

Different Shades of Being - Part 4

For Halima Abdi

By TheSpiralledEye

Kayden sat with his hands gripping his knees, shoulders tense as he waited outside Mr. Sanches' office. It had been an innocent mistake! Why could nobody else see that? The door opened and Jessica walked out, staunchly refusing to look at him as she stomped past; ignoring his outreached hand.

“Jessica-”

“Save it, creep.”

He deflated back into his seat. There was no point; even if he could properly explain, nobody would understand.

“Come in.”

He swallowed nervously, feeling like a kid who'd just got called to the principal's office and closed the door. Mr. Sanches had always been a good boss, one Kayden had gotten on well with; now he'd probably ruined everything.

“Alright, Kayden.” he sighed, “Why don't you tell me your side of the story.”

“I wasn't trying to harass anybody!” He burst, feeling his eyes burn, “I just noticed her collar was uneven, I just neatened it that was all.”

“You snuck up behind a woman and reached into the back of her top in the middle of the office.”

It had been a motherly instinct, leftover from Soraya. It had happened without thinking; he'd noticed a young lady with a piece of clothing out of place and he'd just...done it. He hadn't meant to be creepy.

“I really just wanted to help.”

“Look, Kayden, I will be honest. I know you and Henry went on some sort of soul searching holiday in India or whatever but I don’t think you had a full on personality shift in that time.”

Kayden sank further down into the chair.

“I get it, I’m a man too but that sort of behaviour just can’t be tolerated. Not in this day and age. I’ll have to suspend you at the very least.”

“I understand.”

Soraya would never have gotten suspended from the university. Soraya was well respected by her peers; not thought of as the office creep. He’d never even realised that was his reputation till he’d gotten back and started being a little more aware of what people were saying behind his back.

It didn't help that ‘appropriator’ had not been added to the list. Soraya’s accent kept slipping in; making him sound like a complete ass. A white dude ‘imitating’ an Indian woman’s voice. The few connections in the office he’d discovered to be true withered pretty swiftly after that started happening. He’d quickly learned not to bring any Indian food for lunch as well.

Dejected he walked through the office and back to his desk with his head low, trying to be as noticeable as possible. He wondered how Henry was doing, he worked in the IT department so they only saw one another on breaks. Was he having as much trouble adjusting back to ‘real’ life as he was? Was it wrong that Kayden almost hoped so?

Yes, that was wrong, the guilt flooded him immediately. That was his daughter; as a mother he should only want what’s best for her. The pencil in his hand snapped.

He wasn’t though.

Henry was not his daughter. Soraya and Saanvi didn’t exist here. They were a fantasy, an alternate reality he had created through science and imagination.

So why did it feel so wrong to be back?

~

Henry felt like an imposter. All his colleagues felt so much older than him. He felt like the token new intern at a company where everybody already knew each other. Which was ridiculous of course, he was the same, older in fact, than most of his colleagues in the IT department. Even weeks after returning home he still felt mentally twenty one. He felt like a young college student still figuring themselves out all of a sudden thrust in 'proper' adult life. It made work unbearably stressful; he couldn't help but feel like everybody was judging him for his immaturity.

It seemed like all people wanted to talk about was kids and work; occasionally they mentioned going out or holding some sort of social event but they were low key affairs. Trips to dive bars where they all sat around just talking while he tapped his foot under the table wishing somebody would turn the music up so they could all dance.

It was all so...adult. When he'd passed a group of college kids heading toward the clubbing district on his way home he'd almost been tempted to ask if he could join. Then he remembered himself; he was almost thirty. Nothing screamed midlife crisis quite like a thirty year old man trying to hang out with a bunch of fresh-faced kids, some of whom weren't even old enough to drink yet.

"Hey, Earth to Henry!"

"Hu-what?"

He looked up from his screen and realised he'd totally zoned out again. Charlie, one of the secretaries from upstairs was looking at him, a stack of papers in hand.

"Corporate just sent these down, minutes from the last meeting. Can you digitise them thanks."

It was a task he'd done many times thanklessly but for some reason today being asked wrangled him; his inner Saanvi, sick of being a pushover, pushed back.

"Why are these minutes even taken in pen?" he asked, "Why don't you just type them on a laptop to begin with?"

"Because I'm a slow typer." Charlie said as if it were obvious, "I'd never keep up. Plus the documents keep correcting my shorthand."

“Well, can’t you type them up yourself? I have a lot of work to do. You only need to answer phone calls when you’re not in meetings, surely that gives you plenty of time to slowly type it up.”

Charlie’s brow furrowed and he shook the papers in Henry’s face.

