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American Stranger

“Allah, please, make me look ugly. Please don’t let them like me, please don’t let them, please don’t let, please don’t, please....” Shehnaz chants under her breath as if she is reading a tasbi. Despite her diligent efforts to hide the glow of her soft, pimple-free, freckle-free, unspoiled face, the light of the candle clasped in her fist illuminates her face even more. She had expected the power failure to aide her cause, but it is working against her with the utmost vehemence. Her olive skin radiates between the two thick, black braids which she made with the intention of reducing the charismatic flow of her wavy hair. Escapee locks now curl around her forehead and fall in the way of her worriedly fluttering eyelashes. She does not move them for the fear that any kind of movement from her side might attract attention, yet all sixteen sets of eyes in the room follow her movements meticulously, like radar guns picking up speeding cars on the road. They record her skin color; that is the most important point of focus—the girl must be fair. Here Shehnaz could have disappointed them, but the darkness of the room and the brightness of her candlelit face make her luminous. The eyes try to determine her height, weight, etc., but it is hard to do so since the rest of her body is hidden in darkness; so they focus on the plumpness of her cheeks, structure of her cheekbones, sharpness of her nose, length of her forehead, etc. The reflection of the fire from the candle on her pupil makes her eyes sparkle in the dark, and so all the eyes in the room return to rest on the glittering holes half hidden by carefully lowered

eyelids. She bites her trembling lower lip in a failed attempt to conceal the fullness of her lips, and mutters under her breath, “Allah, please don’t let them like me, please don’t, please...”

The chitchat, laughter, and commotion in the living room had died down a bit as Shehnaz entered. The room now resumes its cheerfulness, and the festive atmosphere returns. Shehnaz does not understand why everyone else is so excited about the approach of her doomsday. Even her two younger sisters helped her mother convince her to come out for a few minutes in front of the family who proposed to her family and asked for her hand for their son who lives with them in America. He was born in Bangladesh as Shehnaz was, but he left the country when he was fifteen years old, and now returns after eleven years to get married to an innocent, Bangladeshi virgin. Shehnaz frowns in disgust as she thinks. Eleven years ago, his parents left for America because they wanted a better education for him, as if Bangladesh could not offer that. The thought angers Shehnaz; education is just an excuse these NRBs- Non Resident Bangladeshis- use to reach the so-called “land of opportunity.” They just couldn’t make it here, so they left. The land of opportunity, land of freedom, land of whatever, doesn’t attract Shehnaz. Why does everyone want her to get married and leave the house where she grew up, where she and her sisters played with rag dolls, arranged weddings for them, and invited the neighborhood for feasts—soups made of mashed flowers, salads of leaves, beef kebabs of wet, molded mud, vegetable rolls of broken stems? Shehnaz acknowledges that her own life has become one of her childhood games. Now she has become the rag doll and the neighborhood will come to feast on her childhood.

She grew up here. This is the house where she and her sisters had gotten wet in the splash of rain across the bars in the veranda. Ma would get angry if they tried to go outside in the rain, so they had to stretch out their arms and grab the raindrops in their fists from inside the house.

Shehnaz remembers- the drops of rain always escaped from in between her fingers, just as her childhood is escaping with every breath in this stuffed, sweaty, living room full of people staring at her face. This is the house where Baba took his last breath, his palm resting on Shehnaz's head as he asked her to study hard and become a doctor who would find cures for incurable diseases. Shehnaz remembers her father's limp hand dropping on the side of the bed, brushing her hair and cheeks on its way down. She remembers his last rail for breath, his only failure in life. Baba was the bravest man Shehnaz had ever met. He did not die of old age or a weak heart; it was blood cancer that killed him. Since then, Shehnaz has waged a war against blood cancer, cancer in general. She took all her exams and passed them with some of the highest marks in Dhaka board. She had applied to Dhaka Medical University and her acceptance letter arrived two days ago, a few hours before her marriage proposal knocked on her door and threw her dreams out the window.

