

CHAPTER SAMPLER

# CALL ME AL

WALI  
SHAH  
&  
ERIC  
WALTERS





# CALL ME AL

WALI  
SHAH  
and  
ERIC  
WALTERS



ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

Copyright © Wali Shah and Eric Walters 2024

Published in Canada and the United States in 2024 by Orca Book Publishers.  
orcabook.com

All rights are reserved, including those for text and data mining, AI training and similar technologies. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher.

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Title: Call me Ali / Wali Shah, Eric Walters.

Names: Shah, Wali (Poet), author. | Walters, Eric, 1957- author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230206964 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230206972 |

ISBN 9781459837942 (softcover) | ISBN 9781459837959 (PDF) |

ISBN 9781459837966 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8637.H3845 C35 2024 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023934939

**Summary:** In this middle-grade novel, eighth-grade student Ali Khan finds that writing poetry—first about his crush, then about what it means to be an immigrant and the anti-Muslim racism around him—helps him discover who he truly is.

Orca Book Publishers is committed to reducing the consumption of nonrenewable resources in the production of our books. We make every effort to use materials that support a sustainable future.

Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Cover images by GCShutter/Getty Images;

smartstock/Getty Images

Design by Troy Cunningham

Edited by Sarah Howden

Printed and bound in Canada.

*To my parents, and to the real-life  
Ms. Riley and Ms. McIntosh  
—W.S.*

*For those who try to bring peace  
and kindness to the world  
—E.W.*



# ONE

The halls were crowded as Zach and I wove and bumped our way along. It seemed like everybody else was moving in the opposite direction as we were. They were going out to the yard, while we were headed toward the office.

“Are you sure we’re not going to get in trouble?” I asked.

“Al, we’re not going to get in trouble,” Zach said. He half-smiled, half-smirked and brushed his hair to the side with his fingers. That was something he did a lot—pushing his hair off his forehead. We both had dark hair—mine black and his brown—but his was longer.

“Well, no trouble unless we get caught,” he added. “Then there’ll definitely be issues.”

“Not what I wanted to hear.”

Zach chuckled. “Look, Al, we’re just going out to lunch. We’re not going to rob a bank.”

“We’re going out to the *mall* for lunch, which isn’t allowed without our parents’ permission...and we don’t have permission.”

He shrugged. “It’s a stupid rule. We’re in grade eight, not eight years old. Next year in high school we can go out and eat wherever we want.”

I almost said, *Then let's wait until next year*, but kept my mouth shut.

"Besides, didn't one of your people say something about how you're supposed to fight against things that are unjust?"

"One of my people?" I asked, raising my eyebrows.

"Yeah, that guy in the pajamas. You know, who talked about nonviolent protest," Zach said.

"Guy in pajamas...wait...do you mean Mahatma Gandhi?"

"Yeah, that's the dude!"

Gandhi, along with Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Thomas Jefferson, had been part of a social studies unit our class worked on.

I frowned. "First off, he's from India, and my family is from Pakistan."

"Isn't that sort of the same?"

"No, of course not!" I exclaimed. "Second, those *pajamas* are traditional South Asian dress. And third, he was talking about freeing his country from colonial rule, not going out to lunch."

"He could have done both. That guy seriously looked like he needed a couple of good meals in him."

"He actually stopped eating as part of his nonviolent protest," I explained as patiently as I could.

"That's probably why he was so skinny."

We stopped just outside the door to the office. Darius, Raj and Ryan were still standing there at the counter. I knew them, but they were more Zach's friends than mine. Zach took me by the arm and steered me over to the side and



around the corner to where we couldn't see them and, more important, the secretary couldn't see us.

"We want to give them some space so Mrs. Baker doesn't connect us all going together," Zach explained.

I was prepared to give them as much time as needed. It meant less time away and less time to get caught.

"Besides, what's the worst that could happen if we did get caught?" Zach asked. "We might get a detention, two at most."

I sighed. "I was thinking more like being grounded for life. You know how strict my parents can be."

"I know they're tough, but have they ever grounded you for life before?" he asked.

I shook my head. That was because I had never really done something this wrong. Really, I hardly did *anything* that was wrong. I followed the rules and did what I was supposed to do. It was easier that way.

"We've been doing this once a week for a month, and we haven't gotten caught," he said. "Besides, aren't you the one who spent half of last week trying to convince me to bring you along the next time we went?"

I sighed. "Well, I guess."

Zach had been my friend for years. He and his mother lived in the same building we did. I'd known him since we were four or five, hanging around in the playground. Then we were in the same elementary school and now in the same homeroom class for the past three years here at Camilla Road Middle School. We always ate lunch together—except for the

days when he went over to the mall. When I stayed at school during lunch and Zach was gone, I felt like a loser, like I was being left out. I was sure they were having more fun there than I was eating at school.

“Are you sure the rest of the guys are okay with me coming?” I asked.

“Why wouldn’t they be? They’re not just my friends.”

I was friendly with them, and sometimes we played football or soccer or basketball together at recess, but they weren’t really my friends. They weren’t even in our class. In a school this big, you couldn’t really be friends with everybody—I couldn’t even *recognize* everybody.

We heard the office door open, and Zach peeked around the corner. “Okay, they’re gone. Let me go first, and then you come after. I’ll wait for you outside by the crosswalk.”

