

FOUR EIDS *and a* FUNERAL



*For all the librarians who fight for marginalized readers –
thank you*

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FOUR EIDS
and a
FUNERAL

USBORNE

Beatrice: "I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow
than a man swear he loves me."

(Act I, Scene I)

Benedick: "For which of my bad parts didst thou first
fall in love with me?"

(Act V, Scene II)

Much Ado About Nothing, William Shakespeare

Let's get one thing straight: this is a love story.

I know both the funeral and the fire might be alarming, but I can assure you that despite the rather unfortunate beginnings, the betrayals that would put even Shakespeare to shame, and the regrettable *incident* several Eids ago, this is simply a morbid tale about two doofuses who fell in love over the course of several years.

You may hear other iterations of this story from *untrustworthy* sources. But this is the true account of what *really* happened.

This is a tale of four Eids. And a funeral.

ACT 1

THE INCITING INCIDENT



OUT OF THE BLUE

SAID

“Can Said Hossain please report to the principal’s office?”

I glance up at the speaker hanging off the ceiling in the classroom, wondering if I just didn’t hear correctly. But from the way Julian is looking at me with a raised eyebrow, I know that it was my name being called to the principal’s office.

I furrow my brow at Julian. In all my time at St Francis Academy for Boys, I’ve never been called to the principal’s office. I’ve never gotten into trouble. I’ve been so good, in fact, that I’m on honour roll, and on track for early admissions to the best universities in the country. My parents often use these facts as dinner-time conversation to impress anybody and everybody.

“Can Said Hossain please report to the principal’s office *immediately?*”

Mr Thomas glances at me from his desk. “Said?” he asks, motioning towards the door. He doesn’t seem too bothered about the fact that one of his top students is getting called to the principal’s office out of the blue, so maybe I shouldn’t be either.

Since class is almost over anyway, I gather up my things into my backpack and slip out the door. The hallways of the school are completely empty, but I can hear the sounds coming from different classrooms as I make my way down to the principal’s office. The near-silence would almost be peaceful, if worry wasn’t gnawing its way into my stomach.

I turn into the main office, and immediately I’m greeted by a familiar voice.

A voice that sounds a lot like my older sister’s.

The closer I get, the more sure I am that it is her. From the fact that she’s loudly trying to convince the principal that his rules are ridiculous, to her long black hair and her bright purple sweater.

“Safiyah?”

Saf turns to me, her eyes wide with...well, I’m not really sure what.

“Said!” she says. “Oh, finally. We need to go.”

“What’s going on?” I glance from her to Principal Carson, who has never looked so uncomfortable. Usually, he has an air of authority about him, the kind that will make any student here think twice about breaking any rules. But apparently just a few minutes with Safiyah can change all that.

“There’s been an inci—” Principal Carson is cut off with a small glare from Safiyah, but my stomach drops all the same.

“Ammu? Abbu?” My mind immediately jumps to the worst possibilities.

Safiyah shakes her head slowly. “It’s...Ms Barnes.” And then, I just know. Even without Safiyah telling me, I know. Because I knew she was sick. I had even written to her. Sent her a get-well-soon card, like that would somehow help her deal with the cancer. But I’d never let myself consider the possibility that she might actually...

“I’m so sorry, Said.” Safiyah holds out her arms, and it’s like my body is working automatically. I walk into her hug. Safiyah wraps me up tightly in her warm embrace, and we stay like that for a long moment. All the while I’m trying to register it – Ms Barnes is dead. Ms Barnes, the woman who encouraged my love of reading. Without her recommendation letter, I probably wouldn’t have even gotten into this school. And now she’s just...gone.

“We have to go,” Safiyah says as soon as I pull away from her hug. “The funeral is tomorrow morning, and if we leave now we should be able to get back to Vermont with plenty of time to spare.”

“But...” I shake my head, because Safiyah’s words are barely registering in my mind. Ms Barnes gone. Funeral. *Back to Vermont?*

“Said has classes,” Principal Carson chimes in when I’ve

been silent for a little too long. “There’s still a whole week left until the semester is over and the summer holidays start.”

Safiyah scoffs. “Look at him!” She waves her arm at me like I’m some kind of a painting in a gallery. I blink at Principal Carson, because, really, I’m not sure what he’s supposed to be looking at. “You think he’s going to be okay going through classes for another whole week? He needs to be back home, with his family. He’s distraught.”

“This Ms Barnes was...a family member?” Principal Carson asks.

