

Missing Pieces

Tazeen Said

The screen door clattered shut behind her as she chased them up the narrow stone steps and out onto the rooftop.

As they squealed their way into the middle of the rooftop, she hesitated, before stepping quietly onto the concrete, following their laughter.

The heavy monsoon rain poured down, soaking her clothes through. This was a strange sensation, not like the cold, penetrating rain back in London, where she walked home drenched, and the house had that horrible damp socks on the radiator smell for the rest of the evening. This was something else altogether, and as she looked up to the sky, she outstretched her arms wide, palms upturned. The water trickled down her fingers and along her arms. As the heavens opened, she closed her eyes and held her breath.

“Erm, has your cousin never seen *rain* before?”

Sophie opened her eyes and felt her cheeks redden, as she looked over to her cousin and her friends.

“Well, she lives in London...I thought it rained there every day!” Sana said, before laughing at the spectacle she saw before her.

Sophie could have explained that actually she hadn't seen *this* kind of rain before. The kind that fell warm onto your skin, the kind that cooled you down rather than chilled you to a shiver. The kind that you ran out into, rather than ran under cover from.

She could have told them that usually she would run home in the rain, her mother waiting for her at the door, with a towel and a hug, before muttering about her leaving her wet rucksack on the carpet and to “go straight up and change!” That this wasn't like the rain that meant her uniform sticking to her, making her skin itch around the collar, or the steamed-up windows of the school bus as the rain pelted relentlessly and she had to calculate how many stops she had left, and what would happen if she missed it, when would she realise, and would the driver tell her or forget all about her? No, this rain meant running on an open roof terrace, the sun and the rain creating a magical shimmer around the edges of everything.

She could have told them that, but they had already made enough fun of her, and Sophie didn't want to give them any more ammunition. She decided to save the story of the rain for her best friend Emma when she got home. She hoped Emma was missing her.

They had started talking about her, as if she weren't there.

“My brother went to England—he said it was grey and miserable all the time and people lived in tiny little houses, some don't even have a garden.”

“Well, they don’t need gardens, it’s raining or snowing or dark most of the time—it’s like being a vampire!” another replied, and then laughed as if she had just newly discovered how funny she was.

Turning their attention directly onto Sophie, they told her,

“Just because you’re from London doesn’t mean you’re anything special, you know. Anything you get back home, we can get here, Miss La Dee Dah with your Queen’s English, and tea and scones,” she said, as she burst into giggles and looked for approval at the others.

They started playing one of their favourite games—mimicking Sophie’s accent and pretending they were enjoying a nice spot of tea.

“Back home.” Sophie thought about how Ali had gotten into a fight at college a few weeks ago. She had heard raised voices and crept her way down the stairs, to find her father shouting at him. She couldn’t recall much of what was said, as she was distracted by the dark dried blood on his football shirt. *He deserved it Soph, Dad doesn’t get it, we don’t have to put up with this anymore, not like they did—getting in my face, telling me to go back home! He won’t be telling me that again in a hurry, won’t be saying anything, with that fat lip...*

And then he had smiled at her and she remembered thinking that everything would be fine, although she didn’t quite know exactly what was wrong.

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“*What* are you doing with that?”

Surprised to hear Sana behind her, Sophie dropped the nail varnish. She had thought they’d still be up on the roof, having long left them to their games and entertainment.

“S-sorry, I was just looking...I didn’t try it!”

Keeping her eyes on Sophie, Sana walked over and picked the bottle up from the floor. She put it back on the shelf, slowly and purposefully.

“Mum says I have to be nice to, because of...everything. But just because I have to share my room with you, doesn’t mean you can touch all my stuff.”

Sana was sitting on her bed now, mopping her wet hair with a towel, her legs swinging back and forth. Under her cousin’s microscopic stare, Sophie could feel the hair stand up on the back of her neck. A small smile crept across Sana’s face as this continued interminably. Did she want her to apologise again? Did she want her to say that she wouldn’t touch anything again? Sophie had no idea what she was meant to do.

In this uneasy silence, and with the peculiar sense that perhaps she was not able to leave the room unless granted permission, Sophie took a step towards the door, half expecting a reaction.

