

Robbed Dreams

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There are two types of people in this world. The people who let life control them, and the people who take control of their life.

My family was the latter. We had lived in Adilabad, a small, poor town in northern Telangana. Everybody's future was already decided for them. You were either a street vendor, spending your life selling goods on the road; a tailor, working long hours, sewing and stitching beautiful fabrics, only to be paid minuscule amounts; or a teacher, sacrificing time and effort to educate children, getting little or no money in return. If you were lucky, you'd get a job working in the city. It wouldn't pay a lot, but it would pay enough for a decent life, consistent food, shelter, and clothes. Most people accepted that these were the only futures they were capable of. But we weren't most people. My parents had big dreams for me. Dreams no one else would dare to have.

Beeeeeeep! Beeeeeeep! Beeeeeeep! The familiar sounds of traffic snap me back into reality. The trees dance in the gentle breeze, delicate leaves scatter the ground, and vibrant flowers are on the verge of blooming. I take a deep breath, the fresh air cooling my nerves. Just a couple of days ago I was walking to a rundown school in Adilabad through thick smog, dust-covered paths speckled with toxic trash, and no hope for a bright future. But we had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to go to America. The land of possibilities. The land of greatness. My parents and I huddled into a boat, each crammed in a wooden barrel, just for a chance to achieve the 'American Dream'. My parents had saved just enough money to rent a small apartment and they immediately enrolled me in the local public school. School is a basic right in the United States so we didn't need any documentation. I look up into the sky, thanking the gods for how fortunate I am.

Suddenly, fat globs of water splatter down. A cold shiver runs up my spine. Rain isn't a good omen, especially on my first day of Grade 9. Apprehension washes over me like a tsunami as my new school looms ahead. The pristine beige building towers over a sea of colours, filled with students wearing jeans, skirts, shorts, leggings, dresses, shirts, and jackets. I swallow nervously, looking down at my navy blue salwar kameez. I stick out like a sore thumb. I swallow nervously again, smoothing my pigtails and adjusting my orange ribbon.

"Orange will bring you positivity, prosperity, and passion!" my mother had said earlier this morning.

The crossing guard blows her whistle, signaling that it is safe to cross the road. I smile at her, gripping my backpack tightly as I walk through the black and white rectangles. Back in India, I had to run through the cars whenever there was a gap in the bumper-to-bumper traffic, hoping that I wouldn't get run over. Here, they had people making sure that kids were safe at all times. I beam gratefully at the crossing guard.

"Thank you so much, Auntie!" I call, completely unfazed by her hostile glare and brows furrowed in confusion. As I step onto the school grounds, people shoot me curious looks. I keep my head bent, staring at my feet as I hurry inside the building.

Wham! I crash into someone. Dread sweeps over me.

"Oh my god!" a girl shrieks. "Watch where you're going!"

"Very sorry," I mumble, chastising myself for being so careless.

"You scratched my hand," she says angrily, pointing to a thin red line on her wrist.

"Oh no. Here take this!" I quickly reach into my bag and pull out a tube of turmeric paste.

"I don't want turmeric! I need a Band-Aid! Besides, who would want to smear themselves orange?" she screams, pointing to my turmeric-stained fingers.

"It's a natural way to heal anything," I say softly, covering my fingers.

"Freak," she sneers. Her blonde hair bounces behind her as she sashays away.

I take a deep breath and walk to my first class. As soon as I enter, my neck prickles under the judgmental gaze of my classmates. I try to ignore it and nab a desk at the front, right next to the teacher. She smiles at me warmly.

"It's very nice to meet you, Miss. My name is Meenakshi Kumar and I just moved here from India," I introduce myself. Snickers and whispers spread through the class and I sink back lower in my chair.

The teacher clears her throat. "We're going to start by doing a quiz. You can begin as soon as I give you a sheet."

She places the test on my desk and I immediately get to work.

"Okay, time's up," Ms Keely announces, picking up everyone's papers.

Before I know it, it's the end of class, and the teacher hands my quiz back to me. I gasp. A big red zero is on the front of the page. What? How could this have happened? Oh no. What if I wasn't good enough to achieve my dreams? My parents had sacrificed so much to get me here, but what if it was all a waste?

Brrrrrrring! The bell rings loudly, saving me from my thoughts. I quickly get up and follow the bustling crowd into the canteen. I spot an empty seat in the far corner and place my stuff on the table. I pull out my sleek stainless steel tiffins. The spicy aroma quickly engulfs the table. The familiar scent terminates my worries as I gaze at the divine spread in front of me. Soft, homemade chapati, steaming dhal, fresh white rice, creamy aloo curry, delicate paneer tikka, and spiced kichadi. Delicious.

"Yuck!" someone squeals. "I knew the stench was coming from here."

It's the same blonde girl that I bumped into earlier. A group of kids are right behind her, pinching their noses.

"You're actually gross!" the girl hollers. "Can you sit outside? Nobody can tolerate your revolting food."

I slowly stand up, gather my things and leave the canteen. I sit in the hallway all alone, my appetite disappearing. I was so excited about coming to America. I had such high hopes. I would have so many friends. I would make my parents so proud. I would live the 'American Dream'. But now that I'm actually here, I realise none of that is going to happen. The 'American Dream' is a filthy lie. All of my dreams and hopes are pointless. They're never going to happen. I'm a nobody here.

All of a sudden, loud popping sounds reverberate through the hallway.

"Lockdown!" the speakers boom. "We are in a Stage 5 lockdown. There is an intruder in the building."

My heart pounds rapidly against my chest. What was happening? Everything was fine a minute ago! How can everything change so fast?

"He is armed with a gun. I repeat..." the speaker abruptly goes silent.

A series of loud gunshots resound. I have no idea what to do. The footsteps are coming closer. The screams are growing louder. The pounding in my chest is getting faster. Panic surges through me.

I try to stand up, but I can't. It's like I'm underwater. I can't breathe, but I need air. The walls turn into white blurs as the world begins to spin. My head aches, my throat is tight, and my chest feels like it could burst at any second. I hate this feeling. I don't know what it is, but I want it to stop. I want it to go away. I want it to leave me alone.

Suddenly, pain stabs through my shoulder. Warm, red liquid trails down my arm covering the floor, like lava flowing from a volcanic eruption. I look up and see somebody covered head to toe in black clothes, aiming a gleaming firearm at my head. No. No. No. I don't want to die. I still have so much I want to achieve. It can't end like this.

Click click! A fresh jolt of hot pain courses through my body. I scream and scream, wishing for someone to do something. Something that would let me live the life I deserved to live. I fight the pain with all my might. But it's not enough. I can feel the darkness seeping in. I try to resist but I can't. Not anymore. I give in, letting the darkness coat me.

I lie there on the hard linoleum tiles with my eyes slowly drifting closed. This is it. I feel the pool growing around me, encasing me in a tomb of my own blood. I'm just one more story robbed of a chance to get told. Robbed of my dreams. Robbed of a rightful ending. I feel somebody squeeze my wrist and mumble something, but I know it's too late. My dreams are gone. I'm gone.