

ALEESHA HAQ – AS JAN (WINNER)

I barely remember a time when the electric lights above me worked. The blanket of dust that covered the tabletop was as familiar a friend to me as the perpetual darkness. The eerie stillness that hung in the cold air felt awfully loud. What little light filtering through cracks in the ceiling revealed worn and chipped walls. Yet dismal and cold as my surroundings were, I felt safe, and that was all that mattered really.

"Habibi," came a soft voice from behind the door, "Let me in."

I glanced at the skinny woman sat hunched opposite me in the dark room for approval. My mother, once an ample lady bursting with mirth, had lost so much weight that she was barely recognisable. She looked up briefly from the baby who nestled against her breast, her voice a breathless whisper, and said, "Open the door. It is Baba."

Quiet as a mouse, I unlatched the door. A blast of cold air hit me square in the face causing me to stumble backwards. Baba stepped inside and hurriedly closed the door. My baby brother, Rahim, stirred in his sleep. I could tell that Baba was tired for there were dark circles under his handsome and soulful brown eyes.

"Shahira, my princess. Baba has brought you some food," he said, a wan smile stretching across his face. From his pocket, my father produced a single slice of bread, which he tore in half. One half, he gave to Mama and the other to me.

I was ravenous! I stuffed the entire piece into my mouth immediately. "Eat it slowly, Shahira! Make it last," warned Baba reproachfully, but I gulped down the whole thing anyway.

"She is hungry; there is no need to scold. Here, Shahira. Have my piece," said my mother. She put it into my lap, where it lay staring back at me. Guilt weighed down my heart, even though my treacherous hands itched to shove this other piece of bread into my mouth just so I could quell the gnawing hunger. I decided to listen to my heart of hearts and returned the bread to my mother.

"Mama, I don't want ..."

Then came the dreaded whistle sound. Death from the sky.

BOOM! CRASH! BANG!

Dust fell from the ceiling. Shouts could be heard. Within seconds, everything around us started to topple over - books, pots, pans. Glass shattered into smithereens. Before I knew it, tears trickled down my pallid cheeks.

I was jerked back to the present as mama screamed, "They're coming!"

"Get inside the trapdoor now!" bellowed Baba, panicked written all over his face.

Gunshots pierced the air. Instinctively, I scrambled to lift open the secret trapdoor that was hidden beneath a threadbare carpet. Mama bundled up my baby brother and pushed both of us into the damp hole. He had begun to cry! She stifled his cries with her hijab.

Saying that we were in the nick of time was an understatement because as Baba was closing the trapdoor, the front door opened. We could hear the footsteps of the terrorists as they entered the house. The wood of the trapdoor creaked under their boots. My heart was palpitating wildly. A million possibilities of what would happen next raced through my mind. If they found us, would they torture us? Would they kill us straight away? I could hear the terrorists checking the cupboard and underneath the bed. They seemed to be rummaging through our belongings.

"Hold on, what is this?" came a voice from directly above us. I swear my heart stopped beating in my chest. They had found the trapdoor! I prayed to Allah for them to go away. Dear God, please, please. There was a long pause.

"Do not waste time, Ali. We have many more houses to inspect!" Another deeper, authoritative voice called out and the footsteps quickly receded as the soldiers left.

We waited a few more minutes just to ensure the coast was clear. Our home was in shambles, but at

least we were alright. We went over to check our neighbour's house. Inside, I saw my best friend's mother kneeling on the floor.

"Auntie Jan! Are you alright?" I called out tentatively, rushing towards her. She was cradling something and muttering to herself. As we came closer, we realised she was reciting a verse from the Quran.

Inna lillah waiina lillahi rajiun

We belong to Allah and to Him we shall return.

I gasped. The person she was cradling was my best friend, her son, Amir. His eyes were closed, and his shirt stained with blood. Immediately, I was enveloped with a profound and indescribable feeling.

A momentary dull buzz, an impermanent flicker, then everything was silent. A sudden drop off from the connection felt moments before. A punctuated ending followed by that involuntary reflection that happens when life abruptly changes from quick to slow. And I was at home in it; cocooned in the tranquility and peace of some last shred of innocence that still blossomed in the depths of my heart.

I turned to my parents, "Mama, Baba. We cannot stay here anymore. Yes, it's cold outside but we have no other choice. This is not safe. This is not home."

LAUREN TSE - GCSE (1ST RUNNER UP)

It was cold out here.

She breathed out warm air onto her palms, hoping to provide some warmth from herself to her icy, numb fingers. Shivering, she pulled the edges of her coat to wrap it more tightly around herself, then stuffed her frozen, rigid hands back into the pockets of her coat. She kept her head down as she trudged through the snow-covered pavement. Dirty clumps of white with footmarks imprinted on top littered the ground, crunching under her feet.

