

Let Me Pretend

“Your daughter told me she was probably meant to be a tree.” Niri’s sister said in her matter-of-fact sort of way. Niri heard, but said nothing.

It was morning, a still one, that felt like the way a body turned calm after a horrendous episode of tears. It was sunny, the kind of sun that taunted a person when they imagined their death—saying everything would carry on just the same whether you were here or not. The kind that reminded all that lay between the earth and the sun’s rays that they were merely fleeting, and stuck its tongue out to mock their silly mortality.

“Saidi? She’s doing okay I think,” Niri stated, so mechanically one could almost assume her voice was initiated by a “speak” button on a remote control. She wasn’t very old, but her face was worn down in a way that showed she’d been crying—not today perhaps, but the consecutive few preceding it.

She turned to her sister, suddenly, the way people turn when someone taps them on the shoulder. The two shared such a striking resemblance that it was almost depressing to see how unimaginative their parents’ genes had been in the procreation process.

“I know she said that,” Niri continued, “that whole thing about being a tree. “She paused as her eyes quietly blanketed themselves with a layer of water. “It’s just that she has a hard time dealing with all this life business, you know? She just said pretending to be a tree is the only time she feels alive.”

“I’m worried about her, regardless of what anyone says. I really am, but I don’t want to stifle her imagination.” Niri continued, feeling that quiet need to justify herself.

“What are you talking about? Stifling her imagination? You’re starting to sound like a hippie, you know that?”

“So?”

“So, your daughter’s been standing in the courtyard pretending to be a tree while the rest of the kids are playing basketball or something. You know I love her just as much as you do, but it’s just not normal behavior, Niri. And that stunt she pulled...my God! You know, the counselors have a point.”

“That was blown out of proportion,” Niri said. “She didn’t really try to kill herself. She just wasn’t paying attention, that’s all. She can get lost in her own head. You know how she is. I was the same way when I was her age.”

“Don’t be so naive, Niri. You’d have to be in one hell of a daze to thrust yourself into a busy street. I mean, luckily the driver was paying a little attention, but I’m sorry Niri, I just don’t believe her.”

“She’s going through a lot these days. It’s not easy for her.”

“Don’t think you’re doing her any favors the way you’re dealing with it. I think the school’s right to interfere.” The room grew silent as the sun warmed its way even further through the windows and split the couch into two shades of blue. Footsteps tumbled down the stairs like an unsteady drum roll growing closer and closer until they stopped.

“Just drop it for now, OK?” Niri whispered, as her daughter made her way into the room.

“I think I live for the weekend,” Saidi exclaimed as she stumbled in, in her wrinkled pajamas. Her ruffled head of brown hair, if combed out, would turn pleasantly straight and hang

nicely off her shoulders. She flopped herself on the love seat and let her legs fall over the side. Her eyes instantly sunk into the vertical line that separated one shade from the other on the blue couch.

“Good morning, sweetie. Did you sleep well?” her mother asked.

“I guess... I don’t remember really,” Saidi smiled. “So, I must’ve.”

“What were you reading last night?” her aunt quickly asked, before Saidi’s eyes fell further into the couch, to be lost forever. “You were so consumed. If there had been an earthquake you probably wouldn’t have even noticed.” She let out a laugh that sounded more like a big truck stopping than anything that might have resembled amusement.

Saidi looked up, stared at her for a second and, as if trying to recall an answer on a test, finally remembered and opened her mouth to speak.

“The Bell Jar.”

Her aunt raised her eyebrows and sighed. “Isn’t that your mother’s?” she asked, turning her head to Niri to further impose her disapproval of the pair’s disturbed choice in literature.

“Yeah. I borrowed it from her library.” She paused for a second and raised her eyes towards the ceiling, searching for the invisible one who would tell her just what she wanted to remember. She found him as he whispered it softly into her ear, “You even underlined the same lines that got to me.” She turned her head towards her mother and smiled at their similarity.

“I read it so long ago.” Niri dug her eyes into the rug on the floor, trying to see through it and all the way to the core of the Earth with her newly found super powers.

“I just love her descriptions!” Saidi quoted:

She stared at her reflection in the glossed shop windows as if to make sure, moment by moment, she continued to exist.

She’d spent her night weighing the words down on her tongue and tattooing them into her memory, to be a mark on her mind forever.

Every time I tried to concentrate, my mind glided off, like a skater, into a large empty space and pirouetted there, absently.

“I don’t think I’ve understood anything so well,” Saidi said. Her eyes gleamed, until her aunt spoke again and extinguished them like water over a dying flame.

“Didn’t she kill herself? Come on! Why would you want to read something like that when you know what eventually came out of it?”

“Because it’s real!” Saidi quickly said, defending the right of madness on paper for all those who have circled it, but dared not step any further than the words themselves. “And that’s not the point!” She was growing furious with her aunt’s lack of understanding for beautifully written truth.

Niri was quiet. She stared at her daughter and smiled. Saidi always said exactly what Niri felt but dared not say herself.

“I guess I’m just too ignorant to get the point then,” Saidi’s aunt stated mockingly, as if she were the only sane person in the room. She got up and walked towards the kitchen.

Saidi sighed. “She just doesn’t get it, does she mom?”

“No, sweetie, I guess not. She loves you though...” Niri smiled as she surrendered herself to her maternal heart and accepted that this person that was a product of her. “You know, people are just different.”

“But you don’t think I’m a suicidal nut like she does.” Saidi grew quiet for a moment, her thoughts fumbling around for an explanation for it all inside her. “I just have a hard time focusing, mom. I really do...”

“I know, I know, sweetie... You don’t have to justify anything to me.” She watched Saidi for a moment, trying to find the words that would reassure her daughter that everything will be just fine – whether she herself believed it or not. “People tend to feel threatened when you’re not what they want you to be. It’s just the way they are.”

“What about the way *I* am?” Saidi sighed.

“I guess you just have to find your way around it.”

“How do *you* do it, mom?”

“I just pretend, sweetie.” She smiled. “That’s all. I just pretend.”

Written by Shirin Kamal