As she stepped out of the room she suddenly screamed and jumped back in horror. A huge caramel brown cockroach scuttled across in front of her, wings raised and twitching, its shell

gleaming and shiny. Trembling as she walked away, she could hear Sana's laughter exploding behind her, followed swiftly by the single, hard slap of a shoe against marble floor, the cockroach disposed of.

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Sophie lay back, blinking at the ceiling, scanning it for any intruders.

"Go to sleep, please...!" Sana said, her voice sleepy and exasperated.

Sophie pulled the corners of the blanket closer towards her; tucking the edges under. She looked from corner to corner of the ceiling.

"It was just a lizard, I can't believe you're afraid of a little lizard...better get used to it, they're all over the place...probably some under the bed, too..."

Even in the dark, Sophie could sense the smirk on her cousin's face as she broke this news to her.

She wondered if the lizard was directly above her. She raised her chin to look up but staring at that one spot somehow seemed to just make the room darker and she couldn't see a thing. She pulled the covers up and over her face. The fan gently whirring above her, her panicked breath slowed and steadied and eventually she fell asleep, the last image flashing before her being the scaly looking lizard, and its tiny dancing feet.

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"You're nearly done, that was quick darling," Aunty Rukhsana said to her with a smile.

Sophie, perched high on the kitchen stool, wondered if she was going too fast, was she meant to be more careful, she hoped she hadn't done it wrong, and looked down at the two bowls in front of her, one full of peas, and the other full to the brim with their empty limp looking shells.

Her aunt laughed,

"Don't look so worried! I wish Sana were as quick a helper as you," she said, kindly.

Relieved, Sophie went back to her designated task and to listening to the conversation of her aunts around her, as they prepared dinner. When she had first arrived, she had thought there must have been a special occasion, with there being so many people. It was so different to dinner at home, just the four of them. At first, she had thought they were all arguing, the raised voices and interrupting each other. But then she realised, when each conversation usually ended with her aunt piling yet another spoon of food on someone's plate, or with someone bursting into infectious laughter, that no one was arguing at all.

"The girls are going to the mall later on Sophie, why don't you go? You don't want to be indoors with us oldies all day," Aunty Farhana said.

"In fact, wasn't Sana saying she was going to the cinema with some of her friends—you can go with them as well," she continued.

Sophie kept staring down, wondering how to get out of this one.

“Oldies? Speak for yourself.” Sophie could feel her aunt’s eyes on her, as she gently said, “It’s ok, Sophie can help me with dinner today. It’s nice for me to have some company for a change. Why don’t you go and watch TV for a while? I’ll call you when I start cooking.”

As Sophie walked out of the kitchen, she could hear hushed voices.

“She has to get some normality Rukhsana, let her go with the others.”

“Leave her be. God knows what’s going on inside her head right now, I can keep an eye on her here.”

“Honestly! Between you and her father...children are resilient, they recover. But not if you keep them wrapped up in cotton wool like this. She needs to spend some time with the family, with the girls...”

But Rukhsana was only half listening, as she stood staring towards the doorway, a small frown on her face.

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“You can come in, you know. In fact, I could do with your help,” Sophie’s grandmother said, looking at the incomplete jigsaw in front of her.

Sophie poked her head a little further around the doorway, her feet remaining firmly where they were. She wondered when she had been spotted.

“Come on in, dear,” her grandmother said, fitting a piece of the jigsaw firmly into place. Nani looked up at Sophie, smiling. “It’s only me in here.”

Walking in slowly, Sophie sat down, grabbing a cushion onto her lap.

“I’ve been trying to do this one for ages. Who knew so many flags had the same colours...” Nani said, shrugging her shoulders and moving the pile of remaining pieces towards Sophie. “But now, I have a helper!”

Picking up a piece, Sophie crossed her legs and cast aside the cushion. As she leaned in, she could smell Nani’s perfume; it smelt sweet—a bit like vanilla. Her grandmother, running her fingers through the loose pieces, selected two or three at random. She twirled them between her long fingers as she rocked back and forth, silently in thought. Sophie immediately fitted one into place.

“Oh! You’re already on your way! Well done darling, it takes your old Nani far longer than that! Well done...”

“It’s easier if you start with the edges first,” Sophie said sheepishly, “that’s all really.”

With her gaze still on the puzzle, Nani reached out and gently squeezed Sophie’s knee.

