

Awaiting Summer

The orange silhouette of a high-fiving palm blinked at him – warning pedestrians not to cross the road. Jamal stared at it and sighed. This was the longest traffic light. He knew it for a fact because he stopped here every morning and every afternoon on his way to and back from school. Whenever he was running late, he prayed silently that the traffic light was green for pedestrians. If not, he knew he would be stuck waiting for ten minutes, and on mornings like this one, he did not have ten minutes to spare. He glanced up and down the road; traffic was sprinkled upon the blacktop that day as if the streets were a playset that came with only a few cars. He *could* jaywalk. His exam was about to begin in 10 minutes – every second counted for him. He took a tentative step, his sneakers crunching the gravel sprinkled on the sidewalk. *Bismillah* (with the name of Allah), he said in his heart, let's go. Just as he took a second step, he heard an engine rev. He quickly retraced his steps to the safety of the sidewalk. A white four by four zoomed past Jamal. RAM he caught a glimpse of the side of the pickup truck. "Cool," he muttered. Dodge RAM was his favorite truck. It had the speed and strength of a bull. It could drive on any terrain, and it could go *fast*. He watched the truck disappear into the distance just as the traffic light changed and Jamal started walking across the street.

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"Here you go, *ammi*." Raheela placed a red, blue, and white pill on her mother-in-law's outstretched palm. "*Ammi* doctor has changed your blood pressure medication. I am also giving

you the medicine for your knee pain and your sciatic pain. *InshaAllah* (with the will of Allah), you will feel better.”

“*Shukria beta* (thank you, my child). May Allah preserve you and our family and always keep you happy” Raheela’s mother-in-law prayed for her as she took her pills.

“*Ammi*, today after Jamal comes back from school after his last exam and Amir comes back from work, let us walk to the neighborhood park. It is a beautiful day today.” Raheela said to her mother-in-law as she set a pot of tea on the stove.

It was a lovely summer day. The air was intoxicated with the sweet scent of summer blooms, and the bees buzzed about busily. There was not a single cloud in the cocktail blue sky. A warm breeze ruffled the trees gently from time to time. It was also the last day of school. From tomorrow the front and backyards will be filled with the chatter and bustle of children enjoying their summer break. For Canadians, summers were a fleeting glory. After six months of harsh winter temperatures, summer offered a chance for everyone to enjoy the beautiful outdoors. A picnic and barbeque on the portable stove would be perfect this evening, Raheela thought, a great start to what she hoped would be a fun-filled summer. She had been swamped writing her final thesis for her Ph.D. program in environmental science while managing her full-time duties as a mother and homemaker. While most women would complain about their husband’s mother, Raheela was entirely grateful to her mother-in-law, who had supported her throughout her education and helped her around the house and especially with taking care of Jamal.

When they had moved to Canada, Jamal was only two years old. Now, he was an intelligent and sweet nine-year-old boy. Jamal was sensitive and caring, and living with his grandmother, he had learned to appreciate traditional family values and proudly acknowledge his Pakistani heritage and Muslim identity. Having grown up in London, Ontario, a predominantly

white city with few brown kids like Jamal, Raheela was grateful to her mother-in-law for instilling cultural values in Jamal when she had been busy with her work and education. As Raheela looked out from the kitchen window, she lazily sipped her tea. She was ready to be lazy this summer. To sleep in, to eat waffles, and drink a lot of lemonade – ahh, summer. She couldn't wait to enjoy it with her family.

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“Jamal, how was your exam?” Amir asked his son as they started walking together. Their feet rose and fell in unison. The pavement was hot from the sun beating down on it all day. Jamal could feel tiny beads of sweat gather upon his brow. He wiped them up and looked at his father, “it was great. An A for sure. Baba, can I go for a nerf fight to Collins house tomorrow?” he threw in his request – seeking reward for his hard work.

“I think so. No more school, bud. Just make sure you come back when mom tells you to.” Amir smiled down at his son. He looked over his shoulder; his mother and wife were walking slower behind them. He saw his wife gesturing, and he said to his son, “Jamal, I think mom wants something from you.”

Raheela called out to Jamal, “Jamal can you run back to the house and get dadi's walking cane? Her knee is bothering her.”

“Okay, sure,” Jamal replied, thinking that he would grab his nerf gun as well and practice at the park for tomorrow's duel at Collins. Jamal ran back home. Sweat trickled down his back. He grabbed his grandmother's cane from her room and his nerf gun from his room. Then he stopped in the kitchen to get a drink of water. Water splashed from his glass on the floor, and his muddy shoes made black streaks across the white kitchen tile. His mom would be so mad. He sighed and

put his glass down, and went to grab the mop. Quickly he wiped the floor. He was leaving no trace of his muddy shoes. Holding his grandmother's cane and his nerf gun, he headed back out.

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Jamal's feet pounded against the pavement as he ran to catch up to his family. They must be at the crossing by now, he thought. He prayed as he always did that the traffic lights would be green for pedestrians. He saw the back of his mother, father, and grandmother waiting at the roadside. The traffic light was *not* green. The orange silhouette of palm high-fiving blinked at him – warning pedestrians not to cross the road. Jamal stared at it and sighed. He slowed down and started walking more slowly. “Mom,” he called out to his mother, gesturing to the cane in his hand. His mother turned to look at him and smiled. His dad and his grandmother were talking, and his dad was holding the portable stove in his hand. His mother was holding a bag of barbeque meats in one hand, and she waved to Jamal with the other. Crickets were singing lazily in the summer evening, and the air was unusually still. The sky was still clear – not a single cloud. It was starting to get humid. A thunderstorm was in the forecast for that night. Just then, the traffic light changed, allowing pedestrians to cross. Raheela waved to her son to hurry up. Jamal quickened his pace to catch up to his family. His grandmother and father had already started crossing, and his mother was walking up behind them. Just then, Jamal heard an engine rev. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw a white RAM speeding towards the intersection. With a jolt, he realized the truck was heading straight towards his family, crossing the road. As Jamal watched with disbelief and horror, metal crunched, and his nostrils stung with the smell of burning rubber. The stillness of the perfect summer evening shattered with a woman's blood-curdling scream. Jamal braced his hands against his face as the truck rammed against him. Jamal felt the gravel on the sidewalk pierce through his skin as his head thudded on the pavement. His

vision blurred sandwiched between the cold, soft dirt and the hot, slick metal of the car. He tried to wipe his eyes, but his hand was stuck. He realized he was still holding his grandmother's cane. Luckily for Jamal the cane had acted as a barrier between Jama's head and the truck's hood. Jama could not move. The weight of the car pressed down on the lower half of his body with monster force. Jamal braced himself for pain, but it did not hurt; his body was numb. All he could feel was the car hood's mass stamping his body farther and farther into the ground. His lungs pinched shut and air could neither enter nor escape them. His mind was buzzing. What had just happened? He blinked, and he saw the perfect blue sky. Through the overpowering smell of smoke and gasoline, he caught a whiff of garlic on the barbeque somewhere close to him. To complement it, he tasted the metallic taste of blood in his mouth. The summer evening was still once again. A cricket wailed somewhere in the distance, his song no longer merry. Jamal tried one last time to look around. He felt hot saltwater sting his face as his eyes dropped shut, and everything went black. The traffic light changed, and the orange silhouette of a palm high-fiving blinked – warning pedestrians not to cross the road.

Inspired by the true events of the hate-crime shooting in London, Ontario that killed a Muslim Pakistani Canadian family of five, the only survivor is a nine-year-old boy.