



BLACK AND WHITE

“Just ignore it and move on.”

That’s what he keeps telling himself. That’s what he’s been telling himself for the last fourteen days. No, that’s not entirely true. Fourteen years perhaps? In the end, what does it matter? He may have been telling himself for fourteen seconds and it still wouldn’t change just how determined he is to see this through.

According to the law in Pakistan, a person legally becomes an adult at the age of eighteen. The process that follows is fairly straightforward, and it starts with gathering every single document proving your existence — your birth and matriculation certificates, paid utility bills of the house you live in to prove you actually live in that part of the country, and have done so for a good amount of your life, the identity cards of your parents...

And yes, your parents, too. In person. Like you could just haul them around town as easily as you would your documents’ folder.

Once you’ve got all of those things, you then head over to the nearest facilitation center of the National Database Registration Authority, or NADRA for short, and get in line for their amazing one-window solution staff. NADRA; actually a beautiful Arabic name. Nadira for girls and Nadir for boys, both meaning rare and precious. Also used to describe unique and precious stones such as rubies and diamonds.

Sad how people don’t name their children *Nadira* as much as they used to.

One would have thought one-window meant having all your problems resolved at a single point within the center instead of having to face the runaround that is commonplace in every government office. But instead, one-window literally means a single window with a single member of staff, handling all the different queues for men, women and senior citizens standing in poorly air-conditioned offices, while those haplessly standing in queue continue sweltering away and doing their best to avoid trading sweat with each other.

A dilemma further compounded for the women who, in their attempts

to adhere to a certain sense of modesty and avoid the gaze of *other* men, cover themselves from head to toe in heavy black garbs called gowns, or *burqas* in the native Urdu language. A garment that, while does bring a sense of security, is practically unsuitable for the harsh environments of government queues.

They are also utterly needless since the *na-mehram*, or *other*, men would rather look into their file folders every five minutes to make sure they have all the documents and photocopies they need for the day. Considering the queue for women isn't as long as the one for men, it's also a good idea to bring both your parents along just to make sure you have them standing in both queues and then pounce at whoever reaches the window first.

A shame you wouldn't bring any of your grandparents to take advantage of the miniscule senior citizens' line, but then you're not *totally* heartless. Practical, but not heartless.

But he is. Both practical and heartless to a certain degree. That's another thing he keeps telling himself. *To a certain degree*. He may never know exactly how much. Maybe he will find out today. After all, he has been planning this for fourteen days. But really, it has been a long time coming and it has been eating at him a lot lately; driving him to take practical steps. He's planned this as thoroughly as he could, repeating the whole scenario in his mind. Waiting anxiously to finally play it out, come what may.

"Seriously, just ignore it and move on."

Sitting comfortably in his trusty old white Honda Civic, he watches across the street as his quarry steps out of his apartment block in the morning, just as he does every weekday at seven o'clock in the morning. Mr. Ali Azmat, a balding forty-something banker at one of the most prestigious banking and finance institutions in Pakistan, lives in a relatively posh neighborhood in an apartment block that is swanky, but not new enough to have all modern amenities such as covered parking. This leaves Azmat no choice but to park his flashy new Toyota Corolla in the readily available road space just outside his building.

A nuisance for Mr. Azmat and the other apartment owners no doubt; but not for the man in the Civic. It suits *him* just fine.

He's been here for an hour across the street parked right outside — of all places — a NADRA facilitation center; hence all the mental meandering. It's just the way his mind works, trying to back-track every step behind every event in a logical progression. He wonders if NADRA checked Azmat's documents or actually took a test to determine whether or not he was a competent adult. He thinks about this, for the briefest of moments, till he spots Azmat approaching the Corolla. Balding with a goatee supposedly for compensation, his stocky frame makes Mr. Azmat appear as if he were a genie in a custom grey suit.

Grey. He hates that color; that annoying space between black and white. Not just two absolute colors but absolute concepts. As clear as

night and day. But grey? Just how grey is it going to be? Light grey, medium grey, gunship grey? Nothing absolute, nothing final.

Finally picking his moment, he finally steps out of the Civic and darts across the road.

