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Finalist - Migrant Worker

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Migrant Worker

Omer Aziz

Abba worked for the City's sanitation department, back then a shabby building downtown that was practically a mansion compared to the City's other decrepit offices. It had been built after the War in a frenzy of development and was one of the few municipal offices not treated like a backwater by the City's politicians. The crime rate was steadily rising, muggings had become common everywhere except the financial district, and so the City Council focused on cleanliness as a way of giving the City a fresh polish. Abba had started working there in the early 1970s after coming over to America from Pakistan with his engineering degree. The work came easy to him even if it meant getting his hands dirty, and while his English was without the refined hints of upper-class Bombay where he had finished his primary school, it did have traces of middle-class Lahore, where he was born and had gone to university. Early on, it was not his accent that gave him trouble nor the pressed suits he wore with colorful ties that the other public servants laughed at during their coffee breaks. Instead, it was his name. Abba's bosses and co-workers could not pronounce Tariq, so they began calling him 'Ta-reek,' which became a parlor game around the office. *Ta-reeks-of-curry* started it all, uttered by a junior manager at an after-work drinks gathering that Abba had skipped to get home to his mother. Curry was replaced with other words— Ta-reeks-of-fish and Ta-reeks-of-manure—until the game got boring and the office workers needed a new name. They settled on 'Turk' and asked Abba if he had special rugs for the office. Always a quick study, Abba picked up on the game and demurred in the self-amusing way that would become his staple. 'I have many rugs at home,' he said, 'but they are for my dogs.' He then told his colleagues about the specific breed and color of all his German Shepherds, how they had helped raise him and walked with him to school every morning and would be waiting on the porch with his mother when he returned at the end of the day.

Rocky and Hero were still in Pakistan, but Abba left out this detail. His colleagues, having been schooled about canines by a brown immigrant with an accent, were so bewildered that they stopped playing and settled on a final name. 'Mr. T' is how he came to be known to all the senior managers, and later, to the average citizen.

Abba had come to America with Dadima in a packaged deal. They had left one early morning in January and bid goodbye to their clan with promises to sponsor everyone once they figured out how. At the airport, Abba made his first purchase in his new country, an American flag. His second purchase was another flag, this one for Dadima. 'Now we are Amreekan,' he joked, and he put the handle in his pocket so the flag would hang out and everyone would see just how Amreekan he was. They were met with a fierce snowstorm when they stepped outside of the airport doors and Abba spent his first night shivering in a motel, desperately hoping he would not get sick because it would bankrupt him of what little money he had. Those were the days when you could not sleep in peace if you thought you had an infection and Abba, the son of a medical doctor lost to the viruses of Partition, knew he was ill when he placed the back of his hand on his forehead and felt it burning. Dadima cared for him for three nights until he recovered. 'It must have been the dirty air,' he would later say. When he was better, they moved from motel to motel until Abba started working and used his first checks to rent a small one-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of the City. It seemed that even the germs in America welcomed you with open arms.

At the sanitation department, Abba developed a reputation for his work ethic and everyone who called him Mr. T took a great liking to his relentless pursuit of a clean city. It made him happy knowing he was improving the sewer systems and the roads, and he routinely slept in his cubicle when some pressing matter kept him late at the office. The other workers would sometimes come in early and see him back at his desk in yesterday's clothes, responding to another complaint or filing another order. They never said anything, it meant less work for them, but the seasoned managers all noticed. His long hours turned

him into the most prized bureaucrat in the department, a throwback to his days at Punjab University when the professors referred to him as the *human calculator* for his lightning-quick arithmetic. He was not born with mathematical genius as his peers thought, he just stayed up late memorizing patterns he noticed in numbers so that he could see the answer to any math problem while others were still trying to figure out the question.

Eventually, a local newspaper took notice of Abba's efforts and wrote a story about the Pakistani who was on a mission to rid the city of garbage and rats. The City Council then increased the department's budget, and Abba won the eternal gratitude of the senior managers who pocketed a good sum of the extra change.

It did not take long for Abba to settle into the American way. He tasted booze and enjoyed its bitter taste, not unlike his first experience of tasting bitter chai as a boy. He went to the pictures one day and walked out of the packed theatre calling it a movie and wanting to emulate Sean Connery, his new hero. After he got a raise, he started bringing women home for dinner: skinny blondes, large brunettes, curvy redheads, they all warmed to his charm. Dadima for her part was so happy to see her son with company that she would cook dinner for Abba and his muses and then go to sleep knowing that her future was bright. A year after their arrival, they moved into a bungalow in the suburbs where Abba and Dadima were the first immigrants in town. Later, the entire neighborhood would become a multicolored collage but back then it was a white canvas which in the eyes of some of the town's residents now had an unwelcome blotch of brown right in the middle.

