

BARRIERS

by
Rehana Mirza

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Rehana.Mirza@gmail.com (e)

ACT 1, SCENE FOUR

As lights up, Khalil sits on the sofa, staring off blankly at the tv. Sound of newscasters. Naima comes into the room, flitters about him, tidying.

NAIMA

Shehry is setting the table. Dinner will be ready soon.

KHALIL

That's fine.

NAIMA

Do you not want to come and -

KHALIL

When it's ready.

NAIMA

(concerned)

You know... They say... too much tv is not good for you -

KHALIL

It's fine. (Pause) I'll be, just a minute...

Naima departs. A moment passes, then enter Shehry.

SHEHRY

Dad, dinner's almost ready.

(yelling towards kitchen)

There! Happy now?

He departs. A moment, then enter Sunima from front door.

KHALIL

Sunima! My darling. Come sit with your father, eh?

He shuts the tv off. Sunima drops off some bags of groceries by the door, then walks over to perch herself on the edge of the armchair gingerly, smoothing her skirt as she does so. She kisses the top of Khalil's head lovingly.

KHALIL (CONT'D)

Where have you been?

SUNIMA

I was at the store, picking up a few things... Groceries are so much cheaper in Jersey...

KHALIL

That is why you should stay here. With your family.

SUNIMA

Pa... You know I'm going... I have responsibilities in New York.

KHALIL

So? They will understand -

SUNIMA

It's not about 'them', it's about me.

Enter Naima.

NAIMA

Khalil - Oh Sunima. Good you are home. Can you please tell your father that dinner is ready?

KHALIL

Arre, I am right here, I know that dinner is ready.

NAIMA

You do not want to eat with your family anymore?

KHALIL

Why must you act like this in front of Sunima -

NAIMA

I am just stating the simple truth -

KHALIL

Garbage. You are full of garbage.

NAIMA

Always my fault. I am always -

SUNIMA

I'm engaged.

Parents pause in their routine and turn to look at Sunima. Sunima begins chanting it as if she's clicking the heels of her ruby slippers on the yellow brick road and it's her only way home...

SUNIMA (CONT'D)

I'm engaged. I'm engaged, I'm engaged, I'm engaged!

Khalil stands in pleasure and surprise.

NAIMA

(dismayed)

Oh my G-d, I would have never thought!

KHALIL

(to Naima)

What a thing to say to your daughter!

NAIMA

Would you think at 28 anyone would -

KHALIL

Who? Who is it? How could we not have met -

SUNIMA

I met him at school... In my art class... and I didn't mention it before because.... It just never came up... He's very smart, he's already accepted a professorship in the city.

NAIMA

And you?

SUNIMA

I'm sure I'll find a teaching position at one of the public schools-

KHALIL

In the city? Why? I thought after this year, school would be over, you would come home...

Khalil collapses down onto the couch.

NAIMA

What is his name?

KHALIL

Home is where you belong.

SUNIMA

His name is Roger--

NAIMA

Roger? Not Raj?

SUNIMA

He would prefer to be called Roger. (beat) He grew up in Connecticut - (beat, still no reaction) - He's white.

NAIMA

Oh...

KHALIL

So you're engaged to him? His parents know?

SUNIMA

Yes.

KHALIL

Well... As long as you're happy, right?

Silence.

SUNIMA (CONT'D)

Oh. (beat) So that's it?

NAIMA

Yes. As your father says.

SUNIMA

All right then. (beat) So, I guess... if that's it... I'm, uh- I'm going to be taking the 10 o'clock train back-

KHALIL

What?

SUNIMA

I'm leaving tonight.

KHALIL

Alone, you want to go?

SUNIMA

Roger will be meeting me at the station -

KHALIL

It is too late -

SUNIMA

-And then I'm staying over at his place.

KHALIL

No.

SUNIMA

Papa...

KHALIL

No.

Khalil stands abruptly from the armchair and crosses the room, standing in front of a bookshelf.

His fingers run across various book titles, then move to linger on a folded, dirtied and charred piece of paper.

SUNIMA

Papa, I love him. I'm going to marry him, after all!

KHALIL

And does this mean you cannot listen to your father anymore?

SUNIMA

Not when you're not listening to me!

KHALIL

I deserve respect. This is my home - my house.

SUNIMA

I'm going, Papa. Do we have to go through this every time?

Khalil crosses the room, then crosses back again. Khalil pauses back in front of the bookshelf, then turns to look at Sunima sadly.

KHALIL

You are not leaving - It is too soon -

SUNIMA

I am leaving, papa.

KHALIL

I said -

SUNIMA

I'm not five...

KHALIL

(angered)

Yes you have gotten so old you forget! You forget so easily!

SUNIMA

I can't forget! That's why I'm going. I'm doing something. I'm living, taking classes, making my art. And at least I have someone who's doing the same, right alongside of me-

KHALIL

(turning back to books)

He's a fool just like you then.

SUNIMA

I knew it. So two seconds ago you were just pretending to accept him when really, deep down -

KHALIL

(turning back to Sunima)

I don't care about him! I care about you - and I don't want you to go!

SUNIMA

You can't keep controlling me -

KHALIL

Sunima! Enough! Do you understand me! Enough!

Enter Shehry watching off to the side.

SUNIMA

No! I don't understand you! I don't understand why. I don't understand why this house is locked up in silence. Why nothing can be said. Why we have to let it eat away at us until there's nothing left! So I'm going. I'm getting out! And if you can't tell me why then I'll just have to leave you to rot... In this, in this... Hell hole. Wondering why you don't know how to make the pain go away... Because you don't know how so all you can do is tell me NO!

Naima takes a step forward.

NAIMA AND KHALIL

Sunima!

KHALIL

No... YOU DON'T KNOW. I know! You think you know better. You think you can just tell your father... You're not the father, Sunima. Be glad that you are not. Because you don't have to suffer like I do. You think you are so much smarter? Then why is it that you don't know what's going on in front of your face? ...

Khalil pulls that charred piece of paper from the bookshelf and waves it at her.

KHALIL (CONT'D)

Look. You want to see. You want to know. Then look! Look!

Sunima takes the piece of paper out of his hand slowly.

KHALIL (CONT'D)

They burn holes. They burn holes in his eyes... His mouth. My son. Mera beta. And they do this. I don't know why. Maybe because when they read a Muslim name, they don't want to see kind eyes staring back at them. Maybe because when they see this brownness, they only remember how to hate. You remember, though.

You remember, you tell me, Papa, I will put flyers all over the city, with his picture, with the word 'Missing' so they will know to look for him, to bring him home to us... And your friend would even help you. It was Roger, right? That friend?

But even as you and your American boyfriend walk by his picture and light your silly candles, when your back is turned they disgrace him, they take your candles and they burn holes into my son... NO eyes. NO mouth. It's just paper, but... They burned holes into him.

Sunima unfolds the charred piece of paper to reveal Nabhil's picture with the words MISSING - LAST SEEN AT WTC heading the top.

SUNIMA

Papa...

KHALIL

Four months later, no body, just this paper. All I have of him, is this paper. They do this to the dead, Sunima. What would they do to you? Hmmm? I can't lose two... I can't...

SUNIMA

Hush, papa... Shhh....it's okay... I'm not going... I won't go into the city tonight, okay? Shhh... I'm home... I'm staying home...

She looks up over Father's shoulder to meet gaze of Mother.

END ACT I.