The Other Editor

by Amer Nazar

Where Muslims come home to reflect

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By Amer Nazar
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For the Discerning Reader

This story is fictional and allegedly exaggerated well beyond reason. Any resemblance to real individuals is entirely coincidental—particularly any named editors, who bear zero responsibility for any distress, despair, or questionable decisions afflicted upon any writers named herein. It would also be pertinent to note that no one mentioned in this story is delusional; all such impressions are purely the result of dramatic and comedic license. All grievances are imaginary, and any characters named herein, are best considered blameless in all known and unknown universes.

"The house at the end of the street was...scary, dreary, dangerous, abandoned..."

I watched the responses roll in and thought, *Jeesh...maybe I should have just gone to the dawat with my family.*

I knew I just *had* to lighten the mood a bit. So I started typing...

Sitting at the end of the neighborhood's grandest cul-de-sac, the house at the end of the street was intimidating, not because it was dark or creepy, but because it was too perfect. The kind of perfect where even the doormat looked like it had been imported from Dubai...

Hmm, I thought to myself. *Perhaps this wasn't quite the levitous start I had envisioned.*

I paused.

Who even uses the word "levitous"?

I internally facepalmed and resisted the urge to delete the entire paragraph.

The prompt was "**The house at the end of the street was**..." and I started to think there was no funny way to write this. I began freewriting ideas on my notepad, my mind drifting to what they were serving at the dawat that I'd skipped.

And then...it clicked.

The solution to my problem here was the one thing I'd do anything to avoid...AUNTIES!!

And as the idea settled, the story really began to write itself. It was almost like my fingers had a life of their own and the story became about some poor guy stopping by a *dawat* and witnessing a fellow brother-in-arms facing a proverbial firing squad of aunties picking his life apart. By the grace of the Almighty, our hero barely escaped a similar fate by the skin of his teeth after being warned off by the unfortunate victim in the story.

But even more importantly, somewhere in the terror that was the Aunty menace in our communities, I had my story. Little did I know then, but my life was about to change significantly over the course of the coming months. Because in response to the next prompt, I wrote another Aunty story, and then the next week, another.

Someone in the group chat suggested that I write a collection, and that, ladies and gentlemen, is where our story begins.

Writing the stories was the easy part. They came quickly—sometimes too quickly. And for a while, that felt like progress. But when I finally paused and looked at what I had, all I saw was a growing draft and no

real sense of what it was becoming.

I knew I wanted my collection of Aunty shenanigans to be made into a book. But what I didn't understand was just *how* these stories were supposed to flow together: How do I turn my stories into something cohesive?

Enter the person who would help me see this project through—the editor, Mariam S.

The day of our first editing call, I logged in a few minutes early, adjusting my camera angle, making sure the lighting was decent, and opened up my draft. I was feeling good and eager to get started, riding high from the responses to those original stories in the group chat.

Suddenly, I heard the *ding* as Mariam joined the call, amid a cacophony of noise. "*Assalaamu alaikum*," she said warmly. "Please excuse the noise, my kids are watching *Ms. Rachel* in the next room," she added, as the sounds of *The Wheels on the Bus* drifted from my laptop speakers.

"*Wa alaikum salaam*!" I replied enthusiastically. "No worries at all! I really appreciate you taking the time."

"Of course," she said with a small smile. "Let's see what you've got."

I began with a bit of context. "So this is one of the stories I've been working on. It's part of a larger collection—kind of humorous, a little reflective, you know...community-based."

She nodded, a tuft of hair appearing at the corner of my screen as one of her children climbed up into her lap. "Hmm. Okay–" she started to say, before her son's giggle interrupted her mid-sentence, as he tugged on her sleeve. She gently put him down and resumed the call. "If I may, what is your intention behind writing these stories? Is it to entertain, a social commentary on that generation of women, or...?"

"Well...it's not just the *women* per se," I replied. "I want this to be

a generation's commentary on an entire community. This means uncles, kids...everyone," I started walking her through my thinking, the themes, my intention behind certain lines, laying it all out as thoroughly as I could.

She sat there listening, while gently shooing her son back to the other room where *Itsy Bitsy Spider* was now playing.