Shehnaz tries to look around the living room, though she was told not to raise her eyes too much. "Try to look modest for a change, Shehnaz," her mother told her before pushing her softly inside the room. There is an obese woman sitting beside a young man in a light blue shirt and gray pants. There are more than a dozen people in the room, but Shehnaz's eyes land on the woman even before scanning the room properly; she beams despite the darkness of the room. Shehnaz knows that if the family accepts, this woman would become her mother in law. She feels all the components of her digestive system churning— the stomach, pancreas, large and small intestines, and she swallows the sudden bile rising at the back of her throat. The woman is wearing a heavy, golden sari on this hot summer night. Shehnaz feels a sudden flash of euphoria imagining her future mother's discomfort due to the power failure. A golden watch shines on her wrist, and Shehnaz notices her heavy eye make-up under a pair of glasses with golden rims. Is

that a golden dot in the middle of her forehead, or is it a mole? All this gold is hurting her eyes now. Shehnaz lowers her eyelids. Her mother's voice echoes in her ears: "*Try to look modest, Shehnaz.*" Like the typical obedient Bangladeshi daughter who has been trained like a circus elephant to follow instructions, she tries. And she tries.

As she tries to recover from her feeling of disgust towards her possible new mother, she notices her old one on her side. Ma never wears anything that is not white, and look at this woman! Widows are not supposed to wear a lot of colors; cream or gray might have been okay, but Ma prefers white. The sari she is wearing now has a gray hem and simple, light blue, teardrop patterns on the achal. She remembers how her mother cried on her father's deathbed, and after a few hours, how she composed herself for her three daughters. Shehnaz knows it is her duty to get married into a well-off, well-known family and open the gate for her sisters. She does not want the neighbors to wonder why her mother's daughter cannot get a proper suitor; she hates how people gossip. These same neighbors whom she once invited to her dollhouse weddings now want to come to her wedding. They just want a little excitement in this old, boring town. And for their entertainment, she has to sacrifice her dreams. Sacrifice, she tells herself, just like the helpless, captured cows on Eid.

She is only twenty-two, Shehnaz considers, and she has time in her hands. But Ma says that this time won't return, the family is rich and the boy is educated, and most importantly, he has an American green card. "But I don't want an American green card, Ma," Shehnaz had tried to plead her case. "I like it here." "Don't be foolish," her mother had replied. Shehnaz did not notice any foolishness in herself. She does not lust after the American dream; she has dreams of her own. And if her mother really wanted her to go to America, she could, for higher education, with a student visa. But her uncles told her how hard it is becoming to get student visas for

America. The attack on the World Trade Center caused a lot of problems for Bangladeshi students. Her uncle who had come from America for her wedding preparations had told her one day, “We are Muslims, you know, they think we are all terrorists. We are not Middle Eastern, Arabic people, you know. Not that all Middle Easterners are terrorists. They’d rather accept Indians in their country than us. They think, if we are brown and Muslims, then we must be Pakistani, as if Bangladesh doesn’t exist. You know what’s funny? They go after Hindu Sikhs these days too, because they wear turbans. Some Americans tried to tear off one of my Sikh neighbor’s beard after the nine-eleven incident. He was just a domestic, little taxi driver who gets beaten up by his wife at home. On top of that, he’s Hindu! It cracks me up!” Her uncle roared with laughter. She thought she saw tears glistening in the corners of his eyes. Were those tears of laughter or tears of pain and humiliation? She did not think about it much then; she is here in Bangladesh. Who cares what happens in America! But wait; does she have to start caring now? Now, the American stranger is sitting on the familiar couch in their living room, from which she likes to dangle her legs as she eats mango pickles with her fingers, straight from the bottle, while watching the soap operas on BTV. This stranger is intruding into her space already. He can only bring destruction. She feels like a captive. Already.

Shehnaz tries to look at her mother while keeping her eyes fixed on the floor. All she sees are her mother’s toes caught in the gray straps of her open toed shoes. The theme of captivity seems to be weaving its sinister web inside her heart; it quickly hangs on to one dark corner of the room, and now it’s spreading all over the room, and now it’s covering up her life in its maze, the trap getting wider and wider, its grasp reaching farther and farther. And now, its enormity is engulfing her. With her eyes, she tries to untangle her mother’s toes from the grip of the straps. Her eyes instruct the little toes to rise up and fall in a violent thump, the sudden weight flattening

the rapidly spreading plague under the sole of the shoe. *My soul*, Shehnaz confirms, *Baba would have never agreed to this degrading sale of my soul to a stranger. If only Baba were here*, Shehnaz's cautious sigh escapes through the quivering holes of her thin nose. She only has to stand there for a few minutes to let the desirable boy's desirable family observe her and determine if *she* is desirable or not. These few minutes seem like a lifetime, a lifetime of humiliation. A lifetime of hard work and ambition has given her these few minutes that are to change her life again. Shehnaz's mind trails back to the last few moments of her father's life, his last few words. *Study hard, become a doctor*; his words were getting tangled with each other. He tried to wet the cracks of his dry, thin lips with his almost limp tongue, which seemed almost as dehydrated as his lips. Shehnaz had shut her eyes in an attempt to deny the reality of the present situation.

