



Zaira

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I remember the way the waves used to lash on the shores of the town where I was born, mighty in their onslaught, yet gentle when they retreat. It seemed to me as two lovebirds lost in an eternal mist of incompleteness, where the man in the sea lashed out onto his lover at shore with infinite passion, only to wake up to realize that the weight of his passion carried more pain than pleasure, forcing him to retreat at his gentlest best, leaving only a tender touch to remind his lover of how deeply he cared.

My eyes wandered across the sprawling coastline that made up the beach where I had been standing, shuttling seamlessly between the disparaged clothes of two boys and a gilt adorned shawl on the horse they both were pulling. The mild howl of an evening wind was falling as music onto my ears, and I had slowly begun letting myself sink into the tranquillity of the moment. That was when my eyes caught hers. It had been a decade. She had draped herself in layers, black at every inch. But all it took for me to fly back in time was that one split second when I caught those kohl lined eyes of hers.

I had been a student of Standard 1C. She had been from 1A. True to the lettering in our classes, I've always felt that I had been two blocks behind her. She had been a sophisticated child, with a short burst of hair that stood upright in a ponytail right at the centre of her head, held up by a clip whose colour matched with that of her pinafore. Blue on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and white on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the same way our school had mandated our uniforms. The rest of her hair would always be combed and divided by impeccably perfect lines, resembling sacrosanct boundaries between rival kingdoms at war with each other. I sometimes examined those boundaries, juxtaposing them with the upper tips of her ears to verify if any kingdom had expanded its territory. I couldn't find any encroachment in one full year of my inspections from a distance, and hence concluded that the inhabitants in that world around her hair were as peaceful as she had been herself, at ease in her every sight, and at peace come what might. That upright ponytail of hers stood like a watchtower in the middle of her world of peaceful kingdoms. Her eyes had the protective cover of a thin line of kohl, tracing the contours of each of her eyelids in flawless accuracy. They did well to guard her round black eyeballs from preying eyes.

I never dared to venture out near her. First, I considered myself to be an opposite to her in almost all ways fathomable. I barely bothered whether the

socks I wore were of the same pair, let alone ensuring that they matched with the colour of my daily uniform. I had been that careless fellow whose bow tie would hang out loose even as early as the morning assembly. Chaos would be a soft word to describe the state of kingdoms that made up my hair; combed leftwards on some days and rightwards on other days, thereby making a mockery of everything boundaries stood for. Above all of this, I had been a 1C student. I wouldn't dare one bit to tread near a 1A girl, that too the most perfect of 1A girls that befell my eyes.

Weeks passed, making way for months, yet the farthest I got near the kohl eyed girl with kingdoms in her curls was on a sunny day at the training ground, on the eve of our sports meet. Both of us stood at arms distance from each other for the PT drill where we were part of unified 1st Standard, no longer divided by lettering that wore our class on its sleeve. I remember her looking at me while we threw our hands upwards, leftwards and rightwards as per our PT instructors whistle. That had been about it for the whole of my first standard, she remained far away, smiling at me, yet staying in her own little kingdom.

Then came Standard 2, and my school's remarkable decision to transfer some students from A to C. The last five roll numbers of Class 1A thus found their way to 2C, and there she was, the kohl eyed lady with kingdoms in her curls and a smile that made my day, walking in to my class with her ponytail standing tall. The angel had descended among mortals, she had been of C class now, and the primary reason I stayed away from her was no longer valid. Yet, every time I gathered enough courage to ask her for that sharpener after scribbling well with my pencil to make it blunt enough to warrant one, I found myself reminded of some reason or the other that held me back. Maybe the hole in my left sock, those bite marks on the other end of my pencil, the fact that I didn't know if my hair was combed left to right or the other way around that day.

"Zaira Mariam!" Miss Fernandez called out loud enough to give the entire class a jerk. The kohl eyed girl sitting on the last of rows in our class stood up in a snap. "How many times have I told you not to talk and disturb others during class." Miss Fernandez continued, looking directly at the petrified little kid in the last row. "Enough of sitting at the back. Pick up your bag and come sit in front."

It was only after Miss Fernandez finished her admonishment that I realized

that I was sitting in the first of benches of our class, and that it had just been me and Abin Jacob to my right on that three-seater row. Zaira Mariam had just been asked by our class teacher to occupy the same row as mine!

