

# Patience

by

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Saabir put the van in neutral, turning down his *Noor Jaban's Golden Film Hits* cassette and letting out a slow exhale. He adjusted the rearview mirror, jerking his chin upwards to view his purple stained lips hiding behind an overgrowing mustache and beard. *I ought to shave or get a trim now that Rihanna's going to be working late tonight.* There was a throb of anticipation flowering inside his belly. He would be alone till 10pm. His almond-pinned eyes sifted through the sea of white shalwar kameez and loose ponytails around the Beaconhouse school gate, surveying the same chapped lips and subtle outlines of training bras until he noticed a young mother passing by his van to collect her daughter. Scratching his patchy bearded cheek, Saabir scrutinized her smooth pink heels and worked his way upwards. *A-line kurta aur cigarette pants,* he mused. Her matt black purse slung in the crook of her elbow, a smooth manicured hand fluffing its owner's mane. She turned to head back to her car, a 9-year-old now trotting at her elbow, and Saabir stared at the nude lipstick caked on her full lips almost in a trance.

“Saabir bhai! Open the door!”

Saabir was violently yanked out of his reverie by a chorus of high-pitched laughter, forcing him to reach across the back of his seat and manually unlock the sliding door, permitting the jarring cacophony of car horns and loud conversation to rush in like physical assault on his ears. Above the rim of his “Roy-ban” spectacles, he counted the six girls as they settled down in the back, conversing animatedly with each other and diffusing their mellow saccharine scents in the van. “Bismillah” he murmured to himself, turning onto the main road after a swift glance at his rearview. He checked his watch and counted down the hours till 10pm.

Mira was the first one he had to drop off, so she sat closer to the sliding door and directly behind him. Sabir picked up a few words from her conversation with Zainab, like “Urdu final”, “McDonalds” and “nail polish”. Saabir ran his distracted left hand through his beard as he heard Zainab proclaim:

“*Yaar* what’re we going to wear on the farewell? Has the theme not been decided yet?”

“The 11<sup>th</sup> graders will wear *saris* I’m sure, so the rest of us will probably have to wear maxis,” Neelam chirped in response.

“Omigosh we’ll finally get to wear heels! Y’know my mom said that one of those front strap ones are good beginner heels because they really secure the feet.”

“I have court shoes; they have a back strap.”

“...and obviously I’ll be buying new ones.”

“Zainab, can I have some water?”

Saabir looked past the speedo bus to the billboard displaying pearly white feet encased in red stiletto heels. He blinked at its beauty, so out of reach, suddenly becoming aware of the tiny corn on the sole of his own left foot. His mood soured at the thought of the unsightly thing.

“...and it was so white, she looked like a *zombie*.”

“My sister told me to just use concealer and a little foundation, and then face powder at the end.”

“Right at the end, yeah, but don’t cake it on your face.”

“You have to make a really long wing for me, I don’t know how to do that.”

“Minahil, make my wing too! I’ll bring my eyeliner to school.”

“Or just tell me how you do it, my hand trembles like crazy...”

Minahil cleared her throat, effectively silencing everyone else, and brought out a notebook and pen to make a cartoonish eye as a demonstration. Every ear in the van was hanging on to every word and committing every little morsel of information to memory. It was as if the swoosh of their eyeliners determined their place in the pecking order. 10<sup>th</sup> Grade farewell was no joke.

Staring at the rear of the car that overtook his van, Saabir shifted his weight around, glimpsing in the rearview all 6 girls now huddled together around Minahil. They were *just* out of earshot, so he couldn’t make out much from their overlapping murmurs, even when he had carefully decreased the volume on his stereo. Noor Jahan’s buttery voice swum in the air drowsy with dreams of being beautiful.

*“Tak tak tainun mere nain naiyo rajday*

*Tere bina bulliyan tay hass naiyo sajday”*

Saabir’s housekeys jingled in his right hand as he took slow, heavy strides up the narrow alley to his house in Mughalpura. The sky was losing its pink blush to an inky blue melting from above.

