



HOME, ALWAYS

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She stepped through the gate and, for a moment, it was as if time had either stopped entirely, or the clocks had turned back all the way to the first day.

In one single moment, she was a little girl crying her eyes out, daddy carrying her bag for her, gently tugging her away to the sidelines and trying to comfort her, telling her he would be back when it was over. It had taken a full ten minutes to stop her from clutching at the hem of his shirt and bursting into tears from the sniffles the comforting had brought her to. She hadn't wanted to go in, said she never would, said she hated it here; and at the time, oh boy, she did. She really did.

The clocks ticked again and she came back. She quickly stepped out of the way of other people getting in and walking forward, she looked at the greenery around her, the red-bricked building. It looked so plain, yet held all the warmth in the world. She looked at the small pathway that led to the collapsible gate inside, thinking of all the times she had walked out, groaning at the fact that she would have to come back the next morning. It had been sheer hell, hadn't it? Time flowed backwards again; her

father picking her younger self up late and her crying over it, thinking he had forgotten her; laughing her head off with her friends over some ridiculous joke; sitting four or five feet away from her boyfriend so that the aunties in front wouldn't have more gossip to spread about how that one girl was slobbering over a boy in public; fuchka or jhalmuri afterwards; and this was all just the area outside the collapsible gates. There was so much more inside that she was honestly a little wary of getting in today.

Someone tapped her lightly on the shoulder and she looked at her best friend, Raidah's face. "It's hitting you too, huh?" Raidah asked sadly. Mutely, she nodded her head and they both walked into a treasure trove of golden memories realized too late.

The children's playground, with the basketball court to the 'west' side and the football field to its 'north' side, was empty. The morning had yet to start, the playground yet to be filled with the bright shouts and laughter of joyful children. Together, she and Raidah went up to the see-saws, their place to simply sit idly and talk. Today, however, they sat and savored a sight they thought they had hated. She looked at the slides; she had tried running

up those once, had gotten scolded quite severely. The canteen close by hadn't opened yet, where she would spend all her money because she hadn't had breakfast before leaving—that would happen a lot less now. Her gaze lingered over the remote corner where, after school on a rainy day under the shade of the clouds, she had nervously and excitedly had her first kiss. Her eyes took in the basketball court and she felt a pang of regret for never actually have tried out the sport. The court and the field had been more of a place where she walked around with friends, all of them sharing food and enjoying twenty minutes of anticipated freedom from the confinements of class. Club activities which she now wished she'd took more interest in. School events which she might never get to experience ever again.

Raidah suddenly asked, "By the way, did you collect the test paper yesterday?"

Startled out of her reverie, she blinked at her confusedly before her brain processed what Raidah had said. "What? Oh, yeah, I did. What did you get?"

Raidah grinned and triumphantly said "Six out of fifteen."

She laughed and said, "Sorry, snowflake, I got the same."

"I'd give you a hi-five but you're too far off," Raidah replied. And suddenly it hit both of them—they would have a lot less of these conversations. They lapsed into a sad silence.

And still more realisations would come as the day passed: they wouldn't have to grumble about how they have to study for a pointless test, holidays would become stale, the excitement of meeting school friends gone, and they would finally hit the thought that those long, sheltered years are over. At the end of the day, they would all promise to keep contact, to meet up once in a few months, to have get-togethers and parties. And then life would happen and they'd all drift off.

She looked up at the skies, ever eternal, never changing, and her home underneath, today a surreal view. A place where she thought she had all the time in the world.

But in the end, when it's finally time to leave, you can't help but wonder: "Where did all those years go?"

Rasheed Khan is a hug monster making good music but terrible puns and jokes where he's probably the only one laughing. Ask him how to pronounce his name at aarcvard@gmail.com