

Privilegium

While traveling alone for the first time to the gas station in Starkville, Mississippi, I waited for my mother's voice to echo through the phone, telling me to return, telling me the streets were dangerous. I kept my hand in my pocket the whole time, ready for a police car to roll up beside me and an officer to reach toward me with his hand out. The car passed me by, and the officer waved; I bought my Gatorade and walked back home under an intense glare of the sun. Then I realized I had not traveled to a new country, but a different realm of existence.

I was ten years old when I saw a police officer rob an innocent couple walking down a street in Karachi, Pakistan. I do not recall the month or the name of the street, but I do remember the geometry of the moment as though it had just happened. The woman's voice was frail, pleading with the laws of this city that were supposedly just. The officer's uniform stood out against the dirty road, and he slipped the stolen cash into his pocket with the boredom of a man who would take hundreds more. The system of justice in the city I lived in hadn't just failed its people; it had sworn itself to corruption and darkness. The streets were dirty and dangerous, and danger was as natural as the monsoon season. You did not ask when it would come; you simply learned to bring your umbrella everywhere you went.

But Karachi wasn't just the grime and the monsoon rains; it was biryani, rich with the scent of turmeric. Nihari simmered for hours and pulao was steamed on Eid with cousins laughing over plates of food, while the Adhan rang out across the city, rolling into the crooked alleys like dust. It was the neighbors who treated your home as an extension of theirs, and the family traditions that felt older than the stars, binding you to a Thursday evening as if it were a holy day. The people made you feel as though you were home just from breathing the same heavy, salty air as them. Home is not a physical location there, but a wavelength. Everyone tuned in.

In December 2022, we landed in South Dakota. The atmosphere was different. It was clean, and there was space. Space, honesty, and freedom, and people looked you in the eye when they talked to you. They held doors for you; said please and thank you, with professionalism that struck me as odd since I was used to elbowing my way through life. Even strangers were helpful without it costing them anything. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the price to come due for this kindness. It never did.

By June 2023, we had transferred to Starkville, Mississippi, and I had embarked on my true journey. School was a battleground, and the language barrier stood between the other kids and me like frozen glass, keeping them all safe. I saw them but couldn't reach them. I didn't know the unspoken rules, the jokes, the clothes, the tables in the cafeteria. I tried for months to fold myself into a shape that would fit, to mute parts of myself so I wouldn't stick out. I needed to fit in.

What saved me was the thing that reminded me I was not one of them. The cooking of my mother. When she made biryani in the kitchen of our home in Mississippi, the scent of cumin, cardamom, and fried onions filled the room, and for a moment, I wasn't in a strange land. I was in the familiar part of my old world, the part that had loved me first. I found my salvation in food, in the knowledge that I could hold home inside of me, wherever I went. Then I met others who had come from Pakistan and now lived in Mississippi. They fed my family without asking why, and we sat in their living rooms and ate with our hands and spoke Urdu until my shoulders dropped from my ears. I realized then that home is not a place. It's an act of recognition. They made me feel like home. In this generosity, I learned that the Karachi I loved was not gone. It only traveled with me.

But the greatest change did not happen at the dinner table or in the classroom. It happened on my walk to the gas station and the many trips after, when my mother did not call me back, did not tell me the streets were dangerous, because they weren't. In Karachi, it was a negotiation with your safety: going out alone. Here, it was walking. I had traveled across oceans and across cultures, but this was the most remarkable journey I had ever made. I understood, with the fullness of my being, that I was privileged, but not in the way people usually are. Privilegium, it is said in Latin, meaning a private law, a set of rules particular to me. Not that I had it easy, but that I had a right to move through the world without my life being the price. I could take walks without my mother instructing me, without her voice trembling with the knowledge that an innocent boy on the street could be taken by authorities. That was when I became someone else.

The destination of my journey was meant to be America. A green card. A new address. A safer life. But the destination was only a door. The journey was the terror of the corrupt officer stealing money in Karachi, and the relief as I saw the wave of Mississippi officers. It was the loneliness of not yet speaking the language, and finding my voice again in a stranger's living room. It was the loss of the streets that had raised me, and the finding of streets that did not demand a ransom for my presence. It was the realization that "fair" did not mean the world gave you what you wanted, but that it gave the innocent the chance to live their version of a perfect life, and no one with a badge would steal it from them.

I am still traveling. I am still between two worlds, still learning to translate, still missing the food and the warmth of a place I may never have again. But I no longer believe that a journey ends at its destination. I arrived in America, yes. But I am still learning to be a man who can hold my old home and my new one without breaking. I am still learning that safety comes not in the absence of danger but in having dignity. I am still learning that the dirty and dangerous streets of my childhood taught me what to value now that I have it. The destination is a country. The journey is a boy who learned step by step that he was allowed to take up space.