



## THE OLD ITALIAN Bushra Rehman

When Saima and I ran outside, a train was just passing. Saima's house was crammed up next to the train tracks, and every time one passed, it would blast through, blowing garbage and letting its long wild siren blow in the air. The houses were all by the railroad tracks like this:

railroadtracksrailroadtracksrailroadtracks

Farah's house/Old Italian's house

Saima's house/Lucy's house

When Saima and I got outside, with the sound of her little brother Zia screaming behind us, we saw that Lucy and Farah were already hanging out in the frontyard, under the grape vines. Zia was screaming because his mother was forcing tablespoons of hot chili powder into his mouth. It was

the way Saima and Zia's mother punished them.

It was hot hot hot. Lucy was sitting on a milk crate snapping her gum and her long dark hair. She was wearing short shorts. Her belly was chubby as cake. It pushed through her t-shirt.

Farah was lying out flat, hogging the entire sofa Lucy's mother had put out under the grape vines.

All over Corona, there were sofas like this, growing like mushrooms in our front yards, yellow, red, orange, brown. Who could get rid of a sofa after paying so much? This one was red vinyl, and I could hear Farah's skin unstick when she got up.

'I'm bored,' Farah said when she saw us.

'I'm bored too,' Lucy said.

'I'm bored three,' Saima said. 'Move over.' She pushed Farah's skinny legs over to the side.

'Whaddayou want to do?' Farah asked. She must have been too hot to start a fight.

No one answered for a few minutes.

'We could go get some icies,' I suggested.

'Anyone got money?' Lucy looked around, but we all shook our heads no. We were ten so we didn't have jobs.

'We could go to the park,' I said.

We heard the sound of Zia crying from one floor up.

Saima's eyes stayed looking at the window. 'My mother's not going to

let me,' she said.

'You know when Aman crashed his bike in the fence?' Farah asked. Aman was Farah's brother who no one liked. We stayed quiet and Farah made a face. 'Now there's a hole where we can look into the next yard along.'

The Old Italian's yard was a field of sunflowers. He must have planted them years ago, crammed up each seed close to each other, and now the sunflowers grew so close together and so tall we could see their heads bend over the fence. On warm days in the summer, the Old Italian wandered through his garden, a floating head among the flowers. But mostly he leaned out from his second floor window, smoking his pipe and letting his belly hang out. He was always looking at whatever was going on in the neighborhood, at the new Halal meat stores and Dominican mothers pushing wheelie carts.

Saima reached over her head and snapped some grapes off the vine. There were a few that had survived and turned purple and sweet. Then she jumped up. 'Let's go.'

We were all experts at climbing fences, and in a few minutes we were pushing against each other to press our eyes against the large crack Farah had found in the fence. The crack was the size of a hand. I saw the Old Italian. The knees of his pants were worn from bending down to water the flowers. He poured water and it caught the light. The sunflowers stiffened and straightened, and the light moved through the flowers like lions set loose in Queens.

Up close, the Old Italian was a giant. There were puffs of white hair around his smooth bald head and his face was old and sun burnt, cracked. He was wearing a white tank top and it made his skin look older. He had a shoebox in his arms.

‘Whaddya think is in that box?’ Lucy whispered. She pressed her body up against the fence.

‘Maybe a dead baby,’ I said.

‘Don’t be stupid. It’s a shoebox. He’s probably got shoes in it. And stop hogging already.’ Farah pulled Lucy and me out of the way.

‘It could be a really small baby,’ Saima said, and I laughed.

All of a sudden, Saima screamed and pushed back so fast, we all fell over. And there was the Old Italian’s eye pressed up into the crack looking back at us. Just as quick as it had come, his eye disappeared.

‘Great idea, Farah,’ Lucy said as she dusted off her legs. She was starting to grow hair on her calves. It was still light blond, but I could see it as her skin got darker in the summer.

Farah straightened her skinny body up. ‘Whatever. I’m not scared of him. Let him come over here.’

