

Lesser Equals

This is a story by Maryam Ali Khan for the AI fable writing contest. You can reach out to the author at [alikhanmaryam6\[at\]gmail\[dot\]com](mailto:alikhanmaryam6[at]gmail[dot]com).

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This neighbourhood is beautiful and I'm so excited about living here. I can't wait to meet other people who've been placed here for housing. I assume they're all pretty cool – the houses have really neat front gardens, they've got three different bins for waste and recycling, there's at least one nice car in each driveway. Within 15 minutes of here there's a supermarket, a library, a hospital and a vet's clinic. According to the pamphlet that came with the keys, there's a park at the end of our block. I'll go look for it now. Have to call mom tonight before she gets upset with me for not calling today.

I finish writing in my digital diary with a flourish, a tiny little squiggle at the end of the paragraph.

Outside, the sun sets to the chorus of crickets, car doors opening and closing and shoes clicking on the pavements. I peer out of the new window of my new house, making sure my neighbours aren't in their driveways – I'm too anxious to introduce myself to anyone yet, having just moved in. It's complicated enough that I've been placed in this housing block – no one I've known has ever been moved to a block as high as this one when they've come of age – *Block C! It's one of the top 3.*

I check my pocket for my Block Identity Card. I don't want to go anywhere without it. It's a small plastic square with 'Rawls Housing System' in block writing

at the top. Named after some ancient philosopher. I learnt about him in school, but I don't remember anything except that the housing system operates on something he...gave? Or came up with? Or propositioned? Whatever philosophers used to do. I didn't care too much about them—they weren't like engineers or scientists, the people who actually gave us the systems that give us all this equality.

I peer out of my window one more time. Forget about *that* Rawls. I care about the Rawls that put me here, AKA the AI that runs the Housing System for the Global Government.

I turned 20 last week and it was amazing—I was finally an adult by Global Government standards. But I was rudely awakened into the world of responsibility and adulthood when the Block Identity Card arrived. I had to move within a period of 10 days to my newly assigned home, in preparation for the next phase of my life.

I don't want to think about that.

I step out bravely as the sun bids me adieu in a warm, orange glow. I adjust my hijab, and because I *really* don't want to be noticed, I pull the hood of my jacket up too, for good measure. I hurry off the front porch and onto the street, hands shoved in my pockets, speed-walking in the alleged direction of the Block C Park. Out of the corner of my eye, I see someone watching me from a window. I don't want to look at them, but I do anyway. The curtain snaps shut.

The rest of the walk is uneventful. Everyone seems to have returned home. There's no one walking their dogs, or themselves. It's quiet. The crickets are my only company.

I arrive at the park and the gates are shut. The park gates in my home block were always open.

I assume I can unlock the gate so I tap the keypad with my Block C Identity Card. The interface lights up, giving me hope that the doors will swing open with a warm welcome. I reminisce for a few seconds about the block I grew up in, a block very far from here. In those few slow, decisive moments, the pleasant blue lights blink to an angry red, bathing my face in the shameful colour.

“You do not have access to this facility. Please contact Block C Management on your household comms.” It responds in a crisp female voice. I frown. “Why don’t I?” I try tapping my card again, but this time the interface remains dead.

I’m nervous, looking around to see if anyone has witnessed this. There’s a figure further down from the pavement, with a cute little dog on a lead. I purse my lips and pocket my card, casually stepping away from the gate. They don’t move at all, and I soon realise they’re on the phone. I hear them as I’m crossing the road and my blood goes cold.

“Yes sir, she’s crossing the street to the other side now. How long did you say you’d take to get here?”

He sounds like he’s complaining to someone about my presence. I have every right to be here—this block doesn’t have any curfews and if it did, he’d be in as much trouble as me.

I want to pull out my Block ID card and throw it at the man like a shuriken.

“Do you have a problem, sir?” I’m standing in the middle of the street, and I let my hoodie down, wielding my hijab like a sword, ready to butt heads.

The man visibly panics. His dog wags his little tail, and a small tongue protrudes from the folds of his mouth. “I don’t know how you got in here, but you should leave.” His voice cracks as he attempts to intimidate me. I cross my arms and frown. Short as I am, I think he really is afraid of me.

“This is *Block C*. Your people don’t live here.” He says, trying desperately to explain something to me that he thinks I don’t understand.

“I *live here*.” I don’t need to explain myself to him but I find myself doing that anyway. I try to sound firm, and to look cool, I turn on my heel and finish crossing the street. Unfortunately for me, my exit is interrupted by a flying police droid that lands just in front of me, blocking my path. These things are so quiet you don’t hear them coming.

“ID PLEASE.” It’s loud.

I’m frightened, and with a shaky hand I hold out my ID card for it to take. The card floats to it.

“MS. MALEEHA KHAN. YOU HAVE BEEN PLACED HERE UNDER THE DIVERSITY PROGRAM. YOU HAVE AUTHORISATION TO BE HERE. YOU MAY ACCESS THE PARK.”

Across the street, the interface on the park gate pings positively, turning a bright green.

The card floats back to me. I look at it hesitantly. I want to go home and sit in my parents’ lounge, adorned with pieces of our life and my childhood. I want to enjoy the comfort of the bedroom I’ve spent my whole life in.

I don't take the card in time, and as the police droid turns to the man on the street and his dog, the card drops to the ground. I bend down to pick it up.

