

Cultural Daily

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Zayan's Rocky Start

Mariam Khan · Tuesday, September 21st, 2021

Bang!

Zayan knocked his plate out of Sana Apa's hands, causing his naan bread, tandoori chicken, and lentil daal sauce to splatter all over the newly polished floor. And yet, the mess on the ground was nowhere near as chaotic as Zayan's surroundings: the shouts of the other boys drifting through the window, telling each other to pass the soccer ball; the high-pitched laughter of his girl cousins and family friends around the dinner table as they brought up embarrassing stories to make fun of each other; the uncles chortling in the family room, oblivious to everything except for the shisha bottles and the delicious dinner; and the aunties in the kitchen, bustling around to scavenge whatever was left over of the meal they had concocted. Zayan's mother and her sisters, his khalas, were still scrubbing the dishes clean while gossiping about the drama they were having with that family friend who had just left for the bathroom not even two minutes ago.

The atmosphere was so busy that nobody really seemed to notice what Zayan did at first, let alone his contorted expression and quivering chin. It was only when he began hurling insults at Sana Apa, his older sister who had been halfheartedly trying to feed him in the middle of conversing with the other girls, that he received a reaction at all.

"I hate you Apa!" Zayan screamed at the top of his lungs, his eyes filling with tears. He scrunched his eyes shut and hid his face in his hands. He heard the chaos around him come to a screeching halt, if you could call 'silence' a 'screeching halt.' He waited a full three seconds, not wanting to see what he had just done. But against his wishes, his eyes snuck a peek through his fingers, knowing full well what he was about to see: Apa's mortified expression, the dinner he had just wasted on the ground, and the stares of all 10 girls falling upon him that very moment.

Apa, her face reddened with embarrassment, rolled her eyes and mumbled an almost imperceptible "whatever, Zayan." She then stood up, brushed the chicken remnants off her skirt, and left to clean the rest of her outfit in the bathroom. The conversations in the kitchen, briefly muted for those 10 seconds, began to start back up again. As if nothing had happened. And now Zayan was all alone. Again.

His mother, who had just set the drying towel down after seeing Apa run out, hurried her way over to the table. "Zayan, sab theek hain?? Is everything okay??"

Zayan's face began to burn in shame because he knew it wasn't. He knew he shouldn't have hurt his sister that way and that he shouldn't have thrown his food out of frustration. He knew that at

five years old, he was too old to rely on his sister to feed him, let alone throwing this type of tantrum. He knew that he should just tell his mother how his eyes had welled up with tears when Ali had asked his two older brothers to be on his team as soon as their family had walked through his front door, but didn't even spare Zayan a glance because he thought he was too little to play. But, at least he could trust Mamma to care. He knew that she would not yell at him the way Baba would have if he had seen Zayan's tantrum. And maybe he could even tell Mamma about that shiny black rock he had found an hour ago in their front yard, on his way to the car. How delighted he was to be the first one to discover such a sparkly stone that nobody else had ever noticed enough to pick up. He could feel it right now, weighing heavily in his pocket. His face brightened, just a little.

"Mamma, I..."

But before he could tell his mother what was wrong, she immediately gave him a hug and said,

"I know you are tired, jannu. My baby always gets tired around dinnertime. I will give you my phone and you can play on it until we take out the dessert. Okay?"

Zayan wordlessly took the phone that Mamma was offering him. He did not know why his heart was sinking. She wasn't even punishing him. After all, who would punish a silly little baby? And, quite honestly, he already knew this was how it would play out – just like every time before. He muttered out a "thank you." Because he did not know how to say what he really wanted to say: "No, Mamma. It's not okay."

His left hand firmly gripping the phone, Zayan left the table to make his way to the stairs at the end of the kitchen. He took six steps halfway up the staircase, then sat down. From where he was sitting, he was able to peek out from the railings, although he knew that the wall kept him hidden from view. Not that it really mattered, anyway. Nobody noticed him when he was sitting at the table in the center of the whole kitchen, so who would notice him all the way back here?

Zayan opened Mamma's phone and clicked on Angry Birds. This game had never made any sense to him. How could these silly birds ruin everything around them just because they were mad...and just keep doing it? Did they ever feel happy after getting so mad all the time? Didn't they ever feel bad about being mean? Why didn't anybody ask the birds how they were doing before they destroyed everything? Maybe the birds wouldn't have broken all the buildings if someone cared to help them. Maybe they were just sad or lonely.

By now, the game had finally loaded. As practiced as Zayan was at Angry Birds, beating round after round after every public outburst, he wasn't too excited about it. But this was how it always was. And besides, it's not like he had anything better to do. And so he played for the next thirty minutes, noticing that the desserts were now set out on the counter, but waiting until the adults and kids had gotten what they wanted. He did not want to talk to any of them, so he would wait to get his share until they all left.

