

Jannat

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Naseer staggered into the lobby of the cheap hotel that he was living at, visibly spent from all the walking he had done in the harsh New Delhi sun. It was as if all the halfway decent houses in the entire city had suddenly dried up under the autumn breeze. He was regretting letting go of his flat so early before his departure. The landlord himself had insisted that they stayed. Why wouldn't he have? Naseer was paying way above the market rate and he was as perfect a tenant as they came. He silently cursed himself for giving up the house.

He flashed the briefest smile he could to the receptionist at the desk, even moving his cheeks hurt. His whole body did. If it had been a month ago, he would not have even imagined walking all over the city on foot. He would have ordered an overpriced cab. A month before that, he had even had his own car, barely a year old. It was amazing, and a bit scary, how quickly things could change.

He let his finger linger on the button of the elevator a moment too long, as if holding on to the button was what was keeping him standing. He waited for the elevator doors to shut smoothly and tilted forward until his forehead

touched the doors of the elevator, as some sort of a weird, standing Namaz. How had it all come to this, he asked him, how could he have been so blind, and so stupid, and so arrogant. It was ridiculous.

A soft “ding” told him that he had reached his floor. He peeled his face off the door and forced a smile on it. He could not let Yasmin see him worried. She was already pretty stressed as it was. Zahra had had a fever for a while now, from all the vaccinations her tiny little body had to go through. Naseer winced remembering the night Zahra had got her vaccinations. She had not slept a wink and had spent the entire night crying. Back then, he was too optimistic, too excited to understand the severity of the situation. It was a fever, it will go away, he had insisted. Yasmin had been up the whole night cradling Zahra and walking her around as Naseer had gone to sleep, saying he had a long day tomorrow.

He braced himself before knocking on the door, even though he knew that it was meaningless. Yasmin knew that he was back, they were the only people living on the floor. The empty spaces had made whispers audible, the elevator dings were practically declarations at this point. He hated the way the floor smelled. Of damp, sweat and mothballs. But this was all they could afford right now, even though he had close to \$20,000 in his bags and another thousand or so in his wallet.

Yasmin opened the door and Naseer, instead of walking in as usual, simply stuck his head in and looked around.

“Is anyone around?” he whispered.

“No. Everyone is upstairs, what are you doing?”

No sooner had Yasmin said it that Naseer rushed in and lifted her off her feet and twirled her around.

“WHAT are you doing? Someone will see us!” Yasmin hissed back, lightly slapping his shoulder.

“You are the mother of my child! Let them! They probably know I must have done things much worse than this anyway!”

Yasmin felt herself turning a deep shade of red that looked even more prominent on her milky white Kashmiri skin.

“You just say anything! Now put me down!”

“Give me a kiss first!”

“You are seriously asking for a beating now! Put me down!”

“Atleast ask me what happened!”

“I will, after you have put me down.”

“You are no fun.” Naseer dropped Yasmin, scrunching his face into a false pout.

“What happened? Where did the Sun rise from today?”

“The West! Remember that company I was telling you about?”

“Gogol?”

“Google! It’s not Gogol, it’s Google! Repeat after me. Google.”

“Yeah, yeah, that. So what about it?”

“I got a mail from them today. They want me to join! Team Leader on Google Search!”

“When did that happen?”

“Today! Are you even listening to what I am saying!”, Naseer replied, clearly exasperated at his wife! How did she not get it! It was an amazing opportunity! After the culling of the unworthy in the dot com bubble, only a few giants stood now and Google was one of them. He would not be surprised if by the end of the decade, it was one of the biggest companies in the World.

“Congratulations! I know you deserve it.” Yasmin squeezed Naseer hand momentarily. It was all the physical intimacy she could show out here in public. Even though there was no one around them, she still felt like she was being watched and doing anything more to show her affection would cause eyebrows to raise.

“I know! Where are Ammi and Abbu?”

“Upstairs. Wash your face before going!”

Naseer had already bounded out of the room, leaving Yasmin to clear up the battlefield he had managed to turn the living room into in five minutes that he had spent there.

“You are home?” Yasmin asked as she opened the door, her eyes betraying worry.

“Yes. How is Zahra?”

“She just slept. Did you eat anything?”

Naseer slumped down on the bed, taking off his shoes and socks, never answering or meeting her gaze. He had not eaten and he did not have the stomach to lie to his wife. Yasmin understood the answer from his silence anyway and quickly busied herself with making tea for him in the dilapidated, old electric kettle in the room, not asking any more questions. She was acutely aware of how stressed Naseer had been these past few days and did not want to make it any worse.

Naseer closed his eyes and leant back on the pillow, unbuttoning his shirt, and taking a deep breath, breathing the cold and slightly damp air from the loud, groaning air conditioner mounted on the window. The last hotel they had been living at had been a five star, with central air-conditioning and the whole nine yards. He had tried to stretch his budget for as long as he could have but once it was clear that he would not be able to survive for much longer at the current rate of expenditure, he was forced to rent out a room in a cheaper, seedier hotel near the Railway station in *Paharganj*.

Yasmin handed him the cup of tea and sat down on the chair beside the bed gingerly, waiting for him to speak. They were both too scared to broach the subject, not because of the answer but because neither wanted to hurt the other person with the answer. There is a very fine line between love and sacrifice, one that most people play jump rope with far too often without even realizing it.

“Not too sweet?” Yasmin spoke. Still not sure enough if she wanted the answer to the question Naseer knew that she

wanted to ask. He simply shook his head. It was. He already had enough bad news for her, he didn't want to break the camel's back with the incorrectly measured packet of brown sugar.

