

*A Short Story*

NEITHER HERE

NOR THERE

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TINY WINDOWS

Cover: Photo created by OpenAI software Dall-E (an AI generator) using the direction: “a group of teenagers surrounded by various monsters like aliens, dracula, werewolves, digital art”.

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## Part One

It was a quiet road. A lone streetlamp flickered, briefly illuminating the unkempt side street and the riverbed it ran next to, dried and forgotten. Not much could be heard aside from:

- The occasional rustling of dried leaves
- The buzzing of flies manically throwing themselves against the lamp
- The belligerent stomping of four young men, one of whom was plastered.

“And thissss one’s for you, Petey,” yelled the tallest one, taking a swig from his flask. He gripped his hand on the shoulder of his shorter companion. “Cheers to you, and your future as a – as a lawyer. Yes, soaring high through the fields of justice and – ”

“Yeah thanks Charlie – I already heard you the last eighty times,” groaned the man, lifting Charlie’s arm off his shoulder. “And I’m not even Pete. He’s over there, you enormous cretin,” he said, shoving Charlie away from him. Charlie stumbled towards the man they called Pete, who was actively running away from him.

“No, Charlie,” Pete blurted out. “Not again –” he cried before Charlie leapt onto his back, sending them both crashing onto the ground. Roaring with laughter, the other two ran over and lifted Pete back up onto his feet.

“I liked it more when he was just singing,” mumbled Pete, rubbing dirt off his pants. He glanced at his wristwatch,

eyes goggling in shock. “Jesus, it’s 4am!” he exclaimed. “You all realize we have to be up and ready in two hours?”

“Would you relax?” drawled the short one.

“Yeah, Petey, relax!” cheered Charlie, still face-down on the ground.

“We’ve just graduated,” continued the short one.

“We’re free men now and we abide by no schedule!” he declared triumphantly to the empty street, whooping and pounding his chest with his fists like a gorilla. Charlie jumped up and did the same.

“Yeah, okay Jude,” cried Pete over their yells. “We have no schedule except for the very strict one saying we have to be in the Hall by 7am for the actual ceremony.”

“Oy,” groaned Charlie. “Who killed your buzz?”

“He’s just worried ’cause dear Vicky will be mad if he’s home too late,” sighed Jude.

“Ohhhh.... icky Vicky,” sneered Charlie.

“Don’t call her that. And it’s not her, it’s just – oh, come on –” spluttered Pete as Jude walked over to him and gripped his collar.

“She’s got you wrapped around her finger, mate. I’m telling you,” he warned, wagging his finger. “You’re gonna be the first one to leave us in the dust.”

“Yeah, right. Take a good look at Hass, lads,” said Pete, removing Jude’s arms and placing them on the fourth man’s shoulders. He was a tall, scrawny man with the distinct look of someone whose mind was somewhere else entirely. “He’s already gone!”

“What?” said the man, stirring.

“See? Just one night and he’s moved on from us already,” said Pete.

“Hassan, look at you, man,” said Jude, exasperated.

“It’s pathetic.”

“Who’s the medic?” said Charlie stupidly.

“Pa-the-tic, Charlie. Look at him! He’s completely head over heels!” exclaimed Jude. “No, I’m not!” demanded Hassan, who in spite of himself, felt a smile creeping up on his face.

“Mate, you need to forget about her. She’s totally, utterly snatched,” said Jude.

“I can’t. Did you see what she was wearing? Oh God,” he said, putting his face in his hands. “And – and she gave me a free drink! Remember?”

“Hass,” emphasized Jude. “She gave Charlie a free drink too – it was out of pity!”

“Ssstrue” slurred Charlie.

“You know she’s gonna tie the knot with Tom,” said Jude.

“I know,” grunted Hassan.

“And can you blame her? God knows he’s easier on the eyes than you.” Jude playfully punched Hassan’s arm.

“Hassssssy,” said Charlie, lumbering over towards them. “You’ve been chasing after that girl for years, my friend. But you’re better than her. Time to let her go – here, this will help.” He slapped his flask into Hassan’s hand. “Now drink to your new life – and all the... babes and the... uh, soaring for justice – ”

“Hey, that’s me,” piped Pete.

“Oh yeah. Listen, I gotta piss like a racehorse,” he mumbled, sprinting into the trees.

“Pete, you go after him,” sighed Jude. “You’re the most sober one here.”

“Okay, but then we’re leaving,” said Pete, wrapping his arms around himself. “Christ, it’s cold.”

Hassan watched Pete walk towards the trees and took a long sip from the group flask, allowing the bourbon to warm his insides.

“Man,” breathed Jude. “Still can’t wrap my head around it – tomorrow we are officially done. Everything changes now, huh?” said Jude, looking up at the moonless sky. Hassan, who tried to shove aside obsessive thoughts of his hopeless romance, smirked and looked at Jude.

“Not everything. Race you to the bench?” said Hassan, pointing at a black bench about 200 yards away.

“Awe, I hate it when you get all giddy-drunk,” said Jude, kicking feebly against a dry leaf.

“Come on!” urged Hassan, getting into a runner’s position. False confidence surged through him. Jude looked at him and sighed, getting into the same position.

“Fine, but if I fall and break my face, it’s on you.”

“Okay, three – two – one!”

The two men shot forward and ran as if their lives depended on it. Hassan could feel the crisp air rushing through his hair, his eyes watering in the cold wind. His feet felt awkward in his dress shoes as they pounded on the cobblestone, but he urged himself to go faster. He glanced to his right. Jude was gaining speed. Hassan angled himself lower and focused hard on the bench that was now growing larger and larger until –

“Ha!” Jude boasted, leaning down to catch his breath. “Beat you. Now I get to pick the dare.”

“Fine,” panted Hassan, clutching his side. “But make it quick before they come back.”

“Okay, okay,” said Jude, scanning his surroundings. “I dare you to... cross that bridge.” He pointed at a dilapidated

footbridge spanning the riverbed nearby. Its peeling paint glinted white in the starlight.

“But that’s ancient,” complained Hassan. The bridge did indeed look severely weathered. “It’s about to fall apart.”

“That’s why it’s a dare,” said Jude sinisterly. “Better run if you’re nervous.”

“No way, I’m not killing myself for you.”

“Oh come on, it’s our last dare of the night – of uni! You have to! If anything, I’m more worried about the bridge than you.”

Hassan sighed and walked unsteadily to the edge of the riverbed. Up close, it actually didn’t look like that far of a fall from where he stood – just about seven or eight feet down.

“Okay, fine,” he agreed, walking up to the bridge. He didn’t know why he was agreeing to this. He could have easily just ignored Jude – but for some reason, an intense desire overtook him and he felt compelled to end the night doing something memorable. Stupid, but memorable.

He gingerly stepped forward onto the bridge, forcing himself not to look downwards. He kept his eyes focused determinedly beyond the bridge, at the twinkling lights from office buildings at the edge of town. The bridge creaked, but it remained quite firm. He took another step forward, and still the bridge carried his weight steadily. Feeling more confident, he straightened up and quickened his pace.

“Okay,” he called out. “This isn’t too bad actually...”

He paused as a curiously warm breeze greeted him halfway across the bridge, passing as he continued onwards and stepped off the bridge. He looked at the office buildings, eyebrows furrowed. Something was... different about them.

Rubbing his eyes, he looked again. No, something was definitely off. He pointed to a black building in the center.

“Jude! Didn’t that building used to be white?” He turned to find that Jude had vanished. “Jude?” he called out and looked around, but both ends of the bridge were uninhabited. Worry seeping in, he quickly walked back. Another warm breeze brushed past him halfway as he crossed to the other side of the bridge, and found Jude looking at him.

“Wha – how did you – ” stuttered Hassan.

“So? Are you gonna do it?” asked Jude eagerly.

“Do what?”

“Cross the bridge!”

“But... But I just did.”

“Nice try. Do it.”

“I just... didn’t you see me – ”

“Oh come on, it’s the last dare of the night – of uni! You have to! If anything, I’m moreworried about the bridge than you.”

Hassan stared at him curiously. “Where did you go?” he asked finally.

“Go? I didn’t go anywhere. You’re the one who keeps leaving us mid-conversation!” he said impatiently, knocking on Hassan’s head.

“Err... okay. Yeah, I’ll do it. Again,” Hassan mumbled. He turned and looked back at the buildings. The building at the center was white again. Hassan walked quickly onto the bridge, this time pausing at the center, where he felt yet another perpetual warm breeze. He noticed that at this point, both ends of the bridge looked slightly hazy. Like someone had rubbed their fingers on his glasses. He took a cautious step forward and gasped.

