

SHORT STORY

Nooh

by Nazia Kamali



"Self Portrait" by Natanjah Driscoll Harvey

The playground, with its decrepit walls and dry, yellow grass, seems smaller than it did when I was younger. The slanting rays of the late afternoon December sun, peeking from behind grey clouds, kiss the back of my hands as I hold the heavy, iron chain linking the seat of the swing to the rod above.

Amma sits on one of the wooden benches facing the swing, her hands clasped in her lap. Her form has shrivelled like an old raisin. She seldom speaks these days, and when she does, I can see her rotting teeth. Whenever I ask her to visit the dentist, she waves her hand and says, “Next time.” A next time that never comes. Behind her is a line of fruitless mango trees. Their crowns fill my sight as I rise high on the swing. The broad green leaves flutter, and so do the strands of silver hair that have escaped Amma’s bun.

The chains on both sides of the seat cut through the flesh of my broad hips as the swing lowers and then rises in the opposite direction. The two see-saws on my left are dilapidated, and the surface of the slide on my right has eroded in the middle, ready to give way to a hole. The sparrows, *mynahs*, and *bulbuls* have migrated to warmer grounds. I miss their chirp, but Dehradun is too cold for them at this time of the year.

Zippering my jacket up to my neck, I think about the muffler Amma discarded before coming to the playground. The howling wind does not affect her. She still sits in the same posture — her hands clasped, her chin raised, and her gaze fixed into oblivion.

Common sense dictates we should return home, but neither Amma nor I, leave our seats. The thick, grey clouds roar past, and fat raindrops fall on my lap. I stop the swing with my feet and walk toward Amma. She looks at me with watery eyes and says, “Nooh is calling me.”

Holding her arm, I force her to stand and speak as fast I can, my words crashing into one another, “Amma, weneedtoleave.”

She brushes the front of her kurta and asks, “Are we going to leave Nooh behind? Do you not care for your younger brother at all?”

I clasp her right arm with one hand and her shoulder with the other and push, compelling her to walk fast. “He is not here,” I reply and pray that we reach the car before she is soaked.

“Is he at home?” She slides another question across my already muddled brain.

This woman stares blankly when I come for advice, or to ask if she needs new socks or underwear. She did not utter a single word when I told her Haroon and I separated, and now she cannot stop talking.

“Is he not back from school yet?” She croaks again.

I shake my head, open the door of the passenger seat, and hoist her inside the car. The raindrops pelt so hard I fear the windshield might crack. Turning up the speed of the wipers to maximum, I press the accelerator.

The way back home is clogged with cars. The long line in front of me inches forward at turtle speed. The drivers of other vehicles honk like there is a contest to create chaos. Amma sighs and leans back in her seat, closing her eyes. I lower the volume of the radio and look outside. Standing under her mother's large umbrella, a small girl jogs at the intersection, waiting for her turn to cross the road. I roll down my window a few inches to get a better look. Her raincoat is yellow — bright sunflower yellow, just like our stairs.

Amma had chosen the whitest of white marbles for the floor of our house. The walls, doors, and windows all were painted white to match the marble. Against them, she hung bright red curtains.

When Nooh started crawling, he looked like a colourful ball rolling against a spotless white backdrop. He was always on the floor, making his way from the nursery, through the lobby, into the living room, to the kitchen, to Amma's room, or wherever his knees and hands took him. Nooh was so in love with crawling that he refused to stand up and walk until the age of a year and a half, and when he did, the boy fell short of climbing the staircase. He changed directions upon reaching the base of the stairs or cried aloud if he was chasing Amma or myself.

One evening, I plucked a few sunflowers from our garden, separated the petals, and stuffed them in my pant pockets. Asking Nooh to wait for me, I went inside the house, ran to my room on the first floor, and was busy leafing through the pages of *Five Go Off in a Caravan*, my favourite book from the Famous Five series, to place the petals, when Amma shrieked, and I skidded out to see what all the commotion was about. Nooh had clambered up the stairs to pick up the petals that had fallen on my way to the room.

The next day, when I returned from school, the stairs were painted yellow — bright sunflower yellow. They still are, except that the paint has come off in most places, and the layers of years gone by have stuck on the surface, giving them a rustic yellow tone.

Nooh, as Amma had predicted, became a regular at the staircase; rushing up and down. With time, the landing outside my room became our favourite spot to play board games. Amma abhorred finding Lego pieces or Monopoly cards in the living room. The landing provided a perfect alternative. It was easier to hear Amma if she called either of us from the kitchen or

to notice her movements, ensuring we cleared the game board before she crossed the pathway between the gate and front door, when she returned from work.