Safiyah glares at him once more. “Is he only allowed to be upset when a family member passes?” she asks. Her voice doesn’t rise – Safiyah doesn’t shout – but there’s this way she has of making it all low and scary. When we were kids, Safiyah used to use this voice to make me do all the chores she didn’t want to do. I’ve grown immune to it now – a little bit immune, at least. But Principal Carson is obviously meeting Safiyah for the first time. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

“Well, no. It’s just, we don’t know a Ms Barnes, and—”

“Check his school records. You’ll find Ms Barnes’s letter of recommendation for Said. They were close. She was like a mentor to him.”

Was. That’s the word that echoes in my head over and over again. Ms Barnes was like a mentor. Because she is no more.

“I just don’t know if—”

“We’re going!” Safiyah exclaims, throwing her hand up. “I’m taking Said, and we’re packing up his things and driving back to Vermont, whether you think his loss is important enough to warrant missing a week of classes or not.” She spins around and stomps out the door.

I stand there for a moment longer, because in her anger she’s obviously forgotten that she came here to get me.

Principal Carson heaves a sigh. “Said, you can go. I’ll send a message to the registration office,” he says. “And I’m... sorry for your loss.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Thank you,” I say.

Safiyah seems completely unimpressed by my dorm. Of course, my side of the room is perfectly intact. Everything in its place, and a place for everything. But Julian’s side is a completely different matter. There are clothes strewn all over, and his books are anywhere *but* on the little shelf above each of our desks specifically designated for our school books.

“How does Julian ever find anything in this pigsty?” Safiyah asks, clicking her tongue with disapproval as she eyes his side of the room.

“He gets by,” I say, while staring at my own side of the room. I figured I still had an entire week left to pack up for the summer. Now, with grief lodged in my throat like a rock,

the idea of putting away all my things seems even more daunting.

Safiyah seems to almost sense this, because she slips past me and begins pulling clothes from my drawers and into an open suitcase.

“When did it happen?” I ask, after a moment.

Safiyah looks up at me, but she doesn’t stop in her one-track focus of packing up my things. “I’m not sure. A few days ago, I think.”

A few days ago. Shouldn’t I have known something was wrong? Isn’t there something in the universe that’s supposed to tell you when someone you love is suffering? Is...dead? But for the past few days, I went about my life like everything was normal. I went to my classes, played soccer with Julian, did my homework. All the while, Ms Barnes was gone.

“How did you find out?” I ask Safiyah, instead of indulging my guilt for longer. I can feel the pressure in my throat growing, can feel the pinprick of tears behind my eyes. I’m definitely not going to break down in front of Safiyah like this. Not now.

Safiyah stops in her tracks for a moment. “Um, I just... someone from home told me.” She goes back to packing up my things like she didn’t hesitate to answer my question. But I immediately know: It must have been *her* – Tiwa. For all her faults (and she has many), Tiwa, at least, loved Ms Barnes as much as I do. At one point in our lives, Tiwa would have told me as soon as she knew.

“Okay, all done!” Safiyah says, zipping up the suitcase. “The sooner we get out of here, the sooner we can get to... well, the funeral.” She glances at me out of the corner of her eye, and there’s sympathy written all over her face. She’s looking at me like I’m about to break, or something.

I duck my head and approach Julian’s unkempt desk. “I should let Julian know,” I say. “He’ll wonder...what’s happened.”

“Can’t you just text him or something?” Safiyah asks.

I shake my head, picking up a pen from his desk and unfurling a balled-up piece of paper. “We can’t check our phones in between classes. When he gets to our room, he’ll be confused.”

“Well, I’m going to get your things into the car,” Safiyah says, dragging my suitcase behind her. “So, I’ll see you there in a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Don’t forget to add a Pokémon drawing to your note,” Safiyah adds as an afterthought.

I pause. “How do you know Julian likes Pokémon?”

Safiyah just glances pointedly at the dozens of Pokémon plushies lined up on Julian’s bed. “Every time I’ve spoken to him, he mentions Pokémon half a dozen times,” she says before slipping out the door, and I realize she has a point.

With Safiyah gone, the rock in my throat seems to grow even larger. I swallow down the lump and tap my pen against the piece of paper. How do I explain to Julian exactly what’s

happened, when he doesn't know anything about Ms Barnes?

I had to leave in a hurry because my hometown librarian passed away? But Ms Barnes was so much more than that. She was my friend, my confidante.

My sister came to drive me back to Vermont early, I scribble down quickly, because... I stop there, unsure of what to say next. *Because a friend of mine passed away.* It doesn't seem like enough, but I guess it's all the information Julian needs. *I'll see you over the holidays,* I add, and do a quick doodle of Psyduck, which is – for some strange reason – his favourite Pokémon. And just that two-minute drawing lets a strange relief wash over me. Like learning about Ms Barnes's death had twisted me into a knot of grief, and the ink against the paper was letting some of that grief out.

