

MYM LITERATURE

Halal Meet Cute – Part 2

by Zahra Wadia

Where Muslims come home to reflect

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Act II: Biryani is a Love Language

“Most mothers worry about their children being out too late partying,” Kanwal’s mother’s voice rang through her tiny apartment. “And here I am worrying about whether my daughter is trapped under a *patiila*, or has burned herself, or gotten *mirchi* in her eyes -”

“Mom, how big is this *patiila* that I -”

“Allah tests all of us differently, I guess.” Kanwal’s mother sighed loudly. On her phone screen, Kanwal could only see her forehead and the ceiling of her childhood home over four thousand kilometers across the country. However, it didn’t take much effort to conjure the eyebrows pinched in concern and lips twisted in disappointment.

“At least I’ve been messaging with updates,” Kanwal said, keeping her voice neutral despite the guilt and frustration creeping up her spine. “There was a mix-up with my stall, and I had to partner with another business. It’s been so busy I’ve barely had time for anything else.”

Her brain felt like curdled raita left in the sun too long and there was a constant ache between her shoulder blades. She ran a finger over the labels and packaging strewn across her laminate kitchen counter. In pistachio green lettering were the words “Amma’s Biryani & Fine Falafel” embossed on white glossy card stock.

“A collab on a family box. That’s my counteroffer,” Mazen had said when she offered to share the stall fee and her net profits. “I’ll provide the falafel and marketing; you provide the biryani.”

They sat on the docks watching pigeons fight over crumbs of blueberry bread and had ironed out the terms of their partnership.

“You could have taken the stall fee I offered and saved yourself all this hassle you know,” Kanwal had joked when they parted ways.

“I know,” Mazen grinned, his dimples flashing, “but where’s the fun in that?”

“*Beta*, we sent you so far away to study, to make something of yourself. Not to spend your days in a kitchen.” Her mother’s furrowed eyebrows and tortoiseshell glasses filled the screen.

“I only spend Thursdays in the kitchen, Mom.”

“*Haan, jo bhi*. You know what I mean. *Acha*, Shahida Khala said you have to come to Sana’s *dholki*. I tried to explain that your flight gets in that morning, but she’s adamant that it won’t be fun if there isn’t a good turnout.”

“Mom, Sana’s having like twelve *dholkis* for her wedding. Can’t I just go to the next one?”

“And Fatima Maami wants your biodata to start looking at potential *rishtaas*. It was different when you were across the country studying, but I can’t put her off much longer.”

Her mom recounted the latest news of their extended family, from Sana’s upcoming wedding, to Fatima Maami’s matchmaking escapades. Kanwal took the nine strides needed to get from one end of the kitchen to the other end of the living room, her hand rubbing the back of her clammy neck. She considered turning on the AC, even though the loud hum made it impossible to watch TV, much less talk on the phone.

She opened a window. A breeze carried the smell of burning wood

chips through her apartment. She wasn't the only chef on the block on summer nights. When she first moved in, she had tried to use lavender Pine-Sol to mask the smell. She gave up after a month. Eventually, the sounds and smells of house parties and barbecues had made her feel less alone.

"I'm going to be glad to not have to stare at that hideous wallpaper when I talk to you. You must be looking forward to being back in your own space. Your bedroom is exactly how you left it."

"It's not that bad," Kanwal muttered, glancing over her shoulder. It was the most generous thing she had ever said about the powder blue damask eyesore that belonged in a regency drama, not a rent-controlled unit.

Her mother's full face came into view. Grey strands of hair peeked out from under the loose beige scarf slung over her head.

"I'm sorry, *beta*," she said. "I know you must be disappointed about leaving, and you've worked so hard. Are you sure you don't want to try talking to your supervisor? Maybe he can make space for you?" Lines creased her eyes and her face was drawn. More and more recently, Kanwal was reminded of how her parents were getting older and her heart cracked each time.

"I'm not staying, Mom." She knew that if her parents discovered Devin's offer and that she had turned it down, they wouldn't understand. Avoiding her mother's sharp-eyed gaze, she scanned the calendar whiteboard pinned to her fridge. Her neat handwriting had listed the tasks and appointments for the month. "And I'm fine, really," she added, with a forced bright smile. "I had always planned to come back after my undergrad. And you know how much I miss your biryani."

