

Different Shades of Reality

For Halima Abdi

By TheSpiralledEye

Life has continued for Soraya and Saanvi; Soraya is now a middle aged mother to a toddler and Saanvi is struggling to find her place out of college. Suddenly, they both realise they are starting to forget their old lives as men and wonder whether or not that is a bad thing at all.

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The sound of clicking keyboards was as monotonous as it was irritating. Saanvi sighed, finishing up yet another order for the usual office supplies; paperclips, printer ink and a dozen or so boxes of pens. She'd graduated ages ago, she was supposed to be a star reporter by now or at the very least an up and comer. She was supposed to be following political intrigue, or foreign affairs or hell, she'd even take sports if it meant she could be doing some actual journalism.

It seemed unfair really; she'd found a passion in journalism, a real reason for striving forward in life; and now she couldn't even do that. Not even with an early graduation, diploma and a set of stunning references. In the age of AI writing and clickbait faux news sites it was basically impossible to get into real journalism anymore. All the real news outlets had their star reporters and didn't seem keen to hire new ones.

So after several gruelling months burning through her savings and stubbornly refusing to move back in with her mother and Manuel, Saanvi had accepted a position as an office assistant at an insurance firm. It was better than writing for one of those internet sites doing lists of the ten hottest skin care routines or something. Even if it was mind numbingly boring and depressing.

Well, with one exception.

“You know, you could at least pretend to be less miserable here.”

The tone was jovial and sarcastic and the first genuine smile to grace her lips formed as Saanvi turned to regard the owner.

“What are you going to do, report me?”

Mia shrugged.

“Might get me a promotion. Who knows?”

The two women laughed. Saanvi hadn't expected to see a familiar face when she started here but it had been more than welcome. She hadn't seen Mia since high school, they had run in the same circles for years before Mia ascended (quite literally, she was a tall girl) up the ranks of high school popularity and left Saanvi in the dust.

She hadn't done it deliberately, Mia was too sweet for that. But when she had come back from summer break having gone through a massive growth spurt and somehow taken on a model physique she'd become all the more intimidating. Saanvi had been scared to even stand in her shadow.

It was strange to think that somebody who she had once felt was so above her was now the closest thing she had to a best friend. Like so many people, they had clung to one another out of inertia the first day here, just glad to have somebody somewhat familiar to suffer with. It had been surprisingly easy to fall back into old habits and it felt nice to have somebody to gossip with. When she told Mia her mother had another baby at her age the woman had to practically pry her jaw off the floor.

Her phone buzzed on the desk and Saanvi groaned; her mother. It was hard for them to talk these days with little Arjun keeping her busy. He was almost two now but still kept her mother up half the night. Normally, she was happy to talk but ever since she took this job things had been awkward. She couldn't help but feel like a failure. Even if her mother ever said anything to support it Saanvi couldn't shake the idea that she was silently judging her decisions.

“Are you going to get that?” Mia asked, looking over her shoulder at the ID.

“Yeah....I just...”

“I keep telling you, your mum doesn't think you're a failure.”

“She'd be the only one.” Saanvi only half joked and Mia gave her shoulder a squeeze.

“At least two people are proud of you.” She replied sincerely before leaving her in privacy to take the call.

The touch left a warm patch on her skin and Saanvi felt the heat spreading to her cheeks. Doing her best to ignore the feeling she lifted the phone to her ear.

“Hi.” She greeted, wincing at how curt she sounded.

“Did I call at a bad time?” Her mother asked, Saanvi could hear the inane music of some toddler TV show in the background.

“I’m just at work.” Saanvi admitted. “Slow day.”

“Oh darling, don’t sound so sad. I am sure you will find your dream job soon enough.” Her mother tried, her sympathy made Saanvi feel even more pathetic.

“Sure, was there something you needed?”

“I just wanted to check on you dear, you’ve been so down lately because of work. I know you’re disappointed because you need to stay positive! Maybe pick up a little side hustle or something to raise your spirits.”

“I don’t think more work is going to make me feel better.” Saanvi deadpanned.

“Make it something fun! What about this streaming thing all you young folk like these days? Why not give that a go?”

Saanvi was about to beg her mother to stop trying to sound in touch with her generation when she was hit with a strange emotion that was somewhere between nostalgia and unnerved. Streaming, hadn’t her mother tried being a streamer...before? Actually, when was the last time she’d played a game? Any game? She’d loved that action one with all the army fighting maps.

