

Hands

by Barakah Shakoor

Content warning: This story contains mention of abusive relationships.

If Nuha moved, she knew she wouldn't be returning to her dorm with traditional exhaustion. An encounter that would cause her brain and chest to burst into flames more destructive than exhaustion loomed before her. She forced herself to stop breathing. Ameer, her ex-boyfriend, did not have supersonic hearing, but his girlfriend did. Two leaves blowing across the pavement triggered a flick of her head, her waist-length, henna-wrung hair blanketing her shoulder and then returning down her back as she refocused her attention on Ameer.

They crossed the street. To pick up Arianna, Ameer's sister, Nuha knew. Once their silhouettes ceased to exist, Nuha walked briskly down Jalan Gasing, as the Thursday sky turned its evening hue. She grabbed a front tuft of her choppy, cropped hair and started tugging it backwards, a habit of hers when nervous.

"Is that Nuha?! *Nuha!*"

Her head flicked with a severe lack of elegant hair-blanketing, and she found that her calculus classmate, Jasveen, was behind the wheel of the Proton Persona next to her. Removing her grip from her hair, she waved. Of course, she was offered a ride. Of course, she accepted.

She didn't expect the back seat to be occupied by Vasu. She had seen Jodie in the passenger's side but Vasu was hunched over her knees, thumbs speedily jabbing at her phone screen. She tilted her head up slightly to look at Nuha, her eyes squinted. Nuha knew that look. And she returned it.

It had been this way for the past two years. Nuha frequently questioned (in her mind) why they were cultivating a childish rivalry as college sophomores. She wondered if Vasu ever felt it foolish of them too. Living across the hall from each other and having two classes together was not the best set-up for their little dynamic. Nuha accidentally tripping her in the bathroom on their second day of university had gotten them off to a rough start but Nuha didn't believe that two years of an attitude could be the result of an accident. Vasu just thought she was better than her. Right? And Nuha wasn't eager to argue with that.

Vasu could have a chat with anyone and leave them yearning for more of her attention. Vasu could start a debate with a lecturer mid-lesson. Vasu could bring home record-breaking wins for the netball team. Charm was something she casually possessed. Like an earring.

Forgoing much thought, Nuha instinctively returned the hostility that she received. Feeling unfairly loathed by someone who maintained such affability was reason enough for her to become slightly obnoxious.

Strangely enough, though, her relationship with Vasu brought her comfort at times. It was a constant in her life. She'd experienced so many drastic changes in her world one after another over the past two years, the whiplash costing her internal stability. She found relief in the things that stayed the same.

"Hey, there's the bus." Vasu jutted her chin out towards the windshield. "Why didn't you take that, eh?" Her sharp but thin, angled eyebrows furrowed.

Ameer and Hannah were about to cross the street when the bus passed and she had frozen in her tracks. Nuha wasn't going to say that.

"I...wanted to stop by the pisang goreng stall."

Vasu's eyes squinted further. "Hello? Are you stupid? You shouldn't walk alone at night."

As Vasu threw her head backwards onto her headrest, shoulder-length straggly waves doing a complete flip, Nuha noticed something behind her. A scene so dreadful she never thought she'd witness it in her lifetime. Her heart leaped to the back of her mouth and her body felt like it had frozen over. A split second passed before she dove over to Vasu and pulled the both of them down to the floor of the car. She was met with a shocked frown. It was transitioning into a glare when Nuha screamed.

Screams filled the Persona after that. The vehicle swerved in a way that replicated a video game. Everything felt so slow yet so fast.

Gun shots after gun shots. Nuha thought her time was up. She said her testimony. She was expecting them to crash at any second, just as other cars already had.

The black-suited and black-masked individual who had charged towards Vasu's door with a pointed gun had shot, but above the car. And a series of shots had followed.

Nuha's eyes were clamped shut like that was what her life depended on. She only realized they had been shut after opening them. An entire movie had been

playing in her head. She'd been watching the past, hypothetical present and hypothetical future.

It was quieter now. Her senses slowly returned to her. She first felt Vasu's nails digging into her back. Peeking out the window, she recognized a stone pillar that could only be the Universiti Malaya archway.