The office building remained white this time, but the corporate building next to it had vanished. In its stead was what looked like a small restaurant.

“What the – ” he breathed. Again, he looked back, and again, Jude was gone. He jogged back over the bridge to find that Jude had once more re-appeared.

“So? Are you gonna do it?” asked Jude eagerly.

“Jude,” said Hassan, amazed at his discovery. “You’ve gotta come with me.”

“No way! This is your dare. You have to do it! If anything, I’m more worried about the bridge than you.”

“Yeah I know, but you gotta come! Trust me!” Hassan grabbed Jude’s hand, but he yanked it back.

“This bridge isn’t gonna support both of us at once – you do it first!”

“Okay,” groaned Hassan. He jogged back across the bridge, his head feeling a bit dizzy from all of the running. He looked up, again amazed. The office buildings were no longer offices, but rather, they were now tall apartment complexes. Excitedly, Hassan crossed back over the bridge.

Again and again, Hassan ran back and forth on the bridge. Each time he did, something in town changed slightly. Sometimes the buildings were different colors, or a building would be missing entirely. One time, an enormous clock tower cropped up where one had never been before.

And every time Hassan went back to Jude, the office buildings would look the same as they always had. And Jude would restart his same spiel every single time, urging Hassan to cross the bridge. No matter what Hassan did, however, he could not get Jude to cross the bridge with him. He did not want to physically force him, and he was too enamored with the phenomenon to take the time to find Pete or Charlie, so

he crossed the bridge alone again. This time, however, he decided to venture a little farther into town.

Hassan was amazed to find that whatever world he was in right now, it was very much like his own. Many of the buildings were the same, and the people looked the same – but there were subtle differences everywhere. He noticed, for example, that many men kept their hair tied in long ponytails instead of the short, cropped hairstyles that had been the current trend Hassan was used to seeing. Newspaper headlines were also different. What was “US TESTS MISSILES AMID NORTH KOREAN LAUNCHES” was now “NEW UK PM PLEDGES NET ZERO EMISSIONS”.

Hassan wondered if he had jumped into the future, but the date on the newspaper remained the same: “May 28th, 2021.” Shaking his head in disbelief, an idea struck him. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed Jude’s number.

“Hass!” Jude’s voice flooded his ear. “Where are you?! We’re trying to save you a seat, but the place is filling up quick.”

“Where are you?!” pressed Hassan.

“Where are we? My God.” Hassan heard something muffled against the phone. Jude’s voice spoke faintly, “He just asked where he’s supposed to meet us.”

“For fuck’s sake,” said another muffled voice.

“Ask him how he made it past the third grade,” said another voice. Jude’s voice came back clearly.

“O’Leery’s, you stupid idiot. Shameless O’Leery’s – where you said you’d meet us half an hour ago! Honestly, Charlie’s right – how did you ever make it past third grade?”

Hassan stared at his phone, stunned. He had just been at O’Leery’s with Jude, Pete, and Charlie earlier tonight. He hung up and looked up at the Post Office building next to

him. The bar wasn't far from here. He sprinted over the next couple of blocks to O'Leery's and gaped at the sight of his friends holding down a table amidst the crowd, urgently waving him over.

"Finally," said Jude, pulling out a seat for him as Hassan approached. "Charlie's already smashed. Try to catch up." Jude poured him a cup of beer from a pitcher.

"What are you so smiley about?" accused Charlie. Hassan couldn't stop grinning in amazement.

"So... you guys don't remember?" he asked.

"Remember what?" asked Pete.

"Whatever it is, I'm trying to forget," said Charlie, chugging the rest of his beer.

"Us going to that street with the bridge," he said eagerly, turning to Jude. "When you dared me to cross it – just now!"

The three men stared at Hassan blankly. Finally, Pete's voice cropped up.

"What are you on about?"

"The bridge, the bridge, Jude!"

"What bridge?" asked Jude

"Oh come on, you know," urged Hassan. "Or maybe you don't..."

"I don't believe it," said Jude in amazement. "He's done it!"

"Done what?" asked Pete.

"He's actually cracked. Incredible," scoffed Jude.

"Listen, my guy," said Charlie, grabbing Hassan's beer and pouring it into his own cup. "I don't know what you're talking about, and my superior intellect is officially too spent from finals to figure it out. Or I'm just drunk. Either way, go talk to your wannabe girlfriend over there and get us another

pitcher,” he said, pointing towards the bar at a very pretty tan woman with curly black hair.

“My... girlfriend?” asked Hassan, horrified.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” said Pete. “It’s not like she’ll ever actually be your girlfriend, given that you’ve only failed to ask her out once over the last four years.”

“Rosalia? But... but she’s with Tom!” stammered Hassan.

“Who?” asked Pete.

“Tom, you know – her, her boyfriend!”

“Oh, do you mean that guy – Tanner? From ages ago?” asked Jude. “Hass, they broke up freshman year. You knew that.”

“No, no Tom.”

“Who is Tom?” asked Pete. “This entire conversation is making my brain hurt.”

“Wait,” asked Hassan hesitantly. “So, she’s single?”

“And has been the entire year, you git!” said Jude. “It’s honestly been horrible, waiting for you to man up and ask the damn woman out. Look, I know we agreed to not pressure you but it’s grad night and I’ve – ”

Hassan had already leapt from the table. His heart raced as his feet carried him towards the bar. Rosalia was single? Could that possibly mean – no, way.

“Hey Rosa,” said Hassan, in as suave of a voice as he could muster, squeezed between two much larger bar patrons.

“Hey Hass,” said Rosa, winking one of her large, lovely, brown eyes towards him. “Happy grad night,” she smiled, with her perfect smile.

“You too. You got any plans tonight?” Hassan forced himself to keep his eyes locked on Rosa’s, preventing the inevitable drift down to her wide-shouldered top.

“Well, I’m off in an hour. Gonna try to catch some of the girls if they’re still alive by then,” she said, squeezing a lime into a drink.

“Oh, so you’re not going to go see... Tom?” asked Hassan, cautiously.

“Tom?” Rosa paused her cocktail stirring. “Who’s Tom?”

An enormous smile erupted onto Hassan’s face. “Nobody, baby, he’s nobody.”

Hassan could not believe his luck. He spent the next half hour talking to Rosa, avoiding eye contact with his friends, who were shooting him dirty looks (because of his abandoning them to talk to a girl) mixed with pride (from finally seeing their friend abandon them to talk to a girl). After making plans to meet her after her shift, Hassan sauntered back to the table.

“Wow,” breathed Pete.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but well done,” said Jude, slapping Hassan’s back.

“Listen, guys,” said Hassan, leaning in. “What do you know about... parallel universes?”

“Jesus Christ, man,” groaned Jude.

“Not with the weird questions again, honestly Hass! I’m trying to relax,” complained Pete.

“No, no, it’s important!” urged Hassan. “Jude – as of tonight, you’ve officially gotten a bachelor’s degree in astrophysics – ”

“Only if by some divine intervention I passed that quantum mech test, God help me – ”

“Never mind that! What can you tell me? Are they real?”

“Well,” he sighed, looking up seriously. “No. Is their existence physically possible? Debatable. I mean, the entire multiverse is of course, hypothetically feasible, but there’s absolutely no proof it exists.”

“And no proof it doesn’t,” posited Hassan thoughtfully.

Over the next few nights, Hassan truly believed he must have found himself trapped – wonderfully trapped – in some cosmic phenomenon. As the days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, Hassan felt less and less tempted to cross back over the bridge. What if he crossed and could not find this world again? This one in which Rosa could be his?

Everything else was the same: his mother was still his mother, his friends were still his friends, and the Earth was still round. Sure, there had been a few instances where Hassan would mention a certain famous band or film, only to be met by blank stares. But the universe – or universes – had given Hassan a gift, and he dare not question it.

And so it was that the days turned into weeks into months into years, and Hassan more or less forgot about the strange circumstances on the night of his graduation. As far as he could recall, it had been a rowdy night of drinking and fooling around until he finally developed the nerve to ask his future wife, Rosalia, out. Life continued on its usual bumpy, hyper speed, roundabout journey.

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“Based off our tests, you have a condition called “endometriosis,” which is a common cause of infertility in women. Sometimes surgery can help women conceive, but unfortunately in your case, it has caused severe scarring of the uterus, making it nearly impossible for a fertilized egg to be implanted. Unfortunately, we don’t have any ways to reverse the scarring,” said the plump, Indian doctor, placing a firm hand on Rosalia’s.