"I will try again tomorrow. I saw a couple of flats today but none of them were worth anything. We don't know how long we would be stuck here anyway, I don't want to get a house just for the sake of it this time around. If it takes a little bit of time, that's fine."

Yasmin listened without a word, quietly sipping her tea. There was not a lot she could have said anyway. She knew that Naseer was doing everything he could. He always did. She would not ease things by blaming him for anything right now. A time would come for this conversation, where she would demand answers, reprimand him for everything that she had had to go through, but this was not the time for that conversation. It would have to wait.

"What about the other thing?"

Naseer again simply shook his head, taking another sip before speaking.

"This guy was trying to rip me off. They are all vultures. Crawl out of the woodwork, exploiting people who are in need. I have another contact. I will go there tomorrow. Talk to him. I am sure he would understand."

Yasmin nodded lightly, her eyes glued to her cup of tea, not feeling like she wanted to speak what truly was on her mind.

“Alto? Like the car?” Najeeb asked, still trying to wrap his mind around what his son had just told him. He found it easier to process the information if it was not so abstract, so unfamiliar, so abrupt.

“I guess you could say that. It’s not the whole thing though. I told you that, didn’t I? It’s called Palo Alto, that’s where their office is. They offered me New York but I denied it. It’s way too cold up there. Plus that place is full of other companies.”

“New York?”

“No! Palo Alto! It’s the Silicon Valley. Every major company has its office there. And it’s really close to Hollywood too, where all the movies are shot.”

“Like Bombay?”

“Yes Abbu, like Bombay.” Naseer sighed out, exasperated at his Father’s need to connect everything to something he knew in order to make sense of it. Sadly enough, the illness had very little to do with it. Naseer remembered his days from his own childhood when his father had been just as slow on the uptake. Though he found it very disrespectful to allow himself to voice it out, Naseer knew somewhere at the back of his mind that he had outgrown his father’s mental faculties by the time he was 11.

It wasn’t like he loved his father any less for it. He had seen all the troubles and hardships that he had endured raising Naseer. Naseer knew that if it came down to himself, he would not have been able to do half the things that his father had done for him. His hands weren’t calloused like

his father's, they had grown soft holding pens and typing on keyboards.

"When do you have to go?" Najeeb breathed out, his words escaping his mouth with a lot more difficulty than usual.

"In a few months. It's a long process. I have to get a passport, a visa, it will take some time."

"You will leave us after two months?"

"I am not leaving you Abbu!" Naseer said, rolling his eyes.

"You will be so far."

"It's a just a day's journey by flight. It's nothing! I will be here in a flash if you need me."

Najeeb turned his head away from Naseer and stared at the ceiling, not caring to reply. That is what they all say. All immigrants. That is what he had told his friends when he was coming to Delhi so many years ago. "Just call my name once and I will be beside you." He didn't know if they were still alive or not. He did not even know if his village stood anymore or not. There had been a letter or two for the first few years, then an occasional telegram, and then it was silence. A silence that had still persisted, emboldened by the reluctance of the countries to talk to each other.

"Abbu! Don't be like that! I will come home twice a year. Definitely for Eid! You know I will", Naseer said, taking his father's hand into his own and squeezing it tightly.

"*Inshallah.*" Najeeb said, still staring at the ceiling.

"Naseer!"

Naseer looked up on hearing his mother's voice, calling him from the kitchen. She had walked out of the room, the second he had mentioned that he had got a job, remembering that she had left something on the stove top to cook. Now that crisis had been dealt with, she could finally show her happiness at his son's achievement. Women have their priorities sorted, Naseer thought ruefully. They never needed to be told that they need to distinguish between the urgent and the important. Sure, her son might be a big man someday, but the burning *Rogan Josh* had to be dealt with immediately.

He let go of his father's hand and slipped out of the stool kept beside the bed. His father still continued to stare at the ceiling. Naseer wasn't sure if he remembered what he had just told him, or if that Naseer was still there, sitting beside him, holding his hand.

Naseer walked into the kitchen and saw that mother was still at work over the stovetop, viciously scraping the bottom of the pan with a steel spatula, holding the rim of the pan, still on top of the fire, with an old rag, tilting it towards herself.

Abida had learnt everything that she still used every day from her mother, who had learnt it from her mother. The line continued backwards more generations than anyone had ever cared to remember. There were occasional substitutions where aunts stepped in in lieu of a mother but the tradition had continued unbroken. Women passed down their few decades worth of knowledge of housekeeping to their next generation. That was all the

women needed to know and so this was all that had been taught to them. Yasmin had been the first woman in the family to have gone to college and completed a degree. Abida blamed it on her upbringing in a city like Delhi. All those hours lost over nothing. If she had spent the time in the kitchen helping her mother, Abida would not have had to teach her simple stuff like how to make an edible *naan* and how to actually wash woollen clothes.

"Ji Ammi?"

Naseer stood there quietly waiting for her mother to finish what she was doing.

"So what have you thought?" she struggled to find the words for a while and then spoke, after a silence, never looking up from the pan.

"About what?"

"About this job and everything?"

"What is there to think about?" Naseer said, genuinely confused.

"So you are going?"

"I shouldn't?" Naseer asked incredulously, his eyes as big as the meatballs simmering happily in the gravy.

"Have you taken a look at your father?"

Naseer didn't reply as Abida turned her profile ever so slightly towards him and was relieved to see a shimmer of guilt on his face.

“In his condition, do you think it is good for you to leave the country and go so far away? What if something was to happen tomorrow?”

“Don’t just say anything Ammi! Nothing will happen to Abbu!”

“How do you know that? Have you even seen him? You haven’t! You are out the whole day, I see him. He looks weaker every day. His hands tremble now when he lifts the cup of tea to his lips.” Abida turned sharply towards Naseer and brandished her spatula like a strict teacher’s wooden ruler.

