August

Everyone has their regrets. Mine was Sanjana Tariq.

We were both freshmen in college when we met at the first Asian Student Association meeting of the year.

They didn’t set out enough chairs, so I was forced to stand in the middle of the crowded room, balancing a plate of rice and chicken in one hand and scrolling mindlessly through my phone with the other. No one seemed to notice or care that I was there, until someone tapped me on my shoulder. “Don’t you think they should’ve specified that South Asians weren’t welcome on the flyer?” said a lightly accented, soft voice from behind me.

It was an irritating remark, and I meant to tell her so, but when I turned to face her, the words dissolved upon my tongue. The first thing I noticed, though I don’t know why, was her nose and how it ended in a perfect, rounded tip. It was a unique nose, at least for a brown girl. And then it was her eyes; they were owlish and deep brown with curly, dark lashes that cast long shadows over her cheeks. Her hair spilled over her shoulders in thick, black waves and tapered off at her waist. There’s really no other way to put it, she was beautiful.

“I think,” I sputtered, phlegm sticking to the back of my throat, “they made it pretty clear which Asians they were referring to.” I awkwardly gestured to the flags they had displayed around the cramped room. China, Vietnam, Korea, Japan...

She raked her eyes over me and shrugged, a few drops of the dark drink in her hand spilling onto her loose fitting pants as she did so. “Then why are you here?”
“For a friend,” I said, looking around and suddenly realizing I had lost Lydia. I returned my attention to the petite girl in front of me, considered her, then reached out a hand. “I’m Aisha.”

I never did end up finding Lydia again that night.

Sanjana begged me to leave early with her and dragged me to an old kabob place in a sketchy part of town. I had only agreed to go because I was fascinated. It was rare to find a Bangladeshi girl who wore her culture on her sleeve, who didn’t hide behind box dye and booty shorts and a mid atlantic accent - myself included. We ended up spending hours exchanging stories in that harshly lit, musty hole in the wall as we tried to choke down the rubbery lamb kabobs and uncooked rice they set in front of us.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve read the reviews first,” Sanjana laughed, bouncing a piece of meat off the table and letting it drop to the floor. “How about I make it up to you, my ammu makes the best biriyani in the world. I could ask her to send some over?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shifting uncomfortably in my seat. “That stuff would probably smell up my dorm. Don’t want to get any complaints, you know?”

To my surprise, she didn’t seem offended by this. Only intrigued. “Noted,” she said as she leaned forward, a smile tugging at her lips. “Thanks.”

I don’t know how, but meeting her had awakened something in me. Or so I thought.

Old memories of those summers I spent in Dhaka came flooding back in my dreams that night. Sitting out on the deck in my Nanu’s lap, enveloping myself in her sari as we looked out onto the rainy afternoon, rickshaws whizzing by on the uneven path below us. The smell of
cigarettes and the incessant honking of horns. Huddling under the mosquito net at night as Nana told us stories about magic servants and princesses off in far away lands.

When I woke up the next morning, I was convinced that Sanjana was the key to rediscovering a part of myself I thought I lost long ago. So I decided to become her best friend.

*September*

I took a shaky breath with the phone pressed against my ear. “*Rathtre...ami...bireh jaboh, teek?*” I stuttered nervously.

My mom chuckled on the other line. “*Tomar Bangla ato sundor, jaan.*”

It took me a moment to rearrange and translate the words in my head, then I racked my brain for a response. “Uh, *Thondabaad.*” I groaned in frustration. “At this rate I’ll be speaking fluent Bangla by the time I’m eighty.”

“Don’t worry, *shona,*” she said. “You already are fluent, you just need to get comfortable speaking. The last time you used the language naturally was, what, ten years ago? It takes time.” I rolled my eyes, but said nothing. “Hey, why don’t you ask your friend to help you out? I know it might seem embarrassing to ask, but I’m sure her help would be valuable.”

“You know what, that’s not a bad idea,” I said as I watched my bedroom door swing open. “As a matter of fact, that’s her coming in - I’ll ask her now.”

“Okay, don’t forget to think about my offer,” she said. “Love you, bye.”

I think my mom was slowly beginning to see the difference in me over the past few weeks. My willingness to eat the desi food my grandmother set out when I visited home, the Bollywood movies piling up in my Netflix que, my newfound desire to relearn a language I abandoned long ago. Whatever change she was seeing must have inspired her to call me every
now and then, asking if I wanted to go to Bangladesh with her in the winter - something she’d
never imagine me agreeing to before. Still though, I refused. Despite everything, spending my
time off in a tiny third world, air polluted country was never going to be appealing to me.