“Maybe if you didn’t oversleep and could actually do the early morning shifts for more schools, I wouldn’t have to work at two houses,” he recalled Rihanna’s tirade. “I’m so tired, Saabir, I’m just exhausted. And I want to have kids. Rubina next door just had her third son. I don’t care about you going around doing God knows what, just please think of my needs too.”

He shook his head softly, reminding himself that for a few dark hours, he didn’t have to think about her needs. Despite himself, he felt a smile replacing his frown at the sight of his neighbors Ashfaq and Ramzan. Their relaxed, lightweight frames lay draped across two charpayees, with their black hair oiled and combed with terrible concentration. Ashfaq was 27, with a lined stubble, curled eyelashes and a laugh that made his head roll back, rewarding Saabir’s wrung out wit with the sight of his Adam’s apple. Ramzan was 31, with a cleft chin, straight teeth and long, delicate fingers that deserved more than the crude activity of selling vegetables. The three of them had married insipid, laughing girls almost on a whim, and in the gentle tug between freedom and duty, became accustomed to lounging right outside their creaky house doors, watching the days roll lazily by like the smoke from their cigarettes.

Saabir apologetically smiled as Ramzan motioned to the empty chair beside his char payee. The invitation entailed a round of tea that Sabir would buy, followed by another that came out of Ramzan’s pocket. Ashfaq’s job was to supply enough cigarettes to help them shed their dutiful husband robes that itched and scratched and annoyed them all greatly. Despite their differences, the three of them reveled in the high of their evenings together; it made them feel capable of soldiering through the long, disappointing nights of tedious fumbling that lay ahead.

“Sit down for a while, you look like Rihanna has a treat for you in there” Ramzan tilted his head so that his cheek rested on his shoulder. Saabir exhaled sharply from his nose, looking at his toes and switching his keys from one hand to the next. 3 hours to 10.

“No, she’s working late tonight, some big dinner at the house.”

“Alright then, let’s have tea” Ramzan looked up from the corner of his eye, the kohl slathered on his lower lash line glinting in the streetlight.

“Okay but I can’t stay that long tonight...gotta sleep early so I don’t miss *Fajr*.”

Saabir motioned to the sprightly little boy working for the next-door *dhaaba*, waving 3 fingers at his round, brown face and sinking in the plastic lawn chair with an exhale. He knew he ought to lose weight, and his beard added 5 years to his somber, diamond shaped face, but he had reserved grooming himself for the right time.

“Thank God Almighty we didn’t become drivers. We don’t have nearly enough patience to stay out in traffic all day. We’re better off where we are, better suited, happily settled, a thousand praises to God, *haina* Ashfaq?” Ramzan was smiling in anticipation, his foot tapping the leg of Ashfaq’s charpayee who propped himself up on his elbows, closed his eyes and mouthed “*Alhamdulillah*”. After a woozy smile, he slumped back on his charpayee, and Saabir tore his eyes away from the profile he was being offered, clearing his throat.

The silence between the three of them was like a cocked gun – one wrong move, one slip of the tongue, and he would lose everything all over again. As he

downed the milky tea, Saabir realized how much of himself he carried inside of him like a brimming cup, and how one drunken hand in the dead of the night could let it all spill. Suddenly, he found he could not bear the easy presence of the other two, and hastily got up. He didn't care to make up excuses. Not for them.

Saabir made his way inside his house, where he surveyed the little pink living room, dining table and kitchen in single, swift glance. 2 hours to 10.

After having showered and shaved and trimmed himself meticulously, he made his way to the bedroom windows, muttering under his breath and closing the little slit between their pink curtains with urgent, jerky motions. The little bedside table stool that his wife never used invited him, but he had to recheck the lock on the door and turn down all the lights but one. Taking a seat, Saabir brushed a hand under his toweled bottom, straightening his back and scanning his smooth, shaved canvas of a face in the mirror. God knew better than to judge him here. He had earned a little privacy.

His brown hands fumbled inside the make-up drawer as his mind wandered to where he was in the morning, among the schoolgirls, collecting scraps that they carelessly sprinkled in the air: “just use concealer, and a little foundation...and face powder at the end...right at the end...don't cake it on your face...”