Saanvi blinked, no, that couldn’t be right because...she never had a gaming console at all. She didn’t play games except at other people’s houses, it was somebody else who’d played Xbox on his off days.

It wasn’t often she was reminded of her other life. In fact, most days it didn’t enter her mind at all. Yet all of a sudden she realised it wasn’t just that she was embracing her new

identity...she was struggling to recall the old one. Had her mother tried to be a streamer? Had gaming once been both of their main hobbies? Yes, it had, she was sure but her stomach began to tie itself in knots as she realised she couldn't remember what her mother's name had been.

“Are you still there?”

Saanvi snapped back to reality.

“Yes, sorry mom I just really need to work.”

“Alright, darling.” She sounded disappointed. “But I miss you, why don't you come over for dinner soon? I'll make anything you want.”

Guilt tugged at Saanvi's heart, she did miss her mom.

“Sounds good, I uh, actually don't have much in the fridge right now-”

“Tonight it is! What do you want?”

Saanvi opened her mouth and paused, all her favourite dishes flooded into her mind but a cold thought crept in, what was her old favourite? Before she knew how good Indian food was? Cheeseburgers? no , that was just her picking the first 'western' food she could think of.

“You pick. I'd better get back to working.”

“Of course, but remember you can call any time!”

Saanvi hung up and felt a shiver go down her spine before refocusing. What did it matter? That old life was done and dusted, she got through almost every day without thinking about it. And yet, it weighed on her. It was fortunate this job was easy; the idea of those memories slipping away left her distracted for the rest of the day.

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Soraya let out a disappointed sigh and she put the phone down; there went her hopes of some adult conversation. She looked over to the TV where Arjun was sitting happily watching his show. She loved her son more than life itself but he wasn't exactly mentally stimulating. It was hard being home with him some days when all she wanted was an adult conversation or to use her brain a bit.

She had been lucky enough to finally get him into day care recently, so she could start working full time again but there were still long afternoons when Manuel was still at his office and she was home alone with their son. She was a new mother in her forties; she just didn't have the energy she had when she'd been taking care of Saanvi at this age.

That and, it turns out, having a child so late in your life had some effects on your body. She was thankful Indian sari's were so loose and customisable because despite two years passing her body had never returned to what it once was. And she hadn't exactly been a small lady then either.

She'd gone up a full cup size thanks to breastfeeding and was now sporting a frankly indecent G cup. Not to mention how much thicker her thighs, hips and butt were now. Her rear was prominent, no matter what she wore; something her students always took notice of. She couldn't help but roll her eyes at the young men in her class who ogled her.

They really thought they were being subtle but in truth it was obvious. She heard how they whispered every time she turned to face her power point presentations, and the way they stared at her chest even when it was fully covered. The one hot July day she had been forced to wear a light, low cut top half the eyes in the room almost popped out of their skulls. That was the moment she realised she'd better try some new clothes. There had been a time she actually enjoyed that sort of attention; she cringed at the memory.

She'd basically had to buy an entirely new wardrobe to suit her pear shaped body; a task Manuel had delighted in. Despite her discomfort, it was good to know somebody found her new body attractive. Manuel basically worshipped the ground she walked on, eager to take every opportunity, both inside and outside the bedroom, to show her how sexy he thought it was.

Soraya smiled softly; he really was such a beautiful man. As much as she missed her first husband, she was glad to have found a second love. At first she had harboured a small amount of guilt; like falling in love again was somehow betraying Anil's memory. But slowly, those feelings had washed away. It honestly felt like a lifetime ago that she had been that young thing who married and had a life with Anil.

It wasn't that she would forget him, no she treasured the memories of them meeting and immigrating together. She would never forget him but she knew he would want her to be happy and loved.

She was so caught up in her nostalgia she didn't realise Manuel was home until she felt a hand on her ass and a kiss on her cheek.

"Do you have any idea how dangerous it is for you to lean over like this?" He muttered, "I walk in and the first thing I see is that perfect ass, presented just for me?"

"Oh you." She scoffed, giving him a playful kiss, "you shouldn't say things like that in front of the baby."

"He's not a baby anymore."

"Exactly."