Two hours of classes had passed on day one after Zaira's arrival to our row. I noticed that Abin had been slipping an occasional word to her. She hadn't been responding to him, only occasionally smiling to what I knew was a lame joke Abin had cracked; quite possibly one he had memorized from last week's issue of Balarama. A short bell rang announcing the first break of the day and I deliberated hard in choosing the best of openings lines to her. She had pulled out a packet of Krack-Jack biscuits from her bag when Abin offered her a slice from his box of cut apples, which she had refused profusely. Perhaps her mother had warned her against accepting food from strangers. In any case, she did well by refusing the creepy apples. It helped me avert a major catastrophe, as one of alternatives I had been considering in my masterplan to initiate a conversation was to offer her whatever my mom had put in my break-box. Letting out a laugh on the outside and sigh in my mind seeing her refusal, I took out my break-box, placed it on the table and opened it. Never had I been more embarrassed than this.

My box was filled to its brim with steaming-hot *puttu* and *kadala curry*. Boiled rice cakes and a curry made from chickpeas. I had explained to mom a hundred times that break-time only meant a five-minute space for snacks. By snacks I meant cool snacks, like Krack-Jack biscuits and slim sliced apples. Not *puttu* and *kadala*. How was she expecting me to impress the pretty kohl eyed girl on my bench with this when the girl wasn't even giving her attention to someone trying to entice her with apples? I sat staring blankly at that snack of mine, and there, by a strange stroke of fate, Abin had made a fantastic decision to take his eeriness to the next level. He had taken a slice of his apple in his hand and moved it towards Zaira, seemingly to coax her to accept it. Taken aback by his act, she jolted and retreated away from him, hit me unknowingly, and in the next second, turned around with a shudder, accidentally letting her left arm snap my break box and sent it off the edge of our desk. By the time she had figured out the consequences of her actions, the floor beneath our bench was festooned with *puttu* the scent of *kadala* curry gravy.

Zaira looked at me, filling both her eyes with apology right up to those kohl

lines. My gaze back was one of acute embarrassment. One of the *aayah*'s around the corridor walked in upon hearing the noise in our classroom. As she noticed what had resulted in this commotion, she shot me a glance of rebuke. I only remained at my place helplessly. The *aayah* fetched a broom and a bucket and began cleaning up the mess under our desk. Abin was staring at me contemptuously from the other end of the desk, while Zaira carried worry all over her face, looking with guilt at the *aayah* who was cleaning up the mess. Everyone else in our class had gotten back to minding their own businesses. Another bell rang, indicating the end of our break time.

"Sorry." Zaira said, in all earnestness, and while saying so, held out her packet of Krack-Jack biscuits for me. "Take."

I took a moment to savour what had transpired, gently letting a smile take form across my lips. I found the worry on her face transform into being a smile as well. Her head tilted gently to the right as I put forth my hand to pick up a biscuit from the packet in her arms. In the background, I noticed Abin standing up and looking away from us. Perhaps the sight of Zaira sharing her biscuits with me was slicing his heart into a thousand apple pieces.

"ZAIRA and ADAM." I heard this shout in a familiar voice from not so far away. "In which dreamland are both of you?" I recognized Miss Fernandez's voice, and realized that it wasn't out of surprise or jealousy that Abin had stood up and looked away from us. The entire class except Zaira and I had been standing to greet our class teacher who had walked in after break.

"What's all this water around here?" Miss Fernandez continued her rant inspecting the wet floor beneath our desk, as we stood up in shame in the middle of a classroom of hushed laughs. "Go back to your place, Zaira."

The last few words she spoke pierced like a thorn into my heart. Petrified visibly by the tone of Miss Fernandez's scolding, Zaira took no time to pack her bags and run back to her beloved last bench. Abin was looking at me with fury fuming in his eyes, and I knew not what to say.

Weeks kept passing like a stream flowing beneath a walking bridge, unnerved, and never once in more than two months had I spoken a word to the kohl eyed girl who had offered me her Krack-Jack biscuit. I had tried initiating in a conversation more than once, during our physical training sessions, just before she boarded the school bus and during practices sessions

for our Children's Day skit, where she was playing Cinderella and I was playing one of the guards at the palace, yet, none of these seemed to get ahead. Finally, I harnessed all my courage during our Christmas celebrations, and confronted her.

"Why aren't you talking to me Zaira?"

She merely kept staring at me through her round, black eyes, still bounded within those sharp kohl lines. Not a word spoken in reply. Her friend Veena K Menon rushed towards us.

"Adam." Veena spoke in seriousness. "Miss Fernandez thinks there is something going on between both of you. It's best that you both do not talk."

I felt a chill run down my spine. She had used the word 'dreamland' when she scolded us on the day Zaira gave me her Krack-Jack. If this went to my parents, I was going to be dead. That lump in my throat at the sight of Zaira's upright ponytail had now disappeared in a snap, and I vowed not to talk to her ever again. So, I never did, for the next six years.

