

Conversations

Sameem Wani

Scene 1

Three friends, Zeeshan, Amir, and Umair are sitting cross-legged under a tree on the bank of Jhelum. They are similar in terms of their looks—wide shoulders, fair skin, pointed nose, and blacking lips. In the distance, right on the opposite bank, sand is being extracted and loaded onto the tippers. It is evening. The sun is drowning; a cold breeze is forming ripples on the water.

Zeeshan: An abomination! Like there's no place to even smoke with peace! Freaking eyes, everywhere. Inside the house. Outside. And there's nothing we can do about it...

Umair (*cutting him short*): Stop whining, Zeesha! Look! The moment is solitary enough for you to smoke your lungs out. There's no one, and I am keeping an eye as well. Just light one and pass it along.

Amir: Let's not talk about eyes. It is triggering. There's no escape. We cannot run away from eyes.

Zeeshan (*lighting the cigarette dangling in his mouth*): Ahhhhhhh! Mazz Balaye!

Amir: You sound like you had an orgasm.

Zeeshan: A whiff of a fucking Four Square is the closest we can get to orgasms, anyway. But I love how mind-numbing these cigarettes are.

Umair: I know right! I have heard that they're imported for that very reason. I mean, who doesn't like dissociating. Spit anywhere and it'll fall on the head of a dissociative person.

Amir: Enough about cigarettes and dissociation. Like we don't need to theorise the fuck out of everything! The more deeply we think about something, the more it's going to hurt.

Zeshaan: Okay, I think we should change the topic. Honestly. Everytime we get high, we end up talking about depressing shit.

Umair: Alright! What should we talk about...hmmmmmmmmmm..something that's cheerful...I guess I can't think of anything.

Amir: We can talk about snow, mountains, flowers, ponds, glaciers, birds, apples, mutton, beef, marriages, cars, houses, government jobs, Gulmarg, Pahalgam, waterfalls, forests, lakes. The list is inexhaustible really.

Zeeshan: Let's pick one and make sure that it does not get depressing. That is our task for today!

Umair: Okay, let us talk about houses! Aren't they beautiful to look at? These days everyone seems to be constructing. Case in point my uncle, constructing a mansion, even though he lives alone with his wife and a single child.

Amir: Full marks for the aesthetics! Those roofs have some seriously intricate designs. Some blue, some red, some brown. What variety!

Zeeshan: Yes, but those aesthetics always come at a certain cost. In this case, apart from the money, the cost of constant nuisance—the screeching, the sound of cement mixing in a machine, the constant hammering at tin roofs. All that. The Kashmiri fetish for aesthetic houses is unprecedented. Also, just to remind you...only time will decide who is going to live in them.

Umair: Shut up. I thought we were steering clear of the depressing stuff. But here you are, spiralling down a loop. And please, pass the cigarette. You've almost finished it.

Zeeshaan (*passes the cigarette to Umair*): Sorry! I think we should stop talking and dissociate for some time.

Amir: Okay! Let's talk about cheerful things..*(looks longingly into the sky)*.....Fuck it... Let's just take a walk. Could be cheerful.

Umair: That's way better than what we are doing.

Zeeshan: I am down for it as well.

The three friends get up and wipe the grass off their pants. Then, they start taking a stroll. All have a similar gait, as if they're walking in a parade. Zeeshan, the tallest of them, is moving ahead, followed by Umair and Amir. The three friends are walking in a straight line. The light is fading with every second, and they can already hear the sounds of crickets emanating from nettles and small shrubs scattered all over the slope. At the same time, the muezzins from the six mosques in the vicinity begin calling for the evening prayers by singing the Azaan. All they can hear is God's greatness being extolled in a variety of modulations. Here, a shortened syllable, and there, a stretched one.

Scene 2

Inside Umair's House. Umair is engaged in a conversation with his parents. Just having finished the dinner, they are all in a chatty mood inside the kitchen.