“You should cry,” Safiyah says once we've been on the road for a few hours. There's been nothing keeping us company except for whatever radio station gets picked up by the car's frequency. We've listened to everything from country music to heavy metal, and even a talk show about different kinds of potatoes.

“Why would I cry?” I ask.

“Well, because crying is good for you. You shouldn't keep your emotions bottled up like this.”

I roll my eyes and stare out my side of the window instead of looking at Safiyah. Ever since she started majoring in

psychology at college, she thinks she knows everything. Well, she's always been like this, but it's just worse now because she has the promise of an undergraduate degree to back up her know-it-all attitude.

"Said...I'm sorry," Safiyah says softly after a moment. And I thaw a little. She's trying to help – even if she's being completely and utterly unhelpful.

"I'm fine," I say, even as pressure builds behind my eyes. I blink away the tears and keep my eyes trained on the window.

"You should share a happy memory you have of Ms Barnes," Safiyah says. "She would like that, right?"

Safiyah didn't really know Ms Barnes, but she's right. She *would* like that. Ms Barnes was the kind of person who liked to think about the positive things in life. She wouldn't want me to spend this entire drive glaring out my window, being annoyed at my sister, and feeling guilty because I didn't write to her enough during her time at the hospital.

I try to think of a happy memory. "Well, I remember when I got into St Francis, and Tiwa was annoyed at me. She said she wouldn't speak to me ever again if I decided to go."

"That *doesn't* sound like a happy memory..."

"Let me finish," I say. "She was so annoyed at me. But then she went to see Ms Barnes. She said Ms Barnes invited Tiwa into her office, and made her tea in her little china cups. That's what she did when she wanted to have a serious conversation. And she told Tiwa about how she had written the letter of recommendation for me, and all the reasons

why I needed to go to St Francis, and all the ways it would help me. And Tiwa was still annoyed, but when she came to our house afterwards, she understood. She wanted me to go.”

“That’s a story about Ms Barnes? It sounds like it’s more about Tiwa,” Safiyah says.

I scowl at Safiyah but I know there’s some truth to what she’s saying.

The thing is, every happy memory of Ms Barnes somehow feels tied to Tiwa. Even every happy memory of home is tied to her. “It’s just that...that’s the kind of person Ms Barnes was. She was always making peace between me and Tiwa, always helping us see each other’s side. I thought Tiwa would be angry at me the whole week before I left for St Francis, but Ms Barnes made sure that didn’t happen. She made sure I had the best last week in New Crosshaven.”

Because of Ms Barnes, I knew that even though I was leaving, I would always have people back home. I would always have Tiwa. I would always have Ms Barnes. But Tiwa and I aren’t friends any more. And Ms Barnes is gone. I don’t get a lot of time to think about that, though, because the next moment, Safiyah swerves the car so fast that I’m pretty sure I see my entire life flash before my eyes. A car honks in front of us and misses us by just a few seconds.

Safiyah curses under her breath, and I turn to her with a glare.

“What the hell was that? You could have gotten us killed.”

“It’s dark,” she says. “I didn’t see that car coming. It’s fine, it’ll be fine.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose with my fingers. I always knew Safiyah was a terrible driver, but I didn’t realize how much worse she might be at night. I check my phone for the time. It’s already ten p.m., and we haven’t even left Virginia yet. It’ll probably be a few more hours until we’re in Vermont.

“I think we should pull over for the night. Get some rest somewhere.”

“We’ll be late to the funeral!” Safiyah says. “It’s just a few more hours.”

“You’re tired,” I say. “You’ve been driving for hours. You want it to be our funeral next?”

Safiyah sighs. “Okay, fine. We’ll find a place to stay for the night, but...we’ll have to be up at the crack of dawn if we want to make it back in time.”

I nod, already setting multiple alarms on my phone. There’s no way that I’m going to miss my chance to say goodbye to Ms Barnes. Not even Safiyah’s terrible driving can keep me away.

WHAT AN ASSHOLE

Tiwa

Funerals to me are like weddings.

People fly out from far and wide to celebrate someone's life. There's food, music and family drama – only, after a wedding is over, the guests don't dig up a six-foot hole and shove the celebrant in.

I guess that's the only difference.

That and the fact that at least at a funeral, it's acceptable to be dressed in all black and to wear an unflattering scowl all day.

