



Mijwaan

A short story by
Saaleha Idrees Bamjee

Mijwaan, a short story

© Saaleha Idrees Bamjee

Cover photograph: Dominic Morel

The ginger biscuits would just have to be the buffer. There was no way she could have the chocolate dipped ones right next to the butter biscuits. It was muggy in the kitchen and the coating had already begun to soften. They would leave crude skid marks on the lighter-coloured biscuits.

Really ugly stains. Zeenat knew all about those.

A slight tremor from her hands almost cast the contents of the plate to a game of hopscotch on the smooth tiles. She leaned on the kitchen counter, her palms drawing equilibrium from the cold granite.

She needed just a few seconds to pick up the millions of little beads that had spilt all over the floor of her mind and begun to jab into the backs of her eyeballs.

A few seconds of macro-staring into the nothing of biscuit crumbs, and Zeenat was fine. She picked up the plate and walked towards the lounge, streaming worst-case scenarios with each step.

There really was no easy way tell her daughter that the man who'd come to ask for her hand may very well be her own brother.



“Good family. Good boy. We will not hear anything of this. Bis!” Her father turned away and her vision filled with his back turned to her. She could not remember a time when it didn't. Her sister Nisa was the timidly acquiescent one; eyes always downcast, -jee Ma, jee Pa- in that kowtow caricature that drubbed Zeenat's nerves.

Her mother wouldn't show face to her either. Everything was already arranged. The degs had been hauled out, the khalas had already cleaned all the chickens. Everyone knew Zeenat was flighty

and four-minded. This was best for her; a good family, a good boy. It would sweep out her nasaarah fancies. Imagine, she wanted to bring home a white boy!

Zeenat sat in her room as the walls around her closed in to crush her ribs and the roof fell in on her head. It was just like what she'd learnt in madressah; the aadhaab of the kabr.

She even remembered the exact moment she died. She was hovering outside of herself, tethered to her shell by a silken thread. She saw her mother asking her something and her own empty head nodding consent. She could not get back in time.

And when she finally squeezed into the corners of herself she saw how her mother's brow was less a few lines. Could it be? A smile in those eyes; it had been a long time since Zeenat had seen that.

The Almighty was merciful, in His way. The white boy met what they usually call an untimely end; a freak accident at the factory where he worked as a welder. A beam fell on his head.

Zeenat mourned quietly, wishing it didn't feel as painful and as comical as it did. She didn't even love him. Not like the way she read that people loved. He was a plain and kind man, the first who'd ever spoken to her as if he really cared to hear about her ideas on the world. She simply enjoyed their conversations whenever he came in to her father's shop.

It was a mistake to tell Nisa about him. The very next day her mother ambushed her in the kitchen. Zeenat always had the devil in her. Her mother told everyone it was because she never listened to her warnings about playing near the fig trees at Maghrib time. Perhaps it was a type of possession, for Zeenat often took great pleasure in riling up her mother with flamboyant untruths. That was how a few conversations over a shop counter turned into midnight lovers

trysts and an elaborate plan to elope. Her mother's jaw fell off of its hinge. Zeenat had gone too far.

After cutting the sleeves off of all of Nisa's dresses, Zeenat fell onto her bed headfirst and vacillated between smothering herself with the pillow or the comforter. She woke to Nisa's wails and her mother's shrieking threats of dispatching her to Mia's Farm where they would beat the Shaytaan out of her. It was less than a week before the Ahmed's came to 'see' her.

The mother was meek, the father seemed kind and the boy, well he just seemed average. Polite enough and soft-spoken, Zeenat found the whole thing strangely bearable. That was enough for her parents. Zeenat was just a handkerchief pegged to a washing line while the wind had its way with her. A few phone calls, a few trousseau trips to town, a few awkward conversations between her and 'the boy'; and now she wished a beam would fall on her head.

Or she could run off with Ridwaan. Ridwaan. He boarded at her Auntie Khayroon's house. He was from some far-away farm town with a name she could never remember. He worked at some place in Jeppe and would often come to their house to drop off something from her aunt. He was really bad at pretending and Zeenat never missed the look he'd give her.