Umair: I think we should really buy an inverter. It doesn't really cost much. We can also buy it on EMI, if Abu agrees.

Abu: Sounds like a fair plan, but these days the electricity supply has mostly been consistent.

At exactly the same time, there's a power cut.

Mouji: Let no one talk about consistency here. Umi, can you please check if we're the only ones who have been deprived?

Umair quickly ventures out, glances over the roofs, and stares blankly into the streets.

Umair *(in a loud voice):* No, Mouji. Everyone is in darkness. There's no light.

Mouji: Thank God! Now that's some fair and equal treatment. We should all thank PDD.

Abu: If the line man comes asking for money on Eid, I swear I will give him a piece of my mind.

Mouji: You've hypertension. You should not let such things bother you.

Abu: It's better for you to worry about your own set of diseases.

Umair *(enters the kitchen, with a torch in his hand):* Have both of you started bickering again? For once, let's have a cheerful conversation.

Mouji: Well in that case, I was cheerful before I married your father. I can talk about my childhood. My parents used to feed me with golden spoons...

Abu *(cutting her short):* You should have brought some of those spoons to this house. Might as well have sold them in time.

Mouji: Like you sold my jewellery off? I wonder how many loans you still have to repay?

Abu: That's not for you to think! Your illiterate brain can not perform such intricate calculations!

Mouji: I could not educate myself because my mother, that pious woman (May Allah grant her the highest place in heaven) died early. Anyway, if an educated person sounds like you do, I am better off as an illiterate.

Abu (*talking to Umair*): Then you accuse me of violence. Ask her to stop before I lose it.

Umair (*in a harsh tone*): Thank you for such a cheerful conversation! I think I will go to sleep now.

Umair retreats into his room on the second floor. He opens the almirah, takes out a mattress, a pillow, a blanket and sets all of them up on the floor. After slipping into the blanket, he closes his eyes. He struggles to sleep, turning left to right in a frenzy. The night advances and nothing can be heard except for some isolated howls. Slowly, he slips his penis out and begins massaging it with his right hand. Then, almost hurriedly, he switches to the left hand. With his eyes closed, and his thoughts wandering into his neighbour's house, he jerks off, and heaves a sigh to conclude the ceremony.

Umair: Ahhhhhhh! Finally, some cheer.

Scene 3

Inside Amir's room. It's midnight. He is talking to his girlfriend, Ayesha, on a call. Once, out of sheer desperation, Amir had been calling random numbers and had luckily connected with Ayesha. Through the past three years of their relationship, they had only met thrice.

Amir: But it's difficult to get a government job, anyway!

Ayesha: If you're serious about me, you'll have to find a government job. My parents would not agree otherwise.

Amir: Not that I have not been trying. All the three entrances I sat in were cancelled because of corruption allegations. Now that's not my fault.

Ayesha: If we are fated to be together, then you will find one soon!

Amir: Well, I always thought love is enough.

Ayesha: It is, when you have a government job.

Amir: You are obsessed with it! Anyway, I will try again.

Ayesha: Thank you. I know you love me enough to do this.

Amir: Let's just talk about something else. What did you have for dinner?

Ayesha: Mouji had cooked rajma. We also had dahi and achar. What about you?

Amir: Zombre Thool.

Ayesha: Wahh! It's my favourite!

Amir: I know. What are you doing?

Ayesha: I am just lying in bed.

Amir: What are you wearing?

Ayesha: My mother's phiran.

Amir: Okay. Okay. That's nice.

Ayesha: Why are you acting weird?

Amir: You know...we don't meet often. And when we do, we don't even get the privacy to hold hands.

Ayesha: It's a sin to do anything before marriage!

Amir: Yeah. Yeah. But a kiss or two inside a shikara wouldn't hurt anyone.

Ayesha: It will. I think it's important for us to control our desire. If we do things right now, we will lose all the excitement too soon after marriage. Then it will all be boring.