At that exact point, Jasveen topped the list of drivers Nuha trusted.

No one was allowed to leave their house that night as the shooter was searched for. Nuha lied diagonally across her bed, ankles hanging off the mattress.

The news had plunged through the internet. The shooter's motto was "Di tangan aku!". This was apparently what they had shouted with each shot. "Dengar! Senang sahaja untuk mati! Hidup engkau di tangan aku! Di tangan aku!" was the series of exclamations that one video had captured. Nuha had heard the shooter screaming in the car but the words hadn't registered to her until she'd seen the recording.

There were three injuries, but from car crashes, not bullets. No deaths. Thank God.

She got up and grabbed her toiletries basket. A calming shower was much needed.

It was like a mirrored image: Vasu came out of the door across from her, basket of toiletries in hand and towel slung over shoulder. A two-second hard stare was exchanged before they both walked down the hall.

This was very awkward. What do you say after an event like that?

Nuha had barely rested her foot inside the stall with the water heater when Vasu said, "Hey. I want hot water." Monotonous. Low-pitched.

But Nuha wanted hot water. She couldn't have a calming bath in freezing cold water.

It may have been the fact that Nuha had just witnessed Vasu in a vulnerable state and hence wasn't very intimidated by her in that moment, it may have been the combined stress from that evening's events, but all Nuha knew was that water temperature was suddenly a major concern for her.

"Well? Wait for a while then."

"You usually use cold—" Vasu didn't miss a beat as if Nuha's very breath offended her.

“Yeah, well not tonight. I got here first. Just wait,” Nuha snapped. And she slammed the stall door shut and latched it behind her.

She held her face in her hands and breathed long, silent breaths. It felt hot.

After she finally turned on the water, she let it trickle onto her face first. The face she swore filled her father with sheer terror. Whenever he was around she spared him any eye contact, feeling like Medusa.

She used her hands to distribute the flimsy stream across her body. Two thick, silver rings encircled each of her middle fingers. Her nails were very short; bitten to the bone by anxiety. Cringing, she thought about how she used to hold Ameer’s hands with these hands.

One of the rings was given to her by Tasha. Tasha wouldn’t have let her stay with Ameer. Tasha would have gotten her out of it. Tasha, her friend since primary school who, fifteen months ago, never made it back home after a trip to Nuha’s house. Tasha, who caused Nuha to start praying properly again, because Tasha deserved heaven and therefore heaven had to be real.

Dragging her fingers through her hair, she thought about how her father had become even more of an enemy after she’d cut it that short. Maybe her mother would be experiencing lesser of his fits had she not cut it. She remembered how Ameer had plainly detested her after she’d cut it. He had said it made him feel like he was dating a boy. Her hair was already short beforehand and she’d wanted it even shorter because it always grew out quickly. She liked how short hair felt. She thought about how Tasha had been so excited for her to cut it short, as Nuha had been expressing her desire to do so for a while. Ultimately, she’d done it for Tasha. In memory of her.

Nuha should have obeyed her father more, so as to spare her mother. Just like she should never have trusted Ameer. There were red flags. She shouldn’t have ignored them. Just like she shouldn’t have let Tasha go home alone that day.

This was not a calming shower.

She left the stall and quickly walked back to her room.

She noticed Vasu standing at the mirrors, drying her hair.

Nuha, Jodie and Hakim were sat at a table in the corner of the library. They had planned a discussion for their programming project. Instead, they were discussing the previous night.

Hakim fell into a trance the second he learned that Nuha and Jodie had both been physically there. He drank in every word they uttered. “Gila sial,” he said when they finished their recap. “What do you think their motive was?”

“Was there even a motive? Sounds like they wanted to act like God to me. Like they had the power to cause death,” said Jodie.

“I’ve been thinking that, too. That’s why no one was shot. They just wanted that feeling. Kan?”

“But still...why? Why would they want to feel like God? What lead them to that point?” Nuha thought aloud.

“Ha’ah, that’s the thing, too.”

“Sorry I’m late.” Ezra sighed as he joined them. “You guys are talking about last night, I assume?”

Three heads nodded.

“Guy must be out of his *mind* lah.”

