

## 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 grey colour. The street was quiet at this time; the late afternoon silence and the slight bite of chill to the languishing air made me shiver involuntarily. I maneuvered past the gate that was always open, the gate that looked drab but seemed to extend its unspoken welcome every time.

With only one person in mind, I made my way to my grandfather's room. Though I knew grandfather was slightly wistful at having to live away from my uncle and grandmother, I took guilty pleasure in the fact that his new home was closer to my house. Closer to me. 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.

I came here so often that I was half astounded after glancing down and failing to behold the imprints of my steps, criss-cross patterns on the underside of the same sneakers I always wore here. Nana's house was gigantic, with several rooms. I visited daily, yet every day there seemed to be a new room. By now, I had learned to pay no heed to the ever-expanding house. After all, my sole purpose for coming

here was only to see grandfather. Just before entering my grandfather's room, I smoothed my hair back, adjusted my scarf, brushed invisible lint off my black kurta and shifted the bag of red rose petals from my right hand to my left. Nana was always pleased when I dressed up.

“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 colour gleaming from the light sifting through the window. The blue was ever so subtle, almost nonexistent. I constantly told Nana that the blue was very much present but he always argued, insisting they were nothing special. He smiled up at me beatifically and I laid my hand on his. “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. School was as good as ever. I threw my friend a surprise birthday party. Mama had cooked biryani, for which I was thrilled. I told him how I

missed him picking me up from school, getting me a kulfi on the way home. All the while, I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, wondering if he was still listening. People were always annoyed by me going on and on about every single detail. I was 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. My mother had always implored me to return early and not spend too much time with Nana. This confused me but I never mentioned this to Nana. He would be hurt. 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.

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"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." I nodded, not quite sure what 'five times' my age meant, but I figured it meant quite a lot.

"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. I scrambled to give him the register and sharpened the orange pencil till its point was paper-thin. I turned adoringly to my teacher, watching intently as he put the pencil to paper. The point of the nip cracked as he scribbled furiously before handing the register over to me. I bit at the pencil's end as I wrote numbers, scratched them out, checked and double-checked. "Hold the pencil from a higher point," said Nana, jolting me from my reverie of going back in time and preventing Mathematics from ever coming into being. I sighed and did as he said, holding the pencil at a point short of the middle. "Never hold the pencil from the very bottom," he chided, "I keep telling you that." I nodded, ashamed at forgetting every single time.

Nana 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 really wish you were at school too, Nana," I said, once I was done with my sums, "I do not like the teacher. She does not explain like you do and always glares at us when we ask a question." Nana shook his head. "Do not speak bad of your teacher," he said, with a wise look in his eyes, "You must always respect her, no matter what. You know how teachers

in our time used to punish us for insubordination?” he asked. I shook my head, leaning forward with curiosity. Nana took my pencil, put it in the space between his middle and ring fingers and squeezed the tops of the fingers together. I cringed, horrified. “How could they?” I asked indignantly but Nana said, “How couldn’t they? They were present to make sure we were disciplined. We still held them in the highest regard.” I understood what he was trying to say. “I will keep that in mind then,” I vowed. Nana smiled approvingly.

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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 put it down near the staircase and beamed at me. “Fetch a knife from the kitchen,” he said to me and I complied, picking up the black handled knife and returning with it. He gestured to the carton and said, “Open it yourself.”

I exchanged a bemused glance with Mama, who shrugged and indicated her chin towards the mystery carton. I crouched down and ran the knife's point carefully over the yellow tape binding it. Prizing it open, I gasped, the forgotten knife clattering to the granite floor. Mama rushed over to my side and put a hand on her mouth. My father smiled from afar. 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. Nana had ordered a whole batch of mithai and thrown a spectacular dinner. As if picking up on my thoughts, Mama hugged me tight and whispered, “Nana would have been so proud of you.” I clenched my hands into fists momentarily and then relaxed them. “He is proud of me,” I reassured her and withdrew. “Go back to sleep now!” said Mama and I practically skipped to bed, my heart expanding with joy and gratitude.

The next morning, I had been enveloped into several hugs and blushed at several compliments. My best friends had gotten the first copies of my book and my teachers had congratulated me warmly. Throughout the school day, my knee bounced up and down excitedly, wanting to dash to Nana and show him my book as quickly as I could. The Physics teacher glanced questioningly at my moving knee as she lectured and I immediately willed it to be still. The hours passed **like glue**. As the bell indicating the end of the classes resounded, I tore out from the classroom. All through the car ride home, I chatted incessantly with Mama and even restrained myself from teasing my little brother.

After arriving home, 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 resolve of steel in the other, I moved past the grey 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. “Wow,” said Nana simply and I smiled happily. Nana put the book down and hugged me tightly. I breathed in the earthy scent, mixed with a hint of perfume. We stayed like that for a long time. 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.

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I found myself back in Nana’s room. My hair was tucked beneath a dark hat and my robes billowed. “Assalam Alaikum Nana,” I spoke softly and made my way to him. Nana propped himself up on one elbow and I spread my arms, showing what I was wearing. Nana was delighted. He patted the place next to him and I nestled myself there. The sun had not yet crested the sky. I was uncharacteristically early but this was something that couldn’t have waited until after. 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 came in. I blinked, trying to conceal my bafflement. Mama hardly ever visited. The fact that she chose this day to come over and visit him spoke volumes. “Assalam Alaikum Abu,” she spoke. I started to edge away and waited outside the door, listening to the birds chirping and swaying slightly in time with the breeze under the shade of the neem tree. After a few minutes, Mama came over to me. I turned to go out the grey gate when she closed her fingers around my arm, grinding me to a halt. I turned around and faced her, raising my brows. “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. Unconsciously, I began to shake my head. “It’s been three years. You are hurting yourself. I know you love 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. The rooms were graves. I looked at Nana and realized I didn’t really see him. I never had. 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 covered my grass. My rose petals from yesterday were sprinkled over it. 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.”

Anger, hot and swift, descended upon me. This wasn’t supposed to be happening. I had prayed for Nana’s long life since as long as I could remember. I had never imagined that my prayers would be of no avail. I couldn’t come to terms with the fact that on the morning of my graduation day, I was speaking to Nana in the graveyard. I wouldn’t.

I blinked out of my anger, letting it drain away before bowing my head. Nana wouldn't have liked it. Rubbing my eyes with my palms till I could see green brightness, I fled the graveyard.

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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.

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 smoulder  
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  
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*