“So there’s no chance at all?” asked Rosa, her voice quivering. Her thumb absentmindedly circled her abdomen. Hassan’s throat tightened as he placed a hand on his wife’s back, awkwardly rubbing up and down. He didn’t know how to make her feel better. They had, of course, suspected this would be the case. They had tried for a child for two years after marriage and were only met by frustration and heartache; but, despite Hassan’s sadness, he could not fathom how his wife felt. How it would feel to have something as intangible, yet intrinsic, as the chance to carry life stolen from you.

“For you to conceive a child? Unfortunately not. For you to have children? Of course there is,” the doctor replied, handing them some papers. The couple accepted the adoption pamphlets, thanked the doctor, and left somberly.

Over the coming months, Hassan hardly saw Rosa. She spent as much time as possible at the hospital, volunteering frequently for holiday and midnight shifts.

“What’s the point?” she snapped at Hassan on one of the rare nights they went to bed together at the same time. She removed his hand from her waist and turn to face the other side. “It’s not like it’ll amount to anything. You married a broken woman.”

“Ro-sa-li-a,” said Hassan, enunciating her name as he wrapped his arm around her. “I’d rather have a broken woman than a broke one,” he whispered, grinning against her ear.

“Hass!” she exclaimed, wriggling against his chest as he held her firmly.

“Okay, okay, I take it back,” he murmured. “I was just trying to express my appreciation for all this extra dough you’ve put in our pockets. Maybe I’ll use it to fund my new ice-skating lessons.”

“Oh, that’s good,” she snorted. “Do something useful with your time at least.”

“Hey,” emphasized Hassan. “I’m a goddamn business manager. Those papers aren’t going to push themselves.” Rosa snorted and turned to glare at him.

“Listen,” said Hassan, stroking her cheek. “I love you. So things have not gone quite to plan. But that’s okay. I still want to have children with you. Why not do the world a favor while we’re at it and find a baby that already exists?”

“Maybe,” sighed Rosa.

“Think of the bright side – we’ll be saving a child and no one has to inherit my nose.”

“I like your nose,” said Rosa, slowly tracing Hassan’s long nose.

“Yeah, actually you’re right – it’s pretty much perfect. It’s your temper our new kid gets to dodge.”

Rosa gasped and hit Hassan, but for the first time in a while, felt herself smiling. She closed her eyes, imagining what her new child would look like. A small seed of excitement began to flicker inside of her chest.

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The following winter brought fresh sheets of snow that blanketed the roof of their small apartment, harsh winds that rattled their thin windows, and the melodious tones of a new, green-eyed baby screeching at the top of her lungs.

Her name was Leila and she was only three weeks old. At the adoption agency, it had been clear from the start that she was the one they would take home – and, as Hassan would insist in later years, not just because she reached for his hand first before Rosa's. The baby was very smiley and precocious, quickly learning that yanking sharply on Hassan's beard elicited a funny yelping sound from his mouth that made her giggle – and this action was to be repeated several times.

Giving the child a Muslim first name had been the result of a fierce battle of the in-laws that Hassan's mother had, of course, won. As she told her son, it was only fair compensation for him not marrying a girl of their faith.

"I will have no granddaughter of mine named *Maria*," she scoffed, protectively cradling the infant – as if to shield her from a life with an inferior name.

"Right. Coming from the woman named *Mariam*. Mum, it's the same –" Hassan started, before being promptly shushed.

And so Leila Cielo Razvi was born – or rather, reborn. As the first baby in her parents' circle of friends, she spent the first few weeks of her new life being ooh'd and ahh'd at by several curious adults.

"Oh *Jude*, look at her eyes," cooed Tara, Jude's girlfriend, leaning so far over into the crib she might tip over. "And her little toes." Tara caught one of Leila's feet as she

grumpily kicked the intruder trying to wake her from her nap.

“She is a beaut, Hass,” said Jude, looking down at Leila, awkwardly patting her head.

“Oh, who could ever give *her* up?” said Tara, staring dreamily at the baby. Jude looked up at Hass curiously and stepped aside, plopping down on the sofa next to him.

“Who could?” he asked, leaning back. “Do you know anything about where she came from? Or the... birth parents?”

“No,” said Hassan, sipping his tea. He glanced towards Leila, who was now starting to make a fuss. Rosa rushed over from the kitchen, oven mitt still on hand. “I think it was a single mother – a young one, but the agency didn’t tell us much. I guess she signed a waiver saying she didn’t want to have anything to do with Leila – or whatever she was called then.”

“Jude *look!*” exclaimed Tara, proudly holding Leila up in a Simba-fashion. Jude, unsure of what he was supposed to be impressed by, gave a weak smile. “Look at how *motherly* I am.”

“You’ve got the instinct,” remarked Rosa as Leila leaned on Tara’s shoulder, falling instantly back into a very drool-y sleep. Jude looked back at Hassan with a grave expression.

“Now you’ve done it,” he said grimly, shaking his head. “This is all she’s going to talk about on the ride home. And for the rest of my life.”

Hassan laughed, looking over at the two women, excitedly whispering and glancing at Jude as he sank lower into his seat.

Tara was not alone in thinking of children incessantly. Hassan was afraid to admit it, but he had become *that guy* at work. That guy who always had pictures of his daughter at the ready in case the conversation ever veered slightly towards children, families, or the weather. That guy who skipped the office happy hours to catch his daughter before she slept. That guy who held his employees hostage with baby anecdotes only he found funny. That guy who, throughout the sleepless nights, the tantrums, and numerous foreign objects retrieved from Leila's mouth, had never been as enraptured by anything or anyone in his life.

He had only just met her, yet he could not remember life before her. She commanded his attention – whether she was sleeping or in the middle of a nuclear-level meltdown. An intense curiosity overwhelmed him. Here was someone who would grow up to be *somebody* – and he and Rosa were in charge. His inner mother bear came roaring to life as he felt a deep instinctual duty to protect and nurture.

After her maternity leave ended, Rosa returned to work busier than ever. Frequently, she came home past midnight to find father and daughter peacefully sleeping together on the sofa – or, to Rosa's horror, Hassan sleeping and Leila chewing thoughtfully on his cell phone. Regardless, Hassan was sleeping.

On one infrequent occasion when she could escape work early and catch her husband still awake, Rosa returned home to find her two favorite people doodling at the kitchen table. Hassan's glasses lay on top of the strewn briefs he had abandoned reading.

“Break time?” Rosa questioned, shoving her husband's work to the other side of the table and settling down next to Leila.

“No, no, she’s helping me with my presentation deck,” explained Hassan.

“Ah, I see,” Rosa leaned over to look at their work. “And you’re presenting on... spiders?”

“Blurghjedoobiwah” gurgled Leila cheerfully.

“Well put,” said Hassan.

“Sweetie, what is this?” asked Rosa, pointing at a figure on their daughter’s paper.

“Mama,” said Leila matter-of-factly.

“But why does mama have legs coming out of her chin?” asked Rosa.

“Sorry honey, that’s just what you look like,” offered Hassan consolingly.

“Dada,” said Leila, pointing at the next gruesome figure.

“But why does Dada have *four legs*?” implored Rosa.

“Well, I don’t know about four, but you might as well say I have three,” muttered Hassan, grinning. He ducked his wife’s slap on the head, but Leila ignored them.

She pointed eagerly at the smallest figure and exclaimed “Lee Lee!”

“Oh,” smiled Rosa. “That’s you?”

“Lee Lee!” repeated Leila.

“No, say *Leila*,” said Rosa, overrenunciating each syllable.

“Lee Lee!” cried Leila, pounding her crayon onto the paper.

“*Lay.*”

“*Lee.*”

“*LA.*”

“LEE.”

Rosa sighed and turned to analyze Hassan’s drawing, which looked remarkably similar to Leila’s.

“Well, my dreams of having a Picasso in the family are shot.” She heaved herself up from the table and walked to the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of wine. “Hass, honey, listen – Elena called. She wants to bring Sofia over for the weekend, okay?” She paused, but heard no response. “Hass?” Hassan muttered something nondistinctive. Rosa came back and wrapped her arms around her husband.

“Come on, sweetie,” she said softly. “It’s just the weekend.”

“Yeah, but then you two ignore me the whole time,” he grumbled. He didn’t have a problem with Rosa’s sister, really, except for the fact that she talked so much to bring a grown man to tears, which was redundant since she often provided the tears herself.