Years passed. Abin and I quickly became avid quizzers, shuttling between schools in the city on competitions.

It was in the beginning of 6th standard that a new student walked into our class. Adriana had spent the first ten years of her life in Dubai and had gotten here as her mom had moved back to India. Intimidating and attractive in equal measure, Adriana had difficulty differentiating between men who hit on her and those who genuinely wanted to befriend her. By virtue of our names, we ended up with adjacent roll numbers, sharing benches, computers and being together in every project group. As was usual with kids at the cusp of hitting puberty, the whole class had begun talking about 'Adam & Adriana'. She introduced me and Abin to the world of debating. The three of us had become a trio that teachers adored for all the prizes we won, and kids revered for all the points we used to bring to our house during Literary and Cultural festivals.

It was during our 8th standard excursion that I talked to Zaira again, as both of us had sneaked out from campfire to grab bowls of soup for ourselves. As I reached out for pepper, my finger touched the edge of the burning hot bowl and I jerked, letting a bit of my soup leak.

“Are you okay?” Zaira asked me as she inspected soup on the floor. The upright ponytail and the kingdoms in her were long gone. Now, her hair was silky smooth, let to roam free.

I nodded.

“Do you remember me toppling your lunch box once? In first standard?” Zaira asked.

“Second standard.” I replied. “And you offered me your Krack-Jack biscuits.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. The kohl lines were now sharper and thinner, visible only to those who looked at her eyes carefully enough. “That is some sharp memory.”

I figured that she would have long forgotten the reason why we had stopped talking. We sat down a little far from the commotion and talked things as random as could be.

“Where is Adriana?” Zaira asked in between, when we had almost run out of things to talk about.

“I don’t know. Must be around somewhere.” I said, wearing a look of surprise.

“Why aren’t you with her?” Zaira kept inquiring.

“Why should I be with her?” I asked, now genuinely surprised.

“Oh. I thought you both were a couple.”

I took a moment of silence before I replied. “I don’t know what made you think so, but for your information, we’re not.” I stood up and walked.

“Hey!” I could hear Zaira’s voice, but I didn’t turn back.

School shut for vacations after a month. I had been idling away the summer exploring the new sensations of Orkut and Yahoo, which was keeping kids in touch even over summer. One afternoon, I got a ping from an unknown handle that carried a photo of a flower as display picture.

“Hi Adam. I’m sorry if I offended you that day.”

“Who is this?” I replied, unable to figure out.

“This is Zaira, the girl who toppled your lunch box.”

“Oh!” I was pleasantly surprised, and now noticed that her messenger name had been *zairamariamrahman*. “But on which day did you offend me?”

We began chatting intermittently from then. School reopened and we made our way to 9th standard. It was the class when House Leaders were picked, and quite naturally from all that we had been up to, Abin, Adriana and I took charge as leaders for our Red House. As the year unfurled, we began spending more of our time outside classrooms on our responsibilities. I began noticing Zaira around me, for some reason or the other.

“Hey, when is the Literary Meet?” Zaira asked while Adriana, Abin and I sat at the library reading through the script of ‘The Emperor’s Cook’ for our House Drama.

“17th. It was just mentioned in the assembly this morning!” I replied, while the other two looked at her in wonder of why she’d asked such an obvious thing.

“Would it be possible for me to participate in poetry writing?” Zaira asked on another day at the canteen.

“Zaira. We’re from Red House.” I said, turning to Abin beside. “You should be checking with your Blue folks.”

“Which song is your House Orchestra performing for the cultural meet?” Another of Zaira’s questions, this time in a relatively deserted corridor on the ground floor where Abin and I hung around ogling at junior girls.

“Since when did you start taking interest in music?” I asked, making it obvious that it was rhetorical. “In any case I won’t tell you. It’s a competitive secret.”

That evening when I had logged in to my home computer, I found a rather unusual scrap on Orkut from one of my friends named Nida. I knew not who this was.

“You’ve become sort of a big head.”

I paused what I had been doing and began chatting to figure out who she was. Then came sets of unrelated scraps, praising my speaking skills, another one about campfire, and at the end, one that referred to a lunchbox.

“Zaira!” It dawned to me that my cold responses at school had created an

impression of head-weight. “But why this fake name?”

“Sssh.” She came online on Yahoo Messenger. “My parents would kill me if they get to know I have an online profile.” I noticed that she had the same flower as display picture on Orkut as on Messenger.

Instances of my running into her only increased with each passing day, to the point that folks around me had begun noticing.

