



**Senior Winner – Raniya Hosain, age 15, Pakistan**  
**2014 Commonwealth Essay Competition**

Team Commonwealth! How would you describe what your country has to offer other members of the team?

There is a little old man who sells fruit around the corner, with a bald head, and eyes that have a twinkle that even decades of tears for a son lost in a drone attack cannot extinguish. He sells fruit for the best prices and has more need for the money than the rest, so the faithful buyers staunchly ignore the fact that the apples are a little dried up, or that the oranges are smaller than those in the other sellers carts. He sits under a giant, paisley umbrella given to him by one of his older buyers, who declared that he looked utterly abysmal sitting in the pouring monsoon, his rough, cotton shawl wound around his head for protection. The buyer's name was Rashid Abdullah and even though he harboured perhaps the greatest love and devotion for the fruit-seller he was not used to showing affection so he did it the only way he knew how; with shared cigarettes, gruff criticism and occasional gifts. It was far from ideal for his wife who constantly harassed him about being more open and affectionate, but the old fruit-seller was perfectly content with this treatment. So, there he sat in his plastic chair under his paisley umbrella, with sun-browned cheeks that looked more like crumpled up paper than skin, eyes that were constantly darting around the busy traffic-jammed streets and a nimble hand that almost always had in it a toy for the beggar children who roamed around the alleys. Rashid had criticized him before for wasting money on those dumb toys but the fruit-seller had smiled his toothless smile and said that it was money well-spent and what use did an old man have for money anyway? Death, he would remark casually, was right around the corner and his son waited for him in heaven. Rashid would blow air out of his nose and turn away to hide the pain in his eyes at the thought of the fruit-seller dying and buy more fruit than he needed so that the fruit-seller could have more money to buy his stupid toys.

In the evenings, after the call to prayer had been echoed around the narrow street and the haze of smoke and dust had lifted somewhat, as most people had gone home, the fruit-seller would sit and tell stories of the wars and of the village. The children would sit wide-eyed waiting for his creaky voice to bring them back to the magic days of old and he would always comply. But one thing he refused to do, despite numerous requests from the children who crowded around him every night was tell a story that was either scary or sad. Life was scary and sad all on its own, but the stories that came from it didn't have to be. So every night the sounds of raucous, innocent, care free laughter would bounce around the street and bring smiles to the faces of all the people on it. 'Fruit man is at it again. How he makes them laugh' they would say via eye contact and shared smiles. There was always one person who was older than the rest present at these story times. Her name was Meena Khan, and she was a prostitute who would sit in her bedazzled clothes and listen to the old man. The first day the girl came, the fruit-seller asked her why she wanted to listen to his juvenile, childish stories. She had replied that she had never gotten the chance to be juvenile or childish and with him she could almost forget the fact. He had never questioned her again. Yet when she would throw her head back and laugh louder than all the children present his strange eyes would twinkle even brighter in triumph.

When the night comes crawling in the fruit seller goes home, on his old bicycle with wheels that creak and a handle bar that's partially broken. He bikes for one hour every day, slowly and steadily making his way back to his ramshackle hovel. He would always stop at the shop next door to buy

toys for the little ones the next day, and the shop keeper would beam at him from behind his bushy beard and give him an extra toy for no money at all, for the old man was his most loyal customer. When he got home, he prayed. His aching bones screamed in protest as he prostrated before Allah, but he persevered. He finished his prayers before collapsing with exhaustion on his hard mattress. He slept fitfully, until the first rays of dawn lit the sky in pastel pink and orange hues. He shook himself awake, a task that got harder as time progressed and went to work.

I didn't know this man personally, and I don't know anything about him but the exact shape of his gravestone, grey and worn. I heard of him, stories by the dozens, from all the fruit sellers that remained. The people in the alley paid for the funeral. There were many tears at the funeral, none as long and loud as Rashid's. The children mourned for a veritable treasure trove of stories had died along with the old man. But there is always sadness and there are always tears. The reason that this man's story stood out was that his life and the people who were a part of it ARE Pakistan. So if anyone ever asked me what Pakistan had to give to the commonwealth, I would tell them this story: The story of dried up apples, toothless smiles, stupid toys, juvenile stories, raucous laughter and crystal tears. The story of our people, the story of our country.