

I tried not to stare as we drove past the gates into Kamal's house. I had ridden past it on motorcycles, observing the well-kept grass outside and the towering palm trees above the spiked fence. Imran had shared stories about how nice the house was when we hung out, but this marked the first time he had invited me to visit. Imran had picked me up, and the car entered the compound, proceeding down a lengthy driveway. Cars were neatly parked in a row along the driveway, and I noticed not only the familiar vehicles I had seen drop Kamal at school but also a few exotic cars. Kamal's older brother had recently graduated from university and acquired the city's only Jaguar of its kind. Although it always stood out on the road, among these cars, it appeared as just one among many.

A gathering was planned for watching football, and for the first time, I would be part of the Monday morning recaps and inside jokes at school. I didn't understand why Imran had decided to bring me along this time. The fact that he usually hung out with more popular guys without me had been an unspoken sore spot in our friendship. We had become close friends in JS1 when I was seated behind him, bonding over our shared love for comics. He was more socially adept than I was, and it became clear that for our friendship to endure, I would have to accept that he would be invited to all the parties without me. I thought I had made peace with it, but it felt incredible to finally be invited, even if just for a football match. I checked my pockets to confirm my wallet was in the jeans I had chosen the previous night. I had ironed my outfit earlier in the week and had also withdrawn money from a bank account my uncle had gifted me last year. I didn't anticipate needing it, so I hadn't informed my mother about the withdrawal. Today was supposed to be about watching football at Kamal's house.

Imran looked up from bidding farewell to his driver and noticed me staring at the brand-new G-Wagon parked in the premium spot by the front door. Even the rims were jet black, and I could only imagine the cost of such a car. He gave me a knowing look, acknowledging how cool all of this was.

"This is incredible," I said quietly to him. He smiled in response. "Just wait until we get inside."

Kamal emerged from the double front doors and warmly greeted us. We knew each other as mutual friends of Imran, so he wasn't surprised to see me, or at least he concealed it well. I prepared myself to appear unimpressed when we entered, but Kamal shut the door behind him. As he passed by, he mentioned, "We're just going to get some doughnuts at Dalema before everyone else arrives; I think the game starts at 3."

My disappointment at not going inside immediately was replaced by my efforts to calculate the cost of the doughnuts and whether Kamal would be covering everyone's expenses. He found their in-house driver, and Imran and I got into the backseat to head to a local bakery. As we set off, I glanced at the G-Wagon again, wondering if it would embarrass Imran if I asked Kamal to see the inside.

We had been driving for only a few minutes when the driver exchanged a few words with Kamal and then parked the car. I watched silently as Kamal moved across the front seat and settled into the driver's seat. I glanced at Imran, and he avoided eye contact so deliberately that I understood I needed to accept this.

I was relieved to be seated behind the driver, ensuring Kamal couldn't see my expression

through the rearview mirror. The popular guys often drove to places after school and on weekends, and the inside jokes I hoped to understand on Monday usually referred to the weekend adventures. My mother had forbidden me from ever getting into a car with a 16-year-old at the wheel, but the odds of encountering her were low, and my chances of speaking up were even lower. Kamal started honking at a slow-moving car ahead. He moved into the middle of the road to check for an opportunity to overtake. He accelerated past the white Honda as we aimed to get ahead. However, once we were speeding to overtake, Kamal showed no intention of slowing down. Nervously, I glanced at the speedometer needle as I was pressed back into my seat.

"Are we in a hurry?" I asked quietly, avoiding eye contact with Imran. Kamal made no response as the speedometer needle continued its ascent. Leaning to my right to see the road, I realized we were rapidly approaching a bend. Finally, Imran broke the silence and said, "Take it easy, Dominic Toretto."

Kamal appeared to snap out of his trance and slammed on the brakes, but it was too late. We were all thrown forward as the car's wheels locked and produced a deafening screech. Before we could regain our composure, the car's rear end slid violently underneath us, causing Imran to slide across the backseat, pinning me against the door. Finally, the car screeched to a stop, having completed a half-circle spin.

A massive cloud of red dust surrounded us, creating an underwater-like isolation. The noise of screeching tires and flailing limbs was replaced by stunned silence.

"Did we hit anything?" Kamal asked. I thought I had heard a thud as we spun, but the dust made it impossible to see anything through the windows.

"I don't know," I managed to say, lowering my voice to avoid disturbing the delicate peace inside the car.

After a moment of hesitation, Kamal shifted the car into gear and began driving back the way we came, away from the settling dust cloud. I sat frozen in the backseat, struggling to comprehend what had just occurred. Imran was staring out of the window in absolute silence. He hadn't uttered a word since we started skidding, his hands visibly shaking in his lap.