Zach disappeared, leaving me alone. Well, alone along with dozens of other people still flowing by. With Zach gone this would be the perfect time for me to just turn around and head back to eat and—I couldn’t do that. What would Zach think about me if I did that?

I looked around the corner just as Zach came out. He gave me a nod of the head and a look that said *no problem*. Then again, he always looked confident, even when he had no right to be. I waited until he went out through the front door. I took a big breath, steadied myself and then pushed the door open and entered the office. There were a few kids sitting on the chairs, waiting for something or someone. I walked up to the counter.

“Can I help you?” Mrs. Baker asked.

“Yes, ma’am, sorry to trouble you, but I forgot my lunch at home, that was really careless of me, and I need to go home to eat, and my mother is home so—”

“If you like, we can provide you with something,” she said. “We have bologna sandwiches.”

“Um...is it halal?”

“I don’t think so. Sorry, I should have figured that out by looking at you.” She smiled patronizingly. “We also have jam sandwiches.”

“I’m allergic to jam, I think.” I was such a bad liar.

She laughed. “Allergic? I wouldn’t eat them either. What’s your name?”

“Khan, Al Khan.”

“You’re from Ms. McIntosh’s class. It’s *Ali* Khan, right?”

“Yes. But I just go by Al.”

I had a terrible thought that she was going to phone my mother or at least check with my teacher, who might then check with my mother and—

“Print your name here, Ali,” she said as she pushed the sign-out sheet across the counter.

There was a pen attached to the clipboard by a piece of string. I took it and wrote my name, my actual name, right beneath Zach’s.

“Sign in when you arrive back, and don’t be late. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I turned and left the office. I knew it wasn’t a bank robbery, but it felt like I was getting away with something pretty bad.

I hurried out the door and ran down the sidewalk to where Zach was waiting for me. My heart was pounding, and I was positive it had more to do with what we were doing than the fact I'd sprinted to catch up.

"Any problems?" he asked.

"She offered me a bologna sandwich."

"They *always* offer you a bologna sandwich." He chuckled. "I should have warned you. Let's catch up to the guys."

We jogged along the sidewalk, crossed the road on a run, dodging traffic, and then got to the mall parking lot. They still weren't in view. Zach led us in through the Walmart entrance, and just as we hit the escalator going down, we saw them at the bottom.

"Guys!" Zach yelled out, and they stopped.

We ran down, dodging around a couple of older ladies—I made a point of saying "Excuse me" as we passed, but they still didn't look happy.

"You brought along Al," Ryan said.

Obviously he hadn't known I was coming, and I felt uneasy.

Ryan was one of the most popular kids in the school. He was white, a lot taller than me, athletic and always dressed in clothes with fancy labels.

"Since when do I need permission to bring somebody along?" Zach asked.

"You don't," Darius said, jumping in. "It's a big mall with lots of seats, and there's plenty of room for him...so no big deal."

"Look, I didn't mean anything," Ryan said. "Besides, it's Al, so that's cool."

That made me feel a lot better, although I wished he'd said *Al's cool* instead.

"But nobody else, okay?" Raj added. "More people means more chance we'll get caught."

"Yeah, nobody else," Zach agreed.

We moved through Walmart and into the mall. We were headed for the food court in the middle of Square One. I'd been in the mall with my family lots of times but never with just my friends. My parents thought a bunch of kids on their own would only cause trouble.

I walked along at the back of our little pack. Two white kids, two brown kids and one Black kid. Everybody was loud and laughing, and I realized we were being noticed by people as we passed. Heads were turning to look at us. I did a quick, fearful double take when I saw a woman who looked a lot like my mother giving me the same scowl my mother gave when she disapproved of something. Did all Pakistani mothers have that same scowl when they were annoyed?

We came up to the food court. "Somebody, grab us a table!" Darius called out.

"I'll do that," I offered.

Zach gave me a slap on the back as they all scrambled to get food. I'd known we were coming here, but I didn't know we were buying food. I just thought they liked eating here. I had a few dollars in my pocket, and I could get something. But really, did I need to? My mother had packed me a lunch, and they were always good. Big and good.

I unzipped my backpack and put the container and the wide-mouthed thermos on the table. I took one more long look around before sitting down. There were hundreds and hundreds of people. Senior citizens, mothers with small children, older teenagers and mall workers. I was relieved that I didn't see any of our teachers or anybody else I knew. I slumped into the seat.

I unscrewed the top of my thermos and a little puff of steam and smell escaped. I recognized what was inside before I even looked—it was one of my favorites, aloo palak. The fragrant, cumin-scented mix of spinach and potatoes made my stomach grumble. My mother didn't add too much spice, but any Pakistani food without some curry and spice just wouldn't be right.

I opened up the container and pulled out a piece of roti. My mother always cut it into quarters so it would fit. It seemed like more that way, but there couldn't be enough roti as far as I was concerned. Well, at least not if it was my mother's. You could buy roti, but my mother used flour from a store in a little plaza that sold Pakistani products and made it herself. It was so much better than the store-bought type.

I took a big bite. It was fresh and tasty, and if I'd only had roti to eat, I'd still have been happy. I dipped a piece of the rounded bread into the aloo palak and scooped it into my mouth. It was delicious.