Manuel groaned in disappointment and moved his hand away but kissed her passionately to make up for it. Somewhat reluctantly Soraya pulled away, feeling heat build in her chest.

"Saanvi is coming for dinner." She said, "I'd better start cooking while Arjun is content watching his show."

"Counter offer," Manuel grinned, "We go to the bedroom and I get to touch your butt as much as I want while he's distracted and then we can have daddy son time while you cook."

"You're incorrigible."

"Your English professor is showing."

Soraya just snorted in laughter and took his hand, leading him to their bedroom. The second the door was closed Manuel was on her, kissing her mouth passionately and tilting her head back so that their tongues could intertwine.

Soraya sighed happily, wrapping her arms around her husband and squeezing him tight only for her good mood to be instantly spoiled. Her bust made it hard to reach all the way around his body, and she could feel his spread palm barely covering a quarter of her ass cheek. Her body tensed and she felt milk welling behind her nipples, making her breasts stiffen. Her changed body suddenly felt so ugly and she found herself withdrawing slightly.

"What's wrong? Manuel asked, concerned.

“I just...don't feel sexy.” Soraya admitted after a moment, looking down at her feet and only seeing her thighs. “I have such a mom bod.”

“You say that like it's a bad thing!” Manuel replied, sounding genuinely confused. “Look at these!”

He hefted up her breasts almost reverently.

“The curves of a goddess.”

Soraya felt her face flush.

“Manuel...”

“No, I am serious!” He wrapped his arms around her neck and kissed her cheek. “I cannot stand for the woman I love not feeling like she is a ten out of ten! Which, for the record, she is!”

He began to kiss along her neck, gently untying her sari and letting it fall away. Soraya felt her skin heat as Manuel gently stroked over it, making sure to touch every inch of her skin while murmuring about how he loved each and every detail. Every curve was caressed and Soraya felt her self consciousness beginning to fade away on her touch.

Her whole body was burning with need by the time they were both naked and Manuel laid her down gently on the bed, still kissing every inch of skin he could. Finally those lips found her breasts, sucking on the nipples and Soraya couldn't keep a moan at bay as she felt some of the pressure inside her breasts lessen.

Manuel chuckled around her nipple before looking up at her and smiling.

“To think there are men who don't like doing that.” He teased, giving the pert, brown nipple another lick before slowly moving southwards.

Her breath began to hitch as those lips got closer and closer to the heat between her legs.

“I thought we were going to-?”

“We will, but you deserve a few extra orgasms.” Manuel muttered against her hair, “I’m seducing you, in case that wasn’t obvious.”

Soraya held back a giggle.

“I’m your wife already, you can’t seduce me.”

“Watch me.”

Soraya didn’t have time for another retort before his tongue was between her legs and curling around her clit. Any and all words fled her, replaced with deep moans that she was forced to bite down on her lips to stop. Her legs wrapped around Manuel’s neck, holding his face close to her pussy and rhythmically so that his tongue dove in and out of her hole.

Manuel continued to fuck her with his tongue until it was almost torturous. She was trying so hard not to moan as the pleasure built and built till it was simply unbearable.

“Manuel!!”

She had to cry out as she came, there was no other option; her whole body shuddered and she swore she could feel her husband smiling as his mouth continued to kiss and lick at her through the orgasm.

When it finally ended he reappeared, wiping the juices from his mouth with a cocky grin which Soraya matched. Without a word she flipped over and pushed herself up on her hands and knees before lowering her arms down; presenting the ass she knew drove Manuel wild. Judging by the groan, he approved.

Soraya wiggled her butt playfully to entice him forward as Manuel’s hands found her hips and slowly pushed inside her. She was still slick from her first orgasm, but no less tight. The two of them groaned together as Manuel began to thrust and she leaned back and forth to meet him in the middle.

“Oh yes…” She moaned in Hindi before switching back to English. “Harder.”

“Oh that voice. The accent makes it.” Manuel groaned, speeding up.

It didn’t take much for Soraya to cum again, Manuel following soon after silently. His grip on her hips was almost painful and Soraya could tell he was doing his best not to cry out. With a shudder they both finally stilled before flopping down on the bed, breathing heavily.