“THE RAWLS HOUSING SYSTEM IS A FAIR AND EQUITABLE SYSTEM. IT PROVIDES SOCIALLY JUST DISTRIBUTION OF FACILITIES FOR *ALL* PEOPLE, MR. HANDORF.”

The man's pale scalp glistens from beneath his wispy-thin white hair.

“Now, now I know that. I wasn't trying to be rude. I was just *worried*. We haven't seen people like...*her*.” He gestures at me with the hand holding the lead and the dog trots forward excitedly, impatient with this conversation. “We haven't seen people like her in decades. My family has been between Blocks A, B and C since 2085. Your housing system has given us a way of life that *those people just don't have. They don't understand it*. Please tell me you're not extending the *beautiful liberties* of our block to the lower blocks?”

I've been thinking of going back to my shiny new home, but Mr Handorf's words plant me firmly in place. I'm asking myself what more liberties there could be here beyond the beautiful free housing and the fact that I don't have to pay anything to live here.

“MR. HANDORF, PLEASE.” The droid travels across the street, moving quickly through the air. “I UNDERSTAND YOUR CONCERNS. I ASSURE YOU THAT BLOCKS P ONWARDS DO NOT HAVE AUTHORIZATION FOR VISITATION.”

Visitation? People in other blocks visit each other? There's an acidic taste in my mouth. Under the warm material of my hijab, my ears are pulsing hot. If this Mr Handorf is speaking again, I can't hear him. My heart is loud and angry.

“Your family can visit you, Mr. Handorf?” I call out to him, moving to stand under the streetlight so he can see me fully. The police droid travels back to me. I can see Mr Handorf turning away with a pleased look on his face, eyebrows raised.

“PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR NEW RESIDENCE, MALEEHA.”

“We’re on a first name basis now?” I move away from the droid begrudgingly. Mr Handorf has escaped, disappearing into the park.

I want to pick a fight with the droid. Shove it. Tell it to keep its stupid block and stupid housing to itself. But my parents didn’t raise me to be disrespectful to anyone, regardless of their sentience. I’m walking home and the tears rolling down my cheeks are leaving streaks of cold on my skin.

When I get to the house, I call my mom. A video of her appears on the wall I’m standing by, and it follows me as I walk around. “Hello, *beta*¹.” She says warmly, “How’s it going?”

The warmth is replaced with concern when she notices my tear streaked face. “What’s wrong?” Hearing this, my father emerges in the background, wearing the kitchen apron I gave him for his 49th birthday. He’s asking my mom what’s happened, unaware that I can hear him too.

“Did you know about Block C having visitation rights?”

My mother looks blankly at the screen and turns to my father who has joined her on the couch. They exchange a knowing look. He sighs.

¹ ‘Beta’ is a term of endearment in Urdu and Hindi. It’s used to address younger people, such as your children.

“Yes, but *beta* you know we love you and want you to live a good life. You can visit us in Block P whenever you want. You know that.”

“But you can’t come here!” My voice is shrill and loud, “You’ll never be able to see this house or this stupid shitty neighbourhood.”

“Maleeha, listen.” My dad leans forward, clasping his hands. His grey speckled beard twitches as he squeezes his lips in a firm line. “If it’s really so shitty then we probably don’t want to see it.” His eyes twinkle with mirth, but his joke falls flat. Seeing that his humour has lost, he nods his head and continues.

“Okay, okay. The housing system has given us *a lot*. You got to go to a great school, you had a good life with us. Now you start your own.”

“But it’s not fair-”

“Life has historically never been *this* fair.” He counters. “Please Maleeha, you have to accept what you’ve been given now. What better could you want? I don’t understand what you are so angry about.”

I’m quiet. My parents are quiet. We all wait for me to speak.

“A man called the police on me.” I mumble quietly, shamefully. “I found out from the police droid that I’m here because of a *diversity* program.”

My mother is scared, I can tell from the look in her wide eyes. She’s trying to look calm, but she’s clutching my dad’s knee and her knuckles are white.

“That’s good, now you know. People like us, *Muslims*. Brown people. People of colour...” He goes on, “We have never been treated as equals. You should see how our ancestors lived and died, for wars that meant nothing.” His voice cracks with

emotion, “Now things are *better*. You live in a higher block today, tomorrow five more people like you will live there. Think of the future.”

“I thought that Rawls made it equal for everyone already. Like, now in the present.”

“Who? The philosopher?” My dad is confused.

“*No, dad!* The AI. The one who decides where we live.”

“Oh. That one.” His fuzzy eyebrows come together in a frown. His glasses slide down to the raised bridge of his nose. “Now you know I’m not that kind of engineer, I don’t really know how that Rawls works, but like I said before, we have never been treated as equals. Historically! Just look at what’s happened in the past. Our ancestors- No wait, *their* ancestors made this AI who treats us the same way *they* treated us.” His hands move a bit as he speaks, pointing in the air at ‘*them*’, “But now we are in a just world, so we are treated as lesser-equals. We should just be grateful.” He tries to suppress a chuckle at something in his monologue that’s supposed to be funny.

“Lesser equals.” I repeat. “That’s pretty shitty.”

“Yes.” He says in a soft voice.

My mother has sat back and when she senses the lull in conversation, she leans forward again, “Maleeha,” The sharp motherly panic has returned, “You were not rude to anyone were you?”

I know in my heart that what she really wants to ask me is whether I’m okay.