“You’re an IT guy right, typing and computers and shit is your job. So do it.”

He dumped the pages on his keyboard.

“You know you were a lot easier to get along with before you grew a spine.”

Henry swore in Hindi under his breath.

~

Kayden lay in bed; he’d made curry for dinner and the spices still lingered in the air of his tiny apartment. If he closed his eyes he could pretend he was home; in his big house with his daughter and lover. Unconsciously his hand reached out to the other side of the bed to find Manuel and met only with cold sheets.

It felt humiliating but hot tears began to burn behind his eyes. He missed him. He missed Manuel, not just the sex but his smile, their banter, the way he looked at him like he was the whole world. He missed the way it felt to be held in a strong man’s arms and he felt his eyes shoot open as he realised that he hadn’t felt a single ounce of attraction to a woman since returning.

Before their little dip into the other universe he had always been casually looking. Not creepily, at least he hoped, but if a pretty lady walked past him he was going to appreciate it. Now he realised he dismissed them almost entirely. He dismissed most people honestly, except when he saw a flash of olive skin out the corner of his eyes or a swath of dark hair. Then he’d turn, hoping to see his man only to be crushed by reality every time.

He rolled onto his stomach and groaned. It felt wrong being able to lay so flat. He missed his curves, his dark hair, his full lips. His body felt so square and *wrong*. Frustrated he threw the blankets off and made his way to the bathroom to complete what was swiftly becoming a nightly ritual.

He had started it the first night he had returned; he stared into the mirror, knuckles white as they gripped the sink.

“Your name is Kayden.” he said in an American accent that sounded fake even to his own ears.

He stared at his reflection, trying desperately to feel right in it. But no matter how hard he tried, the man in the mirror didn't feel like him. No matter how many times he tried, he kept wanting to see Soraya in that glass. That's who he really was, who *she* really was. More frustrated tears burned behind his eyes and he went back to bed, daring to hope that he would wake up at home with Manuel burning toast in the kitchen.

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Saanvi took a deep breath as she walked up to Kayden house; her heart was beating in her chest. Her small, flat, *male* chest that she hated so much. She knew she was Henry, logically, but in her heart she was Saanvi and this was the one place on the planet where perhaps, she could be that way around another person without judgement.

At least, that was her hope. She and Kayden hadn't really spoken in the weeks since they returned. It had been too awkward. Once or twice they had passed one another in the halls, or tried to have lunch in the company cafeteria but they'd given it up almost immediately. It was too awkward; they had no idea how to be Henry and Kayden anymore, especially not together. She knocked on the door and shuffled awkwardly until it opened.

“Hey.” Kayden greeted in a thick Indian accent.

“Hi.”

“Come in, sweetheart.”

Saanvi felt the tension in her shoulders drop and heat burn behind her eyes; the voice was wrong but the inflections were all right. She felt like a kid coming home from an awful day at school to the comfort of her mother. She resisted the urge to fly into Kayden's arms; he may sound a bit like her mother but he wasn't her really.

She stepped inside and took a seat in the lounge room; the Reality Warper was sitting in the corner of the room and her heart ached with jealousy. Had Kayden gone back after they returned? No, there was a layer of dust across the machine that showed it hadn't been touched.

She certainly wouldn't have had the strength to resist if the world she so desperately wanted was so close. Then again, if she went alone what would become of her mother? Would she even still exist in that world without Kayden? She wasn't sure.

Kayden sat down next to her on the couch and then, to her surprise, wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

"I miss you." He sighed.

"I know, it's just taking a while to get used to being this again." She admitted, looking at the floor.

"No, I mean I miss my daughter. I miss our life."

Saanvi swallowed.

"I miss our home, and Manuel and your father, I miss his recipe books and the photos on the wall. In this world I don't have anything to remember him by, it feels wrong."

"That was just a convenient way to have me be your daughter without a husband in the mix, he wasn't really married to you."

"Yes he was." Kayden replied with so much conviction it made Saanvi's heart ache. "I remember our first meeting back in India, I remember what it felt like to hold his hand. I remember our wedding day and...I remember the day I lost him. We lost him. It may have been a different reality but it was as real as this apartment, this life. More so."

"I miss him too." Saanvi said, letting out a shaky breath as tears began to well, "I miss home, I miss your cooking and my classes and actually learning about something I care about and-and I miss my f-friends!"

She knew she probably looked ridiculous but Kayden didn't make fun, he just rubbed soothing circles on her back and hushed her. She wished she had her real body so that her mother could stroke her hair like she used to when she got upset as a little girl but this was a close second.

