

Dinesh

Acci! Where are you, Acci?"

Her back hunched over a small mat in the kitchen. Her sharp cheekbones were golden with sweat, and her bony hands rummaged through a bag. I could smell the spices poking the insides of my nostrils. Her grey strands were tied neatly into a bun, like a small silver crown. It was Monday.

I called her again. She looked at me, and her golden tooth twinkled at me.

"Dinesh, let's have lunch."

The cafeteria was empty. I struggled to walk to the nearest bench with my heavy schoolbooks. I just finished my extra language classes with Miss Suraya and I was always the last to return home. I was perfectly fine with it because if I did go home, I would sleep the day away.

Miss Suraya brought me to the burger stall. The day was hot and

I could see the Malay man behind the stall almost falling asleep. I asked for the usual 'burger ayam special satu.' One special chicken burger. One of the important phrases I learned for survival.

Miss Suraya sat in front of me. I felt like I was being tested, so I repeated the words I learnt that day. "Keluarga. Family. Nenek. Grandmother..." I listed out the members in the family tree. My mind was busy translating it from the Sinhala language.

The chicken patty hit the surface and made a loud sizzling sound. I watched the smoke circling upwards to the blue sky as it reminded me of the fire that burned my village down.

When the smell of smoke entered through the window of our old home, father knew we had no choice but to escape our village. The Tigers were here. The Tigers were evil, they said. Brutal murderers. They walked on two legs, just like you and I, but they weren't human. They killed everything in sight. Other villages had lost their people to the Tigers; they had devoured them. Father's warnings echoed in my mind.

But father, what about Acci, who was sleeping soundly in the next room?

I rushed to Acci and shook her tiny shoulders. She had grown weak, but she could still walk a mile. She opened her eyes. Let me stay here, she said. I am old. These Tigers are not stupid. They should know one or

two things about respecting elders. I begged her to follow us, but she wouldn't budge, and said that I should go. I should be the one to escape. I have a future while she has used up hers....

I woke up from the memories as Miss Suraya put the warm burger onto my palm. "It's not good to daydream in public, Dinesh." She winked.

Miss Suraya first saw me after I'd been bullied by a group of boys in school. She was kind enough to take me to the clinic without being irritated by my snot and tears. It was embarrassing, but the scar I bore afterwards marked the beginning of our language lessons.

"They're just afraid of you because you know a language that they don't understand," she had said to cheer me up. I wished that was the case, but even months after I was still a coward. I still ran to the classroom whenever the boys threw names at me or gave me the cold shoulder. I had yet to find the courage to step out of the classroom by myself.

The word courage reminded me of another brave soul that was long gone: my Acci.

For a week after the attack, we stayed hidden within the trees. Mosquitoes feasted upon our frail bodies. We sacrificed our comfort for safety. When the Tigers were gone, we slowly crept out, back to our charred village.

I searched for Acci. Where was she? Did she manage to escape? Was she hiding in a cellar? She was still alive, wasn't she?

I went to her favourite sanctuary, the soul of the village. When I reached there, all I saw were piles of rubble and burnt pillars. The temple was only a thing of the past. I fell to my knees. I let the ashes soil my bones. I could imagine her dragging her feeble legs to the temple. I could see her taking a seat, face calm and undisturbed, as the Tigers approached with fangs and claws. She must have threatened them. You will not take this away from me.

That was when the Tigers turned into Devils. This floor I was kneeling on, it must be where they pushed her. Kicked her. She must have dug her nails into one of their legs. It must have hurt him so much because if not, why would he have cut her hand off? She must have been crying prayers that sent birds circling above their heads, dogs barking louder than ever. The prayers must have burnt through the Tigers' eardrums. That must have made them cut it. Cut her brain.

The Tigers were afraid.

Dinesh

After that incident, we turned our heads away from the burnt village and searched for a better future. We couldn't save any documents from the fire, so father had to bear with school authorities spitting this excuse to his face every single time.

"I am sorry, but without his birth certificate, we cannot accept him here."

At the brink of giving up, Father turned to his brother-in-law and received the calling, "Go to Malaysia."