Naseer didn’t reply. He didn’t know what to say anyway. It was true, no matter how hard he tried to deny it. His father’s condition had been worsening over the last few months. He barely got off the bed anymore. Earlier, he would not touch the bed until it was late at night and he had to sleep. Now his entire existence felt confined to the old bed he had got a Kashmiri carpenter to make many years ago from Walnut wood, working on nothing but descriptions from Najeeb of the way his father’s bed used to look.

“It will be fine. I will call you there once I have settled down there.”

“As if your father will leave! You know that is not practical anymore. Not at his age. Or with his condition.”

“WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO! I am not doing this for myself! You know how much money are they paying me? Who am I doing all this for if not for Abbu and you?” Naseer

yelled back in frustration, careful to not show any anger towards her mother, only his own frustration.

Abida stared hard at Naseer. She missed the old days when her word was law. If she said that Naseer had to run to the market to bring eggs or flour, he had to go. It was not up to debate. Now, times were changing. It was almost as if Naseer was slowly becoming aware of the fact that she and her husband were relics of a past generation and their opinions and wishes were suggestions, equally appropriate for rejection as for consideration and was rebelling with that knowledge. She realized suddenly, painfully, that she was out of things to say to him.

“You are a big man now. I am sure you know what you are doing.” Abida said, returning all of her concentration back to the Rogan Josh that was almost done and despite the slight char at the bottom of the pan, had been salvaged beautifully.

“Ammi! I...”

“I will call you when dinner’s done. Go wash your face and hands.” Abida cut him off.

Naseer tapped his foot nervously, the file in his hand slippery from sweat. He fished out an old handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow, careful not to appear too obvious about it. Someone had told him, the first time he was here, that they watch you the entire time and if you showed any signs of nervousness or anything similar, they reject you.

Naseer closed his eyes and rested his head on the wall behind him. This was stupid. He had been here before, he already had the Visa. This was probably just a follow up thing, some of the other formality that he had forgotten about. It happened all the time. There was no reason why he needed to worry so much. He was being silly. In a few minutes, the guy would call him inside his office, they would talk, he would show him a form where he had forgotten to sign, he would sign a fresh copy of it, they would have coffee together and then Naseer would leave laughing at how stupid he had been to worry about the whole exercise. Unless....

No! There was no unless. That was what was going to happen.

“Mr. Irfan? Come in please. Mr. Brown is ready for you now.” a woman, Indian, in her mid-twenties, stuck her head out even though the door was made out of glass.

Naseer exhaled as quietly as he could, clenched his fists a couple of times to get the blood flowing and forced a smile on his face that would have fooled everyone except Yasmin and his mother. It was time. Finally.

“Mr. Irfan, am I pronouncing it correctly?”

He was not. He pronounced the “fan” in Irfan as “Fan” instead of the correct pronunciation of “Faan” and a lot of stress on the R’s. But it was ok. White people rarely managed to get his name correct ever. He had spent the first 10 minutes of his first interview with Google teaching the interviewer how to say his name correctly. They had

both broken down laughing once it was clear that it was a hopeless case and the interviewer had declared that he would call him "N". It had delighted Naseer. It was the first time that he had been given a nickname. His mother had, in his childhood, referred to him at times by the rather undignified "Nassu", something that he hated. "N" was so much cooler.

"It's Irfan. Just call me N. It would be a lot easier for you."

The man, somewhere in his mid-forties, flashed him a smile of gratitude that reached his eyes, making Naseer feel a lot more at ease almost instantaneously.

"Thank you! I already like you!" The man said, making Naseer beam in pleasure.

"So, what do you want to go to the States for?"

"I have been offered a job there. It's an amazing opportunity and I don't want to pass on that."

"I see! Where is this job?"

"Palo Alto. There is this company called Google..."

"Internet?"

"Yeah", Naseer grinned sheepishly.

"Aren't you worried? I have a cousin who lost big in the dot com bubble last year. What if this company goes down too?"

"I think the worst is over. Think of it like a culling. The weak have been weeded out, now the strong remain."

"You wanna reconsider that image? Sounds pretty ominous!"

"Maybe. Just what I had at the top of my head."

"Anyway, to business now. Who would be accompanying you?"

"My wife and daughter."

"Ok. Can I see their Visa applications?"

"They are attached, I think. Let me just...yeah, here they are."

"Ok! So your wife hasn't had her interview yet?"

"No. Not yet."

"Will you be coming back to India?"

Naseer stopped and considered the question for a while, all the camaraderie that he felt with Mr. Brown evaporating pretty quickly. The man was shrewd. He had put him at ease and then thrown him a low ball, expecting to hear an instinctive answer. Naseer suddenly became much more wary of what he was going to say next, realizing that whether or not he got to go to the USA lay entire in this man's hand.

"I do not know honestly. I am uprooting my family here and moving them to California so I obviously do not want to disturb them right away. I would be there for at least a few years. And that is as far as I can see into the future. I do have my family here, my parents will be here, so I will be

coming home a couple of times a year, but that is all I know right now.”

“I see. I appreciate that you were honest with me. Your parents live here?”

“Yes sir, here in Delhi. Born and raised.”

The rest of the interview went smoothly. Mr. Brown recognized that the boy was ambitious, and intelligent, the kind of people he had been encouraged to allow into the country. He had heard everything that he needed to hear anyway. The papers were solid, he did not know about the company but it was impossible to keep track of all the new dot com companies that were popping up all over California like mushrooms. He was not worried though. These kids, with their computers and internets and phones, worked in fits and starts and didn't have any problems in pulling in people to work with them from anywhere in the World.