She knew that look. She'd read lots about that look and how girls could get into trouble because of it. Nisa thought Ridwaan was like something out of the film magazines. Poor Nisa, stupid and naïve, Zeenat knew her sister would have her heart broken at least ten times by five different people before she learnt anything of the ways of the world.

She did agree with Nisa on one thing though. Ridwaan was something of a looker, with those almost oriental eyes and cocky smirk.

While everyone busied themselves with wedding preparations, Zeenat slipped out of the house to look for him. He was in Aunty Khayroon's backyard, fixing a wheelbarrow.

Squinting up at her, he motioned his head towards the garden cottage he rented. Zeenat looked around the yard quickly, and flew into the cottage. It was only when she sat down on a milk crate to find herself again that she realised they'd barely exchanged one word. How could he have known what she wanted? Did all men just know? She started to feel something bitter rise up inside her. Guilt? Rebellion? She tried not to think too much of the Allah she dutifully prayed to. If there was such a thing as a necessary sin, wouldn't this be it? Tomorrow night, she would lie down with an almost-stranger, how would this be any different? At least this, what she was about to do, was on her own terms and not her parents. Before she died to herself, she needed to know she had lived for herself.

Ridwaan entered the room.

"It's not proper for a bride to be in a strange man's room."

"I couldn't give a fuck about propriety."

Zeenat was outside herself again, a bopping helium balloon strung to the arm of a fairground mannequin. She was the omniscient narrator and Zeenat and Ridwaan were the characters from a chapter in one of the novels she read while her mother and Nisa prattled on about stupid things like pastry dough.

It was over quicker than she'd ever read about. And no one had ever written about the burning. Or was that from the Jahannum she'd invited?

"Zeenat, let's get married. I know this one moulana who will do the nikah. We can go live in Cape Town. I have a bit of money put away."

Zeenat lunged for the bin at the table side, and proceeded, in one solid gush, to hurl the day's breakfast and lunch.

"I'm so sorry! I'll clean this. I'll take this outside. I don't feel well. I must go. I'm sorry Ridwaan. This was a big mistake. A huge mistake."



It would be 27 years before she saw those almost oriental eyes again. They were now in the face of a portly middle-aged man, who shifted his weight on her leather sofa and coughed to hide the rude noises the movement made. Next to him sat his portlier wife and their son Ismail, a boy her daughter had met at a business conference and who was now determined to make her part of his family.

If only you knew the half of it Issy-boy. Zeenat hoped that only sounded uncharacteristically loud in her head because everyone else was so quiet.

"Ridwaan, Feroza, please have some biscuits with your tea." As she dipped one of the chocolate-coated ones into her cup, Zeenat wondered why it had taken so long for Allah to begin punishing her.



Zeenat found Nisa crying in the cupboard of the room they shared. Nisa's paw-paw place, that's what Zeenat called it. Whenever Nisa was teased or scolded, she would creep in amongst the packets and bales of their mother's unsewn fabric and sponge her tears with the corners of her dupatta.

I should be the one crying in a cupboard.

“How Nisa? What’s wrong? Who’s troubling you now?” Nisa was incomprehensible when she was in one of these states. Zeenat could just about make out the words -ugly- -fat- -never- -get- -married. “Don’t be silly Nisa! You’re not ugly! A bit chubby, but that’s because you’re always eating the ghor out of the pantry.” Nisa responded with more unintelligible wailing. “Please Nisa. Stop crying. Mummy will think I’ve done something again.”

Nisa looked up at Zeenat with the big round brown eyes inherited from their mother, the only departure being that the matriarchs eyes never flooded in front of her children or husband. Nisa sucked back the fullness in her mouth and said the first clear sentence Zeenat heard from her all day.

“I want to be you Zeenat.”

Zeenat fell to her knees and clasped her sister’s clammy hands.

“No, you don’t. I’m a bad person Nisa. I’ve done a bad... I’ve done bad things. You’re nothing but good.”

“Good for nothing.” Nisa whimpered, her cheek cradled against a packet containing the scraps from the dresses her mother had sewn for Zeenat’s trousseau.

“I also want someone to like me enough to want to marry me. No one ever likes me. Even that Ridwaan. I see how he looks at you. And that Ayesha from the butcher. He never once looked at me like that.”