Kamal appeared to have recovered better than the rest of us. He drove smoothly down the road until the driver, who had remained silent, started giving him instructions to go a bit further and park on a side road so he could take over driving. Seconds after we made the turn, two men on motorcycles careened around the corner, obviously chasing us. As we slowed down to park, one motorcycle blocked the front of the car while the rider screamed at us.

"You hit someone back there!"

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

We all exited the car and learned from the men that we had indeed hit someone when we spun around the bend. We quickly agreed to return to the accident scene and address the aftermath. The driver took control of the vehicle, and we headed back to the bakery for the second time that day. The words of the motorcyclists continued to echo in my mind. We had accidentally

harmed someone while attempting to get doughnuts.

The scene at the accident site was chaotic.

Around 20 people had gathered, all speaking loudly. As we arrived, flanked by the two motorcyclists, the crowd's volume rose even further.

"These wealthy kids believe they own this town."

"Who was driving? Bring them here!"

Kamal and the driver exited the car to make sense of the situation. For the first time since we had arrived at Kamal's house, Imran and I were alone.

"Should we call the police?"

Instantly, no. There was no way I could call my dad and explain all of this. I couldn't even fathom his reaction; I'd be in serious trouble if any of this came to light. "Let's see what happens first," I replied to Imran, desperately hoping it was all a misunderstanding.

"Do you want these guys to kill us or what?" a street vendor shouted across the hood as she walked past. "Well, that's what they tried to do," came the angry response from the crowd. The implication of that response hit Imran and me simultaneously. Perhaps it was the stories of people being set ablaze inside their cars by angry mobs, or maybe it was the thought of calling my parents about this, but as we locked eyes, I suddenly found the resolve to get out of the car.

"Let's go and see," I said to Imran, unlocking my door and stepping out into the afternoon sun.

We had parked on the inside of the bend across the street from the crowd. Passing cars slowed down as they drove past, attempting to understand what had occurred. A house on the bend was under construction, and heaps of sand had been delivered and dumped by the roadside. The loose sand and soil had been kicked up and finely misted over an area a few meters wide around us. While crossing the street, I noticed a bicycle with its back wheel bent at a right angle. This must have been what we hit as we spun. Lying beside the bicycle in a once clean kaftan was an old man who, while writhing on the ground, was evidently not dead.

Any relief I had felt dissipated as I looked to my right. A shirtless laborer was approaching the scene, visibly furious and brandishing a hammer in one muscled fist. He demanded to see the driver, and right on cue, I turned to find Kamal with his hands up, attempting to explain to a group of people shouting accusations at him. Having heard enough, someone from the crowd seized a nearby plank and struck Kamal as he raised his arm to shield himself. As another person bent down to grab a stick, the crowd seemed ready to trample him and impart the lesson they felt he deserved. A man in a blue blazer stepped in and positioned himself between Kamal and the crowd. His voice cut through the angry shouts as he announced that nobody was going to be attacked by a mob today. To emphasize his point, he drew a handgun from a holster concealed beneath his blazer.

The crowd appeared to ponder this new information. Would the threat of a firearm be sufficient to deflate their righteous anger, or would it intensify their bloodlust? The man in blue let the

silence linger for a moment longer before revealing that he was a plainclothes police officer working at the hotel across the street.

“Let’s check on the old man,” I said with a voice that oddly resembled mine as the mob turned to face me. Once again, there was a moment of contemplation before a woman who had been watching the events agreed that the old man’s well-being should take precedence right now. The moment of violence seemed to have passed as we approached the old man, whose cries grew louder as attention returned to him and his condition.

The mob quickly decided to take him to a nearby pharmacy, and I was relieved to leave the area that had nearly become my final destination. As the old man recounted the incident to the pharmacist, we learned that, although we had struck his bike, he had managed to leap off before the impact, resulting in a bruised rear end and a prescription for surprisingly inexpensive painkillers. Kamal first handed the man the medicine we were instructed to purchase, then guiltily offered him a wad of money ostensibly to repair his bicycle. The old man scoffed at the amount, saying, “This won’t even fill my tires with air.” I knew for sure that the amount being offered could replace the bicycle’s two tires, but a quick look around told me this wasn’t the time to haggle. Imran, sensing our predicament, emptied his wallet and increased the total amount to nearly the cost of a new bicycle. They both looked at me expectantly, forcing me to withdraw the money I had saved for the absolute worst-case scenario to finally satisfy the old man, who seemed content after a bit of haggling. Reluctantly listening to a few parting reprimands, we made our way back to the car and pulled out of the pharmacy.

“Which way are you going?” Kamal asked his driver as we took a turn away from their home.

“Aren’t we still going to get the doughnuts?”