‘Oh yeah what would you do?’ Saima’s kameez had also gotten dirt on it and she was quickly trying to rub it off. I knew her mother would not be happy about cleaning another dirty salwar.

While we were arguing the Old Italian had walked around the corner and come in through Farah’s fence. He walked slowly with a limp. His pants

were blue and splattered with paint. He had a big belly as if he was pregnant.

He spoke with a thick accent. ‘Hallo.’

‘Hello,’ we mumbled as if we were in school. It was the first time the old Italian had ever talked to us.

The heat was pushing off the cement. I heard cicadas, and the sound of a train over them. He was still carrying the shoebox and he held it out to us.

We gathered around the box, and this time we didn’t push. It was lined with newspaper, and in the center, there was a tiny grey kitten. She was so tiny she could’ve fit into my palm. Her fur puffed up all around her like a grey halo.

‘I find her in the flowers,’ he said.

We looked up at him. We had all become mute with the kitten so close. I had never seen a kitten in real life. I had only seen them on the Scholastic posters my family couldn’t afford to buy. I reached out to touch her softness. She was grey as a cloud on a thundery day, as the balls of wool that settled under the furniture of Saima’s house.

When I touched her, a spark of electricity flew in through my fingers and the world around me came into focus. I saw the chain links of the fence, the weeds that grew up and everywhere in Farah’s and Saima’s yard. Everything compared to the kitten felt harsh, dirty, brown, covered with graffiti.

Our neighbourhood was left over from the Italians. When we moved

in, most of them moved out. But some of the old ones hadn't left. They sat on stoops with milky white skin and let the sun drip over them, or they hid behind doorways, stacks of old newspapers and cold salads. They watched us all the time, frowning.

They had spent a generation planting and creating gardens out of the hard rock soil of Queens. When mostly Italians lived there, gardenias and roses grew, cherry trees and magnolias burst from the ground. But in our hands, these same gardens filled up with weeds, old sofas and rusty old cans.

'You wan' her?'

'Oh yes, yes, yes,' we all said.

He grunted, relieved we had finally said something. And just like that, he became uncomfortable. He placed the box down under the grape vines. He walked back out through the fence, back to his garden.

Like a pressure cooker bursting, everyone starting talking at once. 'Stop touching her!' 'You stop touching her!' And soon we all were fighting.

'Stop! You're scaring her!' Lucy yelled and the kitten jumped inside the box.

She was shivering. For all she knew, we could have been shouting about how to kill her.

I turned to Lucy. 'Can you bring milk?' Lucy could go into her fridge without her mother yelling at her.

Lucy hesitated, then she said, 'Only if one of you come with me.'

Saima and Farah both looked at me. Lucy was Dominican, and our mothers wouldn't let us go into anyone's house who wasn't Pakistani, but I lived two blocks away so my mother was the least likely to find out. And besides, Lucy was my friend. I followed her back over the fence to her yard.

There was a door that had once connected the two yards, maybe back in the day of the Italians. But it had rusted shut so we always had to climb the fence. My salwar snagged and ripped on a chain link. My mother was definitely not going to be happy about that.

'They should figure out how to open this stupid door,' I said.

Inside Lucy's house, everything was different than I imagined. The way Saima's mother described it, I would have thought there were fountains of beer and drugs everywhere. I didn't know what drugs looked like though, so while Lucy went into the kitchen, I looked around for something that might be drugs.

There was an old table fan going in the livingroom, blowing hot air around. There were orange plastic sofas, an old TV with aluminum foil on the antenna, books, newspapers and shoes scattered around the brown carpet. It could have been anyone's house. When I went into the kitchen behind Lucy, I saw they even had the same fridge as Saima. When Lucy opened it up, there was beer inside and for some reason I felt better.

'We better hurry, my mother's still in the bedroom putting her face on.'

Before I could ask what that meant, I heard her mother call out, 'Lucy?'

