

# IRRELEVANT INTERIORS

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The door creaks as she pushes it open, making all heads in the room turn towards her. Suddenly, she becomes aware of how her sandals don't exactly match her clothes, how her hair is limp and lifeless compared to the others', and how there is a huge pink pimple sitting right on the tip of her almost circular nose.

She can feel their eyes on her, scrutinizing every flaw. She greets her teacher in a small voice before taking a seat at the very corner, wishing she could blend in with the wall. *I should wear my pistachio green top next class, she thinks, that way they wouldn't notice me next to this wall, and they'd have to find someone else to judge.*

As she cranes her neck to become familiar with her new "coaching-mates", she notices several pairs of eyes snapping back to the books in front of them. However, they stare long enough for her to catch the disdain in some, and the pity in others.

She tries her hardest not to scoff. They feel bad for her because she has a darker complexion than most; they laugh at her because her hair never obeys, but those are her problems. She doesn't see the point in having strangers worry about those when she herself couldn't care less.

Unfortunately, laughing and worrying seem to be all her companions are capable of. She tries socializing; she always does. She asks the girl next to her the usual questions: Name, Subjects, etc. The replies are curt, a clear indication that the girl does not want a new friend. *Oh well, she thinks afterwards, they can't say I didn't try.*

It is the same in all the classes throughout the week. She tries to join into conversations as much as she can without appearing nosy. This is a problem in itself, because she can rarely contribute to any of the topics discussed. Her peers prefer talking about their wardrobes and the regular Hindi serials while she would rather evaluate the latest music albums, or the points table in one of the European

Leagues. When she does manage to find a common topic, though, her opinions are discarded. Sometimes, they feign interest, only to mock her later, when they think she doesn't notice.

It hurts. She decides to stop trying, because it clearly isn't helping; it never really does. They all take one look at her and dismiss the idea of her being an actual human being, all because she is not conventionally beautiful. She tries to trick her mind into taking things positively. *Besides, she thinks with a sigh, it will change soon. It always does.*

A few days pass, and results come back after one test or the other, and suddenly, they are swarming all over her. They compliment her on the most stupid things, they laugh at her lamest jokes, and most importantly, they absolutely love her brain. They all want to sit next to her (especially during a test) and treat her like their best friend.

They still don't treat her like a human, though. They still don't bother to get to

know her. Now she is an alien who has no pursuits in life apart from education. They are careful to not express these thoughts of theirs in front of her, because who else will help them with those notes they're so confused about? However, even the most cunning among them slip up sometimes, letting snide remarks and taunting chuckles escape their lips. They think she doesn't understand. But after years of acing tests, you tend to develop a rather sharp brain.

So now she sits in class among her admiring horde of "friends", who not a week ago refused to even look at her for a few seconds. They wave and smile and ask how her preparations for exams are going. Why bother asking about her life? It isn't like she actually has one.

They used to hate her for her looks, and now they kiss up to her because of her grades. She doesn't know which one she despises more.

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DYUTY AURONEE

'You really think so?'

'Yes, I do.'

'I'm trying to understand your point.'

'Maybe, you should stop trying so hard to understand everything.'

'Maybe.'

'Maybe.'

Nabeela dropped Ruma off at her place. She couldn't take her mind off the conversation. The eastern sky had taken on a peachy orange colour and the Azaan would go in just under ten minutes. Nabeela looked at her phone. Eight missed calls from home. The table must have been set by now. As soon as she would enter, Dadu would ask her to put on the headscarf and sit beside her. Mom would gently pour

Nabeela's favourite chicken haleem on her bowl with a squeeze of lemon. Dad would pass on a glass of glucose water which she would refuse but eventually agree to drink because that's what she had been fine-tuned to do. That's what we all have been fine-tuned to do.

Maybe it really is one of the first world problems. Crisis of faith or a lack of direction, whatever you call it. As Ruma said, it's one of those issues you think about when you have too much time in your hand and your room is air-conditioned and you have fancy food on your plate. Nabeela thought of Kulsum. Had she or her sister ever felt anything like this? Maybe Nabeela should really focus on her bowl of haleem and her air-conditioner at times.

The next day Nabeela hoped Ruma

wouldn't remember anything from the conversation they had had the day, before but she did.

'So, how are you feeling today?'

'Hey, I'm sorry I talked you into all that yesterday. "I was childish."'

'No, Nabu. I'm your best friend. We can talk about things like these.'

'Thank you, Rumu. I love you.'

Ruma got off and Nabeela asked her driver to turn left. He stared at her for a few moments but she cast him an assuring look. Nabeela switched off her phone and put it back in her purse. In one of its pockets lay the dried jasmine garland that she had bought from Kulsum at her college gate in the morning.

Kulsum was really surprised to see Nabeela. She was sitting on the ground and

her red frock was as dirty as her hands.

'Kulsum, kheyechho kichhu?'

'Abba bhaat aanle khamu.'

So, Kulsum had been starving and her family too. No meal for her mother, her handicapped sister, her blind grandparents, or herself before her father returned from work. Nabeela thought of the dates, the haleem and the glucose water on her table. It's a strange world. She decided she would starve as long as Kulsum had to.

Nabeela sat on the ground with six-year-old Kulsum beside her. The eastern sky was losing colour rapidly. Was Nabeela's abstinence a show-off on the face of Kulsum's? Was Kulsum getting more rewards for staying hungry?

Up above the seven heavens, someone must be playing a one-sided game.