“We don’t know if it’s a guy, technically,” Nuha commented.

“Eh, only a guy would do something as gila as that. Probably some girl broke his heart and now he wants to terrorize her and everyone.” Ezra moved his hand as if waving the subject away. “I’ve had this conversation five times already today, jom mula.” He opened his laptop.

“Oh my God, jom! Kali keenam, here we come.” Hakim leaned over the table with exaggerated enthusiasm. “Okay guys, so the shooting tu kan—”

“Hakim, I will kill you.”

But they had all cracked smiles. Nuha knew that Hakim was patting himself on the back for that one.

Jodie was having a small party at her house that night. Nuha, Jasveen and Ezra could each invite one person and that chain of invitations could go on for five more people. An open party was not at all an option with the shooting situation. Nuha had invited Hakim.

Nuha’s mother called her at the party. She rushed into a bedroom to answer it.

“Nuha, kenapa tak balik rumah?” Mama said, worry dripping from her tone.

“Ada banyak assignment. Tapi dekat kolej okay je, Mama.”

“Is it safe? Tolong lah balik kalau boleh.”

“It’s okay, Ma. Boleh je duduk kolej.”

“Stay safe—ah, ah. Tengah cakap dengan Nuha. Nuha, Nuha.” Mama started rushing her words. Nuha already knew what that meant. Ayah had entered the room. Nuha wished she could grab her mother through the phone and pull her away.

“Mama, bagi Nuha cakap dengan Ayah.”

“Oh...ni, Nuha nak cakap ni.”

A bit of commotion and then silence followed. Nuha couldn't make out the words of her father, and she knew her mother was purposely putting her hand over the phone. “Ma?”

“Ya, sayang,” her mother said a moment later. “Ayah ada kerja. Nanti boleh cakap dengan dia, eh?”

Nuha knew her father had said he didn't want to speak to her. Well, she had just wanted to take his attention off of Mama. And it had worked. He'd been reminded of how much he disliked Nuha and left.

“Nuha kena pergi dulu, ya Mama. Take care. Love you.”

“Okay, baik-baik eh. Love you, too.”

Returning to the party, Nuha adjusted her favorite orange sweater vest and surveyed the scene. Hakim was slouched across the couch. Ezra was talking to a girl she didn't know. Jodie was sitting with Jasveen and Vasu. Hannah was—

Hannah.

Hannah was there. Someone in one of the invitation chains had invited her.

If Hannah was there, then...

“That's Nuha lah, bodoh.”

Her brain forgot its function. There was no way. No way.

She bobbed her head to the side, wide-eyed, like a clueless chicken. As if to see who it was, but she already knew. Of course it was him.

He was with his friend Khairul. “Oh. Hi, Nuha,” Khairul said, glancing down at her as the two of them passed.

Ameer made a sound like he'd been holding a laugh in his nose. “Baju macam construction worker.” It was said loudly enough for her to hear, but it wasn't said to her. Just a passing comment. As if Nuha was a museum exhibition. She heard Khairul chuckle and quickly walked away before she could witness anything else.

She sat down on a bar stool, her back to everything. Closing her eyes, she did breathing exercises as she fiddled with one of the zippers of her cargo pants.

“Hey.”

Nuha took her face out of her hand. She gave a lame smile.

“That’s him, kan.”

She gave a slight nod.

“Nak aku dropkick cakap je.”

She gave one of those sharp-breath laughs. Hakim was funny. She wondered why funny people were always the best at comforting others.

Nuha had confided in him once about Ameer. It was about a month ago, after she was forced to quit therapy because she could no longer afford it. Hakim had sensed that something was off with her and invited her to rant to him via text. He validated her experience in his unique way, and the fact that someone who wasn’t her therapist understood her made Nuha feel better.

“You want to go outside? Ni rumah orang kaya, ni! Let’s go to the backyard. If you want.”

That did sound nice. So they went.

On the way there, they crossed paths with Hannah. Hannah immediately faltered and walked away quickly.

It was because Hannah used to go out with Hakim, until two weeks ago. This party was really on a roll, grouping exes in the same place. Nuha knew it was unintentional. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that she deserved better. She did not deserve to bump into Ameer that night.