"It might be helpful if you read a couple of passages, show me what you mean," she offered.

Nodding my head in agreement, I began reading, building my rhythm, and added a bit of performance to it.

I paused where I thought the humor landed, emphasizing certain lines, pantomiming personalities and letting the characters present themselves.

"...Hmm..."

An ominous whisper floated through the room.

I paused mid-sentence, and looked up to see Mariam staring back at me, waiting for me to continue.

"Did you say something?" I asked, confused.

She shook her head.

"*Acha...*"

There it was again.

But Mariam's face hadn't changed on the screen.

I could have sworn I'd heard that out loud, but I shrugged and continued reading.

I made it about three paragraphs in, when again I heard:

"Amer."

I stopped reading and looked around the room before cautiously replying, "Y-yes?"

There was a small pause, but thankfully this time it really was Mariam speaking.

"This is really great, thank you for reading. That last sentence though..." She trailed off, tilting her head ever so slightly. "What are you trying to say?"

I blinked.

"Oh...uh, I mean it's kind of setting up the idea that...like...it's more of a metaphor, you know, so it's not meant to be taken literally, it's more of a..." I paused, searching for the right word.

"Hmm." She nodded slowly. "I think you can say it simpler. With all due respect, this feels a bit like you're...rambling."

I started to reply that I wasn't sure that I fully agreed when—

"You talk too much bakwaas."

This time I froze.

I had been watching the screen, and Mariam *definitely* hadn't spoken. She watched me quizzically as I looked around frantically.

Where had that come from?

I turned around in my seat, half-expecting to find someone standing behind me.

But there was nothing there. Just a faint cool breeze from the AC vents and the sounds of the house settling.

I shrugged and turned back to the screen in front of me.

"Ahan...."

It came again.

Louder this time. Closer...from somewhere just over my shoulder.

I immediately looked up and that's when I saw...it? Her? Honestly, words escaped me at that point.

Standing—or...hovering? I couldn't quite tell. But in front of me was an aunty I'd never seen before, although she didn't seem entirely unfamiliar either.

I blinked and looked again.

But she was gone.

There was no one there except for Mariam, still sitting on my screen and looking at me expectantly.

I shook my head, thinking that I needed to work on my sleep habits. Late night doom scrolling and caffeine heavy mornings was making me hallucinate.

I glanced back over the sentence, considering Mariam's thoughts.

"Yeah," I said, after a moment. "I think I can."

Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion, but she smiled.

"Good," she said. "Let's continue."

I read through a few more stories, with Mariam occasionally pausing me with a question or a suggestion.

But I wasn't able to get back to the page. It wasn't anything my editor had said, or the work itself, but the quiet accumulation of the notes, the questions, my lack of sleep and that weird hallucination I'd had, was starting to get to me.

"Hey, uh, is it okay if we take a break? I'm so sorry...I'll follow up with an email once I work my way back through the pages," I said.

I heard a disgruntled *Tsk* behind me and I felt the hairs behind my neck raise. "That's totally fine," Mariam nodded. "My kids have been staring at a screen for the last hour anyways and I should check on them," she said, glancing at her watch.

"And Amer, as you look over everything we discussed today, work on ways to tone down your...rambles," she said. "Trust your readers, say less," she advised (a phrase I'd come to know as her motto) before we ended the call. "You don't have to explain everything."

It was simple advice, delivered without emphasis, but it lingered longer than anything else she had said that day.

I nodded along but I *definitely* didn't want to 'say less.'

*This is **my** book and **my** chance to say **what I** want, **how** I want and **as much** as I want.*

I didn't know it yet, but it would become something of a refrain between us—her reminding me to stop rambling, again and again. And me trying desperately to hang onto my words, again and again—a final stand against the oppressor in my midst! One last bastion of free thought and my final defence being brought to its knees!

The curtain fluttered next to me, and I caught a whiff of starched cotton.

Mariam gave a small smile, offered a quick salam, and logged off. I closed my laptop screen and leaned back in my chair.

What on earth had that been? Who was that...thing?...Aunty? Had she actually been there, or had I imagined the whole thing?