"What are you doing?"

I looked up. Zach was standing over me with a tray holding a big container of fries and a burger.

"Eating."

“I mean why are you eating *that*?”

I shrugged. “It’s what my mother packed. You know, aloo palak. You like it.”

“I know what it is, but we didn’t come here to the mall to eat *homemade* lunches. Put it away—fast.” He looked all around. “Before they come back and see it.”

I quickly picked up the lid and screwed it back on.

“It’s just not cool,” Zach said.

I put the thermos back into my pack as Raj and Darius came toward us, but the other container was still out. I tried to cover it with my hands. They both had pizza and slumped into the seats across from me. Zach sat down beside me. Ryan was the last to arrive. He was carrying a gigantic plate of pasta. He sat down at the end of the table.

“Is that all you’re eating?” Raj asked, pointing at the roti. Obviously I hadn’t hidden it too well.

“No!” Zach said. “These are his.” He pushed the container of fries at me. “He was letting me take a few, ‘cause, you know, that’s the sort of guy he is. Anybody could take some, right, Al?”

“Yeah, of course.”

I picked up the container of fries and offered them around. Ryan, Darius and Zach all took a few.

“That roti looks good,” Raj said. “Is it homemade?”

“My mother makes it,” I said as I slid the container across the table to him.

“Mine too.” He grabbed a piece and took a bite. “This is really good! Even better than the stuff my mother makes.” He smiled as he chewed.

“I got lots.” I offered the container to the others, and both Ryan and Darius took a piece. Zach didn’t, which I thought was strange—he loved roti.

“Funny,” Raj said, “I’m not sure where it’s coming from, but I swear I can smell something my grandmother—my nani—makes. It’s made with potatoes and spinach and—”

“That sounds like aloo palak,” I said.

“That’s what it’s called!

“That smell must be coming from Curry in a Hurry,” Zach said, pointing to the fast-food counter off to the side.

“I should have gone there instead of getting a slice,” Raj said, holding up his pizza.

“I’ve never seen you get pizza before...and wait, isn’t that, like, meat lover’s?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah, so what?”

“But you’re Hindi?”

“I’m *Hindu*. I *speak* Hindi.”

“But you’re not supposed to eat meat, right?”

“We eat meat. You know, goat and lamb and—”

“That’s got hamburger meat on it,” Ryan said. “Killed cow.”

“He’s right,” Zach added. “Aren’t you supposed to be worshipping cows instead of eating them?”

Raj made a face. “It’s a lot more complicated than that. Besides, when did you two white boys become the meat police?”

Zach held up his hands like he was surrendering.

“Besides, this isn’t India, you’re not my mother, and I really like this pizza!” He took two enormous bites, and everybody laughed.



I was pretty sure both ham and pepperoni were on that slice, which, as a Muslim, I wasn't supposed to eat either.

As we ate, we talked about sports—especially basketball. I liked basketball, although I didn't seem to like it as much, or know as much about it, as these guys did. We didn't watch a lot of sports in my house except for cricket. I was glad I was here with the guys. It felt okay, now that it was happening, and we really weren't doing anything wrong.

My telephone alarm beeped, and I jumped slightly as I fumbled to turn it off. I'd set it for fifteen minutes before the start of afternoon classes so we wouldn't lose track of time and be late. I stuffed the last few fries in my mouth, put the lid on the now-empty roti container and put that into my backpack.

I realized nobody else seemed to be getting ready to leave. I looked at the time again. We really had to get going. If we were late, the school would call home. I slowly eased myself out of my seat and grabbed my backpack. I wanted to push them all in the right direction so we'd get back on time.

"How about I run ahead so we don't all show up at the office to sign in at the same time?" I said.

"Smart," Darius said. "I think Mrs. Baker is starting to get suspicious. But better yet, how about we race back and whoever gets there first signs in first?"

Before I could even reply, the four of them leaped to their feet and started racing out of the food court. I took a few steps and then realized we were leaving all our garbage on the table. I wanted to get back, fast, but I couldn't leave the table like this. My mother wouldn't know I'd even been here, but I

thought of how she'd react, because she was always cleaning up other people's trash. I'd clean this up and be the last to sign back in. It really didn't matter as long as we all didn't arrive at the same time.

I started collecting the scraps of trash and food. Looking up, I saw that the guys were moving so fast they were almost completely out of sight. There was no way I was going to catch up. I put all the trash in the garbage container, and just as I was getting ready to run, I realized my left shoelace was untied. I took off my bag and bent down to tie it, wasting another few seconds.

Then suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder from behind me.

I froze in fear.

"Ali, what are you doing here?"

I turned around, and my jaw dropped. I was dead.

## TWO

It was my grandfather standing over me. He was dressed in his security guard's uniform. I'd thought he wasn't working today! I was too stunned to speak. I stood up so fast my head spun.

"Ali, why are you here?" he asked again.

"I was just...just eating lunch with my friends." I looked down at the floor, too embarrassed to look at him.

"I do not see any friends."

"It's Zach and some of the other guys. They just left—they ran off so they wouldn't be late."

"And why did they leave you?" he asked.

"They didn't...really. I just wanted to clean up the table...leave no garbage behind."

Maybe that would make him think better of me—at least I was cleaning up after myself, after all of us.