“My clever little granddaughter,” she said, almost to herself.

Sophie smiled, and moved some of the edged pieces towards Nani.

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“Well, Emma is my best friend but then I have three other friends who I see all the time in the holidays. One of them follows Ali around all day when she comes over. It’s soooo annoying,” Sophie said, rolling her eyes, “and Ali hates it.”

“Ha,” Nani chuckled, “he doesn’t hate it as much as he says, trust me. Boys love a bit of attention. And tell me about your schoolteachers...”

Sophie carried on talking, the two of them working through the remaining pieces of the puzzle bit by bit until eventually Sophie picked up the last one and fitted it in place. Her grandmother gave a little yelp as she did.

“Oh, we’ve done it! Well done Sophie—what a team we are!” she said as she leaned over and gave Sophie a hug, “Why don’t you carry the board over to the table, so we can show off to the others later.”

“That was fun, I haven’t done a puzzle in ages,” Sophie said, trying to keep her hands as steady as possible.

“Well, you’re very quick at them. You know, I used to do them with your mother all the time when she was little.”

As Sophie lay the board down on the table, she caught her breath a little.

“Did you do puzzles with her too, Sophie?”

“No.”

Nani was now stood behind her, her hands rested gently on Sophie’s shoulders, both of them looking at the table before them.

“But we used to do other things a lot—she used to help with my artwork for school. And the cake bakes for the summer fair—Dad used to sneak in and steal soooo many of the cakes when he thought we weren’t looking. She had to always make a whole extra batch. And also, Textiles. I’m rubbish at Textiles, so I’ll still need her help...” Sophie’s voice tailed off and she fell silent.

“Yes, she used to send me photos of the things you made together. She said you were very good.”

“Nani...do you miss her?”

“Well of course I do, darling. I miss her every day.”

“Then, what do you do?”

“Do?” Nani turned Sophie around to face her.

“I mean how do you stop missing her, how do you make it stop?”

“Darling, it won’t stop, not altogether—and there’s certainly nothing you can do to make it stop. And why would you? She’s not here with you, but that doesn’t mean you should make yourself try not to think about her. Whenever you miss her, you should tell us that. Tell Ali, tell your father. They both miss her too.”

“I can’t talk to Dad,” Sophie said quickly. “It...it makes him even more sad. I make him even more sad. That’s why he sent me here. He kept Ali with him—he even took me out of school so that I could come here.”

“Sophie, you’re here because I wanted to see you—so did your aunts. He didn’t want to be away from you, but I insisted. That’s all.”

“I don’t want to make him sadder.” Sophie’s voice lowered.

“Alright, how about you and I make a deal, hmm?” Nani pushed Sophie’s hair away from her face, tucking a strand behind her ear.

“Next time you miss your mother, or you’re thinking about her, you send me a message. Or you call me. And you tell me what you’re missing and what you’re thinking about. I promise it will make you feel better. We’ve been chatting all afternoon, haven’t we, do you feel sadder?”

“No, Sophie said, raising her eyes up to Nani.

Nani pulled Sophie towards her, hugging her tightly,

“He loves you, very much.”

Sophie remained silent. Her Nani’s arms felt like a vanilla scented cocoon and she squeezed herself tightly in them and closed her eyes.

“Maybe I can sleep in here tonight, with you?” Sophie’s muffled voice came through.

“Of course you can, darling. You don’t snore though, do you?”

Sophie smiled. Her Nani lifted her chin from the top of Sophie’s head and called out towards the doorway.

“Sana, why don’t you come in? Well, either come in or go and fetch your Nani a cup of tea, won’t you? I have *finally* finished that blasted puzzle!”

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Shielding her eyes from the midday sun, Sophie looked over to Sana and her friends on the other side of the garden. Exhausted from the heat, but not yet ready to go back in, they languished on the lawn, surrounded by bottles of drinks and snacks. One of them was theatrically licking each of her fingers, coloured orange from the crisps, taking obvious pleasure with each taste.

“You’re so gross...” mumbled another in disgust, wiping the drip of ice cream which had landed on her jeans.

Another was lying on her back, holding her phone suspended in the air.

“Oh my God, have you guys seen this...”

Sana sat a little apart, lying on a garden bench. Elbows propped up, chin in hands, she was reading a magazine, only breaking momentarily to reach for her bottle or glance down towards the others.