Her father stands behind her chair, and twisting her ears with his hard fingers, he turns her face towards him as she bites her tongue. "Drawing, the night before your biology exam..." he grabs the piece of notebook paper resting between the cracks of the two pages of her open Biology book. "I'm sorry, Baba...it will never happen again." Shehnaz lowers her gaze, and stares at his brown, leather sandals. The next day, she returns from school to find her parents in their usual position on the porch. Their rocking chairs rock back and forth as Baba looks up and puts down the sweater he is helping Ma knit back on his lap. "How was your exam, Shehnaz?" He gives her a stern look. "Um, it went well, Baba. Really." Shehnaz widens her eyes to affirm her look of honesty. "Come here." She walks up the stairs and observes the chuckling face of her mother and the serious face of her father. Her father picks up something from the side table as she reaches the last step. He extends his hand and the object held in it, towards her, "There is a right time for everything- study when it's time to study, sleep when it's time to sleep, and the

rest of the day is yours. Your hobbies are important. Don't draw on scrap paper again." Shehnaz grabs the brown paper bag from his hand, opens the mouth, and peeps inside to find a handsome sketchbook lying there. "Baba..., for me?" Her father continues, "Be the best at what you do. If you want to steal, don't be a pickpocket, be like Phulan Debi, rob like the Bandit Queen. If you want to draw, be like Picasso, or Leonardo Da Vinci, and create another Mona Lisa. If you want to study medicine, be a doctor and find cures for incurable diseases." He looks at his wife sitting next to him and says, "and if you want to be beautiful, be like your mother." "Ishh..." her mother looks away, feigning annoyance, as her father reaches for his wife's hand and roars with laughter.

Tight nostrils opening a little wider, Shehnaz breathes for fresh air in this crowded room filled with the sweat from her future family's bodies. Shehnaz moves her gaze from the toes of her mother's feet to the cheerfulness in her eyes. She suddenly wonders how much truth lies in the sparkle of those eyes. The late District Commissioner's proud wife showcasing her beloved daughter to a family of American strangers. What about the dreams hidden in the corners of her eyes? What about the memories of her husband? How far can she push her helplessness towards those deep, dark corners, without wetting her eyelashes? Shehnaz realizes that she is not alone. Her ever strong, hopeful mother affirmed that Shehnaz can still be a doctor, even after marriage. But Shehnaz knows these typical desi mothers and fathers-in-law, especially the mothers. She feels her temper rising. These people only care to know how thin she is, how fair she is. Honestly, the color of her skin matters more to them than her degree in biology. They want their sons' wives to be innocent, little housewives, doing all the work in the kitchen, taking care of the them, cleaning the house, taking care of the kids, attending the guests, taking care of their sons. Why don't they just get caretakers, servants? Oh, servants must be expensive in America, and

they cannot sleep with their sons and create the next generation of the family, and oh, most importantly, there are no Muslim servants in America. Are there? They are not even called servants in America, are they? What will I be called?

Her thoughts trail off as her eyes come across another pair of eyes, the eyes of the young man sitting beside the woman in the golden sari. He must be Sahil, her fiancé to be. He does look like the man in the photo she has seen, but she was too angry to look at it carefully then. And now that he is here, she has been so busy watching other things that she has forgotten to notice him. Or maybe, she just didn't care enough. She still does not care, decides to give him an angry glare anyway, but as she gets ready to look at his eyes, she halts. By accident, their eyes meet. But it does not seem like an accident. He catches her taking a glimpse at him, removes his own deadly glare from her face with a look of distaste and obvious revulsion, and shakes his head. Startled, Shehnaz stops her chanting, "please don't let them like me, make me look ugly..." quickly recovers from the surprising gesture from her stranger, and lets the feeling lead to anger. She asks herself almost defensively—do I look *that* ugly? But the man does not seem to care about her looks or anything else for that matter. She finds her American stranger sitting there limply, his eyes tightly shut, his brows crooked, his lips twisted, lost in his own thoughts, in his own world, far away from hers.