Lucy didn't answer, but she should've because just then her mother came in. She must have been getting ready to go out. Her hair was all in pink curlers and her make-up was half on, half off. Lucy was just about to pour some milk into a cracked cereal bowl. Her mother smiled at me, but then looked at Lucy and said something in Spanish. Lucy started talking back to her mother, but I didn't understand what she was saying.

I looked back and forth between them. From Lucy's hands, the way she moved them around, I knew she was telling her mother about the kitten. Her mother's smile got tighter and tighter and then finally snapped and fell apart. She said something else and Lucy looked at me as if to say 'it's time to leave'.

When we walked out, Lucy carried the bowl carefully. There was just a little milk in it, but it was enough for now.

I climbed over the fence first. Lucy passed the bowl to me and then climbed over too.

'How would it feel,' I asked, 'if you lost your mother?' I was thinking of the kitten.

Lucy didn't answer at first. She concentrated on getting her bare legs over the fence. When she was on the other side she said, 'If I lost my mother that would be good 'cause then she wouldn't be yelling at me all the time.'

I decided not to ask Lucy what her mother had said. Even with Saima and Zia's mother, I never asked. She was always yelling in Pashto, and I knew it wasn't always good.

When we got back to Farah's yard, Saima and Farah were still playing with the kitten. Saima was saying, 'meow' over and over again, trying to speak in the kitten's language. There wasn't room in the shoebox for the bowl of milk.

Everyone else was too scared to do it, so I lifted her out of the box. I could feel her small bones in my hand. I put her under the grape vines. We watched as she explored the dirt and sticks scattered there. The kitten was still shivering, but when we put the bowl of milk next to her, her pink tongue came out like a snail, and she started drinking.

I don't know how the whole day passed, but we couldn't feel the heat anymore. We spent the whole afternoon with the kitten. Saima, Farah and I wanted to give her a Muslim name, but Lucy wanted to give her a Catholic name like Maria. We finally settled on Maria Perez Parvez Din. But since that was too long we just called her Miss Kitten.

We decided Lucy had to beg her mother to keep it. It had to be Lucy because we were Muslim and Lucy was Dominican and everyone knew Muslims didn't have pets. Lucy looked doubtful, but she said she'd ask.

The next morning I was up early. After eating nashta, my mother gave me permission to go back to Saima's and Lucy's. I told her all about the kitten. She gave me a look but let me run over right after breakfast to check on it.

When I got to Saima's and Lucy's, Lucy was under the grape trees. The front of her t-shirt was wet with her tears. By her feet was the box with the

kitten, but I didn't hear any kitten sounds.

I looked in the box and it was empty.

'What happened to Miss Kitten?' I asked.

Lucy didn't answer, she just ran inside and slammed her door shut. I rang Saima's doorbell. But no one answered there either.

I heard the sound of the train coming from the back alley next to the railroad tracks. I knew I shouldn't follow it but I did.

At the end of the alley, there was a circle of kids, and Zia and his friend Nelson were in the center. There was a circle of blood at his feet. Zia was holding what looked like a rat in his hands.

The children were yelling. 'Throw it! Throw it!'

'Zia!' I was only a few years older than him, but in our families that still had some power. 'Zia!'

He turned and looked at me and there was terror in his face. I must have sounded like his mother. But the crowd was pushing now. He turned his back on me, arched his arm back. I saw it was our kitten in his hands. Its body sailed through the air, and it landed on the railroad tracks.

It could have still been living when the train came.

'Zia!' I screamed and ran to grab him, but all the boys scattered and ran down the alley laughing. 'Zia! Zia!' But my voice sounded like nothing under the tracks of the screaming train.

When I walked back, my throat felt like it had a rope tied around it. The Old Italian had limped out into the back alley and was looking at the

ring of blood in the cement. I felt sick. He looked at me and the concern left his face. It filled instead with the look I saw from all the other Italians. A look of hate.

And then I knew they were right. We were bad. We were as dirty as all the old Italians said. We didn't know how to take care of life. We didn't know how to grow anything and when we touched the world it died.

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