“What’s with her?” Adriana asked after another instance of a pointless question from Zaira on when the Science Exhibition was.

“Leave it. Let’s get back to rehearsal.” Abin announced and pulled us back on stage.

“You’re around Abin all the time.” Zaira sent forth over chat that weekend. “I think you both have become a couple now.”

Something began ticking inside me as I read that. I hung around with Adriana and Abin all the time. Her reference to ‘couple’ startled me. I had already denied about Adriana and began to get an awkward feeling of where Zaira was heading and logged out instantly. I had been heavily distracted the next day, hence skipped practice and went to class. I was staring at the sky through the window when Bijoy sir called out abruptly.

“Adam, come to the board and draw the structure of Benzene: C-6, H-6.”

I stood in front of the blackboard blankly for a few seconds.

“This is why you should pay attention in class.” He said. “Like I said, think of it as a snake eating its own tail, perfectly round, symmetrical. Same when you look at it from beginning to end or backwards.”

It took a few seconds for my realization to sync in. What a terrible fool I had been.

“Sir, you’ll need to excuse me for the rest of this class.” Saying thus, I sped out of that classroom onto the auditorium where my folks were practicing.

Adriana and Abin paused rehearsal and came down upon seeing me run.

“Zaira’s problem is not me.” I said, gasping for breath. “It’s Abin.”

“What?” Abin asked, perplexed.

“I told you of how she asked if Abin and I were a couple right?” I told

Adriana. “She said, ‘*You’re with Abin all the time*, and not ‘*Abin is with you all the time*’.”

“So?” Abin wasn’t convinced.

“Who did you play in this drama?” I asked Abin.

“The Emperor.”

“Of Japan.” I added.

“Right.”

“On what does he sit?”

“The Chrysanthemum throne.” Abin replied. This was us quizzers talking.

“Zaira’s online display picture is a flower, that too, a chrysanthemum.”

“Holy shit.” Adriana exclaimed.

“And most of all.” I added, “Do you know her Orkut profile name?”

“nida.”

“Mirror reflection.” I announced.

“abin.”

We wrapped up practice in two hours after classes that day and went over to Abin’s house, which was just a few blocks from school. I wanted Adriana and Abin to witness the moment when I announced to Zaira how I had seen through her masterplan. As we had hoped, she came online twenty minutes after we had begun our wait in front of Abin’s computer.

“Miss Zaira.” I began unfurling our discovery and took her through all that I had deciphered.

“Is there anything you wish to say?”

“Yes.” Zaira replied. “That you are a stupid jerk.”

“What?”

“Nida is my grandmothers name, and I have no idea about whatever throne you were talking about.” Zaira lashed out. “I have been trying to give signals about the huge crush I had on you since months and this is what you got of it? You’re a disaster.”

“Crush on whom?” I felt life draining out of myself.

“You, jackass.” Zaira sent.

Adriana began laughing while Abin hid his laugh. I shut my eyes in embarrassment and ran out of that house.

I consciously avoided facing Zaira from the next day onwards, but over time, I found her becoming even more comfortable around me. She seemed to have let go of the baggage she carried when she opened her thoughts. I felt that the baggage had now been transferred to my shoulders, as I had become increasingly uneasy around her. I logged out whenever I saw her online and ran away from groups when she got nearby. I knew not why I feared the girl I once had a crush on, yet, I could never digest the idea of being with her now. It had been the opposite for her, as she smilingly occupied the space next to me at the canteen on most days.

What changed was our online contact. Never after that incident had we had a chat on Messenger, or a scrap on Orkut. I was rather surprised when I got a ping from her on a quaint February evening, after many months.

“Where did you disappear?” She asked.

“Nowhere.” I replied. “I’ve been here only.” I tried to remain calm, though I knew well that I had been avoiding her.

“I’m sure tomorrow would be the best day.” She sent.

I looked at the calendar and noticed that it was 13th February. Tomorrow meant Valentine’s Day. I found uneasiness take over me and logged out instantly.

My heart was beating incessantly every time Zaira befell my eyes the next day. I knew not her plan, but she seemed to be literally following me. I dreaded those twenty minutes in the canteen fearing her imminent arrival at any moment and made Abin and Adriana take seats beside me. Just when I let out a sigh of having finished eating, I felt someone grabbing me firmly by the wrist and pulling me away. Before I could realize it was Zaira, she had dragged us into a corridor beside the old music room, one which led nowhere, and hence was always deserted. We stood facing each other on that narrow corridor, and she gradually loosened her grip on my wrist, only to catch hold of my palms.

