

12A

INQIAD BIN ALI

CLANK!

The heavy iron trunk crashed on the floor.

'What happened?' hollered Mr Wahid.

'Nothing!' replied his son, Razeen, at the top of his voice to ensure his father heard him amidst the pandemonium. 'I accidentally dropped your trunk...'

'Are you *this thick*?' an enraged Mr Wahid asked without expecting an answer. 'You can't even do simple tasks!'

They were changing homes for the second time in four years. Naturally, things were pretty tense and hectic in Razeen's home. He was crossed at his dad but he had his reasons. Despite Razeen excelling in school and co-curricular activities, he couldn't settle down anywhere due to his father's job, which required them to move around often.

'I wasn't the one ordered to transfer during my secondary exams,' Razeen countered, with an anticlimactic cool voice.

Looking down at the floor, Razeen realised that the unlocked trunk had broken open. The contents inside the trunk scattered across the floor. He quickly got to cleaning the mess, more out of fear of his dad's wrath than saving time.

Rank badges, small bags, books, diaries, notebooks, files... That's when it caught Razeen's eye: a weathered, dusty, old envelope bearing a faint, unrecognisable logo. It was so old that the paper had turned brown and resembled rusted iron. The document inside felt smooth and slippery on the fingertips.

'Give it to me,' Mr Wahid ordered as he barged into the room and snatched the paper from Razeen's hand.

'But abbu, what is that?' Razeen asked.

'Will you help packing or not? We haven't got all day,' an exasperated Mr Wahid said as he shoved a supply of ropes and tape into Razeen's hands. 'Secure everything tightly. We don't want to lose any valuables while shifting.'

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Razeen stood with his mother and relatives at the airport. They had all come to see him off on his flight to the USA.

He lived a few different lives since that frenzied day three years ago. Razeen aced both his secondary and higher secondary exams with distinction. On top of that, he was now a published researcher, with his works on psychology and mental health blazing new trails in school-level research – a noble concept in his nation.

However, he never quite attained his father's approval or affection. And now, as Razeen stood minutes away from flying to a new life, Mr Wahid wasn't by his side either. A stroke had taken him from this world one-and-half years prior.

'Not that it would've mattered,' mused Razeen.

Mr Wahid wouldn't even let his son near him in those last few days, opting to spend his final moments with his wife only. The tragedy almost derailed his plans. Razeen's mother nearly broke down grieving. To support his mother through the ordeal, he took a gap year.

'Baba, your abbu left you this,' the soft, affectionate voice of his mother interrupted his thoughts and the voluble relatives. His mother handed him a white envelope.

'Don't open it till you are airborne,' she said.

Upon taking the envelope, he noticed Mr Wahid's unmistakeable handwriting.

'To, Razeen Wahid,' the letter read.

Razeen silently stashed it inside his pocket.

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All through immigration and boarding, the envelope kept him intrigued. He could've opened it while waiting for boarding to start, but Razeen's respect for his father outweighed his curiosity.

Upon reaching cruising altitude, he ripped the envelope open. In it was a handwritten letter by Mr Wahid for Razeen, which read:

Baba, if you are reading this, I may have been long gone from this world. But you're certainly succeeding in life, and

making both your parents proud.

Do you remember the day we were changing homes, when you asked me about that old envelope? Today, I'll tell you all about it.

Till date, you've been told that you are our only child. This isn't true: you were supposed to have an older brother. We hid this from you to ensure you weren't burdened with any further pain or expectations.

I was supposed to go to England to do my Masters, obtain a PhD and ultimately settle there. Everything was set. Your mother and I were eagerly waiting for our new life to start.

Then, tragedy struck. On August 14, 1996, at 1:05pm, during our pre-flight checkup, the doctor revealed that your older brother had passed. The embryo had caused extensive internal damage to your mother. In the operation that followed, I almost lost your mother. The doctors said it's a miracle she even survived.

I couldn't leave your mother behind. So, I joined the military. Nine years later, you came along. I made it my life's mission to ensure you could follow your dreams. I didn't leave a single hair unturned and invested my life's savings to give you the best education and support.

Your successes were music to my ears. I wanted nothing more than to be your most fervent supporter and well-wisher. But I never outwardly showed it, and for that, I profoundly apologize. I wish I could've been a better father in this regard.

I once again say how proud I am of you. You are our only hope, and I see the fire in you which fuelled me in my youth. Never lose that drive, baba. Keep on being yourself, for you're truly unique. Godspeed.

Tears welled up in Razeen's eyes. Among the clouds, Razeen Wahid finally understood his father.

Upon regaining composure, his fingertips felt something familiar. Despite the faint print, the old, unused boarding pass's details were unmistakeable: *Razeen Wahid, Oriental Airlines, Seat 12A.*

The exact same airline and seat Razeen was flying.



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN