American Standards

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"Face it, we're in a state of flush."

Harit hears the words but barely looks up from the toilets' latest analytics spread across his lab table. He will not encourage his colleague's levities. And what's worse, Drew always laughs at his own stupid puns. That ridiculous panting laugh of his that half comes out of his nose.

"C'mon, HazMat. You got to loosen your load," says Drew.

"Stop calling me that. I've told you time and again I don't appreciate that nickname . . . and this is serious. Months we've been at this. Months."

Across the workroom squat five of the newest prototypes, their porcelain glowing, their individual water supplies recycling. The race to perfect a self-cleaning toilet has become crucial in the industry. *Crucial*—that's upper management's term—as if not having to touch one's toilet bowl was the biggest issue in worldwide waste. So while these new rim designs are showing increased propulsion, the cleansing action is still requiring too much water. Well within EPA standards, yet still too much, as far as Harit's concerned.

He rubs at the back of his neck and finally notices Drew sitting astride one of the test toilets, a plunger raised in one fist like some scepter. Oh no, here it comes again, thinks Harit. *Off-With-Their-Heads!*

Instead, Drew's voice is soft. "We're getting closer, though," he says. "Admit it. A question of deciliters now, my liege . . . maybe we could retest surfactants?"

Harit sighs. "But closer to bloody what, Drew?! Meanwhile, the glaciers are melting!"

His colleague calmly sets aside the plunger, takes off his lab coat, and folds it over one forearm like a waiter. He stares back at Harit blankly, then at his wristwatch. "Well, for one thing, close to quitting time. And it's Thank God Friday! You taking Nareen out tonight?"

Harit glances toward their other colleagues across the room. "Keep your voice down, will you?"

The company has directives against dating fellow employees. Drew's the only coworker Harit has told, but now he's begun to regret that confidence.

"No, not tonight. Maybe tomorrow," he says.

"Maybe? Don't let her get away, my friend. Nareen's the real deal."

The real deal? The man's supply of ridiculous idioms and antics seems endless. Though younger, Drew's already married with two children. Mortgaged and out in the suburbs with a backyard barbecue. Living the American dream. Oblivious. Look, now he's back kneeling before the row of toilets.

"C'mon, you think tanks!" he pleads. "Help us out here. We're suffering from inspiration constipation."

Before heading back to his apartment, Harit stops at the nursing home. The October sun has already set by the time he parks his car round back. Three of the staff are smoking midway between the door and the dumpster, one vaping a significant cloud.

"Evening, Professor," says the one he recognizes.

"Hello…" Harit answers. He should know his name by now but doesn't pause to ask.

Another employee stands on a ladder inside, replacing fluorescent bulbs in the darkened corridor. For the moment, Harit feels adrift. Ahead, light spills from a side hallway he's never noticed before. At its far end is an open doorway, several seniors seated in a row within—raising alternating knees to the strains of tinny music, passing a blue ball, reaching for the ceiling. Aerobics this late in the day?

Upstairs, the elevator doors open across from the security desk. The guard on duty looks up and smiles at the small package in Harit's hands.

"Another pair?" she asks.

He shrugs, and she buzzes him in.

His mother keeps losing her slippers. This isn't all that unusual on her ward. Many of these residents have nametags sewn onto pieces of clothing. Taped to their eyeglasses. Harit has refused to let the staff do any such thing for his mother. She's been humiliated enough. Instead, he keeps bringing her new pairs. Each the same beige terrycloth, slip-ons for ease. In time, he figures he'll outfit the whole ward and it won't matter anymore.

Harit peeks into her room but finds it empty. Beside the bed hang devotional images of Ganesha and Sita. He sets down his package on the dresser atop the short stack of Hindi classics he sometimes reads to her. He steps back into the hallway.

"Try 303," says a passing nurse.

And that's where he finds her today, fast asleep across Mr. Feldshrieber's bed. His door was wide open too, and God knows where he is at this hour. Some days he'll find her here, some days she'll wander into other open rooms down the hall. It's not like there's any pattern.

She lies there half-curled with her robe riding up one thigh. A dark sock on the opposite foot, not hers. Harit adjusts the robe's hem back below her knee and listens for her shallow breaths. Carefully he slides over a chair from the corner. The whole ward is covered with the same cream-colored carpeting. Keeps things quieter, they say, but then there always seems to be some attendant vacuuming.

Harit sits at bedside and slips the stray sock off her foot. He massages the base of her instep, then each toe. Switches to the other foot. Her skin's grown so dry and cracked, her calf muscles no longer taut. As a boy he used to accompany her after school daily to Ealing's public swimming baths till it was time to go home and prepare supper. His sisters, seven and nine years older, taking turns on the diving board. He'd play alone in the shallows, though mostly kept track of his mother, counting her laps, back and forth. Back and forth.

She'd taken lessons and developed a strong and lean stroke, elegantly cutting through the water. She adored swimming. Every day, like it was another religion for her. Even if there had been a pool back in their Punjabi town, she wouldn't have felt the freedom to use it. She kept telling his sisters how thankful they should be to have emigrated. And how especially lucky Harit was to be born in England. Still, he'd always felt a bit foreign, both in and outside their new home.

Had he made the right choice bringing her to the States? Convincing his sisters? Certainly the initial doctors were better, and his insurance was generously covering her care now. But keeping her here, apart from everything recognizable?

Her family, her neighbors, her culture?

In the beginning, he brought some of her saris to the nursing home. He taught a couple of the attendants how to properly wrap them to drape down to her ankles. Within a month, however, the turmeric-colored one she loved most got soiled and his mother wailed as if in mourning. It was agreed he take them all away. Her accidents, after all, would only get more frequent.

All in all, though, the staff are quite understanding. On evenings that he arrives late, they let him overstay visiting hours. They even wash her thick hair twice a week, every Tuesday and Friday. He should wake her, he thinks. Bring her back to her room and give her the new slippers. But not just yet. Let her sleep.

He sits back in the chair, wondering what she might be dreaming. Or whether that was still even possible in her state? He pictures her mind like some lost boat helplessly tacking in the wind, seeking some faint shoreline. Some harbor. Across the room on the closet door hang drawings sent by Mr. Feldshrieber's grandchildren. Amorphous watercolors and crayoned scribbles, no discernable design whatsoever. And yet each one darling, each one a masterpiece. Nareen would like to have children. At thirty-two, she's made this much clear to him. Was Drew right? Could she be running out of patience? Perhaps, yet how could he think of marriage, let alone children with the globe in such peril.

When his mother finally awakens, she turns his way and, happily, there's a glint of recognition in her eyes today.

"Come, Mum. Let's take a little walk."

It's all a question of volume and pressure. Of dynamics and displacement. Elimination. Waste.

Harit sits idling in traffic, the crosstown backed up. Damn, he should've taken the back route to work. He glances at the dashboard clock again, lowers the heat another notch. Always a question of dispersal. Of optimal flow. Look at all these lanes and lives at a complete standstill. And these, the same people who can't be bothered to brush out their own toilet bowls? Ridiculous.

Back when he was fresh to America, that first year at MIT, he only rode a bicycle. That sky-blue Nishiki his roommate never used. Pedaling across campus from class to lab, his mind flitting from one lofty concept to the next. He and his classmates dizzily tearing down the road to innovation, every one of them a potential pioneer. In retrospect, they were all starved for sleep and running on near empty. Half blind and half-assed.

Behind him, someone leans on their horn. Harit can see the driver's face in the rearview mirror, her hands raised. As soon as possible, he squeezes into the exit lane, and at the bottom of the ramp she blazes past, running the yellow light and honking. At the first gas station, Harit pulls in. His bladder calling.

"You have a restroom?"

The kid behind the counter points with his thumb then holds out a key that's chained to a hubcap. Out back is a wall of worn radials, rusting wheel drums among the fallen leaves. Harit wedges his way into the tiny bathroom, unzips, and exhales.

Standing before the toilet, he thinks, how did I get here? He remembers those first months after graduation. The debt he incurred despite fellowships, his student visa running out. He took that first job, and then the second. And now this one, where day-to-day all he was really doing was helping market yet another superfluous product. Harit leans forward and spits into the bowl. Bull's-eye. *As close to perfect as possible*, that's the company's motto. As close to *profit*, is more like it.

Harit stares into the bowl, feeling complicit. His spit, a white island afloat in his urine. Another day of *eliminating design defects* yawning before him. My God, he could be doing real research somewhere. Maybe outside the States. A whole new cultural construct, that's what's needed. A complete shift in everyone's thinking about waste and accountability. About possibility.

He reaches for the toilet's handle, the yellow water swirling down the bowl, then swiftly refilling, clear and clean. Closing his eyes, he listens for the tank's float to reach level, then the hiss, and silence. Such a simple and convenient design, it hadn't been rethought for hundreds of years.

Harit waits, but neither the hiss nor silence comes, the water still cycling. He removes the tank's cover and untangles the chain—one of whose links he notes has been replaced by a paper clip—and the flapper falls into place. In the corner of the tank sits a brick.

"Ha, take that, you automatic sensors," he says. Then again, who was he kidding? The future was all on automatic. A veritable vortex.

He recalls the old overhead tank in the apartment where he grew up in London, and how his grandfather marveled at the whole contraption when he came to visit them—*All I do is pull this little chain and it all disappears?* This coming from a man who still squatted over a hole behind his home. Whose whole village still slung cow dung against stucco to dry for their fuel.

That's the kind of quantum leap he should be working on.

"It's ridiculous," says Harit, "this tinkering with toilets and antimicrobials. I mean, don't we have bigger fish to fry?"

Nareen sits across the table from him, her fork poised against the plate's white edge. She's hardly touched her meal, though she selected this restaurant. Turkish. The portions are ample and hearty—tomatoes, eggplant, kebobs, and rice, something like raita yet tinged with paprika. He picked the movie prior, a thriller with a woman in the leading role he'd hoped she would like. The theater, however, was packed and they wound up having to sit far closer to the screen than usual.

"Don't you like the food either?" he asks.

"No, it's just . . . I wish we could talk about something other than work." Nareen exhales and stabs at a cube of lamb. "Plus we've been through this. If you really believe it's so urgent, then you should do something about it, Harit. Quit!"

Her words sound more frustrated than angry. She's right, though. All he ever does is complain about the company's practices. Last month, Nareen's division was restructured and she was passed up for promotion. Harit was incensed at first, ranting how she was clearly the sharpest and most qualified. He suggested she file for discrimination, but that wasn't what Nareen seemed to want from him. Nor is work or the nursing home where she needs him to focus his attentions.

"How's your mother?" she asks, as if reading his thoughts.

Harit swallows a forkful. Delaying.

"Now, there's a far more pleasant subject," he says.

Thankfully, Nareen's expression warms. "No, really, tell me something. Anything."

To date he's avoided sharing many details and hasn't dared bring Nareen to the nursing home, convinced it would be a disaster. His Mum's so traditional, and while Nareen's secular, she's still Muslim-born. And Iranian.

"Well, she's much the same, I suppose. In and out. Thinks she's still in London and can't figure out the attendants' accents. Thinks *they're* the immigrants."

The waiter approaches with a ceramic pitcher. They both watch him refill their water glasses.

"And?" says Nareen.

Her tone's not pushy, just curious.

"And?… OK, one evening this week she thought I was my father. Called me Buggi."

"Buggi?"

"Yeah, her pet name for him."

"That sounds sweet," says Nareen.

"I guess. Must've thought she was in their bedroom. The old Ealing apartment I told you about."

"Where you grew up."

"Yes."

Harit takes a sip of water. Nareen raises her eyebrows.

"And, I . . . I played along. Called her Jaan, which is what he often called her."

To his surprise, Harit nearly tears up. Deep down, he's still torn over not being present when his father died. About not getting back in time. He turns aside. Nearby sits another couple, younger. They haven't yet received their food, the boy's hand stretched across the naked table, cradling his date's fingertips.

"And?" Nareen says again.

"And nothing. She asked me, him, how the girls were . . ."

"Your sisters?"

Harit turns back to her and nods.

"But not about you?"

"No. Probably I wasn't born yet. This must've been early on, when my father was still driving a taxi. She asked him, me, to wash hands before getting into bed."

"Really? You never told me that. About your father."

"Didn't I?" Harit notices the lines in Nareen's forehead. "I thought I had."

