

Killing The Kid

I always felt the most alive when people visited. I spun with the ball glued to my foot, the yard and its palm trees becoming a blur, the welcome breeze whipping at my hair as I fended off a tackle while I sought my younger brother Faisal. I found him unmarked and passed to him before receiving his lay-off and pummelling it into the back wall.

“YEAH!” I celebrated like the players from the world cup, making sure all of my neighbours, cousins and friends watched my dance moves as my shoes kicked up dust from the ground. After all, I needed to practice for when I became a professional.

I caught my father’s eyes as he welcomed more guests into the backyard and he smiled with affection. Behind him were Aunt Amira and Uncle Naim, who weren’t really our relatives but it was polite to address them this way. Aunt Amira watched me with a wary eye while their son, Omar, trailed behind them as always. He was much older than the rest of us and never seemed interested in football. His loss.

I scored two more goals as me and Faisal ran the show. Nobody could compete with our team. I dashed inside to grab a quick snack, eager to get back to the action. Several tables had been erected in the kitchen which were lined with an array of vibrant foods that beckoned me closer like an alluring treasure trove calling to a jewel-hungry pirate.

Rows of gulab jamun stared back at me, like plump, syrup soaked little rubies, their warm sugary aroma overwhelming my nostrils. To the right, the jalebis glowed as if imbued with the power of the sun within their golden spirals while to the left, an army of laddoos stole my attention, their saffron bodies coated in a snowy exterior of shredded coconut. I took a bite of one and it was heaven. The sugar melted on my tongue while I crunched through the nutty texture, surrendering my senses to the gentle cardamon fragrance.

After devouring several more, I felt a firm hand clasp around my arm.

“Laila, come with me now. I need your help.”

“Can’t I finish playing football? We’re destroying everyone out there.”

My mother’s eyebrows raised as she fixed me with one of her stares. “I shan’t ask you again Laila.”

So I followed my mother back outside and then round to the side of the house away from the guests. The air had chilled slightly by then and the setting sun had cast a red glow across the horizon. We stepped into the makeshift enclosure where a young goat was laying on its side while tied to the wall.

“As of today, you’re thirteen years old. It’s time you helped me with more important tasks. You’ll need some of these skills sooner than you think.”

I stared blankly at her than back to the goat. I watched as she produced a long, sharp knife, its shiny surface reflecting the rays of the dying sun. She placed the knife handle into my palm.

“What you need to do is make a cut from here to here” she gestured with her fingers across the goat’s neck. “But you must be quick and firm about it. No hesitation, understood? Otherwise you will cause it suffering.”

I gazed into the animal's bulging eye as thoughts swam across my mind. *Did it know what was about to happen? Did it realize its fate?* My stomach felt like a knot was forming inside it and my throat began to feel very dry.

"I can't do this."

"Yes you can. Your uncle Naim is very fond of goat meat. Imagine how impressed he'll be when we tell him you performed the slaughter."

The beat of my heart seemed to quicken as the ticking of time slowed. I couldn't say how long we stood there. My mind went numb, but it was my gut that I listened to.

"I won't do it" I replied, my tone a little firmer this time.

My mother's eyebrows rose exceedingly high even for her. "If you eat the meat, you should be willing to kill the animal."

"Then I'll be vegetarian from now on."

My mother's expression seemed to darken as she looked down at me with a hint of disappointment. Then she took the knife from me, uttering words I didn't hear before bending down and swiftly drawing the blade across the goat's neck.

Crimson red gushed from the wound, spilling to the floor as the animal's legs thrashed. Within seconds the goat's movement stilled, a pool of blood coalescing in the yard. It lay there, lifeless, futureless.

I glanced at my mother, knife still gripped by her hand as a thin bloody stream ran down its edge, droplets splashing into the red river below. I left her there, my hands slick with sweat and my throat tightening as I headed back towards everyone else, away from the murder scene.

After a few deep breaths, laughter met my ears along with the chink of glasses and mild conversation. Most of the guys had still been playing and both teams had grown in numbers since my departure. The ball rolled towards my feet. I smiled. Then I returned to the action.

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The sun danced with me as I turned my opponents with ease, side-stepping tackles and dodging challenges as they flew in. Sometimes I felt as if the ball and my body were one, connected on some unseen level as we waltzed through the mesmerised opposition. It was in these moments that life truly sparkled for me, my body moving as it was always meant to, everyone's eyes on me. These were the moments my heart sang.

I nutmegged Faisal before guiding the ball into the back wall with precision.

"She's been practicing too much." Faisal almost seemed to be protesting to his team mates as he held his hands up in the air.

"Plenty more where that came from little brother. Watch my next move." I grinned back at him, and he allowed a reluctant smile to flash across his face as he shook his head.

I replayed the move in my head, envisioning myself executing it flawlessly. I'd seen the clip on TV recently, and I'd been itching to try it out ever since.

Left foot step over. Shift to the right. Pull back. Dummy left, then shift right again.

“Laila, can you come inside?”

“What, now?”

“Yes now.” My mothers’ eyebrows were climbing as they did any time I questioned her.

Reluctantly, I meandered my way into the house, thoughts still on the move I was plotting to pull off. Most of the guests were yet to arrive and only a few snacks had been laid out. My parents were sat on the sofa at the back of the room where my mother waved me over impatiently.

“Sit, sit.”

“Perhaps we should let her play a while longer.” My father’s voice was soft. He glanced at me, his cheeks forming an affectionate smile as we caught each other’s eyes.

