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Sharleen Mondal

THAT KIND OF GIRL

“What kind of girl are you?”

Her mother’s words stung as she replayed the conversation in her mind.

“Manush ki bolbe? What will people think? Chi!”

Samarah Kabir studied her reflection in her dressing table’s mirror. She slid the stem of the earring she had borrowed from her mother through her ear lobe and into its tiny backing on the other side, the metal crunching when the two pieces attached.

At dinner, she had asked to spend the following night at her best friend Tina’s house. Tina, also a freshman at Samarah’s high school, lived nearby.

“Spend the night? What spend the night? You don’t have a bed in your parents’ house?”

Samarah winced at the memory of her mother’s ridicule as she picked up the second earring, pulling the backing off of the stem. Her mouth soured as she recalled her own reply. “Can’t I just spend the night at a friend’s house on a Saturday?”

Layla had not even looked at her. “Spend time with friends at the mosque tonight,” she had said, spooning another helping of tomato bharta onto her Corelle plate, its rim decorated with a blue floral pattern. “Those are your friends.”

The girls close to Samarah’s age who attended the mosque—the one masjid in the entire Rio Grande Valley serving their far-flung South Texas Muslim community - did not go to Samarah’s school. And as for the one Muslim family that did live in their town . . . Samarah didn’t want to spend time

at Alima aunty and Hassan uncle's house, their stern looks showing their disapproval even when their words did not.

Samarah knew the script: to spend time with an American friend outside of school was tantamount to family betrayal. Her father's gentle voice from across the table had surprised her.

"Why spending the night, Maa? Is she having a birthday? Other girls will be there?"

"No . . . but her cat had kittens and they just started to walk around. And she's so good at math and said she could help me. Please?" Samarah had added the schoolwork part in desperation, fearing the appeal of kittens alone would be lost on her father.

At last her dad spoke. "Will her mother be picking you up from school?"

Samarah had stared at her father to make sure he was not joking. "Yes! She will! Can you get me in the morning?"

"I think so." He had raised an eyebrow, his lips betraying a tiny smile. "For kittens."

She had hardly believed her luck.

Of course, her father's permission was not without fallout. Samarah crunched the second earring into place as her mother's voice reached her from the hallway. She didn't need to make out all of the muffled Bengali words to know what she was saying. *What kind of girl is she?*

As Samarah took one last look in the mirror, she heard her father's knock at her door.

"Yeah?"

Humayun opened the door and appraised her from the hallway. "You look pretty, Maa," he said.

Samarah straightened the orna she had draped around her shoulders, ready to cover her head when the family pulled into the mosque's parking lot. "Thanks," she said. She searched her father's face, wondering if she should say something about her mother. She did not want to hear what a

disappointment she was for the entire car ride.

Humayun stepped forward, the gray argyle socks she loved advancing softly on the carpet. He swept his palm over Samarah's forehead like he used to when she was a small child.

"Don't worry, Maa, I'll talk to her."

"Why is she like this?" Samarah hissed.

Humayun sighed. "It is not like that. She is not angry with you. She just does not want anything bad to happen to you. Try to be patient, ok?"

Whatever Humayun said to her mother before the family climbed into the car must have worked. The trip was uneventful: 45 minutes without conflict. When they arrived for Friday prayer at the former-laundromat-turned-masjid, Samarah adjusted her orna around her head and climbed out of the car. She always enjoyed the prayer itself and looked forward to it. The real test would be the minefield of conversations awaiting her inside.

Samarah kicked her shoes off into the great pile by the women's entrance, the discarded items presenting a tripping hazard that doubled as a disorganized catalog of footwear, a few pairs of high heels or children's brightly colored shoes an anomaly in the sea of sensible and sturdy.

"Layla!" An aunty standing just inside the doorway called out to Samarah's mother, who stopped to say hello. Samarah continued on without her, intent on claiming her spot. She crossed the plush green carpet and moved towards the awkward pillar in the center of the open room. If she stood there, her mother could pray to one side of her without anyone else on her other side.

