



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION

2022

Highly Commended in the Secondary Schools Division

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Collapse

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As the gurney's wheels screech across the shiny linoleum floor of Al Thawara General Hospital, the tiny bundle of newly born tissue struggles within – wailing, kicking, thrashing. Cheap neon lights illuminate the hallway. Through the thin, fractured skylight window, clouds grow dense and heavy, thunder cracks viciously. Wind howls – rattling the windows – sending the panes into a frenzy. Frantic, the doctors swarm around the infant being whisked away. Eyes puffy, mouths loose, heads aching, they persist. As I hobble along the hallway, parallel to my son, I pray in the battlefield of my mind. My father used to always tell me, “A prayer for those who've done right will never escape Allah's sight.” My prayer won't be answered. The guilt of what I have done sticks to the sides of my throat, drips down into my stomach and settles in my bowels. My secret will be revealed.

Pain shoots down my shoulder and radiates throughout my arm as I thrust into the door of the neonatal ICU. My world turns. I feel like I have entered the sixth circle of hell, the residence of Shaytan himself. Everywhere my eyes dart, I am met with the same sight: a child lying in an incubator, gasping for air with a myriad of pipes being fed into every cavity imaginable. One child, especially, catches my attention. His skin is darker than Sajin's, but his eyes regale the same story of guilt and wrongdoing and eternal punishment. My blood freezes.

With the force of a thousand waterfalls, I rip my eyes away from the child back to the vital-signs monitor that Sajin is being connected to. God's will for him will be conveyed through the information displayed – the fate I am responsible for. Oxygen saturation, respiration and heart rate, the three factors that will determine his and my future. All is normal as the screen flashes to life. For a second, just a second, I see him turn to me and tell me that he loves me. Ever so gently I run my fingers along his bare scalp, down his ears, across his chest, as a weak smile spreads over my weary face. Then that second ends, and the room plummets into chaos.

“Blood pressure falling, heart rate irregular, oxygen saturation negligible,” Dr Marbarah whispers to his colleague, his voice tight with apprehension.

“It must be CHD, Doctor. His ECG is clearly abnormal and his nose sits in the right fashion for it,” his colleague asserts. Marbarah presses his steel stethoscope to Sajin’s chest. His face drops and eyes widen. Something is wrong. Very wrong.

“He needs to go in for surgery now,” Marbarah demands.

“B-but,” Adwa, the anaesthetist, stutters.

“Now.”

As the gurney is wheeled to the OT, my face flushes with embarrassment as I feel the eyes of my fellow staff fall upon my near-naked body. The potent scent of sterilised instruments and operating lubricant rushes into my nose and diffuses throughout my lungs. On a typical day, I would usually have to wrestle with frightened parents to keep them out of the OT. Until now, I never understood why they were so terrified as they saw their child being taken away to surgery; after all, the surgeons are more than qualified to maximise the chances of their child living. Though, as I waddle alongside the gurney with fear tingling throughout my body, I get it. Being wheeled into the OT might be the last time they see their child alive. Not this time, though, not for me. I’ve done enough good to deserve something. One mistake can’t outweigh the good of a lifetime. It just can’t.

I press my face on the glass of the theatre’s viewing room. As I attempt to calm myself down, small amounts of fog appear and dissipate with the ebb and flow of my breath. Gazing into the theatre, I meet the whites of Sajin’s eyes as they rescind behind his eyelids. Mere centimetres below his now-asleep eyes, a faint tremor runs through Marabarah’s hands as he guides the endoscope through the keyhole made in Sajin’s chest. Gazing at the video monitor, Marabarah’s eyebrows loosen, frown lines disappear and a veil of confidence drapes over his demeanour. My heart soars. My son will live. I smile.

Although I can’t hear the theatre’s happenings, the nurse comes into the viewing room every couple of minutes and reassures me that the surgery is going well.

“Mrs Yusra, you shouldn’t worry. Dr Marbarah is one of the most skilled surgeons in all of Yemen,” she says with a tone oozing admiration.

I know that Mar is the best. After all, that’s why I fell in love with him against the will of Allah. He was the most handsome man I had ever met. Ever since I started working here as a nurse, I always kept as close as possible to him. His smell was intoxicating, rare blue eyes enchanting, smile lifesaving. Even the hereditary dark

birthmark that covered his left cheek was a thing of beauty. It wasn't just his appearance that I loved. I loved him truly for all he was. And that's why I let him in. Deep.