At the mention of his name, Zeenat felt a coldness unfurl in her stomach.

“Stop this Nisa. Ridwaan is not worthy of you. You’re a good person. You have a good heart. There are no demons in your shoes. You will get married and it will be to someone wonderful. You won’t be like me. I don’t even want this Nisa!”

Zeenat held Nisa close and tight. In the dark quiet of her sister's sanctuary, with Nisa's snot soaking into her shoulder, Zeenat cried for what she lost and was still to lose. It wasn't just about her virginity. Something about her decision to follow through on an impulse had altered her forever. A pyrrhic victory. She'd read that somewhere and it fitted.

Who did she spite, what did she achieve? She was still marrying *the boy* tomorrow. She couldn't leave with Ridwaan, if not for the scandal breaking her parents, she knew she'd be miserable with him. She'd be miserable anyway. She would not fight it.

With resignation steadying her, Zeenat lifted Nisa out of the cupboard and walked her to the bathroom to clean their faces and lift the pall of mourning. It was a wedding house after all!

The next day Aunty Khayroon came over to help set the tables and said that Ridwaan had left for home quite urgently, some family emergency, and asked for maaf that he could not attend the wedding. While Nisa had her mother's eyes, Zeenat got the poker face.

Soon, it was time for the nikah ceremony. Zeenat took to making shapes with the clouds while everyone fussed around her. It was only when she found herself being hugged furiously by her strangely glossy-eyed mother the Zeenat knew she was now a married woman.

The aunties led Iqbal in to sit with her. That was *the boy's* name. *Iqbal*. She had to start calling him something for the rest of their lives together.

When he smiled at her, Zeenat felt more wretched than ever.

If she was more present at her own wedding, Zeenat would have said that it passed by like any other unremarkable Indian Muslim wedding in Jo'burg in the 80s.

After the feeding and the bawdy small talk from elderly relatives and newly married cousins, Zeenat was led to her mother's room where she sat on the bed in her heavy dress and greeted all her relatives with customary eye rain.

Despite the spectacle of it all, she wanted to loop the scene infinitely.

But it was time to leave with Iqbal.



She often wished that the man she married was a disgusting tyrant who beat and belittled her and slept around. She would have deserved that. She didn't deserve Iqbal.

Big-hearted, warm-natured, easy-going Iqbal.

In her irreverent moments she wondered if he could be an incarnation of Ayub, so patient he was to put up with her many episodes in the early months of their marriage.

When her pregnancy became apparent, he was even more attentive and loving while Zeenat just felt bereft. She knew there was a very real possibility that the child may not be Iqbal's.

She took to her musallah with an insane ferocity, remembering desperately the Allah she once tried to forget. When her forehead began to bruise from her penance, she prayed even harder, convinced that the larger the mark on her head, the smaller the stains on her insides. She stopped accepting invites to suppers and weddings; pesky things disrupting her conversations with Allah. When visitors came to the house they would find her in prolonged prostration, without even an acknowledgement of their presence.

Her behaviour became irrational. Her family and in-laws were convinced there was a jinn possession at play. They brought over the india moulanas and people who could communicate with the fire-born. But Zeenat just kept on praying.

And as unwavering as she was, so too was Iqbal. Kind, sweet Iqbal. He would change the alarm clocks Zeenat set for 1 AM so that she'd sleep through the most part of the night and only awake for the Fajr prayer. He sneaked in the supplements into her meals and refused to move from the table until she'd cleared her plate.

He cemented himself to her bedside during the labour and only moved to follow the nurses to make sure Shakira was tagged properly and safe in her cot.

When Zeenat held her baby girl for the first time, she immediately inspected the hour-old face. There was nothing of Ridwaan.

Zeenat read a few verses of the Quran softly and blew over her baby. She handed Shakira back to Iqbal and closed her eyes. The inside of her lids no longer felt like leaded sandpaper and she slept better than she did in a long time.

But, the relief was fleeting. Over they growing years, she'd plot her daughter's features, looking out for the incriminating, double-checking the trick of light that once made the eyes look a bit curved at the corners.

