

Lida

I took home a pregnant girl. I first saw her on the bleachers in Esquire Park. She watched the boys by the iron Mirdad monument fight kites over the lawn. Her hair brushed the cerulean dress that waterfalled over her belly and exposed her pale calves. She swung her sandaled feet, sometimes stretching them out like she needed to know they were still there. No one sat with her.

Fall was starting, and us park custodians patrolled the paths, not giving a leaf a chance to touch the ground. They armed us with aluminum trash pickers, black plastic boots, and yellow jumpsuits. You could spot a rookie by how unwashed and bright their outfit gleamed in the sun.

We found our own figure-eight routines that covered the park, and picked up all of the styrofoam plates and kabob aluminum foil we could. Whenever Masood and I met on the paths, we'd raise our pickers high and pull back on the handles, trying to clamp the rubber tips together in unity. Sometimes, his arm would be up and he'd jerk forward to clamp my balls, but he stopped that the day after I bent his picker in half and chucked it in the pond. The supervisor should've yelled at me but didn't because I was never trouble. I got a laugh out of Masood saying "shit, if it was summer, I would've dove in after that shit, and you would've been all jealous of my ass in the water."

The later shifts were better because the sun weakened after three, and I didn't have to pick up the beer bottles and condoms that ornamented the corner holly bushes in the mornings. The ones leaving those were always sober enough to pile their shit where the old couldn't see. Kept the park innocent for them.

Late afternoons, Potomac air invaded the east side and snaked through the trees. I'd catch the breezes in my collar because they bubbled my suit like a falling skydiver's.

Vendors closed their carts at dusk and Masood always wanted me to ask for the leftover scraps they would throw away.

"C'mon, Nabil. People don't like me," he told me the first time. "You got that, like, noble knight shit about you."

I held the picker above my head like victory.

"And you're tall."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You can impose on a motherfucker."

"So if nice doesn't work, I can intimidate a gyro out of a tired—"

"You've got nice hair."

"I'm not that tall."

"You've got better Dari skills."

"Look, just—"

"People like you more than me, alright?" he said, because I saved money, said "Salaam" with a smile, and had vendors' wives asking me why I'm thirty and not married. "Because I'm waiting for you to leave your husband," I always told them. They knew my dad when he was alive, and were sure I inherited his kind heart.

I told Masood I'd see him later and he followed the path out, guiding a lost old couple to the exit. I saved the bleachers for last because they stood by the paths that lead home. It was

close to nine and the pregnant girl was still there. The girl took something from a black bag too big to be a purse, and leaned back. My picker was caught on a loose screw in the metal jungle under her seat, and when I pulled, the picker slammed into one of the hollow steel pillars, echoing something like a laser blast.

“Sorry,” I came out and said. “Hope I didn’t, y’know, scare you.”

“It’s okay,” she promised, leaning back again, smiling, palms on her belly. The glow of the lamps shadowed most of her face.

I turned and walked a few steps, but came back. “You know it might not be safe around here at night,” I said to her. “I mean it’s safe, but the lamps don’t hit here and it’s dark—”

“Aren’t you tired?” she asked, turning to me.

“Hm?”

“You’ve been picking up trash all day, I’ve seen you. You emptied your bag three times.”

“I don’t remember seeing you eat. I can get you some food. You want water?”

“You were watching me too?”

“Well, yeah. Worried. Who leaves their girl—”

“Who’s parents kick their six month pregnant daughter out?”

Baba would kick my ass for not helping her. I was nice, but he was goodness incarnate. If you were a rained-drenched salesman or delivery boy, he’d pull you into the apartment fast like a tidal wave was gonna eat you in the hallway. The strangers always said they could wait in the building lobby, but Baba insisted on tea and blankets. He was so genuine and pushy that he made a few stragglers take showers, while guess who had to dive sixteen floors to the laundry

room and wash a strange dude's drawers? Using salad tongs to dump the clothes, I boiled inside knowing that a naked stranger could be stealing our shit and getting away with it—Baba was too swollen and chip-hipped to chase anybody—it took him half a painful minute to turn around. Maybe that's why nobody stole anything. Baba's seahorse posture could make the homeless feel sorry for him.