Nuha sat on the swinging bench while Hakim sat on the lounge chair. Yes, it had already occurred to Nuha that her and Hakim’s exes were now together. They never spoke of it. Nuha liked that.

“Aiyo, I was just about to relax.” A figure sat up on the hammock. It was dark; they hadn’t noticed them before.

“Shut up, Vasu. Tidur je.”

Vasu flipped Hakim off. “Mampos. Nuha, why are you hanging out with this fella?” She lied back down, her back towards the both of them.

Nuha didn’t respond. Vasu didn’t normally talk to her like that. She didn’t feel like she deserved a response.

“Ha, now that we’re all best friends here, let’s count stars! I don’t know if Vasu can count properly, lah, but let’s attempt—”

“I already said mampos, okay.” Nuha wasn’t familiar with that tone of voice from Vasu. It was an amused kind of frustrated. Nuha was accustomed to purely frustrated Vasu.

Nuha was half-smiling. She didn’t want to, because Vasu was involved. But Hakim was funny. Nuha had a hard time not smiling at any joke a funny person cracked.

“K.L. got no stars, pun, Hakim,” Nuha pointed out.

“Tak, sekarang ni, I want to see if Vasu can count the few stars visible. Serious.”

Vasu groaned. “I hate you.”

Nuha’s half-smile cracked into a full one.

She was grateful for Hakim.

It was ten p.m., about ten minutes after they’d left the party. Nuha was carpooling with Jasveen, Vasu and Ezra.

Ezra gasped loudly all of a sudden, mid-phone scroll. “That’s insane,” he said, mouth in an O. “On the highway near Jodie’s house. The same shooting just happened.”

“Near her house?!” Vasu and Jasveen exclaimed. Nuha stared at Ezra’s phone in horror.

“It happened on the highway, lah, there. Not near her house.”

“Yeah, but aren’t her parents on the way home?” Jasveen’s eyes were so wide her eyelashes touched her eyebrows.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m calling her right now,” Vasu said immediately.

Jodie’s parents were safe. There were no injuries. The person had sent bullets into the sky, declaring “Di tangan aku!”.

The police had still failed to apprehend them. They’d vanished after ten seconds. Nuha felt like she was going to throw up. It was exceedingly unsettling to have been so close to both shootings. She was scared for the people she knew more than she was scared for herself. Her family was in Taiping. Many of the people she knew were from the capital city itself.

She was now in her dorm, alone, as her roommate had gone home for the weekend. She lied there, in the dark, marinating in a pool of dread. Her mattress was

already uncomfortable. She usually liked being alone in her room, but tonight wasn't usual.

A knock on her door.

"Siapa?" she called groggily.

"It's me."

A short circuit. A blown fuse. Nuha's thought system was crashing as she got up and opened the door. Vasu stood in her pajamas, pillow and bolster in hand.

"Um. I...my roommate left. Is it...okay if I just...?"

There was obviously no need to say that she was scared, because the context of the situation explained it all. But Nuha was still bewildered. Vasu...coming to *her* when she was scared? Where was Mercury currently?

"Okay," said Nuha. Because what could she say. Sure, she had snapped at her the night before, but this situation wasn't at all appropriate for rejection.

"I can't sleep." Vasu's voice was muffled by her pillow. They had been lying down for a few minutes.

Nuha's brain had been going a million miles a minute ever since she closed the door. Vasu was on her roommate's bed, a meter from her. Like, she was just there. Randomly.

"Me neither."

"What helps you sleep, Nuha?"

Why was she saying her name? There was no need. "Uh. Watching YouTube." She'd religiously distracted herself with YouTube post-therapy.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" Vasu's voice had a crack in it that made it sound like a whisper.

They watched a movie.

Vasu's breath on her shoulder as they huddled over the MacBook. Knees knocking like they had on the floor of Jasveen's car.

As the credits rolled, Vasu murmured, "Do you think you can sleep now?"

Nuha nodded.

No. Her heart rate did not let her sleep for fifty-three minutes.

Nuha tugged on a front tuft of her hair.

