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JINNISTAN

Scary stories to tell over chai.

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For *abu jaan*, Malik Muzaffar, a man whose cotton shawl
leaves the scent of bravery, he who taught me that life is
nothing but a kebab and should be lived one bite at a time,
For *ama jaan*, Sanila Muzaffar, my best friend and the
woman who taught me the difference between *kay* and *keh*
in Urdu for ten years,
For *nano jaan*, my second mother,
For my *late dada abu*, the man Sharaqpur recognizes,
For Farhan, for letting me be the sheera to his gulabjamun,
For 119 E, the welcoming roof under which I wrote these
tales,
For Salma, my Moroccan friend
For Sugar Courted, for catering to my meetha cravings,
For Momina and Hajera, the two princesses without whom
none of this would have been possible,
For Iqra, Sajeer and Nibhaan,
You are all a part of this.

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3 Men 3 Stories

The grains of Karachi's muddy sand feel like home as they slide between Yawar's toes. He often comes to the beach after Maghrib time, when the cool summer-time breeze has replaced the scent of camels and their urine; when the colorful clothing of women with wailing children hanging on their waists has been replaced by a clearer, calmer, and colorless view of the night.

Cities apart, Mehmood rubs his beard and orders a diet Pepsi with his medium-rare beef steak and baked potatoes. He dips his finger into the hummus sauce and plays with it. The texture is gritty, and his frown makes it obvious that he likes his dips smoother, just like his ami used to make them. His second wife, sitting across him, sighs. All she has ever wanted in life was a man's undivided attention and bhaiyya's kebabs for lunch, and today, she has none.

Sandwiched between Lahore and Karachi, in the city of darbars and sohan halwa, Naveed sits in front of his autistic

son, visually explaining the shapes of clouds, waiting for him to chuckle every time he waves his hands in a circular motion. “Biryani!” says his son. “Nahin,” replies Naveed. “Clouds. Badal, betay. Badal.”

“Biryani!” giggles his son.

This is the story of three men; three men with different lives, different solutions, but the same problem—jinns.

1

Yawar wasn’t always like this; he didn’t skip family dinners with aunty Parveen’s khandaan to enjoy a quiet night at the beach by himself. As far as Yawar could recall, he never liked the beach—at least not till some months ago.

Aunty Parveen did not mind. Yawar had been in her nazar for the longest time, and she was utterly delighted to have him engaged to her daughter, Mahzaeb. Mahzaeb, too, was on cloud nine knowing that she’d be getting married to the cousin everyone had secretly wanted to get hitched to. She had never talked directly to Yawar because she felt that it was her shyness that he very much approved of, warna the other cousins were bold and nangi pungi.

It was true that Yawar was not inclined towards his other cousins, but it was also true that he had no interest in Mahzaeb. It wasn’t because they had grown up calling each other bhai bhen, but because Yawar felt that he was

already married.

Yawar had always been interested in physics and its laws. He explained life through that particular science, and he believed that nothing fell outside its numerical boundaries. So, when his dadi ama claimed to talk to jinns, he laughed. He sat massaging the tips of her wrinkled, khajoor-like feet, and heard stories about how a jinn lived in his dado's room. On one occasion, he was explicitly told not to play with his Bob the Builder toy truck in the corner of the room because the jinn lived there. When dadi ama wasn't home, Yawar sat in that corner and played there for hours.

He witnessed something very fascinating; when he rolled the truck towards the corner, it sped sideways, like somebody was throwing it away. After the truck would land on its top, Yawar would examine its tires. Almost always, they were burning hot. So, Yawar took it upon himself to study that corner. After analyzing it for days, Yawar came across a faulty wire that had been let loose behind the curtains; because of the current passing through it, it charged anything metallic thrown its way. And so, the young man concluded that his dadi's jinn was, in fact, roaming electricity.

When Yawar was at NUST, his professor relayed an account he had with an energy disguised as a human and told the class that jinns were actually energy, and that they very much existed. Yawar guffawed. He told sir Suleman that he was mistaken, for energies were anything but human, and

jinns they certainly were not. He wrote his thesis on how kinetic energy could turn into sound energy and motion energy, and finally, any energy the brain perceived, but it was not anything supernatural. To Yawar, what could not yet be explained by science would be put into the realms of parapsychology, for it was the easiest alternative, one that did not require hard work.

One night, when Yawar's mama, ami Najma, congratulated the family on her son's baat paki ceremony, Yawar crept outside. The roads were closed due to Imran Khan's protests, and due to a container blocking the entrance of the main road, he ended up at the beach in the middle of the night. There was a couple there, holding hands, very much in love, and Yawar rolled his eyes. To him, love was like jinn—explainable by science. Perhaps it was a chemical reaction—the same kind as the dopamine rush he felt when studying nuclear fission—that people termed 'love'.

In an hour, the voices outside had reduced to indistinct murmurs, the couple had left, and Yawar stood in the farthest corner of the beach, examining the water circle around his toes. A honk-like sound disrupted his thoughts, and he examined the roaring waves through a bird's eye view. *Honk*. There it was again, louder this time. After five long minutes, Yawar saw a wooden boat wash up on the shore a little distance away.

It's the middle of the night. The waves are ruthless. How have they spared this boat and its owner? Yawar

contemplated as he ran towards the boat. Upon reaching it, he saw a woman lying inside, her figure now loosely hugged by the moist sand. The woman appeared to be ill, for she lay lifelessly on the wooden plank. Her face was covered by a thick layer of silky, straight hair that shone under the October moonlight.