When Lida wasn't gripping my wrist coming down the bleachers or up the steps in the park, she said nothing; just held her big purse bag below her stomach where she could feel it punching her thin thighs. Two more months of baby on her frame, and she'd have to limbo walk just to not fall on her face.

At home, she noticed I had mattresses instead of couches, and no dining table.

"Kandahari?" she asked.

"Yup." She looked Panjshiri, from her light hair and eyes.

"Pashto?"

"Dari."

"How come?"

"Okay, there's a bathroom in your room, but if you want to take a shower, there's the one in the hall."

"Okay," she said. "It's like an art gallery with no art. Don't worry, that's not a bad thing. Just a thing thing."

"I can warm up some palauw, or give you some extra blankets if you want."

She slowly spun around. "Which room is it that—"

“End of the hall,” the four foot hall.

I waited until the lights went off under her door (Baba’s old room) to take a shower. Pregnant women, I thought, had to keep eating or drinking, and she was doing too little of both. Maybe she was trying to put me on the line for something, and that this whole thing is a setup for her and her husband to sue the green out of a dumb shit. My money stayed in a safe in my room, and it would’ve sucked to spend it on the crap results of good intentions. She couldn’t stay for long.

At 4 AM, a heavy-heeled marching punished the linoleum in the kitchen. I woke with my hands in my hair while I burned my feet roughing through the carpet. The lights were off and I saw a figure absorbing the light of the fridge. Lida’s elbow was high in the air as milk dripped down her neck and into the same dress she wore at the park. She saw me and choked. She put the milk back in, closed the fridge, and wiped her chin, wrist to elbow.

“I thought I found the light, but the switch didn’t do anything, so I couldn’t find a cup,” she said. “I tried to drink it without putting my lips on it, but I kept missing my mouth. Some got in my nose. I thought I was gonna drown,” she chuckled. White pooled around her toes. “I’ll clean it up. Promise.”

I released the test button on the wall switch. “Should work now, just don’t hit that button again,” I said. “You can use the clothes in your room if you need to change.”

In the morning, she laid out butter, long Afghan bread, honey, toast, smelly cheeses, and rainbow jellies on the floor in front of the two mattresses. Lida had puzzled together all of my placemats to protect the carpet.

“Salaam!” she beamed, touching her cheeks to mine and kissing the air. She dressed in Baba’s old undershirts and nylon sweats. They made good maternity wear.

“Salaam,” I said, trying to rub out the magnetic strands on the back of my head.

“Nice breakfast before work,” she claimed.

“Did you go out and get these?”

“I had some extra money. I had to wait for somebody to let me in the building, though.” Which meant that she left my door unlocked.

“Here, I’ll pay you back.” I went to my room and she followed, protesting. She braked in my doorway.

“Your room is like the rest of your house,” she said.

“Yeah.” I kept my back to her so she couldn’t see the combo on the safe. “What’d you expect?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged, sliding inside, balancing herself with the wall so she could sit on my bed—the mattress on the floor. “People’s rooms are different than their living rooms. But my room has a bed frame, and nightstands.”

“It’s the guest room.”

“You don’t have any paintings or posters or pictures in yours.”

“I have memories,” I said, holding out a few folded twenties.

“You don’t need to pay me back,” she said. Her eyes sharpened, “That looks like more—”

“There’s a little extra.”

“Little extra?”

“For you, you might need it,” I said. “For a hotel.”

“Can we just, just eat first?” Her eyebrows straightened, and her mouth twitched like it was holding a frown back. I was defenseless to how she made me villainous. I dropped the money on the mattress, and she led me back to the living room like I’d never been there before.

I spent half of the conversation scraping the burns off the toast, and she spent the other half apologizing and praising my strong oven.

“You’re the only Afghan ever with no toaster,” she said.

She told me she lived on the North side of the island where the houses were. Her parents kept her at home when her belly started to show, and told her to stay in the house until the baby was born. They thought that as long as Lida was seen without a pregnant belly, no one in the neighborhood would ask questions. When they found out she was sneaking the car to midnight movie showings in Burke, they threw her out.