“Mr. Ali Azmat!”

Hearing his name, Azmat jerks his eyes up from his smartphone. This is unusual, obviously. No one calls his name out in the middle of the street, least of all so early in the morning. It’s not like he doesn’t realize he shares a name with the former lead singer of Pakistan’s most influential rock band turned solo star turned whatever it is the popular Ali Azmat is up to these days. His receding hairline hasn’t helped dispel his senior colleagues from making comparisons, and it is something that he has little tolerance for. Music means very little to him unless it is the sound of money.

Azmat looks up at this tall but somewhat burly, overweight person clad in some cartoon t-shirt and cheap shorts with flip-flops running his way. Even from a distance, Azmat can tell this person’s goatee is self-groomed, unlike his own which is done to perfection at an upscale men’s salon. Who is he? Not a mugger from the looks of it. The fruit vendor? The dairy shop guy? Who is he, and why should he care?

“Who are you, and why should I care?” Mr. Azmat asks this stranger in stern Urdu.

“Oh don’t hold back now, Mr. Azmat,” he replies in English, gasping at his short run from across the street. “We both know you can use that high-priced vocabulary out here. It won’t change what people already think about you.”

Azmat’s expression remains the same: Indifferent. But he does switch to English now.

“You still haven’t told me who you...”

“Who I am isn’t important,” he interrupts. “What’s important is who you are, Mr. Ali Azmat. Senior investments manager at Featherstone Banking and Financial.”

“I doubt this is official,” Azmat replies, “but if it is, you’ll need to make an appointment.”

“Oh, but you did.” The stranger smiles back. “Fourteen days ago, you gave me your word that you’d see me. Remember, we were at Liberty square when you sped past a red light, with no turn signals and no high beams whatsoever. You remember that, don’t you?”

The corners of Azmat’s mouth start twitching a little, almost scowling now.

“What do you want, you idiot?!”

“And then,” he continues “you said *tujhe dekh lo ga.*’ I know you meant it in the colloquial Urdu sense, but it still means what it should. So here I am.”

The stranger can see that Azmat is scowling now.

“No? Still nothing? Okay, well how about that,” he asks while pointing

towards his old white Honda Civic across the road. "Tell me you at least remember that beautiful piece of early 2000s engineering."

Azmat gives the old car a brief glance and shakes his head.

"I'm a banker. I've bought and sold and repossessed and auctioned hundreds of those cars."

"Not that one, I'm sure," the stranger clarifies. "That's all cash. Been in the family for a while. Seriously though, you honestly don't remember me at all? I always thought breaking the law and threatening average people must have felt like a triumph to someone like you. But of course, I see now the whole thing must seem fleeting, like a fly you just casually wave off."

"You have wasted a lot of my valuable time!"

"Funny. That's exactly what she said. Maybe you know her, though I have to tell you she's pretty out of your league. An account holder maybe, one with a really expensive black Hilux Revo."

Upon hearing this, a twinge of recognition appears on Azmat's face.

"You know Ms. Ghazal?"

"That's the one! I thought you might remember her. She sure is a strange one, isn't she? I'm sure she wouldn't give us the time of day unless it mattered to her. I remember you meeting her at your office once, you know, while I was trying to approach you there. Of course you looked busy and she had this rather dangerous looking bodyguard with her. I don't think it's bank policy to allow mustachioed gunmen to stand inside its offices. But you obviously made an exception."

The scowl is still there, but now there's another look. A look of apprehension that rarely appears on Azmat's face, unsure of what will happen next.

"Now strangely enough, call it fate or Kismet or whatever, but that very night Ms. Ghazal decided to drive up right behind my trusty old Civic and was obviously not satisfied with the stock headlights her Hilux had. Why else would she go for those illegal custom HID lights that were made for the sole reason of blinding people unfortunate enough to find themselves in their path? Not to mention someone mistakenly told her that the little blue light in her dashboard for high beams should be on at all times. So there she was, with HID high beams right in my rear-view mirror, nearly blinding me for the fifteen seconds she was behind me till she sped past. And that's when it hit me that something needed to be done. So I did."

"What?" Azmat is now curious, and in a kind of state of dread. "What did you do?"

