

Young Writers Award 2019 | Runner Up

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Teacups

“He has been waiting for you,” said the *chaiwala*¹ with a wink as Jamila approached the tea stall. She pulled her veil over mouth, trying to hide a giggle. A tall figure lounged on a seat next to the tea stall. The *chaiwala* gave her a toothless smile and placed a wrinkled hand over her head, a blessing he had given her since her first time here as a little girl.

Rahim grinned as his eyes fell on her. He stood and pulled out the rusted old stool next to him. She sat down and folded her hands on the small table between them. He enveloped them in his own and leaned forward. For a moment, the chaos of the streets of Karachi around them disappeared – the skinny children running around in shorts, the hollow-faced men selling balloons, the other lovers. All she could see was Rahim. The moment was cut short when he saw the paint mapped across her fingers. “Were you painting your hands again?” The corner of his mouth twisted up with amusement.

Her cheeks burned as she looked down at the flecks of blue, green, and the pale blue-grey she had spent an hour perfecting. She had been trying to paint the mountains where her mother was from, and the grey clouds draped over them. She did not know how to explain this to Rahim so she said, “I was painting.”

“I hope the paint washes off quick enough – soon you’ll have henna on these lovely hands, hmm?” He pinned her down with those sharp brown eyes, and she felt like a teenage girl again. “Tomorrow is the day. How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Well I am excited, of course. But I’m also a little nervous...”

Rahim laughed and leaned back in his chair. He waved at one of the children at the stall to get his attention and put up two fingers to order. “What is there to be nervous about?”

¹ Urdu – someone who sells/serves tea

She pulled the veil tighter around herself and placed her hands in her lap. The arch of his eyebrow and the lines around the corners of his mouth made her acutely aware that he was more worldly, more experienced. “I’m nervous about leaving my family behind. And you know how they say a girl’s life changes after marriage.”

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing,” he said, distracted as he waved at the boy again and raised his hand in the air as if to ask, *what’s taking so long?* “Your life will change for the better, I’m sure. My family will take care of you. *I will take care of you.* Just think of the places we could go. We will set up a whole new life in Australia or Canada or something, breathe in fresh air for once.”

She had always known Rahim wanted to move to a different country after they got married, but she had not imagined it would be on the other side of the world. She gripped the edge of the table. “Rahim, I don’t-”

He covered her hand with his. “Don’t you trust me? You will want for nothing.”

She nodded, trying to feel reassured. *I like the air here just fine*, she wanted to say.

The boy hurried over to them with two small glasses of tea. Jamila breathed in the intertwining scents of cardamom and cinnamon. As soon as it cooled slightly, Rahim gulped down his tea and continued making plans. She nodded along as she watched the fine tendrils of steam dance through the air. She savoured the alternating hints of sweetness and bitterness and hoped this was not the last time she felt at home.

Her mother’s eyes filled with tears. She took Jamila by the shoulders and held her at arm’s length, tracing the lines of her face with her eyes as if to memorise it. “Lovely girl. I cannot believe how beautiful you are.”

Jamila fought back her own tears as she noticed how her mother’s eyes were the exact blue-grey of the clouds over the mountains she had tried to perfect. Perhaps she had tried to frame a piece of her mother’s beauty to keep with her when she went far away. Jamila wished she could take her mother with her, wherever she was going.

As if reading her mind, her mother smiled and said, “To make sure you do not forget me, I want you to have something.” She reached into the cupboard and pulled out a large box, covered in faded golden paint. Something inside clinked softly as Jamila

took the box into her hands. She opened the box and found four fine, porcelain teacups with matching saucers. Three of the teacups were painted with deep, rich colours in exquisite detail. Each of them depicted similar scenes. In one of them, a girl wearing a blood red skirt danced while a young man sat by her playing the *dhol*². In the second, a girl with a dark blue veil stood in a field of poppies and held her hands in front of her face, as if in prayer. In the third, a woman with black hair flowing to her knees blew flower petals of all colours into the wind. Jamila could only imagine the dexterity and expertise it had taken to create such fine artwork on such small canvases. The fourth teacup was as blank as a fresh white page.

“Three of those were painted by me, and my mother, and her mother before that.” The box felt heavier suddenly with the weight of those generations. “The fourth one is for my beautiful daughter to paint whatever her heart desires, wherever the world takes her.”

“These are amazing, Ma... but you never told me that you were an artist? Or that *Nani*³ was too?”

Her mother stroked her hair. “There are many things that a daughter does not know about her mother. There are many things that a mother sets aside to ensure she pours all her love into her family.

Her mother’s words, the priceless gift – a wave of fear and pain rippled through her chest. Already, she felt as though she was pouring out too much of herself.

“I am scared, Ma,” Jamila confessed, and to her relief her mother did not laugh at her. “Rahim is always talking about how he wants to move to a different country and start a new life, leave Pakistan behind. I don’t want to go.”

Her mother sat her down and held Jamila to her chest as tears fell from both their eyes. “Your country and your home will remain alive somewhere deep in your heart even when you think that flame has burned out. But sometimes, we must follow what our husbands think is best.”

“Even if I am not sure that it is for the best?”

A rueful smile spread across her mother’s face. “It is our job to pick up the pieces, it is our strength that keeps families together.”

² Drums used throughout South Asia, played by hand

³ Urdu - maternal grandmother

6:30am – the countdown had begun.

The cold bit at Jamila's toes as she stumbled towards the kitchen. The silence enveloped her and she greeted it with a smile. She had slept in this morning so she would have to hurry before her family's sleepy footsteps began trudging around upstairs. She set the old pot on the stove – her mother's old dented and slightly blackened one Jamila had insisted on bringing from home. It had been months since she had had the time to use it. She set the water to boil and dipped in the teabags. The red-brown goodness began to bleed out from the bags as she began the assembly line of her daughters' lunches. Bread, lettuce, cheese, chicken. The tea began to boil in the background and she slipped in some cardamom, cinnamon, and a bit of sugar. She turned back to wrap up the sandwiches and place them into colourful lunchboxes. Footsteps creaked upstairs – probably her youngest, by the sounds of it. She did not have much time left.

