

## Saturday

Where to, he asks, the to becomes muffled in the closing of the door. The man's arm drapes over the head of the passenger seat, and he cranes his body back to watch her stumble into the car. The leather of his jacket pleats along his outstretched arm, and she unintentionally avoids his eyes as he takes her in. She works to assemble her effects, sit comfortably and answer him all at once. She re-adjusts her skirt, not making eye contact and tells him she's heading east. He asks which route she would prefer and she states she does not care; surely he knows the roads best. He shifts gears, goes to drive and then pauses. As he pauses, she notices that there is a thin white headphone wire hanging down his chest, and one headphone is in his left ear;

*Ma'am, do you mind if I talk on the phone? I still drive very safe,* he asks with the confidence that few would say they mind. It is a formality but she appreciates it nonetheless. To be polite is to be virtuous, she has been taught.

He is driving before she has answered, and so she settles in. She oscillates between watching the buildings, the idle mindings of everyone on their Saturday afternoons, the dogs and the children and the dogs and between watching the driver. His eyes are on the road, but she notices him, once or twice in between windows of her own restlessness, briefly looking at her through his mirror. It hasn't been long enough for her to discern why. She hears him quietly bid *khuda hafiz* into the phone, making eye contact with her as he bids whoever on the other end goodbye and a wish that God may be with them, and she smiles to herself.

She is reminded of herself at 9, saying *khuda hafiz* to her own mother as she left to go eat a meal on Eid with her Pakistani friend Mariam. Her mom's face changed from shock to fear as the wooden door closed. Later, at home, after the biryani, the fish fry, the beef curry (which she was not asked to eat, of course), the rasmalai and the rosewater rice pudding, her mother sat her down at the dinner table.

*Mama, we don't say khuda hafiz. Muslims say that. We say goodbye or dekha hobe, which means I'll see you again. Hindu's do not say khuda hafiz. We do not say alhamdulillah, or call our mom and dad abbu and amma. I am your Ma, not your Ammu. Do you understand?* I nodded my head. Somewhere in me I had known this; I said *khuda hafiz* to gauge her reaction and it was not unlike what I had imagined. I never called her Ammu again, or said *khuda hafiz* again. Except when

I was at Mariam's house, of course. Mariam's Ammu looked at me funny when I said *dekha hobe*.

She is interrupted from her memory when he poses a question to her.

*Indian?*

*Oh, my parents are from Bangladesh.*

*Oh. Muslim?*

*No. They're Hindu.*

*Ah.*

His eyes are back on the road.

*I am Muslim. I am from Bangladesh as well. Dhaka.*

She nods her head. Suddenly, there is a discomfort she cannot place. They are from the same place, but they are not the same. Or so he thinks. She thinks that they could be.

*You know about the liberation war?*

Her father had taught her about it. He was a historian himself, and the only moments the two had spoken in recent years with zest and a mutual interest in what the other had to say was about the history of Bangladesh. Her father's voice rings in her ear

*Mama, we are a nation born of language. Hindu's and Muslim's have co-existed in peace before, and there has been unrest as well. But we fought mama, we fought hard against the Urdu language and against the Pakistani army. Your language is the most important part of you, you understand? Read some Tagore sometime, if you can.*

Her mother rolled her eyes as she kneaded the dough for parathas, and her father continued to speak. This was commonplace in their home; Ma cooking, uninterested in Baba's cultural diatribes, and her, trying to give them both attention.

*Yes, I do know about the liberation war. 1971. My baba taught me about it.*

*Your Abbu is a good man, then. It is important to know our history. Bangladesh now...it is a broken country. I here for 14 years now, never to go back. Why go back? Everyone fights, Muslim this, Hindu that. Here, everyone is something else too. Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, no one cares.*

She mulled over his optimistic observation. She was not feeling compelled to offer her own opinion; that this place was rife with its own religious and cultural conflict, and that she questioned whether any place was better than another. He, on the other hand, feels compelled to continue.

*Are you married?*

Something takes over as her hatred of the question sets in. Suddenly, she thinks he is not so different from her family.

*No. Would you ever let your children marry someone hindu,* the question blurts out of her mouth before she can stop it. She is ashamed of her own boldness, her audacity. His eyes are back on the road again, and there is a silence that weighs on her. She notices that he is not angry like she would expect; angry like how her father gets when she asks the same question about marrying someone Muslim.

*No mama. We have muslim friends. But we do not cross that line. You never want to marry a muslim. It would hurt us very badly, Ma. Anything else, please.* She has stopped asking her parents this question.

Her eyes are downcast as the silence stretches and settles over them both. They are both thinking of the weight of her question, the weight of their differences and the pain of their similarities.

*I don't think so,* he answers finally. He is sounding cautious, testing the waters of his answer and avoiding looking at the poser.

*Hmm.*

She cannot think of anything else to say. It is to be expected, she supposes. She feels disappointed. If everyone feels this way, who is to break the mould?, she thinks to herself. It has always been her family's way of knowing how to regard other Muslims; keep them at arm's length. Share our language with them, our food and our time but do not give them any more. She is filled with sadness at all

the other ways she knows Hindu's can know Muslims, and Muslims Hindu's but will not. As neighbours, as companions, as lovers and as their own.

They are almost where she needs to be, but she feels the conversation is incomplete and she is desperate to not have ended their conversation there. Her desperation surprises her, and she forgets where she is meant to go anyways. She has an outlandish image of her parents, her racist uncles, her loud and unkempt aunts, her liberal cousins and her quiet siblings all having dinner with this very man. It feels like a manic dream and she asks herself to snap out of it.

*I wish I could say yes, I do wish I could be that forward thinking. But it would never work. Our society does not accept it. It would be so hard for them, for us. There would be so much shame, and so much talk. How could they live happily?,* he poses gently. He is asking her for redemption, and for forgiveness almost, she thinks.

*I understand.* She says, and she is being honest.

They arrive and he parks the car. She does not make a move to leave.

*Am Khaled. You?*

*Meghna.*

*Nice to meet you, Meghna. It is nice speaking to you. Do not mind what I have said. I am not trying to be impolite. To be polite is to be close to God. But it is how things are.*

Meghna nods and feels she has nothing and everything to say back to Khaled.

He smiles.

*Okay I will think about it. Maybe my daughter can marry a Hindu, okay? I will think. Anything can change, right? Canada has told me that.*

She thinks that he's joking and she laughs, and opens the door to leave his taxi.

*Khuda Hafiz, Meghna.*

She pauses before stepping out, and looks back at him. His brown eyes are warm, and his smile feels like he knows her.

She smiles back and steps out.

*Khuda Hafiz.*

The door shuts, and he drives off as Meghna re adjusts her skirt and heads towards her building, waving in and out, through the dogs and the children and the dogs