When she reached her spot, however, Samarah fought hard to suppress her disappointment. Mrs. Khanna, an overly made-up, hawk-nosed woman wearing sickly-sweet perfume, whose predatory eyes missed nothing, was already there. Mrs. Khanna made it her personal business to give

selected teenaged girls a dressing-down, commenting on the girl's appearance, behavior, perceived slights to her parents, and character, in as loud and public a manner as possible, all while never moving her eyes from the poor girl's face, as though her intended audience was not actually everyone around them. The more independent and creative a girl was, the more determined Mrs. Khanna seemed to crush her spirit.

Mrs. Khanna's eyes gleamed when she saw Samarah. Before she could reprimand Samarah for not greeting her, Samarah said with a meekness she hoped would soften the blow, "Assalamualaikum, aunty."

"Walaikumsalam. You are looking very shrunken today, Samarah." The fake concern in Mrs. Khanna's voice caused the family in front of them to turn and study Samarah. "Don't you eat what your mother cooks?"

What kind of stupid question is that? Samarah wondered. Aloud, her demeanor was sober. "Yes, aunty."

"You are not eating well. You are shrinking away. Your face looks ugly." Mrs. Khanna did not wait for a reply before turning to another woman behind her, starting a new conversation about the deal she had gotten from a local butcher on halaal meat. Samarah felt the gaze of the young girl in the row in front of her and smiled weakly in return. She wanted to say *Wait until she comes for you*. Not brave enough to say this with Mrs. Khanna nearby, she simply winked, and the girl, looking dubious for a second, winked back and then turned around, her sequin-studded headscarf occasionally sparkling in the overhead lights.

Layla came and took her place next to Samarah. "Mrs. Khanna said I'm ugly," she whispered to her mother.

"What?" Layla seemed distracted as she pulled the anchal of her sari more tightly around her head in preparation for the prayer.

"Mrs. Khanna. She said I'm ugly. In front of *everyone*." Samarah's eyes searched her mother's face for some sign of

righteous indignation that would make her feel better.

“So what? Who cares? Just ignore.” Layla closed her eyes, shutting Samarah out. In the final seconds before the imam’s voice reached them through the loudspeaker, Samarah felt a brief sting, that of an invisible disloyalty, even though she knew the game had been set up so that only she could be disloyal.

Later that night, Samarah sat on her parents’ bed while her mother gossiped about the ladies at the masjid. Samarah had little interest in these post-prayer gab sessions. But now that she had started high school, her homework kept her so busy that it was the only time she and her mother spent alone together.

“Your Rabeya aunty had such a bad time in post office,” Layla confided. “Can you imagine, trying to manage with two small babies, and then the person at the counter is yelling at you in Spanish! And Rabeya kept saying she needs English but the lady did not believe her. With everyone in the line seeing everything, ish!”

These situations amused Samarah. There was something so predictable about them, even comical, as each person aimed their linguistic missile at the other, *your English isn’t good enough* their shield. Nothing could top the time her mother, whose Spanish consisted of a few mispronounced words almost always used in the wrong context, yelled at the top of her lungs at the lady who had come to their door to sell them her homemade tamales. “Cómo está usted! We don’t want any! Do you understand? Cómo! Está! Usted!” The woman’s face went through several machinations, from surprise to shock to amusement, until she said quietly, “I’m sorry to have bothered you, señora. Good afternoon,” before she turned and left, the gap of missed connection cleaving the humid air between them in heavy silence.

Rabeya aunty’s post office misadventure reminded Samarah of one of her own. She flashed her mother a broad

smile. “Remember that time I made you take me to the post office for the cross-stitch?”

Layla threw her head back and laughed, eyes closed, mouth open, glossy hair falling around her shoulders. “Tumi!” she said, shaking her head. “Shaitan! So naughty!”

“It made total sense to me then!” Samarah giggled. “And besides, I thought it would be special for you to get something in the mail.”

