

MY HERO

FARHAN AHMED[∞]

Blending reality and imagination, Ahmed writes a short story about running into an old friend and hero of his—himself. Ahmed explores his hopes and dreams as an immigrant, his transformation into a writer while incarcerated, and his fierce confrontation with the past.

In the early afternoon I was sitting in a cafeteria sipping French Vanilla coffee. I put the china cup on the table and stared at my reflection in the mirror: a round face, a few-days-old beard, keen eyes, and a sly smile. After a brief pause, I blinked and thought my hero was standing behind me. When I turned around, there he was, my spitting image, my hero—Farhan.

After exchanging pleasantries, I studied him, wondering if he had gotten over his obsessive nostalgia. It had been a few years since I had noticed him dwelling on his past mistakes and was warned by the psychiatrists that it could become a major identity crisis for him. When I would tell him he needed to sacrifice a part of himself and move on, he would stupidly smile saying, “I will get over my past regrets.”

Now he was hiding his true emotions behind his fragile mask, yet they seeped out and were caught by my practiced observance. “Do you still blame yourself for your past decision, even though you have become a well-known writer?”

He shrugged. “That was a part of me and still is.” His eyes brightened. “Now, I have managed it.”

For the past few years, he had whipped out best-selling thrillers one after another. His distinct style of combining fast-paced action with a sprinkle of literary writing sprouted fast, and readers loved it. He satisfied his fans, making them excited and convincing literary critics to take him seriously. Yet, the more he enjoyed his fame, the worse he became within, struggling to control his conflicted inner parts.

“That sounds better. Is there another action thriller coming up?”

A soft chuckle erupted from his throat. “No, I think the seed you have planted has grown.” He pointed at the book on the table. “This is not a thriller.”

I didn't even notice it until now. I had been on vacation for a few months and couldn't stay in touch with newly released books. I was totally unaware of his new novel.

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He laughed. “I know I told you that one day I’ll grow out of my inner conflicts. They were begging me to write a literary novel”—he referred to literary people as ‘they.’ — “My thriller novels are killers. My intentionally poetic, metaphoric, and dramatic writings hooked them. Now they have what they asked for, and that made me complete as well.”

“What's it about?” I leaned forward to pick up the book.

He stopped me midway. “No, not right now. You will take it with you and read it later on.

Then, we will meet again, perhaps . . .” He trailed off and studied me curiously.

Again, I asked. “What is it about?”

A sly smile emerged on his understanding face. “This is a literary crack. This is what they begged me to write, and it will satisfy your concerns of my inner struggles.”

One late evening, I was comfortably sitting in a black leather chair in my study room. As I heard the utensils moving in the kitchen downstairs, the faint aroma of mutton engulfed in curry drifted in my room through the door ajar.

I had been reading this novel since the late morning, and now the novel was at its denouement. I put it down and laughed wholeheartedly at the crispy twist in the plot. The writer was using himself as a protagonist, internally struggling with his conflicting selves. A part of me admired the writer for his crafty writing, yet I strongly despised him, hoping this novel would crush his career to the ground. I felt sorry for the literary critics for being duped by a mentally ill person.

The hero in the novel grows up in Pakistan and in his late teens leaves home to chase the American dream. He faces obstacles and accepts defeats. He becomes distant from his family and friends, and strangers take advantage of him. Then at intermission he commits a murder and goes to prison.

For a moment, I thought the hero would give up his goal of the American dream, turning the novel into a poignant story.

Slowly, the hero begins to observe his surroundings and then deliberately adopts his new setting.

Once again, hope sputters in his heart and he finds new friends, cherishing most of them as his own heroes, and learns from them. He becomes fascinated with how people volunteer their time and come to a prison to teach needy people. He even has a genuine reflective moment after he learns some dance moves from a Jewish lady, because he never thought he would become a nonjudgmental person. Then he experiences, in learning and acting, a metamorphosis into a writer. Yet all the while he dwells on the actions which brought him to prison.

I picked up the book and began reading again.

As the plot unravels in the denouement, the hero, heartbroken, is laying on the grass near the fast-running creek. Then, for a brief moment, it really seems true that

he has broken down and succumbed to his dark past. He slowly gets up and walks back towards the thick forest, as if accepting his defeat.

Yet after a few steps, he jerks in the air, and then, turning fiction into fantasy, he lands near a two-story house.

He rushes forward with a confident gait, heaving the main gate, climbing the stairs, and inhaling the pregnant smell of curried mutton. As the door of the study room opens, inward soundlessly, he pulls out the gun.

A woman's voice reaches upstairs faintly. "Dinner is ready."

For a long moment, the hero stares at the side mirror, studying his past self, who is wearing a sly smile and consumed in reading. In his mind, the hero cherishes his volunteered heroes who came to prison to help him grow. Then he levels the gun at this target slumped in black leather chair; with a satisfied sly smile emerging on his own face, the hero squeezes the trigger.