“Very well. Do you have any questions for me?” Brown said, leaning back on his chair for a bit to straighten his back. It had been a long day and he couldn't wait to go back to his home and take a shower. He missed his bathtub back in Houston, where he could have just soaked in a hot bath for an hour with a book after a long day like this. Instead he had to make do with an old, slightly rusty shower out here which didn't help with the sweltering New Delhi heat anyway.

“I don't really think so. Thank you so much for your time.” Naseer smiled back politely.

“You are moving to an entirely different country and there is nothing that you want to know about it?” Brown said, slightly amused. It was always the same with these Indians. So servile, always walking on eggshells, afraid of offending.

“There is nothing that I can’t Google.” Naseer shrugged, looking nonchalant.

“Erm, you can’t what sorry?”

“Google. It’s the company I will be working for. Wouldn’t be a very good employee if I didn’t use the product I made now, would I?”

“What does it do?”

“Let me show you.” Naseer said, smiling broadly at Mr. Brown.

“Aah! Mr. Irfan, please come in. I am sorry to have kept you waiting. Please sit down.”

“Good morning Mr. Brown. How are you?” Naseer forced a smile on his, trying his best to hide the fact that it was a forced smile.

“I am fine, thank you very much. Well, let me just pull out your.....here it is. Aah! Yes! I believe that you received our call. It was rather difficult to reach you to be honest.”

“Yes, my living arrangements have changed recently. There had been, erm, a situation, and I had to move out. I am here now though. What is this in regard to?”

“I will get to it. Let me tell you before we begin that this is highly unusual. I don’t remember doing this in the last few

years. But considering the...extraordinary circumstances (Naseer nodded knowingly) we are surrounded by, as well as your unique condition, it became important for us to talk to you once again. So something came up in our routine checks and we figured that it would be best to talk to you directly about the situation. Now, can you tell me a bit more about your family?"

"Erm, yeah. Sure. So I have two siblings, a sister and a brother, I am the eldest. My father used to own a business with his brothers until he fell ill a couple of years ago. It is now looked after by my uncles. My mother is a housewife. My wife used to work before we got married but she quit when she got pregnant with Zahra. That's pretty much it. What else do you want to know?"

"Yes. This is what had concerned us about your application. Your wife's family has been well documented in the public records but your side of the family has not been. We found no public records of anyone in your family from your father's side. It is almost as if you just appeared out of thin air one day. Why did that happen?"

Amina took one last, lingering look at the *baithak* before shutting the door as gently as she could, as if afraid that door will break down if she was too harsh with it. It took her a few seconds to get the key in the lock. Her hands were trembling and her shoulders were shaking. She had tried very hard over the past few days to not let the kids see her upset. They had been scared and confused and were totally dependent on her now that Ashraf was gone. She needed

to be their rock, tell them that everything was going to be okay.

But the finality of the act had finally pushed her over the edge. This may have been the house she had been married into just a few years ago but she had practically lived here her entire life. She would run away from her home every time Ammi was mean to her and hide here, playing with Ashraf's sister. Thinking back this house held happier memories in the far reaches of her mind than the house of her own *Ammi* and *Abbu*.

She had a hard time turning the key in the lock. The lock hadn't been turned in the last few years. Before that, it had always been Ashraf's job. The man of the house. Locking up the gates and the doors every time they went on a vacation. She felt like calling for help, maybe get Yasir to lock it up but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Twelve was far too young to be turned into the man of the house. This burden was hers to carry.

Ashraf had carried it beautifully, all these years, she thought to herself. He had always been calm, putting her mind at ease even though violence was splurging in the valley. Every day since the *Goras* had decided that they would carve up the nation into two portions, even though they were done feasting upon it, riots had sprung up all over the country. The valley itself was no exception. They heard hearsay every day that fights had begun to erupt all over the region. The Pakistani army, taking advantage of the situation, were beginning to encroach further and further into Kashmir, liberating the region.

Even amidst this knowledge, Ashraf never mentioned leaving, all for Amina's sake. He knew how much the house meant to her and after just one conversation where she had refused to leave the house until her death, he had never brought the topic up ever again. He was different than other men that Amina knew in this respect, even her own father. For every other man in her life, their word was law. The women of the house were expected to comply with them, and that was the end of that discussion. But Ashraf had never done it with Amina. Behind the closed doors of his house, he had always treated Amina like an equal, even deferring to her judgement on more than one occasion.

Amina remembered it clearly the day they had brought Ashraf back to the house, wrapped in a green shroud. It had not begun snowing yet, but it would in a few days, maybe less than a week. The sky was a bright shade of white, like in the eye of a hurricane. It had not been anything out of the ordinary, he had gone to the neighboring village for business, something that he did three times a week. Amina had not even asked him to be careful, it had been so normal in their routine. A riot broke out in the village. Someone had written something on the walls of a local mosque. A mob never has a religion.

Amina had family here, her mother was alive. Ashraf's sister lived nearby with her husband and children who were the same age as Najeeb and Yasir. She could have continued living there if she had wanted to, her family urged her desperately to reconsider.

But Amina had her sights set on Delhi. Ashraf had wanted to go to Delhi for months now. Though he never showed it, he had been nervous about the violence in the valley. Until the day his fears came true. Even years later, till her own death, Amina often laid awake in bed, listening to her own breath guiltily, wondering if in his last moments Ashraf had blamed her. He was too gentle to have done so, Amina knew it in her heart. It did not make anything better. If she had not been so stubborn, maybe instead of her own breathing, she would be listening to Ashraf snore slightly as he always did when sleeping on his back, palms resting on his chest.

“I see. So your father’s family migrated to Delhi from Kashmir after the partition?”