"And will you now be late?" he asked, looking concerned.

"No, I don't think so. I'll be on time if I run."

He peered at me. "Do your parents know you came to the mall for lunch today?"

I didn't want to answer, but I couldn't lie either. "Not exactly."

"I do not understand your answer," he said, suddenly switching to speak to me in Urdu. "What does 'not exactly' mean?"

“They don’t know,” I replied in English.

“Then you have no permission.” He looked at his watch. “I need to return to the service desk for my assignment, and you need to go to school so that you are not late. We will discuss this later. This evening...with your parents.”

I wanted to plead with him to not tell them, but I knew I couldn’t ask that. It would only make this worse. I’d been caught, and I’d pay the price. I’d find out if they really were going to ground me for life.

My grandfather looked at me and slowly shook his head. He looked so disappointed in me. It would have been easier if he was angry, if he’d raised his voice and yelled at me. Although there would be plenty of time for angry tonight.



My mother had told me she had things to do in our building today, so it was my job to pick up my younger brother, Danny, after school. I usually did this two or three times a week. He was in third grade at my old school—Clark Boulevard Junior Public School. It was much smaller than Camilla Road, with only about 300 kids, and almost all of them were from our complex or apartments in the other direction. At Camilla kids were from all sorts of different areas. Some kids walked to school, but a lot came by school bus. Camilla was much bigger, busier and different. Things had been so much simpler back then when I went to Clark. I missed it sometimes. Maybe especially today.

“Why aren’t you talking?” Danny asked.

“I’m thinking. You should try it sometime.”

He rolled his eyes. “Is Abu going to be home?”

“I don’t know, but probably not. Why?” I asked.

“I was just wondering.”

Our father *was* gone a lot, and I knew Danny missed him. I missed him too, and I figured he missed us. He had no choice—he was just doing what he had to do for the family. When he wasn’t driving his cab to earn money, he was taking courses. He was training to be a respiratory therapist. It took a lot of his time, but I figured it wasn’t too difficult for him—after all, he’d been a medical doctor in Pakistan. He didn’t talk about it, but it must have been hard and frustrating to be trained as a doctor and end up driving a taxi instead. His doctor’s degree was framed and hung on the wall in my parents’ bedroom. He once told me he’d hung it in there because it deserved to be on display, but he didn’t want to show it to other people who visited our apartment. I wondered if it was hidden away because part of him was ashamed of being a cab driver now. My grandfather always reminded us that it was best to be “modest” and not to be “too proud” or to “seek fame.” There was no danger of us becoming famous.

Tonight I wasn’t sure if I wanted my father home or not. If he wasn’t there, our talk would have to wait for another night. Really, though, it was probably better to get it over with. Waiting and thinking about it all afternoon had been bad enough. Even now thinking about it made me feel sick to my stomach.

We came up to an intersection and waited for the lights to change. Other kids and parents from school gathered behind us. Traffic raced by, and a big truck roared past. A cloud of dust and dirt blew into our faces. I shielded my eyes. Huron Street was always so noisy and busy. The light flashed out a warning that it was about to change, and cars sped up to make it through the intersection.

As the light went orange, I grabbed on to my brother's backpack and pulled him back a little from the edge.

"Hey!" he yelled in protest.

I gave him a serious stare—the sort my mother gave when she was angry or annoyed.

Our parents had ordered me to always take my brother's hand when we crossed Huron Street. That was okay when he was in kindergarten. He'd liked to do it back then. In fact, he'd always wanted to hold my hand all the way home. Now that he was nine, it would have been embarrassing for both of us.

"Danish, either you take my hand to cross the street or I hold on to your backpack."

"Stupid choices."

"Do you want me to tell Ammi and Abu you think they're stupid?"

"No. Don't do that."

This was wise. Our parents were always kind to us, but they were Pakistani. If a parent told a child to jump, the only questions allowed would be how high, how many times and for how long. Usually—almost always—I did exactly what I was told.

We reached the far sidewalk, and I let go. He bounced a few steps away from me. Our building, the middle of the three tall towers, was visible up ahead. It was the only home I remembered. I'd been told that before we immigrated, we lived in a very big house with a courtyard and flowers. I didn't remember it at all, but I'd seen pictures.

We lived in the superintendent's apartment. It was on the first floor, right off the main lobby, with the furnace room on one side and the elevators on the other. It was located there so my mom could keep an eye on everything. From our apartment we could hear people coming in at all hours, and it seemed that the later they arrived, the more noise they made. It was a pretty big apartment with three bedrooms. Me, my big brother, Osama, and Danish shared one bedroom, my parents had another, and the third was for my grandfather. It was lucky that we were three boys, because we couldn't have shared a room with a sister.

A couple of Danny's friends ran by and called out to him as they passed. He gave me a questioning look, and I nodded in return. He pulled off his backpack, tossed it at me and ran after his friends. I watched as they raced into the playground that sat between our building and the next. It was a nice playground, with swings, a climber and a slide. It was in this park that I'd made my first friends, including Zach. Sometimes people came and left really fast in our building, but Zach and his mother had been here even longer than we had.