"You know, you really are missing out on the advantages of covered parking. Safe, secure, and pretty much dust-free. Anyways, she's visiting this friend at this really posh apartment block and parks her Hilux inside the guest parking slot. She pops back around midnight and it's only when she gets in the car that she realizes something's wrong. The seat and steering wheel are sticky with something. She tries to get out but it's too

late. Her hands are stuck on the wheel and so is she on the seat. She tries and tries and tries, but just then, this intense spotlight shines right at her, blinding her completely. She closes her eyes but the light is piercing her eyelids, its heat searing away at her till she screams and screams and screams for someone to help her.”

Disgusted, Mr. Azmat feels like hitting this stranger with his briefcase, till it dawns on him and he rushes for his car door.

“Did you do something to my car?! What did you...?”

“That never happened by the way,” the stranger smirks. “What kind of a moron are you? Did you not spot any of the holes in that whole story? Where’s the mustachioed gunman, how did the super glue stay wet all that time, and how on Earth did I get an industrial spotlight inside a covered parking lot? Granted, with the right preparation and patience, I could just about come up with something even better. But come on, I’m not a criminal. I don’t break into cars.”

Azmat is now incensed as the stranger continues his diatribe.

“I do, however, break them.”

Mr. Azmat turns, now visible with anger at this stranger who has brought him to the brink of his patience.

“You’ll find your car’s headlights, turn signals and tail lights in that garbage bag over there. Since I had to yank them out, I’m afraid they’re in no condition to be reinstalled. That and I smashed them with a tire iron. And while I was at it, I managed to spot your horn inside the hood and did the same to it, too. Since you didn’t feel the need to use these items last time, I reckoned you wouldn’t miss them.”

After examining his Corolla and convincing himself that it had indeed been stripped of all its outer lights, the stoic and rigid banker can contain himself no longer. Azmat drops his briefcase and lunges at the stranger, but recoils instantly as the stranger sprays his eyes with pepper spray.

“Bad move,” he says, as Mr. Azmat writhes and cries in agony while clutching his eyes. “I’m not entirely a violent person, but I am practical. And maybe an absolutist. See, black and white is exactly how the world is supposed to be. Not to mention red and green. Like when there’s a red light and people, normal people at least, stop and let the people with the green light go since they have something called right-of-way.”

Azmat tries again to charge at the stranger but the can of mace still has a second serving.

“Now if only you were taught that in driving school, or if only that were criteria of testing at the Licensing Office: Civic sense. If only they tested you for the kind of person or human being you are instead of whether or not you can park between a couple of orange cones to get your license. But it’s not entirely their fault. There are about, what, three licensing offices in the city, maybe four. They’ve got their hands full. No, it has to be you, or at the very least your parents who didn’t slap you around enough, or teach you the values society comes to expect of us.”

In pure agony, Azmat rubs and pulls at his eyes, trying his best to make the pain go away, not realizing he's making it worse.

"Or maybe they were nice, kind people that you dumped in an old age home the minute you got your license to be a prick. Maybe you were born a prick. Maybe. Shades of grey."

Trying very hard not to gag from the concoction of chemicals he's taken in, Azmat leans against his car while the stranger pockets the can.

"You might want to think about that the next time you decide it's okay to take advantage of people and their humility. See, if there's one truth to life, it's that the nicest people can be the biggest pricks when the chips are down. But then, you don't need me to tell you that."

"I'm going to find you!" Azmat groans, his breathing labored. "I am going to find you."

The stranger crouches down next to him, looking at Azmat's tear-filled face and careful to avoid any residual chemicals flying into his own eyes.

"My name is Nadir", the stranger finally responds to Mr. Azmat's original question. "Come find me."

With that, Nadir finally heads back into the Civic and drives off, his heart pacing and his mind finally content that this actually happened. Not like the imaginative scenario with Ms. Ghazal that would also have been very satisfying.

And now that it is done, now that he has achieved a sense of satisfaction as well as catharsis, Nadir understands all too well that this is just the beginning. That he can move forward with all he and his friends have planned together. That all his fantasies of change can finally be given a tangible form.