But she never found it. Shakira was the image of her mother. So much so, it didn't even seem that Iqbal had any hand in the matter. It was almost as if Zeenat's importunate pleas had rendered a miracle. An immaculate conception to her mind, the fruit of forgiveness. So while Zeenat did still pray regularly, it was with a little less fervour and the marks on her forehead faded.



Now, her forehead throbbed as she scanned over the bodies wrinkling the leather on the couches in her lounge.

“Don’t you worry about Shakira, Zeenat. It’s also good that girls these days are so independent and busy with their careers. I’ll teach Shakira everything. In our family, we’re not so fussy about cooking.” Feroza looked every bit a woman who wasn’t fussy about eating.

Bite it back Zeenat. It wasn’t unusual for her to hear her ten-years-dead mother’s admonishments.

“Well, our Shakira is quite capable in that sense when she wants to be,” Zeenat said.

Shakira’s cough distracted the lioness from attacking her cub’s aggressor. Now that she was an adult in her own right, Shakira had much of her late nani’s mind and Zeenat sometimes felt the victim of a haunting.

Is this really what her daughter wanted; a lifetime with a morose looking boy and his unimaginatively typecast mother? Marriages are not built on dhal ghos. Not anymore, anyway.

Where did Ridwaan find this Feroza? He never came across as the settling kind; him of the easy smile and easy everything. Perhaps he too had realised not too late in his life that it was better to be safe than alone. He’d changed in more ways than that, Zeenat surveyed.

The cocky grin had long been suffocated by the generous shrubbery framing his mouth, extending out towards his chest. He’d picked up weight. Quite a bit of weight.

She shot a look at Iqbal. Trim, groomed and proper. *Score 1 Zeenat.*

But for all of Ridwaan's hirsute and latitudinal transformations, there was one part of him that took her right back to that damned afternoon.

Those almost-oriental eyes belonged on a twenty-three-year-old.

Eyes that showed not even a scratch of recognition when she returned his salaam and asked if he'd like a bit of masala in his tea. He was either kicking down the same demons she was or he really, genuinely, didn't recognise her.

If there was indeed an Armageddon behind those eyes, she hoped it kept him too occupied to count back the years and come to his own unsettling conclusion.



On those Sundays in simpler times, she'd wake to Nisa's toes tickling her ear. It followed invariably that her mother would toss off the gurdus, to expose the yinyang of their economy to the elements of raw morning and her not so dulcet tones.

"Get up you lazy things! Sunday! Mijwaan aawaano!"

"But he comes every Sunday Ma!"

It was not long before little Zeenat and littler Nisa realised that Mijwaan was not a specific person, but encompassed a whole range of visiting aunties, uncles and cousins they had to get the house neat in time for. Zeenat had never known a Sunday without a steady stream of family washing through their home on tides of tea and cold drink.

The families of Fifth street were all related by some link or two. Most shared a communal yard and those who didn't, lived close

enough to be just a few doors away. This meant that anyone's guests were hosted by the entire neighbourhood.

And it was among the flotsam of fried samoosas that Zeenat got to know all her cousins and their cousins and their cousins. These were her friends and cohorts. She holidayed at their homes in those bundu towns one usually drove through to get to somewhere that mattered, and she wrote letters to them when she returned home.

It didn't matter if it was the half-sister of a third cousin related by marriage, everyone was family and that bond was concrete and came with obligation.

That was how Ridwaan ended up boarding at Auntie Khayroon's. A tale followed him and his bags to Fifth street; a whispered bit of sordidness involving the young wife of a certain well-to-do back home. As the son of Khayroon's second cousin's husband's nephew, she couldn't refuse him a roof. Khayroon hoped the local girls would have better sense and heavier skirts.



A few months after her wedding, Zeenat had heard from Auntie Khayroon's daughter-in-law that Ridwaan had crossed over the seas to the U.K to work in a biscuit factory his uncle owned.

Some time after, she was told he was planning to return to South Africa and settle in Cape Town. News of him petered off as the bonds lost their stretch to passing years and families relocating to suburbs many kilometres off from Papa Seedat sneezing and Uncle Joe saying yarhamukallah from four doors away.

