

Creative Writing Essay for Non-Native Speaker of English - First Place

Shamsi

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Had you passed him by on the streets, you'd have thought Shamsi was an ordinary, lanky looking fellow. Had you passed him by on the streets, Shamsi was the type of man your eyes would lock onto for less than a second before your short-term memory filtered him out of your brain as soon as he was out of sight. He was a blur in the sea of people you saw daily; a silhouette you couldn't really discern into its specific features. But of course, Shamsi was no ordinary being. For as long as he could remember, he'd possessed a gift or curse- he didn't know which of the two it was at times- to read people's minds.

The first memory he had of this unusual trait was from when he was around six. It was his first day of kindergarten and his soon-to-be best friend, Maha, had caught his attention with her out-of-tune singing of Rockabye Baby. He'd been observing her for a while when he came to the realization that her lips weren't actually moving. Before he'd had time to comprehend the phenomenon, Maha's thoughts began to switch haphazardly from what her homeroom teacher might be like to how she wasn't satisfied with the ending of the episode of Pokemon she'd seen last night.

Seeing this as an opening for conversation, Shamsi said, "I didn't like the ending either. How could they end the episode in the middle of Ash's battle like that? I couldn't stop thinking about it all night." Maha's eyes widened in surprise, yet her response was so casual that one might think that it wasn't the first time someone had read her mind. Perhaps it was at this very moment that Shamsi subconsciously decided that he could trust this girl and confide in her. The school bell rang, and they immersed into a deep conversation about the supposed outcome of the show as they walked to assembly together.

With the passage of time, Shamsi got used to the idea of being able to penetrate the one thing human beings believed was their safe haven: their mind. Possession of this ability had its pros and cons, particularly now that he had reached the age of twenty-three years. By asking his

teachers and professors the right questions, he'd been able to gain insight into possible exam questions. He'd had his share of "luck" with girls because unlike most men, he somehow always knew what they wanted even if it was never said out loud.

On the other hand, the downside had been that he'd matured much faster than most of the children his age. Because he could see past the duality of the adults around him and the lies they uttered almost effortlessly early on, Shamsi had been forced to grow up ahead of time.

As he had entered his teens, it had become increasingly difficult not to lash out at someone because of what they were thinking. The overworked engine of teenage minds induced a constant background noise in his brain and just being around people was a burden for him until he eventually learned to manipulate his power so as to improve his situation. With the right amount of focus on an inanimate object, he could lower the volume of the buzz. Singling out one person and concentrating on them alone had the same affect on the surrounding thoughts.

Although he'd used his mind-reading powers to give himself the upper hand where convenient in life, Shamsi had never really thought about manifesting his powers for the greater good. And why would he? He didn't feel he owed the world anything. Being born at the cost of his mother's life and spending the first seventeen years of his own life in the inferno that was his stepmother's house didn't exactly infuse any empathetic qualities in him. Quite honestly, Shamsi didn't even know why this ability had been bestowed upon him in the first place. It wasn't like he was an extremely pious man, overflowing with wisdom that could use to set things in order on Earth. He lied when he had to and capitalized on his power in order to get out of things he felt were too discommodious for his taste, just like everyone else.

It was a typical Sunday and Shamsi was on his way to the local grocery store to pick up some essentials when he overheard something that made him cease momentarily. He didn't need to turn around to know that it was a thought and not something being said aloud. Dark thoughts were always kept inside to maintain the façade of innocence. *Naïve humans*, thought Shamsi.

Yeah, she looks like she won't cause much trouble. With that built, she shouldn't be able to resist much either. I'll just wait for her to get to the alley behind that abandoned steel factory. She usually uses that route when she's late, anyways.

Silence. Shamsi thought he might be reconsidering.

"Anwar, meet me at the alley behind Fire Steels. Be ready in 5 minutes."

Guess not.

Before he continued along his intended path, Shamsi turned his head to get a brief look at the face of the man who was about to ruin some girl's Sunday.

A few days later, when he was standing in the kitchen waiting for his coffee to boil and scrolling through the Dawn News website, Shamsi's eyes set on a photo that popped up underneath the headline "Young Woman Missing from the Streets of Valencia Town." He felt his knees buckle and his breathing stopped. A sense of dread swept over him as he began to read:

“A frantic search is underway for Maha Khan, who has been missing since Sunday, 20th September, 2015. She was last seen by her sister on her way to attend the parent-teacher conference at Bright Learners Primary School, where she taught as a 3rd grade Math teacher. The school reported that she never attended the conference, indicating that she went missing whilst walking to work. Police officers from Lahore Police Station have begun investigating possible leads. Maha was described as a fair, twenty three year old woman having a height of 160 cm, weighing around 50kg and possessing brown, wavy hair. She was last seen wearing a pink shalwar kameez in the Valencia Town market area.”

He didn't have the strength to read any further. Panic stricken, he tried to envision the face he'd seen that day. Brown male, slightly taller than him, lean, clean shaven, and brown eyes, possibly upturned. What else? He began to pound the side of his temple with his fist in attempt to force the remaining memories out. Shamsi knew that this was all his fault. Had he not ignored the thoughts he'd heard; had he reported it to someone or even called Maha and stopped her from taking that route...

A scream of desperation escaped his lungs. He had to find her. Shamsi pulled himself together and bolted out the door, running to Fine Steels as fast as his legs could carry him.

Abandoned was an understatement for the interior condition of the warehouse. Worn out and obsolete machinery piled with layers upon layers of dust lay scattered. The musty smell coming from mold and mildew accumulated in broken waterpipes filled the air. Shamsi began his frenzied search for any sign of human inhabitation. If he couldn't find them here, he'd file a report with the police. He'd give them his description of the convict along with the accomplice's name. He wasn't sure what good information of a common first name and a vague description that could fit most middle-aged men would do, though. If only he'd stuck around a while longer, he might have heard something of actual value.

He continued his hunt, but the place seemed untouched. She wasn't here. Shamsi had seen murder documentaries on TV before and knew that they'd probably taken her to a more permanent residence where her screams would do her no good. Seeing that the front gate was in closer proximity than the back door which he had entered from, he decided to exit from there. Just as he pushed open one of the gates, the influx of light made him catch something in his peripheral vision. Amidst the browns and greys of the warehouse lay something that appeared out of place. A pink scarf. As he stepped closer, Shamsi's eyes were drawn to the body shriveled up behind the concrete pillar. There was no rise and fall in her chest and dried-up blood had amalgamated in several dents in her forehead. Taking the scarf he'd spotted before, Shamsi lay it over the body, covering her somber-looking face and wept in silence.

Maybe it was the guilt for which he was trying to compensate. Maybe it was the realization that he hadn't been able to use his worthless being to protect the one constant in his life. Or maybe it was the epiphany that you don't know the pain of another until it befalls you. Whatever it was, it had ultimately made Shamsi look at his power in a renewed way.

Months after finding Maha's body, Shamsi gathered the courage to confess at the police station, saying he could read minds and intended to use it to help law enforcement. They'd laughed in his face, of course, saying that he was a magician, a trickster who wanted to be entertained. But Shamsi was adamant. He kept returning with new ways to prove the authenticity of his capabilities, but it was another year before they were convinced enough to take him into the Criminal Investigation Department, wherein he served as their personal, fool-proof lie detector. They didn't rely on him solely, though, because justice required proof. But whatever contribution he could make, he would. Although Shamsi made international headlines for weeks on end and was given countless opportunities to use his ability to acquire fame and fortune, he never utilized them, for he did not consider himself a hero. He was merely serving his penance; a price he would willingly continue to pay for as long as he lived.