

Riddled Realities

I carefully made my way across the road, the laces of my shoes brushing the tarmac. I ought to have tied them but anticipation held me in its relentless grip. Pausing before the gate, I breathed out slowly, looking at the unremarkable gray color. The street was quiet at this time; the late afternoon silence and the slight bite of chill made me shiver involuntarily.

With only one person in mind, I made my way to my grandfather's room. I cast my gaze on both sides, eyes taking in the garden. Tall neem and oak trees towered above me. At first, they intimidated me but now, I looked upon them in a new light. Their gnarled barks were imitations of kindness, not anger. Their leaves swayed with whispers of invitation, not suspicion.

"Assalam Alaikum Nana." Entering the room, I went straight over to grandfather. Clearing my throat, I crouched down, sitting on the corner of his bed. Nana opened his eyes, their blue gray color gleaming from the light sifting through the window. "How are you feeling?" I enquired. Nana shook his head slightly but his smile never wavered. My heart sank slightly at his lack of answer but I patted his brown,

wrinkled hand reassuringly. Nana hardly ever answered, but I didn't mind. I was here to give him company.

I told him about my day, relieved to find Nana's eyes on mine, nodding fervently at just the right places. All too soon, I heard the call to prayer echoing throughout our society. I rose haltingly, emptying the bag of rose petals by his bedside. "I really hope you recover soon," I told him, "*Allah Hafiz.*" Nana raised a hand in farewell. Satisfied, I hurried out. It really was quite late and I did not want Mama to scold me.

"I hereby give you the seven B's!" said Nana, face solemn. "Seven B's?" I parroted curiously. "Beautiful, brave, brilliant, bold, bright, best-behaved baby." I grinned at the list of compliments but suddenly pouted. "Baby?" I asked, incredulously. "I am five years old, not a baby!" Nana laughed, the lines around his eyes wrinkling as he did. "You will always be a baby to me... I am your mother's father after all. No matter how old you get, I will always be five times your age."

“Now let us get started. Take out your Mathematics register and I shall give you some addition and subtraction sums to work on,” said Nana. Subsequently, he checked the sums and pointed out one of my mistakes. “You were supposed to borrow one from the left side,” he explained patiently, “We did this last week.” I hastily corrected the offending sum and huffed out a breath.

I opened my eyes and blinked out of the memories flooding me from ten years back. My mother was calling me for dinner. I brought my enfolded hands to my face, ran them over it and got up from the prayer mat. Everyday, I prayed feverishly for Nana.

One night after winding up with dinner, I strayed to my room. I took a book from my shelf and settled comfortable atop the red cushions on the white swing in my room. An hour flew past as I rocked to and fro gently. Hesitantly, I closed my book and settled for bed. Just as I was about to close my eyes, the jarring bell ringing had me sitting bolt upright. Belatedly, I wondered who it was. No one ever came to our place this late. I put on my slippers and went towards the wooden door but my father emerged from the other room, beckoning me to go back and sleep. He exited

and I hovered outside the door, listening to the metal door outside open. My mother came to stand with me. After a few terse minutes, my father came inside, shouldering a bulky brown carton. He gestured and said, “Open it yourself.”

Prizing it open, I gasped. With hands shaking with excitement, I pulled out a blue book encased in plastic covering. The book gleamed, with the white words ‘Beneath the Depths’ embossed on it. I ripped off the plastic and stared at the book, awestruck and elated. “It is here at last!” exclaimed my mother, breaking the pregnant silence. I turned around and hugged her, tears of jubilation pricking my eyes. My second book had gotten published. I had spent twelve months sweating over my laptop, typing this book. Clutched in my hands was now the proof of my diligence.

I gave the book to Mama and twirled excitedly. I could scarcely wait to show it to my family. Nana would love it! I remembered how his happiness had known no bounds when my first book had gotten published.

After arriving home from school, I quickly changed, offered my prayer and walked to Nana’s place. This time, I did not bother to pause and survey my surroundings during my stroll. With my book in one hand and the resolve of steel in the other, I

EMAAN AQIL ABBASI

moved past the gray gate and went over to Nana. “*Assalam Alaikum* Nana,” I greeted him breathlessly. Nana looked up curiously and I thrust the book at him. “Look!” I said and waited patiently. Nana looked at the book and suddenly, clarity lit his eyes. Nana kissed my forehead and glanced worriedly at the darkening sky. I inclined my head. “I love you Nana,” I said passionately before bidding him adieu and running home.

I was uncharacteristically early but it was my graduation day, and I could not imagine myself climbing the steps to get the diploma before having gained Nana’s approval. Nana slowly clapped his hands and whispered, “I always said that you would bring us pride.”

I thanked Nana. I sat with him for a few more minutes and was about to leave when suddenly Mama “*Assalam Alaikum* Abu,” she spoke. I started to edge away and waited outside the door. After a few minutes, Mama came over to me. “Emaan,” she began, sending a trickle of apprehension down my spine. I had an inkling of what she would talk about and I felt the urge to cover my ears and drown out her words. “It’s been three years. You are hurting yourself. I know you love

EMAAN AQIL ABBASI

Nana to the moon and back but you have to come to terms with this. You have to let Nana go. Please.” I jerked away from her. Blood roared in my ears and I felt dizzy. I shook my head faster. “You go. I’ll be out in a minute,” I said to her, hardly seeing her tears past my blurry vision.

I raced back to Nana and knelt on the ground. At the same time, I let my illusion shatter. I saw the house as it really was. A graveyard. It was my mind that had conjured up his visions, that had pacified me and helped me deal with my pain. Where Nana was, I saw the mound of dirt. I held back my sob, blinking furiously to prevent the onslaught of tears. I had never cried here. Never in front of Nana. “Don’t cry,” Nana had said gently the night he had gone, “When you cry, I get sad.”

That night, Nana visited me in my dream. He stood tall, with his hair cut neatly and wearing his black sweater, looking more alive and tangible than ever before. I tentatively stepped up to him and hugged him tightly. I could feel the warmth emanating from him as he hugged me back.

EMAAN AQIL ABBASI

I withdrew slightly and astoundedly asked, “You are back?” Nana laughed and the sound warmed my heart. He looked at me and said, “I was never gone.” All too soon, reality punctured my vision and I awoke.

The dainty bird alighted on my shoulder

Deceptive t’was: clawed at my skin and made me choke

Pecked at me sharply; making me go, bit by bit, colder

It was a dreary dream, through hurt I had to soldier

Hazy tears, all that was left of him was memories like smoke

The dainty bird alighted on my shoulder

I drowned in dismay; my loss, with its carnage, grew bolder

My wrecked state, vultures came to prod and poke

Pecked at me sharply; making me go, bit by bit, colder

How inconsequential it all seemed next to life’s dreary smolder

I clung on desperately to the golden words he spoke

The dainty bird alighted on my shoulder

‘Is’ changed to ‘was’, closed too soon was his life’s folder

EMAAN AQIL ABBASI

My world it shattered, my heart it broke

Pecked at me sharply; making me go, bit by bit, colder

Peculiar was the bird's master, paid no regard to younger or older

To be accosted by it head on; it seemed to me but a cruel joke

Grief's dainty bird alighted on my shoulder

Pecked at me sharply; making me go, bit by bit, colder

Word Count: 1490

Glossary:

Assalam Alaikum: Greetings

Allah Hafiz: Farewell

Nana: Grandfather (mother's father)