"I want to go back."

“So do I.”

Saanvi shook her head.

“We can’t though, we can’t keep disappearing from reality, living with one foot in each world it just won’t work.”

“So we won’t, we’ll go back and we’ll stay.” Kayden, no, her mother, replied.

“How?”

“I set the Reality Warp to permanent, it involves jailbreaking the machine, but it can be done. I don’t know about you but it was easy to let all of this life fade away if I wanted to. I don’t think we’ll ever forget it completely or anything, but we’ll get to be our true selves again. Without worrying about ever having to come back here.”

That sounded too good to be true.

“What’ll happen to the ‘us’ from this reality?”

“Don’t know, don’t care.”

Saanvi realised she didn’t either.

“Let’s do it. I...I’ve missed you too mom.”

Soraya hugged her close.

“I’ve missed you too sweetheart.”

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It took a few more weeks of work and careful recalibration to jailbreak the Reality Warper but when they finally slipped the bands around their heads neither of them had an ounce of regret or hesitation. The world swirled around them and then Soraya was blinking her eyes open; the lingering smell of spices met her nose and it almost brought a tear to her eye. It

wasn't like the smell back in Kayden's apartment, this was something older; the scent that had seeped into the walls after years of cooking.

She snapped her eyes open and practically flew out of bed only to stumble a little as her centre of gravity adjusted. Her chest was heavy, her legs a different length and the movement felt a tangle of long black hair right into her face.

The emotion was overwhelming; she was back, she was home. She was Soraya again, now and forever and nothing could ever take that away. She began to giggle, when then became a full on laugh out of relief and elation. It took several minutes for the minor manic episode to finish but when it did she simply smiled.

"Home." She breathed before looking over at the clock.

Nine in the morning. Far too late to be waking up even on a weekend, at least in her opinion. With utter glee she practically speed walked down the hall towards Saanvi's room and threw open the door. Making her daughter flail in her sheets.

"You'll sleep your life away!" Soraya chided, though she couldn't keep the smile off her face. "Come on, it's time to be up and facing the day!"

For a moment Saanvi just blinked in shock before a small smile tugged at her own lips and she flopped back down onto the mattress with a dramatic groan.

"Mooooooooooooom."

"Don't 'mom' me, time to get up!"

"Don't act like you didn't just wake up yourself, I see your pyjamas." Saanvi giggled, sitting up and stretching. "Fine. I guess I am awake now anyway I may as well get up."

"Just because it's the holiday break does not mean we have an excuse to be lazy." Soraya waggled her fingers, "I'm sure you've been doing your holiday assignments, hmm?"

"Oh yeah, almost done." Saanvi replied, not even making an attempt to sound convincing.

For a brief moment, the two of them just looked at each other, smiling warmly. In that moment, for the very final time, they were Kayden and Henry, the friends who had finally

made their fantasies come true; even if it wasn't in the way they had expected. And then the masks finally slipped away for good, leaving just mother and daughter, mid discussion.

“Well I don't want you to fail. You'd better get to it. I want my daughter to be a star journalist so I can frame all the articles you write one day.” She smiled, “Now get up and get dressed, I'll make us some breakfast.”

Soraya turned, humming to herself as she made her way down to her beloved kitchen and began grabbing plates and items with all the familiarity that came with being home. She didn't need to think about where the butter or bread was, or the location of her favourite mug that Anil had given her years ago as a Mother's Day present. It had a chip in the side, but she still used it regardless.

She was just about to put the toast in the toaster when she paused. Toast seemed so...western. She was suddenly in the mood for something a little more traditional. With a hop in her step she cooped up the rice to start parboiling some poha. It had been a while since she had anything Indian for breakfast and it was about time she changed that.

With practised precision she began to chop onions and chillies; listening to the sound of the pipes rattling while Saanvi showered. It was such a domestic scene; it was good to be home.

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“Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug!”

Saanvi swallowed down the last of the burning cup of alcohol and slammed it back down on the table with a bark of laughter and Jack sighed in defeat.

“Alright, I got beaten. You win.”

“Ha!” She grinned, jumping to her feet and running over to ruffle his hair. “I told you.”

“How do I always lose drinking games to a girl half my size?” He groaned.

“I'm just that good. Another round?”

Maya appeared from the crowd as it dispersed back into the party.

“I thought you said you had to go home early tonight, don’t you and your family have some event tomorrow?”

Saanvi groaned.

“Oh yeah. And now I am gonna be majorly hungover for it. Great.” She rubbed her eyes. “Mom’s going to kill me.”

