

All That Glitters

by Farrah Yusuf

Within seconds of starting, the gunfire stopped and the screaming began. Droplets of blood glided through the air across Dr Aziz's garden. Some coated blades of dry grass as they dropped to the ground. Some splattered against the array of gold and silver balloons that had been carefully tied to the meticulously pruned rose bushes. Some left a delicate crimson mist over the high grey walls of Dr Aziz's garden. All glistened in the moonlight.

The day had started, as they always do, very differently. Preparations had begun at dawn in the Aziz household for the evening's festivities; the city's elite were due to arrive for a party to celebrate Dr Aziz's re-election to government office. An election won on the basis of an army of thumb prints of people both dead and alive. No one had cared enough to investigate the sudden surge in the population of towns which had not previously been known for their inhabitants' desire to visit the ballot box.

Dr Aziz had spared no expense to ensure the party would be talked about for months, if not years. It was a PhD rather than a MD which had given him the title of Dr and a sense of superiority which ensured he never failed to use it. Dr Aziz's guard listened as Dr Aziz's latest assistant gave a photographer strict orders to capture every milky white smile, jewel encrusted necklace and manicured nail at the party. The photographs were to be circulated to the press and most popular bloggers by morning. Ready to be devoured by teenage girls desperate to soak up every lipstick shade and hair flick captured through a filtered lens.

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At dusk, Dr Aziz's guard carefully adjusted the sling that held his assault rifle around his shoulder, taking care not to crease the freshly starched collar of his new uniform. After eight years of working for Dr Aziz the guard could block out most of the sounds that came from the Aziz household at will. He had perfected the art of only taking in what was directed at him, an undoubtedly useful quality that had served him well in every household in which he had set foot. Here too, it had not gone unnoticed by either Dr or more importantly Mrs Aziz. The couple showed their silent appreciation through what they valued most, bank notes.

Even amidst the chaos of the party preparations the guard felt at peace. Away from his squabbling teenagers and mounting bills. Five daughters meant five sets of school fees and five dowries not to mention five hungry mouths to feed. For now, he took his usual seat outside Dr Aziz's main gate, slowly chewing the tobacco he never left home without replenishing. Always tapping his right pocket to ensure that the tiny green tin was tucked firmly inside before shutting his front door. Years of grinding the tangled fibres had left his teeth with a yellow tint and his breath bitter. His routine was always the same. Sitting. Watching. Sitting. Watching. Day after day. Now, he waited for the arrival of Dr Aziz's guests as well as the inevitable line of beggars and onlookers. He surveyed the government owned open field of decaying bushes and dry soil opposite Dr Aziz's mansion, checking for any undesirables. His gaze fixed on a crow. It flew over the field before descending onto a telephone cable directly ahead of him. Ruffling its jet black feathers as it perched effortlessly on the thin cable. The sky slowly turned from azure to darkness but the crow did not move. A bad sign, the guard felt but not an uncommon one in these parts.

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Against the darkness, Mrs Aziz's gold and silver balloons shone as brightly as she had hoped. They bobbed over the gate walls and the fairy lights she had insisted be woven through the trees that lined the driveway twinkled to her delight.

Behind Dr Aziz's gate, the guard heard the catering staff bickering over who would inflate the children's bouncy castle. They nearly drowned out the familiar cries of Dr Aziz's eldest granddaughter, Miriam, who as usual was demanding her maid, but even as a collective they were not quite loud enough. Miriam's voice had the ability to reach a decibel the guard had yet to hear elsewhere. He pondered whether time would subdue her volatile temperament and resolved to resign before she hit her teens.

A candyfloss machine, hired for the occasion, was wheeled past him and the sharp screech as someone tried to crank it up shook him out of his thoughts. A smile slowly crossed his lips as the air filled with the sweet scent of freshly spun sugar started to waft over the gate. He resisted the urge to bite at the air to capture as much of it as he could, instead he just breathed in deeply. His stolen pleasure did not last long for a stampede of footsteps meant Dr Aziz's tribe of grandchildren too had smelt the magic of the machine that spun furiously revealing baby pink cloud like treats. They hurtled towards it like their little lives depended on it. Their shrieks of delight gave way to mumbles as the candyfloss melted into their greedy mouths. Not long after, the sweet notes the guard had so enjoyed were replaced by smoke that tickled his throat and stung his tired eyes. A BBQ had been ignited and it would billow over the walls and descend over him for the rest of the night. He settled down into his seat and pressed another clump of tobacco fibres into ball just as one of Dr Aziz's children abruptly turned on the sound system making him jump. The latest Bollywood tracks

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proceeded to be pumped out so loudly the ground shook. A signal to all around that the party was due to start.