We would sit cross-legged, facing one another, the board open between us, with game pieces spilled all around, and play for hours. Fighting, shouting, and snatching cards and game pieces from one another, is how we grew up.

The summer I turned sixteen, Nooh became smart enough to win Monopoly without a blink, and I looked for ways to bully him into defeat. One lazy Sunday afternoon, we were playing Scrabble, a game I was still better at, when the phone rang. Amma asked me to receive it, and like every elder sibling, I dumped the task to Nooh. “Go and see who it is.”

“But Amma asked you to take it,” he snapped, placing an “L” after “WANDER” on the Scrabble board.

“The board is half on my lap. It will fall if I get up now.”

He looked at the board with a scowl and quickly placed “U,” “S,” and “T” to complete the word. The glowering expression on his chubby face made me laugh.

The phone stopped ringing.

Amma shouted from the kitchen, “Did no one answer it? Should I do everything on my own in this house?”

We eyed one another wearily, dreading the lecture awaiting us once Amma was done cooking.

The phone rang again. I raised my eyebrows, and Nooh shot up. Midway through the stairs, he looked back, as we always did, to ensure the other one was not swapping their cards, or word tiles, or tampering with the board.

In his playful voice, he quipped, “I can see you.”

I raised my head, startled — I was messing with the board, after all — and it was the last time I saw him grin.

While keeping a close eye on me and descending downstairs, he slipped and toppled, his head smashing at the edge of one of the steps on the broad staircase. I opened my mouth to shout his name, but no sound came out of my throat. I sat there, my hand extended, eyes widened, mouth agape, like a statue frozen in time.

“Amma.” His shrill cry filled the house.

“Amma,” he cried again and went silent, while I did nothing but sit on that landing, my breath stuck somewhere in my chest and the Scrabble board on my lap.

After dropping Amma home, I head to the 3 Pine Café to meet a prospective client. Having recently left my job to start a landscape architecture business, I cannot tell him that a meeting on a Sunday evening is not something I look forward to. Three of the café walls are painted in shocking hues — fuchsia pink, sunset orange, and cherry red. Admiration quotes from happy customers are scrawled over the fourth one, which seems to be painted white on purpose. The song playing in the background is unrecognisable to my aged ears, but the melody catches my attention.

I sit on the closest empty table, whiffing in the pleasant smells of coffee and cake floating in the café. A part-timer wearing a maroon apron over a black t-shirt with the café logo, passes by after clearing the neighbouring table and points to the large menu stuck on the wall behind the service counter.

“I am waiting for someone,” I tell her and check the time on my phone.

The young couple on my right coo into each other’s ears. They nod and smile at one another in a dream-like trance.

We were like them — Haroon and me. We walked hand in hand through the gardens of the Forest Research Institute and raced on our bicycles, pedalling from the clock tower to Robber’s Cave in Hathibarkala. Sitting on the plastic chairs at Maggie Point, looking at the valley sprawled below, we slurped spicy soup noodles or sipped hot, steaming, fragrant tea poured into paper cups from the thermos flask he carried everywhere. Haroon loved Masala chai. He threw in a variety of spices — cardamom, cloves, ginger, Tulsi — and made the best tea I ever drank. During those dates, we talked about everything — our dreams, fears, wants, and weaknesses. We swapped our darkest secrets in the dead of night and shared our burdens, making our hearts lighter.

I take a deep breath and study the man who just entered. Lean, tall, and with his trimmed hair neatly gelled in position, he flaunts a confident smile. A black leather bag is strapped to his right shoulder. The beige woollen coat he wears over navy blue pants, looks too expensive for a casual meeting.

Recognizing him from the picture on WhatsApp, I wave, and he strides over to my direction.

“You came early,” he extends his right hand, still standing. No *hello*, no *how are you*, no apologizing for being late.

“Do you like the designs?” I ask this man, who now sits in front of me and pays more attention to his phone than he is paying me.

“Uhh, huh,” he replies, scrolling through his screen.

“So, you want me to design the office then?” I enquire.

“Obviously,” he smirks, as if my question is foolish.

I bite my lower lip. He should have just emailed me the contract. Why bother coming at all?

Haroon rarely checked his phone during a conversation. He considered it disrespectful.

“Disrespectful to the person, to the conversation, to the food and drink. It’s just disrespectful to the entire ambiance,” he would say hotly whenever someone he talked to fiddled with their phone. His light brown eyes would widen in anger, and his face would turn crimson, making me love him even more.

Sharing my world with Haroon was effortless. His soft touch siphoned all the worries out of me. At five feet and seven inches, with a slightly bulky frame, he was the opposite of the tall, dark, and handsome man described in Mills and Boons novels, but he was my knight in shining armour.