I leaned back in my chair rubbing my eyes tiredly, when—

"Achaaaa...so you want to be a writer huh?"

My eyes shot open and I lurched forward.

There she was again. This time sitting in the chair across the table from me, stirring a cup of chai.

I rubbed my eyes. "What—who are you?" I stammered, "How did you get here?"

"Haan ji, beghairat. I am Nata Ji," she replied.

I had been so focused on writing this book, late nights and amounts of caffeine bordering on illegal, that I had gone through the looking glass and come out the other side.

Choking slightly, as my mouth went dry, I tried reciting the three *Quls*, but Nata Ji just laughed.

"That won't work, beghairat," she said in a sing-song voice. *"You wanted to write about us, na? So I am here to make sure you do the job right...hee hee hee..."* she cackled, draining the last of her chai.

"It's bad enough that you didn't want to become a doctor..." she continued. *"But I'll not tolerate bad writing from you!"*

She glared at me and raised her hand menacingly.

"Are you a ghost?" I stammered.

"You wish..." She cackled again. "*I'm the Aunty-geist!*!"

I gulped. I had initially thought that working with Mariam would be simple. I'd present my work, she'd tell me what she thought, and we'd find a middle ground. Bas, khalas, simple.

But now...this was so much worse than I'd thought. Whether unknown to my editor (or *because* of her) Nata Ji had arrived and I had no idea how to fight against her.

Then, suddenly, Nata Ji launched out of her chair towards me, stopping inches from my nose. *"Listen very carefully to me, beta. I am here, not because I want to be, but because you were refusing to see reason."*

A frown marred her expression and a faint whiff of cardamom and milk blew into my face.

"Your book needs me, even though you do not want me. The day you stop fighting your editor—bas, I will be gone." She snapped her fingers theatrically.

"Until then..." The cackle returned, sharp and shrill. *"I will be everywhere."*

And just like that, without marking a single word in red, Nata Ji had quietly asserted control over my editing process. I was doomed.

Most of my sessions with Mariam took place virtually—though that did nothing to soften the impact of her edits. As if her professional critiques weren't stressful enough, Nata Ji's appearances also amped up the pressure.

What I thought would be a few weeks of suggestions, running through a checklist, correcting grammar and spelling, turned into my book being "wrent asunder" (to use a Quranic metaphor).

While Mariam took her editing seriously, Nata Ji prided herself on abuse. Mariam would find an errant dash or rambling sentence or repetitive concept, and Nata Ji would make sure, with her flinging random objects in my direction, that I knew it.

I wish I'd triple-checked every comma before daring to claim that my draft was complete.

On our calls, Mariam would listen without interruption, her expression steady, thoughtfully considering the words in front of us. She didn't react the way I had initially expected an editor might. There was no visible wince at an awkward sentence, no dramatic pause before delivering a critique. Instead, she would tilt her head slightly, gently shush her kids, and then ask a question so specific that it made entire paragraphs seem unnecessary.

"I'm wondering if you really need this level of detail here," Mariam would say.

"Yes, listen to her duffer! Clearly she is better at this than you are!" Nata Ji would add.

"Amer what is your purpose in writing this section here?" Mariam asked at one point. "Is it because you're worried the reader won't understand?"

Before I could answer, I felt it—that familiar shift in the air just over my shoulder.

"Haan, bolo badtameez—tumhara maqsad kya hai?!" Nata Ji muttered. *"What is the point of your uselessness? Explain it again, and make sense this time"*—her voice somewhere between a whisper and a threat.

Unaware of the *hungama* on my side of the call, Mariam continued, scrolling slightly, her brow narrowing just enough to signal that she had found something else. "You've already shown this here," she said, pointing to an earlier paragraph.

"Exactly," Nata Ji snapped behind me, now pacing—or hovering, or whatever it was she did. *"We should be glad you never became a doctor! Patient is dying and you are too busy explaining the symptoms instead of treating him!"*

I shifted in my seat, trying to stay focused on the screen, on Mariam's voice, which remained even, unhurried, completely unaware of the chaos unfolding just inches from my ear.

In this war between writer and editor, there were moments where I'd had enough.