Soraya felt like she was a young woman again, more than that, she felt *sexy*. How could she have ever hated her lovely curves? Knowing just how wild she drove this man was the biggest boost to her self confidence ever. Even exhausted and sated his hands roamed over her curves, his lips pressed to her temple with genuine love and adoration.

“You're incredible.” He breathed. “And again, that voice, it *does* things to be, love.”

“Is this when you reveal that you married me for my accent?” She teased and Manuel put on a face of mock sadness.

“Ah! My dark secret revealed!”

The two of them laughed; Soraya felt a youthful vigour slowly building inside her. Maybe she would even be up for round two if they had the time. It had been almost a decade since she'd been able to do that.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she was aware that she had never been a young woman, that those memories she was comparing herself to were fake but she didn't care. This life was too perfect; she wasn't about to let those memories fault it.

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Saanvi breathed deep as she walked into her mother's house; the air was full of spices as usual. A sense of calm settled over her; this place still felt like home, at least while her mother was cooking.

“Hi, Manuel, Mom!”

“Saaaaaaaanvi!”

She barely had a moment to brace herself before her little half brother came flying down the hall and threw his arms around her legs.

“Hey, little fella.” She cooed, “can you let go of my legs now so we can eat?”

He pouted, but relented before running straight back down the hall toward the delicious smell. Saanvi followed and walked in just in time to see her mother putting kofta's down on

the table with a contented smile. The spices weren't the usual Indian ones either and Saanvi took a sniff.

"Persian food?"

"Iranian specifically." Manuel grinned, "she's been on a quest lately to cook as many Iranian dishes as possible."

Saanvi raised an eyebrow and he shrugged.

"It's part of our heritage." Soraya smiled, walking in with the rice and giving her daughter a hug. "Ever since having little Arjun I've been wanting to connect with it more. Did I ever tell you about my great-aunt from Iran? I am named after her and yet I barely ever speak about her! I'd honestly forgotten, honestly I'm becoming an old woman."

"Nonsense, you're as youthful as ever." Manuel complemented, giving her a deep kiss. "At least in the ways that count."

Saanvi pulled a face.

"You two are putting me off my dinner."

"There is nothing wrong with a passionate relationship." Manuel teased.

"There is when it's your mother having it." Saanvi muttered, trying to focus on filling her and Arjun's plates rather than watching the couple.

The truth was, she was happy for her mother, really. But it was hard not to feel bitter that her mother had more romance in her life than she did.

"I'm going to the bathroom." She excused.

"But we were about to start eating." Her mother's brow furrowed.

"Just start without me."

She didn't wait around to argue and quickly brushed past her mother and step father and down the hall. One good thing about having a baby brother was that he kept them busy; Arjun chose that moment to dump his rice on the floor so her mother wasn't able to follow her.

She walked past her old bedroom and peered inside, it was emptier, but at the trapping of her college bedroom were still there. Her mind was suddenly filled with images of her on that bed, with Maya, Jack or both. How many times had they explored one another's bodies there.

God she missed them.

Saanvi quickly made her way down to the bathroom and locked the door, putting the toilet seat down so she could use it as a chair. She opened her phone and navigated to Maya's Instagram, resenting how the predictive text automatically filled in her tag after a single letter; did she really search her up that often.

There were the usual posts; fancy coffees, a pretty sunset, Maya and some friends all huddled together grinning wildly at some concert. She sighed and searched up Jack to see the same thing. A happy life; granted her own socials were full of similar images; nobody's life was as perfect as it looked online. Still; she wondered if they did this as well, checked in on her.

Their time at college together had been intense; wildly passionate, but being a throuple wasn't exactly sustainable. She'd picked up her phone to try and contact them more than once and chickened out. It just felt wrong contacting them now and what would her goal be? To get back together? She wasn't sure she wanted that; she could never pick between the two but she had come to the conclusion that she wasn't up for polyamory.

With a huff she closed the app without sending a message as always and glowered at the Tinder icon on her home screen. Trying to replace them, even with a casual fling, had been about as successful as a sand shop in the desert.

"You'd think being bi would make dating easier." Saanvi sighed, "all the options in the world and I'm still alone. Maybe I'm just too fussy."

Her mind wandered to Mia and she felt her cheeks blush. Or maybe she just had eyes for somebody in particular and like with everything, was too scared to actually admit it.

"Saanvi?"

Manuel's voice on the other side of the door.

