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# Seeking the Truth

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**Oxford University Press Short Story Competition 2013**

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# Seeking the Truth



1st place: Ayesha Sharafi, 20  
American University of Sharjah

14<sup>th</sup> June 2008

Dear Ashley,

I am writing to you hoping that you still remember me. I'm Shamsa, your classmate at Generations Private School in Dubai. You sat beside me in class, remember? It was because of you that I acquired the professionalism of passing post-it notes that have silly messages like "BooOOOOOoor-inG!!!!!!" Ah, the good old days. You promised to write to me after moving back to New York, but you never did. It's been around six years. So, what happened to you? Did you study Philosophy at NYU like you always wanted? As to me, I did not complete my studies after high school. I was never the diligent type anyway. I now stay at home and help my mother with her home-based Abayya business.

You are probably wondering what reminded me of you after all these years. Ashley, remember the times I told you that I sometimes hear voices and you would tell me that our house is probably haunted? Well, these voices are back. As I was combing my hair today, I heard a soft whispering voice calling your name. The voice was so loud it felt as if someone was whispering an inch away from my ear. I looked around the room and there was absolutely no one. I then rushed downstairs to the Abayya showroom to tell my mother, but she had some customers and I did not want to disturb her, so I went to the garden for a breath of fresh air. I sat there for a while, but it was getting too hot so I decided it was time to go back and tell my mother. It was getting around lunchtime and the ladies would have probably left. As I got up, I heard a manly voice scolding and threatening me that if I told my mother something bad would happen to me. It told me that I am of no good and that my mother didn't even care for me. It told me that I should *die*. Shortly after, the soft voice was back and all it said was your name again, but this time it told me to write to you. I rushed to my room, opened my closet, and took out a large white box. I remember that I had your address somewhere in there, and I found it. So here I am, shivering as I write to you after all these years, and it's all because of the ghosts that follow me.

My mom is calling me so I'll have to end this letter here. I am too scared to tell her, but I have to soon.

Sincerely,  
Shamsa

3<sup>rd</sup> August 2008

Dear Ashley,

It has been more than a month since I last sent you my letter. I haven't heard from you yet. I truly hope you did not change your address. Ashley, I am scared. The voices are getting louder. Sometimes, they command me to carry out actions against my will. Actions that are atrocious and rude. Last week my mom had some of her customers over for the launch of her latest collection. I was sitting with the women when I suddenly heard a voice commanding me to spill hot tea on Um Ahmed (the mother of Ahmed), one of my mother's loyal customers. I tried to ignore the voice, but the more I ignored it, the louder it became. I felt like my head was about to burst from how loud it was. I looked around to see if anyone else other than me recognized that voice, but they all looked happy and undistracted as they were chatting. It was getting really loud. I tried to cover my ears but the voice only got louder. "Spill the tea at her before we spill your blood," said the voice. It was a voice of an angry female shouting. I got up and walked towards the teakettle, poured some into a cup, and decided to let it cool, and then I'll fake losing my balance and spill it on Um Ahmed. I thought the voices would settle after pouring the tea into the cup, but they only got worse. "WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? WHO ARE YOU FOOLING? SPILL IT NOW NOW NOW" I thought my ear drums would explode. So I got up, picked up the tea, walked towards Um Ahmed, and spilled it on her. I

quickly rushed to my room afterwards. I locked the door and took a deep breath. Finally, silence. The voices were gone.

My mom is extremely angry with me. I wish I could tell her what is going on without feeling threatened.

Write to me, Ashley. Tell me what to do.

Sincerely,  
Shamsa

15<sup>th</sup> November 2008

Dear Ashley,

I pushed my two-year old cousin into the pool. I drove my car into a street lamp. I added a whole container of salt into my aunt's orange juice. I have become a monster, and it's all because of the loud voices I hear. I feel scared and helpless, and all I can do is write to you. For some bizarre reason, the voices never appear when I sit on my desk to write to you. I was planning to tell my mother yesterday, but the voices came back again. "Do you think she'd believe you? You're a dishonor to your family. You've embarrassed them. She won't believe you." Sometimes I turn the music to the highest volume to avoid the voices, but they'll still come, louder as ever, making the loud music sound as faint as background music. I'm contemplating of moving away for a while, hoping the voices won't find a way to follow me. Maybe I could visit you, Ashley. I still haven't heard from you though. I truly hope you are well.

Sincerely,  
Shamsa

26<sup>th</sup> December 2008

Dear Ashley,

I finally told my mother. The threatening voices were loud but I got used to them anyway. She was surprisingly very sympathetic and compassionate. She told me that she knew something was causing my irrational behavior recently. She told me to play some verses from the Quran, for our house may be haunted by demons. She then spoke to my father and my grandma about it. The next day my grandma showed up with some holy water, telling me to pour it on myself as an evil eye might have struck me. I've been following their instructions religiously, yet the voices are still there.

News has spread around town that our house is haunted. My mom says that she can see the looks of fear and agitation on her customer's faces. Our house, once gleaming with energy and liveliness, has now become quiet and empty. People have been avoiding us, or me in particular. I feel guilty for putting my family in such a position. I feel helpless for I can't figure the truth about the voices I hear. After all, the voices weren't wrong; I *have* embarrassed my family.

Sincerely,

Shamsa.



1<sup>st</sup> February 2009

Dear Ashley,

My mom came to me yesterday and told me that I might be possessed. She said that she had called a *Mutawā'a* (religious man) to come read some Holy verses and command the demon to leave me. An exorcism. I objected strongly. I told her that of all the possible truths about the weird voices I hear, being possessed was not an option. But my mother, being the persuasive individual she is, convinced me to give it a try.

There I was hours later, in a room crowded with my family. I placed the headphones around my head and a bearded man sitting across the room started to recite Holy verses through a microphone. I felt calm. I did not shiver, cry, nor plead. I just sat there listening to him. When he finished reading, he walked out of the room with my father and had some words with him. My father came back, and quietly uttered those words "She *can't* be possessed."

He said that the *Mutawā'a* told him that my reactions weren't those of a possessed individual and that I seemed too calm to be possessed. He told my father that there is one possibility; that I am mentally ill.

My mom has already taken an appointment with a psychiatrist tomorrow. I tried to convince her that there is no way I was making up the voices. I told her that they sounded as real as her voice did, but she just wouldn't listen.

Sincerely,  
Shamsa.

*Shamsa was diagnosed with schizophrenia, a chemical imbalance in the brain causing individuals to see or hear things that are not there.*

*Shamsa's letters to Ashley were reaching a man named John Cooper, who wrote back to Shamsa's family expressing his worry about Shamsa after not receiving a letter for seven months.*

*It was later discovered that no one with the name Ashley Wilson attended high school with Shamsa.*

#### *Judge's Comment*

*Ayesha has used a successful letter format which allows for a very personal voice and a framework for building suspense over a period of time. There is humour in 'professionalism of passing post-it notes' swiftly followed by an increasingly dark malevolence which creates a strong sense of unease. How bad can events get? What is causing them? We must read on to find out. Abruptly, the letters stop and we have an answer - a commentary which acts as an important reminder of a serious illness and the uncertainty of what happens to the sufferer. A valuable lesson indeed.*