“Yes sir. The city where they lived falls in the region that is now comes under Pakistan’s occupation. So my grandparents never really were citizens of India, technically speaking. They were first subjects of the then principality of Kashmir, and after that they were refugees. So now you can see why you cannot find documents related to them.”

“I see. But did they not apply for asylum when they come to the country back then? Those records or documents should be available, I assume?”

Naseer had never really given his father’s heritage a lot of thought. He knew that his father and uncles came from Kashmir from all their evening musings that they got up to every few days at his house till his father’s health faltered but he had always treated them like legends, coloured red by the rose tinted glasses of nostalgia. It was one of those

things that the elders of the family had learnt not to bring up often and the children, oblivious of what had transpired, never knew enough to even pique their curiosity. In this moment, Naseer became painfully aware of the fact of how little he knew of his own family's history.

"I will have to check on that Sir. Can I get back to you on that?"

"Yes, please do. Because we have not been able to find any such documents in our background checks and that puts us in a rather precarious situation. We have instituted a lot of new security measures in the recent past and that needs us to be completely sure of an applicant's background and history before we clear the person for arrival to the States. I hope that you would understand. These are extremely exceptional circumstances as you must be aware and your position is extremely unique."

Naseer suddenly realized how dry his throat really was. He tried to work up some spit in his mouth to swallow but found all liquid had been drained from his body. There was no blood in his veins, no tears in his eyes. He tried speaking but his tongue stuck to the roof his mouth, making even speaking the most basic of sentences the most challenging of tasks.

"I..If, hypothetically speaking, such documents do not exist, what would be the further course of action?" Naseer spoke, pretending desperately that this was simply a technical problem, one that can be circumvented by a closer reading of the regulations.

“I am sorry Mr. Irfan but I do not know that myself. You see, your circumstances are extremely rare to begin with, and combining that with the exceptional circumstances surrounding us at the moment, I am not sure that there is a recent precedent for us to follow as officials. We will have to review your application and take a call about what needs to be done next. So at this point, I would suggest that you look very hard for any documents that prove that your grandparents existed as citizens or refugees in this country. Any such document would help us put the entire matter behind us.”

“I see. So any such document would mean that there would be no troubles?”

“Not at all! The only reason I called you back was that we had looked extensively in the public records, dating back decades and were unable to find anything. You know that the process takes a long time with the Government, so we thought that it would actually be better to talk to you directly and save us some work. Had there been any documents in the public documents, we would not have bothered you. The only reason why we are even here having this conversation is because we did not find what we had been looking for.”

“Very well! I will get to it right away.”

“That would absolutely perfect Mr. Irfan. All the best. I will see you next week?”

“Next month? Are you crazy? What is he talking about Abida?”

“You talk to him *Bhaijaan*, I have given up with this boy. He does whatever he wants to anyway; he has become too big to listen to his parents now.” Ammi replied from the kitchen.

Naseer tried his best to not roll his eyes and appear deferential and respectful in front of Yasir *chacha*, his father’s elder brother. It had gone significantly more difficult of late. He had listened to his advice the first time he had talked to his uncle. He was respectful, understanding and explained very politely to his uncle why he was wrong. But he should have known that it would not be the end of the story. Family is persistent that way.

It soon became a daily affair. Every evening his drawing room would turned into a battleground where arrows flew from all directions and he heard everything silently, speaking occasionally and infrequently, simply to correct his detractors. After a few times, he gave that up as well. His corrections tended to be seen as exhibitions of disrespects and did nothing except aggravate the antagonism of his well-wishers.

“You are leaving in a month? Eid is just a month after that! Who has ever heard of travelling during Ramzaan? You would die in that cold country if you keep a roza there. Don’t be stupid. You can’t leave next month”, Yasir chacha rattled on, declaring with such finality that for a second even Naseer stopped to consider whether he was actually travelling or not.

“Chacha, it is nothing. Don’t be absurd! People keep Rozas there too! I will be fine.”

“I am being absurd? Listen to this boy! I am being absurd! You are leaving the country a month before Eid and I am being absurd. The company isn’t going to close down if you don’t go for a month. There is no need. Call them and tell them you are not coming.”

Naseer sighed, shaking his head. It was a pointless discussion. Why did he even bother? It was not like they were going to let up. Even if he acquiesced to a few of their demands, they would simply be replaced with new requests, until they made it impossible for him to leave his nest. His mother, for example, had a new whim of seeing her grandson’s face. He had even stopped listening to to her pointless urgings now, sometimes even throwing out instructions to bring milk on his way home with the bathwater.

“I don’t get a say in that Chacha. They will send my tickets according to my joining date. It is not my decision to make.”

“At least talk to them. Send them, whatdoyoucallit, an email”, Naseer couldn’t help but smile as he noticed Yasir Chacha’s chest swell up a little on remembering the word and using it correctly.

“Ok Chacha, I will talk to them. Happy?”

“Listen! Listen how he talks to you! He has sold off all his morals like those white demons. That is what I have stopped saying anything to him.”

Naseer fumed and was tempted to point out the argument his mother had initiated that very morning but desisted, not wanting to stretch out this conversation a second further

that its destined life. It was a tactic rule breaking children employ with great success when sent to the principal's office. In its extreme form, it helped Mafiosi protect their own. One of silence.

"I don't even get it. Why on Earth do you have to go all that way for a job? Don't we have jobs in India?"

"It is not the same thing Chacha. You know that too!"

"It is too much! You wanted to study engineering and not join in the family business but I didn't say anything. (Naseer could recall 12 distinct occasions when Yasir Chacha had most definitely attempted to dissuade him) But now this is getting too much."