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“I love you!” Sahil screams against the vastness of the ocean, his voice cracking. He is not an escapist; he can defeat this ocean that he feels responsible to love, and reign over its unruly waves, if she stands by his side. They stand side by side at the beach, letting the sand escape from in between their toes, a little more, with each wave. Their arms are stretched out on the sides, with only his left index finger and her right, intertwined in the middle. The ocean breeze blows through his hair. It reminds him of Jen’s hands brushing his hair before their high school prom; she laughed as she complained about its messiness. Sometimes Sahil would pretend to forget to gel down his hair in the morning. He would not even brush it, and leave it the exact way as it was when he woke up. He wanted Jen to be disturbed when he arrived at the bus stop; she looked beautiful when she frowned. When they got on the bus, she would scold him for being so messy all the time, all the while putting her hand through his shoulder length hair, untangling it, and brushing it with her hands. She never carried a comb or a mirror; she wasn’t one of those girls. Even when she went to college, she did not enter any sorority, or many clubs at all, apart from FLY—For Loving Yourself, and Amnesty International. She was majoring in English, and read or wrote during her free time, or she conversed with Sahil on the phone. Sahil was usually busy with his college courses for his chemistry major and other pre-med requirements. Jen remained patient and waited for the weekends. Sahil waited too, his impatient adolescence changing into a silently responsible adulthood. When he went away to college and came home to Atlantic City on the weekends as a 6 foot, 4 inch young man, Jen was too short to put her hands through his hair. Sahil’s hair was much shorter now, too. That didn’t stop him,

though. He would kneel down in front of her, as if he were about to propose. At times, he did have the greatest urges to break down and propose, but he always found it to be too early to face life and begin to try and change the course of the impending doom.

Now, he realizes how late it was then, but then, he was a carefree bird, taking life as it came, moving from moment to moment, like the waves in the ocean, and the breeze on their faces. Sahil looks over and finds the excited face of Jen, staring at the sky, where it touched the ocean. The sun had begun to set. The waves had come and taken away most of the sand from beneath their feet. Now they stood on little lumps of sand under their feet. His feet feel funny; he is sure Jen's do too, for she turns to look at him and a look of uncomfortable sadness comes over her face. A big wave comes towards them, and as it goes back, and more sand escapes through their toes, Jen suddenly turns around. Their intertwined fingers unlock; she runs towards the wooden boardwalk. He remembers not following her that day, but standing there, alone, with life rapidly escaping through his toes, waiting for something. Now, he can't remember what.

Sahil opens his eyes. For a second, he can't recognize the dark living room or the people around him. His toes feel sweaty inside the white socks, and his socks feel wet inside his black, polished shoes. No sand in between his toes, just sweat. The darkness of the room is not the result of the setting sun; it's just the stupid power failure. His mom's golden achal prickles his arm. Sahil wonders why his mother always has to overdo everything- her outfits, make up, gossip, and now her collection of suitable girls for her son. Why doesn't she understand that it embarrasses him? Dad works as a bartender in Trump Taj Mahal, and Mom works in a shoe store on the boardwalk. They earned enough money to buy two houses in Florida, which they rented out, using that money to pay for the mortgage. Their jobs or financial status never embarrassed Sahil, but their proud attitude at parties, and the way they flaunt his supposed

intelligence and grades in school always embarrass him. When he graduated as the Valedictorian from Atlantic City High School, his parents threw a huge party in their small, birdcage-like house in Ventnor City. They were Bangladeshis, yet there was loud, Indian film music playing from his boom box. They held the knife together, he and his parents, as they pressed his fingers down and cut his cake for him. The Bangladeshi crowd, consisting of their relatives and his parents' friends, cheered, and some little kid started crying from the back; she had dropped the boom box on her foot. After that, the food was served- pure Bangladeshi cuisine, oily rice, fried chicken, the oil seeping through the napkin underneath, beef drenched in oil and masala, tuna kebabs, fried fishes, fish chutney, all kinds of chutneys, and pickles dipped in oil, different kinds of vegetable dishes, and salad. Sahil hates oily food; his mom knew that very well. He took his food on a plate and walked down to the basement, into his room.