Amir (*in a sulking tone*): Yeah...Yeah...If I had a government job, you would agree to it even without marriage.

Ayesha: No. I wouldn't. That's ridiculous.

Amir: Sure, whatever.

Ayesha: Fine. I can only let you touch my hands. But for not more than twenty seconds. Otherwise, the devil might nudge us to commit adultery.

Amir: To hell with you and with the devil! Can we at least imagine that we are kissing and all?

Ayesha: I do not want to corrupt my imagination with all that.

Amir: Okay then!

Amir hangs up angrily. Then, he opens his phone and starts scrolling through reels again. After some point, he throws the phone away and tries to sleep. Struggling from one turn to another, he finally decides to masturbate. He aligns his thoughts with the movements of his left hand, and keeps thinking for a minute or two. Finally, he heaves a sigh, closes his eyes, and submits himself to a restful sleep.

Scene 4

Inside Amir's house. Amir is sitting in the balcony attached to his room. The sky is bright with stars and a full moon. After managing to smoke a cigarette, he hears his father calling him from the ground floor.

Abba: Amir... Amir! Are you there?

(Amir rushes to the washroom. He quickly places some toothpaste and water in his mouth and gargles thrice. Then, he rushes downstairs and enters the kitchen)

Amir: Yes. Abba. I was taking a nap. Did you call for me?

Abba: Yes, I did. It's time for dinner. Your mother has already served the food ten minutes ago. It's not a good practice to disrespect food.

Amir: I am sorry, but I am not hungry. I don't think I'll have dinner tonight.

Mouji: Are you ill? What's wrong? How come you will sleep on an empty stomach?

Amir: It's okay! I'm not ill. Nor will I die if I don't have dinner this one time.

Mouji: I had cooked doude wangan.

Amir: I can have it tomorrow.

Abba: Let's not force him to eat. But we also had to talk to you regarding something.

Amir: Yes. Sure. *(sits down)*

Abba: We just received a call from Mr. Moshin, our neighbour. He says that he saw you smoking a cigarette on the balcony.

Amir (nervously): No... No. I didn't. He must be mistaken.

Abba: Come closer. I'll smell your breath.

Amir (comes closer and exhales right into his father's nose): Here.

Father: You smell of Colgate!

Amir: Then I must have been smoking Colgate on the balcony.

Mouji: Don't fool us. It's clear that you've smoked and rinsed your mouth so that you don't stink.

Amir: Well, you can think whatever you want to think!

Abba: What would people think of me if they saw you smoking? What about my dignity before the neighbours? Have you got no shame?

Amir: Even if I do smoke, you should be caring more about my lungs than about your ‘dignity’ in society.

Abba: How impertinent this boy is!

Amir: It’s high time both of you realised that I am an adult. And I hate putting up a mask in front of you. All the time. I feel like I am performing all the time! I’m going to sleep.

Amir returns to his room, and locks the door from inside. He jumps on the bed and looks at his reflection on the phone screen. He quickly turns his gaze away after spotting a receding hairline. Then, he places the phone on the bed table, and turns the light off. He falls asleep, and wakes up at five in the morning. Struggling to sleep, he thinks of masturbating. He lets his thoughts wander across different houses, different places, and creates a storyline in his head. The hands are in sync with the scene playing in his mind. After some time, he heaves a sigh, coughs, feels disgusted, and goes to sleep, once again.

Scene 5

The three friends are sitting on the same spot again. Zeeshan is emptying a cigarette, mixing the tobacco with hash, and filling the cigarette again with this new found potency. His hands are shaking. The other two friends are keeping an eye.

Amir: I think Kashmir has the best hash. It's not like stuff from India. That shit fucked with my head last time.

Zeeshan: No doubt about it. I once smoked Ganja from Rajasthan and it was adulterated. I thought I would die.

Umair: Haha! That's a typical Kashmiri bad trip. Like everyone feels like they'll die.