“I don’t really blame them,” Lida said. “I’m not married and I’m pregnant. They don’t know how to explain that to other people. They play strong and don’t bring up any weaknesses.”

“That how you think it is?” I said, looking at her arms, thinking that her parents didn’t feed her. Unless it was genetics.

“They told me to go back to the *gookhor* who did this to me.”

A Persian guy who worked the sunglass stand by the restaurant she served at. She said he was more pretty than handsome, and was too small to be as loud as he was. When the

doctor confirmed she was with child, she never went to work again. She never knew where he lived.

Masood believed her less than I did.

“Are you sure she doesn’t have a pillow under her shirt?” he asked. “I mean, have you seen her shirtless? Okay, maybe not, but have you seen her in a tight shirt? Like a size small from the teen section?”

“She’s twenty-four,” I said.

“You should’ve gave her your white tee and been like: ‘oh my goodness, I just spilled like a whole glass of water all over your stomach.’ Then you’d know.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking.”

“Wait, did she leave?”

“I told her she could stay one more night,” which was true.

“You left her alone at your place?”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Not leave a stranger—”

“She’s alone.”

“She doesn’t have parents here, Nab. I’m telling you. It’s bullshit. She came here and got knocked up.”

I didn’t care if she lied about her past, as long as everything else was the truth.

Lida simmered potatoes and I put a bag down by the counter. She bought a rice cooker and a toaster with the money that was on my bed. I should've been angry.

"Shopping?" she asked from only hearing the bags. "Fun." She had one hand on her hip, and one stirring the pot. One of Baba's longsleeves was tied over her stomach, and her hair stood proud in a bun. She looked like she knew where everything in the kitchen was. I knew the longer she stayed, the sooner I'd fall for her.

"Did you go to the Southside?" I asked.

"Took the bus."

"The bus."

"The. Bus."

"When's your next doctor's appointment?" I asked at dinner. She used her first three fingers to scoop rice into her mouth. I'd only seen older folks do that.

"Couple weeks," she mumbled, while some things tumbled off her lips.

"Think your parents are worried? Think they started asking around or something?"

She pointed a glistening finger at me, "You're worried about getting in trouble? People knowing I'm here?"

"I mean, they probably thought you were gonna go to a friend's house for a day and come back."

She smiled. "I'm not at a friend's house right now?"

I went to the kitchen and brought the bag. "Here."

She put her bowl down and wiped her hands on the shirt-apron. Stray grains of rice stuck to her lap. "Vitamins!"

"Calcium and folic acid. Did some reading last night."

"Reading? For me?"

"They sold out of iron, so I'll go back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" she sang.

"Tomorrow."

That night she called me into her room, and she was under the covers, on her side, with a grey t-shirt collar darkening between her teeth. She was embarrassed to ask for more pillows. She wanted to see if sleeping upright would help her back. This meant that I had to give her my pillows and sleep flat-backed like Baba did when I was a kid. Every morning that I bursted into his room, I'd find fluffy casualties against the door, beaten like they tried to escape. I used to think that was his way of telling me to stay out, so I beat him with those pillows until he woke up or gave up.

"You can stay," Lida said. "If you want."

"You have a boyfriend."

"He never was my boyfriend. And I don't want him to be."

In my bed, sleeping without pillows meant a corkscrew-necked morning and an afternoon of not being able to look up. Baba's mattress was a king size softy. I told her that I would stay because she might need something else in the middle of the night.

She woke up three times for the bathroom, and landed back on bed, nestling closer and closer to me until we kissed, her belly a hot barrier between us.

Baba's blue shirt hovered over Lida's bare thighs as she flipped hashed browns. She slapped my hands with the stirrer when I tried help, so I put my arms around her, smelling and listening to the food sizzle.

"You're always making potatoes," I said.

"Cravings. Pregnant."

"Aren't you cold?"

"Nope."

I couldn't interlock my fingers, so I put them below her belly, and lifted it a little like it would take some weight off of her. She giggled and leaned back, landing a long one on my scruff, not telling me I need to shave.

On my way out, I told her to take her vitamins.

She rushed at me and pinched my chin. "Hey, mister, who's the parent here?"