Sophie kicked off her shoes, sinking her toes into the grass. Pulling her knees up to her chest, she reached out for her bottle of Coke. Ali would love the glass bottles, she thought, maybe she could take one back to show him. She'd send him a photo at least.

“So, are you too good to sit with us now?”

Sana's friends were looking down at her. She squinted uncomfortably, the shards of sunlight glaring in between their dark figures.

“No way! You're drinking Coke!” one of them blurted out, before looking at the other and bursting out laughing. “Didn't you know? Never have the Coke!”

Sophie suddenly felt a little chill. Her fingers moved from the bottle, and she nervously started to play with the straw, twirling it slowly around. She had no idea what they were talking about, but she was absolutely sure she wasn't going to like it.

“The dark Coke bottles! Don't you know—the cockroaches get in them and sit at the bottom! You don't find them until you get to the last sip! Ewww, you've been drinking the cockroach Coke!”

Sophie could feel the sting of tears building in her eyes and felt herself redden.

“Why do you think we always go for the lemonade bottles,” one of them said, tossing her hair behind her shoulder.

She wanted to move, to immediately get up and run back inside. She wanted them—and that bottle—far, far away from her—but she was frozen to the spot, desperately trying not to cry in front of the girls.

“What's going on?”

The girls turned back, making space for Sana.

“Nothing. We're just telling your cousin to be more careful with what she drinks,” said one of them, smirking.

Sana stared at her friends, before brushing past them to sit on the grass with Sophie. Sensing no indication from Sana for them to also sit down, nor any sign that she was going to join in their fun, the girls quickly lost interest and went back to their spot on the lawn.

“What's Sana's problem...” one of them whispered as they walked away.

Sana grabbed the bottle from Sophie.

“Please don’t tell me you believed them, did you? It’s not true, they were just trying to scare you.”

Sophie watched Sana dramatically prod and poke the straw into the bottle to prove her point—and then taking a sip herself, as her finale.

The girls sat for a while in silence, Sophie plucking at the blades of grass around her feet; Sana fanning herself with her magazine. They both gazed over to the girls. As if reading Sophie’s thoughts, Sana said,

“They’ll probably go home in a bit. They’re not staying for dinner. Mum wanted it to be a big family dinner, as it’s your last weekend. Nani’s made her famous *kheer* for you...you realise that makes you royalty, right?”

Sophie looked over to Sana and smiled.

“I was thinking, after dinner...maybe we can have a movie marathon? What do you think?”

“Ok,” Sophie replied, hesitantly.

“Ok, great, done,” replied Sana, as she stood up, brushing down her jeans and yawning out a large stretch, “I’m going back in.”

Sophie nodded.

“By the way...”

Sana had stopped and was looking back at her.

“I overheard a phone call between Mum and your dad today. Mum wanted you to stay a bit longer, but your dad said no—he said he wanted you back next week, no discussion.”

Sophie was alarmed; Ali hadn’t mentioned anything about her staying on a few extra days when he’d texted that morning.

“Anyway, I didn’t hear the whole thing, but...well, sounds to me like he’s really missing you.”

And with that, Sana turned back and walked away. She headed into the house, smacking her friend lightly on the shoulder with her magazine as she passed them by. They grinned at her, relieved.

Sophie leaned back on the lawn, arms outstretched behind her, eyes closed. The sounds of the girls were drowned out by the passing of a plane overhead. She raised her face towards the sky, the warmth of the afternoon sun on her face giving it a glowing hue. After a few moments, smiling, she picked up her shoes and she went back inside.

She realised once indoors, that she’d forgotten to grab the bottle for Ali. It lay discarded on its side on the lawn. A cockroach slowly crawled out, its wings hitting the side of the bottle neck as it emerged. It teetered unstably on the edge of the straw for a few seconds, at one moment very nearly dropping off, before finding its balance, and taking flight.

Tazeen Said has previously posted three short stories on ABC Tales.com, all three of which were selected by the editors of the website as their “Story of the Week.” Her piece, “Four Across, Six Letters,” was awarded third place in the Wundor Short Fiction Contest in 2018, and a second short story, “Crescendo,” was published in the 2018 inaugural edition of *From Whispers to Roars*.