Naseer could feel the anger bubbling up in him. He had had this conversation way too many times to be able to silently sit through the entire charade all over again. He clenched his fists in his lap and looked resolutely away, only to meet Yasmin's eyes who was shaking her head vigourously. Even though it was invisible to everyone else, she could see the throbbing vein in Naseer's temple. She had a lot of respect for Yasir Chacha. He was the one who had approached her family with the proposal for marriage and was therefore, in many ways, the first person she knew in her new family.

Yasir caught the silent communication between Naseer and Yasmin and suppressed a smile. He had picked the perfect bride for his nephew. Maybe she would talk some sense into this idiot.

“Yasmin! Why don’t you say something?” Yasir Chacha called out loudly for Yasmin was still standing outside the room, her head covered with a *dupatta*.

“What can I say Chacha? Whatever he has decided must be good for us.” Yasmin replied, careful not to tread any of the million different lines that married women are expected to toe.

“What did your parents send you to college for? You don’t have to accept everything that he says without even questioning it. You are educated! Tell him that he is wrong.”

Yasmin flashed a coy smile without showing the slightest intention of following it up with a word. Frequent silences may strangle conversations and lead to emotionally stunted adults and incomplete, unhealthy relationships between parents and children but at least it did so deferentially. Till parents valued shows of respect over having a healthy relationship with their children, things were bound to stay the same.

“What is Abdul doing these days Chacha?”

Naseer knew that it was a low blow but he was far too angry at this point to care. It was one thing to have dragged him into a conversation that he did not want to have and then demonize him for it but he was not going to let his wife be made into a pawn in this twisted game of emotional manipulation and stupidity.

Naseer could see Yasir Chacha stiffen up a little. Abdul was his only son, a couple of months older than Shahira,

Naseer's sister and was someday expected to take over the family business someday and be the man of the family. However, while Shahira was on fast track to probably one of the best colleges in Delhi for a post-graduation in Urdu, Abdul felt that his time was more productively spent playing marbles with kids half his age in the colony. He rarely went to college, having failed once in his second year and did not show much interest into learning the intricacies of trade either. After much cajoling and some subtle palm greasing, Yasir Chacha had managed to get him into a job at a local shop as a cashier, just so that he would do something with time other than playing marbles or flying kites. There were, however, frequent complaints of him sneaking notes out of the *galla* but Yasir Chacha quietly paid back the owner of the shop for his losses, effectively paying someone to keep his son in employment.

"What is he getting paid? 5000 a month?" Naseer pressed on, despite Yasmin silently begging him with her eyes to stop talking before he did irreparable damage.

"Yes." Yasir Chacha replied curtly, never matching Naseer's eyes. He looked towards Najeeb, who lay helpless in bed, staring blankly at the ceiling, oblivious to the cloud that was about to burst.

"I went to IIT Delhi, you know? Got a degree in Computer Science. Do you know how much I make right now? 5, maybe 6 times as much. Do you know how much I will make when I get there? At least 100 times what Abdul does. I have to ask, why would you not want me to go?"

“Money isn’t everything son” Yasir Chacha replied, with a pained expression on his face.

“That’s what people without any tell themselves.” Naseer spoke with a cruel smile forming on his face.

“NASEER! Is that how you talk to your elders? Apologize this instant!” Abida’s voice boomed from outside the kitchen and for a second, Naseer was 8 years old again, being told off for breaking a vase, playing cricket inside the house.

Abida walked into the room fuming, wiping her hands on a dirty towel that had not been washed in forever and held the unique distinction of actually managing to make the pans wiped clean using it dirtier than they were before the washing. Yasir sat paralyzed on the chair, unable to speak or even get up and leave the room, hurt by the affront.

The next few hours went by in a blur, as if Naseer was drunk the entire time. He remembered flashes of things that he said, his mother crying, his uncle leaving in a huff, the noise even attracting his father’s attention, who turned his head curiously. Years from then, he would sometimes lie awake in bed and try to recall what were the things that he had said that day but he could never recall any of them. Or maybe he could have recalled them and his brain simply chose not to. He did not realize it then, in his youthful arrogance, but when you hurt someone you love or care about, you hurt yourself much worse.

Two days later, he moved out, a suitcase in one hand, a sobbing Yasmin’s hand in another. He did not turn back to

say *Allah Hafiz* to his mother, who watched him leave from the window of her room on the first floor.

“Naseer Bhai, you will make me lose the roof over my head this way.” Faizal spoke, grinning like a baboon, his red teeth from years of abusing *Paan* disgusting Naseer.

“You have 20,000 Dollars with you. The demand has tanked in the last month. If I gave you the old rate, how will I feed my family? You have to understand too” he cajoled further, watching Naseer go silent in contemplation.

Faizal could not help but smile in anticipation. The US dollar was not going anywhere of course. It was simply a matter of time before the rates came to the usual standards. A bit higher if anything because of the war that was going to happen eventually. He could afford to sit on this money for a while and make a total killing in three months. It was not every day that someone with 20,000 in cold hard cash walked into his doors. Most people never change anything over a 1000 and only once a white girl changed 5000.

Naseer considered his options. If he changed his money at this rate, he would lose out about a quarter of his savings but he could not see a way out either. He was out of money. He had barely enough for his hotel room rent for the next 3 days. His search for the documents to secure his Visa had turned up nothing, absolutely nothing at all. Google, sensing the charged atmosphere, had simply sent him a mail saying that they will get back to him for the position after a short while, once the whole situation was resolved and they were clear on how the policies have changed. It was an excuse of course. He knew it. They knew it. They

were never going to call him again. Not in the next few years anyway. He was not going anywhere. He was to stay here, in India, forever, until he died.