“What can she do? She has no one else to talk to. She didn’t get to marry a strong, kind, caring, gorgeous man like I did.”

“I am pretty strong,” mumbled Hassan.

The following weekend would be the first of many of its kind, as Elena’s daughter, Sofia, quickly became Leila’s best friend. The two tearfully begged to go to each other’s houses every summer in the years to come – which Hassan never understood since all they did was fight with each other. Plus, he was usually the one tasked with babysitting the two of them as their mothers would go out shopping – or whatever women did.

“No, no, no, you have to tuck your knees in like *this*. Watch.” Leila confidently strode up to the edge of the diving

board. “CANNONBALL!” she roared before plummeting into the water.

“DADDY DID YOU SEE THAT?!” she screamed, waving her hands in irritation that her father dared to read his book rather than devote 100% of his attention to watching their cannonball practice.

“Oh yes. Ten out of ten,” he said indifferently, glancing up. Sofia crept cautiously towards the edge of the board and stared fearfully into the water.

“Come on Sofia! Do it, you sissy!” taunted Leila.

“Leila!” barked Hassan. “Do not call your cousin that. Sofia, take your time.”

“I was just encouraging her,” said Leila grumpily, sinking her face underwater so that just her narrowed eyes were visible. Finally, after a series of false starts, Sofia jumped – well, flopped, really – into the water, resurfacing to Leila’s ecstatic applause.

“Mommy, mommy did you see me do it? Did you see me cannonball?” cried Sofia, gasping for breath, as the girls’ mothers came out from the house.

“I did. Very *good* Sofia,” said Elena before turning towards Hassan. “Hass, thank you again for watching them. We’ll be back soon,” she said, squeezing his shoulder in appreciation.

“Yeah, yeah, go paint the town red,” he said, waving the women away. “Except the doors, of course.”

“What?” asked Elena sharply.

“You know – *I see a red door, and I want to paint it black,*” he sang.

“Why would you do that?” she asked, nervous for what he might say next.

“Ignore him,” said Rosa, planting a kiss on his cheek.

“He’s quoting some band he likes – the Rolling Boulders or something. I haven’t heard of them.”

“The Rolling *Stones*,” he said, seething. “Seriously? Elena, come on – you know them, right?”

“Hmm, I’ve never heard of them. But I don’t know any of this new age music. I only listen to the oldies,” she scoffed as they walked away.

“It’s not – never mind. Bye,” said Hassan, returning to his book. About a half hour later, two dripping eight-year-olds waddled over to Hassan, breathing heavily over him.

“We’re hungry,” whined Leila, clutching her stomach as if in great agony. Hassan looked up to find Sofia doubled over, playing the part of the starving child.

“Okay,” said Hassan, putting *You Are the Mountain: Climb, Conquer, and Get Rich!* down. “We have the leftover tacos in the fridge. Do you want me to heat those up?”

“I don’t want tacos,” complained Sofia.

“Okay then what do you want?” asked Hassan staring back at Leila’s eyes boring into him.

“Can we go out? Please Daddy please please please please?” Sofia joined in, clutching her hands in prayer.

“Please please please please – ”

“Okay, okay. Go shower quickly and then – if you promise not to tell your moms – we’ll go to Lino’s. That okay?”

“YAY!” they squealed in unison before running into the house.

“Are you *sure* you don’t want anything else in it?”

Hassan asked, pleadingly. Leila shook her head adamantly.

“No lettuce or tomatoes? Pickles?”

“I *hate* pickles,” insisted Leila, her face contorting in disgust.

“I like pickles,” mumbled Sofia.

“Okay, strange child,” sighed Hassan, turning back to the cashier. “One burger then, with just the meat and ketchup, a chicken wrap, and I’ll have the number four.”

“Bacon okay?” asked the cashier, unsurely staring at Hassan.

“Yeah,” responded Hassan, pushing aside the tiny twinge of religious guilt he felt. “Oh and,” he whispered, leaning towards the cashier. “Could you please make sure they get the same toys? I don’t think I can handle it if they start fighting again. Girls, go find a seat.”

Sitting down in the booth, Hassan stared absent-mindedly out of the window at the large “LINO’S ITALIAN DELI” sign hanging above them, thinking about an upcoming sales meeting for work while the girls squabbled about their futures.

“Well, *I’m* going to be an astronaut,” declared Leila.

“I thought you were going to be a fireman,” responded Sofia.

“Oh,” said Leila thoughtfully. “That too. I’ll be the first space firewoman!” she said triumphantly.

“But I don’t think you can have fire in outer – ”

“Daddy, your phone is ringing!” yelled Leila, interrupting his reverie. She handed him his cell phone, now decorated with ketchup smears on it.

“Thanks,” muttered Hassan. He looked at the unknown number on his phone’s screen in confusion, hesitated, and then answered the call.

“Hass?!” cried a woman’s voice. “Oh Hass, you’ve – you’ve got to come here now. It’s Rosa. She’s – she’s – it came

out of nowhere, oh I don't know, just get here quick," Elena's voice faltered. Hassan dropped his sandwich.

\* \* \*

"Mommy, when can you come home?" asked Leila, squirming restlessly in her chair. The squeaks of her shoes mixed with the various beeps and whirring noises emitting from the machines her mother was hooked up to while the nurse took her vitals.

"Soon, *mija*, soon," said Rosa weakly. Hassan gripped her hand tightly, although it did not grip back. His vision blurred yet again as he looked at his wife's limp body, half wrapped in casts and bandages, and the other half spotted with yellow, purple, and black bruises. He gently swiped the hair from her forehead, careful not to touch any of the cuts on her face. His mother sat next to him, her hand on his knee.

"Leila," he said, clearing his scratchy throat as the doctor came into the room. "Go with *daadi* and play in the waiting room."

"But—"

"Now," he said firmly. His mother lifted her hand and walked a sulking Leila out of the room.

"Mrs. Razvi, how's the neck feeling?" asked the doctor, gingerly pressing various areas of her neck. Hassan tried his best to participate in the rest of the conversation, but he found that even stringing words together had become too difficult, and so he stayed quiet. Again, tears welled in his eyes, but none fell down. A month's crying seemed to have dried him out.

On the car ride home, Hassan watched the road with fierce concentration. Ever since Rosa's accident, he had developed a great fear of driving, and a paranoia that death was waiting for him at every intersection. Eyes darting left and right, he cautiously crept forward, watching for any sign of danger.

Once home, his family's journey towards some sense of normalcy was a long and difficult one. After the first month, Hassan went back to work – their insurance more than covered them for much longer, but work had now become his safe retreat and he savored being there. No mothers and mothers-in-law bickering, no Leila to repeatedly snap at, and – he hated to even think of it – but no immobile wife to deal with.

The home he had once rushed to – often at the expense of work or his friends – was now a place Hassan tried his best to avoid. On the few occasions when Hassan and Rosa's mothers got along and he felt okay leaving his wife with them, he would escape with Leila, his only confidante, for a few hours at a time to do something as far away from the house as possible.

“Do you think Mommy will move again?” asked Leila sullenly, swinging her legs from the park bench they were sitting on and eating from a bag of Doritos. She crushed a chip in her hand and tossed it out to a flock of pigeons nearby.

“Mommy *can* move, my jaan,” said Hassan, chewing his hot dog robotically. “Just not all of her.” He watched her eat another chip before throwing the next one back out to the birds. “How was school?”

“Dumb,” said Leila automatically.

“At least they’re teaching you a sophisticated vocabulary,” sighed Hassan. “What about your friend Megan? How’s she?”

“Fine,” said Leila, looking at her father strangely. “Why?”

“Well, since you’re over at her house all the time, why don’t you invite her over this weekend for your birthday?”

“No, no, I don’t want to do that,” said Leila shaking her head.

“Why not?”

“I just... I like her house more.”

“You like Sofia’s house too, but she’s over at ours all the time.”

“No, it’s different. Sofia already... I don’t know.” She hunched over, staring at the pigeons waddling around her.

Hassan pressed his lips, deciding not to push the matter further.

Later that evening, after Hassan had brushed his and Rosa’s teeth, and changed his and Rosa’s clothes, he fell into bed, exhausted from the day. He wrapped his arm around his wife’s now thin chest and pulled her close. She turned her head to nuzzle his neck.

“Bee in your bonnet?” said Hassan, half-asleep. His eyes were closed but he could feel hers boring into him.

“Something like that. Can’t sleep.”