“Aisha!” Sanju screamed, jumping on my bed.

“Hey, I wanted to ask you something. -”

“Oh my god, that can wait. You’ll never guess what just happened.” She dropped to the
mattress, folding her legs together and leaning in. “I got asked out! On a date. Like an actual
date!” Curly tendrils of hair fell over her eyes as she spoke, but she didn’t seem to mind. “Okay,
well not an actual actual date, I guess. This boy from my statistics class invited me to come by
his frat’s party tonight. But I really, really think he likes me. Baal, man - can you believe it?”

“Baal?” I repeated, not recognizing the word.

Sanjana flinched. “Oh, sorry. It’s sort of slang, we use it like you guys might use ‘shit’?”
She slapped her forehead. “Allah, I need to make sure I don’t slip up and say something like that
tonight. Imagine how embarrassing. What will the boy think?”

“No, that’s not how I meant it when I asked. I’m actually trying to learn -”

“Look Aisha, would you please come with me tonight? I’ve never...been to a party
before.” She stared down at her hands as her cheeks turned a soft shade of red.

“Of course,” I sighed.

“And also,” she croaked, clearly mortified, “I’ve never...well, drank before. Like,
alcohol.”

“Not really surprised, I sort of figured,” I laughed. “Don’t worry, girl. Lots of people go
to parties sober. It’s better, anyway. You won’t get sloppy around this guy you’re into.”
“No...that’s not exactly what I meant.” When she realized I clearly did not get what she was hinting at, she continued. “I don’t want my first time drinking to be in front of a lot of people. Like you said, I can’t get sloppy, right?”

“Oh,” I said, mildly taken back. “I mean, I have half a handle in my dresser. I guess I could let you try some so you know how it feels?” Sanjana eagerly nodded her head. As I hesitantly opened by sock drawer and reached for the Blue Raspberry Svedka, I paused. “I don’t get it, aren’t you religious?”

“So? We’re in college, everyone does it. I’m sure I will be forgiven.”

I, never having read the Koran once, shrugged and poured the liquor.

October

My project to reclaim my roots was failing fast. I don’t know when or where I went wrong, but the more I hung out with Sanjana, the more lost I felt. The more I felt I was losing her, something I couldn’t help but wonder if I was to blame. Still though, the dreams of Dhaka never stopped.


The clothes in my closet were slowly disappearing. Sanjana, after wearing a modest long sleeve, knitted top to her first party last month and getting snickered at by a group of bitchy girls, decided to swear off any piece of cloth that belonged to her. It wasn’t as if the knitted top didn’t work for her, though, as she spent the majority of the night hooking up with Aaron (not the boy from her stat class) while I hung by the drink station and chugged as many cups of jungle juice as I could before leaving.
One afternoon, Sanjana was getting ready for her date with Aaron, who she’d been seeing for about two weeks, in our communal bathroom. She stared into the mirror as I awkwardly stood beside her. “Why did you want me here again?” I asked.

“Consulting,” she said.

I looked at my face beside hers. Our skin was nearly the same shade, but she had pink undertones instead of yellow, which I envied. Looking at the two of us side by side, it suddenly became clear to me that I wore a lot more makeup than she did. Everything about me, actually, was a lot more groomed. My arms were shaved, my eyebrows plucked, my hair with blonde highlights running through it. And somehow, despite all of that (or maybe - because all of that), Sanjana radiated a sort of beauty that outshined my own. Her appearance was raw, authentic, and rough around the edges in a way that felt warm and welcoming to anyone who laid eyes upon it. I’m not sure why, but hers was a beauty that I couldn’t even find myself being jealous of. All I could do was admire it.

I realized then that she was looking back and forth between us too, as I had been. “I know what it is that’s bothering me,” she said. “Aisha, can I borrow some makeup?”

A few days later, we were hanging out in my dorm. It had become a sort of tradition for us. “What are you gonna be for the Halloween party next week, Aisha?” Sanjana asked, splayed out on my bed with her laptop open.

“I was thinking Wonder Woman,” I said, joining her on the bed with a bag of Cheetos in my hand. “Maybe Sandy, from Grease.”

Sanjana scrunched her nose. “Aren’t those characters both, well, white?” she said, reaching for a Cheeto.
I laughed. “What easily recognizable characters are there that share our complexion?” I rubbed my chin comically with orange crusted fingers. “Princess Jasmine and...Princess Jasmine.”

