

2020 Short Story Contest

First Place

Azadeh Hormozdiari

The Bumpy Road to Happiness

Diiing! The sound of the doorbell drifted to his ears waking him up even from four floors above, the melodic sound brought with it new treasure every time. “Vanessa!” he exclaimed from the fourth floor, “go sign off the package!” Throwing his tall legs over the California King bed, he pulled on a white robe – the Versace logo seemingly visible from miles away. Slipping on matching slides he walked out to the balcony, a smile creeping over his face, it must be the new chandelier he had ordered the night before. Hands on the railing he looked out in front of him, as far as the eye could see was his property. The basketball court adorned with hoops NBA players wish they could dunk on, a garden Queen Elizabeth II had once complimented, tennis courts, a pool, each amenity as luxurious as the last. Breathing in the Beverly Glen air and admiring his home, he glanced at his watch, realizing he needed to be at the office within an hour.

He calmly walked back inside, going through his morning routine and finally changing into his Tuesday black Armani suit. Pulling his tie into place, he glanced in the mirror – his dark brown locks were cut in a professional manner, beard freshly shaven with only a bit of stubble remaining in a way that framed his sharp jawline. He glanced in the mirror one last time, his fingers tracing over the golden faravahar looped around his neck, his gaze remained fixated on the symbol. “Mr. Jamshid Javanmard breakfast is prepared!” Vanessa exclaimed snapping him out of his daze. He tucked the faravahar under his white collared shirt heading down the spiral staircase to start another day.

After eating, he stood in the garage, making the hardest decision he had to face every day – what car to take out. His golden-brown eyes glossed over the matte black G-Wagon, silver Bentley coupe, white BMW and finally landed on the Rolls Royce.

As he drove bumper to bumper with others, running late, the GPS gleamed “ –take a shorter route to avoid traffic?” Enthusiastically he clicked yes – changing direction to a part of town he had not visited since originally leaving California for Yale University fifteen years ago. Minutes away from pulling into the Deloitte Firm parking lot, to the left he noticed a sight he had not seen in ages, he saw folks he had grown up with, attending classes with every Sunday walking into the golden doors of the California Zoroastrian Center. A wave of nostalgia hit him as he felt a hole open inside of him, he brushed it off by reassuring himself he now had what they all wish they did. After all, here he was, all the riches he could’ve wished for; sitting in a Rolls Royce wearing an Armani suit, on his way to his job at the largest law firm in the country.

Pulling into Deloitte his momentary crisis had now been completely forgotten, but the hole in his heart remained, it had been there since he left for Yale fifteen years ago, since he left his old life behind, the hole still remained, eating away at him. Nonetheless, it was a feeling he had grown used to, he had found shoving expensive products into the emptiness he felt was an effective way to reach happiness, even if it was momentary. Pushing his dark thoughts away the best he could, he walked through the

double glass doors labeled Javanmard to his office, the natural light beaming and filling up the spacious white room. A singular desk sat in the heart of his room, right behind it a window with views of the city just as spectacular as those in his home. "Mr. Javanmard your mail is on your desk!" shouted his secretary Julia from the receptionist desk right outside. As he came to a seat at his desk, he glanced at the stack of what seemed like hundreds of letters. Tearing open one envelope it read, "Thank you for defending Ezra Yates, he's my favorite artist and it's an abomination that this is happening to him!" The next wrote "I know Ezra didn't do it because he has you defending him! Thank you for being someone we can always count on!" All the letters spoke to something similar, all fan mail on behalf of his newest client Ezra Yates.

Ezra was the perfect client, from his millions of followers, sold out worldwide tour concerts, tens of Grammys, spotless record and persona as the most loved celebrity by the public. Truly, he was yet to meet a person that didn't adore Ezra and his sweet wholesome demeanor, hell, even the democrats and republicans would put aside their fighting for this man. Ezra was not only the perfect client to defend in the abstract, but also one of his closest friends since Jamshid himself had also gained fame. Even the accusation Ezra was facing of murdering his wife hadn't tainted his public perception, not a single person believed it, and it was Jamshid's job to keep it that way. The trial was tomorrow morning but Jamshid had already finished all he needed, all that was left to do was celebrate with Ezra for the essentially guaranteed innocent verdict.

Lunch time arrived and he left to do exactly that, walking into the private room at Nobu in Malibu he had paid a hundred grand to book, the two good friends sat for a sushi lunch. The conversation was light and unserious, until Jamshid's mind began to wander, jokingly he asked Ezra the question you should never ask a client. He smiled as he looked up, "Well Ezra, did you do it?" he remarked playfully. "What? Like killed my wife?" Ezra said as his light blue eyes cut into Jamshid's soul. "Yeah," Jamshid remarked still chuckling at the joke of a question. Ezra suddenly burst into laughter, a cold genuine laughter that lasted too long for comfort. The hairs on Jamshid's neck stood up as Ezra's eyes pierced into him, his voice turning cold, "J, of all people I thought you would've seen through my mask. Of course, I did it. Seeing her blood drip down my hands and the life flutter out of her eyes was euphoria." He paused and began laughing again, the warmth returning to his eyes "But not a single person would believe I did! Isn't this great?" Jamshid couldn't remember quite what he said after that, but he stayed for lunch and left frantically after. As he drove back home, he passed the Zoroastrian center again, this time the eyes of the statue of Zartosht cut into him, seemingly in deep pain.