“What hurts?” he said, promptly sitting up.

“No, no, nothing like that,” she said, jerking her head so that he would lay back down.

“You know,” she said, looking up at the ceiling. “Even though it’s been a year, every time I wake up, I feel myself

automatically reach for my phone to turn off the alarm. And every morning, it's a disappointment."

"You mean you're disappointed to have a husband who feeds you breakfast in bed every day? Most ladies would kill to have me," murmured Hassan, his mind drifting to sleep. Rosa chuckled softly.

"You could if you wanted, you know... with other women," she said softly. Hassan looked at her quizzically. "Not now – I don't think I could take it. But in a couple years... I would – I would understand."

Hassan propped his head up and stared at his wife. "Ro-sa-li-a," he enunciated. "I know you think you're hot shit now – the one with a cool back story, the *interesting* one. You're like the guy who's the life of the party just because his leg is in a cast."

"What?" said Rosa, giggling.

"But no matter how hard you try to get rid of me so you can run away – well not literally of course –"

"Oh if I could slap you–"

"So you can *roll* away with the many suitors who are lusting after you – I won't leave. I swore I would duel to the death for you."

"I do not remember *that* in our vows."

"Because you were too busy making lusty eyes towards my friends!"

"Okay, alright my sweet. I'm just saying – please don't feel guilty if you... well, never mind. We'll talk about it later. How's Leila? She barely said hi to me today."

"She's fine," said Hassan, letting his head fall back down.

"Did you talk to her about her birthday? It'll be so nice to have *something* cheerful in the house for once... Hass?"

Hassan chose not to respond, closing his eyes to feign sleep.

The following morning, Hassan struggled to keep his eyes open as he helped Leila get ready for school. He had spent half the night awake – as per usual – and was currently wondering how best to sneak an office nap into his schedule today.

“Daddy? Are you listening?” huffed Leila. Hassan shook his head in an effort to revitalize himself. He looked down at his hands as they automatically finished braiding one half of her hair without him thinking about it.

“What? Band, please,” he said as Leila handed him a hair tie.

“I was saying I want to do my birthday party here this weekend,” she said, as he moved to wrangle the left side of her thick, curly black hair into a braid – the only hairstyle he knew how to do after intensely studying YouTube tutorials.

“You do?” he paused, registering what his daughter had said.

“Yes. I’m tired of seeing Mommy so sad all the time and I want to do something to cheer her up. I’ll ask Megan to make her a card too.”

Hassan continued to braid in silence. For the first time in over a year, he felt hot tears pouring down his cheek as he looked proudly down at his daughter. His daughter – his Leila, with whom he had gone through so much with – was choosing to take pride in her mother, to introduce her to her friends, while her own father did everything he could to hide this part of his life from the world.

“Dad?” She turned around and groaned. “Not you too. Everyone in this house cries too much.”

Despite the initial hopefulness, the following year did not bring much optimism to the family. Despite the unwavering attention they gave her, Rosa's health continued to decline. Hassan felt increasingly stretched between being a good husband, a good father, a good worker, and a good caretaker – scratch that. Even being okay in any of these departments would have been fine. Rosa's attitude became more and more dour – she frequently snapped at Hassan and their parents when they came to visit. Leila spent most of her time in her room, away from her quarreling parents. Even Elena, with whom Rosa used to talk to incessantly, hardly ever called after her sister repeatedly told her to never speak to her again.

“Rosa, my darling,” whispered Hassan, after a long and weary fight over finances between the two of them. He cupped her face. “I’m sorry. I know how painful – ”

“No, you don’t. None of you have a clue. Hassan,” she said, her voice breaking down. “What kind of life is this? I – I can’t do this anymore.”

“Yes you can,” said Hassan wearily.

“No I can’t. I see how much pain it’s causing – *I’m* causing all of you. I’m not blind. It has to stop – oh Hass, please make it stop,” she cried. Hassan did not know what to say. “There are things I wanted to do and I... ugh, there’s no point anymore. Every day I wake up, wishing I hadn’t. Every night, I pray for some way to go back in time to before the stupid accident. I’m just so tired of wishing for things that aren’t – Hassan? Are you even listening to me?”

Hassan was standing up, staring blankly towards the wall. A thought had struck his mind like lightning. *Go back in time...*

For the first time in years, Hassan thought of the bridge. The bridge that he had eventually assumed was some bizarre drunk hallucination on that strange night. No, no, he thought. The bridge had been *real*. Could there be a way...? But no, he couldn't possibly...

"Hassan?" asked Rosa, worried. "What's wrong? What happened?" Hassan slowly turned towards his wife, his thoughts racing.

"But what if there was a way?" he asked slowly. "I... I have to go."

"Hassan? What are you talking about? Come back!" his wife called out, but Hassan had already grabbed his jacket and was out of the door.

He walked in concentrated circles around his house, his slippers crunching in the snow. Could there be a way of changing what happened? Could there be a way of preventing the accident? To save his wife?

Hassan's feet stopped in its tracks. If he remembered correctly, whenever he crossed the bridge, he was always sent back to the same moment in time. When a 22-year-old Jude was urging him to cross the bridge. Did that mean he would have to start all over? And what if, upon crossing back on the bridge, it was a different universe? One in which he was not with Rosa?

No, he thought confidently. No matter what, he could get Rosa back. He would go back and forth across the bridge until it put him back into the right world. A world in which he could reunite with Rosa, prevent the accident from ever happening, and make everything right again.

Oh, but what was he thinking? Could he really restart his life from 13 years ago? No, no, this was insane. *He* was insane. He trudged back up the stairs into the house and

hung his coat up. His body felt tired. All he wanted was to go to bed and put to rest this crazy notion. Yes, he must have just been getting delusional from a lack of sleep.

He went upstairs to Leila's room to wish her good night, but she was already sleeping. Book still in her hand, her head was lolled onto her shoulder. Tangled, curly locks of hair flew away from her face with every breath.

Hassan looked at his little girl, and his heart broke. He and Rosa had felt so noble, rescuing her from the litter of forgotten children – excited to give her a new life. But what kind of life was this? An only child, caught between a near-paralyzed mother and a resentful father who no longer had any time for her – living in a house filled with bitterness and fear of what the next day would bring.

No, thought Hassan. He would make this right. He carefully removed Leila's book from her hand and wrapped the blanket around her. He watched her chest rise and fall with her breaths, her eyes darting under her eyelids from whatever dream she had escaped into. He pressed his lips against her smooth skin.

“Goodbye my love,” he whispered.

“Big dove,” mumbled Leila in response, before turning away from him.

“I'll see you soon.”

Hassan was wide awake now. He knew what he must do and felt a sense of urgency pushing him out of the house and into his car. He turned the ignition and backed out of the snowy driveway. Taking one last look at the house – at the light left on in Rosa's room – he turned onto the road out of sight.

Without regard to the speed limit or the snow flying into his windshield, Hassan tore through the empty streets. It was a relatively small town, and so it took him only ten more minutes to find the ancient dried riverbed he was looking for.

Approaching it, Hassan parked the car and hopped out. Despite the late hour, the area was well lit from the full moon above. He walked towards the edge of the riverbed. In the years that had passed, he could see that far more debris had piled up underneath the snow – making the area look even more abandoned than he remembered. He scanned left and right, looking for the bridge until finally, he could make out the shadow of some large object to his left and he ran towards it.

He didn't know why he was running so hard, but something was pulling him closer and closer towards what he could now see was the bridge. His feet felt awkward in his slippers as they pounded on the snow, but he urged himself to go faster.

Approaching at last, Hassan felt an eerie sense of déjà vu. The bridge was indeed the same one he remembered. It was more dilapidated now, the paint mostly chipped and the sides collapsed. Small scuff marks made Hassan briefly wonder if others had also been here, but he pushed this thought aside and with trepidation, he took his first step.

He glanced back at the town lights twinkling behind him, as if winking at him in farewell, and he continued onto the bridge. The wood creaked and groaned under him, but still he strode forward, nervous but determined. The black bench on the other side glinted in the moonlight, drawing him closer.

Halfway across, he felt a familiar warm breeze ruffle his hair. He paused and took a deep breath in, feeling the

warm air greet him as if he was an old friend. After a moment, he placed the next foot forward.

And then everything went black.

## Part Two

“Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“He said something – listen! He said it again! It sounded like – ”

“Did he say.. Rosa?”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I don’t believe it. I actually don’t – there he goes again!”

“What the hell? Who’s Leela?”