Amir: I thought that was the human condition, but okay.

Zeeshan: On a different note, Gula gave me some extra hash this morning. He was in high spirits.

Umair: I like his stuff the most. It's like the best in town. Plus, his rates are reasonable too.

Amir: It's funny to hear Umair talking about liking hash. He did not even smoke a year ago.

Zeeshan: The fucker fell in love. This had to happen.

Umair: Well, then what happened to both of you?

Zeeshan (*taking a huge puff*): Nothing, as such. I smoke to soothe the soul of my ancestors who probably smoked as well.

Amir: Same here. I care about my ancestors.

Umair: My ancestors worked in a stone mill. Like I have heard my great grandfather was made to forcibly work in a stone mill by some fuckall ruler. So, that way I come from stoners too.

Zeeshan (*passes the cigarette*): Hahaha! Well then, we all agree that stoning is a pretty decent way to connect to our past.

Amir: Also, a way to disconnect from the present.

Umair: Settled! Stoning helps in navigating time! Like it's cheap time-travel.

Zeeshan (*suddenly looks ahead in alarm*): Look! Look! What's happening there?

Right on the opposite bank, all the tippers suddenly begin to roar and vanish in a frenzy. There are policemen chasing them. Some workers have been caught.

Umair: That is a raid! I don't think the miners have the mandated licence required for extracting sand.

Amir (*laughing*): Look! Some workers are being roughed up

Zeeshan: That's nothing new. Like it does not even surprise me anymore. Back to time and ancestors.

Umair: Fair enough. But my Kashmiri instincts have been awakened!

Zeeshan: Of course. And what are those?

Umair: The instinct to run away. To start running. To start running for my life.

Amir (*laughing*): No one's messing with you. Don't be so faint-hearted. The stuff is over and we've got nothing on us. Also, didn't you just say that you are from a family of stoners?

Umair (*bursting out in guffaws*): Yeah. That's true. I will stand firm! I will try....

After this, Umair gets up and starts running. The two friends can see him vanishing in the distance.

Zeeshan: I think it's the hash. He panicked because of it!

Amir: Most probably. But my Kashmiri instincts are awakened as well.

Zeeshan: The instinct to run away from the police?

Amir: No! No! The instinct to run after I see someone running!

With this, Amir gets up and starts running. Zeeshan can see him vanishing in the distance.

Zeeshan: Losers! Both of them. But I guess they awakened my Kashmiri instincts too—the instinct to follow the crowd.

He gets up and walks slowly towards his house. The muezzins are extolling God's greatness. The sun is about to set. And the world is about to fall silent in an hour. Out in the distance, he can see the flickering lights emanating from an embankment. As he walks ahead, through foliage, he comes across a man, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the street. The man has thick, long, and grimy hair, yellowish teeth, and is robed in an oversized phiran. Zeeshan gets closer, and is able to identify the man. It's Habib Mout, from the adjoining village. This person had lost his wits some years ago, and is known for blabbering nonsense.

Zeeshan: Assalam-u-Alakum! How are you?

Habib: It's India vs Pakistan and Sir Vivian Richards is bowling over the wicket ... It's a great shot...it's a four madarchod that's nice, what an amazing display...There's a grenade...It's a six! Haha...I am a government officer...the phiran caught fire...the fire within...always..the heat within...it's a catch and he's out Tendulkar Dravid what a beautiful bowling..the houses are burning..all of them...

Zeeshan: Oh! Who do you think is going to win?

Habib: Your mother's rotten ass. Behenchod. Run away from here.

Zeeshan, visibly infuriated, walks ahead. As he is about to reach the turn, he looks behind. Habib is lying flat on the street. His penis dimly visible and his eyes cast towards the sky. After this, Habib can be seen massaging his penis, up and down, as he hurls invectives at the sky. His penis is sticking out like a pole without any flag attached to it. Towards the end, there's a loud orgasmic groan.

The End