

ONE GATEWAY TWO WORLDS: A SMOKY GRAY DOOR ANCHORS ME IN AN UNFAMILIAR WORLD

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Ahmed further explores his early childhood education experiences in Pakistan.

At the age of five, I was happy and never knew what a worry was. As the baby of the family, I played all day, my siblings treated me like a prince and my parents cherished my presence. Within my familiar world – home – everything was paradise.

Then the opportunity arrived for kindergarten in the public school.¹ I anticipated attending school and exploring the world beyond the main smoky-gray wooden door of my home. Yet within a week, I witnessed teachers slapping the students and whipping them with sticks. I began to mimic other students who were behaving and avoiding punishment. Even though I became frightened to attend school, for a while it worked.

One summer morning, nervousness lingered in the air as I glanced at my school bag. My sister Masooda had sewn it out of a heavy gray fabric with kelly green piping. It resembled a briefcase with a one-inch wide cord attached to its top corners. I opened it and shoved in my books and a storage bag, which was woven out of a thick nylon. Since there were no chairs in the school, I would spread the storage bag on the ground as a makeshift carpet to sit on.

I hung the school bag on my right shoulder, but it fell lower than my knees, producing an awkward walk. After carrying this bag for a week, I knew what to do. I grabbed the cord and pulled it over my head, letting it drop on my left shoulder. I then reluctantly opened the smoky-gray door and buckled in my steps. Finally, I took a deep breath, closed the door, stared at it for a moment, constructed a picture of it in my mind and walked straight for two blocks to my school.

Since the school sat on the corner of the block and lacked walls, the cacophony of students engulfed me as I reached near it; and again I became frightened. I hopped over the narrow wastewater channel that marked the school boundary and scanned the yard for my class. After a moment, I spotted my teacher sitting on the char in the far corner against the wall. The students were clustered in front of him on the ground like a group of skinny sheep behind their stern shepherd. I joined them, pulled out my improvised storage bag, spread it on the ground and sat on it, folding my scrawny legs underneath me.

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¹ Since financial issues were crucial in my family, I was sent to the public school like the rest of my siblings because the fee was almost non-existent.

In less than an hour, the teacher assigned us a multiplication table to memorize while he hovered around us like a hungry hawk, making sure everyone was chanting loudly. I dutifully obeyed and after a while my throat became dry. A moment later, the teacher slapped one student who had stopped repeating his lines. The chanting sound of the group immediately reached its peak. I kept my voice loud as well and stared at my gray school bag for comfort. After a long beat, I caught a student next to me scribbling on the ground with his bare hands; then the teacher's stick made a whipping contact with the student's upper arm. I clenched my school bag and visualized the smoky-gray door.

Five minutes later, when the teacher sat in his chair, I carefully avoided his glare and glanced toward the light traffic in the distance. Two black figures hastily crossed the road. I watched them for a few moments until they came closer to the school. Black dresses were covering them from shoulders to ankles. Their heads were veiled with black *niqab*² – only exposing their faces. Females. They looked familiar. Finally when they cut through the empty soccer field, making a shortcut to their destination, I recognized them. My mother and sister Masooda were carrying clear plastic bags. I concluded that since they were coming back from the bazaar, there was some food in those bags.

All of the sudden, I felt thirsty and hungry. I waited as the idea materialized in my mind. Then, after five minutes, I got up and meekly asked my teacher for permission to use the bathroom, who indifferently nodded his head to say yes. I moved toward the school bathroom, but jumped over the water channel and made a sharp left turn, heading straight for the smoky-gray door.

My mother and sister were retrieving things from the bags in the kitchen. They amusingly inquired about my early arrival and I deeply laughed, explaining how I had seen them coming back from the bazaar and asked the teacher to use the bathroom. Sighing, my mother frowned and moved toward me, but Masooda confidently wrapped her protective arms around me and led me to the water fountain. She washed my hands and generously produced some grapes from the bag to feed me.

That moment, in my mind, Masooda's gesture of healthy emotional dosage ignited self-confidence and equipped me with courage to face my unfamiliar world. I felt brave to tackle the brutal world beyond the smoky-gray door.

A few minutes later, I proudly marched through the "gateway," closed it behind me without a return gaze and deeply inhaled the sweet smell of roses coming from the front garden. As a gentle breeze brushed my face, I rushed forward to school, occasionally leaping in the air and chanting my multiplication table.

While sitting on the ground, my eyes gleamed with joy as the teacher disappeared in the headmaster's office. Since there were no school walls, I, with the other students, gazed at buffalos, cows and goats grazing in the distant field. Men went to work, riding bicycles. Women rushed away for late morning shopping, carrying babies on their hips. Then, in unison, we focused on the steady traffic and started counting trucks, buses and cars as they sped away on the main road. A moment later, we heard the slow rumble and impatiently waited as the train appeared

² A piece of cloth commonly used in Muslim countries to cover a female face.

on its tracks next to the main road. We stood straight and vigorously waved at the passengers on the train. As someone shouted that the teacher was coming, we immediately began chanting the multiplication table.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. At dawn of the next day, I got up with one attempt by my sister to wake me, performed *wudu*³ and accompanied my father and brother to the mosque for morning prayer. Then, I ate breakfast, picked up my school bag, confidently entered through the smoky-gray “gateway,” once again closed it behind me without a return glance, inhaled the scent of roses and rushed away.

As I leapt over the school boundary, I felt the tension in the air. I carefully blended in with other students, avoiding any angry look from my teacher. Yet this constant glance in my direction worried me and I wished to run back home. Right before the school was about to close, the teacher called me over and demanded my storage bag. I obeyed. Without any warning, he clasped his giant hands on my shirt collar, pulled me up and shoved me inside the bag, pushing my dangling arms and legs with his forearm. As I wiggled and squeaked for help, tears ran down my cheeks. Gasping for air, I begged, “Please let me go, I didn’t do anything. Please—”

He shook my body and I started babbling. While glaring at me, he declared, “If you go home to use the bathroom again, I will tie you up in your bag and beat you with a stick.”

This time I pleaded, “It won’t happen again. It won’t happen again.” As he let go of me, I squirmed out of the bag, wiped my nose and tears with my shirt sleeve, collected my stuff, embraced my school bag and ran in the direction of the smoky-gray door.

Crying, I burst through the “gateway” and ran straight into my sister’s comforting arms. Then I mumbled about my teacher’s awareness of yesterday’s secret trip. I kept saying: I am not going back to that school. Then I overheard Masooda complaining to my mother, saying “See? I told you not to send Rizwan to inform his teacher.” They persuaded me to go back to the same school and promised me that my teacher would not scare me again. But I kept crying while staring at my sister with my pleading face and expecting her to rescue me from the public school.

A week later, in the early morning, I once again stepped through the smoky-gray door and sniffed the scent of roses. But this time, I wore a white dress shirt, gray pants and black shoes. With a smile on my face and a black school bag on my back, I marched straight for a block and then made a sharp right turn, heading for the kindergarten in the private school – Modern Education School.

³ A process of washing the face, feet and hands including the forearms in order to purify oneself before offering a prayer.