# Chapter 23

She remembered the day he put her hand on her head. It was her wedding and he had paid for it after all, how couldn't he have, it was his responsibility. She remembered the day Wajid helped her choose that dress of hers for the day of the wedding, she remembered how he lovingly kissed her forehead and said to her “always be my little sister”. She started to go back to days with those bats and balls, that house in Delhi, that garden where they ran and laughed and where they fought. She remembered that journey where he carried her and always looked at her smiling, even though it was hot and that smell was wretched. She remembered for she could not forget, she remembered for it was the only way.

He remembered the day Dad got him that tricycle. It was blue and had that bell, the one he wanted. It had wheels that were big, bigger than anyone else’s on the block. Dad smiled and asked him to take it out for a spin. It was fast too, faster than anyone else’s on the block. He remembered the day he graduated, he was proud, Dad was. He had the biggest smile in the world and that look of approval that he had longed for. He remembered when he had his own son and he saw Dad become a grandpa. Dad smiled again this time, welcoming him to adulthood and to a life of responsibility. He remembered  for he could not forget, he remembered for it was the only way.

She remembered the day she saw him for the first time. It wasn't what one would call love at first sight for she couldn't really clearly see him from behind the veil. He was quite the looker apparently, or so she had heard, but looks were the last of her worries, men were scary and she was terrified. Society didn't care but Wajid did. That day Wajid would do nothing; he would sleep on the floor. He would be kind. She remembered the day they had their Hassan. She was 30 and he was 50; both were battered and bruised but within his eyes was peace. It felt as if he was silently thanking her for what she went through. She remembered for she could not forget, she remembered for it was the only way.

Wajid had been sick for a while now- he was old and frail and couldn't do much. He was once a man with great strength, someone who carried the weight of three families upon his shoulders. Now however he needed a shoulder to carry him to the washroom. Age had resulted into him devolving into someone who as less than the sum of all his parts. Hassan had seen his father

deteriorate and it wasn't pretty. The man had taught him how to drive, how to work in an office, how to deal with his responsibilities. The man was the pillar of strength for the household at one point and now he seemed like the weakest link. Life had become a series of laboured movements, it had slowed down to the point where the biggest challenge in Wajid's life remained to maintain bladder control but regardless he was loved, Hassan couldn't imagine a life without him, his wife couldn't imagine sitting in the living room without his presence and his sister took solace in the fact that she could see him every so many months. The writing was on the wall but no one was ready. No one was ready.

Wajid enjoyed the paper every day, at least it seemed he did. He had lost some vision and it was unclear how much he could comprehend. Hassan sat next to him while Mom got breakfast. Hassan had wanted to tell him about the promotion that he had received. That's when he got a phone call; he usually left his phone downstairs when he was with Dad but he had just got promoted and wanted to show his boss that he was always ready. With a welcoming "hello", Hassan got up and moved to the next room; he was happy and chipper, today was a good day. A scream and a shatter of china later it seemed to all but end.

The doctor who lived next door confirmed for the family what they had already known but weren't willing to except- no one was with him while it happened, no one was there to help him across his journey, no one was there to help, no was there to witness his passing. Even with all the caring people around, him Wajid went through it all on his own. No could help him because no one was ready. No one was ready.

*Death is real. It is unambiguous, it is absolute, it is clear and yet it is incomprehensible. Death is strange. It is enchanting, it is daunting, it is inevitable and yet always unexpected. Death is pain. It is tears, it is unceremonious and yet always followed by ceremony. Perhaps death is best explained by the word itself, for all those things are encapsulated within. The word death rings within our ears and we are aware of what is to come perhaps instantly forgetting about everything else. We move with purpose and decisiveness when death is witnessed; there is a strange the level of commitment to perform one's rights even if they were ignored while he lived.*

There were no tears, no cries, no veils, no drama after the confirmation. There was tacit acceptance and surrender. There was pain and sorrow but no one knew what to say- they couldn't have prepared anything, they weren't ready, yet most importantly everyone already knew their

role. The grandson scrambled upstairs, they moved Wajid who was clearly not himself anymore, onto a light bed and brought him downstairs, all four feet held over the heads of people with iron clad resolves for there wasn't a single teary eye in the household. He was moved to the open veranda downstairs where he would lay until, the rights due to him were performed.