"The surgery should be finished in about thirty minutes, Mrs Yusra," the nurse reassures me as she enters the room for what must be the one hundredth time.

The promise of the surgery's conclusion and my child's return eases my anxiety. Leaning back in my chair, I imagine bursting through the front door and surprising Ali when he returns from his business trip. Sajin wasn't expected for weeks. But, then, I remember. And I vomit. My breath quickens. My chest tightens. The floor spins around me. A panic attack is coming. I reach for the Valium in my purse. I only have fifteen seconds to swallow the pill; otherwise I will have a fit. I reach into the side pocket and rummage around for the pills. Keys. No. Cards. No. Cylindrical bottle. Yes. I rip it out of the pocket and tip a pill into my palm. But, then, I hesitate.

Three seconds.

Two seconds.

One second left.

I don't take it. I don't deserve relief. I have done wrong.

My throat begins to tighten as if to choke me out. I've felt this before, but never this violent and painful and horrible. I've done wrong. It's not Ali's son. I checked. I did a prenatal DNA test. It's Mar's son. It is.

I seduced Mar. I could not help myself, stop myself. I'd never been in love before. I was forced to marry Ali on the will of my parents and Imam. Mar's love was the first time and place where I truly felt free to be me, not having to conform to some norm, but to be how I truly am. And he loved me for it. Unlike Ali, he never complained about my body, or having to be with me. We loved every second of it. Then it happened. The mistake. We'd always been very careful, but one time we got too eager. We forgot. Sajin was conceived.

"About ten minutes to go," the nurse casually says as she swings in and out of the room.

"Are you alright, Mrs Yusra? You look awful."

"No, I'm fine," I manage to blurt out as I pull my features into a somewhat normal formation.

This is what I hate: having to pretend that I'm okay because no one else can know what I know. Not even Mar. I told him it was Ali's. I just couldn't put the burden of an illegitimate child on his conscience. He will go many places, and having a promiscuous wretch like me in the back of his mind will only worsen his ability to concentrate on his talents. Talents that will serve the world, not just the lust of one deviant woman.

"Five minutes left."

The sentence echoes throughout my skull. Only five minutes to go until the surgery is over.

Hope surges through my lungs and asphyxiates my anxiety. It's going to be alright. In five minutes, I will have my Sajin in my arms and everything will just melt away. My mind glows with happiness as I imagine our life together: kissing him goodbye for his first day of school, his face lighting up as he opens his birthday presents, crying in pride at his graduation. I can't feel guilty; I'm elated.

"No. No. No. It can't be," Mar yells so loud that his voice manages to pierce through the double-glazed glass. I jump out of my skin as I am torn away from my daydream and thrust into the very real present. What's going on? Mar's frantic. He's rushing around Sajin. The other doctors are trying to restrain him.

The ECG has flatlined. Sajin's still. I feel numb.

"We're losing him, Marbarah," Adwa exclaims – eyes spilling with shock. Panic spreads through my body, stinging my eyes with tears. Then my world goes black.

The harsh beep of an ECG monitor greets me as I regain consciousness. My whole body feels stiff. On the tallboy next to me, a clock reads 6 am. I've been asleep for nearly nine hours. I feel strangely calm as I manage to move my neck enough to catch the attention of the nearest nurse. She rushes off and returns with Marbarah and Ali. Ali sinks to his knees as soon as he nears my bed and embraces my hand with warmth and kisses it with passion. It's all an act. He doesn't love me. He never has. He just pretends in public to maintain the image of a kind, well-meaning businessman with a respectable wife and a happy marriage.

"Yusra, are you okay?" he whispers, voice full with hollow empathy.

"I'm fine," I reply, pretending to be thankful for his concern. But, I don't care about him. I don't love him, not after what he has done to me. I still have the welts on my back, deep and blue, from the time I forgot to prepare food. On the other side of me, there is

Mar. Although he is maintaining a deportment of professionalism rather well in front of my husband, I still feel his love, his empathy, his kindness towards me – the emotions he can't show for the risk of losing everything. Sadness fills me. Then, he says it. What I had hoped for. The sentence, the words, the sounds that bring me euphoria.

“Yusra, Sajin made it through,” Mar utters with a look wracked in pain.

Rapture runs through my veins, yet it can't reach my heart. What does that look mean? Could it be? They both know? I feel Ali squeeze my palm until it's about to break. Mar blushes violently.

They know.

The birthmark. I collapse.