"*Pagli*," her mother's voice softened. "I thought you'd be sick of biryani by now."

“Never yours.”

Her phone vibrated and a message appeared: *I’m here.*

“Mom, I’m really tired. I’m going to take a nap.”

“Okay take care of yourself and call -”

“I’ll call tomorrow *Insha’Allah.*”

Kanwal grabbed her keys and lifted the crates by the front door. She lugged them down the elevator, out of the building’s side door and into the parking lot. Sirens wailed in the distance along with the constant rumble of traffic.

“Took you long enough,” Aicha said, no heat in her voice. She was candor with a cheshire grin and an impeccable sense of style. She put her aviator sunglasses on top of her bright yellow hijab. “I was beginning to think you got trapped under a pot of biryani or something.”

“Not the first person to say that to me today.” Kanwal loaded the foil trays of biryani into the trunk of Aicha’s beat up sedan. All labels and references to Amma’s Biryani had been removed from the packaging.

“So, this is where you live,” Aicha looked up at the tall red brick building with flowerpots and clothes lines hanging on balconies. “I always assumed you were closer to the kitchen.”

The commercial kitchen where Kanwal cooked was a twenty-minute drive away. As Executive Director of the Safa Homes women’s shelter, Aicha usually met her there to pick up food.

“Thanks for coming all this way,” Kanwal said. “Things have been so busy with the Market.”

“Oh please. You saved me a lot of complaints by making it work.” Aicha slammed the trunk shut. “Your biryani has a dedicated fan club.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Such little imagination,” Aicha shook her head. “You’re coming to the annual volunteer appreciation dinner at the end of the summer, right? And before you say no as you always do, know that it’s our five year anniversary and you’re a big part of our success.” She squeezed Kanwal’s shoulder. Her bergamot and sandalwood perfume engulfed them.

“I don’t know about that.” Kanwal shifted from one foot to another.

“Think of it as a favour to me then. It would mean a lot to me if you were there.”

Kanwal took a deep breath. She knew Aicha meant well. Still, she felt like an imposter for being on the receiving end of any sort of appreciation. Safa Homes’ staff and volunteers housed vulnerable women and children. Kanwal just made biryani for them sometimes.

“I even have volunteer appreciation hoodies, designed by yours truly.” Aicha grinned. “What do you say?”

Three weeks after moving to Vancouver, Kanwal failed her first course assignments. In a bout of homesickness and anxiety, she found herself at Safa Homes with pots of biryani she had stressed-cooked. Aicha had sat with her for an hour, made her a cup of tea, and gently explained that the shelter couldn’t accept food that wasn’t cooked in a professional kitchen. She had taken a few containers nonetheless. After all she had done for Kanwal over the years, attending a dinner for her was the least Kanwal could do.

She watched Aicha get in her car, put on her sunglasses, and look at her expectantly from her rolled down window.

“Fine. I’ll be there. Besides,” Kanwal laughed, “who doesn’t love a free hoodie?”

A shiver ran down Kanwal’s spine as a breeze rolled in from

English Bay. It was a welcome reprieve from baking in the market's heat all day. Walking down Burrard bridge next to Mazen, a buzzing energy coursed through her veins.

"Well, today was a day." He glanced sideways at her.

"I can't say I've ever had a fight break out over free samples." Kanwal's eyes lit up and she started laughing. "The look on your face when you realized they were actually going to start throwing punches."

"How do you respectfully break up an argument between two elderly women your grandmother's age?" Mazen grinned as Kanwal's pace slowed and she erupted into a new fit of giggles. He pivoted to stand in front of her. "This is totally going in your spreadsheet, isn't it? Are we going to have a checklist about promos now?" He shuddered. After they started working together, their different working styles quickly became evident. Whereas Kanwal had itemized checklists and plans for every scenario, Mazen operated on instinct, copious amounts of coffee, and an unsettling knack for recalling names, faces, and numbers he only heard once.

"There might have to be. Even if it's to stop you getting socked by a Daadima." They stood grinning at each other. A ring of a bike bell reminded them it was the busiest time of day on the bridge. A few cyclists sped their way and Mazen swiftly moved between Kanwal and the bicycle lane as they began walking again.