He sighed. He had no other way out. It would mean losing about a quarter of his savings. The exchange rates had gone down by 25% in the last month alone and would continue their downward spiral for at least the rest of the year. It was simply not worth the risk. He had already lost a few lakhs for not exchanging the money right away in his fool's hope that he would escape being coloured by the broad strokes of the brush painting all of his people. He was not going to doggedly refuse learning from his mistakes all over again. He took a deep breath and steeled himself.

"Fine. I will come tomorrow with the cash."

Faizal tried hard to keep his eyes from lighting up. Years in the business had told him that the customer can run away at any point if he gets a better deal. There was no honor among them. They would screw you over even if it meant that they would save pennies that way. He was not going to celebrate until the money was locked up in his safe.

"It's ok. I will come with you right now. You are living at the Deluxe, aren't you? It's not that far away. I might be busy tomorrow. Let's just get this done today itself. Ok?" Faizal spoke with a diligently practiced nonchalance.

Naseer considered the idea. This did make sense. The rates could change again tomorrow and at the current trend they were more likely to go down than they were to go up. Again, deciding against the risk, he made up his mind to get it over

with and put the whole business behind him. With this safely out of the way, he could focus on his job search. Now that he was not going to Palo Alto, he would have to look for a job here. He could not continue living on his savings, now more so than ever that he had to rent out a house and had the responsibilities of Zahra and Yasmin too. He might have to take a pay cut but it was unavoidable. In the current scenario, he would be lucky to get a job. None of the biggies were hiring and the ones that were, were abusing the lull in the market to its fullest.

Faizal lodged himself comfortably in the auto beside Naseer and blabbered incessantly about something or the other, all of them holding the qualification securely of not interesting Naseer in the slightest. He rested his head on his hand holding the metal bar and closed his eyes. He had not wanted any of this to happen. Any of it. And yet here he was, homeless, jobless, swindled out of his hard earned money that he had been saving up for years just so that he could go to the States and study further. It was surely not happening anytime soon anymore. It would take him another 5 years to save up enough for Grad school in USA, by which time he would be way too old to return to college. Zahra would have started school by then, maybe Yasmin would want another child. His life was over. He felt like a painter whose masterpiece had been slashed ruthlessly by a sadist and all he could do now was pick up the pieces and think about what he could salvage.

What made it worse was that he had burnt many of these bridges himself. He had taken the wrong turn at every fork

in the road. He left his home in his arrogance, his flat in his rush and changed all of his savings in his confidence in the unknown. He had hurt everyone in the process. There was not a single person on the face of the planet who loved him and had not been burnt for doing so. Maybe except Zahra. Zahra still loved him, her tiny little face lighting up every time he cradled her, walking her around in that small, cramped room, oblivious to what her life could have been had her father not made all the mistakes that he did.

He could not help but find his thoughts go back to Yasir Chacha in the last few days. Ever since that day. Yasir Chacha had cradled him the same way he now cradled Zahra. He was who Naseer ran to every time his father refused to buy him chocolates and Chacha never disappointed him ever. He had bought him his first calculator (digital calculators were still a rarity) and had laughed the loudest when Naseer has pulled the whole thing apart to see how it worked within hours. Even their names sounded so much alike. In her last days, with her mind muddled and limbs trembling, his Grandmother had often called Naseer as Yasir. Naseer had often found a certain amount of pride in being so alike to his uncle.

And what he told him the last time he had talked to him? That he was jealous of Naseer's success. Yasir Chacha knew him from back from times when success for Naseer had been not wetting his shorts. And now he had the audacity to insinuate that the person who was like a father to him was a jealous of his success.

What had he achieved anyway? A degree? An obscure, arcane skill that happened to be in demand in the recent times? That was it. That all paled in comparison to everything his father and uncles had built. They had started from nothing and built a house in Delhi. The house alone would probably soon be worth more than all the money he was ever going to earn in his life. And yet he had been stupid enough to feel proud of what was nothing more than a short run of good luck.

Naseer was pulled out of his reverie as the auto jerked to a halt, still hurrying under his feet like a beast snoring gently. Faizal, ecstatic at his imminent financial windfall, did not bother haggling for the change and the auto driver, amazed at his good luck, rushed away before Faizal could change his mind.

The elevator dinged to a stop at his floor and instead of the usual silence that greeted him, he was surprised by a loud, booming voice. The confusion on Naseer's face scared Faizal. He had had many such brushes with bad luck where things that he was sure were his slipped through the cracks of his fingers before he could even begin comprehending what exactly was it that just happened.

Naseer walked quickly to his room, Faizal struggling to keep up behind him. The closer Naseer got to the room, the more he could feel that there was whirlwind inside the room, turning it upside down. Things being flung across the room, zippers being closed with unnecessary force and speed, making their usually muffled "Zoop"s clearly audible across the hall. The door was thrown wide open and he could see

people walking around in the room as Yasmin sat docilely on the bed with Zahra in her arms.

Naseer strode quickly and appearing more confident than he felt into the room and stood tall at the doorway, as if demanding an explanation about what was going simply by his posture. He looked around the room and saw the last person sitting angrily in the chair in the corner that he expected to.

Yasir Chacha had his eyes closed, his face visibly red, which clashed horribly with his Henna dyed hair and beard. He steeped his fingers and placed them in his lap, his mouth a thin red line, his lips still red like those of the people who live in the mountains even after all these years in Delhi. Naseer was not sure which rose in him first, shame or relief.

Yasir Chacha, probably alerted by the change in the light being blocked by Naseer, opened his eyes and glared right back at Naseer. Naseer cowered in response.

“You complete ass of a person. Who runs away like that? Do you have any idea how long have we been looking for you?” Yasir Chacha bellowed, his voice sounding sweeter than music to Naseer’s ears.