“Are you alright in there?”

Shit, how long had she been moping?

“Fine! I'll be out in a second!”

She flushed the empty toilet and ran the sink for a moment before opening the door with her best fake smile.

“Sorry, let's eat. I'm starving.”

“Nothing quite like coming back to a home cooked meal from your mother is there?”
Manuel smiled warmly as they returned and sat down.

His face turned a little more serious.

“I hope you know you're always welcome here if you need us.” Manuel placed a hand on her shoulder and Saanvi shifted uncomfortably.

She liked Manuel, but he wasn't her father.

“I'm Fine. Just tired. Work is hard.” She lied smoothly before changing the subject and grabbing one of the meat skewers. “These are great, mom.”

Neither Soraya nor Manuel bothered to point out that she was yet to take a bite.

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There was something simultaneously off putting and comforting about standing in the kitchen washing dishes. Saanvi almost felt like she was back in college again, cleaning up after a normal night's dinner. She could hear Manuel and Arjun giggling as they played in the living room, the air still smelt of spices and her mother was singing under her breath in Hindi. It was all so warm and domestic, everything she didn't have at her cold apartment in the inner city.

Yet being here made her feel like such a child, she was a grown ass woman! She was supposed to have a successful career by now and maybe a partner. Post university life was not living up to her expectations at all. Was it like this the first time? Back when she'd been...somebody else?

Saanvi bit her lip; why was it so hard to remember? It was one thing to accept her life as Saanvi but to forget she was ever somebody else, that was something else. She felt a coil of panic forming in her gut as she tried in vain to remember even basic information about her old life.

“Darling, you're liable to break that glass.” Her mother said gently in Hindi and Saanvi realised her knuckles were white around the glass in her hand.

She put it down, trying hard to seem calm but only managed to slam it down hard on the benchtop. Soraya put down her tea towel and placed an arm around her daughter's shoulders.

“What's wrong, darling?”

That thickly accented Hindi was normally a comfort but now all Saanvi could think about was how once they hadn't been Indian at all. Or had they? Had they changed race as well as gender? Why couldn't she remember?!

“Saanvi? Talk to me please, you're starting to scare me.”

“Mom, what's our past?” She choked out, “I'm struggling to remember.”

To her surprise her mother smiled warmly.

“Oh I know darling, it was the same for me. Especially when I was young, it's part of why I am embracing our heritage all the more in my old age-”

“No, mom. I mean...*before* before.”

For a moment Soraya looked confused and Saanvi was concerned she had forgotten entirely but then realising glimmered in her eyes and the warm smile melted away.

“Does that matter?” She asked.

“Yes.” Saanvi insisted, “What happened to the old us? How did we even get here?”

“That’s simple we...we umm...” Soraya’s brow furrowed.

Suddenly Arjun, unable to read the energy of the room rushed in and wrapped his arms around Soraya’s legs.

“Night night, mommy!” He babbled as Manuel followed and scooped him up, giving his wife a kiss on the cheek.

“I’ll get this little one to bed.” He smiled, “You two keep catching up.”

The two women nodded awkwardly as they continued out; as soon as they were out of earshot Saanvi swung back around to face Soraya in a panic.

“You have a kid, you got knocked up but you were a man before. How does that even work?” She ran a hand through her dark hair, feeling a sweat form on the back of her neck.

“It doesn’t matter.” Her mother said curtly, “whoever I was before, I couldn’t have been happier or we wouldn’t have come here. I would have none of the richness or culture and history to enjoy.”

“But doesn’t it bother you that you can’t remember at all?” Saanvi asked, “I still want to be me but I feel like if I forget who I was then, I don’t know, isn’t that messed up? Do you even remember your name?”

“My name is Soraya.” She replied proudly and Saanvi gave her mother a withering look. “But my old one was...ummm...Kale? Or wait, Kayden! Yes! I was Kayden and you were...something that started with N.”

“Nathan? Nathaniel?” Saanvi guessed, “No, neither of those sound right. I think maybe it was a H? Hunter? No, dammit!”

“Why does it matter, you’re Saanvi now.” Soraya said, but then her brow furrowed. “Were we friends? Or family? Surely we were still family?”

"I...I don't remember! Were we even Indian? I do remember we both liked video games! We used that sort of VR headset to come here..."

"VR?"