“Why are you so scared, Adam?” She smiled gently and looked straight into my eyes. My heartbeats were thumping at the loudest they’d ever been.

“Where is my gift?”

I remained silent, unable to comprehend anything.

“What?” She asked. I felt a shiver run from my toe to scalp as gently, slowly and gracefully, Zaira had begun moving towards me, pulling her arms upwards to hold my face between them, bringing her lips near to mine.

“What’s wrong with you Zaira?” I shouted and pushed her off.

“ADAM.” She shouted. I briskly walked off from that corridor.

That evening, I got a phone call home. I couldn’t fathom what had happened, but Zaira was in no mood to listen. She unleashed her rant, crying, shouting and almost abusing. I sat through it all patiently, until the point when she accused me of cheating her.

“Listen Zaira, I cannot be responsible for your feelings and mood swings. Please leave me alone.” I said and hung up.

I spoke of what transpired to Adriana and Abin. Adriana’s temper rose, and she braced herself to confront Zaira, but Abin held her back, telling me to calm down and just remain out of touch with Zaira. In a few weeks, school shut for summer, and we went our ways. When we all returned two months later, I couldn’t find Zaira anywhere in our corridor. It was 10th standard; teachers were drilling down the importance of not missing classes. Despite being a week in, Zaira never showed up. In some time, I too begun forgetting her, until one afternoon when Abin and I had been to a neighbouring school for a Quiz competition. I looked down from that stage to recognize that familiar kohl eyed girl in the crowd, looking at me in a mix of anger and despair. Though I searched for her after the contest was over, I couldn’t find her. The next day at school, I caught hold of her friend Veena K Menon to find her whereabouts.

“Why would someone switch schools in 10th standard?” I asked Veena. “That too within the city.”

“You’re asking me for the reason. Cruel.” Veena said, expressing contempt. I couldn’t understand this, but she refused to speak further.

Weeks passed briskly as we all buried ourselves neck deep in studies, and the year drew to a closure faster than we thought. Twelve eventful years of schooling culminated in one Board Examination, and we were all given a handsome farewell by our loving juniors. I sat with Adriana and Abin in the balcony of Abin's home, reflecting on our journey that far. Abin was leaving town to join a school near an entrance coaching hub. Hence, this also was our last evening as the trio from school. As the sun set, Adriana left, leaving behind just us, two boys, or now, men.

"Adam." Abin called out. "I've been preparing to tell you this for a while."

"What?"

"Something about Zaira."

I sat upright. This was the only thing from school still incomplete.

"Well, I did have a small crush on her always. When you told me with those clues that she was into me, I got excited. That day when you confronted her, and she said that it wasn't me, but you that she loved, I was... upset."

"So?"

"If you remember, we confronted her from my computer. And you hadn't logged out of Messenger. You ran off that day. She pinged after you left, and for strange reasons, I replied."

"As me?" I asked.

"Yes. I told her you loved her too."

I found every inch of myself filled in remorse and anger. There was silence for a minute.

"Our chats continued." Abin spoke. "It was cruel of me, but I had gotten addicted to her. I created another ID and asked her to message on that. Our chats gradually grew more personal... we began flirting."

I held back an urge to slap him.

"I realized that I had gone too far on the eve of Valentine's day, when she told me that she wanted a kiss as a gift. I deleted that ID and never messaged her again."

I was lost for words; and got up and left his house, carrying the heaviest of hearts I had carried my lifetime. I regretted having never tried to listen to

Zaira, for I might have known, and I could have explained.

Zaira left our city after 10th standard. None, including Veena, knew of her whereabouts. The depth of the brutality I had put her through began to taunt me every day since then. I never knew that every gaze she had sent forth, every word she spoke to me, and every smile she carried for me all had love she believed I had for her, and yearning she supposed I felt for her. I spent much time to figure out where she'd be, but it all ended in vain.

I continued to search for those kohl lined eyes in every crowd, in every vehicle that buzzed past me, and every Facebook profile that flipped by. Not for anything, but to merely bow down and leave a word of apology for how cruel I had been to her, though unintentionally.

The waves lashed with even more vigour, and the lady whose kohl lined eyes I had caught reached even nearer. Everything about her was wrapped in pristine black; all but her eyes covered in a silk burqa. As our gaze gained more intimacy, I noticed a little girl holding on firmly to her right hand. The girl had a ponytail standing upright in the middle of her head, and the rest of her hair divided into kingdoms by boundaries impeccable. I smiled to myself as I paced towards them, but before I could get near, the kohl eyed lady chose a different direction and dissolved into the throng. I stood there again, with an unsaid apology... an incomplete kohl line.