The park also had a couple of picnic tables and benches. I liked the tables because I could pull out my math book and start on my homework while I watched Danny. I knew the

first question I'd be asked when I walked in the door was "Do you have any homework?" And if the answer was yes, I had to sit down and do it right away. If the answer was no, then they'd ask why not and give me extra work to do. So I was fine staying here. Besides, right now going home wasn't something I wanted to do. As long as I was out here, I could pretend there wasn't going to be a serious discussion. I wondered how I was going to be punished. Certainly there'd be no TV, no mall—probably until I was old enough to drive there myself—and this would be the last time I'd be in the playground for a long time. This was all just a guess, though, since I'd never been in any real trouble before.

Danny was on a swing, pumping his legs, trying to go higher and higher. He was fearless. Much more than me. Two of the picnic tables were taken, and I sat down at the third. I'd started to pull out my books when I caught sight of my grandfather. I did a double take. He was off to the side. He always stood very erect, which made him seem taller than he was.

He was still in his security-guard uniform. He must have just gotten off work. There was a book in his hand. He always had a book with him. I gave him an awkward little wave, and he waved back and then came toward me.

"Good afternoon, Ali," he said in Urdu, sitting down beside me.

"Good afternoon, Dada," I replied in English.

*Dada* is Urdu for "grandfather." Sometimes I called him Dada, sometimes Grandfather. Sometimes I added a little more and called him Dada-jaan. That was more affectionate



than the other two and could be used for any older person in your life. Maybe I should have called him that this afternoon to get on his good side.

Actually, he mostly had nothing but good sides. He was always kind and had time for me and my brothers. He listened to us and had stories to share. Zach once joked that between my grandfather's full white beard and his gentle expression, it was like having a brown Santa Claus in the family. I'd never mention that to Dada, but it made me smile thinking about it now.

"Do you have any homework?" my grandfather asked, continuing in Urdu.

It seemed I didn't even have to be at home to be asked that question.

"A bit. I was just about to start it right here," I answered in English.

"It is good to know that you were able to return safely to school this afternoon."

Without saying anything more, he'd said enough.

"Yes, Dada-jaan. I'm sorry," I said.

"Sorry for returning safely?"

"Sorry for...well...you know. I'm sorry."

We sat silently. I was unsure what to say next.

"Ali, if I was caught in the same situation as a child, I would be punished very severely. But punishing someone is temporary. Teaching them to do better is forever."

My grandfather wasn't angry, but he was firm. I listened, wondering what he'd say next.

“Why did you do it, Ali?”

I didn’t know what to say at first. I looked at Danny playing with his friends, and the answer came to me.

“I wanted to be with my friends, to fit in. I didn’t want to be the odd one out. My friends were all going, and if I didn’t, it would have felt bad.”

“Ali, what if your friends steal from stores and—”

“They wouldn’t, I’m sure, and even if they did, you know I’d never do *that*!” I protested.

“Of course you wouldn’t, but can you say certainly, completely, positively that those boys would never steal?” he asked.

I was pretty sure about Zach, but really, I couldn’t be 100 percent sure of the others. I shook my head.

“If you were together and one of them were to steal and was caught, then all of you would be held for the police. Did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“With some boys who are caught, it is their parents who are called,” he said.

“I think I’d rather deal with the police than my mother.”

My grandfather laughed. “You would deal with both most likely. You are not white enough to get away with just a call to your parents.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When they catch a Black boy, they almost always call the police. With the white boys and girls, they often simply call the parents. With you, well, you are brown, so it could be your parents or it could be the police.”

“That can’t be right,” I muttered.

“Which of us works in security at the mall?” he asked.

I met his gaze. “I meant it shouldn’t be like that,” I said. “That’s just wrong—that’s racist.”

He shrugged. “Wrong or not, that is how it is. You must become aware. You are not a boy. You are almost a man, and you will be held to account,” he said, suddenly switching back to Urdu. “I know you want to fit in. But you are the eagle who flies above the flock, Ali. You should strive to stand out. It is certain that friends are important, but in times of need, ‘he who has a thousand friends has not a friend to spare. And he who has one enemy will meet him everywhere.’”

I let his words sink in. He meant that when life was at its worst, even people with lots of friends were often left alone in their struggle. He was right. And I knew it.

“That’s a great saying, Dada-jaan. Did you just come up with it?”

My grandfather took the old-looking book he was holding and placed it in my lap.

“No—it’s from this. Now how about we make a deal? You read this book to me, and I’ll keep what happened today between me and you.”

“Really?!” I exclaimed, my eyes widening at his offer.

I grabbed the book and opened it. I was immediately disappointed.

My grandfather started laughing.

The book was written in Urdu, and my hopes were as torn as its pages.

As he laughed, he put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer. It felt good. My father never put his arm around me.

“Well then, I can teach you. In return you can help me with my accent when I speak English. Deal?”

“Deal. Definitely a deal.” I couldn’t help but smile. We laughed together.

My grandfather had been a professor of literature in Pakistan. My father had told us that he was one of the most respected scholars in our country. His English was pretty good considering he hadn’t been in this country very long.

“Do you miss teaching?” I asked.

He gave me a sad smile. “I was coming to the end. It was time for new voices to take my place.” He sighed. “Yes, at times I miss my job. I miss my country also. I would never believe I would even miss the monsoons. They are far better than the cold of the winter in this country.”

My grandfather had stayed behind in Islamabad when we emigrated. He came three years later, sponsored by my father, his only son. For years I’d known him only through phone calls and FaceTime, and, of course, the things my parents told me.