We sold almost everything we had and booked our flight out of the country. Luckily, mother had a friend here. We were crammed like sardines in the small apartment as we adjusted into the society. Father knew that we couldn't live like this forever, so he put on a security guard uniform and worked day and night. His hard work earned him a house fit for two beds, and with the help of my mother's friend, I was enrolled as a student. I was finally going to school.

"Hey Dinesh," Nguyen hissed. "Can I lend your work? I ... I just want to look at a few questions...."

I rolled my eyes. "Hey, first it's 'borrow', not 'lend.' Second, no. Yesterday's algebra was the easiest. Even my five-year-old sister could do it." I slapped his hand. Nguyen was a leech and he deserved that. He never did his work but he would be the first to grab our books and copy ours. We all knew that mathematics would gradually become difficult, but you can overcome it with little effort. Sometimes I wanted to kick Nguyen in the back and tell him that we were stuck in the same hell of numbers together.

While Nguyen tried his luck with Ratnor, I tried to form appropriate sentences to break the news to them. Two weeks ago, a fellow native man with age visible by the wrinkles on his forehead, visited us. His oversized suit drooped on his thin frame, begging to be washed twice. "Your father is a dear friend of mine," he convinced us.

"Let me warn you before you waste your time, boy." He patted my shoulder and sent goosebumps all over my body. "These exams do not matter. They drill this and that into your head, but I am sure you will flush it down the hole anyway. You're a bright man, with a bright future. Do you know where you can get a brighter one?"

His offer was like diamond to the family. I took out the crumpled map he gave to me and presented it to the boys during recess. All of them gasped in awe.

"Australia? Whao..." "I heard you could ride waves there!" "You'll have kangaroos and koala

bears as pets!" "You'll be rich, Dinesh! You'll have a wicked Australian accent!"

My nostrils flared. It felt so good to be in the spotlight. Back then, these boys used to bully me. But in two years, we bonded as I helped them with their work. Miss Suraya was right; kindness helps you in a long run.

"Don't worry, guys. I'll invite you over once I get my own private beach house."

Well, no use in reminiscing over one-month old bragging.

He said we would get to Australia with a better education, a better quality of life, a better future. But there we were, counting minutes in a small dodgy hotel room, waiting for our dinner. The door crashed as stern-faced men clad in dark blue uniforms barged through the door. Mother stumbled onto her back. I scrambled to the corner of the room.

Father tried to explain to the men that we had done nothing wrong. We had paid an agent who had arranged our documents. Father showed the papers, but they handcuffed him with no remorse. Mother's cries rent my heart. I tried to break free, but their grip was so strong; it bore marks on my wrists. I looked back to my father's face, and could only see devastation.

Father was innocent in all of this. He was only trying to help me to succeed. He sold all his valuables for the second time just to give me a future, but he had been fooled. He sold everything just to find himself locked behind bars.

I threw another stone to the wall, amplifying my regret. I heard footsteps approaching my cell. Once I saw who she was, I quickly hid my face under my shirt. It was Miss Suraya herself.

"Dinesh, I told you not to trust strangers," she said softly.

Miss Suraya, please remember this: you, too, were a stranger once. It didn't make any difference. It wasn't my fault. He gave us hope the same way you had given me hope. We were only being hopeful, but we were trapped in a scam. We had no permit to go in Australia. I wanted to express my heart's content, but all I could do was to hide in silence.

Dinesh

I was embarrassed. My tears rushed down my cheeks like rapid waterfalls in front of Miss Suraya. How could I show my face to her, or even to the boys? I could hear their raucous laughter in the classroom. Dinesh the Fool! Thinks he's all that! Now he won't be able to hog the ball in our games!

As my tears clouded my eyes, she nudged my shoulders. It did not feel like a human's touch. I looked up and saw her arm outstretched through the bars with a set of books. English, Science, Mathematics. What is this for, Miss Suraya?

“Dinesh, remember when you effortlessly answered that sum on the chalkboard? Do you want to miss out on all that knowledge? Do you want to return to the outside world and be laughed at again?”

Suddenly, Acci's last words rang in my mind. “You should escape. You have a bright future while I've used mine...”

Miss Suraya handed me a pencil. “Australia or not, Dinesh, I cannot afford to lose a student. I need you to help me solve this problem.”

I took it, and read the first question.

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