"Hey, don't lah mess up your hair." Vasu reached across the table and ran her hand through where Nuha had just pulled. "Have you ever tried to slick it back?"

“Um. No. The front is too short for that.” Nuha nibbled on her nail.

“Wait ah, let me try something.” Vasu eagerly zipped open her pencil case and extracted two paperclips.

Nuha watched her fingers as they fashioned a large bobby pin.

Suddenly, her hair was being tugged again. She couldn’t believe Vasu was clipping her hair back with paperclips.

“Okay, now smile!” Suddenly Vasu had her phone out and was snapping her photo.

Nuha did think she looked nice with it clipped back. But she wasn’t going to tell Vasu that.

They left the library, as they had gone there to relieve themselves of their post-party guilt. Several assignments were due the following week.

They hadn’t gone together. Nuha had shown up, seen Vasu and sat with her. She had wanted to see how Vasu would react.

It was getting dark as they walked back to their college. They took a shortcut behind the drains. This shortcut was taken only by the people who stayed on their floor (the second), as there was an old staircase that led up to it.

Ahead of them, a figure came into view from the left, and Nuha squinted to see which floormate it was.

For the third night in a row, her heart dropped.

It fully sank to the floor.

The person was black-suited and black-masked. Vasu stopped in her tracks and shrieked at the same time Nuha did.

The felon also seemed startled. Like they had not expected to run into anyone. Immediately, a gun was drawn. “Jangan jerit.” Their voice was deep yet soft.

Nuha and Vasu ran. They were swiftly blocked and grabbed harshly by their arms. In that moment, it became dreadfully apparent to Nuha that when someone with a gun has you in their grip, any resistance could get you offed.

As they were helplessly dragged across the grass, Nuha bit her tongue to suppress a scream. She felt so light-headed. Suppressing her screams was bringing tears to her eyes.

They were headed towards the cupboard next to the old stairs. It was where the janitors’ cleaning supplies were kept.

Before being thrown in, their phones and backpacks were taken.

“Jangan jerit. Jangan gerak. Sampai esok.”

And they were shut into complete darkness. The lock audibly turned and clicked. Nuha started quietly sobbing. Vasu was shivering next to her.

Nuha, again, was terrified of the endangerment of others’ well-being more than her own. What was the shooter doing *at her university*? She couldn’t bear to think about her college getting shot up.

“Okay,” Vasu whispered shakily.

Nuha felt a tug at her hair. She couldn’t see anything, but Vasu touched the point of the makeshift hair clip into her palm, and she understood. It was as if they were on the exact same page. They needed to get a warning out there.

“Will they notice?” Nuha asked.

“They left. I heard them walk away.”

“Do it.” She pressed herself up against the walls of the dusty, disgusting box and Vasu started picking the lock.

Nuha tried to steady her breathing. Vasu seemed so much braver than her.

After a moment, the door creaked open. Nuha silently gasped. She’d done it. The tiny ray of light allowed her to see Vasu peeking through the crack.

“No one. Come.” Vasu crawled out, Nuha in her wake. It was as if Nuha’s arms were struggling to hold her up—they were vibrating.

They crawled all the way to the corner of the building. Vasu knelt and peeked around the stone edge. She whispered, “Crawl around here after me. Then immediately run. Okay?”

“Okay,” Nuha breathed.

Vasu disappeared round the bend. Nuha could hear the lightest of footsteps taking off shortly thereafter.

Nuha had extended her knee forward when her life began flashing before her.

“Jangan gerak!” And Nuha saw the foot of a black suit in her peripherals.

A pause that was so short yet so long followed. Nuha’s insides had fully shriveled.

“Jangan. Gerak,” the voice repeated. This time it was more like the voice from earlier. It was much deeper. Artificial.

It was too late. Nuha already knew.

And Nuha knew he knew.

Of all emotions, Nuha's chest filled with regret in that moment. Because she had spent much of her life blaming herself. And it was unfair. She could see that as she crouched there, on one knee. That nothing was in her hands. Not what happened with her father, or Ameer, or Tasha. Nothing.

Because absolutely nothing could have forewarned her of this. She had been crawling on the pavement with her sworn enemy and now Hakim had a gun barrel to her skull.