Do that at your auntie Amaal's wedding and suddenly you're the weird one. At a funeral, there's little judgement. I guess everyone is too busy being sad to judge others and how they look.

Besides, it's not what Ms Barnes would have wanted.

She was all for being yourself and not giving a shit about what anyone thought of you. She would have wanted everyone to show up here as their authentic selves, whether that be wearing a circus costume or a fancy suit and tie. She'd want to know everyone was celebrating her life without forcing themselves to be less than they are.

When Ms B got her cancer diagnosis last year and had to start chemo, I remember how she'd bought these ridiculous wigs and would wear them without a care in the world. Her favourite was this electric-blue one that kind of reminded me of the wig from that old Katy Perry music video. She'd worn that wig everywhere she could: to my birthday, to the annual New Crosshaven pumpkin festival, and even to the Eid party at my house last year.

Picture after picture of her with her big smile and her bright-blue hair is on the board by the entrance of the funeral home, where everyone has hung up their favourite memories of her.

A stark contrast from the way I imagine she looks now inside the closed wooden casket: her eyes shut, her face pale, and her head mostly bald with small tufts of unruly ginger locks, like it usually was when she wasn't wearing her wigs.

No more smiles, no more telling me funny stories from her youth, no more life.

No more Ms B.

I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand and reach out to touch the casket's lid, hoping that when I do it will somehow

trigger something in the universe and I'll wake up and this will all have been a really fucked-up dream.

But of course, when I touch it, nothing happens.

I'm still here in this funeral home.

And Ms Barnes is still dead.

Someone clears their throat. When I look up, I'm met with an annoyed-looking stranger peering down at me.

"Are you done? You've been standing here for ten minutes. Other people want to pay their respects too," he says.

I now notice the long line behind him. I didn't realize I've been here for so long.

"Oh...s-sorry," I say, swallowing the knot at the back of my throat. It wouldn't help anyone if I started crying in front of this stranger, who's already pissed off at me.

I wipe my eyes again and give Ms B one final glance, before moving away from the casket.

The room is crowded, filled with people from all over, young and old. A lot of people must have really loved the library – or just Ms B. She had an infectious personality that made it hard not to want to hang around her all the time.

Earlier in the ceremony, I recognized a few people from school. But no one I'm friendly enough with to strike up a conversation or even give a polite nod to. So I decide to find my own corner.

It's weird to think that I was in this very same funeral home less than two years ago, and yet everything and nothing has changed. The layout is different, as is the paint on the

walls, once an oatmeal beige, now a sickly green. The feelings that come with being here have stayed the same, though. I still feel the same squeezing in my chest, the same pit in my stomach, the same urge to hide from the reality of things.

Honestly, I'm tired of funerals.

There are seats all around the room, most unoccupied. There is something about standing at a funeral that makes the whole thing less depressing. Sitting forces you to think, which I guess is the last thing I want to do right now. So when I finally find my seat, I do what anyone does when they want to avoid dealing with their thoughts and emotions: I take my phone out and turn it on. I'm hoping that while I've been here all morning, something scandalous happened online to some rich celebrity that will take all my attention away.

When my phone switches on, I'm immediately met by four missed calls from my best friend, Safiyah.

I sit up, eyebrows furrowing. Saf usually never calls so early.

I hope everything is okay with her... I press the call back button just as the room falls silent.

Saf's familiar ringtone sounds somewhere in the room: the shrill sound of *The Powerpuff Girls* theme song.

But it wouldn't make sense for Safiyah to be here; she barely knew Ms B. Maybe there's another person with Saf's level of love for the Powerpuff Girls. But that's impossible.

I look up, noticing now how almost everyone in the room is staring in the same direction. At the front entrance.

Strange.

I stand to get a better view, regretting my decision when I see what, or rather who, had caught everyone's attention.

My best friend, Safiyah Hossain, and her brother, Said.

I take back what I said about not being judgemental at a funeral. People are definitely judging. They both look incredibly out of place here.

Safiyah is wearing a bright purple sweater with a print that says *Hello Suckers* in bold and Said...well, he's wearing his fancy boarding school uniform. Looking like his usual douchebag self.

Safiyah spots me and smiles, waving frantically as though we aren't at a funeral. Some people turn to look at me now.

I hesitate before I walk over to her, grimacing when I accidentally lock eyes with Said for a brief moment.

When I get to the entrance, Saf pulls me in for a tight hug.

"I missed you so much, T. How've you been?" Saf asks when she finally frees me, as though we don't talk every single day.

She has this creepy serial killer smile on her face. It's weirding me out.

