

FICTION

The Last Kulfi Makers

The Chandni Bazaar smelled of cardamom, saffron, and simmering milk. The heat of the afternoon pressed against the cobbled streets, and at the far end of the alley, under the shade of an old neem tree, two men worked over large brass pots, stirring, tasting, and arguing as they had for years.

“Too much sugar,” grumbled Iqbal, wiping sweat from his brow. “You always add too much sugar, Salman.”

Salman, older by five years and significantly more stubborn, scoffed. “And you never add enough. Kulfi should melt on the tongue, not make the eater pucker like they’ve bitten into a lemon.”

Iqbal snorted. “Kulfi should taste of tradition, not like a festival treat for children.”

Despite their constant bickering, the two men had been making kulfi together for decades. They had inherited the trade from their fathers, who had inherited it from theirs. The small, timeworn shop had once been the most famous kulfi stand in the bazaar, a place where people would queue in the sweltering heat just to get a taste of their mango, pistachio, or rose-flavored kulfi, frozen in metal molds and buried in crushed ice.

But times had changed. Ice cream parlors had taken over the streets, neon lights flashing promises of flavors neither Iqbal nor Salman could understand. Coffee-caramel-swirl? Chocolate

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with sea salt? It all seemed unnecessary. Who needed such complications when you had the perfection of condensed milk, nuts, and time?

Salman tasted a spoonful of the thickening mixture and nodded in satisfaction. “This,” he declared, “is how it should taste.”

Iqbal leaned over, tasted it, and begrudgingly agreed. “Fine. But next time, less sugar.”

Salman rolled his eyes but said nothing. He had won this round.

As evening approached, the first customers arrived. A young boy tugged at his mother’s dupatta, pointing eagerly at the display of golden-hued kulfi, nestled in a bed of ice. She smiled, handing over a few rupees. Salman carefully removed a kulfi from its mold and placed it in the boy’s hand. He took one bite, his face lighting up instantly.

Iqbal watched, a slow smile creeping onto his face. “Still better than any fancy ice cream,” he muttered.

Salman only grunted in response, but the pride in his eyes said everything.

As the sun dipped below the rooftops and the lanterns flickered to life, the two men continued their work, stirring, tasting, and arguing, just as they always had. The world around them was changing, but as long as they had their brass pots and the taste of saffron on their tongues, they would remain the last true kulfi makers of Chandni Bazaar.