“No, this is important, we cannot delay any longer.” My mother’s voice maintained its calmness but there was a hint of authority that accompanied it.

My mind wandered back to the yard and football. I *really* wanted to try that move out.

“Samosa?” She offered me a plate, but I refused.

“No, there’s meat in those. You know I’m still vegetarian right? Nothing’s changed.”

“Very well.” She lowered the plate before fixing me with a piercing stare. “As I was saying, you’re now sixteen years old, and you are becoming a fine young woman.”

This sounded like some sort of lecture. My focus faded. Back to football. To the move. *Left foot step over.*

“But as you grow up there are certain responsibilities that must be taken on.”

Shift to the right

“And it’s about time you embraced those. After all, we’ve been very lenient with you all these years.”

Pull back

“That’s why we have taken the initiative to arrange your marriage.”

Dummy left, then shift right again. Wait, what!

“You are welcome Laila.”

“What do you mean marriage? Married to who?”

“Omar of course.”

“Omar?” I scoffed which caused my mother to stiffen her upper lip, eyebrows flying into the stratosphere. “But he’s so old. And he can’t even play football. This is stupid.”

“Hold your tongue! Omar is as good a match as you will find. His family is very respectable and he is doing well with his career. What need have you for a husband that plays football?”

I felt as if something was worming its way through my throat. My chest was beginning to feel tight as if some sort of snake was wrapping around my heart. I glanced at my father but he just stared at his feet in silence, avoiding my gaze.

“This has to be a joke. I haven’t even finished school yet. Omar’s already a man and...”

“You will be wed in one year. This way you have time to prepare for your marriage.”

“I won’t do it. This is all wrong.” My fists clenched, heat rising to my face as the anger simmered inside me, replacing my initial shock and confusion.

“This is not a request Laila and it is not up for discussion. It is done.”

The last word struck me with a finality I hadn’t expected. My fists unclenched, the heat in my cheeks cooling. Suddenly, I felt cold as if her words had chilled my very bones. *This was really happening.*

“Now go and get changed. You need to be ready to greet your husband-to-be appropriately.”

I felt as if I were falling into some endless dark void. Disbelief was quickly becoming despair. I needed someone to catch me.

My parents stood before bustling off to another part of the house. My father turned to look back at me, his eyes distant, his customary smile absent before he hurried after my mother. He wouldn’t be catching me. Nobody would.

I stood with shaky legs as I tried to calm myself. I needed to distract myself

Left foot step over.

Omar’s face swam into view, trying to usurp my focus. I pushed him away.

Shift to the right

My mother’s face appeared in my mind, her voice resonating within my head. “It is done.”

Pull back. What was the next step?

“It is done!”

I rushed outside, wiping a single tear from my cheek. The sunlight felt odd on my skin, as if I shouldn’t have still been able to feel its warmth.

“Hey Laila, what happened to that move of yours?” Faisal teased, but for once I had no response.

The ball rolled towards me. But the move was gone, the sequence evaporating from my mind as swiftly as water leaking from a cup with a hole in it. I headed for my room to get changed.

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I hardly spoke a word, merely nodding to people as they passed by offering their congratulations. The house was packed and stuffy as guests clamoured to fill their plates with food. The sickly sweet scent of the laddoos wafted throughout the room while the hordes of gulab jamun stood ready and waiting, like little pouches each offering the gift of diabetes.

I could hear the younger children playing outside, the faint sound of a ball being kicked, barely audible over the cacophony of crunching teeth, loud slurping and pointless gossip. I kept myself as far away from the windows as I could, sitting next to my parents and Omar. My new husband. I couldn’t believe how quickly a year had passed by.

When the event ended, my father squeezed me into a tight embrace, wishing me luck and promising to visit soon. My mother’s eyes met mine for an instant, but no words were exchanged. We’d already

said all that needed to be said. Faisal watched as I got into the car, looking confused but putting on a smile for me as the door swung shut.

We rode for what felt like hours, passing village after village full of houses that all looked the same. One had a group of kids playing football outside, so I rolled my window back up to block out the sound. I was almost grateful when I stepped out of the stifling car, but then I realized this was to be my new home. Suddenly I wanted nothing more than to clamber back in and drive as far away as possible.

Omar and his father made for the house while Aunt Amira, now my mother-in-law, gestured for me to follow her. We wound around the house to a yard at the back where we encountered a small goat tied to the fence.

“Will you help me with the slaughter? I’m planning to make a stew for our guests tomorrow. You don’t have to actually do it, just keep it held in place.”

I looked down, noticing the knife and other apparatus that were laid out on a cloth besides the animal. I bent down with purpose, scooping the knife in one hand and kneeling on the dry earth. The goat’s face seemed to change as the knife moved towards it. First it seemed to wear Omar’s face. Then it morphed into my mother’s for an instant. I drew the blade quickly across its neck, just as I’d once witnessed all those years before.

If the blood was plentiful I didn’t notice. As for the colour, it may as well have been black for all I cared. I stood, handing the knife to my mother-in-law as the goat lost consciousness.

“I’m surprised” she said, the hesitation in her voice matching her words. “I didn’t think you could do this. And I thought you were still a vegetarian.”

“I guess that was a different girl.”

My mother-in-law surveyed me with interest. A knowing look seemed to cross her face before she simply nodded.

I left her there, heading for the dark house. My mind was blank as I approached the threshold, devoid of thoughts that had once swam like a school of fish. I glanced back at the goat in the distance which had now been hung up.

I’m sorry for what I did. But you are not the only one who died today.