Samarah’s fourth-grade class had undertaken a cross-stitch project for the holidays. Even though Samarah’s family did not celebrate Christmas—and even though Samarah desperately maintained hope that her teacher, Mrs. Smith, might have remembered her and picked an option that wasn’t Christmassy—by the time the kits came her way, all that was left was a pattern of Santa Claus’s legs peeking out through a fireplace decorated for the season. Dejected, she worked on it each day during the time allotted in class until it was almost finished. Her mother had helped her put in the last Xs the night before the children were to have finished their cross-stitch projects, the two sitting close together, passing the small patch of cloth back and forth, Layla’s experienced fingers creating much neater stitches than Samarah’s small, sweaty ones.

When it was time to bring her framed and mounted ornament home, now hanging delicately from a loop of silver thread, Samarah thought long and hard. She had been rebuked year after year when she had begged her parents to celebrate Christmas like her friends, longing for Santa Claus to visit her home and wondering, given the songs she learned in music class, if he did not come because she was a bad child. She knew she could never give the craft to her parents as it was intended: an ornament to hang on their non-existent Christmas tree. Instead, Samarah reasoned, she could surprise her parents by sending it to them in the mail.

That night, Samarah crept to her room and carefully penned a note.

Happy I love you day, from Samarah.

Satisfied, she folded the note in half twice. She didn't know if I Love You Day really existed, but it was the best she could do. That weekend, she begged her parents to take her to the post office. "I can't tell you why," she said defiantly. "It's a surprise. Just take me. And help me mail something."

Layla and Humayun had exchanged amused glances but did not object. Humayun had stayed in the car while Samarah and her mother went inside the post office. Samarah easily wrote her name and home address in the top left corner of the large manila envelope. But when it was time to write the recipient's address, Layla assumed Samarah did not understand how to prepare an envelope when she saw their home address carefully etched onto the center. An exasperated post office employee had finally extracted the truth: Samarah was trying to mail something to her own house.

"Ah! You don't mail to your own home!" Layla had said, dragging her daughter away. "You can just give it without spending money!"

Back in the car, when Layla told Humayun the story, he had shaken with laughter. "Dushtu!" he had said, his eyes crinkling. He paused, then mused in a philosophical tone, "So far to go for such a short distance." He began laughing again.

Eventually Samarah, who had been mortified, began to giggle, too.

"We had good time," Layla told her, smiling at the memory. "Sewing together."

"That was fun," Samarah said. "Do you even still have that thing?"

"Of course! Check in the shelai baksho. It would not get crushed there" Layla said, pointing to the bottom right drawer of her dresser. "You look and see." She rose and disappeared into the adjoining bathroom.

Samarah opened the drawer. Unlike the rest of Layla's drawers, this one was disorganized, crowded with old items her mother could not bring herself to throw out. Stuffed by the far edge were her mother's fluffy pink bathrobe and a small handkerchief with ducks printed on it that Samarah recalled from her childhood. She easily found the circular Danish biscuit tin, right up front, in which her mother kept her sewing supplies. She popped open the lid and there, under a pile of spools and odds and ends of fabric, she saw her cross-stitch in its little house-shaped ornament frame. How pathetic it looked! It was smaller than she remembered and grimy - from her grubby hands as she had made it, she suspected, and not from normal wear and tear. Yet in its own way, it was beautiful. She smiled, remembering the late night she and her mother had spent toiling away, taking turns stitching until they filled in the missing parts of the cozy hearth.

Samarah placed the cross-stitch back in the tin and closed the lid. As she rested the container inside the drawer, a wadded-up piece of cloth caught her eye. She picked it up and spread it out on her lap. Her face lit up when she realized what it was: a pink shirt with yellow, black, and turquoise stripes, worn soft from many washings. It had been her mother's favorite shirt when Samarah was little. She lifted up the shirt, prepared to show her mother. She stopped short when its fabric flopped forward on either side. She turned it over and saw the angry, jagged cut across the front. The shock of the memory stunned her. As she heard the toilet flush, she hid the shirt away and closed the drawer, not wanting her mother to know she had found it.

In her own room that night, Samarah lay in bed and thought about the pink shirt. She wondered if a pair of old jeans was also stuffed somewhere within the drawer that carried the secret of the person her mother had once been.