“Do you ever think about going back to live at home?” I asked.

“I *am* home,” he said meaningfully. “A man is meant to live with family. To be under the same roof as my son, my daughter-in-law and my three grandsons is a blessing. Someday when you are older and there is more money, I will take you and your brothers back for a visit.”

“That sounds nice.”

He paused, then said, “Ali, do *you* miss it?”

“Miss what?”

“Pakistan.”

I figured I should tell him the truth, even if it wasn’t what he wanted to hear. “I really don’t remember enough to miss it. I was pretty young.”

What I knew was mostly from things my parents had said to me and pictures I’d been shown.

“That is so sad. I need to tell you more stories,” he said. “You like my stories, don’t you?”

“I like them a lot.” Actually, I *loved* his stories and just talking to him. Especially this conversation, because it meant I wasn’t going to get in trouble.

# THREE

I saw my mother through the glass window of the manager's office that was across the hall from our apartment. The building manager, Mr. Robertson, was sitting across from her. He was an older man with bright-red hair and freckles. He was training my mother to eventually take over his job. He handled renting the units, complaints and getting service people in to do the big repairs. My mother said there were always complaints, and Mr. Robertson had told me my mother was particularly good at handling them. She'd trained and worked as a teacher in Pakistan and was good at settling disagreements and getting people to listen. My mother had told me that ten-year-old children and some of the tenants had a great deal in common.

It was also helpful that she spoke Urdu. A lot of the people in the building were from Pakistan, although there were also many from India and Jamaica and countries in Africa and Asia, like China and Korea and Vietnam. Basically, there were people from all over the world. It showed in the languages spoken and the smells that filled the halls. I could almost tell from the food smells where people were from.

Most of the families came from different countries, but others came from different parts of *this* country. Zach and

his mother had come from a little place called Huntsville. It seemed that a lot of people moved from little places to the city. Some of the people in our building were white and others were brown or Black or Asian. Our building was a rainbow.

What everybody shared was that no one had much money. Most of the people in the building didn't have a car. And because they didn't have cars, they pushed home their groceries in carts and then left many of them behind in the apartment parking lot.

My mother *hated* those carts piling up in "her" parking lot. Every couple of weeks she'd make me push them back to the stores. Sometimes Zach helped me. Between the two of us, we could stuff eight or ten carts together and push them back. Danish helped as well, but most often that involved him sitting on top of one of the carts I was pushing. It was not as much about him being helpful as me having to take care of him at the same time.

Mr. Robertson looked up from his desk, saw me and gave a big wave and a smile. My mother turned around and saw me as well. As usual, her long hair was tied up in a bun, and she was dressed in work clothing. She looked a little tired, but what else was new? She gestured for me to come. I felt such relief that we weren't going to have a conversation about the mall because she wouldn't know. I felt a little guilty keeping it from her, but not guilty enough to say anything.

I walked into the office. "As-salam alaikum, Ammi."

"Wa-laikam as-salam, Ali," she replied. "Where is your brother?"

“Playing in the park with Dada watching him.”

She nodded and looked relieved. “Do you have homework?”

“Yes. I’m going straight to my room to finish it.”

“Ali,” she said, giving my arm a playful poke, “offer greetings to Mr. Robertson.”

“Yes, Ammi. Good day, Mr. Robertson,” I said, nodding my head at him. “I hope you are well.”

“Very well, my young friend. Your mother is helping sort out some legalities about a family we’re going to have to evict. It’s always sad when it comes to this.”

“Yes, very sad,” my mother agreed.

“And it happens so often,” Mr. Robertson said. He let loose a big sigh. “So, Ali, when you grow up are you going to be a teacher like your mother?”

“I think a doctor like my father.”

Mr. Robertson shook his head. “I keep forgetting he’s a doctor because I see him driving a cab. So that means you’ll have two doctors in the family.”

“Three,” my mother said. “Osama is going to university next year on scholarship and wishes to become a doctor.”

“That Sam is one smart kid,” he said.

Sam was the name my brother most often went by outside our house. Being Sam made him sound normal. Being called Osama didn’t go over well these days.

“All your kids are smart,” Mr. Robertson added.

I almost said he didn’t know Danish very well, but I didn’t. My little brother’s marks were just okay, nothing like those that Osama and I got.



“It’s a shame your husband has to drive a cab instead of working as a doctor. I guess I understand things are different here, but isn’t being a doctor the same everywhere?”

My mother nodded but didn’t say anything. I knew this was a difficult thing for my parents to talk about.

“I guess they could argue about his training not being good enough, but couldn’t he just take some tests to show he really is qualified?” Mr. Robertson asked.

“Yes.” Ammi nodded. “They are called the medical boards.”

“Then why doesn’t Sal take them?” he asked.

My father’s name was Salim, but mostly he was called Sal by anybody who wasn’t Pakistani, the same way Osama was Sam and Danish was Danny.

She pressed her lips together, then said, “My husband is not allowed.”

“Why wouldn’t he be allowed?”

“Only doctors from some countries are allowed to take those tests.”

“That’s just, well, just stupid, or bad, or something,” Mr. Robertson said, his pale face going ruddy with outrage. “We all know how hard it is to get a doctor in this country. We could really use more doctors instead of wasting them by having them drive cabs.”

