

Year 9 Short Story: Nilima

After all this time, he still knew his way home. When Ahmed stepped out of the airport, he was greeted with a gust of hot air. Even though it was autumn, the air didn't fail to feel like steam from a furnace. He left the airport at noon and got into a brightly coloured rickshaw. The roof of the rickshaw was made of only thin, red floral fabric that draped over the top and sides to shield his face from the blazing sun. After a while, he felt a shift in the roads and knew they were close to the town. The rough gravel roads turned to sandy dirt paths beneath him. Fields spread out in front of them as they drove, and the busy chatter from the airport quietened down. As he was tossed from side to side, he braced himself for a bumpy journey.

As they rode, he took in his surroundings. Things had changed. The once-isolated town came to life. Children squealed in the streets and played with their friends while their parents went from market stall to market stall. A few years ago, he would have found it unusual to see the market stalls busy and thriving. Eventually, he arrived at his village and paid the driver. The village had something different about it. He didn't recognise anyone, but he wasn't expecting to. Some things had stayed the same. Like the bustling at dinner time, with parents cooking and children terrorising the chickens and geese outside. Food wafted to his nose and tempted him just as it did when he was a child. Even if things were the same, something about the atmosphere had changed. When a car drove nearby, no one ran home or called their children hurriedly. There were no gunshots heard in the distance; the only thing you could hear was crickets chirping and mosquitos buzzing. For once, everyone's minds were free of fear, and everything was normal. What happened before was in the past; now there is peace.

Along the path, he met a small child—no older than 8—selling cheap bouquets. Marigolds that had obviously been taken from someone's garden were scattered about and wound in thread. Ahmed always enjoyed marigolds nature and the importance they held. When he was younger, his mother told him a story about how the musky smell of marigolds would guide dead spirits back to their homes. Thinking back on this memory made him buy one as a gift for the person he was visiting.

Walking further along, he could see the damage that the village faced. Old stores were burned down, with windows smashed out of their frames. Only the ruins of homes, which had been completely destroyed, remained. What he saw now was what normal was for him before. He walked further and further along until he reached what he called home. But it wasn't only his home now. He opened the towering black gate that stood in front of him and proceeded down the path. Familiar names caught his attention, and he stopped and stared for a while. Finally, he saw the person he was expecting. His father. 10 years had passed since he last saw him.

Even though he barely remembered his father, his mother made sure to tell stories about him whenever times were tough. Memories of their last day together flashed in his mind again. People rushed to leave their homes and say their goodbyes. Families sobbed together in this last moment before being split apart. Ahmed's family was no different. He, his mother, and his father embraced in a hug that seemed to last forever but still wasn't long enough. They hugged as if it was the last time they would see each other. He didn't understand what was happening at the time, but years later when they heard the news, everything made sense.

Replaying these memories in his head didn't make him feel at ease. In fact, he felt more nervous than he did when he left. But that didn't matter; he had to face his fears. As he got closer, he felt his stomach going in twists. He read the headstone. He wasn't ready to accept his father's death, but there he was, standing before him. 6 feet never felt so far. He had the life his childhood self would have dreamed of. But at what cost? Tears came to his eyes, but he knew that his father didn't die for no reason. He died for his people. He died for his family. Kneeling down, Ahmed placed the marigolds at the base of the headstone. The bright orange lit up his father's grave among the dull surroundings of the graveyard. Suddenly, the air felt colder, but it wasn't an unsettling cold. Although the air was still hot, it was not as scalding as before. The slightly warm feeling in the air was like being hugged by someone, comforting him in his time of need.

He knew that he wouldn't need the marigolds for his father to return. After all this time, he still knew his way home.