



THE QUEEN'S COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2017

Senior Runner-Up: Hiya Chowdhury, 15, India

The Smallest of Things

“Meera! How have you been?” said Fatima, a wide smile playing on her lips, her face clear and beautiful even in the dusky twilight.

I admit she recognised me far earlier than I did. As a child, I had spoken to her a couple of times in the bazaar, the marketplace in front of our home. Her father, Ahmed Abdullah, was an affluent and respected businessman in the neighbourhood. I had always seen Fatima following him around like a wispy shadow, clutching at his *kurta*. Her alert green eyes, supple skirts and bright hijab framing her face were often overshadowed by her father’s personality. Never did I have the courage to befriend her. Maybe it was her father’s looming presence, or maybe my mother’s subtle, yet grim instructions that kept me at bay.

I had heard that her family had moved to a bigger city a few years ago, and her face had faded amongst the thousands I had encountered over the years in the bazaar.

When I was a child, I used to find the bazaar the most entertaining and peaceful place in our locality. As soon as the sun set, dozens of bulbs flickered on at the same time, their yellow light shining on the washed fruits and vegetables, dresses and bangles arranged on torn, ragged sheets inside makeshift blue tarpaulin shelters the vendors would put up. Ladies in bright fuchsia *sarees* with crimson *bindis* on wrinkled foreheads brushed past those in pitch black veils and *burkhas*. The aroma of flatbread lathered with butter, slow-cooked meat and barbecued kebabs were enough to pull anyone towards them through the bustling throngs. On days when it rained, the smell of deep-

fried *samosas* from the stall in the corner of the road would waft in along with that of wet mud, if you were to take a deep breath. It all coalesced into a confusing yet exciting continuum of colours, smells and sensations; it was a puzzle not done quite right, but the picture somehow fell into shape.

In contrast, the old-fashioned building next to the bazaar - my home - seemed like a monotonous, unyielding collection of bricks. While the rest of the world lit up with brighter colours and higher definition, my home had stubbornly remained in the black and white era. My family had lived in this house for three generations. When India was on the verge of her independence from colonial rule, the whirring wheels of the country were brought to a screeching halt, and the streets were stained with alarmingly crimson innocent blood. The partition lines between India and Pakistan might have seemed like a simple dash of ink across paper, but had actually been a crack of a whip on an already blood-stained nation. It had made a sound that reverberated across the country; riots, violence and slaughter crawling in its wake. My great grandfather and his small family had to leave their ancestral home and had found refuge in this uninhabited piece of land in India. There were many others like him, Hindus and Muslims alike, who had been a part of this exodus. With time, livelihoods were established, but none of the lives was really permanently mended.

That day, we were standing outside the *mandir*, and I was waiting for my mother to return from her evening prayers. I presumed Fatima was making her way towards the *masjid*, which was only a few steps away. Our neighbourhood was one of those unique places where a *mandir* and a *masjid* stood side by side, each seemingly towering over the other, depending on whose eyes were scaling the heights. The sound of the *azaan*, the evening prayers from the *masjid* and the tinkle of the *mandir* bells reverberated at the same time.

Fatima and I exchanged pleasantries, sprinkled with amiable laughter and the latest neighbourhood gossip. It felt like I was speaking to a distant friend; we didn't have much to talk about, but we

devoured the little conversation that we were capable of having. Just as we were running out of things to say, I looked over Fatima's shoulder to see my mother making her way towards me.

"Here," she said earnestly as she caught up with us, pressing a small bundle of red cloth into my open palms - presumably containing an assortment of sweets. "The priest gave us some *prasad*. He says it'll help you do well in your examination next week."

"Why don't you ask him to write my examination as well?" I said. My cheekiness had gotten the best of me most times in my life, and this time was no different.

My mother's eyes flared up, and she raised a single eyebrow.

Religious rituals were all-encompassing for my Hindu family. The auspicious basil plant which stood right in the middle of our courtyard, and was watered daily by an entourage of the women in the house, somehow demanded more respect than any elderly member of the family. Each morning, I would wake to the sound of my mother chanting a prayer under her breath while she hung washed clothes on the clothes-line, and then placed small incense sticks in every corner.

"They keep away bad omens, Ram." she would tell my brother when he indignantly questioned their need.

I wasn't completely besotted by these rituals, nor did I resent them, but I did hold them at arm's length. Nobody found out when my impertinent eyes would fly open while everybody was praying, their hands folded and eyes shut, and I would narrow them at the heavily garlanded statue of the goddess with curiosity, and with a dire need to find out what made her so powerful. But powerful she was.

I looked up.

“Fatima, would you like some *prasad*?” I asked, extending my open palms towards her. An alarming turn of the head from my mother and a raised eyebrow from Fatima made me realise that I had made a grave mistake. However light, there was unfathomable weight in what I held in my hands at the moment. I clenched my teeth, awaiting her reply.

“No, thank you,” said Fatima, her face falling. “I really must be leaving now.”

She turned around, her hijab flying in the light breeze, and made her way towards the *masjid*.

“Meera!” came my mother’s voice - gushing in unbound torrents. “How could you embarrass me like that? Who knows what she’ll think of us now?! Why did you even think she would take the *prasad* from our *mandir*? She’s Muslim!”

Growing up, I had grudgingly realised that maybe the world was bigger than the bazaar. The bazaar was a bubble. In the real world, we kept the peace by keeping the distance.

Ours was a neighbourhood where Hindus and Muslims co-existed in one geographical landmass but in countless worlds. The wounds of the partition would be periodically left to bleed whenever the bold newspaper headlines announced communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in different corners of the country and loud, unfiltered discourse on the television scrutinised our relations; deliberated on peace. We did have our good days, when no faith was bigger than crowding around to drink Rashid-miyan’s famous sweet tea in the bazaar, and no belief trumped the fact that Ramanji’s wife made the best *jalebis* in all of India. But on bad days the situation simmered, quite like the milk my mother would heat up every day. It was easy for the milk to spill over; and it often took just one irresponsible comment to turn a crowd into a mob.

I silently kicked the gravel under my feet. My senses were numbing; whether it was with embarrassment, anger, or helplessness, I wouldn’t know. Simply put, I refused to accept that lines had to be drawn, which made me tragically naive. The acerbic irony in Fatima’s voice reminded me

of that. It was a clean hand across a misted glass pane, and I could see a clear picture flashing in front of my eyes, but I'm not quite sure I liked it.

"Meera!" someone called out as we trudged back home. It was Fatima.

She walked right up to me, her eyes levelling with mine. I could sense my mother's open jaw without even looking at her.

"Meera, I was fasting for Ramadan when you had offered me the *prasad*. Would you mind if I broke my fast with it?" she said and placed her hands over my palms, which were clasped shut.

The sky began to colour indigo, and I looked up to see a few bright stars through the spiralling clouds of dust. It was a rare sight.

Maybe we can start with the smallest of things. Maybe we need to walk those steps to bridge the distance. Maybe peace will follow.

"Of course you can." I said, my face breaking into a smile, as I searched for the small bundle in my bag.