While Abba worked long hours at his job, Dadima worked equally hard on the telephone each day keeping up with the latest gossip from their old cantonment in Lahore. Her days were split between making chai and sitting on the couch and yelling into the receiver. 'Why?' she would yell, 'Tell me more, more!' There was news to be shared and many questions to be asked, Dadima not wanting her friends to leave out even the tiniest detail. If some-such-person had received a new shalwar kameez as a gift, Dadima would ask

what color it was, what size it was, and whether or not it had come with blessings. If misfortune struck an enemy of hers (there were many of these), she was to be told immediately and would then analyze the story over the phone for hours, eventually concluding that it had all been Allah's will. She seemed to be in competition with her entire extended family and friends and she made sure her presence hovered over their existence from afar. In turn, Dadima's friends and hangers-on (there were many of these as well) asked about America and whether it was true that people slept with each other before marriage and that you could go into a store, pay money for a ticket, and win a million dollars. She spent many hours playing the expert and telling them how different her new world was from Lahore, from Pakistan.

When her friends started asking questions about Abba, she initially ignored them and said Tariq was too busy to get married, but as the questions about Abba's future persisted and the questioner's grew more curious, Dadima fell back into her old self. She told Abba there would be no more white women, these lecherous goris were to be avoided like disease-ridden mosquitos. She thought the skirt-wearing, arms-bearing gori would brainwash her son, break her home, and take her money. 'Keep yourself protected,' she began telling him. It became her mantra, this piece of non-negotiable advice—*Keep yourself protected*. In her working theory of American life, White Woman would trap Man and Man would be chained against his will to a woman with only selfish motives. These traitors-in-waiting could not be give any opportunity to kidnap her son's heart.

As the months passed and Abba continued his dating ventures, once even bringing home—to Dadima's utter shock—a Hindu woman, her anxiety grew into anger. This was now about honor, which meant everything was at stake. Her son was in his 30s and showed no signs of wanting to get married. Rumors were spreading back home like wildfires, passed from mouth to ear and repeated until the line between truth and falsehood became blurred. 'We have heard Tariq Bhai has become corrupted,' her closest friend said to her one

afternoon. ‘We have heard he has become a gora’—a white man. How this information could have traveled across oceans and continents was a mystery, but it became clear to Dadima that she needed to act.

When she saw that her weekly whispers to Abba about marriage were not enough, she opted for daily reminders. Abba ignored her for many weeks, continuing on his American dream, but one day, on an especially bright Spring morning while he drank his chai and read his morning paper, she played her final card. ‘What will the family think?’ she asked him. Normally Abba would have pretended not to have heard her and would have gone on reading, but this time, he looked up from his newspaper before looking back down. When she repeated the question, Abba said, ‘To hell with the family!’ and got up and went to his room. He did not care much for the opinions of others, an independent mind and spirit had gotten him quite far, but as Dadima repeated this question to him every morning while ironing his work clothes, his temper began to lose out to his reason. Abba knew that when Dadima asked, ‘What will the family think?’ she meant, ‘What will our clan, our city, our ancestors, our descendants, believe about us?’ Like a panel of infallible judges, The Family would render a guilty verdict against any tribe member who dared to use either of his heads rather than obey custom. Abba had prided himself on defying every rule he came across, but Tradition works in mysterious ways, the contract between the present and the past is difficult to amend much less break, and so while Abba could wink at the Prophet and even at Allah, it grew on him, this subtle thought pushed from his subconscious mind to the front of his skull, that to ignore Tradition was to commit an inner suicide from which he would never recover.

They flew to Lahore on a humid August day and planned to keep the purpose of their trip a secret, but it did not take long for word to spread that Tariq-from-America was in town looking for a wife. One uncle and aunty after another showed up at their door with a

rishta, a proposal. They did this elliptically, coming over with food and inquiring about the U-S-A, and after an obligatory cup of tea, hinting that they were looking for a nice husband for their daughter. Abba found this proposal ritual an absurd exercise and so would sometimes tell his prospective brides stories about Americans who fornicated on the street or who drank liquor at breakfast, scaring away the precious girls and laughing to himself about the entire thing. But he knew that his power now was limited. The parents made the important decisions when it came to finding what some of the more hip aunties called a life partner. A decision like marriage, the parents counseled, was far too important to be left to the whims of children.