Layla's clothing transformation had happened slowly, its seed

planted before Samarah was born. Pregnant and en route to the United States from Bangladesh, Layla left behind a sleeping Humayun and went to vomit in the airplane's tiny washroom. She struggled to hold the lower edge of her sari above the damp, dirty floor while she hurled violently into the reeking toilet. As the airplane jerked and pitched her weight forward, she desperately avoided touching the toilet seat where muddy footprints exposed details of her fellow passengers' varied practices of elimination. Once safely back in her seat, the anchal of her sari wrapped securely around her shoulders brought her comfort. But back in the bathroom, as she struggled to preserve her sari from filth while retching out the contents of her stomach, her clothing reminded her that on this journey to the other side of the world, even her own body had become a stranger.

Soon after the Kabirs began life in the midwest, Samarah was born. Layla healed from her C-section and was ready to move on from weeks spent in soft cotton nightgowns under her pink robe. She found the sari a practical one-size-fits-all, the anchal a built-in cover-up when she nursed her tiny daughter pressed snugly to her breast. Yet as Samarah grew into a toddler, she tugged on the folds of her mother's sari when she wanted to be picked up, or sometimes, it seemed, for no reason at all. Layla's waist became indented with the severe mark of the braided cord of her petticoat that she tightened to tuck her sari securely inside. One day, Samarah had tugged hard at the folds at a McDonald's after being told they could not visit the children's play area because their bus would arrive soon to take them home. Even the large safety pin Layla had fastened inside her petticoat had not saved her. She was forced to re-drape her sari in the restaurant's bathroom, the fabric dragging against the dirty reddish-brown floor tiles as she tried to dress while calming her screaming child, praying no one would come in. Ever since that afternoon, Layla began to alter her clothing choices until they became comfortably predictable: shirt/pant for home or

even outside, but sari for gatherings of Bangladeshi families. After all, they were in America now. Humayun helped her shop for clothes, including bathing suits for both mother and daughter after Samarah began asking to go to the apartment's swimming pool.

Layla loved those outings with Samarah, the sun warming their skin and soft towels waiting to envelop them when they emerged from the pool. True, neither of them could swim, but they stayed at the shallow end, exploring what their bodies felt like, arms curved one way, legs kicking another, the pool's ledge nearby for support. Once home, they would rinse the chlorine from their bodies and wring out their suits. As she hung them up to dry, Layla would pause, taking a long look at her bare arms, proud of how toned they were. She felt happy.

"Mommy," Samarah once said with wonder. "I want to be beautiful and strong like you when I'm big."

Occasionally, one Bangladeshi family would host the others for dinner and Samarah, who by then had started kindergarten, ran around devising games with the other children, an aunty or uncle always available should adult intervention be needed. The almost-but-not-completely-familiar smell of someone else's cooking wafted through the hallways. Samarah would cry at the end of the evening because she was tired but resented being told so by the adults. She rested her head on Layla's shoulder, inhaling the faint scent of mothballs coming from her mother's sari. In those moments, Layla felt as though their bodies nestled together held the whole world, each breath rising and falling to create a gentle rhythm as Samarah drifted off to sleep, Layla's gold bangles producing a lullaby all their own as she stroked her daughter's back.

That small group of Bangladeshi professionals and their families, gathered together across northern Indiana, offered Layla and Humayun something to look forward to with people who shared their sense of the world and their

place in it. The families received aerograms from relatives in Bangladesh, cramped Bengali script crowding every available space. They would compare notes on the goings-on “deshe,” literally in the country, but more accurately, in the homeland. They exchanged spirited conjectures over plates of pulao about the outcome of the January hartal as Ershad struggled to maintain control. They referenced the summer flood of 1984 lightly, reminding their children to finish everything on their plates. They were lucky, aunties would say after sending a child back to finish the last few bites of rice, to be in a country where there was no food shortage. And in hushed tones, they spoke about the slaughters in the Chittagong Hill Tracts the same year, their voices low and heavy as though the weight of such killings was almost too much to bear. Theirs was a generation already accustomed to gritty, serendipitous survival after somehow scraping through the ‘71 genocide. Each of them had their own harrowing tale of how Bangladesh had been birthed, memories that woke them from uneasy sleep in their apartments thousands of miles away in the United States.