Nata Ji would often hover silently over my shoulder as Mariam gave feedback, daring me to interrupt. I quickly learned to internalize my objections if I wanted to survive the process intact.

Whenever I pushed back even slightly, I'd catch the faint smell of jasmine and *haldi* before Nata Ji suddenly appeared inches from my face.

"Don't make me get your Ammi," Nata Ji hissed once during a particularly tense standoff, a translucent slipper flew past my head and through my laptop screen, making it flicker.

Maybe I should just jump out the window and end it all, I thought—

And then *fwoop*! Nata Ji's hand whooshed straight through the back of my head in an attempted smack.

"Abbe, idiot," she snapped. *"Who on earth tries to 'end it' from the second floor?"*

I blinked, stunned.

"You should thank God we have gravity," she continued, circling me now, fully activated. *"Without it, you wouldn't even be able to hit the ground! You'd just float there, aimless, like your writing. Useless*

beghairat!"

"Wow..." I started.

"Shaddaaap," she cut me off, jabbing a finger that passed through my shoulder. *"No one is impressed. Get back to work."*

I stared at her. She leaned in, eyes narrowing.

"Open the document now."

A couple of hours had passed and I'd made quite a bit of progress. But despite my earlier epiphany, peace wasn't going to arrive immediately.

I clicked on the first comment Mariam made, with a section highlighted: "*Unclear*."

"Unclear? Unclear to who?" I muttered, frowning.

"Unclear to you duffer!" came from over my shoulder.

"Did you just call me a duffer?"

"Did I?" Nata Ji mocked.

I hovered over the "accept" button and paused.

"No," I said out loud. "No, this is fine."

"Tch..." echoed through the room.

I moved to the next comment: "*Can we tighten this?*"–

"Tighten what?" I asked my empty room, leaning back in my chair. "It's already tight. This is...this is a good paragraph."

"Tighten your brain," returned Nata Ji. "*And tighten your face while you're at it. What is this look? Your beard looks like you slept facedown in the yard. Jungali insaan!!"*

Ignoring her ranting, I reread the paragraph. I had to concede that it was...a long paragraph. I sat up straighter, scrolled and clicked another comment: "*I think you can say this with less words.*"

I exhaled slowly and highlighted the paragraph. Maybe it was longer than I remembered. I started deleting a sentence...

...then stopped.

"This is ridiculous," I muttered.

"Shaddaaap!" I heard from across the room.

There was no warning. A frigid sensation seized my lungs as Nata Ji lunged for the backspace key, her arm passing straight through my chest, spectral fingers trailing a chiffon sleeve.

After the shock wore off, I dove in and began trying to make sense of the deluge of feedback in front of me. Unfortunately, "*Can we tighten this?*" usually meant one of my favorite paragraphs was about to die.

And "*Interesting*..." was often accompanied by a *"This must never see daylight, BESHARAM!"* from Nata Ji.

And "*Let's revisit*" meant "I have concerns, and you should too." But the one I feared most was "*I think you can say this with less words*."

Because EVERY TIME I got that comment, I'd hear *"Haan! Do you think I want to be here? Just listen to her so I don't have to look at your face! You bakwaas too much..."* from over my shoulder.

I had dreamt for so long about writing my own book, and in that dream there were always chapters upon chapters. Pages and pages! Details on details! I wanted it to be quality AND quantity!!

And with Nata Ji sitting across from me, conducting along to Mariam's feedback, it took all my self-control not to repeatedly smack my head onto the table.

But despite Mariam's diligence and Nata Ji's assaults, progress was being made. With each edit and rewrite and polish and trim, the book was starting to come together.

That is, until...

There was a story about an uncle whom I found particularly distasteful. A man whose conduct may very well have contributed to a

generation of youth turning away from the community. I didn't like him and was more than content to trash him quite *thoroughly* in my story, but Mariam wasn't letting it go and because of that, neither was Nata Ji.

"Why are you using *that* word, it seems unnecessary," Mariam said.

"Yes, listen to her beghairat, clearly she is better at this than you are!" Nata Ji added.

"This is the filtered version. What I really wanted to say was...@%#$&," I quipped.

"Language!!" Mariam admonished.

"Badtameez!!" added Nata Ji.