Soon a series of yellow headlights approached Dr Aziz's home, signifying the arrival of the guests. In his usual routine to demonstrate his alertness, the guard got up to straighten his shirt and adjust his rifle. Guest after guest walked by, looking neither left nor right, just down to adjust their clothes or to wriggle toes into ill-fitting shoes or to look up at the moonlit sky. Men in pristine suits, women of all shapes and sizes dripping in jewels, tugging at the hands of toddlers and nodding towards uninterested teenagers as they ushered them towards the twinkling delights of Dr Aziz's feast for the eyes. They gushed and gossiped in equal measure.

Waiters were dressed to impress in black and white suits with gold or silver ties carefully chosen by Mrs Aziz to match her glitter theme. During brief breaks they slurped left over cokes whilst sneaking glances at starlets. Furiously texting friends, still stuck in their villages, blurry photos of any and every guest of remote interest. Boasting of their luck and beaming with pride. Chests puffed out until they were called back to resume their duties. They weaved their way around the garden, offering food here and drinks there, invisible for the most part but for their trays. Careful not to step on any of the mini me showpieces who were either attached to their parent's ankles like glue or darting round like feral animals oblivious to the world around them, only guided by their desires.

Meanwhile Dr Aziz's youngest daughter, Deena, sat on her bed combing her hair with her fingers and humming in tune with the Bollywood songs blasting out of the garden. A few

greys strands had begun to peep through, giving her otherwise mahogany hair a slight shimmer. Her humming slowed slightly as one of the maids twisted a key slowly and opened the door. In her hand was a round tray with numerous small plastic plates, each containing a different dish from starters selection of the party. Chilli paneer tikka with crispy edges but soft centres, golden samosas fresh from the oil, perfectly charred lamb chops and steaming hot pakoras cut up into bite size cubes. The maid placed the tray on a table and locked the door without breaking her gaze away from Deena. Tucking the key inside her bra she picked up one of the dishes as she sat on the bed facing Deena. After a few more songs, Deena opened her mouth as the maid patiently fed her piece by piece whilst they both stared at the padded walls that rendered the room unique to the house.

Bits of crispy pastry clung to Dr Aziz's moustache and stubborn clumps of coarsely ground cumin protruded from his teeth. The sole remnants of many generous helpings of his own buffet until his assistant discreetly handed him a napkin and a toothpick which he proceeded to indiscreetly use. High on compliments and soaking up the glory of his victory he navigated around his guests making sure to make a fuss of beckoning waiters if their plates had a remotely empty space. Like a peacock with its feathers fully fanned out to allow its sapphire and emerald hues to shine, he stood tall basking in his own glory unaware of his shadow.

Nibbles had been followed by starters and main course dish after dish rolled out at midnight as was usual at such affairs. Children high on sugar in every form and tired from jumping, running, dancing and shouting sat slumped in chairs or on the laps of their mothers who looked longingly at their husbands, willing them to give the signal to go home. Nonetheless

when desserts arrived there was stampede akin to that of wild beasts on an attack but within moments of collecting their sugar-laced delights, the near full bowls were discarded on every table surface or empty seat. Just as the men were sipping the final piece of Dr Aziz's hospitality, creamy tea from stainless steel vats rolled out by waiters, the sound of tyres grinding to a halt outside the gate startled the revellers.

Deena sat upright, the maid having long gone, and the door firmly locked. She pressed her face to the bars blocking her reach to the window and craned her neck to see what was happening but to no avail. Her long sleeved jumper slipped slightly by the movement revealing the scars on her arms where the razors had never worked. Try as she might she could see nothing. She began to hum softly.

A round of gunfire was followed by screams and scurrying feet. Then as abruptly as it had started, it stopped. A long silence ensued until it was broken by the abrupt popping of a balloon, so loud that it made even Deena jump. Nearly an hour passed before curious neighbours began to creep out of the cocoon of their decadent homes to investigate what had gone on.

Finally in the early hours of morning, the police arrived and the bodies of old and young were collected to be identified by wailing loved ones. Easily done for those encrusted in jewels but less so for those wearing gold and silver ties who had travelled from far away villages for the city's bright lights. Deena was the sole survivor. Found clawing at her wrists with nails chewed raw.

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For weeks and years later, on the anniversary of the massacre, headlines were filled with the smiling faces of the party goers found on the photographer's discarded camera and interviews with neighbours. The one image that lingered in the minds of everyone who saw it was the blood splattered on a white washed wall accompanied by a message written in glitter, 'Congratulations!'. If anyone cared to look closely they would see a worn green tin between the fingers of the first victim whose blood it had been.

Rumour had it that when Deena was led out of the house her eyes fixed on the message and the faintest of smiles passed her lips before breaking out into a roaring laugh which risked never ending.

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