They were a generation filled with brutal trauma on one side and pure, unbridled promise on the other, holding both together like a magnolia branch in late bloom carrying its last flowers like wounds alongside new and virile green leaves. They lived in two hemispheres at the same time, neither of which was home, believing in the possibilities ahead while mourning the loss of a world that was accessible intermittently and never completely. Layla and Humayun found solace in the company of those who experienced similar bewilderment at the gaps between Bangladesh and America. Layla found it difficult to leave when Humayun was offered a job in South Texas, far from these brothers and sisters with whom fate had surprised her. The connections they forged were lifelong, the Kabirs’ faded blue and white floral address book bearing more scratched out lines every year as the latest contact information was added.

In their early Texas days, Layla felt especially alone as every week, she wrangled six-year-old Samarah and two full hampers to the apartment's laundromat. The sun, unforgiving, baked them both. One afternoon, Layla carried a basket under each arm, her small sequined orange and maroon coin purse with metal snaps perched atop one basket. By the time they passed the third car parked by the curb, Layla dragged one basket while carrying the other. By the fifth car, she dragged both behind her, stooping as she walked. She paused to wipe the sweat from her forehead, damp patches growing under her arms. Samarah's sullen frown conveyed her dejection with this hot and slow journey as waves of heat wafted up from the concrete.

For Layla, who had not yet been able to pass the driving test, the trek felt humiliating. She tried not to think of driving her daughter in air-conditioned comfort to the laundromat. She tried not to think of the neighbors watching them, or worse, pitying them. When they finally reached the laundromat, the back of Layla's striped pink shirt was drenched with sweat. Yet she felt pride as she hefted the baskets onto the center table, plucked the correct change from her coin purse, and started the wash.

A long wait stretched ahead. Layla insisted on staying the full hour and half ever since another tenant, a tall, pale man in faded jeans and a dirty baseball cap, had shoved the family's wet clothes into a precarious pile in the corner of the room when Layla arrived two minutes after her machine had finished, the four other machines in the row still humming away. Humayun's underwear had fallen to the dirty floor and Layla had been horrified to behold them, so twisted and public. They seemed too filthy, even though they had just been washed, to touch her husband's lean body. Layla had gingerly picked up the underpants and thrown them away. One of Samarah's socks had also gone missing and Layla imagined it languishing in the crack between the washers and the wall, cockroaches and other nefarious insects creeping across it.

And so the two waited, sitting outside on a bench by the pool. Layla tried not to think about dragging home two baskets of hot clothes just released from the dryer. She rose from the bench with her coin purse, returning with a Sprite from the nearby soda machine. The afternoon felt a little better with the shared sweetness on their tongues.

The cold can felt good in Samarah's hands. She handed it back to her mother and as she rubbed the cool dampness from her palms onto her neck, she broke into a smile.

"Mommy, remember in Indiana we would go swimming when it got hot?"

Layla laughed. "On a day this hot, we would jump right in!" Samarah laughed, too, because she knew jumping into the pool was not allowed.

A battered brown sedan approached, parking nearby. In its rear window, a sticker bore the Arabic script of the shahadah proclaiming that there was no god but Allah and the prophet Muhammad was his messenger. Alima aunty disembarked and came towards them, leaving her laundry basket perched in the backseat.

"Asalaamalaikum."

When Layla returned the greeting, the stiffness in her voice surprised Samarah. Her mother stood with her arms crossed over her chest, one hand covering one of the three buttons at the top of her pink shirt that had been left undone.

Alima aunty, the anchal of her green patterned sari billowing in the breeze, did not smile. "How are you, Samarah? Hot day?"

"We were just talking about going swimming!" Samarah took a sip from the Sprite can as if for emphasis.

"No, no." Layla broke in with an embarrassed laugh. "We don't swim."

Samarah was perplexed as the liquid fizzed down her throat. "Yes, we do, Mommy. We can put on our swimsuits and come back."

Alima aunty caught her anchal and wrapped it closely around her body. Layla shot her daughter a sharp glance that pained Samarah. What was that look?