Jack and Maya just laughed. It was the end of their first year and Saanvi had been enjoying the usual slate of end of year parties. The workload in the last term had been incredible and it felt like she’d barely done anything but bury her head in history books and writing essays. Her paper on journalistic integrity had earned her high honours but also made her feel like she was turning prematurely grey.

“It’s just the practice lunch.” She sighed, “Why we need to practise having lunch for a wedding is beyond me. It’s not like Indian weddings aren’t long enough. Three fucking days guys, three days of dresses, and ceremonies, and food, and parties and people. Mom had all our relatives flying in, it’s a nightmare.”

“Aw, you’re being a bit harsh aren’t you?” Maya teased, sitting down and handing her another drink, “You like Manuel don’t you? I hear he’s a pretty cool professor.”

“Having two teachers as your parents is going to be rough though.” Jack mused. “Well, not that Manuel is your dad but you get the idea.”

“Manuel is fine. I’m just getting sick of them making out in the kitchen while I’m trying to make my breakfast.”

Jack threw back his head and laughed while Maya pretended to gag.

“Real mature guys.”

“Being mature is for adults!” Maya announced, holding up her paper cup to the air before downing it. “Which we are but you know, proper adults. With mortgages and chequing accounts and all that shit.”

“Don’t remind me, the future is terrifying.” Jack shuddered, “Anyway, Saanvi, shall we get you a taxi home?”

“Yeah I suppose, gotta be responsible and all that.” She sighed dramatically, “When they go on their honeymoon we can throw a rager to make up for the stuff I am missing tonight.”

“Sounds good!” Her two partners grinned.

Saanvi still wasn’t really sure on where their relationship was heading. She liked both Jack and Maya and she knew they liked her but there was almost a sense of impermanence to it. They never talked about it, but there was a silent understanding that this relationship wasn’t permanent or serious. It was experimental, fun.

While she enjoyed sharing both her man and woman deep down Saanvi knew she was the monogamous type, one day she would find a single permanent partner but for now, this was all she needed. She had no idea what gender she would end up with was still a mystery, both seemed equally viable. She tried not to dwell on it; her twenties were for experimentation and fun and she intended to use the time for just that.

Jack called her a taxi, even opened the door like a gentleman and closed it for her. Sad as she was to be going early, she wasn’t actually too bothered; she knew how much the wedding meant to her mother. And she did like Manuel, he seemed to know how to toe the line between wanting to be involved with her, and not trying to be a father. She was too old for a new dad at this point but with her graduation looming closer every day the knowledge that her mother wouldn’t be alone in that house when she left one day was a comfort.

She opened the front door as quietly as possible, she said she’d be home by ten, it was now closer to midnight. Maybe if she was lucky her mom would be asleep and she could sneak to her room and pretend she got home on time.

She crept into the kitchen and-

“Oh my God!”

Manuel and her mother sprung apart as if they’d been hit with electricity. Thankfully, both of them were still clothed but the position of their hands and looseness of their buttons suggested a few minutes more and that wouldn’t have been the case. Saanvi covered both her eyes in embarrassment.

“Seriously? In the kitchen!?”

“Saanvi! You were supposed to be home two hours ago!”

“So what, this is my punishment?”

“It is now.”

Manuel snorted in laughter before composing himself and clearing his throat.

“Perhaps we should all just go to bed.”

“Yes please.” Saanvi replied hurriedly, pushing past, “This never happened, see you tomorrow morning.”

Her cheeks were burning with embarrassment; walking in on your mom making out with her fiance was just...no.

“Good night, sweetheart!” Her mom called after her, voice full of mirth and Saanvi swore under her breath.

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Soraya was still giggling when she and Manuel slipped into bed. She was almost tempted to start jumping on the bed or banging the walls just to see if she could rile Saanvi up again. She wasn't actually cross about her lateness, after all, she was still enjoying her prime college years. So long as she behaves for the rehearsal tomorrow, everything will be fine.

“Do you think we should tell her?” Manuel asked as they curled up to face one another. “It's a good thing she covered her eyes or I wouldn't have been able to grab the picture in time.”

It was sitting in her drawer now; the tiny black and white photograph that had set off their little love session. Their son, currently growing inside her. Luckily for Soraya she had a little meat on her bones so she wasn't showing yet. Though it would be a gamble by the time the wedding rolled around in a few weeks.

“How do you think she'll react?” Manuel asked, “We should tell her soon I think.”

“You’re right.” Soraya replied, “I suppose I am enjoying just having it between us for a little while. Saanvi is a lot older than most people getting a sibling. All the advice online is for children.”

