

MY CHILDHOOD VACATION

FARHAN AHMED[∞]

Ahmed shares a childhood memory, capturing both the excitement and anxieties felt as a young boy during an adventure on a hot summer day.

Children have their own logical reasoning. Once they focus on an objective to achieve something, they don't get distracted by obstacles. That is how I felt in my childhood.

It was late on a humid morning. At the age of eight, I was on a summer vacation in my sister Famida's house in Karachi, Pakistan. I wanted to play with my two-year-old niece, Madia, but she was sleeping.

I scooped up some scrap papers from the plastic bin with both hands and settled on the carpet in the far corner of the bedroom, avoiding the ceiling fan from blowing my papers away. I selected a piece of lined paper, folded its top corners inward, aligned them together, and then folded again downward, recalling from memory how to make a paper plane.

A moment later, I stood up in the corner, arched my left arm backward, and flung the plane into the air. It took a sharp dip, then in a steep curve banked right, and finally soared to the center of the bedroom. A sharp screech filled the room when the ceiling fan shredded my plane. Bits of paper showered downward on the bed, but Madia did not stir in her sleep.

I sighed, made sure my sister was still in the kitchen, then climbed on the bed. Lowering Madia's tiny fist from her face, I pinched her nose and held it for a couple of seconds before letting it go. She wiggled and turned sideways. I did it again. This time she whimpered for a long beat before going back to sleep.

I heard my sister Famida. "Furry! Come into the kitchen." It was time to eat.

While sitting in the chair and eating breakfast, I listened to Asfa, my brother-in-law's sister, making plans to visit my brother who lived over a kilometer away. I wished to join her on this trip while Madia was sleeping. I stared at Asfa with pleading eyes and she smiled back. Confident, I began to rush through my food, I tore a piece of greasy *roti*, scooped some scrambled eggs with it, and placed it in my mouth.

Asfa said to Famida, "I vaguely remember the direction to Sulman's house. Do you think I can take Furry with me? He knows the way."

I scarfed down my food. I could feel my sister's eyes studying my whole deciding her answer.

[∞] Farhan Ahmed, born in Punjab Pakistan, is a writer and an activist. He has earned his associate's degree in Liberal Arts and bachelor's degree in Social Studies from Bard Prison initiative (BPI) and is in the process of applying for Master's in Public Health at Columbia University. Currently, while he is writing his first novel, he is also working to build a community-based program, providing physical and mental support for climate change related displaced populations. He believes in including young generations in decision-making processes to address current social and ecological crises because they are our future leaders. You can reach him at Ahmedfarhan1218@gmail.com.

“Yes, he could lead the way for you and enjoy the day.”

After a few moments, Asfa yelled downstairs to her friend, Maria, and told her to get ready for the trip as well. Five minutes later, wearing navy blue knickers and a matching t-shirt, I marched out of the main gate onto the concrete sidewalk. Both teenage girls accompanied me. Occasionally, I would glance back to make sure they were behind me.

I knew the way to my brother’s house by remembering the stores’ sign posts.

I kept squinting at the tall buildings and speeding vehicles, while I followed the colorful marketing gimmicks hanging on the top of the stores’ entrances, which directed me toward my destination.

A few minutes later, we turned right at the next intersection. The street was crowded. I slowed down, closing the gap between us. As people rushed by, I held Asfa’s hand and craned my neck to search for the next sign post. When I saw the picture of a Pepsi bottle drawn on the big board, soda trickling down from its opened mouth, I announced to make a left turn at the end of the street.

As we made a left turn, Asfa shouted, “Look, look.”

I glanced back at her, followed her gaze, and then squinted at the big poster of a vanilla ice cream cone on the side of the store’s wall next to us. I saw the triangle pattern on it. The tiny pieces of cashews and almonds on the top part of the cone tempted me into taking a big imaginary bite. I kept staring at the cone and forgot I was leading the way to my brother’s house.

The next few moments were like a blur. I still remember extending my right hand for money. Asfa smiled, bent down, handed me money and said, “Just come back soon, Furry, Okay?”

I rushed into the store and saw a big ice box with a transparent sliding door on its top. I strained my body upward, balanced on my toes, and looked inside. There was a wide variety of ice cream. When a clerk asked which one I wanted to buy, I barely pointed my finger at the picture displayed on the ice box, the similar one I had seen outside. I paid for three ice cream cones, secured them inside the black plastic bag, and exited the store.

I was thrilled as I let go of the store’s door. I looked for Asfa and Maria, glancing at both sides of the street. I did not see the girls. I thought they were playing hide and seek. I shut my eyes, smiled, waited for a few moments, and teased their names in a fainting sound.

There was no response.

Then, after a long pause, I panicked. I opened my eyes, and felt strange warmth trickling down my body. I called them again. Nothing! My knees felt weak. Then I shouted their names, but I heard only my voice. I stared at the ice cream cone poster, and then at the place where Asfa had given me some money.

Instead of searching for them, I hurried off to my brother’s house.

The hot sun glared down. I wiped away the sweat on my face with my shirt sleeve. I trudged forward, while the black plastic bag bounced against my thigh. I knew I was going in the right direction because I saw a park next to me. It was close to my destination. I jogged through the park and stepped out of it.

There was a wide road next to me I needed to cross. My excitement faded when I noticed the heavy traffic. I waited for a few moments until the traffic became

thin. I looked again. The first lane was clear. I rushed forward. The oncoming car in the second lane was far away. I scurried on. The third lane was empty. As I began to cross it, I saw a truck speeding in the last lane. I froze in my steps and thought of running back, but another car was approaching in the previous lane. I felt heavy pressure on my legs. Within, I heard a voice: *run, run, you're almost there.*

I remembered dashing forward at the last minute, the black bag tucked in one hand while my knickers pulled up with the other hand. The truck honked, slammed its breaks, and screeched its tires on the road; I leapt the last two steps. A gust of wind swept up a cloud of dust, settling on my sweaty skin. I landed on my hands and knees on the sidewalk. The bag had lurched upward and then dropped next to me.

I got up, picked up my belongings, and ran for the rest of my trip. Finally there, I pushed the doorbell with my right hand, and held it for a long moment. My brother rushed downstairs and yanked the door inward. After pulling me inside the house, he scanned both sides of the street, and then closed the door. Once we climbed the stairs to the second floor, he looked at the bag in my hand, and then inquired if I had come alone.

Speechless, I stared at him and tightened my grip on the bag. I shut my eyes, suppressing my tears, but a single tear rolled down from my right eye. That was it. The bag fell on the floor and I began crying. Before my brother could calm me down, the doorbell rang again and he hurried downstairs to answer it.

Asfa and Maria stepped onto the second floor, rushing towards me. I buried my face in Asfa's arms while Maria explained. They were standing on the corner of the street under the shade, but I could not see them. After a bit, when Asfa let go of me, I picked up the black plastic bag. Then I opened it, pulled out the melted ice cream cones, and extended them toward Asfa and Maria. Both took the ice cream from my hand and smiled.

While holding the ice cream in my right hand, I wiped my tears with the back of my left hand, looked at Asfa, and asked, "Madia might be up, now. Can we go back to my sister's house?"