“You’ve got mail,” AOL declared as he signed in. Jen wrote; *I miss you baby. They have gone out to the Casinos. They won’t be back until midnight. I’m alone in the house. Wanna come over? Even better, we could go to the boardwalk. The sun is about to set.* Sahil wrote back: *I can’t. It’s my graduation party. I’ll see you tomorrow?* He didn’t want to bring up the topic of Jen again and ruin this happy occasion for his parents; he had already gotten their verdict. He told his other friends who IM-ed that he wasn’t feeling well. He left the chat room where his friends discussed how to get into Pink Pony with their fake ID cards. Sahil could hear the sound of hundreds of footsteps above him, heavy and light. He locked his door, and turned on the music system he had pleaded for and succeeded in getting for his graduation from his parents, along with a big poster of the periodic table, a chemistry tool set, and a copy of *Chemistry for Idiots*—gifts he didn’t plead for. He would have preferred a sketchbook, but chemistry was more appealing to his parents. His father used to be a professor of chemistry in Bangladesh. They said

Sahil had too much intellect and too little time, now that he's graduated, to waste on such hobbies—his interest in art has always been an insignificant hobby to his parents. Initially, he had tried to protest, "But Rina, your sister's daughter is studying art at Rutgers University." His mom replied, "She has no brains, and a 3.4 GPA; its okay for her to be 'artistic.' Plus, she's a girl." Sahil pressed the play button of his music system, and Linkin Park blasted out—*Crawling in my skin, these wounds they will not heal, fear is how I fall, confusing what is real*. He tried to block out the sound of laughter coming from the living room. He knew some people were dancing, right above him, and in his head. Linkin Park crawled inside him—*I can't seem to find myself again, my walls are closing in...I've felt this way before, so insecure*.

Sahil realizes that he is doing what he has been doing for the last eleven years of his life—blocking out the laughter of people. Just like the night of his graduation party, this night too, he is blocking out everyone around him in an effort to own his own world. His armpits are sweating, making damp marks on his shirt too. He can smell himself, a strange mix of sweat and Polo Sport deodorant. He doesn't care if he stinks, the way he didn't care when his mom showed him the picture of the girl he is supposed to marry. He realizes that she is standing right there, at the door, looking at him. He doesn't want to look at her, and he closes his eyes again to try and picture Jen with her falsely cheerful eyes looking at him as he left for the airport. He saw no hope in her eyes; she was just pretending. Jen is good at that; she is the one who convinced him to let go of their relationship. She pretended to believe her words, and perhaps even managed to make her face look content as the sun set and the tears ceased to sparkle in her eyes, the wetness of her eyelashes disguised in the darkness. Jen bit her trembling lower lip, then slowly releasing it, she said, "If the future of our relationship hurts your parents, then I guess...we should let go. They immigrated to America for a better life for you." No, for better lives for themselves, Sahil

corrected Jen's words inside his head. "They do odd jobs in a country whose culture is odd to them, in a society where they feel they don't belong." Yes, they feel that way, but I don't. They can't belong, so they want me to feel neglected too. They want me to remember my immigrant status every living moment, even though I'm a citizen now. They always said, *Sahil, you know they'll never accept us as one of their own. You'll never be seen as a true American, and if you forget your roots, you won't be a true Bangladeshi either. You'll be a nothing, stuck between two cultures, belonging to neither. It is only Bangladesh where we're truly at home.*

But I feel at home here, Sahil told himself. "If you knew all along that they'll never agree, then maybe we shouldn't have dreamed so many dreams." Sahil remembered them reminding him from time to time, "Don't become Americanized." What is Americanization?—he had always wondered. Assimilation? Sahil interrupted Jen, "Assimilation. What's so wrong about that? Why can't we all accept each other and live happily? Why does race matter so much? And religion..."