"You don't remember how we got here?" Saanvi said, stricken, how could her mother be so calm about remembering so little?

"Not really." Soraya admitted, starting to look uncomfortable. "A headset? Like a game? And no, I remember we were just friends back in that old world, coworkers as well I think though I don't know where. Oh and we were both white as wonder bread. How dull..."

The two of them, puzzled over the details a little but couldn't come up with much more.

"We must have been brilliant scientists." Soraya concludes, "to have made such a device. Perhaps we were tired of such high pressure lives and decided to come somewhere more lowkey?"

"I remember my hands..." Saanvi said, to herself more than anything.
"White...putting on some sort of headset or maybe a helmet..."

"I must have been the older, more experienced scientist. A silver fox maybe..." Soraya said almost wistfully, "you, my young genius upstart. You probably wanted to prove yourself with a reality shifting device!"

"We can't be sure." Saanvi whispered, "we can't be sure of anything, I barely remember a thing and even that's getting fuzzier."

Saanvi felt tears pricking her eyes.

"What does that mean, am I not real?" Her throat felt thick, "Is my real body withering away in some room with a headset on?"

She felt sick. How had she never thought about all this before? She'd been walking around in ignorance and she already missed it; she wanted to be Saanvi. She almost wished she had forgotten everything so she didn't have to go through this existential crisis.

Her mother wrapped her in a warm, comforting embrace. She could feel her heartbeat, slow and calm and Saanvi tried her best to match her own pulse to it, taking deep breaths.

“Did we murder ourselves?” Saanvi whispered, “Mentally twist those men into being something they're not? into being us? What sort of person does that make us? Monsters? How can I call you my mother when neither of us is even real?”

“We are *very* real.” Soraya breathed, “if anything, that life was just as fake. We are happy, aren't we sweetheart?”

“Of course but, why did those guys,” she had trouble thinking of those strangers as herself, “become us?”

“They were probably unhappy.” Soraya shrugged, “they wanted more enriching lives and looks like they got it, because I couldn't be happier. No wait, I could be, if my daughter came to visit more often.”

Saanvi giggled, nervous energy slowly bubbling away as her mother wiped the tears from her eyes. Soraya took Saanvi's face in her palms, forcing her to look into her eyes.

“Whatever we were before, *this* is real now. This place, these lives are our home.” She said with certainty. “It's not always perfect but no life is.”

Saanvi felt her worries finally dispartate and she couldn't help but chuckle a little.

“They couldn't have made us super rich? Or made this reality a little less...I don't know...real?”

Her mother raised an eyebrow.

“Weren't you just complaining about how you didn't feel real? Now you want things less realistic?”

“I'm just saying that if I could change reality, I'd make it so there were no sexist creeps. Or that gender inequality didn't exist? Seriously, they had the ability to make a world

with no sexism and they totally flubbed it. The least they could have done was make it so periods didn't need to exist, or at least make them less crap.”

“That’s a good point.” Soraya admitted, “A world where nobody fetishized me for being a curvaceous, brown skinned beauty would be nice.”

“...Mom I will pay you real money to never describe yourself that way within my earshot ever again.” Saanvi deadpanned.

Soraya blinked and then bent double laughing.

“Guess they were thinking with something other than their brain.” She chuckled.

“Well they do say that men only have enough blood for either their brain or their dick, never both.”

“At least we don't have that problem anymore.”

The two women giggled and Saanvi felt a sort of peace fall over her. Her mother was right; if their previous life was good, they wouldn't be here right now. She was content, or at least she would be once her life was more in order. Maybe it was time to take charge of that, rather than feeling sorry for herself.

She and her mother pulled apart and Soraya smiled.

“There it is. The fire in your eyes.” She sighed happily, brushing her daughter's cheek. “I was worried it had gone out, dear.”

Saanvi felt a little guilty; she hadn't realised how obvious she had been with her misery.

“Don't worry about me, mom. I will be just fine.”

“I know you will, I raised you.” Soraya said matter of factly, “but mothers always worry. Even if their daughter is the most capable person in the world. If you set your mind to it, I know you can accomplish anything.”

Saanvi walked with purpose as she headed to her desk; for the first time since starting this job her mind felt focused and ready. Not to work obviously, but to take charge of her life. She powered through the day, counting down the minutes till lunch when she promptly clocked off and walked up to Mia's desk with a stomach full of butterflies.