Petting zoo weekend was once a month depending on the weather. Farmers came from the south and the west on short trucks the length of two parking spaces. Park workers were responsible for dragging the plastic logs from the back of the office out to the fields. Unless you were new, you didn't need the instruction booklets to make the barriers. Farmers brought haystacks to wall in the smaller animals, and they sometimes brought kiddie pools for people to buy goldfish. I guarded the Small Animals Pen with an old lady farmer. We watched one mother, scarved beyond comfort, pet a guinea pig with her finger and twitch away like it

scolded her. Her daughter picked the animal up and fed it a pellet. On these days, the kids were the brave ones.

Lida surprised me with a hug and I looked over her to see if anyone I knew was looking. I hadn't seen Masood yet. She wore clear lipstick and one of Baba's bright blue v-necks. I jerked away when she tried to kiss me.

"I smell bad. You don't want none of this," I said.

"Okay." She shrugged her shoulders and looked at the pony ride station. "You know how to make a pony cry?"

"How?" I asked.

"You put me on his back," she smiled, going into my pen.

"You're not heavy," I said to her back. She sat on a crate and massaged the top of a baby goat's head with her fingers. A bunny ate the grass around her feet as Lida cupped a fuzzy golden chick. She brought it to me by the gate and I stared at the bird as it was brought closer and closer to my face. It pecked my nose, and I flinched. Lida hid her laugh behind her hands and popped out to kiss me when I tucked my big embarrassed head.

A week later, Masood invited us to dinner so he could meet her. When we knocked on his door, he slid out, holding the door tight like he was hiding a murder.

"We're going to my mom's," he said. I looked at Lida in her new green dress, matching eyes, and light plum lipstick. "Don't worry," Masood said, "I told her you guys were cousins."

"Really? My cousin who's pregnant and came to visit me *alone*."

“I live in Dumfries with my husband who’s away on work,” Lida said. “I stay with my parents in Fairfax until he comes back in a couple weeks.”

“See that? Girl’s good.” Masood said to me.

“What if she sees you around like a month from now?” I asked her.

“Hm, what if?” she hummed against my cheek. Masood crossed his arms and puffed.

I loved his mom, but POWs wouldn’t eat her food. Khala Vohra had high sodium and decided that everyone else did too. She tried every salt substitute: when she tried lemon, my jaw hurt and I had speak with my neck like a German; with cayenne, fire dragoned out of my ass and my throat burned for two days. One month, she used MSG and I was excited she finally found her cooking groove, but I broke down and told her what the initials stood for. She cursed the world for taking a victory from her, and Masood arced the can into the trash. To him, her food wasn’t crap, just not as good as all the other food he ever had in his life.

She collected rugs, and laid them on the floor so thick that her apartment was ten degrees hotter and an extra three inches above sea level. I sometimes tripped on the rug flaps when I stepped out of her normal level kitchen, and only wished I fell when a pot of her beef was in my hands. I would’ve gladly taken the burns.

Our plate bottoms stuck to the plastic tablecloth, so bringing your plate closer meant bringing everyone else’s. It was like playing Ouija.

Lida was welcomed with a graspy happiness that made her look like family. Khala Vohra’s bubbly soda voice controlled all pleasant conversation. I was surprised that she couldn’t get enough of Lida. But the fake back-story was too detailed to be fake. I couldn’t

verify some of the answers. Was she really born in Welasco, Texas? Did her father really punch a communist? Shit, did she really have a husband? Truth or lie, Lida's Dari didn't stutter, it was slow, calculated, better than mine. Khala eventually took her to the bedroom to show her some homeland photos of when Khala was pregnant.

Lida hadn't flinched when she ate the beef mantu, but every over-spiced dumpling was a battle down my throat—I drank enough water to swallow a bowling ball.

"So what's it like fucking a pregnant girl?" Masood said plainly.

"What'd you say?" I wiped my mouth.

"I mean, do you have to hit it from the back the whole time? There's probably no face to face huh?"

"How do you say some shit like that to me?"

"Nab, what's gonna happen when that baby's born?"

"Whatever's gonna happen."

" 'Whatever's gonna happen.' Dumbass, you don't know her, it's not your kid."