When the time finally read "9:30 pm" at the top of Mamma's phone screen, Zayan closed the app. He peered through the railings. All the girls and aunties seemed to have gone to enjoy dessert on the balcony instead. And – perfect! – there were two gulab jamuns left! Zayan loved the sticky, richness of the dough balls doused and marinated with that sugary sweet syrup. Holding the phone in one hand and gripping the top of the railing with the other, he came bounding down the stairs. With each stride, his smile got wider and wider. Maybe it wasn't so bad being alone after all, if it

meant he could have both gulab jamuns for himself!

But right before he made it to the tray, Ali ran in. He was drenched in sweat and panting heavily, having just won the soccer game. Before Zayan knew what was happening, Ali grabbed a bowl from the other side of the counter, bolted his way across the room, snatched the serving spoon that Zayan's outstretched fingers were about to latch onto, and plopped BOTH gulab jamuns into his bowl! And in the next second, he darted out the door. He hadn't even noticed Zayan at all.

That was the last straw for Zayan. He immediately hurtled himself onto the floor, kicking his feet and pounding his fists into the ground. He could no longer control his screams, and why should he? It wasn't like anybody would care what he did, let alone how he felt.

"Zayan! What's going on?"

But he carried on with his wailing, pretending not to hear her voice. He did NOT want to give her the satisfaction of helping him this time. She wasn't here this entire time! He was doing fine on his own, wasn't he? He didn't need anybody else! Nobody cared about him anyway!

"Leave me alone, Alisha Apa! I hate you! I don't feel like talking to you!"

But she still knelt down next to him. Even without opening his eyes, Zayan knew who it was from that familiar fragrance of jasmine perfume infiltrating his nostrils. Alisha Apa, his oldest cousin, had just walked into the kitchen, arriving late from some college friend's birthday party. For some reason, she always tried to help him whenever she noticed that he was upset. Even right now, when he was trying to push her arms away, she was trying to get him to sit up. But he didn't WANT her help. Why couldn't she understand that? Why was she restraining his arms by hugging him instead?

"Well, too bad because I feel like staying."

And with that one sentence, Zayan finally gave up. He stopped struggling to get out of Alisha Apa's embrace, and began to sob. And once he started, he couldn't stop. He couldn't even get a word in between his choked gasps.

But Alisha Apa understood.

"You know, Zayan, I cannot believe all the gulab jamun is finished already! But it's okay because I already had dessert. When I went to my friend's birthday, the cake was so pretty. It was red and had a bunch of yellow flowers on it. And OBVIOUSLY you know which piece I took, right?"

Zayan sat up and sniffled, rolling his eyes. "Duh...The piece with the biggest flower on it!" Alisha Apa may have been an "adult" officially, but Zayan and their 13 other cousins all knew that she would fight anybody for the cake pieces with flowers on them, because they had the most frosting. Sure, she would do anything for them. But they all knew this was something she would never compromise on. How immature!

Alisha Apa grinned. "Yup! You know me so well! But guess what else I got from there?" She took out a KitKat from her pocket and handed it to him. "I secretly brought some candy back, so you can have this one. Remember when we bought those Indian KitKats across the street during our Hyderabad trip to the family house last year?"

Already unwrapping the KitKat eagerly with both hands (Mamma's phone lay on the side, forgotten for the time being), Zayan finally cracked a smile. "Yeah! And also, remember in that house's living room, when I beat you at Parcheesi THE FIRST TIME I EVER PLAYED??"

Chuckling, Alisha Apa waved her hand and said, "Yeah yeah, we all know you're the greatest Parcheesi player of all time."

And then all of a sudden, Zayan remembered something else. "I have something in my pocket too!" He pulled out the rock, glittery and smooth and almost perfectly round, and handed it to her. "This is for you!"

Alisha Apa grinned as he handed it to her. "Wow, thanks Zayan! You ROCK!" She chortled. Zayan shook his head, but he found himself laughing too. Alisha Apa always made jokes that would cause people to roll their eyes. But whether or not other people found them funny, she always laughed. And sometimes, her excitement in telling the silly jokes was funnier than the jokes themselves.

She continued, "I think I'm going to keep this on my dresser. How'd you find it?"

So Zayan, his fingers and T-shirt stained with chocolate, began recounting his story to her. And as they sat together on that hardwood kitchen floor, Alisha Apa's arms wrapped around him and her chin resting on the top of his head, Zayan knew that, finally, everything was okay after all.

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