"It's better than he deserves!" I protested.

"That's not the point. Think of your target audience. Also...*akhlaq* matters...don't you want to be the better person?" Mariam asked, her kids singing "*We're going UP UP UP it's our MOMENT!!*" in the background.

"If there's one thing that annoys me more than you, it's that K-pop Demon Hunters bakwaas," snarked Nata Ji from behind me.

"It should absolutely be the point and no-–" I started to bicker with Mariam, ignoring Nata Ji when I saw movement in my periphery and jerked back.

Nata Ji had had enough of my sass and swung an open hand at me, but thanks to my quick reaction, her hand only caught my glasses, making my vision flash a bright electric white as her spectral hand passed through them.

"Doesn't matter! Respect!!" came Mariam's persistent reply.

I ignored her, blinking the spots out of my vision, until I saw Nata Ji nodding menacingly at me over my shoulder, reflected on my laptop screen.

"Fine..." I conceded.

After reading a particularly edgy one of my stories, I picked up my phone to a text message from Mariam:

"Umm...I am going to have someone else read this for haya purposes..."

I blinked. *"You're going to...what?"*

"Have someone else read it," she repeated. *"For haya purposes."*

I typed back. *"Haya purposes."*

"Yes."

I paused. *"I don't understand what that means."*

"That is evident, beghairat!!" Nata Ji added.

"It means," Mariam typed, still calm, *"I would prefer a second set of eyes."*

"On my haya?"

"On the content."

"Which is lacking haya..." I said confused.

"Obviously!" exclaimed Nata Ji, looking up from a newspaper that she was reading.

Where she got a newspaper from, I have no clue. There was always some new implement on hand, a dupatta, a slipper, a belan. In the beginning I had wondered where she got stuff from, but now I just shrugged and assumed it had something to do with whatever energies had brought her here in the first place.

Mariam replied. *"Yes."*

I started typing slowly. From somewhere behind me came, *"She's being generous."*

"Fair enough," I sent to Mariam, turning my back to Nata Ji.

Mariam continued typing. *"It's just that some of these descriptions*

are...a lot. Maybe even unnecessary."

"Unnecessary how? It's storytelling," I replied.

"It's a bit much." Mariam pushed back.

"Bit much?!"

Behind me—

"Bahut zyada. Listen to her, you behayat insaan!"

I clenched my jaw.

"You're both overreacting."

Mariam sent a raised eyebrow emoji. *"Both?"*

"Sorry...figure of speech."

Nata Ji cackled, from where she sat, perched cross legged on my coffee table shelling astral peas in a metallic bowl.

"Hmm..." Mariam typed, no doubt questioning my sanity.

"I'm just saying—" I started, *"...that if something feels real, I should be allowed to write it."*

"You are," Mariam texted. *"But not everything that is real needs to be said."*

I leaned forward, my fingers typing a response aggressively. *"That's not writing. That's filtering."*

"Think of your target audience. That's called using your better judgment," Mariam rebutted.

"You mean censorship."

"I mean responsibility."

From behind me— *"She means upbringing."*

I started to turn to Nata Ji. "Can you not—" and stopped. She had stepped closer and was brandishing a chappal.

"It's your book, which means it's your decision. But just think my suggestions over, and in the meanwhile, let's take a break. I'll finish polishing up the next chapter in the meantime inshAllah."

With a *"Gtg, it's my kids dinnertime"* and a smile emoji, Mariam

left me to my edits, the silence of the room and, of course, Nata Ji.

I put my phone down and turned to Nata Ji, fed up.

"Achha," Nata Ji said, folding herself into the space beside me like she had always been there. *"Now we fix."*

"Enjoying yourself?" I snapped.

"Deeply," she said, folding her arms mid-air. *"Your editor said 'say less' and look at you—internally breaking down."*

"I am not breaking down."

"You are unraveling like a cheap sweater."

"Okay first of all—"

"Second of all," she cut in, *"this draft? Overfed. Bloated. You are force-feeding it adjectives like it's last call at a wedding buffet, motu."*

"It's called my voice."

"It's called stupid voice, beghairat."

I stood up so fast my chair nearly tipped. "You don't get to psychoanalyze me."