"Uh...I'm okay, considering," I say.

Saf nods, looking sad.

"I can imagine how hard it's been. I know you both really liked her," she says.

The *both* she is referring to is me and Said.

I'm almost forced to look at him now. It would be weird if I didn't.

When I do, I'm surprised to see him staring right back. Even more surprising, though, is the expression on his face. His usual disdain whenever we're together is replaced by something new.

His eyes are bloodshot and glassy – he looks like he's been...crying.

But I don't understand why, when he was perfectly fine going off to boarding school and abandoning everyone he knew. And he was fine never visiting Ms B at the hospital, not even when she was at her worst.

Why pretend to care now?

It's too late.

I'm still staring at him when he finally opens his mouth to speak.

"I'm going to go and pay my respects," Said says, turning to Saf now.

She squeezes his hand and pats his back, and he moves past me like he always does these days. Like I'm invisible.

I roll my eyes. *That's* the Said I know and hate.

"What an asshole," I mutter, forgetting Safiyah is here. I usually try to keep my thoughts about her brother to myself when she's around.

"I'm sorry, I tried calling earlier to give you a heads-up," Saf says, looking guilty.

I shake my head. "It's okay. Besides, he'll only be here for

a day or two as usual. I'm just so happy to see you," I tell her, but the guilt still hasn't left her face.

"About that—"

"Hi, everyone! Can I have your attention please – the wake will be in the Walker community centre. We're all about to head over, so please grab your things and get ready to leave," Clara Sheppard, one of the librarians who worked with Ms Barnes, announces to the crowd.

"We should leave quickly before the road gets busy," I say.

"Let me just go and get Said first, okay?" Saf replies.

I nod, trying to mask my displeasure at the sound of his name. I guess this is the cost of having my best friend be the older sister of my sworn enemy.

Saf reappears a few moments later with Said. We stare at each other again in silence, my arms folded now to show how displeased I am with having him here.

His glowering tells me he feels the same.

Safiyah clears her throat. "So! The community centre... I take it I'm driving?"

"I don't mind driving," I say, mostly because I'd rather not die today. Saf drives like she's in a video game and has an unlimited number of lives.

"You sure?" Saf asks.

I nod. Very sure.

I glance at Said, again, expecting a protest. But it doesn't come.

Saf nudges him and he looks at me, still scowling.

“Tiwa,” he says with a nod.

I raise an eyebrow. Is that meant to be a greeting?

“Said,” I reply in the same weird, antisocial manner. He’s usually a lot more vocal, but I guess since his favourite childhood librarian died, he might not have much to say after all.

“Tell Tiwa I’ll be walking to the Walker centre. Don’t want to be the last ones to arrive there with the snail’s pace she goes at. I’ll see you in a few,” he says to Saf.

Clearly Said doesn’t realize I have his time today. After all, other than crying about the person you used to know, now dead and lying back in a casket, funerals are relatively uneventful.

“That’s rich coming from the guy weeping at the funeral of the woman he spent the past four years ignoring. Hope you have a lovely walk. With any luck a coyote might eat you on the way and you’ll never have to be put through the misery of being driven by me again,” I say.

Said turns red, but his expression is unreadable.

“Seriously, guys, we will get kicked out, our slot is over,” Clara says, clapping her hands together and gesturing towards the door.

“You’re such a—” Said begins, but stops himself at the last second, as though scared that the ghost of Ms B will rise up and reprimand him.

I smile, victorious. Which only makes him look more murderous.

“That’s it, I’m driving. And you’re both going to sit in the back seat and not complain about it or each other. Got it?” Safiyah asks.

We both stay silent.

“Good, now hurry up. I have plans after this,” she adds.

“Plans? Ishra plans?” I ask, saying the second part slowly.

Ishra is a girl who works in the Walker and has been the target of Safiyah’s flirtations for years. It became a running joke among us, the one-sided crush she had on her, until recently, when Ishra started flirting back.

Saf smiles, before walking out the door without confirming or denying anything.

I’ll dig for more information later when Said isn’t around.

Once we get into the car, I do what I usually do whenever I’m about to experience Saf’s driving. I pray that Allah protects us against any scars or permanent injuries incurred from this.

When I’m done, I face the other way. I look out the window, trying to ignore Said’s close proximity to me, and the stuff I couldn’t help but notice in the short glances I got earlier. Like how much taller he’s gotten, and how his hair is longer and floppier, and how my stomach turns every time he glances my way.

Like now.

I ignore all of that and focus on my second round of prayers, pleading to God once again that Safiyah doesn’t kill us all today.