“I guess you have a point,” she sighed. “Maybe I could be Dorothy, then, if that stuff doesn’t matter. The Wizard of Oz has always been one of my favorite movies.” She paused and looked down sheepishly at her hands. “Do you, uh, have any dresses that would work for a costume like that? Mine all reach far past the knee.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed, leaping out of bed. “I have just the thing.”

“Thanks,” she said in a low voice, then paused. “Hey, Aisha? Why do you think that is?”

I turned around and arched an eyebrow. “Why what is?”

“Why there aren’t many notable brown characters we can dress up as.”

I thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. “I guess ‘cause white girls are pretty. And people like looking at pretty things.”

It was supposed to be a joke.

November

One of our favorite things to do on Thursday nights became watching *Friends* together. Sanjana had never seen it, and I felt it was my duty as her friend to properly educate her on this staple in American culture.

We sat curled up in Sanjana’s bed one night, my laptop open in front of us. “It’s crazy,” Sanjana said. “Everyone on this show is attractive. Fuck that, gorgeous.”

“I know,” I agreed, laughing. “You know, when I was a little kid it was my dream to look like Jennifer Aniston.”
Sanjana snorted, laughing at this like it was the funniest thing in the world.

Slightly confused by her reaction, I tried changing the subject. “So Sanju, how are things with Aaron going?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “Fine,” she said. There was a long pause. “You know something that I’ve come to realize? Brown girls, they’re just, well, not pretty. At least, they could never be as pretty as someone like Jennifer Aniston or Courtney Cox.”

I tried my best not to get offended and cleared my throat, composing myself before answering. “What the hell, Sanju? You know that’s not true. What about Aishwarya Rai? She won Miss Universe for god's sake.”


“Okay...anyway,” I huffed. “There’s a Bangladeshi Student Association meeting tomorrow, do you wanna come with me? I heard they’re serving homemade biryani.”

“Nah, it’s okay,” she said. “I have a date tomorrow, I don’t want my clothes to stink.”

My stomach dropped as those words left her mouth. She sounded like me. Did I implant that fear of smell in her? I looked at Sanju, the soft, blue glow from the laptop illuminating her face. She looked like me too. Her eyes lined with black, her jeans skin tight. She was so different. Did I do that to her? I thought she was supposed to be changing me, not the other way around. *Oh fuck, what have I done?* I thought, running my hand through my hair.

My phone began to ring. “Hello?” I answered in irritation. “What is it?”

“Aisha, I’m calling because I’m booking tickets to Dhaka soon.” It was my mom. “Are you absolutely sure you don’t want to come with me? I’m getting a great deal.”

“Mom, I don’t have time for this,” I sighed, not really paying attention to what she was saying. “No, okay? Love you.”
When I hung up, my chest still felt tight. *Jesus Christ, what have I done?*

*December*

“Sanju!” I called, zipping up my windbreaker. “We’re gonna be late.”

She burst out of the bathroom door and stumbled into the hallway, her eyes watery and red. “I’m ready, let’s go.” I paused to look at her. She had on my roommate’s clothes (because I guess mine just didn’t cut it for her anymore) - an army green tube top and highwaisted, ripped jean shorts.

“It’s cold outside, don’t you want to bring a jacket?”

She laughed as if I had just made a joke and walked past me to the elevator, her now stick straight hair whipping behind her as she did so. I sighed and followed her in resignation.

As we walked down a dimly lit street, I dared to ask the question that had been sitting in my throat for the last 30 minutes. “Were you crying earlier?”

She glared at me. Even in the dark, it was clear to see that her foundation was three shades lighter than it should’ve been. “No,” she said through chattering teeth.

“Aaron?” I asked, watching my breath float in front of me. Though I wasn’t looking at her, I could sense her flinch beside me. “If he’s there tonight with her, we’ll leave. Immediately. Okay?”

Honestly, I wish he had been there.

We were greeted by a wave of sticky heat and the pulse of ear shattering music as we stepped into the tiny, overcrowded house. We plowed our way through the shifting sweaty bodies surrounding us until we finally found the drinks in the back. I picked up a shot that had
already been poured and downed it, the liquid searing my throat as it made its way down to my stomach. I keeled over, composed myself, then reached for another.

Sanjana, however, seemed to have stumbled upon an entire handle of Bacardi. And I noticed too late.