Three years into our marriage, I woke up one night, sweaty, frightened, and breathless. Haroon, a light sleeper, followed suit.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said and rested my head on his chest. The soothing sound of his even heartbeat, quietened my pounding heart. “Breathe,” he whispered. I inhaled his comforting scent as our bodies moved together, becoming one with the rhythm of his breath.

“Do you still love me?” I asked.

“Let’s leave,” he replied, cradling my head.

“Hmm,” I nestled deeper in his chest.

“I’m serious.”

“And go where?”

“Somewhere far far away.” Haroon traced my lips with the tip of his thumb.

“You want me to leave everything behind? My life, my house, my career?” I sat up.

“Us. I want us to leave everything behind.” He emphasized the *us*. “We will get you away from this... this... you know... this trauma, this guilt... whatever this is.” He cupped my face and inched closer. The tip of his nose touched mine.

I backed up and stared at him. A few strands from the thick tuft of his hair hovered over his forehead. He pinched his lips, waiting for my reply. Anticipation glimmered in his eyes. I could cross oceans for this man, with this man, and I could die content in his arms. I could have a different life, a much better one, I thought, but then Nooh flashed before my eyes. A knot tightened in my stomach.

“I don’t want to.” I jerked myself away.

“Why?”

My breasts heaved, and my eyes stung. Lowering my head, I blinked repeatedly.

“Look at me,” he demanded.

When I did not budge, his voice softened again, “Why don’t you want to leave?”

My mouth went dry. *I don’t know*, I replied in my mind.

“At least answer me.” He grasped my shoulders.

I shook myself to break free, but his grip tightened.

Furrows appeared on his forehead as he narrowed his eyes. His adam’s apple bobbed up and down before he hissed, “Until when are you going to let something that happened ages ago, ruin every good thing in your life? In our lives?”

His warm lips landed on my mouth. Instead of kissing him back, I wrestled; twisting myself, and his hands flung open, knocking the vase on the side table. It hit the floor with a thud, shattering into more pieces than I could count.

The house feels cold when I enter after returning from the meeting. All lights except the one in the lobby are turned off. I peep in Amma’s room where she is lying on the bed with her eyes closed and her chest rising and subsiding rhythmically.

“Sweet dreams, Amma,” I whisper and shut the door. The staircase wall en route to my room is plastered with pencil drawings — framed and unframed. Amma could never get rid of Nooh’s things. The framed drawings hang by nails, while she has stuck the unframed ones using glue or sellotape or whatever she could find. Every now and then, they come off, and she frets over sticking them back.

I touch one of the frames — Nooh’s first family portrait. He could draw our features flawlessly ever since he was eight. God’s gift, Amma often exclaimed, beaming with pride. The frame’s pointed corner threatens to pierce the tip of my index finger. I stare at the picture until my vision adjusts to the dark. Our faces are clear now. Nooh is smiling, Amma is knitting, seated on his right, and I am writing in a notebook, a bit farther away from them. We are all on the front porch.

A stray tear rolls down my cheek. I wipe it and walk away. Taking measured steps, I reach my room, drop on my bed, and relive the day Nooh died.

Upon hearing Nooh’s cry, Amma had run from the kitchen, through the living room, to the bottom of the stairs while I sat still, glued to the floor of the landing, the Scrabble board on my lap.

Thick, crimson blood oozed from the side of Nooh’s head and pooled around Amma’s feet. “Nooh!” she screamed. The thump of her fall unfroze me, and I raced downstairs. Tears welling from her eyes, Amma pressed Nooh’s wound tight. When she dragged me by my forearm to sit beside her, her entire body was trembling. She opened and closed her mouth several times, before forming a coherent sentence. “Use all your strength. Don’t let his blood flow,” she guided the heel of my palm over the crack in Nooh’s head, and then she ran. Her blood-stained feet printed all the way from the stairs to the table where the landline phone was placed.

For two days after the funeral, both Amma and I huddled in a corner near the stairs and stared at the blood stains and the footprints, refusing to clean the house, and shrieking when anyone else tried to.

I fling my eyes open to unsee the image and look around. I am sprawled across the bed, still wearing the clothes I went to the meeting in. My temples are wet, and so is my hair and the pillow.

Rubbing my face, I sit up. My eyes burn, and my chest feels stuffed. The lump in my throat refuses to budge. I bang my skull against the headboard repeatedly. Several *what-ifs* swirl in my mind.

When my tears dry, I crawl out of the bed. Changing into my pyjamas, I turn on my laptop and plummet into the abyss of another long, sleepless night, wondering whether Haroon now spends his nights sleeping with another woman, caressing her lips like he did mine, or does he remain as anguished by my absence, as I am with Nooh’s.