“You have a wife and a child you moron. You do whatever you want to do with your life, atleast don’t make them live in this hell. Has grown tall like a palm, hasn’t got brains worth a penny. Pack your things, we are going home.”

Naseer felt at this moment he was obligated to protest. Not because he did not want to go back home, he wanted it more than anything else in the world. He simply felt that he

did not deserve it. He did not deserve such unconditional love and care that looked past all his transgressions, that came back to take him back as if nothing had happened.

“Chacha, I...”

“Save it. I don’t care about whatever you have to say. You are coming home. I am not discussing this with you. Your generation is like this only. Give you a little independence, let you decide how much sugar you want in your tea and you end up making a fool of yourself and breaking your mother’s heart. Did you even think about what she would feel like? Calling her once a week and thinking that you are doing your duty as a son. Idiot.”

“Abdul *Bhai*?”

Naseer turned around, suddenly remembering that Faizal was still with him.

Abdul, his hands full with clumsily folded clothes looked hard at Faizal, his face slowly breaking into a smile.

“Faizal! How are you?”

“I am perfectly fine *Bhaijaan*. How are you?”

“I am great. Mind giving me a hand with this suitcase? I can’t get it to close.”

Abdul walked with quick, short steps and sat grinning on top of the suitcase and Faizal dumped the clothes on the chair beside him to grapple with the latches.

“How do you know Abdul *Bhai*, Naseer *Bhai*?” Naseer could detect a slight tinge of fear in Faizal’s voice.

“He is my brother.” Naseer said, still staring blankly at Yasir Chacha who, done with his rant, had collapsed back into his chair and was stroking his beard thoughtfully.

“Oh!” Faizal spoke, his face falling a little for some inexplicable reason.

“Let me just get the money.”

“What money?” Abdul interjected, his eyes narrowing like a hawk as he turned his gaze to Faizal, who cowered under it.

“I needed some money exchanged.”

“It can wait. Don’t worry about it. Abdul will take you tomorrow. You are coming home right now. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“*Ji Chacha.*”

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Faizal’s face falling a little. Maybe there was a story that he did not know about here but he was suddenly feeling a lot lighter.

“Ok. I will take your leave now. *Aadab Chacha.*” Faizal said, bowing rather awkwardly and managing to knock over a glass. Yasir Chacha merely grunted, his eyes still close, his head resting on the wall behind him.

Naseer caught Yasmin’s eye and for the first time in months, did not find a shadow lingering behind them. Zahra was nestled happily against her chest and slept as if she was in a quiet, calm meadow and not in the middle the battlezone that Abdul and his brother had managed to turn this room into.

Naseer quietly walked up to Yasir Chacha and knelt before him.

“Chacha jaan?”

Yasir Chacha opened his eyes and looked straight into Naseer’s. He had not called him that in ages, ever since he had started wearing full pants and cycling to school.

“I know. Now go. Help your brother pack up the things. Don’t sit here staring at me like an idiot.”

Naseer did not say anything. He did not have to. He was going home.

Naseer stretched his legs out and lay back in his chair with a cup of tea and the newspaper waiting eagerly for him to turn his attention to them. He was finally free for his mini vacation before the job started. This was what the good life felt like, he thought to himself. He did not have to go to a job, he did not have to deal with naysayers and people constantly telling him that he was making a mistake when he knew it for a fact that he was not. Yasmin had protested that the hotel was too expensive but it did not matter. He had run the numbers, he would make back a day’s worth of the rent in about 12 minutes at his job. Hardly something worth fretting over.

She did fret over a lot of things now that he thought about it. Him leaving his house, him getting rid of the flat at the beginning of the month so that he did not have to pay rent for an entire month. It was equal to roughly a week’s worth of rent in this place but if he was going out of the country, he would be going out with a bang. Living the good life.

He was having more fun that he could admit to himself without guilt simply lazing around. He would go to sleep at 8 and then wake up at 10 the next morning, making up for all the lost sleep over the years as he rubbed his nose raw, bent over books and notebooks and keyboards. It did pay off, of course. He was days away from getting his visa and his tickets and his dream job. It was all an upward climb from there. He could switch companies a few years down the line, maybe even start his own business. Or maybe he would go back to school and then go into the academia, living the idyllic life, surrounded by the continuous advent of human knowledge. He would cross the bridge when he got to it.

He stirred the sugar in his tea happily with the silver spoon placed beside his kettle. Yasmin was still asleep and he did not feel like waking her up today. It still was early. He had gone to sleep at 8 the last night just because he could along with Zahra and unlike her, managed to be completely awake at 6 in the morning. It was alright, he did not mind the occasional moment of quiet. It was a good time to gloat over his fortunes without the prying eyes of the World making him suppress the twitches in his smile.

He pulled up the paper and took a sip of his tea, taking in the aroma of the fresh cardamom ground into his tea with closed eyes. He allowed the tea to scorch its way down to the base of his throat, waking up his senses and alerting him to the faint chirpings of the sparrows in the trees right outside his balcony.

He eyes stayed stuck to the headline. Unmoving. Unflinching. Unblinking.

World Trade Center no more, as five floors of Pentagon

The world watched paralysed as terrorists scarred forever the skyline of its greatest city, once, twice, thrice. Killed countless, striking fear in the heart of its most powerful nation, a fear it has neither imagined — nor felt in modern history.

Siddhant Shekhar (b. 1993), spent his early life in Patna after which he got his degree in Physics from Deshbandhu College, University of Delhi. He is currently working towards his degree in Human Resource Management from XLRI, Jamshedpur. His previous publications include Science Reporter, Dainik Bhaskar, and Indian Literature journal.

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