"I should dump her on the street, that's what I should do."

"You can't raise a baby."

"I've got money saved up," I said, going back to work on my plate.

"That how she got the dress? That how she gonna get other dresses? And baby food? Wipes? Diapers? Cradles? Fucking strollers? Are you sure someone's not looking for her?"

"I've got money saved up."

"I love you, Nab, but—"

"Masood?" His eyes were red and holding.

“You deserve someone perfect.”

“Thanks, thanks. You do too.”

“No. You? You’re a good guy, you’re a better man than I am.”

Lida woke with a fever in the morning, so I took a sick day. I filled the tub halfway with cold water. She leaned her back against my chest and her belly islanded out of the water. For hours, I played with her long fingers and slowly clawed her belly and legs. She fell asleep whenever the water warmed.

The nausea and throwing up didn’t scare me until the next day. In the morning, I saw her shiver from the bedroom to the tub, and called out of work again. I tried to give her some crackers and ginger ale to calm her stomach, but nothing stayed down. Her neck ached and the water took less and less time to warm. Lida cried every time I felt her forehead. Sometimes we’d sit up and hold each other, me repeating “it’s just the flu.” I knew it wasn’t that or food poisoning, because I kissed her, and spent moments inside her, hoping to get sick, but my body stayed quiet. When you’re pregnant, the only thing more dangerous than a contagious problem is non-contagious one.

“I’ll leave if you call a doctor,” she said plainly.

“You have to go.”

“I’ll get better.”

“You’re getting worse.”

“Just a little longer.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Save your money.”

I climbed out of the tub and stormed through the cold blitz. I came back dry and dressed.

“If we don’t go now,” I commanded, taking my phone out. “I’m gonna *spend money* on an ambulance.”

Watching her get up was seeing her in old age. She clutched my forearm and I held her above her elbows so she could slide her wrinkly feet out.

Masood drove us to the hospital. Lida had a listerial infection, and they took her to testing rooms I wasn’t allowed into.

“I hope the baby’s okay,” Masood attempted.

“No shit,” I said, staring at a weird poster of a doctor posing like a wizard, a needle in his pocket.

Khala Vohra sat across from me and asked over and over if I wanted something from the cafeteria. She never mentioned Lida’s husband. She never asked why no other family members came by during the three days Lida was in the hospital. Lida lost the baby, and Khala stayed with her during my workshifts. The first day, I felt guilty about it, until I came into the room and the two stopped speaking. They greeted me all cordial, like I was the doctor.

When Lida and I were alone, she’d only speak when she needed a blanket or some pudding. She pleaded with the doctor to let her leave, but he wouldn’t. She huffed about it costing me money, and I told her her words were useless. So she stopped talking to me.

Lida moved in with Khala Vohra one day after the hospital let her go. I know she would've gone earlier if she didn't spend her time washing Baba's clothes and saying goodbye. We hugged for five goddamn minutes.

During Halloween weekend, people pitched in to setup the haunted trails, outdoor fog machines, and black lights. I walked through the middle path in civilian clothes, and gave a wave to Masood, who was in a tree clearing the branches of toilet paper. The worker in the tree beside his hooked fake spider webs on the leaves, and the cotton hung down like a snout. I walked over to Masood.

"I know," he yelled from up high. "I've been watching him. He sucks."

"He new?" I yelled back.

"Yeah," he said.

"Well, I'm out."

"You're here for the morning shift tomorrow."

"I know."

"Have fun, Nab. I'll come later."

On the Southside of the island, the club line was long, but the entrance was still in sight. I checked out all of the out-of-towners with costumes and saw the back of Lida's head a few people ahead of me. I thought about calling out, then brushed the idea off. I would've seen her inside if I wanted to.

It took an hour to get in, and by the time I got a drink, Masood slapped me on the back, and begged me to find someone to dance with. The smells here even drowned him out.

I danced for two minutes and stepped off the floor. Masood rolled up his sleeves and extended his fists like someone was supposed to fit him with armor. He started this tornado move, turning faster and faster. The orange lights lit him up like fire, and the people rippled away in fear, but he kept spinning and spinning.