“Jesus Christ. Insulting prick. Here we are and all he can do is think of ladies.”

Voices whispered around Hassan, interwoven among familiar sounds of machines whirring and beeping. Hassan tried to open his eyes, but it felt like they were taped shut. Even lifting his arm felt like he was lifting a truck.

“He’s moving! Hass, can you hear me?”

“Yes,” croaked Hassan. He was trying to sit up in the pitch-black darkness, when he felt something lift off his eyes and suddenly, several anxious, tired faces came into view. He saw his mother, father, Jude, Pete, and Charlie all staring

down at him, but something was off about them. They looked... younger. Much younger.

Hassan sat up with a bolt. Intense pain seared through his head, but it didn't matter – his memory came flooding back. He didn't know how he had gotten here but he knew he had to get back.

“Woah, woah, calm down!” exclaimed a 22-year-old Charlie, pushing his palms against Hassan's shoulders.

“No, I have to... I have to go,” muttered Hassan, pushing back.

“My *jaan*, sit down,” said his mother, gently placing her hand on his shoulder. “You've had a concussion – you must rest.”

“*Concussion?*” asked Hassan, stunned.

“I'm sorry, mate, I... I was being stupid. I didn't know,” said Jude, cradling his face in his hands.

“What? Never mind – listen, I'm sorry but I have to go now,” said Hassan, swinging his legs back over the bed.

“*Beta*, just *hold on!*” said his father, blocking his way.

“*What?!*” snapped Hassan. He didn't have time for this. He had to get back now. There was no choice.

“Hass, you've been out for over a day,” said Jude. Hassan blinked. A day? He suddenly noticed sunlight was streaming in through the windows – but this was odd. The last thing he remembered was crossing the bridge – and it had definitely been nighttime then.

“You... you missed the ceremony,” said Pete, sheepishly.

“I don't care about that,” said Hassan quickly, but he paused before trying to get out of bed again. How did he end up in a hospital? He racked his brain but could not remember

anything past crossing the bridge. “What happened?” he whispered.

“Well,” swallowed Jude, looking guiltily at the daggers in Mrs. Razvi’s eyes. “You sorta... well, we kind of – ”

“Your friends told you to jump off a bridge, so you did,” scoffed his mother, shaking her head. “Unbelievable.”

“No, no,” rebutted Jude. “That’s not it! I, well, I dared you to – ”

“Cross the bridge. Yeah, I remember,” said Hassan.

“And then... I don’t know. Somehow, I missed you actually walking onto the bridge, but next thing I knew, the damn thing had collapsed with you on top of it.”

“*Collapsed?!*” said Hassan, his stomach turning to stone.

“Yeah, mate, I’m sorry. I didn’t – I know it was stupid – but I didn’t think anything would happen.” Jude stared down at his shoes, carefully avoiding eye contact with any of the Razvis. “It’s the city’s fault, really – dangerous to keep an old thing like that intact – ”

“That’s because they didn’t think anyone would be stupid enough to actually walk on it!” spat Hassan’s mother as the color drained from her son’s face. “Hassan, what’s wrong? Lie back down; you’re looking horrible.”

Hassan was too shell-shocked to respond. The bridge couldn’t have collapsed – he had just been on it. But if it had indeed fallen... how was he going to cross it? No, no, this was impossible. They were mistaken. The bridge was still standing – it had to be up.

“Hassan? What’s wrong?” repeated his mother, gripping his forearm. “Somebody get the nurse.”

Panic seized at Hassan’s throat. He could feel doubt creeping in, clouding his senses. With the agility only a

desperate man could muster, Hassan tore his arm out of his mother's grasp and leapt out of bed.

“Wha – ” breathed his mother.

He spotted her purse on the bedside table, snatched it, and sprinted out of the room. Ignoring the sharp bursts of pain along the back of his head, he tore through the hallways, past the nurses' bewildered expressions, and down, down, down the many staircases. He didn't know how he knew where to go, but soon enough, he burst out of the glass doors and onto the parking lot. A siren blasted through the hospital speakers behind him while a calm voice spoke over the intercom, “Code Yellow, Code Yellow.”

He fished car keys out of the purse and, pressing the panic button, he saw his mother's black Mercedes flashing its lights. He ran towards it, lifting his bare feet as much as possible so as to avoid burning his soles on the hot asphalt.

Once inside the car, Hassan drove with crystal clear determination. His mind only drifted once, as he looked in amazement at his smooth, wrinkle-free hands gripping the steering wheel. He scratched his bare chin, feeling uncomfortably exposed.

The familiar side street came into view and when there was no more room to drive the car forward, he parked abruptly and vaulted out of the car. Branches and pebbles cut and bruised his feet as he ran down the pathway, but he paid no heed. He would be at the bridge soon, and everything would be alright.

But as he got closer and closer to the black bench, he could feel his heart sinking further and further. Where he had only just seen the bridge earlier, was nothing at all. He slowed down as he approached the bench and walked apprehensively towards the edge of the riverbed.

There, marked off with caution tape, lay the wooden remains of an old bridge in a heap of rubble. Hassan's throat tightened. He stepped out and carefully skidded down to the bottom of the riverbed. He dashed across it and clambered back up the rocks to the surface.

His stomach turned to lead. The town looked exactly the same as it had on the other side. He ran back and forth across the riverbed several times, but each time yielded the same result. The buildings were still white, instead of the black and grey he'd grown used to seeing.

He stood in the middle, yearning to feel another warm breeze, but all he felt was the still spring air. Even when he scanned his surroundings as far as he could see, he knew he would not find another bridge. Even when he picked up a piece of wood and squeezed it, as if hoping to extract some sort of magic out of it, he knew he was fooling himself. He looked back at the white town buildings – at the world he was in now. He could not go back.

Tears welled in his eyes and breathing became difficult. He threw the piece of the bridge clutched in his hand against the riverbed wall, his mind racing through images of Rosa's broken body and Leila, asleep in her bed. The Leila that did not exist here. His Leila.

Unable to stand any longer, he picked up another small piece of wood, the last connection to his daughter, and – like the bridge – collapsed onto the ground.

\* \* \*

“And are you still having the same kinds of dreams?” asked a woman sitting across from Hassan. She looked up from her notebook and tapped a pen on her knee. Her jet-

black hair was pulled back in a tight bun, appropriately matching the stark layout of this office.

“Well, kind of,” sighed Hassan. He leaned back on the couch, the back of his head still slightly sensitive from his fall. “They’re only every few days now, and even then – it’s just snippets. I’ll hear them say a couple sentences or just see images of them. Like a weird movie.”

He was, of course, referring to Leila and... Rose? No, *Rosa*. Leila and Rosa: the two girls he had recurring dreams about. Recently, however, the dreams had become mostly Leila. Leila sleeping, Leila as a baby in his arms, Leila eating something. Rosa no longer visited his mind as frequently – in fact, whenever she did, she always appeared blurry, her outline smudged. Hassan even found it difficult at times to recall her name.

It was nearly a year ago when his family and the police finally found him by the bridge, despondent and desperately clutching a woodchip. He had, of course in vain, tried to explain the significance of the bridge to his mother and his friends in the days that followed. How he was not actually 22, and that he had spent the last 14 years somewhere else – with a wife and child.

“Mate... listen to yourself,” Jude said one day, shaking his head, after Hassan tried to explain it for the third time. “I saw you. You walked on the bridge, and it fell apart.”

“No,” Hassan hissed. “I *crossed* it. It... it connected somewhere else. And – I know it’s hard to believe – but I stayed in that world. I had a wife and kid, I’m telling you!” Hassan looked at Jude pleadingly, knowing how the words sounded out loud.

“Who was your wife? *Rosalia*?”

“Yes!” said Hassan, exasperated. He knew he sounded delusional, but how could everyone not even *try* to understand?

“You were *smashed*, Hass! We all were!” Jude stood up in frustration, glaring at Hassan laying in his bed. “All you could think of that night was Rosalia – so naturally, you must have had some crazy coma dream about marrying her while you were out.”

“Look,” he added, sensing a burgeoning argument from Hassan. “I’m not saying it didn’t *feel real*. But I’m telling you – it wasn’t. Rosalia went and left town right after graduation. With her *fiancé*. And it’s not you.”

“I *know* that... but it wasn’t just that, Jude! I saw you too – older. You were dating Tara.”

“How’d you know I fancied her?” asked Jude sharply.

“*See?*” emphasized Hassan.

“Hass, you may be intuitive, but you didn’t see the future.”