There was silence. Awkward silence.

“Ali, it is time for you to go and start your homework,” my mother said quietly.

“Yes. Sure. Thanks. Goodbye, Mr. Robertson. Goodbye, Ammi.”

I left them and crossed the hall to our apartment. I pulled on the chain that hung around my neck to retrieve my key. I unlocked and opened the door.

“Hello...anybody home?”

There was no answer. I closed and locked the door behind me.

I grabbed a glass and ran the tap. The water was always warm and a little off-color at first. I filled the glass, turned off the tap and brought it to my room. I pushed the door open, and it banged against Danny’s bed. It was so close to the door that it wouldn’t open all the way. I edged in sideways.

Our room wasn’t big to begin with, but with three beds, three dressers and two desks, it was completely filled. We probably didn’t need both desks, but my parents insisted that Osama and I needed our own study stations. I thought what we really needed was a couple of feet of floor space to stand in.

I slumped into my chair and dropped my pack on the desk, taking out my math text and workbook. We had a dozen math questions for homework. It was all basic stuff that I could do with my eyes shut. I often did my homework with Zach so I could help him understand the work. Zach was smart, but math wasn’t one of his strengths. Plus, he didn’t have Pakistani parents who would arrange a math tutor if need be and wouldn’t accept anything less than perfect...well, at least almost perfect.

It also wouldn’t hurt his marks if he spent less time on music and more time on school. Zach was always checking out new music, talking to people on Discord, searching YouTube and TikTok. He liked sharing new music with me, and I got texts and links from him all the time.

Most of the music was fire. Sometimes he'd send me rap music, and I'd turn the volume down or use my headphones because some of the words would get me in trouble if my parents heard them. I didn't want them, or even Osama or Danish, to hear me listening to that kind of music. The lyrics were pretty bad, and mumble rappers were hard to understand, but I had to admit, the beats were pretty good. Zach wanted to be a DJ. It was his dream to be standing in front of hundreds of people, playing music and getting them dancing.

For him it was a dream, and for me it was a nightmare. I couldn't imagine anything scarier than being in front of hundreds of people and having to perform or even just speak. Okay, maybe snakes were scarier. Or being in front of hundreds of snakes and speaking. Yeah, that would be the worst. I found it hard enough to present in class, where I knew everybody and knew the work even better.

I figured I'd definitely be getting a call from Zach tonight because there was a math test tomorrow. He was going to do okay. He understood it better than he thought he did. I wasn't worried at all. I figured I had a shot at a perfect score. I always had a shot at that in math. And science and English and... well, almost everything.

I ran my hand along the surface of my computer. It was new and expensive. Osama had an almost matching one. Our old computers, which now belonged to Danish and my grandfather, were still very good, but our parents had other ideas. I thought the computers were still too good to replace, but I did like having the newest tech. Who didn't? Besides, there

was no point in arguing with them, and my parents insisted that we always had the best when it was anything to do with school. No matter what else had to be sacrificed, no matter how many more hours my father had to drive that cab, or my mother had to clean offices as a side job, they would do it. They always told us that nothing was more important than education.

I put on my headphones. This was a new rapper Zach had suggested. His name was Lazarus. His beats were solid, and the lyrics were good. I wanted to hear more from this guy. I'd let Zach know, but right now I had homework to do.

The first few math questions were easy. That's what sometimes got me in trouble. The questions were so simple that I didn't show my work or bother to check the answers, so I made stupid mistakes. That had cost me a perfect on the last test. Ms. McIntosh had told me it wasn't a race and that I really needed to check over my work and avoid what she called *careless* errors. With her voice in the back of my mind, I deliberately slowed myself down as the questions became harder.

Ms. McIntosh was our homeroom teacher. She was young—well, young for a teacher. She didn't care if people wore hats or chewed gum or ate snacks while they worked. She often let us do our work in groups and was happy as long as we kept it to what she called “a dull roar” or “creative chaos.” She often put music on in the background and sometimes even let us pick the songs. More often than not, it was music Zach had brought in. He'd become sort of the class DJ, and kids liked his choices. He not only picked good music but was smart enough to make sure

that the music he suggested was “clean.” Ms. McIntosh told us she appreciated that she didn’t have to check out his stuff first. She was my favorite teacher of all time, and I think most of us thought of her that way.

She was certainly Zach’s favorite teacher. He told me his plan was to finish eighth grade, then high school and maybe college or university, and then come back to visit her. He’d ask her out, she’d fall in love with him, and then they’d get married. I tried to point out that this wasn’t going to work because she was at *least* ten years older than him, but he explained that although she was almost twice as old as him *now*, in ten years she’d be only a third as old and how they’d eventually be “basically” the same age. Math wasn’t one of his strengths. I had to admit—at least to myself—that she really was pretty.

She reminded me of a girl in our class, Melissa. It wasn’t just that they looked like they could be sisters—they even laughed and sounded the same way. It was the sort of confidence they had when they talked and the way they both moved. I knew Melissa took a lot of dance classes, and Ms. McIntosh had told us she’d taken dance when she was younger.

