

A Vicious Cycle
By Saashtika Mohan

“Royston Rogers... topped his school, perfect grades? How can i possibly deny *him* a spot at the university?”

Two light knocks on the thick door interrupted my internal monologue.

My knuckles were white, hand gripping fiercely onto the paper, so tight that it was starting to rip where I held it. Adrenaline was coursing through my veins, increasing in speed and fervour, feeding off my fears. Did I have it in me?

“Come in,” I called out, struggling to level my voice.

The door creaked open slowly, and an apprehensive mother-son pair entered.

“Two thousand dollars,” I stated, before they had even sat down.

“Ma’am, is there any other way? We would never be able to afford that,” the mother asked, her voice imbued with undeniable trepidation.

“If you are unwilling to pay, there’s a whole list of people waiting to replace your son,” I replied pointedly, nodding to thick stack of rejected applications, unable to meet their eyes.

“No, uh, discounts?” she added in, hurriedly.

“Ma’am, this price is already the lowest. I didn’t even factor in the fact that you’re from a *minority* race,” I replied curtly, fighting the manifesting lump in my throat.

Is this even me?

They whispered frantically to one another, each of their voices rising by an octave. Feigning indifference, I flipped through a random application.

“Ok... I will pay,” the mother finally conceded a few moments later, resignedly. Her eyes clouded with worry and concern, as she glanced at her son one last time before leaving the room to withdraw the money.

As the brand new notes came into contact with my skin, I was transported back in time, to another day.

Another office.

Another pair.

And yet, the exact same thing had occurred.

20 years ago.

“Five thousand dollars. That's the final price,” he had said, voice devoid of emotion.

The girl instinctively spun around to look at her mother - knowing, that that was barely what she earned each month.

How was she going to get that kind of money?

Yet her mother had not even flinched. Solemnly, she had met the admission officer's gaze and replied uncharacteristically firmly, “Ok, I will pay.”

She had seen then, in the months that followed, the suffering her parents had to endure to make up for the sum she had given. They worked hard to make ends meet - often without the necessary food, or rest. Dark rings lined their eyes, and the hollows of their cheeks progressively became more pronounced each passing day.

The anger within her had reached fever pitch, at the unfairness of the entire situation. *Especially* when she ran into the officer's son in the university. He was a complete imbecile, incapable of even passing his tertiary examinations- and yet, was accepted into a prestigious university, pursuing a degree in *medicine*.

Apparently, there were places in the world where nepotism was non-existent- where people were all accorded the same rights and given the same opportunities *regardless* of their ethnicity or social strata- where people couldn't *buy* their high ranking positions.

Meritocracy, or so it was called. It almost seemed like an impossible dream.

The girl had - as she gazed at the atramentous curtain of sky that night, illuminated by specks of light- resolved that *she* would be one of the specks of pureness in the dark abyss.

“Be the change you want to see in the world,” everyone said.

I'll change the system, she had resolved.

“But the system changed *me*,” I unwittingly said aloud, my voice dropping to a whisper as the door closed in the wake of the mother-son duo.

I had become something I was hell bent on never becoming.

I rest my head on the smooth table- the weight of my actions bearing down on me. “Disgust” could hardly encompass the way I felt about the situation. No reason would actually be able to justify my actions, no matter how seemingly valid.

My younger brother had stupidly sped while driving the rain, consequently resulting in a rather predictable set of events following thereafter- Because of his idiocy, he had landed himself in the hospital, leaving the family with a shocking bill of \$20,000, *excluding* all additional costs- bribes.

In dire need for money, I had succumbed to the system.

Ultimately, is this not what a corrupted state leads to? A vicious cycle. We each try to get the better of another, for our selfish needs and wants.

As I stamped “approved” onto his application, I felt my heart wrench with pain. Knowing that he too, will almost inevitably succumb to the system- possibly because of *me*. Still, as I penned down the final signature, I fervently *prayed* that somehow one of these applicants would be the change we so badly needed.

(800 words)