

TOUGH LOVE

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In this piece, Ahmed describes his first day in a new school as a child and how that day informed his perspective on education.

It was a hot summer morning. While we were sitting in chairs under the tress in the front yard of our private school, the head master approached us with our English test cradled in his left arm and a thick stick in his right hand.

I felt confident, not because I had done great on that test, because of the assurance I had gotten from my English teacher that I would not be held accountable for my performance on the test.

I had been admitted to this school just two weeks ago. The second day, the headmaster had come in the class to announce an English test within two days. He said that there would be a test for the last two months of the syllabus. Once he had left, I reminded my English teacher that I had just joined this class and had not studied the texts. He assured me that he would let the headmaster know and I should not be worried about it, but I should take the test anyway to gauge my performance.

In my country, you respect your teachers and do not confront them because that could be perceived as a challenge to a hierarchy. I obeyed. That was the end of the discussion.

As the sun blazed down, I noticed the shimmering heat rising above the hot metal of train tracks less than fifty yards from me. The headmaster cleared his throat and began calling our names. One by one, we got up, collected our test, and sat down. By the time he was finished, my English teacher had sheepishly stepped backward, as if he was a silent observer of the class.

I glanced down at my test. Two out of thirty. *Really? I know it's a joke. It's okay. My teacher must have told the headmaster about my peculiar situation. Now at least I know what to study.*

The headmaster's next instruction snatched me out of my reverie. He said, "Everyone who has gotten less than fifteen points, get up and stand in the sun."

I struggled to make eye contact with my teacher, but he was casually staring in the direction of train tracks. I hesitated, but the headmaster's glare forced me to join the students already forming a straight line. For comfort, I wiggled between my two friends.

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The headmaster moved toward his left, the beginning of the line, and started his spiel. He would ask a student how long he had been in this school, if he had an after-school tutor to help him, and why he performed so poorly on this test. After emotional pleading and a minimum explanation from the student, the headmaster would demand him to extend both his hands and reprimand him with wooden sticks.

I wiped away the sweat forming on my forehead and strained my ears to catch every student's responses. In my mind, I didn't need any explanation because my teacher had allegedly taken care of it. The third student to my right reasoned that he had been in this school for only a month and he was really sorry for such poor performance. He collected only two sticks.

I took a deep breath.

The second student to my right had been in this school for at least three years. Six sticks. The student to my right narrated a long, pleading story and then announced "five years." Eight sticks. I assumed I would be fine because of my teacher. Still I evaluated my situation and calculated my time in this school. *The most I may get is one whipping.*

"How long have you been in this school?" He demanded.

For once more, I craned my neck and squinted at my teacher, but he was lost in his own world. I said, "Two weeks. Only two weeks. I . . . I'm trying—"

He cut me off and, without any further explanation, said, "Extend your hands out."

I obeyed. While sweat dripped from my face, I braced myself.

One, two, three. . . . I lost count. *I think it was ten.*

I stared at my reddened moistened palms, already swelling. Bewildered, I glared at my teacher who was still avoiding eye contact. I wanted to scream, but my upbringing to respect and obey my teachers was holding me back. I tried to massage my hands together, but the pain jolted, forcing me to experience every bit of my punishment.

Right before the class was over, I meekly inquired and my English teacher politely commented that he had totally forgotten about my situation and he was sorry.

Sorry? I drowned my anger inward. I felt the pain as I touched the handle of my bicycle. I felt the pain when I tore off a *roti* to satisfy my hunger. I felt it when I washed my hands after responding to a call of nature. I felt it. . . . I lost track of all the moments when I felt that pain, but I felt it for almost a week.

I remember the next morning when, because of the punishment, my anger to abandon education reached its peak. I was sitting on the wooden stool in the kitchen. My mother leaned forward over the stove and stirred into the pot, making sure that the last night's leftover ground beef and okras would not stick in the bottom. I watched her prepare a *pratha*, spiced shredded white carrots stuffed between two thin floured *roties*, cooked on a low heat with fresh butter. In a fluid motion, she flipped the *pratha* on the hot pan with her bare hands, letting it turn golden-brown on the other side as well. Then, after a few moments, she deposited it in the flat woven basket in front of me, thin steam rising and lingering in the air. I deeply inhaled the curry wafting out of the pot on the stove.

I tore off the *pratha* with both my hands, letting it cool off a bit. I looked at my mother and asked, “Mom, in what grade did my older brother quit school?”

Her gaze demanded attention. It was a mixture of affection and sternness. I had not told anyone in the house about the beating from the school, yet her eyes suggested she could feel my pain and didn’t want me to give up like my older brother.

She broke the gaze, dumped some butter on the hot pan, placed thin dough on the round flat wooden piece, poured the mixture of shredded carrots on it, and covered it with another thin layer of dough. Then, slipping the tips of her fingers underneath it, she placed the sandwiched dough on the drizzling grease. I broke off a piece of greasy *roti* in front of me. My fingers absorbed the fading heat from it and I deposited it in my mouth. While the spicy mixture of white carrot melted in my mouth, leaving a hint of ground black peppers behind, I caught my mother’s encouraging expression. As the tasty food disappeared in my mouth and I reached down in the flat basket for more, gradually my hatred toward education dissipated and I made up my mind.

My mother poured some ground beef and okra in a bowl in front of me. I scooped some of it with buttery *roti*. While chewing on it, I absorbed every bit of her affectionate gaze, acknowledging that discipline is a part of life.

Finally, when she inquired what had caused me to ask that question, I commented, “I was just curious, that is all.”