Then again, he probably hadn't. Compared to her parents' ordeal, his family's immigration to England seemed almost embarrassing. A choice, after all, whereas Nareen's parents each had to flee Tehran during the revolution. While still mere teenagers. Her mother ran to Lebanon with a younger brother. Her father, all alone, first to Turkey. They spent years as refugees before gaining entry to the States. That's when they'd met by chance, in transit.

Harit leans back in his chair. Behind Nareen's head, beads of rain on the restaurant's window glimmer like tiny constellations. Drew's right. He's lucky to have found her. So, so fortunate that she still wanted him. What *was* he waiting for?

He watches her tilt her knife to gather rice onto her fork. Carefully, as if rescuing each grain from the surrounding sauce. He pictures rubber rafts on an open sea. Today's refugees. The ones being detained at the borders, here in the U.S. too. He remembers his grandfather's tales of Partition. The endless stream

of humanity like two great rivers flowing side by side in opposite directions. The vicious spilling of blood between. Everyone's fate, utterly random.

It's all a question of displacement. Of volume and pressure. Surface tension and absorption. Osmosis. Harit sits in the workroom across from the line of prototypes, listening to their steady cycling. Just sits there, listening on while the world's being sucked dry. He could sense it all coming. The rising seas and deadly droughts. The mass diasporas.

Yep, we're all in the shitter now, as Drew says.

The fear spreading like wildfire. Streets overrun. Bans and blockades. Bloodshed. Contagion. It's starting already.

You've got to just go with the flow, HazMat.

Drew, the jokester. No, the jester. The company man.

In truth, though, was Harit any different? One of his last professors at MIT liked using the quote "The most dangerous kind of waste is the waste we don't recognize," and he and all his classmates would nod in agreement. But now he knows better. The worst kind of waste is the one we do recognize, yet still deny.

That evening, Harit sits at his mother's bedside and admits to himself that he's been waiting for her to die. Wondering, at least in part, how long she has left. Not how long they still have, together.

Yet today is a good day. He's been reading to her from the BBC's news feed, avoiding the political quagmires and the obituaries. She tends to perk up most at mention of the queen. Despite everything, still a royalist, his mother.

Meanwhile, on her nightstand sit two photographs from his sisters' weddings, traditional flower-laden spectacles that went on for days. The elder sister's was even an arranged marriage. Photos of each grandchild are there too. Everyone busy with their respective lives. Harit feels so distant from them all now. From his heritage, and from Britain. Even from a palpable future anymore. That morning in the shower, he watched the soapsuds circle the drain.

In the bed, his mother's round face peeks out from beneath the covers, her gaze gone flat again. Her skin, so dark against the bed sheets. Harit glances at his own hands, hears his English–Hindi accent in his head. In the U.S., he felt even more like an outsider. Back when he first started studying hydrology at Manchester, he'd seriously thought about going to India, to his grandfather's beloved village, and helping the farmers with irrigation. Initiating portable

filtration systems across the whole town, the whole state of Punjab. There were so many projects, so many needs he could fulfill.

"Harit?"

He blinks. "Yes, Mum?"

"What were you saying?"

"Sorry, Mum. I'll continue."

The next Sunday morning, Harit showers and shaves and fixes himself a warm breakfast. He picks up Nareen and they drive back across town, the weekend traffic light. It's bright out today if a bit chilly. He glances at her beside him, knowing he should speak, but everything he considers saying sounds too serious, too impersonal. When they reach the nursing home, he parks at the curbside and rushes round to open Nareen's door. He takes her offered hand. People pass them on the sidewalk, churchgoers, other visitors near the front entrance. Each one a stranger yet smiling at them. Them, a couple, out here in the open. Harit feels his lungs expand, that space in his chest where happiness might just rush in.

In the elevator, however, he holds his breath. This could all still go terribly wrong.

"Ready?" he says, again reaching for her palm.

Nareen stands poised beside him, wearing a simple ochre dress and no jewelry, her makeup spare. She looks lovely, he thinks, and says so aloud.

"I should hope so," says Nareen.

At the security desk and then the nurses' station, he introduces her by name. Practicing, he realizes.