She was sitting in the corner, taking giant swigs of it as she beckoned me to join her. The dim, reddish lighting made her eyes look almost completely black and her skin translucent. I quickly tried to rip the bottle from her, but she fought back. It finally slipped out both of our grasps and shattered on the floor, the clear liquid seeping into our canvas shoes. “What were you thinking?” I asked, reaching my hand out to her. “You’re going to get us kicked out of another party.”

Instead of taking my hand to get up, she grabbed it aggressively and examined it from the floor. “What is this? Mehndi?”

I looked down at the intricate, orangish patterns that ran down the back of my hand and swirled onto my wrist. “It was Eid-Ul-Adha last week,” I said defensively, tearing my hand back. “I was eight the last time I had it done. My grandma was so excited to do it for me.”

“You look like a fob,” she slurred, stumbling up. “It comes off with lime juice, or lemon I think.” She leaned in close, grabbing my earlobe and yanking it towards her. “So you better fix it quick,” she whispered, “or you’ll never find love here.” She looked around at the half dressed boys that infested the room in admiration and smiled longingly as one crushed a beer can against his forehead.

I stared at her in horror. “Is that really what you think you’ll find here...love?” I hissed. “And might I remind you, you have no business calling me a fob. You are quite literally ‘fresh off the boat.’”
“Girrrrrrl,” she said, clearly trying hard to emphasize the ‘r’ sound in the word. She had spent so much time convincing people that her accent had just disappeared over time. I knew it was BS. “Shhhhhhhhh.”

I was about to drag her home, when some boy tapped on her shoulder. “I’ve seen you around here before,” he shouted over the music. He stood with his back to me, but I could see that he was white and blonde and tall. A description that meant my friend would not be coming home with me tonight. “Sana, right?”

She giggled incessantly and nodded her head.

He moved closer, placing one hand on the small of her back and the other on the table beside them. “Wow,” he breathed. “Sorry, it’s just - you’re so pretty.”

Sanjana tilted her chin up, and I was going to look away to give them some privacy, when she suddenly burst into tears. It took less than two seconds for the boy to disappear from the scene. “What is it?” I asked gently, moving forward.

“Did you hear that?” she said, sniffling and laughing at the same time. “He thinks I’m pretty.” She moved away from me and grabbed a random, discarded red cup from the table. Without even looking inside, she finished its contents. “But he doesn’t mean it.” She swayed back and forth as she spoke, caressing her own arms. “Just like Aaron didn’t mean it. Because he left me,” she was screaming now, and people began to turn their heads, “for that bitch.” She kicked over the table beside her, the empty cups crashing to the floor. She looked at me. Her eyeliner was smudged and her hair was morphing back to its original curly form. “When they say we’re pretty, you know what they mean. Don’t you Aisha?” she looked around accusingly at the people watching her. “Pretty for people like us. But not actually pretty. No, no, no. We could never be, could we?”
“Sweetie,” I said softly. “Let’s go home, okay?”

“It’s my eyes, isn’t it?” she sobbed. “How could anyone love these black fucking eyes? Aaron didn’t. Maybe that’s why his new girlfriend is a pretty blond. A pretty blond with pretty straight hair and pretty blue eyes.” She widened her eyes at me. “That’s it!” She ran to a group of girls doing tequila shots and snagged a lime. “Aisha, remember? Mehndi is lightened with lime juice!” Before I could stop her, she stretched her eyes open and squirted the liquid inside.

January

I wasn’t sure what happened to Sanju.

After we had been kicked out of the party, I had to take her to the hospital because she wouldn’t stop screaming. I don’t think she ever forgave me for that, as her mom and dad had to be called. When they found their little, muslim girl in a hospital bed, half drunk with acidic juice seeping out of her eyes, they must have realized the mistake they made in bringing her here.

I say that because when I came back after winter break, I visited her dorm to find, ironically, a blond, white girl with pretty blue eyes sitting in her bed. “I was surprised too,” her roommate had told me. “I heard she moved back to India or Pakistan or wherever she was from.”

I went back to my room and cried. It was all my fault. All of it. I turned her into what she became, and there was no one left to blame but me. I failed her.

I threw my hair straightener against the wall that night, watching as it made a satisfying crack sound and broke in half. The next day, I was sitting in a chair at the hair salon, asking for my highlights to be redyed black. The Korean hairdresser with platinum blonde hair looked concerned with the request. “Are you sure, honey?” she said, running her hands through my hair. “This looks so pretty on you.”
“Yes,” I said. “And if it could be done quick? I have to catch a flight tonight.”

“Oh yeah? Where are you going?”

“On a trip with my mom,” I said, smiling. “I’m visiting home.”