She was thankful for the wool beanie which was snugly wrapped around her head as it kept most of her head warm. Yet still, cold, frosty air managed to squeeze through the gaps between the collar of her coat and the hat, piercing the delicate skin of her neck. The coldness seemed to penetrate through her skin and sink into her body, chilling her to the bone. She scrunched up her shoulders in an attempt to cover her neck and it worked, but she eventually let her shoulders down, unable to maintain that position for long and surrendering to the biting wind of this December night.

She let out a sigh. She was freezing, that was for sure, but at least she had escaped from the bitter cold of her workplace.

A demanding and relentless authoritarian for a boss, heaps of work piled up on her frail shoulders, combined with unpleasant colleagues was the perfect recipe for her to wonder whether she should quit the job after all. She was obviously struggling, yet could find no one to support her. It was obvious that her co-workers considered her as a competitor, rival, and opponent, so she knew better than to seek help there.

She wrapped her coat more tightly around her body again, an attempt to shield herself from the coldness seeping in between the gaps and cracks of her layers of clothing.

"I'll have to wear an additional layer tomorrow," she decided. "Right now, I just want to be home."

She turned around a corner, then a tall man bumped right into her.

"Sorry," she immediately apologised, though she believed it was not her fault as she watched the man, whose eyes had been fixated on his phone, looked up at her.

He glared at her and snarled coldly, "Are you blind?"

She simply muttered an apology again before turning to walk away. Tired and battered, her patience was running low and she lacked the energy to simply maintain a conversation, much less to deal with a jerk like him.

"He's the one who's blind, eyes glued to his phone, and he has the audacity to blame me?!" she thought angrily. This ordeal only served to fuel her foul mood even further.

With a frown etched on her face, she entered the building. The click-clack of her high heels rang throughout the lobby. She pressed the button and waited impatiently for the lift to arrive. Finally, with a ding, the doors opened to reveal an empty lift. Stepping in, she was glad it was vacant, as it meant human interaction was avoided.

The doors of the lift opened and she hurried along the corridor, halting before the door to her home. She inserted the key and twisted, but the door suddenly swung open on its own before she could push.

"Welcome home!" the deep, warm voice of her husband made her eyes widen in surprise.

There, right before her, was him standing with a bright grin on his face. A smile tugged at her lips as she entered the apartment, her husband closing the door behind her.

He helped her take her coat off and hung it up while she gazed at him with shining eyes, "You're back from work early today."

"Yup. It's the last day of this year after all. I'd like to spend more time with you," he said and reached for her hands.

"Wait, what? last day? It's new year's eve today?" her mind went blank, beyond shocked that she had failed to realise what day it was. "I can't believe I haven't noticed."

"Mhmm, you're too focused on your work, dear," he tousled the strands of her hair. "Your hands are ice-cold," he frowned, enclosing his large, warm palms around hers.

Her hands thawed out as he breathed out puffs of warm air onto them. The heat on her hands quickly spread throughout her frigid body, making its way to envelope her heart in a fuzzy, toasty haze.

"It's cold outside," she murmured before diving into his embrace. His arms spread apart welcomingly as her body crashed into his.

"Papa! Is mama home?" the yelling was accompanied by a flurry of footsteps.

"Yeah," her husband yelled back.

"Mama!" she looked down to see her son sprint towards her.

"Sorry for being late, mama. I was in the toilet," he pouted. "Papa, I want to hug mama too!"

"Mama is cold. I'm warming her up," his father smirked and held her closer.

"I'm really warm, I can warm mama up too!" he frowned.

Chuckling, the wife squatted down and put one arm around her son, "We can have a group hug."

"Fine," the husband crouched down as well.

"Yay!" the son squealed as he tried his best to circle his small arms around them.

It was warm in here.

MICHAEL CHAN – A2 (2ND RUNNER UP)

It's cold outside, yet it is not pleasant inside, in consequence of you.

Sitting here, looking at the fire.

I told myself, 7:89 pm.

4th of June, 7:89pm.

Because of you, I will remember this minute, from now on, we spent one minute together, and we are united for a minute.

This is a fact, it is in the past, you cannot change it. But I will see you again tomorrow.

It is cold outside, people no longer cares what is right and what is wrong.

All you've been taught in school,

Have completely changed in reality.

People do things for money,

People do things for power,

People do things to survive.

It is cold inside.

Because our wings have been chopped off,

Chopped off by society,

Chopped off by humanity,

Chopped off by rules,

Chopped off by our parents.

We are all just prisoners here,

But on our own device.

In fact, we don't have a choice.

The moment we are born,

We are born to be a villain.

As right and wrong are just names for people's action from a certain perspective.

We can't change others' mindset.

We are born to be a villain.