Thankfully, his mother is in her room, all dressed and seated near the window, seemingly asleep, yet with her eyes half open. A juice box hangs tilted from her hand. Harit quickly soaks up the spill with a napkin and apologizes.

"No need to," says Nareen.

She takes off her sweater and hangs it on the back of the door.

"Here, I'll take those," says Harit, reaching for the bouquet she brought.

"You sure?" says Nareen.

"I know where there's a vase."

Someone starts singing at the top of her lungs out in the hallway. Harit glances toward the door, then back at his mother, losing himself for the moment.

"Right. The flowers," he says. "I'll be right back."

But he doesn't move.

Nareen smiles. "It's okay. We'll be here."

He crosses to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. The vase is in the cupboard and he turns on the sink's tap. In the mirror he catches a glimpse of himself, his brow creased. So stern looking, he thinks. So worried. Maybe we should just leave? "No, no," he says aloud, and grabs the vase before it's too full. No, you're doing this.

He slides off the clear plastic sleeve and fans out the flowers in the vase, fussing with one blossom to better face outward. "Mums for your Mum?" Nareen had joked at the market. Funny, he'd thought, and plucky too. She'd already sent out a stack of résumés, though hadn't mentioned if they were all local. He stares into the bathroom mirror again. Takes a breath, and exhales. "Mum, this is Nareen. The friend I mentioned to you once." Harit drops his eyes. On the countertop sits that little packet of flower food, which Drew and he once tested at work—granules of citric acid and sugar, bleach. He pauses with it in his palm, then throws it in the waste bin.

Nareen is seated in the other chair across from his mother, hands folded in her lap. In his brief absence, however, he notices she's shut off the TV and straightened the bed sheets. His mother still hasn't moved, chin to her chest. Harit finds a place for himself next to Nareen. "You okay?" he whispers.

"We're fine. Relax." Calmly she pulls out a magazine from her bag.

She's right, he thinks. And so smart to have brought along something to read. He, too, selects a book from the dresser, yet after several minutes realizes he's read the same paragraph over and over and starts fidgeting in his chair. By now he's convinced his mother will know she's Muslim, make a scene. Ruin everything. Maybe they could just go. Tell Nareen they can try again tomorrow evening. He's about to suggest this when his mother's head jolts up.

Squinting at the two of them, she says, "I have to go."

Harit again turns toward the open door, worried she'll traipse off down the hall. Her eyes widen, looking distraught.

"I have to *go*," she repeats, gesturing toward her lap.

Harit rushes to her side and grasps one of her elbows. His mother, however, withdraws from his grip.

"Wouldn't it be more proper for your wife to take me?"

The room hums. Harit takes half a step back, shifts his weight.

Nareen blushes, then quickly stands and straightens her dress. "Of course,"

she says, sliding past him.

Outside the bathroom door, Harit paces. Leans in. He can hear faint rustling of clothes, then the spin of the toilet paper roll, and all the while the steady flow of water. Nareen must've turned on the sink's faucet for her. Still, he can hear their muffled voices, and then from out of nowhere, his mother's laughter ringing off the tiled walls. He could hardly remember the last time he heard her laugh.

And when the bathroom door opens, she's still grinning. She looks right in Harit's eyes and nods. Then she insists Nareen lead her to the bed, making sure to show her the photographs of the grandchildren.

Heading home, Harit drives with one hand, the other stretched across the seat, smoothing out the tiny hills of Nareen's knuckles. He thinks about all that she's accommodated for him. All that he's put off or assumed were limitations.

At a stoplight, Nareen pulls back her hand and points out the windshield. "Look at that."

Ahead of them idles a truck, whose license plate reads W-A-S-T-E-D.

"Ha, ha." Nareen smirks. "Hilarious."

Harit shrugs, then focuses farther up the truck's flatbed. Strapped three across are standard Port-O-Sans, each stamped with a fanned-out hand of playing cards—all red, all hearts—and the logo ROYAL FLUSH.

"Hilarious," Harit confirms, but then he starts giggling. "Ridiculous," he sputters, which gradually builds to a swell of laughter he can hardly stop. A laughter that echoes with all the screeching delight of his two sisters back in that public bath in Ealing and his mother swimming—back and forth, back and forth, without ever touching the sides. And how impossible a possibility that once seemed to him.