

Gabriel Hackworth
Webster

Aitch

Only a few years had passed, but it hadn't been long enough for Bisma¹ to forget what life was like before. She lay in her bed, having woken up early to the bright sun streaming through her window. '*Ahmad² would have been twelve... no, thirteen,*' she thought. *Ammi³ and Abbu⁴ still both had their jobs, and Ammi was still alive.* Those times were the best; they had plenty of food and, though more for show and status than anything else, a heater to accompany the air conditioner. Yet only a few years later, those luxuries seemed as unobtainable as the moon. Bisma didn't have any time to reminisce however. She had made herself a promise that she wouldn't be late for school again.

Speeding down the stairs, she ran past her usual spot at their stained folding table. Reliving her memories had seemed far more important than a breakfast of nothing but a cup of chai⁵. She quickly slipped her worn shoes onto her feet. As she reached for the doorknob, she realized that the house was silent. Outside, there was noise from the street and somewhere nearby a dog was barking, but in the house only the tick-tick-ticking of an unbalanced fan met her ears. "Bhai!⁶ Abbu!" Bisma yelled. The house was usually filled with the sounds of her father and brother arguing, or gunshots and explosions from one of those American movies her father would get from seedy-looking "friends".

Now all of that was gone. Silence, formerly unfathomable, was suddenly here. Unaccustomed, Bisma panicked. '*Where is everybody? What's going on?*' Ahmad would still be home; even though he abhorred his father and his lifestyle, he had still quit school at seventeen. She nearly tripped as her worn shoes slipped out from underneath her on the linoleum floor. She *did* when she caught her shirt on the banister of the stairs, scoring a friction burn from the wood up her arm.

Bisma burst into her brother's room, eyes frantic and wild. Ahmad sat in a rusted folding chair away from the door. He was reading one of those magazines he wouldn't let her look at, and he had a headset on listening to a battered CD player, the only remaining relic of years passed. Bisma ran up behind him and pulled the older boy into a hug, nearly knocking him out of his chair.

"What is it?" Ahmad said, groaning. He and his sister weren't particularly close, but compared to either of their relationships with their father they were the best of friends.

"Nobody answered when I yelled, and I got scared since what if something happened," Bisma let out, not even pausing to breathe. "...and then it would be just me, and I-" Ahmad put up a finger to his sister's face, silencing her.

"What were you afraid of?"

"I didn't hear anybody respond, and if something had happened then I would be alone so I got all scared."

"Something like... what happened to Ammi?" Ahmad asked, looking down.

Bisma nodded, growing sullen. "Yeah."

Ahmad cracked a smile before answering, a gesture that seemed to happen less and less often. "Well I'm still here, aren't I? Besides, if you don't leave soon, you'll be late, won't you?"

His sister's eyes grew wide. Her detour, however necessary to her sanity, had cost her the thing that she valued most, her education. To be late was just as *incomprehensible* as the silence that had filled the house not a minute before. Sprinting down the stairs and out the door, she left it swinging in her wake.

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After the day ended, Bisma began her walk home. There were only two other girls in her class, but she was determined to complete her schooling. On that day, several years ago, she had promised herself that she would continue her education. ‘*To get out of this place and not be like Abbu,*’ she thought.

Bisma could see their house as she turned the corner, the red-painted cement faded with years of neglect. The mango tree, once strong and proud, lay dead against the dilapidated wall that surrounded the house. The attached tire swing was crushed underneath the withered branches, rubber cracked and dry. Before, Abbu would keep the yard tidy. “Since we own the corner, we represent the whole block,” he had said. Now, Abbu barely left the house, except for the rare times when he went shopping for himself, or to do “business” with sickly-looking men.

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Bisma could hear her parents arguing. Arguments had become more frequent since her father lost his job a few weeks ago, but this one was *intense*. She heard her mother shouting “You fool!” or “You bastard!” every now and then. Thumps and banging noises came from the sitting room, yet her father didn’t say a word. Pushing her door open and tiptoeing down the stairs, Bisma reached the corner into the room. Abbu was sitting in his chair, arms splayed over the sides and a vacant look on his face.

It was only a few weeks before Ammi took up his offer and found solace in the aitch⁷. Several months later, in a moment of simultaneous clarity and insanity, she doubled up, taking her husband’s share as well. In her eyes, she had attacked the source of all of their problems, and she wouldn’t have to worry about him or her children any more.

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As she walked in front of the iron-wrought gate, Bisma could see Ahmad sitting on the front steps, head resting in his hands. He looked up at his sister when he heard her unlock the gate, and the look of pure dismay on his face immediately told her that something was very wrong.

“What happened Ahmad?” she asked.

“We can’t stay here.”

“What?”

“We can’t stay here,” the boy repeated, more firmly.

“Ahmad, tell me what’s going on,” his sister pressed.

Ahmad sat up and rubbed his eyes before continuing. “I went down to the chai-wallah a few hours ago. The thing is, Abbu met me at the door. He had a grin on his face and opened the door for me. That doesn’t happen, Bisma. You know how he gets; I just decided it would be best to take my time. I walked as far as the mosque⁸ before turning around. When I got back, Abbu wasn’t in the house anymore. Not much was actually.”

“What do you mean?” Bisma said, looking worried.

“The table, the computer, our beds...”

“What about them?”

“They’re... gone,” Ahmad said, glancing up at his sister.

“What?”

“Most everything’s gone-,” Ahmad said, but Bisma was already inside before he finished.

Bisma could hardly believe her eyes. The sitting room was bare, save for Abbu's chair and the tattered rug on the floor. She ran up the stairs only to find that her bedroom fared worse. All that was left was a shirt, a hijab, and a pair of socks. Ahmad was left with the same, save for the hijab.

"Were we robbed?" Bisma asked.

Ahmad shook his head. "I don't think so. It's Abbu. He's done it before."

Things disappearing from the house wasn't an unusual occurrence. Closets had grown more spacious, the house became less cluttered. Spare lamps or rugs went missing every few weeks, but when Abbu came home counting rupees both Ahmad and Bisma knew what it was from.

Now Abbu had taken it as far as he could. *He was so "kind" to leave us what he did*, Bisma thought, fuming. "Where is Abbu? Did he leave us?"

Ahmad shook his head. He'll be back sometime. I found a stack of rubies under the cushion of his chair."

Bisma looked up and her eyes met her brother's. Before either said anything, they both knew what the other was thinking.

"We can't stay here anymore."

No words were spoken as they walked up the crooked stairs for the last time. Neither spoke as they gathered their meager belongings.

Bisma looked out her window to the house across the street. This was the view she had seen her entire life. Tied to it were memories of Ammi. Along with those were other memories of *before*, when Ahmad was still in school, when the cupboards still had things in them. But they also held memories of death, of hunger, of neglect.

“Ready?” Ahmad called, ducking his head into the room.

“Ready.”

Endnotes

¹ *Bisma* is a Muslim girls’ name meaning “smile.”

² *Ahmad* is a Muslim boys’ name meaning ‘most highly adored.’

³ *Ammi* is Urdu for “mother”.

⁴ *Abbu* is Urdu for “father”.

⁵ *Chai* is Urdu for tea, but is usually used in this region to refer to *masala chai*, which is spiced black tea from India.

⁶ *Bhai* is Urdu for “brother”.

⁷ *Aitch* is a phonetic spelling of the letter “H”, a street name for heroin.

⁸ A *mosque* is an Islamic temple.