

THE BOX

AYESHA SHIREEN QUADIR

“Aaliyah! Come quick, I found something!”

She turned wide-eyed, with a cement slab still in hand, to see Fayaz smoothing the dirt at his feet. He was always doing something with dirt. Drawing in it, throwing it in her face, making mountains with it. A wave of frustration mixed with exhaustion passed over her. How could he be playing games right now?

She frantically whisper-screamed at him, “Stop yelling! And this is serious Fayaz, we need to find that box.”

It’s the only reason they were anywhere near their old neighbourhood. It only brought back painful memories of lost family and friends. She looked at whatever was left of the Husseins’ house and felt sick. The memory was still fresh in her mind; everyone in the Hussein family had rushed inside the house for cover from the shells and never came out.

She faced Fayaz again, to check if he was alright, and started moving the bricks and stones with more urgency. They needed to get back to their tent before anyone realised that they were missing.

Their family was currently camped out in Rafah and had to leave almost everything behind when the bombing got too intense. Fayaz still didn’t really know or understand what was happening, just that there were bad men, who might possibly be monsters, and, for some reason, they wanted to hurt him. Aaliyah knew he was afraid, but, in some incredible Fayaaz way, he didn’t let this hell of a life take away his hope, humour, or kindness.

But while her brother was still somewhat naive about the world they were living in, Aaliyah’s mind was a constant thunderous storm of fear, anxiety, and dread. But, most of all, desperation to ensure her family’s survival. She was the one to fight for the Egypt plan. Her parents had always been considering it, but it had never seemed to be a viable option because the cost to cross the border was too great, and they were absolutely penniless.

So, she had taken things into her own hands. She had always undergone great risks to take care of things that mattered to her— scouring for food and water at night, while everyone else was fast asleep or stealing from others’ tents.

But this was different. This could be catastrophic. She had snuck out late at night to venture into their old neighbourhood in search of the box. The box held Aaliyah’s idea of a treasure trove. Passports, money, and pictures of her and her family when she was little. It could only be opened with a key, which was currently hanging around her grandmother’s neck. As a child, it would always be a wonder to her and seemed as if her grandmother was guarding



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

secrets. Her grandmother always caught her staring and laughed – squeezing her cheeks – but she hadn’t smiled ever since they had to leave home.

During their frantic escape from the flaming neighbourhood, her family had left the box behind, and it had been on her mind ever since. Only one thing worried and irked her – Fayaz. He wasn’t supposed to be here with her, and it was only halfway to the area that she realised he had followed her. She was furious when she realised, he was there.

How could he put himself in danger like this? But there was nothing she could do but take him along with her. She couldn’t let him go back alone. Alternatively, going back with him and then coming back again was also too risky and time-consuming. To keep him safe, Aaliyah let him come along, but on the condition that he remained by her side and in her sight no matter what.

Fayaz’s insistent calls penetrated her anxious thoughts. “I’m not joking though, look at this!” She looked around to check no one was there and swiftly crawled over to him. She hissed, “What is it?”

He was still taking the object out of the rubble. He blew the dirt and dust off of it. Finally, he managed to uncover the whole thing.

Aaliyah nearly cried. She would recognise the floral outward design anywhere. The rusty old lock was still hanging on the latch, almost as though it was beckoning her to learn its secrets to protect her family.

“What does this mean?” Fayaz asked. She turned to him to see a curious and awed look on his face.

“It means we have a chance to get out, and it is all thanks to you,” she replied with a bittersweet smile. A wide smile grew on his face, and she laughed seeing his missing front tooth. She looked into his eyes, and it was almost as if she was looking at the stars themselves with the way they were shining.

They walked back to the camp with a spring in their steps. Aaliyah held the box in her arms and felt a hundred times lighter. She felt almost giddy with this newfound hope of a substantial, genuine chance to escape. She turned to Fayaz, about to crack a joke, when she saw him frozen in his place, looking up at the dark sky. She was too slow, too encapsulated in her joy to recognise the drone when she saw it high above his head.

And then everything turned white.

The full version of this short story has been published online.



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Serendipity

ARIBAH FARZEEN SHAH

The ringing of the cyclist’s bell as the newspaper is delivered

And the starling chirping from her nest in the walls of my house

Wake me up every morning as dawn becomes a new day.

When I am away from home, I realise those are the sounds I miss in immeasurable amounts.

I look down my balcony to appreciate the familiar view –

The asphalt road and leaves glistening from the sunlight.

I see vehicles passing by and hawkers ready to start their businesses

At that moment, everything feels alright.

The simplicity of the present delights me while

The intimacy of the environment gives me comfort.

I look to the sky and dive into the hues.

It is a feeling that nothing can contort.