“It wasn’t the future – ”

“And it certainly wasn’t the present! Listen – crazy shit happens to people all the time when they go unconscious. It was obviously some dream that – ”

“IT WASN’T A DREAM!” bellowed Hassan. Jude stepped back in surprise.

After a moment, he sat down and looked at Hassan wearily. “Okay,” he breathed. “Even if it wasn’t – and I still don’t buy that it wasn’t – but *even* if what you’re saying is true, and you crossed some magic, multi-world bridge thingy – the bridge is gone. You can’t cross it even if you wanted to.”

Hassan bit his cheek. It was ultimately this truth that held him bitterly in check for the days to come. As the weeks passed, he understood that it was pointless to try to explain

what had happened to anyone. All it resulted in was blank stares and psychiatrist recommendations. But he put up with it. After the first couple of weeks, he nodded, listened, and swallowed any mention of Rosa or Leila. It was the only way he could get away with the construction.

After swearing he would never go back to the site of the bridge, Hassan did precisely that. There, he met with a private contractor to have the bridge reconstructed. Hassan spent most of his life savings on the rush job – not that the money was of any importance. It was the last chance he had to reunite with his family.

The day it was completed, Hassan rushed to the bridge eagerly, looking over the hastily reconstructed bridge. It had never been a stunner, but it was particularly ugly now with the new gray concrete welded together with the original white wood. Suddenly, looking at the strange juxtaposition, Hassan could feel the optimism sucked out of him. He knew before he even took the first step onto the bridge.

The contractor and remaining construction workers watched him with intense curiosity as he walked slowly to the end of the bridge and gazed forlornly at the buildings that stood rigidly the same. They looked at him even more bizarrely as he walked right past them with his head hanging low, back to his car without saying another word.

It was at that point – five months after the accident – that uncertainty began seeping into Hassan's brain. Emotion had driven his every move thus far, staving off rationalism and logic for as long as possible. But now he wondered. Could there be a possibility that this had been some fantastic break from reality that his brain had concocted? A beautiful dream of a happy future – a subconscious coping mechanism for survival purposes?

But it had not been all happy, he thought bitterly, remembering Rosa's accident. And that's what made Hassan so uncertain of what everyone told him. It had felt too real.

"But it was so *real*," Hassan declared after describing his dreams of Rosa and Leila to his psychiatrist during one of their first sessions.

"Dreams often can feel hyper realistic – especially during an extended period of rest like the one you were in and when the body is under intense stress. But tell me this – can you remember specific details? Even for everyday dreams, we tend to forget what even happened five minutes after waking up."

Hassan closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. His memories had indeed been getting hazier and hazier as the days passed. Even now, there were a few moments when he would forget what his wife's face looked like. He would go online and find pictures of Rosalia, but even then, he could never quite conjure the image of her in his specific memories – older, a different haircut, a lower voice – the way he knew her.

Leila, on the other hand, still shined crystal clear in his mind. He saw her so vividly, heard her loudly, felt her thick hair in his hands. It was as if his mind was fighting to keep her alive – and draining his memories of everything else to do so.

"But then how do I know it wasn't a memory?" Hassan rebutted. "Those fade too." The doctor sighed and looked kindly at Hassan.

"Good point. And this is what I stress to my patients that most people don't understand. Just because something didn't happen in a physical, corporeal sense – doesn't mean *it didn't happen for you*. Just because this experience existed in

your head doesn't mean it wasn't real *for you*. I have seen you grieve. I know you feel incredible loss – the only thing I can do is help you get through it. And to help prevent something like this from happening again.”

Reluctantly, as the months passed, Hassan began to slowly accept what must have really happened. Indeed, now – a year later – he could no longer remember his dream-wife's name. He remembered Rosalia, his classmate, of course. He even remembered trying to contact her right after his accident – he pleaded with her in a desperate sort of fashion to meet with him. She had, of course, refused. One does not casually dump their fiancé after an ex- classmate, with whom you've hardly ever spoken, randomly messages you to say they see a future with you and they can prove it because they know your favorite book is *Stardust* and that your guilty pleasure is watching reality television about rich housewives (*How did he know that?! What a creep*, thought Rosalia before promptly deleting the message).

But Hassan no longer thought about this. He was not even sure she was the same woman he used to dream about. Regardless – he could hardly remember anyway.

The only remaining difficulty, however, was Leila. Whereas everything else had faded with time, Hassan still felt an incredibly strong yearning for his false daughter. The only reason Hassan looked forward to going to bed was so that he could stay awake every night, thinking of her. He missed her so much, his whole body hurt. Even as his memories weakened, he found himself inventing conversations with her or making up the color of her shoes to keep her at least somewhat alive.

Frequently in the mornings, he woke with a pit in his stomach. He could feel her slipping away. He knew he should

allow this – be eager, in fact, that the last of the painful dreams that had tormented him were leaving him.

Leila, however, would not budge. He kept her a secret; no one else knew about his internal struggle with her. She was his guilty pleasure and he spent as much time with her as he could in his head, knowing it was unhealthy. Knowing that every morning, he would lose her again.

It was a Sunday, almost a year after the incident, when Hassan realized he could not immediately recall her name as he was going to bed. In a panic, he stood up and paced his room trying to remember. At last, after Luna, Lacey, Linda (*Linda? Seriously?* he thought), and Leslie – he finally recalled it. Leila. Leila Razvi.

Determined to not let this happen again, he grabbed a paper and pen from his bedside table and wrote down her name. He racked his brain trying to remember her birthday as well. He knew they had adopted her in December – supposedly four years from now – but could not recall how old she had been. Two months? Three months? No, no, she was so tiny. It couldn't have been more than a month. To be safe, he just wrote “November 2026” and added “adoption” below her name. Then, with great determination and difficulty, he drew her from memory.

It wasn't quite right, he thought as he leaned back to look at the finished drawing. She still looked different in his head, but at least he managed to get the colors right – tan skin, black curly hair (that looked like ramen noodles, thanks to his artistry), and Crayola “Granny Smith Apple” eyes.

And there Leila remained. Years passed and eventually, he completely forgot much of the ridiculous circumstances of his graduation night. He had recovered from the accident and moved on full force with his life.

As the time passed, however, it became clear to those who knew him that something fundamental had changed. Hassan, for some reason, now acted much older and more mature than he had ever been in school (“Nothing wrong with that!” huffed his mother, thinking that maybe his fall had literally knocked sense into him).

Still, it was difficult for Jude, Pete, and Charlie to stay as close to him as they used to be. He no longer laughed at their jokes or went out on benders with them. In fact, he had developed somewhat of a dour attitude, more befitting of an old man, and became less fun to be around. Even Hassan himself felt his friendship with the boys was somehow a thing of the past and did not try too hard to hold onto it as it drifted away.

Years later, Hassan married and moved to a new town, leaving much of his past behind him – including his drawing of the girl. It was something he never told his wife about, and there was no point, really. It was the drawing of a madman – and besides, whenever he looked at it, it always filled him with a sense of profound sadness. Why would he keep something like that?

Yet before they moved, Hassan had held onto it. Despite ridding himself of everything else that reminded him of his brief bout of insanity – including throwing away the journals from his psychiatrist and therapy sessions – he could never bring himself to throw the drawing away. It was almost as if he could feel the bizarrely drawn girl asking him not to. To hold onto her.

He even remembered going to the damn orphanage in town on the date written on the drawing. He didn’t tell his wife, of course. It was stupid, really – what did he expect to

find? Yet, as he found himself driving closer and closer, a small seed of hope blossomed in his mind.

By the time he arrived for his appointment with the adoption counselor, he could feel something deep stirring within him. Similarly to how he felt crossing the bridge, something was pushing him closer to the orphanage. Something that was eager to reunite with something else long lost.

*Stop it!* he warned his thoughts as they conjured up another false memory from the night of the accident.

Once inside, he felt rather foolish talking to the counselor.

“I’m afraid we don’t have any ‘Leila’ in our system, sir,” she said, scanning her computer. *Of course*, thought Hassan. She wouldn’t have come in with that name – but alas, he did not know the girl’s original name.

“Hmm,” thought Hassan aloud. “I know this is a rather strange ask – and I really appreciate you helping me – but could you possibly tell me if you have a newborn girl with, er, darker skin and green, or maybe, hazel eyes? She wouldn’t have come in too long ago.”

“I’m afraid I can’t share that, Mr. Razvi” said the woman.

“Oh,” said Hassan, disappointedly. “Alright.”