Kanwal fiddled with the scrunchie around her wrist. Over the last few months, she had found herself starting and ending her days with an anticipation she wasn't ready to examine. The daily occurrences that would usually irritate her ceased to have the same effect: the oblivious fishmonger who parked his crates in front of their stall during end of day take down; the cantankerous neighbour florist constantly on the phone yelling at someone; even the wispy coffee

shop owner who always came by to talk to Mazen (although that one still ruffled her a little).

Mazen walked to the edge of the bridge, rested his elbows on the railing, and looked out across the water. Kanwal followed and stood next to him. From weekends spent working side by side, she was constantly aware of the space between them.

“Whenever I had a bad day at the restaurant or at school, or things were hard with Baba, I’d come out here.” The saffron skyline he gestured toward made him glow. He smiled sheepishly. “I know it sounds corny, but this view always made me feel like there is just so much possibility even when I had no idea what I was doing. That things can change for the better in an instant.”

Kanwal bit back a smile. She couldn’t help but feel a little jealous of Mazen for his relentless optimism. They stood in comfortable silence. A cotton candy sunset cast a pocket of stillness and a soft peachy haze over False Creek and the North Shore mountains. Sailboats drifted lazily along a now peaceful Granville Island. At sixty feet above sea level, the city shimmered in a way that she had never noticed.

In first year, Kanwal learned that cells in the peripheral retina of the human eye don’t register colour and detail. As a result, the peripheral vision is hazy through a fog of grey. The human mind fills in those gaps with details and insights based on brain wiring rather than actual sight.

She gazed at the shocks of fuschia and violet across the horizon and her stomach dropped at the thought that she had no idea how little, or how grey, her mind had always perceived her periphery. By fixating on what she had left behind, she had lost so much of the present.

“I’m going to miss this,” she murmured.

Mazen stilled. “Going somewhere?”

"I always planned to return to Toronto at the end of my undergrad."

He silently hunched towards her in a habit she'd come to recognize was intended to make sure he heard her when she spoke.

"Did I ever tell you that I have nine aunts and uncles and they all live within half an hour of my parents?" They both knew she hadn't. In all of their easy conversations, she had rarely spoken of her family despite having met his mother, younger brother and sister, and heard stories about his father who passed away the year before. "Both of my parents are the oldest, so our house is the one everyone gets together at. My mom and aunts cook these elaborate feasts in our kitchen. I never needed friends because I had so many cousins. We still argue about moves and alliances from boardgames played years ago."

"That must have been really nice growing up."

"It was. And so loud," she chuckled. "I don't think I realized what quiet was until I moved away."

Mazen folded his arms. "I can understand if you'd want to go back then."

"I do." She was looking forward to late night iced coffee runs with her cousins, her father's impassioned, irate commentary as he watched the news, and most of all, her mother's biryani. She signed.

"But?"

"I don't know, I miss them of course. But it also feels like returning to the beginning of a time loop. Nothing has changed. The person they're all expecting is the same as the one that left them. I guess I didn't factor in..."

"Factor in what?" He turned towards her.

"Like maybe I've changed? Even though I was excited, I missed home so much when I left. Now I can be with my family again and do my Masters and it'll actually be easier. It makes no sense because this is

what I've always wanted, and I have no reason not to want it anymore. It was always the plan. "

"I do know how much you love a good plan." His smile didn't reach his eyes.

"I really do." Kanwal's eyes began to sting as she held back tears. "Now that I'm getting what I want, I don't know why I feel so conflicted."

"Maybe because you want different things now."

Kanwal held his gaze as the words clicked something into place within her. They were interrupted by her phone vibrating with a text from Devin.

Kanwal, we should talk about your decision. Call me.

She put her phone back in her pocket, her heart hammering. She looked back at the sinking glow across the water. Unlike Mazen, sunsets always made her wistful. More than the millions of colours the average person can distinguish, the way the light hits six million points in the human eye that determines whether it perceives a soft blush or a vibrant gem, more than the limitations of language; it was the transience of a sunset that always unnerved her. The strangeness of knowing that everything will continue moving on, while this magnificent tapestry will disappear in twenty minutes, just like every moment that will pass and person who will have to leave. Including her.