“She’s a big girl, and a smart one too. Most importantly, she loves her mother, I am sure she’ll be thrilled.” Manuel smiled, placing a hand on her cheek.

“Now we just need to think of a name.” Soraya mused, “Any ideas.”

“I think we should wait and meet them.” Manuel replied, “Then the name will come to us, I’m sure.”

“You’re probably right.” Soraya gave him a peck on the cheek. “We should get some sleep.”

She let her eyes flutter closed as her hand rubbed circled on her belly. There was a bump there, small but barely noticeable to anybody who wasn't looking. A single extra layer or a particularly loose shirt was all it took to hide. She'd never imagined becoming a mother again this far down the line but she was accepted for it. And she knew somewhere, Anil was looking down on her, prouder than ever.

He would have wanted her to find somebody new eventually, to find happiness and have a bigger family. They had always talked about giving Saanvi a sibling, but now she could. Warmth and happiness bloomed in her chest and she realised that while their little family may not have been the most conventional out there; it was hers and she had never been happier.

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Soraya took a deep breath, Manuel had already made his entrance with all of his groomsmen and male relatives to much applause. They had decided to try and meld more western traditions with her Indian ones for the ceremony and so she was walking down the aisle rather than being carried. But still, she had Saanvi at her side, ready to give her away at the end instead of any male relative.

“Ready mom?”

“As I will ever be.” She whispered, the two women leaned close together as Saanvi squeezed her mother’s arm.

“I think this is the best dress.” She whispered, indicating to the red sari fringed with gold.

“Yes but I think I am wearing more jewellery than a shop.” Soraya giggled.

“It hides the bump too.” Saanvi grinned, “When are you going to tell everybody else.?”

“Not at my wedding I’ll say that much.”

“Eventually mom, people are gonna notice.”

“Gonna is not a word.”

“Really, right now?”

The music flared and Soraya gave her daughter ‘the look’, the one that said ‘I am your mother, listen to me’. The two of them straightened and walked out. For a moment she was dazzled, the room had been decorated so thoroughly it was breathtaking; filled with flowers and gold, not to mention all the people. The rhythmic sounds of dhol and shehnai filled the air, accompanied by the melodious voices of women singing traditional wedding songs. The atmosphere buzzed with an aura of celebration and spiritual sanctity.

Saanvi gave her arm one final squeeze and the two of them began to walk down the red carpet towards Manuel. He was beaming and Soraya felt her heart flutter in her chest; she'd never been so sure of anything in her life.

She walked under a dazzling canopy, known as the phoolon ki chadar, held aloft by her friends. The fragrant scent of fresh flowers enveloped her as they gently cascaded around her, an ethereal symbol of beauty, purity, and fertility. Her sparkling jewellery gleamed under the soft glow of the decorative lights, reflecting her radiance and the collective hopes of her family.

As the procession made its way through the vibrant venue, Soraya caught glimpses of her family members, their eyes filled with love and pride. Some of them she hadn't seen in years, India being so big and far away. She couldn't wait to catch them up on everything.

The rhythmic beats of the dhol reverberated through the atmosphere, setting the pace for the procession. The sounds of laughter, excitement, and chatter mingled, creating an electrifying energy that seemed to elevate the moment beyond the earthly realm.

Finally, as the procession reached the sacred mandap, Soraya's heart soared. The mandap stood adorned with vibrant flowers, symbolising the blossoming of their love and the intertwining of their destinies. The gentle breeze carried the fragrance of incense and the melodious chants of the priest, offering prayers for their union. Saanvi smiled, giving her mother a kiss on the cheek before stepping to the side and gathering the wreath of flowers and handing them to her mother. She placed them around Manuel's neck and he in turn did the same with her. They had chosen Dahlia's rather than the traditional Indian flowers. A small bit of Manuel's own distinct culture mingling with her own.

The vows and the rest of the ceremony seemed to pass in a blur despite its complexity and the next thing she knew Manuel was kissing her as the sound of a roaring, cheering crowd faded into the background. For a moment all the finery and fancy surroundings disappeared and it was just her and her love together. Manuel wrapped his strong arms around her and they kissed deeply before finally pulling back and resting their foreheads together.

The world came roaring back as they broke apart and suddenly Saanvi was there, crying happy tears as she hugged them both. A whirlwind of people broke around them and soon they were surrounded by family, being led to the table where the caterers were already laying out a feast of foods, both Indian and Western. Manuel laughed, lifting up a spoon of saffron rice to Soraya's lips and she took it happily. Everything was perfect. Soraya couldn't have asked for a more magic life if she tried.