"Want to get lunch?" She asked.

"Sure." Mia smiled, "though, I am not sure you can count what they sell at that cafeteria 'lunch', slop more like it."

"There is a little cafe round the corner?" Saanvi suggested, her palms felt sweaty.

"Sounds great!"

They had eaten lunch together almost every day since starting here together but today felt different, or maybe Saanvi felt different. They ordered some coffee and tasty little pastries before sitting down in a corner booth at the back of the cafe; it was cosy, intimate even.

"Are you okay?" Mia asked, "you seem nervous."

Shit! Alarm bells began to ring inside Saanvi's mind; was Mia even into girls? Why hadn't she found that out first? Shit, shit shit...Maybe she could do this later. After they were finished, that way they wouldn't have to sit and eat together if things didn't go right. Yes, that was a good idea, she'd wait and then before going back to work she'd ask her out to dinner. It was easy, people did it every day, so why were her palms so sweaty?

"Not just looking at how cosy this place is." She replied lamely.

Mia didn't seem to believe her, but dropped the subject. Saanvi began to attack her pastry in the hope that the awkward feeling in the air would dissipate while she still had a good excuse not to talk.

"It is cosy, reminds me of the one not far from our high school. I went on so many first dates there."

"Yeah, you got asked out a lot." Saanvi remembered jealousy, "who did you end up sticking with, I uh, didn't really keep up with your romantic life after we drifted apart."

Mia blushed.

“Nobody, I had a lot of first dates but not a whole lot of second ones.”

“Really, I find that hard to believe.”

Mia seemed flattered and shrugged, playing with her hair nervously.

“Well...the truth is I had a crush on somebody. I went on all those dates hoping they'd realise I was available and get jealous but they never did. Silly high school mental games. I'm beyond that now.”

Mia got a steely look in her eyes and took a deep breath.

“I was actually wondering if you'd like to go out for coffee some time.”

Saanvi blinked at her with a confused, bemused smile and held up her coffee mug.

“No, I mean like...a date.”

What?! Saanvi couldn't believe it, she had been planning on being the one asking Mia out, not the other way around. Her silence seemed to give Mia the wrong idea though as she began to stammer nervously, trying to walk back the offer.

“Yes.” Saanvi said simply, too stunned to think of anything smoother.

“Yes?”

Saanvi nodded, her cheeks were dusting a warm pink.

“The truth is I was planning on asking you out myself.” She admitted sheepishly.

“You're kidding.”

Saanvi felt like she'd been hit by a bus.

“I had a massive crush on you in high school.” Saanvi admitted, blushing profusely. “But you were little Miss Perfect, I could never measure up.”

Mia laughed but then cringed.

“Being an early bloomer may have given me a big head. I thought I was above being the asker, as it was.” She said, “You were the one everybody wondered about, so aloof and mysterious...”

“I was just too nervous to step into the limelight!”

The two women burst into giggles; Saanvi couldn't help but think fondly on how Jack and Maya would have reacted to this news. They would have face palmed for sure, then told her to hurry up and kiss.

“I can't believe this whole time you've been building up the courage to ask me out.” Saanvi said in awe, “You were always so casual and friendly, I never would have suspected you were nervous! Or that you had feelings for me.”

“You were my high school crush and then you just waltz back into my life looking incredible with a frankly fantastic rack; what was I supposed to do, not develop feelings again?”

Saanvi snorted her coffee and ended up half laughing, half sputtering while Mia grinned like a cat that got the cream.

“You still want me after that?” Saanvi choked out eventually and Mia nodded.

“Oh yes.”

Saanvi felt her heart flutter; this wasn't some grand romance, at least not yet. But she could feel that it was more than just a casual affair, maybe love was on the horizon. She hoped so. She thought back to what her mother had been saying, about how good their lives were, even if they weren't perfect. Looking over at Mia smiling back at her, with all the possibilities on the horizon that this new relationship could bring; Saanvi couldn't help but agree.

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Somewhere, in the infinite data that makes up the universe the non-sentient, final parts of Kayden and Henry smiled. Their reality fading away in the infinite swirl of possibilities, their former selves now solidly and fully accepting the new reality that finally solidified. Their true happiness was finally achieved.