



THE QUEEN'S
COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2019

GOLD AWARD



2019

This is to certify that the Royal Commonwealth Society, on
recommendation of the judges, has awarded this certificate to:

Marwan Gafar



Dr Linda Yueh
Chair

Dr Diana Owen OBE
Chair of Junior Judging Panel

Vicki Wienand
Chair of Senior Judging Panel



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

topic

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Will first

Fatima woke up with a heavy feeling in her chest. She looked at her phone next to her, and the tears that had kept her awake throughout the previous night threatened to overcome her. Now, dear reader, I tell you that Fatima is a very special person. She's an immigrant, the daughter of two parents who had fled their country –Bangladesh- to New Zealand, hoping above hope to give their daughter the life they didn't get. They struggled to maintain the best life for their daughter, trying to instill the values of Islam and their culture into her life; trying to teach her values others don't have; and trying above all, to teach her through the easy way, lessons that they learned the hard way- lessons on life.

Yet here she was, enduring pain so great, over trouble so small. The trouble that her parents tried to avoid, now came to their daughter in the image of Emily. A fight that had been the center of attention to all people in Fatima's school had occurred, a fight where Emily – being amongst the most popular girls in Fatima's school – mentioned all of the insecurities of poor 15 year old Fatima, shattering confidence her parents had struggled to build over years of dedication.

Fatima gathered her self-composure and went to take a shower. It was Friday, and her uncle would soon be up to go for prayer (her father was to stay in bed due to a slight fever). After she was done, she looked at the mirror. She looked at her face, at her dark texture. She looked at the pimples that had invaded her left temple. She looked at her hair; her smooth silky hair, thinking about how she had to hide it under her hijab. She thought of that and all of what Emily had said. All she had mentioned. Her hijab, her appearance, her heavy Bengali accent, how she didn't belong, the small number of followers on her Instagram account (a humble 692). She shouldn't think about that. No. she wouldn't. She held her tears back and exited the toilet.

After getting dressed, Fatima checked her phone. And there it was: her breaking point. Her Instagram account had lost followers – 465 followers – in one night! She collapsed onto her bed and unleashed the ocean of tears she had been holding inside. Now, while you might wonder about the significance of such a number to a young girl, allow me to tell you that this number meant her social life was ruined. And so it was that Fatima began weeping, muffling her heartfelt sobs with a pillow, until her beloved uncle entered her room.

He did not know the reason for her tears, but he knew that they were precious; and that they were not to be wasted. And so the time ran by and Fatima's tears dried up, her grip around her uncle tightened with affection. Finally, he asked her about what happened, and as surprising as it may seem, she told him. And soon enough, he was comforting her. His words seemed to ease her pain, his soothing gentle voice assuring her of her worthiness, while his soft fingers caressed her cheeks. 'Ekhanae aso, let's go to the mosque for prayer, there is nowhere nearly as comforting'.

As a girl, Fatima was not obliged to go to the mosque, and usually preferred the comfort of her home. As a matter of fact, a slight guilt nagged at her conscience as she contemplated the fact that she was not nearly as religious as her parents. But that was a topic to fret over later. Still though, she did not want to disappoint her uncle, so she went with him. On the way to the mosque, Fatima thought about her uncle's words. Touching as they were, she could not help but notice the prominent Bengali accent. And it made little sense to take advice from a man aged 40 with less than 200 followers on all his social media accounts put together. Not that Fatima disliked him or anything, it's just that he wasn't the one to ask about such topics.

And now, she sat there, barely paying attention to the words of the sheikh, fidgeting with her hijab, subconsciously wishing to take it off, while her thoughts went to Emily. And at this very moment, her teenager's instincts kicked in, and she resolved to text Emily and apologize to her, as an attempt, to mend what had been broken, dismissing her dignity as a mere price; one she was more than willing to pay in return for regaining her previous status.

Why did time have to pass so slowly?!

All of a sudden, a loud 'bang' shook the place, the sound echoing several times under the mosque's naturally amplifying domes. And then another boom and another and another. Before long, screams filled the silent place and blood was splattered all over the ground. She watched with horror as a white male, in black clothes marched in with a gun mowing down innocent men and women. All this Fatima saw and heard in seconds. It was a veritable pandemonium and Fatima searched frantically for her uncle through the blood-splattered crowd. Worried to tears, she screamed his name, but her voice got drowned in the melee of agonized voices.

And then, the attacker stopped, turned and exited. Fatima rushed to look for her uncle among the many deformed and ruined faces on the ground. Some had holes while others looked as though they had been smashed up into a pile of gore, resembling a poached animal more than a humane face. Desperately, she tried to avoid stepping on any dead bodies- a feat that seemed impossible. Never before has a mosque been filled with such stench of vomit, blood and urine, so shame her not when her own bile was added to the mess. And finally, she spotted him, bleeding from a wound in his shoulder. Hurrying toward him she ran. All of a sudden, her foot got stuck on a body and she tripped. As she struggled to get up, she heard the banging noise renewed, and saw a new dark red stain appear in her uncle's chest. An agonizing shout of grief escaped her mouth, lost among the parade of wails filling the area. He was only in his forties.

Twirling around to shout for help, a sharp blow caught her on her left temple as the barrel of a gun connected. The lights went out as she collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

By and by the days and nights passed, and for five mornings Fatima's parents worried about her, next to her in bed, waiting for her recovery. The family had to bear the double whammy of losing a close relation and having their daughter permanently scarred, physically and mentally; and the tears of grief from Fatima's eyes were enough to break the stoniest of hearts. Her sleep that day had been tormented enough. Images of her uncle being murdered haunted her. She saw the man in black -the attacker- take the mask off, revealing his face: Emily. She saw Emily let out a shriek of laughter as she shot her uncle

again in his chest, finishing him off. She saw as Emily took her black jacket off, revealing a shirt that read: sponsored by Facebook. And then Emily's face changed. It became Fatima's face. But there was something different about it. The pimples were gone, her hair was flowing and clearly visible to all who passed, and her eyes shining with mad glee. Fatima's image was perfect.

But no, she cared not anymore. Her uncle had died and he was only in his forties. *Why did time pass so quickly?*

Next day, she looked at her face, her pimples were now nowhere to be seen, instead covered by the scar from her wound. Without much thought, she took a photo of herself, and posted it, saying '*Bengali, Muslim, scarred and proud*' she paid no attention to the reactions, instead going to the mosque to pray, as an act of solidarity - for her uncle that is. Such is the spirit of a youthful teenager.

She expected the mosque to be empty after the gruesome event of the previous week, but instead it was packed; with women exceeding men! Asking around, she was directed to a woman in hijab as the one responsible, who took one look at Fatima's face before embracing her tightly. Pulling back, Fatima saw it was Emily. "I'm so sorry" she said, and to Fatima's surprise, she pulled out her phone to show that the last post she had put on Instagram had gotten thousands of likes around the world. In fact, the world was using social media to show their support and rectify this mistake. And then, with Emily supporting Fatima's slightly limp body, they entered the mosque together, Muslim and Christian alike.