He arrived home, trying to sleep for the big trial tomorrow, but every time he closed his eyes, Zartosht's eyes would appear, refusing to let him get a second of rest. He tossed and turned for hours, finally swallowing a melatonin to fall asleep. As he slept, he dreamt for the first time in years. He was back at the Zoroastrian center on a Sunday morning, sitting in class. Around him sat his childhood friends, Kamran, Rostam and Shireen, they all chanted the Ashem Vohu prayer "ashem vohu, vahisitem, asti, ushta, asti, ushta, ahmayi, hyat ashai, vah hishtayi, ashem" The teacher, Mrs. Dahnesh asked for someone to share the English translation, unwillingly Jamshid's mouth began to move, his voice as it was when he was fifteen years old began to speak "righteousness is the best virtue, it is happiness, happiness comes to the one who is righteous for the sake of righteousness alone." As his friends looked at him with warm smiles, he began to realize, he may now have riches, cars, houses and luxury; but the one thing he couldn't retrieve now, which he had fifteen years ago, was the emotion his fifteen year old self was feeling in the dream. Genuine happiness. His realization faded, alongside the feeling of genuine

happiness, as the dark thoughts of what he had done to his life replaced it, the words “Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds” written from wall to wall, seemed to be written in red ink, the blood of his friends’ wife, the phrases closing in on him, the walls getting tighter and the words screaming.

He woke up in a cold sweat to the sound of his alarm. He rushed to get ready, brushing away the thoughts that remained from his dream last night, “It’s all religious nonsense, I am happy now, they just use it as a way to cope because I have what they wish they did.” He mumbles to himself as he put on his suit, slicked back his hair and got ready for the big day. As he sat at the mirror, glancing at himself almost ready to leave, he once again tucked the faravahar he wore under his collared shirt. He ran down the spiral staircase once again, slipped in the Rolls Royce and headed to the trial.

The prosecutor finished presenting his case, it was nonsensical and lacking evidence, Jamshid didn’t think winning this trial would’ve been this easy. As he stood up, ready to end the trial briefly and return to his home, maybe even go for a swim in his pool, his faravahar seemed to press into his chest, with every step he took closer to the stand it seemed to press harder, seemingly ready to cut into his soul. Before he spoke his first words, three phrases once again appeared in his mind, “Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds.” Replaying in his mind, almost haunting him, was the voices of his childhood friends as they recited the Ashem Vohu. He blinked twice, then three times, shaking it off – he looked to the judge, closed the folder he had taken up with him and said to the surprise of everybody, “Actually, I have something new I would like to introduce into evidence.” The room went dead silent as all eyes turned to the judge, waiting for a verdict, “sustained, you may do so” she remarked. Jamshid walked up to the stand, plugged his phone into the speaker and pressed play. Out came the last words everyone thought they would hear, Ezra’s cold voice remarking, “J, of all people I thought you would’ve seen through my mask. Of course, I did it. Seeing her blood drip down my hands and the life flutter out of her eyes was euphoria. But not a single person would believe I did! Isn’t this great?”

Looking back at Ezra on the witness table, Jamshid realized something. He wouldn’t be remembered as the hero in this story. The public would find a way to spin the decision, accuse him of faking audio, call him a liar, a cheat. In the public eye he was the villain. Ezra could kill him now and no one would mourn. They would all dance and sing on his grave. But, looking to the camera broadcasting this on national television, he smiled to himself, realizing it didn’t matter how the public saw him, he knew he had done the right thing, he had told the truth. He slipped his faravahar out from the inside of his shirt, to the outside, then turned his back on the courtroom as he headed home.

As he walked into his house, he received a phone call. His hands shook as he answered, “You’ve been fired from Deloitte. Your behavior today in court was inexcusable. We don’t feel as though we can trust you as a lawyer anymore, your things will be sent away. Don’t bother looking for another job, we have more influence than you could imagine in this industry and we will ensure it’s not an option for you.” The voice on the other line quickly hung up, not waiting for a response.

He walked out of his home into the cold air of the night, wrapping his jacket around him as he started to walk. The icy wind blowing in his face, a million thoughts racing through his mind about what would happen next and what he had done to his life – he knew he would soon lose his large home and his cars absent a steady form of income, he had been delegated to the middle class life. His feet, seemingly on autopilot, continued walking down a path Jamshid was unaware of the destination of. Half an hour later he arrived, despite not being here in fifteen years, he knew exactly what today was – Gahanbar. He slowly walked through the golden doors as a wave of warmth hit him. His teacher from when he used to

come on Sundays was the first to see him, she wrapped her arms around him as she said, “We’re happy to have you back Jamshid jaan, We’re so proud of you.” Her genuine and loving embrace stirred an emotion he hadn’t felt in fifteen years – belonging. Kamran, Rostam and Shireen all walked up to him, wrapping their arms around him sharing similar sentiments. “Enough with the sentimental and emotional stuff, Jamshid come have some ash,” Mrs. Dahnes said. As he sat and swallowed the stew, a feeling washed over him, with every spoon he felt the hole in his heart being filled. The ash was more than just a stew, but a representation of the community to which he was proud to belong. The people around him recited the Ashem Vohu one more time. He chuckled to himself as he realized they were right, only righteousness can bring true happiness. He had lost his riches, his home, his cars and his job – but those were all worthless and distracting him from what really mattered – he had gained something priceless that made it all more than worth it, genuine happiness.

Biography:

Azadeh Hormozdiari is currently a junior at Chaminade high school. She has been attending Zoroastrian classes since elementary school and still consistently does. Outside of school and classes she is involved with her school’s debate team.