“We should go home.”

“But Mommy, the laundry!”

Layla appeared not to hear and began walking so quickly that Samarah struggled to keep up. Layla returned Alima aunty’s khuda hafez over her shoulder as they retreated.

Layla did not say a word the whole way home. Once inside, she waited until Samarah had taken off her velcro-snap sneakers and was back on her feet. “Swimming is finished from today.” Her tone held a resolute sternness Samarah had never heard before.

“Mommy! Why?” Samarah began to cry.

“Stop crying. You need to be a proper Muslim girl. You cannot wear such nankta clothes anymore for everyone to see!” Layla spat out the word nankta, naked, with a bitterness that frightened Samarah.

Nevertheless, Samarah uttered one last challenge. “You wear a swimsuit and you’re Muslim!”

Layla’s sharp slap across her face stunned her into silence.

From her bed that night, Samarah heard her parents arguing. She tiptoed downstairs to the kitchen and peered around the corner, through the room’s other entrance and into the dining room, where Layla and Humayun stood facing each other. Her mother’s face was wet with tears and Humayun, enraged, shouted in Bengali.

“Who asked you to wear this? Who asked you to go outside wearing this?” In his right hand was Layla’s pink shirt.

“Shuno.” Layla’s voice trembled. She spoke in the tone meant to pacify another. “I have worn this shirt for a long time.”

“No!” Humayun’s eyes flashed with anger. “Ekhan amader keu nai! Keu nai! Ahmed and Alima are the only

ones!” Samarah’s heart dropped hearing her father say they had no one here besides Alima aunty and Hassan uncle.

“Dekho.” Her mother tried again to placate her father. “Give me my shirt.” Layla’s hands were extended towards her husband for the American shirt she had purchased from a K-Mart in South Bend with an ugly pattern she had come to love, the foreign shirt she had made her own.

In a flash, Humayun crossed into the kitchen and opened the drawer that contained the knives and scissors. He raised the orange-handled scissors that had been in their home as long as Samarah could remember. And then, so quickly that Samarah would have missed it if she blinked, Humayun cut the shirt, slicing the front so that two uneven flaps now hung from it.

The sound that came from her mother Samarah had heard only once before, when a middle-of-the-night phone call from Bangladesh brought news that Layla’s brother had died.

Samarah froze. She was afraid of her father, the scissors still in his hand. She was afraid of her mother who had slapped her that afternoon. When her father turned back to the dining room, Samarah realized she was shaking. Terrified of being discovered, she fled.

Once safely in her room, Samarah raised the covers to her chin and waited for what seemed like hours. When her mother came in, Samarah’s eyes were shut, her breathing regular. She heard her mother sobbing quietly and felt her palm on her forehead. Only when she heard her parents’ bedroom door shut across the hall did Samarah allow herself to cry.

She finally understood her mother’s look earlier by the pool: it was a look of betrayal. She had betrayed her mother. Although she could not understand exactly how, she realized that she must be responsible for the destruction of her mother’s favorite shirt, for her father’s wrath.

Samarah didn’t understand the discrimination suit at

her dad's job that her parents often talked about, though she knew the Hassans were helping them. *Inshallah, Ahmed will know what to do*, her father would say. *He is a Muslim, like us*, her mother would agree. But Samarah could not shake her distaste for the couple. She had not forgotten Indiana and the way her parents had been around those families. Now they put on a stupid act, doing things however the Hassans wanted. Why did her parents pick them over her? Why did they love them more than they loved her?

That night, after Samarah had discovered her mother's hidden shirt, she thought about the deep imprint life in Indiana had left on her, stamping her sense of self with the memory of two bathing suits hung up to dry. Quietly, Samarah crept out of bed to her dresser. She pulled open the bottom drawer and grasped what was hidden underneath the extra package of sanitary napkins she kept there: two pairs of cut-off jean shorts she had made herself with the orange-handled kitchen scissors. Samarah slipped one pair of shorts into her backpack to change into when she got to Tina's the following night.

She crawled back underneath the covers and gave her body a good, long stretch, the sheets soft against her bare arms and legs.