

## Sahib Nazari

### Mr Goes

There are three kinds of students: the a-graders, the ones who just want to pass, and the ones who try not to fail.

His name was Noor. He was the third kind.

One year after the September 11 attack on World Trade Center and our discussions in the classroom had heated up; the students jumped onto terrorism and extremism no matter the subject matter. Noor was moderately religious, unlike the rest of the anti-West bunch. He loved English language but wasn't intelligent or hardworking. A good actor maybe but a better impersonator. His favourite way to pass time was to imitate the CNN broadcasters who broke the news of the plane hijacks and the destruction of the World Trade Centre. He'd open his arms up like the wings of an airplane and produce a loud, surreal sound effect with his mouth as if a plane was about to hit a structure and crash. He knew those few lines by heart and whenever he couldn't think of anything else to say during a discussion, he'd do CNN. This made the students laugh, and most of the time, the teachers too.

Noor tried hard in class but mostly without thinking. His black bottomless eyes bewildered teachers and students but his over-confidence was the reason he always raised his hand before anyone else and mostly he answered the question incorrectly. Noor wasn't bright enough for someone named Noor – which means *light*.

Once a week, he covered his six-foot skinny frame with a pair of blue jeans and a white shirt which suited him too but in the dust and dirt and the dense and deadly smoke of Quetta city, his shirt collar turned from white to yellow in no time. He'd worn-out the blue jeans to the point that it wasn't fair to call them blue anymore; clean-shaven, a dark brown complexion, his dense black hair was often dripping with excessive hair-oil and would be covered in a layer of dust whenever he returned from lunchbreak. His Elvis sideburns running down the length of his over-defined cheekbones made his oval face look abnormal.

The advanced class consisted of ten Pashtun and four Baloch students. I stood out as the only Hazara ethnic. The English language academy had more than a thousand students in any given semester. Four days a week, four hours a day, the academy tried to teach comprehensive English to anyone within a year provided they spoke Urdu. The school had developed their own grammar rules booklets with set teaching methodologies and Urdu language translation. Since Urdu was and still is the official language of Pakistan, the majority of the multi-ethnic population residing in the mountainous city can read, write and speak it.

I hated the open-air discussion classes sitting on those dew-covered wooden benches under the shed of the ancient wild-berry tree. I was a good speaker but my classmates despised me during grammar and writing sessions. I made friends with some students but never Noor. Our friendship never took off so we remained just two classmates like two wild berries on a single branch, growing side by side.

The academy believed in upbringing home-grown teachers. A couple of weeks before the end of our advanced diploma, a delegate of teachers visited our class to talk about the three-day teacher training workshop. I signed up. So did Noor.

The seminar room was full of young and ageing hopefuls. Of course, the majority of the twenty students were either ethnic Baloch or Pashtun. Once again, I was the only Hazara. We learned that the end of the first day the number of students would be cut down by half and five students would remain by the end of the second. Only three would go on to become trainee teachers.

The overweight instructor was filling up the blackboard when Noor's shadowy figure entered the room in his jeans and white shirt. His hair oil reflected in the dim orange light as he looked at me without moving a facial muscle and sat down in the row in front. For the first quarter of an hour, we watched as the plump instructor demonstrated his teaching skills. He dropped the chalk twice during the practice session and every time he bent down to pick it up, his bald octagon head bounced the light back towards the ceiling like a mirror under the sun.

Then it was the students' turn to demonstrate their teaching skills backed up by a solid fifteen minutes teaching experience. Each student had to teach a piece of grammar already written on the blackboard. Despite the fact I was sitting in the third row, the instructor's finger never stopped at me. To him I was invisible. Maybe it was my small frame or his pathetic favouritism but nevertheless, it was magical. For the rest of the session I witnessed actors parroting and parrots acting and the instructor saying 'very good' 'well done' 'excellent' yet I did not see a teacher, not in any of them nor in my aloof and introverted self.

When the instructor pointed at Noor, I smiled. He stood up, overdosing on over-confidence yet fully functional, and walked to the front of the room. He took the piece of chalk from the instructor. I knew Noor would do something special, something no teacher had ever done before.

'Does she goes to school?' His loud over-confident voice echoed followed by the Urdu translation.

Someone from the back of the room shouted, 'Does she *go* to school?'

Noor ignored the comment — and carried on not looking the white lines on the blackboard, 'No, she does not goes to school.'

'... *go* to school,' another voice echoed but Noor continued beating about the bush.

'You idiot,' said yet another voice.

But Noor couldn't stop spreading his light or his knowledge. In a low voice I said *Mr. Goes* to myself and smiled. But the instructor heard me. He turned and, pointing with his chalked-up plump finger, said: 'Hazara, I know what the word *goes* means in your language.' I smiled and shrugged. The instructor got up from his seat and walked to Noor. 'Okay Mr. Goes, that's about enough.' The students kept laughing as Noor went back to his seat. In Hazaragi language the word pronounced as *goes* means fart.

By the end of the day, every student was calling Noor Mr. Goes. As we waited outside for the top ten lists watching the rest of the staff play badminton, I saw Noor

and another staff member having a conversation with the head of the academy, who was waving his racket around – a massive middle-aged man with a receding hairline who greeted every student that passed by him. The list was up. Noor's name was in the top ten. So was mine.

The second day of the workshop focused on speaking and class management skills. As expected, the instructor, with his big brown eyes, couldn't see me; not even with a torch. He was quite the opposite of Noor. Dark on the inside. Noor was the same inside and out – that was the only thing positive about him. During the session, Noor attracted the most attention. Two minutes into his speaking and class management, he ran flat on ideas so of course he did his CNN manoeuvre, with the plane and the wings and the sound effect and the accent. The instructor and the students laughed so hard, the seminar room echoed. Classic.

During the break Noor was having tea while chatting with the head of the academy and the staff member from the previous day. My turn came last, at the end. No one cared. At the end of the second day, when the results were up, Noor and I both had made the list again. Top five. After the final day of the workshop, we were informed that we had to come back the following week to find out who had made it as the newest trainee teachers. I didn't make it.

Three weeks later, arriving to collect my diploma, I stopped by the academy. The classes were packed and the chirping of the students buzzed in my ears like a flock of birds gathering on a tree before sunset. The staffroom was on the right side of the entrance gate. A large glass window occupied the wall overlooking the mighty wild-berry in the distance where students were having a heated discussion. A portrait of the founder of Pakistan – with the traditional tilted hat over his head – hung on the wall behind the ginormous reception desk positioned opposite the glass window. I declared the purpose of my visit and I was told to wait. I sat down by the window watching the students chanting, the wild-berry listening, enjoying the mild breeze.

When I came out of the staff room looking at my diploma, in the short distance, my eyes fell upon a class under the shade of the mighty wild-berry. A teacher was sitting on a wooden chair with his back towards me. When I was midway between the wild-berry and the exit, I stopped to have a last look at the academy, and the wild-berry, and the living memories. A few students looked over at me. So their teacher also tilted his head to see what was going on – a bad idea – he stumbled, almost fell off his chair then steadied himself in the nick of time. In the rush, his notebook fell on the floor but he couldn't care less. He stood up like a soldier does upon seeing his superior. A subconscious kick which he regretted as soon as he was on his feet. He blinked his eyes multiple times before wiping the sweat off his temples. The whole class was mute, so were the birds and the breeze and the wild-berry. I waved and faked a smile. A sigh of relief, at last for Mr. Goes, as he waved back.

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