"I don't have to analyze. You are announcing it to everyone yourself."

"That's not what I am doing, this is *my* work."

"Our work."

"What–"

"Our work," she repeated, drifting closer. *"Because right now, you can't be trusted with it."*

"Oh wow. So now I'm unqualified to write my own book?" I raged.

"To *edit* and publish it," she snapped back. *"Yes. Absolutely. 100% fail."*

I laughed, sharp and humorless. "You're unbelievable."

"And all you have to do is fix this and I won't have to be here! Bas! But here you are, attached to sentences that are not doing anything," she

fired back. *"This line—why is it here?"*

Why are you here, I thought, but I replied with a resigned: "It builds tone."

"It builds nothing. It sits. It takes up space—and like you, it contributes zero."

"You just don't like it."

"I do not like...aray kya hai wo word that Mariam uses? Mediocrity," she said calmly.

That did it. Weeks and weeks of this had pushed me to peak frustration.

"Say that again." I snapped.

"Don't you take that tone with me!" she shrieked.

She stepped, or floated, forward and for a split second, it felt like she was going to shove me.

But then lightning fast, her hand came up—and passed straight through my head.

We both froze.

"W...will you stop trying to hit me..." I said.

"I was making a point," she said, adjusting her dupatta like nothing happened.

"You can't even touch me."

"Want another one?" She shot back. *"Look at you, scared. Thappads work! A good slap will set you straight, beghairat."*

I exhaled hard, dragging my hands through my hair. "You're exhausting."

"And you're avoiding," she said instantly. *"Mariam told you to say less. Why are you fighting it?"*

"Because not everything needs to be stripped down to its minimal form!"

"Correct," she said. *"Only your useless ramblings do."*

She held my gaze.

"You don't trust your reader," she said, quieter now, but sharper. *"You over-explain so no one can misunderstand you. So no one can judge you. So you can stay safe."*

"That's not—"

"It is," she said. *"And it is making your writing worse. Listen to me and stop being stubborn, ghadday!"*

There was a moment of silence. My shoulders dropped as I just gave up.

"Some of those lines matter..." I muttered.

"To you," she said.

I looked back at the screen and then closed my eyes for a second, exhaling.

"Fine..." I said. "Yes, fine. I'll cut it."

"Good," she said immediately. *"Be serious."*

I gave a tired, defeated laugh. "You are actually the worst."

"Just accept the change and I'll be gone." she chided.

I sank back into my chair, suddenly heavy. "I hate that you're right."

"I know, now let's continue," she said leaning forward, all business again—

"You wrote this?" she said, peering over my shoulder.

"Yes."

"This is what you chose?"

"...yes."

"Ya Rabbi..." She fanned herself with the corner of her shawl, our discussion forgotten. *"This chappal won't do. Where is my belan??"*

The thing about editors is that they will always tell you what they

think, as matter-of-factly and as thoroughly as possible. And to make sure that I was aware, using tracked changes and with comments that still haunt me to this day.

In fact I remember trying to vent about my editor to a fellow writer and his response was, "Bro just suck it up, she hasn't even really lashed out at you..."

Of course I couldn't tell him about Nata Ji.

Between the two of them, it was like death by a thousand paper cuts. More often than not, I ended up folding and giving in.

It took me a while to actually believe that they weren't attacking me—well, Mariam at least. For the longest time, every comment still felt personal. Every suggestion felt like a quiet indictment of something I had thought was good—something I had chosen.

But of course, I had to concede that Mariam was right, especially when she confronted me with the fact that my introduction rambled on for almost 15 pages.

I had spent hours on it—layering metaphors, building it up, letting it breathe. I thought it was brilliant.

She read it once. Paused.

"Amer," she said, "this is too much...ridiculous even."

I pushed back, of course, and tried to explain the symbolism, nuance, and intention.

"And here you are saying even more words!" interjected Nata Ji.

Mariam nodded, but then said, "I understand what you're trying to do. But the reader will get bored."

And after a week of debating with Mariam and Nata Ji bickering separately in my ear, I grudgingly gave in.

Finally, we were on the third round of editing at this point, cover to cover. Third! Three versions of my book had already been written, rewritten, rebranded, and presented.