Ten families made it past the screening stage to the discussion stage, and of these, three families made it to the interview-and-question stage before just one family was left. Dadima and Abba visited the Zubairi family house to seal the deal. The house was hidden behind the hills of Murree, a mountainous vacation town where wine was fermented. With its overbearing trees and long grassy fields and rolling peaks, Murree had served as the location of the first American embassy in Pakistan. Now, the *pukka Amreekan* Tariq was visiting to ask for the hand of the Zubairis' daughter. This should have been a routine procedure: Go in, make the offer, discuss the crucial question of dowry, and plan the festivities, except that Dadima had one final trick up her kurta sleeve. When everyone sat down and chai was served, Dadima suddenly demanded to be fed. She folded her arms and said, 'I must eat. I must eat now.' When she was told that they were out of food but there would a lamb feast for dinner, she got up and walked to the door. Baba Zubairi pleaded with her not to leave and Mama Zubairi hurried to the kitchen and brought out leftover curry to Dadima's satisfaction. Abba watched this drama unfold like a hapless serf, his cheeks turning red as Dadima returned to her seat and began to eat. *Show me how badly you want my son*, she seemed to be saying, and the Zubairis, mindful of the competition and their own honor, would not shrink in the face of this challenge. Listening to this argument from the corner of the room was a shy, skinny girl with a dupatta over her head, her pride militating against her

modesty as she raised her gaze from the floor and burned her eyes into Dadima's face. That girl was Afreeda, the bride-to-be, the talk of the town, the jewel in Murree's crown.

They were married the following night. Abba's mustache was dyed jet black and his hair was combed immaculately to the side. Ami's face was doused with make-up and gold, her bangles jangling, her flowering red dress attracting all the eyeballs like moths to the light. Legend has it that alcohol was consumed like water in the bars that popped up magically out of car trunks in the parking lot, and the sound of drums was heard into the early hours of the morning. The sexes were said to have intermingled. So loud was the singing and dancing that the *maulvi sahab*s who had come to give their blessings to the couple and take part in the feast left early because they could not be seen dishonoring their religion. One rumor that circulated widely the next day and became the lore of the town for years to come was that one of the *maulvis* stayed back and took shots of whisky in the parking lot with a poet friend of Abba's and that the *maulvi* and the poet drunkenly agreed, while hugging and chugging, that holy books like all books, required imagination and interpretation to touch the human heart and feed the human soul.

*

Dadima and Ami were locked in a guerrilla war from the start. Dadima thought her life's work was done now that her son was finally married and it was about time her needs were met on-demand. She passed her time sitting on the couch with the TV on mute watching Ami scrubbing the tiles on her knees until the floor literally sparkled. *So much energy, so much vitality*, Dadima thought, and instantly felt threatened by the sight of this younger propertyless village woman who had come to replace her in serving all of Tariq's needs. It was too much to handle, so she complained and complained. She complained about the salt in the food, about the meat in the food, about the smell of the food. Ami's rotis were not circular enough, her bangles jangled too loudly, the chai she made was lacking in taste.

Ami's parents had taught her that no matter what happened she should never raise her voice to her elders. They were to be respected, and their criticism accepted. To speak out of line was unbecoming of a loyal Muslim daughter and so Ami vowed to do better, to serve Dadima as an obedient daughter-in-law, as though Dadima was her own mother. But with each passing day, this promise became more difficult to keep. One evening, after listening to Dadima complain for three hours straight ('these grapes are green, I wanted red; 'do not wear purple in the house, it hurts my eyes'), Ami dropped the roti she was making and glared at Dadima once more with those fierce eyes. 'Cook for yourself,' she said, and walked out of the kitchen. They did not speak to each other for three weeks.

Abba was hardly around, always working late or out of town. Little had changed in his life since he got married, it was just that there were now two women at home instead of one and they were always arguing. He was called upon to serve as policeman and judge of the household, and he almost always took Dadima's side in the disputes. Work was the bright spot in his life, he was rising quickly and had been promoted to junior manager much quicker than his superiors. He commanded the respect of his younger colleagues, particularly the Pakistanis and Indians who had gotten jobs in the department after the top bureaucrats began recruiting them thanks to Abba's efforts. Gone was the meek immigrant who let people call him names. In his place was a swaggering American with a blackened mustache who would bark orders at his juniors when they came in late or were slacking off. Mr. T became Dr. T, and he let the world know of his accomplishments whenever he could.

For Ami, though, the most important achievements were of the heart, and specifically, the devotion Muslims were required to have to Islam. She was so perplexed by Abba's lack of faith that she assumed, in all her innocence, that his refusal to pray was due to a lack of knowledge. No one could choose to carve their own path to hell, she thought, and so she must save her husband from eternal punishment. She told him it was his duty as a Muslim to pray, maybe not five times a day as she did, but at least once or twice. Alcohol

was forbidden, end of story. The Prophet had warned of intoxicants polluting the mind and body and Abba should not fall in with the sinning Americans who had strayed from their own religion. Whenever Ami reminded Abba about what Islam made halal and haram for mankind, he cursed at her. ‘Yes, yes, this religion is good business,’ he said, ‘Maybe I will start my own religion. It always pays the bills.’ He did not like lectures about piety from anyone, least of all his wife, who he thought owed him forever because he had gotten her out of Pakistan. But Ami persisted, whispering to him at night about what he owed to Allah. ‘Be quiet, let me sleep,’ he would say, and then roll over on his side away from her.