In families trying to put more space around them, there was no preventing the spaces that had sprung up between them. No one vis-

ited as often anymore. The catch-up phone calls dried up and weddings, births and deaths afforded the only times to reconnect.

That Zeenat had become something of a recluse didn't help things along either. But that was out of her own sense of shame, what excuse did other people have?

Now, she slept in on Sundays; a luxury even her late mother had begun to appreciate in her advancing years.



When Shakira told her that Ismail's parents would be coming over to visit on Sunday afternoon, Zeenat made sure she greeted the morning in good time.

Her ear tingled uncomfortably from an accidentally slept-on folded pinna. This made her think of Nisa and her cheese-curl toes. She would call her sister after the visit. As adults, they made better friends.

She'd once confided in Nisa her concerns about Shakira . Her daughter never spoke about boys. No one called the house. There were no furtive midnight conversations on her cellphone. No one ever picked her up from a few blocks down so that her parents wouldn't see.

And it was not that they were too strict with their daughter. They believed they'd raised her with a decency and common sense that often eluded her peers. Shakira was not denied any freedoms. She just wasn't interested.

"Nisa, do you think Shakira could be gay?"

"Hai, don't say such things."

Zeenat was used to living by tip-toe between eggshells. It did seem Allah had let her off too easy that time; a lesbian daughter would've been rather fitting.



Shakira and Ismail exchanged intermittent glances that made Zeenat feel like a dirty voyeur.

Once, in awkward pre-teenage, she and Nisa shared a brief, aghast giggle when Ayesha from the butcher told them that her parents still did it. It used to be all so very eww and yuck back but oh look at her now — just pass the age her mother had been then— having done and done and still doing.

To think of her child as a sexual entity shifted the colour-fill from her outlines in much the same way when as a teenager she chanced upon her parents kissing.

But then, what had surprised her more, was that there had been such warmth between two people she'd always thought of as having been forced upon each other.

Her second intrusion was a witting decision to read Shakira's diary. Zeenat's pockets had just about split from all the neuroses she carried. A mother's worry trumped boundaries.

She scanned the pages for keywords, not wanting to read too deeply and steal even more from her daughter.

Her eyes latched onto a name. *Shameem*. And she found it on every other page after that and then on almost every line. There had been a Shameem in Zeenat's Standard Nine class. At the all-girl school.

A sharp pain jerked her away from the pages. She didn't realise she'd been grinding on her own teeth. She read on. "I can't believe I fell for it. All his dumb lies."

His. Not Her.

Zeenat pinched her own ears for failing her daughter. She cursed this Shameem for bringing Shakira pain and closed the diary. After that, she only worried for her daughter's heart. Not who it belonged to, but how it was received.

And Ismail seemed a gracious and grateful recipient. Zeenat just had to stare as her daughter stared at Ismail who stared back. This was all so very novel and sweet. But for the pachyderm balancing the tea tray on its trunk.

Iqbal and Ridwaan were deep into shoptalk. Feroza shared her recipe for Melting Moments biscuits between enthusiastic mouthfuls of confectionary being denied the same courtesy. She seemed a great fan of her own words and was too taken by the crumbs to notice Zeenat's distraction.

Would it be so awfully wrong if she just sewed her mouth and guilt shut? There was the chance that Shakira and Ismail did not share any genes. They didn't look like brother and sister. Ismail had his mother's pop of a nose and her small eyes. He was also what she'd once heard described as soft in the middle, and she knew it was the type of build that would go to portly pot in advancing years. Much like what had happened with his father. But still, he had a pleasant face; friendly and open and full of unabashed admiration for her daughter.

Zeenat could easily just never say anything to anyone. No one had to know. Not Iqbal. Not Shakira. It didn't seem as if Ridwaan had made the connection. And even if he did, wouldn't he have as much to lose? She could lie about Zeenat's birth details.

What good were men with dates anyway right? Besides, she could panel-beat the truth into anything.