I logged in one morning, coffee in hand, ready to make what I assumed would be a few final tweaks before we wrapped things up.

But apparently Mariam had a caffeine cocktail the previous evening.

I waited for the comments to appear as the document loaded, and watched in mounting horror as they began to populate...slowly...one by one.

Ping.

"Ping!" Nata Ji mocked from somewhere in the background.

Ping.

Ping.

Nata Ji's shrill mocking rang in my mind as Mariam's comments appeared. At first, I nodded along. "Okay, yeah...fair...good catch..."

Then I noticed the total comment count in the top right corner.

714.

I blinked and looked again thinking that maybe I had misread it. I leaned in closer to the screen, as if proximity might somehow reduce the number.

Seven...Hundred...

I sat silently back in my chair, agape. For a moment I thought I felt my soul contemplating departure, but it was just Nata Ji appearing over my shoulder.

"Don't hold back, you're probably loving this," I told her, swivelling my chair in her direction.

"Oh yes!" she exclaimed, swooping past me to the other side of the room. *"It's about time someone else showed you how useless you are!"*

Attempting to ignore her, I scrolled down the page. The comments kept going...and going...and going...

All I was seeing was blocks of text stacked on top of each other and margins crowded with notes.

Nata Ji cackled evilly from across the room where she had been standing in front of my bookshelf commenting about my "useless" tastes in literature.

"Why don't I see anything by Faiz, Iqbal or even Chughtai?" she shrieked.

"And why are you reading Hemingway? He was a drunk!" she said shrilly. *"No wonder you can't write,"*

"That's not mine," I protested. "It's left over from college–"

"Haan ok," she fired back. *"And don't think I don't know about that 'C' you got in freshman English!"*

I froze. "How could you possibly—"

"*Beghairat, I am Nata Ji*."

I just stared at my screen. This was different from all of the times Mariam and I had met. There was no dialogue this time, nothing for me to debate. Instead, *everything* hovered in front of me–all the suggestions, comments, little bubbles of critique waiting patiently to be read.

At one point, I stopped reading the comments and just scrolled, watching them pass. It was like the scenery outside a train window. Entire paragraphs highlighted, the margins filled, and her questions, suggestions, observations, and concerns taunting me from the screen.

Eventually, I stopped scrolling and went back to one of the comments I had dismissed earlier to read it again. Then the paragraph beside it.

Nope. I still didn't agree with her.

At least, I didn't think I did. Reluctantly, I changed the sentence anyway. Then another. I read the paragraph from the beginning...and I'll admit.

It *was* better.

And that felt... irritating.

"I hate that she's right..."

"Trust the process, beghairat."

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the screen for a while, suddenly less certain of all the things I had been so certain about.

Maybe every change wasn't a surrender. Maybe some of them were simply making the story better.

A single lamp cast a warm circle of light over the desk. The rest of the room faded into shadow, leaving just me, the document, and a sense of quiet understanding.

A cup of chai, my usual writing companion, sat cooling somewhere to my right, forgotten mid-existential crisis. My room should have been quiet but, alas, I was still being haunted by the Ghost-of-Aunty-Present, who was currently humming, *"If you're a duffer and you know it, clap your hands!"* in my ear.

Ignoring her determinedly, I glanced at the scrollbar again, took a deep breath, cracked my knuckles, and whispered:

"*Bismillah*."

And out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nata Ji open her mouth to say something, but instead to my surprise, nodded with a sparkle in her eyes as I dove in.

One afternoon, in the middle of a call, Mariam paused. She was looking at her notes, not at me.

"Amer, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Some of what I'm cutting...I hope you know that these are just my suggestions. Because the voice is yours. I'm trying to sharpen it, not suppress it. If I'm pushing too hard, I want you to tell me."

"HAIN??" came from over my shoulder. "*Don't be silly, of course*

she should cut EVERYTHING!"

I waved Nata Ji off and thought about it for a moment.

"No," I said finally. "I think you're catching the things I'm not catching."

She nodded. "Good. Make sure you tell me if that changes."