Silently, quietly, they drifted apart before ever having come together.

The only moment Ami felt her house to be more than a brick structure with windows and doors was deep in the night when she was lost in prayer. Impossible dreams about escaping back to Pakistan swirled in her mind, and when she raised her palms and asked for Allah’s forgiveness, she begged Him for any sign that this sordid life of hers would not continue. She pleaded with Him for strength and asked that He protect her from the anger that was bubbling up inside of her—because anger was the work of the devil. ‘I know you are testing me,’ she prayed, ‘But I cannot go on. I cannot.’

When not prostrating on her prayer blanket, she lay awake in their bed and tortured herself with the question of why she had left everything she loved behind for this hell called *Amreeka*. The streets were unclean, the people unkempt. She threw up the first time she had a burger, which tasted to her like dried carcass with ketchup. A once quiet life filled with the joys of her family had spiraled into a solitary existence in a strange and noisy country where she had to translate every word she heard back into her native Urdu and every odd social gesture to its appropriate parallel, which usually did not exist. Her heart had stopped beating to the tune of life, and she lived now just for the sake of living.

That winter, Ami missed her period. She did not tell anyone but instead pinched the skin on her throat and recited a prayer. ‘Oh Allah, please let this be true.’ After she missed

her next period, she walked to the masjid in the cold and donated ten dollars to keep her hopes alive. Her doctor confirmed the pregnancy in its second month, and just like that, while the world outside her window grew darker, the forces of nature had opened another world of light inside of her.

*

Abba was out of town when Ami went into labor. Dadima was at her bedside but looked away when Ami tried calling him and the voicemail was loud enough for both women to hear. When Ami was about to dial again, Dadima told her to leave it and held her hand in silence. 'Before Tariq was born, I was crying every minute,' Dadima said. 'You, Afreeda, have been here for a whole day and have not cried once.' Ami was quiet at first but then smiled, and Dadima smiled back.

Two days later, when Ami still had not delivered, the short, brown-haired, white-coated doctor came into the room. Both women looked up at him and Ami tightened her grip on Dadima's hand as the doctor coughed awkwardly into his fist and cleared his throat. 'I'm sorry...I am obligated to inform you...complications,...We will do everything we can.' Ami understood what he meant right away, though the doctor repeated himself for good measure. She stopped listening and started praying. The doctor hesitated, unsure whether to shake her hand or press her shoulder or offer some comforting advice. He settled on a nod and walked out.

While Dadima slept in her chair that night, Ami prayed with everything she had, her lips moving on their own and reciting every Qur'an verse she knew, her eyes stuck on the black life monitor showing the rising and falling green line. She beseeched the Most Exalted One that if He was going to take a life tonight, let it be hers, for her son should at least have a chance to see the world. When her words ran out, she fell into a slumber and dreamt that her child would be born the next day and would quickly grow and learn the ways of the world only to be thrown into a raging inferno of madness that would pull his limbs and

poison his mind. At 4:00 am, Ami woke from her sleep and shrieked. The nurses and doctors came rushing into the room and began the delivery process as Dadima was ushered out. There was chaos all around her, every muscle in her body convulsing, her stomach pounding downwards. After a harrowing period of pain and violence in her womb, her son came out kicking and crying, then greeted the world by pissing everywhere. 'In thirty years of medical practice, I've never seen anything like it,' the head doctor said. Once they had cleaned up the mess and ran the tests, the doctors handed Ami her child wrapped in a blanket. She rocked him in her arms, her swollen face glowing, his face curiously taking in hers and the cold world around them.

Ami turned to Dadima who watched mother and son with unmistakable nostalgia.

'Do you see now why I believe in miracles?' she said.

When they got home that afternoon with the baby wrapped in blue blankets, Abba was cooking lunch. Inside in the hallway, Dadima announced that they were home and had brought a present. Abba stopped what he was doing. He listened. What was he listening for? Only for the silence that stretched from his heart through the whole room, engulfing it, enshrouding it, masking the failure he knew he had brought about, a failure that would never show up on his resume or in his pay stub.

Ami and Dadima walked in to the kitchen with happy looks on their faces.

'Look what we have brought you,' Ami said.

Abba turned and looked down at the child in his rocker. He approached him hesitatingly, the way one might approach an old but distant friend, and when he picked up the boy in his arms and saw his face, the love that he had for work and for money and for moving on up to the top of the world faded, and he tortured himself as the boy blinked, because he had missed the moment he had come into this world, and there and then, as the

little boy began to cry, Abba thought that it might be a good time to migrate to another kind of life.