“Sunie?” Yawar blurted out. He didn’t know what to say. A part of him was thinking about the honking sound; there was no machinery on the wooden boat. The other part wanted to wake the woman up, but he concluded that she might be dead and that he could get in trouble. He had seen enough CID to know better.

“Sunie jee,” he repeated with more gusto. Yawar rocked the boat. Well, at least he tried rocking it. The weight of the petite woman was heavier than the gigantic bottle of Nestlé that his ama made him place on the dispenser. Ever since he was a child, Yawar had always thought a lot, which was his most pressing problem. As a young boy, he’d calculate the pros and cons of consuming the grape ice-lolly, and the orange one.

He thought about running away from the scene, but then he thought that abandoning the lady would be inhumane. He thought a lot. “Hello, jee?”

Yawar placed his hand on the woman’s head. Her hair was drenched, and she was cold. He took off his jacket and placed it on top of her. Yawar sat there, looking at the moon and then his jacket, and then at the moon again.

Slowly, he slid the jacket enough to catch a glimpse of her face, now that the moon hung right above them. He then brushed the hair off her face using the back of his hand.

Yawar gulped. The lady was unlike any woman he had seen before, and as a child, he had seen many Bollywood movies with ama; none of the women had appealed to him. Her radiant face appeared to be lit up like a lamp. Her features weren't South Asian. The nose was round, and her tiny lips painted the color of anaar were covered in water drops. He wondered if she was Chinese or Japanese. Her face was too oval to be Korean.

"Excuse me?" he said. The nervousness made Yawar's toes tickle. He placed his hand on her cheek, banishing the patches of dirt from the beauty tantamount to the brightest in a kingdom of stars. *A star. Sitara—that's what she is, he wondered.*

Yawar sat there, peacefully, chaunkri maar kay. He smiled to himself and waited. He waited for what seemed like an hour that drudged by as slowly and laboriously as the boat. And then, he saw the lady fidget. At that exact time, his phone started to vibrate.

Yawar quickly declined the call. It was not him being disrespectful; it was just that the lady in front of him lay so peacefully that he did not want to wake her up this way. So, he decided that his ama could wait.

The woman was young, though deciphering even her

roundabout age would be a challenge—her face was too ethnically ambiguous. Her small, sea-green eyes followed Yawar’s the moment she opened them. At once, the silence between them gave Yawar immense pleasure, as if looking into her eyes had been his life-long dream. She collected herself ever so gently, like the owner of a precious necklace does when it breaks, and the beads scatter across the floor. It was when she lifted her upper body from the floor that Yawar noticed her feet were twisted—turned backwards—and yet, he thought that those, too, were indeed beautiful.

“Hello. My name is Yawar. I—I saw that you had—” Yawar spoke in his finest accent, the language of *angraez*, for he was sure that they did not share their descent, and the little clothing she wore suggested that she hadn’t been nestled in Pakistan either.

“Adaab.” She opened her mouth, and words just flew out of it, like Lahori car drivers running across each other, in four different directions, instinctively aware of the way. “Adaab, Yawar Sahab.”

She knew Yawar’s name, and she smiled when she said it. Her little lips parted, and deep-set, even little dimples formed under both her cheeks, running perpendicular to her laugh lines. She was an early birthday present.

And so, that night, under the stars and the tranquility of the sky, Yawar and the girl conversed for hours. She told him that she wasn’t human and that he ought to be afraid—but Yawar wasn’t. She told him that she was what he might

call a siren—*been wali aurat*, an entity that his chapters could not explain. Yawar liked how straightforward she was, how there was no small talk or brushing over the edges between them. Everything was out on the table, and not once did he question how she knew so much about him. He just sat there, listening to her tell him tales of sinking ships, leading captains astray, seducing men to surrender their body to ruthless waves, and how well she could sing.

She sang. She honked. Yawar watched in amusement. She could sound like the wind, like his abba's downtrodden car—but most beautifully. She could sound like the sizzling sound of his phupho's poori from the previous night being reheated on the stove, and even like his phupho herself. She was a star—a sitara.

She told him that she could kill him, that just like the dayans living on the land, she was a makhlook of God, and she could very much kill him.

Yawar had mild urges to say Bismillah. He knew the kalmas. But he didn't want her to leave, and she, the cunning, gorgeous creature of the sea, could sense it.

And so, they both made love. And she whispered in his ear that on the Day of Judgment, he'd burn in the deepest depths of hell if he did so, but Yawar engaged. He had never felt such a connection before. Mesmerized by her beauty, Yawar did not measure his doings by science and its facts for the first time in his life.

Yawar returned home with the biggest grin plastered

across his face at Fajar time. He could see men crowding in the masjid and the occurrence of the prayer, but he could not hear the words of God. He tried to. He went inside and told them all to speak louder, but his ears had become deaf to the sayings of the Lord.

And now, married to Mahzaeb, Yawar often sits at the farthest corner of the beach, waiting for a boat to wash up against the shore. He does so, not to make love to the maiden, but because it has been twelve years since he last heard a holy recitation, and pus oozes out of his starved-out ear canals every time he strains too hard in attempts to listen.

2

Mehmood loved Bibi Bakhtawar. He loved how she made the perfect square parathas, and how she always forgot to send him lunch at his shop in Liberty market. He loved how she tried out the entire stock at Khaadi before buying a single shalwar to go with an old suit. He loved how she drooled on her pillow at night. He loved her double chin, and that one hair that grew out of the mole under her cheek. He loved how when his bhabi went for facials, Bakhtawar stayed home and applied ubtan, because she believed in Zubaida apa kay totkay. Mehmood loved her. Bakhtawar was his jaan. And so, when she died during childbirth on a