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Safar

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Safar

Author Bio

Wamika Shoukat is a sophomore majoring in Biology, with interests in political science, writing, and photography. Her writing is most influenced by her experiences growing up in Pakistan, and she tends to explore social issues through the medium of writing."

Safar

Qaas Shoukat

“Ricardo Acosta”

“Present”

“Stephany Alvarez”

“Present”

“Amanda Arguelles”

“Here”

“Toussaint Bastille”

“Yeah”

“Kevin Brown”

“Present”

She raised her eyebrows and paused as she stared down at the piece of paper in front of her. As she hesitated, a look of confusion, panic, even, slowly spread across her face.

“Well I’m gonna butcher this one. I am so sorry if I mispronounce it.”

The young boy at the back of the class with oil-slicked hair, glistening, polished shoes, and an expertly ironed buttoned shirt and pleated trousers, shifted in his seat, already prepared for what would come next.

“Sham. Shams. Shums. Shums-udd-din? Shams-sud-din?”

The boy raised his hand.

“Shams-sud-din? Is that right? Shams-sud-din Butt?”

A collective chuckle was heard in the classroom. Even the teacher held back a smile as she looked up at the page after re-reading his name. Shamsuddin shifted in his chair once more, slumping down a little to avoid eye contact with the students around him, who of course, stared at him now, having all turned towards him at the sound of his name.

“Shums-uth-deen, miss”

“Oh, I’m so sorry about that, Shums-ud-deen. It’ll take me a while before I get used to everyone’s name.”

She repeated “Shams-ud-deen” several times under her breath, nodding her head and trying to memorise the name she would undoubtedly forget in a few moments. She moved onto the next name as she continued taking attendance.

He found the trouble his name gave his teachers quite perplexing. He had heard all day how perfectly some teachers would pronounce “Ngyuen” and “Usnavi” and “Xavier,” and was surprised to hear how effortlessly they managed to get “Meghan,” “Megan,” and “Megyn” all correct.

Some of the older teachers would flow through the list of names like skilled poets, rhythmically moving down the list, adding flavor and texture and character to each name. But for some reason, all of their showmanship ended when they reached his.

Shamsuddin Butt, son of Muhammad Irfan Ali Butt, grandson of Haji Muhammad Ali Butt. His parents gave him a “modern” name by their own standards, much to the dismay of his grandmother, who preferred “Muhammad Moiz” instead. But that modernity was of no use here; his name could have been anything. His name, like a foreign object, would always get stuck in his teachers’ throats.

He was proud of his name. The “sun of faith,” one who sheds light on truth and justice and all that is right and fair in the world. He always felt that his name came with a responsibility to be virtuous, and he tried his best to live up to it. As a child, when the schoolboys would tease him with “Shammo, Shammo, girls’ branch is on the other side,” he ignored the fact that they called him by a girl’s name. He would correct his classmates. “My name is Shamsuddin, not anything else.” Even from his early school days, he was patient and mature, and never gave them the satisfaction of seeing him upset.

“To grasp something new, you have to let go of what you are holding.” Chacha had told Shamsuddin this in the morning at the breakfast table. Shamsuddin thought about what he had said as he finished his breakfast and left his house. He had thought of Salloo and AB and Beeba as he stood waiting for the school-bus. They were friends since primary school. Everyday they would be dragged to school by their mothers, who chatted and laughed as they gripped their little sons’ even smaller hands, making sure they didn’t try and turn around and run back home in their dread of school. Over time, they were allowed to walk alone, but had to hold each others’ hands, immediately pushing each other away and racing each other down the street once they turned the corner and were out of their watchful mothers’ sights. Eventually, their hands were large enough to grab the steering wheel of Shamsuddin’s car. He used to pick them up one by one in the morning, and the four of them would all ride to high-school together. These memories all swirled through his head as the early morning breeze ruffled his clothes and danced through his hair. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other nervously as he wondered how they all got to school that morning. He looked down at the bus card he was still holding to make sure he was at the right stop. The bus was supposed to arrive at six-thirty. He glanced at his wristwatch: six thirty-five. The other children talked amongst themselves as he watched on.

Shamsuddin caught himself wandering off in his own thoughts and he shook his head to try and focus on the teacher in front of him. But she was explaining how to find the slope of a line, which he had already learned two years ago. This happened to him throughout the day, whenever he was not being spoken to, or he felt whatever was being taught was unimportant, he let his memories run away with his attention. The other students would whisper to each other, and he wanted to speak to them too, but wasn’t sure what he would even say. Where would he start? They couldn’t even say his name. As of now, he had sat through 6 class periods so far, and had heard six different pronunciations of his name, some that even he found a little amusing. But after hearing the laughter of his peers with his glowing, embarrassed red ears, he began to think that maybe “Shamsuddin” was overwhelming. He sat up in his seat, listening to the teacher explain “rise over run,” but stared down at his notebook. He looked harder and harder at the name written across the top of its cover. He thought of a quote his qari-sahab would often say: “If man cannot look up at the sun, how can he think about seeing God?”

Maybe the “sun” was all that they could handle for now, and the faith would come later.

He crossed off the “-uddin” at the top of his notebook. Maybe a better introduction would help, he thought to himself. His lips moved silently as he began rehearsing his new name. If someone ever asked him what his name was, he’d smile, look at them in the eye, and say: “Shams.”