But what if, what if, what if they were half-siblings? Could she live with herself, live with her Allah or without Him knowing she was facilitating her daughter's unwitting acts of incest. What if they had children and something went wrong? She couldn't turn blood into water. And then everyone would know what she'd done, twice over. *Please Allah, a heart attack would be just perfect right now...*

"So Zeenat, Iqbal tells me you're of the Fifth street Khariwalla's. I knew the family well. Very well." It was the first full sentence Ridwaan had directed to her since they sat down for tea.

She looked up from her cup and into his eyes.

He knew.



There was the drawn out skid of porcelain on porcelain. Zeenat's hand caught the cup in the middle of its trajectory towards the tiles. Deftness in the midst of her doomsday. Now if only she could catch her world in time.

"Sjoe, that was a close one. Maaf, Ridwaan, you were saying?" The ceiling started to crack and the room began to fill with a cloud of fine plaster.

"Yes, the Khariwallas. I knew your uncle Boeta and your cousins well. They used to come visit us in Orries very often for the mosque collections. Good man Uncle Boeta was, innalillahi wainailayhiraa-jjun. I don't think I ever met your parents though."

Zeenat fought back the incredulity from creasing up her face. She never knew Ridwaan to be this calculating.

Ah well, she probably deserved it. *Let's play this ball where it lies then.*

“Oh, I thought you must've bumped into him around our neighbourhood. Weren't you boarding at my Aunty Khayroon Makra's place?”

“Ah ha! you see Feroza, all these years and it still happens,” Ridwaan clapped his hands together in fierce mirth, the hairy cymbals setting off more reverberations to bring down chunks of Zeenat's home.

Her tongue was heavy with the taste of chalk. She wanted this strangeness to leave her house.

Enough Allah, please.

“You must be talking about my cousin Ridwaan,” Ridwaan said.

Zeenat's voice didn't waiver, she was more her mother than she thought. “Your cousin Ridwaan?”

The years had not been kind to this man's mind.

“Yes, it was quite the joke of Orries. Our mothers are sisters and our fathers are brothers. You know cousins and their dozens eh? I was born first and my mother liked the name Ridwaan, and then when my cousin came along, my khala liked the name too and my mother didn't mind. There was always some confusion while we were growing up. But while Ridwaan was always getting into trouble, I was the one helping him to get out of it. It didn't help that we looked similar, both have the Ghora eyes, that's my mother's side of the family.”

His cousin. The tinnitus in Zeenat's ears persisted and she reached to pour more tea from the kettle.

“Quite sad though. We haven’t seen Ridwaan in years. He got a bit lost that guy. Allah keep him safe,” Ridwaan said. The Inshallah Ameen’s filled the seconds where oxygen flooded into Zeenat’s brain.

Allah! Forgive me, but this was just mean.

The years of question shrank away from her and she allowed her shoulders to relax.

Zeenat popped a chocolate biscuit in her mouth. The coating was soft and smudged the corners of her lips. She took her time to wipe her mouth, it was a good biscuit.

And finally, Feroza having had her fill of the Melting Moments put her tea cup aside and said, “You know Zeenat, I must say Shakira looks so much like you!”

Zeenat smiled, “Just don’t tell her we look like sisters. Shakira doesn’t like that.”

Shakira didn’t hear her mother. She and Ismail were still engrossed in their conversation of glances.

Feroza said, “But Shakira definitely has her father’s eyes.”

Zeenat looked from her daughter to her husband.

Reaching for another chocolate biscuit, she said, “Yes, she certainly does.”



Glossary

Bis: *“Enough!”*

Nasaarah: *Non-believer*

Aadhaab of the Kabr: *Punishment in the grave*

Maghrib: *The time of the prayer just after sunset*

Mias Farm: *A religious boarding school*

Dupatta: *A long head scarf*

Ghor: *Molasses/Jaggery*

Ayub: *The Arabic name for the Prophet Job*

Musallah: *Prayer mat*

Dhal Ghos: *A type of Indian curry made with meat and lentils*

Gudru: *A heavy duvet made in India*

Mijwaan aawano: *“Visitors are coming.”*

Yarhamukallah: *A blessing said after someone sneezes.*

Innalillahi wainailayhiraajun: *A short prayer said after mentioning or on hearing about those who have passed on.*

Khala: *Mother’s sister*

Inshallah: *If Allah Wills.*