“I’m sorry. It’s our policy – just to protect the children,” she spoke candidly.

“Of course. I understand,” said Hassan. He did not know why, but he began to tear up in frustration. Desperate to avoid any awkwardness, he stared firmly at the ground and blinked rapidly before any tear had the chance to fall.

“I can, however,” said the woman softly after noticing Hassan wipe his eye with his sleeve, “give you a tour of our facilities. Which would include the nursery.”

Hassan looked up at her and smiled appreciatively. He couldn’t believe it – all it took was to cry? He would have to pay closer attention to feminine persuasion tactics more often.

He followed her out the door and up the stairs. They arrived at the nursery, a cheery, colorful room with a large display window, against which Hassan stood. Inside, were six different newborns, all being carefully tended to by two women.

“Is this all of them?” he asked.

“Yes. Not that many this time of year.”

He scanned around the room eagerly, hoping for some sign of familiarity, but to his disappointment, found none. One baby had caramel skin, like his drawing, but it was a boy. Another had hazel-ish eyes, but she was distinctly blonde. The girl was not here. Something heavy weighed down on him as he stepped away from the glass, thanked the woman, and left.

He knew from the beginning that this would be a fruitless visit – yet he still could not help feeling deeply disappointed and angry. His heart ached and he could not understand why. It was as if some great injustice had been cast upon him – just because he hadn’t managed to find some baby girl with emerald green eyes.

\* \* \*

It was a quiet summer night. Deep purple and pink rays still clinging to the late sunset skated across the dark,

cloudless sky. It was the countryside, which meant that the nights were mostly quiet aside from:

- The occasional chirping of crickets
- A distant truck radio playing Today's Top 40 Hits as it zooms by
- The guffawing of a middle-aged woman who had too much wine to drink and found her husband to be even funnier than usual tonight. Or maybe it was just the heat.

"No, I'm serious!" said the man. He lazily leaned back on the porch steps, his long, tan legs stretched out before him. He looked down at his wife, laying horizontally on one of the steps, her head on his lap.

"He's not *that* bad," she reasoned, swatting a mosquito away from her face. "He took Jazzy shopping the whole day today. I'm so afraid she'll start asking us if she can live with Grandpa instead."

"Go figure. You think he could have spared some of the joy on me," her husband responded, sipping the last few drops of wine from the bottle.

"Oh, stop it. Your childhood was fine," she said, snatching the bottle from him to see if he had spared a drop.

"No, no," he emphasized. "I mean, like, I know he loved me and Alia a lot. And he always meant well. I just wish he was... there more, you know?"

"Because he was always at work?"

"No, he was always here physically. He just wasn't always... *here*," he said, pointing at his own head. His wife nodded as she closed her eyes. She knew well to not interrupt her husband on the rare occasion when he spoke of his father.

“I don’t know, maybe it was his work. I mean, I kinda get that now – work stresses me out, too. But he was *never* 100% with us. Even with Mom – and this is why we’re so close – it was like both us were just placeholders or something. Like he was... looking for something else and never quite got it.”

“But he’s so proud of you. He tells me that all the time.”

“No, I know. He was never mean; I just never saw him fully enjoy anything either. If anything, it was like he had some sort of self-punishment complex; but who knows? Maybe he was just depressed. I’m not like that, am I?”

“Only when the Niners lose. Do you think he was like that because of that accident? When he was younger?”  
posited his wife.

“No, no, that wasn’t a big deal. I think...” he paused, debating whether it was the alcohol or him who actually wanted to continue this thought. He had never said it out loud. “I think it might have been some woman.”

“What?” said his wife, sitting up. She looked amused. “You think he had a mistress?”

“No, nothing like that,” he said, chuckling at the thought of his father pimping out. “But I think there must have been some woman in his past who really broke his heart or something.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I remember hearing him say this girl’s name while he was sleeping a few times. ‘Layla’ or something. But it could also have been *kela*, which is Urdu for banana and he loves those.” His wife laughed out loud – a little too loudly – and sank back down onto her husband’s lap.

“Hmm... I prefer the mistress theory. But regardless, he doesn't seem that cantankerous now.”

“He was never cantankerous! But I agree – he's definitely gotten weirdly more cheerful the past few weeks.”

“Maybe it's the age? Maybe he's more relaxed now.”

“Maybe... But he's also always had weird phases like that. I remember when we were going to adopt Alia – he was suddenly really excited and nervous about it for weeks beforehand. Even more than Mom.”

“Well, duh. It's a baby.”

“Yeah – but it was weird. Right after we got her, he fell back into his normal, weird, emotionally absent self again. As if Alia wasn't what he expected – even though we all chose her together. He got over it soon enough, though. I just remember thinking it was a really bizarre reaction.”

“Well, let's hope he stays in this 'spoil-Jasmine-rotten' phase for a while. He could include me too, if he wanted.”

“Hmm. Maybe he is a pimp.”

\* \* \*

It was a busy day at Lino's Deli. The sun was shining clearly after a long, dreary winter and many were eager to get out of the house.

“Okay, let's just go with the number three please,” said one of the many middle-aged women in the store. The cashier looked down wearily at the multiple words scratched out on his notepad. Was she going to change her mind again? “And can I get white instead of rye please? Thanks. And I'll get a cup for water, thanks.”

Hassan stood in line as the woman in front of him placed her lengthy order. Now a much more patient man

than he used to be, he didn't mind waiting. The sunlight was streaming in through the windows, pleasantly warming the side of his face.

For the past 35 years, Hassan came here nearly every week. He didn't really know why – the sandwiches weren't even that great – but it was close by and he got his steps in for the day. It was routine, yes, but what was wrong with that?

“And – I'm sorry,” piped the woman in front. “Could I actually get chips as well? Those kettle ones? But not the spicy ones, please. Great, thank you.” The woman stepped aside.

“Morning, Mr. Raz. The usual?” asked the cashier, smiling at Hassan.

“You know what?” said Hassan, feeling a strange surge of bravery. “I think I'll try something else. How's number 7?”

“Fantastic. But it's got bacon in it – that okay?”

“No, let's just do chicken, thanks.”

“You got it.”

Hassan paid and moved over to the glass display to watch them assemble his panini. He glanced at his watch. His son and his family were about an hour away. Should he have picked sandwiches up for them? But then again, Aadil had never liked these sandwiches. No, it was okay. He was probably on some new keto-paleo-raw-air-only diet thing anyway.

“No olives please,” piped the woman, now standing next to him. Hassan looked at her curiously. She looked to be close to Aadil's age – and was just as frazzled as him. She wrangled her frizzy hair into a ponytail with one hand as the other dug around in her purse for her vibrating cell phone.

“Hello? Hi sweetie,” she finally answered, turning away. Hassan continued to watch her for a moment, intrigued and confused, before turning back to the counter, gripping his cane for support. He watched them add lettuce, pickles, and onions onto her sandwich, ignoring his own.

“Okay, bye. Love you,” she said, hanging up the phone and turning back around. Hassan glanced back at her and then to her sandwich again. Something clicked.

“She doesn’t like pickles,” said Hassan. The man behind the counter paused and looked at the woman.

“I – er, no I don’t,” spluttered the woman. The employee pulled the illegitimate pickles out of the sandwich and tossed them. The woman whipped towards Hassan and he saw her fully.

“How did you know that?” she asked, her green eyes piercing into his.

Her pointed look turned into confusion, however. Instead of responding, the old man just stood there, gaping at her.

“Er – are you okay?” she asked nervously. To her surprise, an enormous smile erupted onto the man’s face.

“Yes, my dear,” he said, finally. He continued to beam at her, and in spite of herself, she couldn’t help but smile back. He was looking at her as if he’d known her all her life.

“I’m sorry, but do I know you?” she asked, grabbing her sandwich.

“No,” he said, now smiling sadly. “But I know you.”

“Sorry?” she said, quizzically.

“I’m sorry,” he said, shaking his head. He looked up, his eyes glistening. “I meant... you remind me of someone. Someone I knew long ago and have missed very dearly. Tell

me, do you have time to sit with an old man for lunch? It's a beautiful day outside."

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Upon graduating from UC Berkeley in 2018, Joban Gill moved to Los Angeles to work in film production and development. A songwriter her whole life, it was only during the isolated stretch of the 2019 COVID pandemic lockdown that she began to dabble in writing without rhymes and catchy tunes. "Neither Here Nor There" is her latest project and was most recently a finalist in the 2021 ScreenCraft Cinematic Short Story Award.



## TINY WINDOWS

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