I could only imagine what my parents would say if I told them I wanted to take dance classes. Not that I wanted to, but if I did, they sure weren’t going to spend money on something like that. I did take extra math tutoring at a special school once a week. Apparently getting almost perfect in math meant that I needed to take more of it.

Melissa was always friendly and nice to me. She was nice to everybody. It would have been more realistic for Zach to have a crush on her instead of our teacher. That I would have understood, because I thought half the guys in the class felt that way about Melissa. Including me. Of course, I had about as much a chance with Melissa as Zach had with Ms. McIntosh.

I took a deep breath and sighed. What could a guy like me do to get a girl like Melissa? It wasn't like I could talk to my parents about it. They had an arranged marriage—what would they know about dating or having a crush, especially on some white girl? And it would just be awkward to talk to my family about it anyway.

What did girls even like? Flowers...dancing...poetry? I had no idea how I'd get her flowers, especially since I definitely was not going to the mall at lunchtime anymore. And I'd probably break my ankles trying to dance. Maybe there was one thing I could do, even if she never saw it.

I pulled open my desk drawer and grabbed a pencil and a scrap of paper. Lately I'd been fooling around, writing poetry. I hadn't talked to anybody about it. It wasn't just dance lessons my parents wouldn't understand. For the past week I'd been working on a specific poem. I was writing this poem for an audience of one—but I didn't think I'd even ever let that one person see it. I couldn't do rap, but I could do words.

I looked at the first lines I'd written down.

To the girl in my class with the cutest smile,  
I think you're really kind, and I really like your style.

These are the feelings that I've felt for a while.  
If you give me your number, I'll keep it on speed dial.

I had to admit that they were pretty good lines. They were better than a lot of rap lyrics I'd heard. I thought and thought about what should come next, but nothing came to me. Maybe it was because I was listening to somebody else rap at the same time. I clicked off the music coming through my headphones and into my head. The silence was better.

Words started coming, and I jotted them down.

I can't help but notice your pretty blond hair.  
I wonder if my feelings are feelings that you share.  
I want to tell you that I like you, and tell you that I care.  
Melissa, me and you would make the greatest pair.

I liked it, but would Melissa? What would she think if I actually gave it to her? It could be the start of something great, or it could be the last time she ever talked to me. What if she showed it to her friends or posted it on social media and everybody laughed at me for writing it? If that happened, I'd be so embarrassed I'd have to leave the school—or even the entire country. Maybe I'd have to move back to Pakistan to escape. It might be good if I learned more Urdu just in case.

A hand shot out and grabbed the paper, knocking the pen out of my hand. My heart sank.

"Hey!" I yelled as I spun around to see my brother Osama standing over me. I hadn't heard him come into the room.

“Give it back!” Other than Melissa, he was the last person in the world I wanted to read this. This was so embarrassing.

“Come on, give it back, please!” I pleaded.

He held it away from me. He was much taller and stronger than me, with wide shoulders. He even had some scruffy beard on his chin. I knew there was no way I was getting it back unless he gave in.

“And who exactly is this *girl*?” he asked.

“Just give it to me!” I demanded as I jumped to my feet and tried to grab it from him.

He effortlessly held me back with one hand and the paper out of reach in his other one.

“Ah, so her name is Melissa. Even if you hadn’t mentioned the blond hair, I knew she had to be white,” he said and laughed.

“Just give it back!”

“Even if we didn’t have arranged marriages, do you think you even have a chance with her, buddy?” He relaxed his grip on my shirt, released me completely and handed me back the page. He slumped down on his bed. I was relieved to get it back but angry at him for taking it to begin with.

“Did you at least finish your homework before you started writing poetry for a girl you have no chance with?”

I stuffed the poem into the top drawer of my desk. “Why are you being a jerk, Sam?”

He shrugged. “I’m your older brother. It’s in the job description.”

I thought about how I often gave Danny a hard time.



“Look, you’re going to have to trust me, Ali, I’ve been there before. You think you’re the first little Pakistani boy with a crush on a *Melissa*? You got a better chance with somebody named Maham or Maryam.” He let out a big sigh. “Look, maybe I’m not in the best of moods. We had a supply teacher in math today.”

“What’s that got to do with you being a jerk?”

“When he took attendance, he called for *Osama*.”

“That’s your name,” I said.

“Yeah, but my last name is Khan, not *bin Laden*.”

I gasped. “The teacher called you that?”

“Not him. A couple of jerks in the class, who don’t have enough brains combined to even pass math, started it. One of them said something about not being comfortable having a terrorist in their class and how somebody should check me for bombs.”

I stared at him. “What did the teacher do?”

“He pretended he didn’t hear them,” Osama said.

“You could tell your principal. He likes you,” I said.

“He likes me a lot. I’m about the best student in the entire school. But what’s the point? What’s he going to do, suspend them? Besides, I’ll have the last laugh. Someday I’ll be *Doctor bin Laden*. I’ll remind them of that when they stagger into the emergency department after they fall down drunk and I have to stitch them up.”

“I’d like to be there to see that,” I agreed with a smirk. Then I thought back to the poem. “Do you think you could keep the poem to yourself? You know, not mention it to anybody?”

He chuckled. “Sure. Maybe I give you a hard time, but I’m still your brother, and I got you covered. You know, you’re actually a pretty good poet.” He paused. “Maybe Melissa might even agree.”

Nope—she was never going to get that chance.