Sahil watched Jen taking a silent but deep breath. Why did he always ask her the questions that she had every right to be asking him? Over the many years they spent together—in middle school, high school, college, and now the university, Jen had taught him how to dream, and Sahil taught her how not to expect those dreams to come true. Jen had learned her lesson well. They loved and dreamed with full knowledge of reality. Forever wasn't part of the plan. It was only a matter of time. And the time had finally arrived. Sahil wondered if he truly loved her; if he did, could he be as blind to her emotions as he is trying to be? He continued with his torture and made her go down the list one last time- the list of reasons why they should not be together. She cupped a handful of sand, "Your parents are just not ready to let go of their own culture, that even in a foreign land, they want to preserve it, especially in their child. They have given you so

much love and they worked so hard for you. Now it's your turn to return." Her fingers spread slightly, and the tightly grasped grains of sand escaped through them as she let out a silent sigh. Jen's own parents had divorced when she was ten. She says she remembers her father, only the sharp stubble on his face, that too, only vaguely. She now lives with her mother and her mother's boyfriend in a two-bedroom apartment that reeks of cheap beer. She has her own room, which is her second heaven on earth, following closely behind her ultimate paradise—the beach, during sunset, with Sahil at her side. She sometimes admitted to Sahil that she was jealous of him. He does not see any reason for that; in fact, sometimes, he is secretly jealous of her. Sometimes. At times like now.

Now. Where is Jen now? At the beach, watching the sunset? Alone? He can't help wishing to hold her in his arms again and smell the freshness of her perfume, mixed with the saltiness of the breeze from the ocean. All he can smell now is his own sweat. Sahil feels a strong surge of disgust towards himself. What is he doing? Leaving Jen for this girl in braids whom he has never met before? Maybe he should turn to his side and tell his mom that he had slept with Jen, and that she is pregnant. What would mom say? He had a feeling she would stay calm, and keep smiling, and tell him that they can talk about it when they get home. Once at home, she would start screaming, and then calm down to tell him to tell her to get an abortion. But isn't it against the religion, Mom? He doesn't expect an answer. Jen isn't really pregnant, but they have made love many times. He still remembers her knees bending in his strong grip; he still remembers the smell...

"Look at her Sahil, isn't she pretty?" his mom's voice snatches him out of his memories and holds him down in the present reality. He glares at his mom, and then at the girl standing at the door. What is so pretty about her? He can't even see her in the dark, and he does not wish to

see her in light either. He knows that she won't look half as good as Jen does when the sun sets on her face. Doesn't she have a life? Why can't she study and try to establish herself? Why is she so eager to get married? She's just after my green card. These stupid Bengali girls; he suddenly feels the greatest urge to flick his green card at her face. Take it, and leave me alone. He does not attempt to hide the disgust and revulsion written all over his face, but removes his angry glare from her face. He knows he's being too harsh to her, but he can't help it. He feels like the goat ready to be sacrificed during Eid-ul-Adha. Just because a page in a monotheistic history tells the story of Hazrat Ibrahim (peace be upon him) deciding to sacrifice his son to fulfill his higher duty towards God than his lower duty towards his son, it is now the tradition to sacrifice cows, goats, etc. And now, history is repeating itself. Parents are sacrificing their sons and daughters. For whom? In the name of Allah?

"Hmm," Sahil grunts. His mother develops an even more exhilarated expression on her face, showing her excitement and relief to hear that her son agrees to the fact that the girl is pretty, as if it makes a difference to her, or anyone else. "I think he likes her," she exclaims, and pokes her husband with her elbow a bit too hard, and smiles at her new relatives. The sixteen pairs of eyes that were scanning the girl's face a few minutes ago now turn to his face that carries the most disgruntled expression. "Alhamdulillah," an old man with a beard, beaded garlands around his neck, and a wooden walking stick declares, "So it's settled, then. Let's have some sweets and celebrate!" Laughter and cheerful chatter fill the room again, and the atmosphere seems to become even more festive as they all stand up and start reaching for the many different kinds of sweets on the table, in the middle of the room.

Suddenly, the electricity returns, and the room is filled with brightness. The ceiling fan begins rotating, and Sahil feels a slap of breeze on his face and through his hair; he looks at the

girl again. Just as their eyes meet, she blows out the candle, turns around, and walks out of the door. Sahil suddenly feels an odd desire to follow her. But he remains sitting there, watching the sacrifice of his soul in the celebration around him. He sits there, alone, waiting for something. He can't remember what.

"I love you," the American stranger mutters under his breath.

The End