She pulled out the tray of chicken and tomato pasta she had prepared last night for her husband's lunches for the week. As she worked, the vibrant scent of the spices wafting up from the tea infused into her, awakening memories of warm hands and whispered conversations about childhood, about love, about family. Her family insisted she set aside the rice and curries she had initially packed for their lunches for simpler foods that did not 'embarrass' them while they were at school or work. "Everyone stares," her daughter Noor had complained. The tea, at least, was familiar to Jamila.

A chair scraped loudly against the tiles, announcing her husband's arrival. Rahim sighed loudly and grabbed at the milk and cereal Jamila had set out on the table for him.

Much like his conversations with her, Rahim liked his tea quick and simple. He laughed at Jamila as she stood by the stove and tried in vain to imitate the mastery of the *chaiwala*. "Think of what you could do with all that time!" he exclaimed as he dunked a teabag into a mug of hot water.

Jamila turned away so he would not see her rolling her eyes. "Do you have a long day ahead of you today?" she asked.

"Yes."

“Will you return late?”

“Yes.”

Jamila turned off the stove. Her fingers brushed against her old, golden box as she reached up for a cup. She had opened it only briefly once before to remind herself that she needed to add to her family’s heirloom. Not today though. She grabbed a different cup and poured herself the tea. She set it aside as her daughters shuffled into the kitchen. She kissed their foreheads as they rubbed the sleep from their eyes.

“Ma, have you heard about the exhibition down at the library?” asked her eldest, Meera. She was the spitting image of Jamila’s mother. Blue-grey eyes, jet black hair that curled delicately at the ends. At fourteen years old, the wisdom of Meera’s eyes reminded Jamila more of her mother than any other feature. Noor was twelve. Where her sister was cautious and wise, Noor was naïve and full of adoration for almost everyone she met. Jamila hoped the world let her stay that way.

Jamila placed the box of pasta into her husband’s lunch bag. “Which exhibition?”

“Well, they want to...” Meera began through a mouthful of toast, then swallowed quickly as Rahim frowned at her. “They want to showcase some artwork done by us immigrants, things that represent home. I was thinking of entering and then I remembered you’ve got that notebook full of sketches of Pakistan.”

“You should definitely enter, Ma!” Noor chimed in.

Rahim walked over to the kitchen and dumped his bowl and spoon into the sink with an emphatic *clunk*. “Where’s my lunch?” he demanded, turning to her with eyebrows raised and hands on hips. Jamila handed the bag to him. He opened it up and closed his eyes. “How many times are you going to forget the fork?” With another sigh he brushed past her and reached for a fork. His arm bumped the teacup and a river of red-brown cascaded down the bench top. He stormed out of the kitchen without another word.

Jamila’s face burned as she looked down at the tea dripping onto the tiles. She could feel her daughters’ eyes on her and suddenly she was overcome with shame. “You know your father does not like me working on my art. Why did you have to mention it?” she mumbled, reaching for a sponge.

“Ma, I just-”

“Your lunches are ready.”

She kneeled down to clean up the mess.

Jamila had fallen asleep. She did not know if she had been sleeping for minutes or for hours. Perhaps she had been sleeping for years.

She had been dreaming of the streets of Karachi. She had been wandering one of the main roads, next to a shiny new mall sitting in the middle of an old community of old souls. Her daughters clung to her hands on either side. It *was* overwhelming. Faces flashed passed them on either side. Some were sharp and handsome. Some were crumbling and toothless with gaunt cheeks. There was one toothless smile that shone out to her from the distance. She smiled back. She squeezed her daughters’ hands. “I know where I am going,” she reassured them.

It had been so long since she had been here. Once upon a time, her plait had swung freely behind her as she walked alongside her friends with the confidence of youth. Once upon a time, she had sat in front of a man and promised her life to him. And every time, she had been invited back by the scent of cinnamon and cardamom bubbling away on a wooden ‘stove top’. The warm breeze, laced with that beauty, beckoned her to the stall. The *chaiwala* placed a hand on her head. A young boy offered her a glass. As her fingers brushed the glass, she woke up.

She had to blink several times. She was on the living room couch. The news was mumbling away softly on the television. Yet the warm scent of those spices boiling away lingered. She stood and once again, let the scent lure her in.

Someone giggled in the kitchen. “Shh!” another voice scolded.

Jamila stepped into the kitchen and saw Meera leaning over the stove top and Noor standing on her tip-toes, rummaging around in the cupboards. Meera blushed when she saw Jamila and said, “I wasn’t too sure how much cinnamon you usually put in. Or the sugar. I just sort of guessed.”

Jamila tried to swallow the lump in her throat and smiled. “It smells perfect. Just like I remember.”

Noor pulled down the golden box. Gingerly, she wiped off the dust and lifted the lid. Jamila watched her eyes widen as she gently traced a finger over the poppies, the

dancer with her flowing skirt, the petals in the wind. Her fingers stilled when she reached the blank teacup. A curtain seemed to fall across her eyes, no longer full of laughter, as she looked up at Jamila. “Is this yours, Ma?”

Jamila opened her mouth but found she had no explanation.

Meera poured the tea into the three painted teacups and set them on the table. She took the blank one and placed it in Jamila’s hands. “Ma is just waiting for the perfect scene to paint,” said Meera.

Jamila sat with the girls at the table, cradling the teacup in her hands. “I am not going to wait any more,” she said. “I have found my perfect scene.”