Wajid seemed at rest and in no hurry for what was to come. The house all of a sudden felt empty, devoid of any sound. It was weird, the silence wasn't really deafening, it was just empty. Such could have been due to the lack of air that Hassan felt. Mujahid was asked to get some ice for grandpa, it was hot and he was not to feel uncomfortable, while Hassan ran out to find a quiet abode, one that would ensure that Wajid had a good clean place to rest; he had deserved it. The silence in the house subsided, calls were made and the same sentence was repeated several times. “It was sudden, he was just hunched over when we saw him, we called the doctor but he was gone”.

But it wasn't sudden, they were just not ready. The neighbors came out to help open their doors to provide room for seating arrangements for the funeral; they owed Wajid this, Wajid had helped them build the house they lived in and they always knew they would have to return the favour. I guess they had forgotten. Regardless, Hassan returned successful and so did Mujahid but success seemed to be moot. The night was spent calling in caterers to set up the tent for those who were to arrive and were to be seated and for those who were to arrive to be fed. Wajid would have wanted anyone who came to visit him be taken good care of; all of this was done with the silent hope that Wajid would somehow wake up, that the doctor was somehow crazy, that Wajid was simply very sleepy. But it wasn't to be. Wajid was getting colder, inhumanly so, and it seemed that the slumber was permanent, the hope of anything to the contrary was only a distraction to those who were to make Wajid proud.

No one would really sleep that night. Both Wajid’s and Hassan’s wife would pray for Wajid’s forgiveness, perhaps to satisfy their need to help, while his son and grandson stood outside making sure that the knots tying down the tent were secure. The silence had returned; this time it seemed serene, even the crickets seemed to stop chirping as if they were showing respect. God knows what Wajid had done for them, or maybe they were simply conscientious creatures realising that death had entered a home unannounced and those who dwelled within seemed to have their hands full at this point.

The sun took its sweet time coming up. Hassan was a step ahead; white sheets had been draped over the areas where the sun would normally shine to make sure everyone was comfortable but strangely enough no one seemed to want such comfort. People started coming in with men and women going their separate ways as if they had their jobs decided for them. The women would enter the home to console the women of the house and maybe reminisce and cry and feel sad while men in all there machismo were to walk up to Hassan and Mujahid and with a *manly* hug reassure them that all was to be alright. Being sad for long didn't seem to be in their job description for they were to be strong, they were men after all. Hassan would meet everyone with a smile for Wajid would have wanted it as such but mostly because crying wasn't really in his job description. He was to remain strong and ready for he was Wajid's successor.

In the coming hours Hassan would hear several hollow "it was meant to be's" and even more hollow "it will be alright's"; people had no idea whether or not what they said was to be true. It just had to be said, for they knew no other words that could be said; this was a meaningless dance and Hassan was at the center of it.

After all those who had to come came and now it was time. Time to take Wajid to his new abode where he would be left to rest in peace. Hassan entered into the veranda first, his presence signaled that it was time for Wajid to be taken away. He was ready now, bathed and dressed in white ready to become one with the world, still quite the looker. With one last heave, the cradle was lifted and taken away, each corner upheld by a different heir to Wajid's legacy. The weight seemed to increase as they moved further from the house but the burden was to be shouldered solely by those who owed their existence to him. The slow-moving procession walked to the graveyard which was expecting them. seemingly unimpressed though. The same family had brought to it a procession that was grander and had more fervor within it. This one was quiet, almost silent, and had notably fewer people surrounding it. Perhaps such was because last time was more shocking, after all it was the funeral of someone who didn't get a chance to sin, someone who didn't really have the opportunity to live, someone for whom the writing hadn't even reached the wall. Hassan however would never notice the silence, all he could hear was Wajid's laugh and all he could see was Wajid's kind eyes.

The procession reached the grave and job descriptions went out the window. Hassan started weeping and no one could console him for no one knew how to; he couldn't do what was required of him, he couldn't lower the body into the grave. He wasn't ready. He wasn't ready.

Mujahid however was- with a sigh of acknowledgment, Mujahid jumped in. He knew he needed to help his father, he knew he needed to shoulder the weight that had befallen Dad like Dad did with Grandpa all those years. Wajid was lowered into Mujahid's arms who gently laid him down on the ground, making sure Wajid was comfortable. Without a sound or a hitch he would climb out and help shovel the dirt in. He couldn't cry for who would shovel the dirt if all he did was cry? And so he shoveled quickly while sobbing meekly because Dad did not need more tears. He shoveled and shoveled and shoveled until Mujahid was Mujahid no more. Hassan continued to watch from a distance, weeping profusely, not knowing he had lost a part of himself along with his father, not knowing that he had become a person unrecognizable from the one who existed yesterday not knowing that even if he wanted to, Hassan could remain Hassan no more.

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