's pupil, the Greek philosopher Aristotle, William Shakespeare and Benjamin Franklin.

Tsunami = A great wave from the sea that suddenly floods the land, usually after a big earthquake, which may cause significant damage and loss of life.

Yaba = a highly addictive illegal drug.

Comprehension Questions

1. **Remembering:** Why didn't the young woman recognize the young man who came to her door? Which part of the story helped you to answer this question?
2. **Understanding:** The storyteller describes beauty as an '*alien concept*'. What does she mean by this? Can you think of other examples of ideas that might be an '*alien concept*' to someone?
3. **Understanding:** What does the expression '*that fateful day*' refer to? What do you think the author is trying to tell the reader by using that expression?

4. **Inferring:** In the latter part of the story, the woman says that she and her husband were unable to have children. Why do you think this was?

Critical Thinking Questions

- **Analysing:** The storyteller describes herself as a young sixteen-year-old and says, at that time, that she thought she was mature, but she later realised her thinking was incorrect. At what point in a person's life do you think someone can be described as 'mature'. In your view, what qualities need to be present that would show that a person is truly mature? Discuss.
- **Applying:** Write a letter of advice to the young 16-year-old woman in the story. If you had known of her situation, what would you have advised her to do? Make sure to give good reasons for your suggestions. Or, if you prefer, write a letter to the older woman in the story. What would you advise her to do to help her deal with her sadness? Whichever letter you choose to write, make sure to give good reasons for your suggestions. Share your letter with another person and discuss your suggestions and ideas.
- **Creating:** Sometimes, people find themselves in difficult situations because they lack good information. In many countries, there are youth 'hotlines' that young people can use to phone for personal advice when they have problems. The service is free and callers do not have to explain who they are. Do you know the names of any 'hotlines' for young people in Bangladesh? If you were to set up a youth 'hotline', what kinds of things would you need to do? Think about things like...
 - a. Who would you employ to answer the calls
 - b. The type of training those people would need
 - c. Funding to keep the service going
 - d. How would you co-ordinate with other support services and agencies
 - e. Location (where would your organisation be based?)
 - f. Availability of the service (Eg. 24 hours? During evenings or weekends only?)

Prepare some written notes or a PowerPoint presentation. Take about eight minutes to present your ideas to others in English. Try not to read directly from your notes.

- **Evaluating:** Young people often turn to their friends for help and advice when they have a problem. What is the best piece of advice you have had from a friend? Why was it good advice? What is the worst piece of advice you have been given by a friend. Why was it bad advice? How can you know, for sure, the difference between good advice and bad advice?
- **Evaluating:** There is a saying, in English, "*You can't put an old head on young shoulders*". What do you think this means? Is there a similar expression in your own mother language? Do you think this saying is true or not? Why/Why not?

- **Evaluating:** Unexpected and/or unwanted pregnancies occur everywhere. People have very strong opinions about how to deal with this problem. Have you formed an opinion on this issue? If so, do you know **why** you think the way you do? If you had to explain your opinion to someone who disagreed with you, what reasons would you give to support your argument? Are your reasons based on reliable facts, strong beliefs or other people's opinions? If you had to participate in a debate on this issue, what three key points would you most like to make?