I sat there for a moment, considering it. But then shot upright as Nata Ji yelled, *"Sit up straight, you have horrible posture! Sit like a man!"* from across the room—and I suppressed an insolent urge to slump further.

So I kept fighting the good fight.

And in the few moments where my sheer stubbornness began to win out, Mariam would deploy messages like, "Well, if that's what you feel is best" and "At the end of the day, it's your book..." while Nata Ji's battle cries echoed.

But occasionally, rarely–the conceding did go the other way. During one session, I dug in particularly stubbornly on a sentence I loved. Mariam read it and then read it again.

"You know what," she said finally, after a long moment. "Keep it. I was reading it awkwardly. But reading it again—that awkwardness IS your eccentricity. Go all in."

Nata Ji gasped audibly behind me. "*She agrees with your oddness?? Perhaps I should go visit her!"*

I saved the line, and felt something shift in my mindset. Perhaps we were on the same side after all.

And then, one afternoon, I saw it—another comment. But then, I took a breath and just read it again. There was a strange kind of quiet in that moment—not the tense, defensive silence I had grown used to, but something lighter.

And for the first time, I wasn't asking, *"How do I justify this?"* I was asking, *"Is she right?"*

I exhaled.

"Yeah..." I said softly to myself—and deleted a sentence.

"Very good!" I heard from Nata Ji.

I deleted another and read the section again, noticing that it worked better now, and nodded to myself.

"You see!!" added the infernal aunty-spectre, never one to let me have the last word.

But for the first time, her voice sounded distracted and almost like it was a little further away than usual.

Days continued to turn into weeks, which had begun turning into months, and my book was really starting to take shape. By now, under Mariam's guidance and Nata Ji's watchful eye, we were now on the final iteration of my book. It was decided that we would hijack part of a writer's meetup to go over the book in person from end-to-end.

I was especially excited because, after this round of editing, we were going to be finalizing the order of all of my stories into the perfect set of chapters before we moved to a final polish. In fact, on the flight over, I had been day dreaming about what the final version would look like and was ever so grateful that Nata Ji didn't make an appearance. God only knows the havoc she might have wreaked on the plane.

During our in-person editing session—printed stories strewn across the table, red pen marks smudged across the margins like mehndi on the face of the bride who fell asleep before washing her hands—things took a slight turn.

The pages shifted and rustled as we worked, my laptop sitting open between us. Mariam came to get stuff done and (unknown to her) Nata Ji was not tolerating any bakwaas from me.

We'd been at it all morning and my brain was fried. Between us were two mugs of chai, a half-eaten sandwich, and enough marked-up pages to wallpaper an entire community center, bleeding through the pages like a rooh-afza massacre.

We had just finished discussing a story about a group of aunties who ran an underground matchmaking service like a Fortune 500 company when she flipped to the next title and misread out loud:

"The Rishta...Spread Sh*t."

I looked up and froze. There was silence—then realization—then mortification. Then sputtering.

And then we both cracked up—laughter echoing through the room.

I was clutching my stomach while she buried her face in the manuscript, muttering between gasps, "Oh no...no no, that's not what I meant!"

"But she is so right!" cackled Nata Ji.

"Tell me what you really think about my book, why don't you!" I managed to wheeze, wiping the corner of my eyes. "No need to sugarcoat it now."

She waved her hand, trying to compose herself. "It was a slip of the tongue!"

"Sure, sure," I said. "The subconscious never lies."

Mariam glared at me half-jokingly.

"I'll show YOU subconscious!" Nata Ji muttered ominously, ever quick to take Mariam's side–again, not that she'd ever know.

We packed up that day, still chuckling over her Freudian slip.

But later that night, when I looked back at my draft manuscript, I noticed her comment in the margin next to The Rishta Spreadsheet:

"I love this story..."

I smiled to myself. "Clearly not sh*t," I chuckled, shaking my head.

And then I flinched as I continued reading the comment on my screen.

"...but I still think that we need to tighten this section."

I stared at the screen.

"Absolutely not," I muttered. "I've already changed this too much."

I turned to look for Nata Ji and found the room empty...

But then I heard it. A very faint "*Shaddap!*" echoing in the distance.

I smiled...

...and deleted another sentence.