Hard Days: Three Stories and a Novella

by

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Dedicated to my grandmother and my mother

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Introduction

My father is a soft, loving man, and to him I owe my love for books. He would read to me at bedtime, adapting stories as he went along. These were English books featuring animals or children in faraway lands. My father would pause to read sentences in his head, and then translate them for me in Urdu. Baba also created his own stories, and these were more compelling to me. One involved Ali, a boy who loves birds and the color yellow. Ali's father intends to buy yellow canaries for Ali's birthday, but because of a mix up, the shopkeeper sells him red canaries instead. Ali, angry at the bird's color spurns them, but eventually learns to love all birds regardless of color. Ali was the name of my father's friend, a recovered alcoholic who worked in my father's rehab. Sometimes, the Ali of the story was presented as Uncle Ali's childhood self, and when I pointed out that I liked birds and the color yellow, and the Baba in the story sounded suspiciously like my own, my father would slyly create a Hassaan in the story, who was Ali's wiser, more compassionate friend, as proof that Ali was not me. There were other stories, too, but this one I remember with the greatest clarity, and now point to in a convenient rearrangement of memory, as an early reminder that my life, people like me and Uncle Ali, and my own father, were worthy of narrative, that narrative could be embellished and adapted at will to suit the story, and that the story itself was an artifact, passed from one to the other, via translation.

I grew up in a small house in Lahore with a dog called Prince, my uncles, aunts, cousins, siblings, a family of servants, and my grandmother, who pooled money from her sons and ran the house. All of us except my mother ate in the living room, squishing together on the sagging sofas. I never had a real bed to myself until I left Pakistan for College. In the limited space of the living room, a built-in bookshelf spanned one entire wall, each shelf filled with two rows of books,

forming an eclectic collection that ranged from the Quran to Russian novels, collections of Urdu poetry and an incredible compilation of erotica. My grandmother, the guardian and duster of the bookshelves was a storyteller in her own right, who moved easily from telling stories of prophets to tales from the Arabian Nights involving adultery, seductions, magic, and adventure. Over morning tea, which she poured in a saucer for me, she taught me to memorize verses from Iqbal, Faiz, Ghalib, even though, at that age, I couldn't understand the high, Persianized Urdu of traditional poetry. My grandmother also told fictionalized stories from history or fables set to rhyme. Her storytelling mode was entirely oral. In the same mode, she repeated, in countless iterations, her own life stories, and my family's histories. Though I have only preferred to read and write in English, it's my grandmother's voice, singular and yet merging with the collective authority of an oral tradition, that has continued to haunt me and my writing.

At school, few students and teachers could speak coherent English, though my school was an English-medium one where all subjects, except Urdu, were claimed to be taught in English. The students in my school mostly came from middle- and lower-middle-class backgrounds. Most had parents who had moved to the city from villages and spoke Punjabi at home. These differences of class (along with ethnicity, rural ancestry, etc.) were not apparent to me until much later. English was the bane of my classmates' existence, a major handicap in their progress in any field. I, on the other had slowly began to despise Urdu as a written medium, finding the textbooks full of propaganda, and stiff, didactic tales. I read widely, but only in English. This meant that I read about people and places and times very different from my own. Once, in a used bookstore, I picked up a pirated copy of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and felt resounding shock when I opened it and read "Lahore" written in the opening passage. A few years later, in eleventh grade, I borrowed a friend's copy of Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* and was moved to tears reading a banal passage of the weeping willows dipping their branches in the water of the Canal. The novel was too outlandish for me. But those weeping

willows, I'd often seen those very trees every Saturday on our way to visit my maternal grandmother's house and had considered the pretty image they made. So, when I read that line in *Moth Smoke,* I thought someone had seen the world as I had, and then captured it in words I had been seeking for but hadn't yet found.

By then, I knew I wanted to write. I thought in those words, "I want to write," and not "I want to become a writer." For I never thought it possible that a person in my circumstances could "become a writer," whatever that transformation entailed. Through reading Mohsin Hamid, though I became convinced that it *was* possible to be Pakistani and write to about Pakistan, the world Hamid depicted in his novels, even as it included recognizable street scenes, concerned lives that felt even more alien to me than lives of eighteenth-century English sisters walking through estates in the countryside. The characters in Hamid's books travel across the world. Their parents drink whiskies and boast about the good old days of secularism, the characters date openly and attend raves in Lahore's farmhouses. My Lahore, by contrast, was solidly middle class and religious and constantly worried for money. Unlike Hamid's characters, no one I knew smoked pot or talked in English. I'd never even been to Nathiagali or Karachi or Peshawar.

The circumstances of my life shifted when I won a scholarship to an elite A Level school, where many students only spoke in English and talked about American TV shows. The collective obsession at this new school revolved around seeking admission in foreign universities. I had hitherto been unaware such an option even existed, never mind its financial viability. But I threw myself into rush of it, and to my surprise, I won a full ride to a liberal arts college in the US.

The stories in this thesis attempt to inspect the journeys conducted between these worlds of differing privileges and social rules both within Pakistan and outside of it, and the fragmentations of identity and relationships that have resulted due to them.

In the three short stories "I Am Sick But Missing You," "All the Best of Luck," and "Permanent Garden," protagonists return to Pakistan from the US, where they had moved for College, and, through the lens of their global and other identities, grapple with their family and country. These stories, thus, utilize the framework of a conventional homecoming narrative to inspect a Pakistan embroiled in instability due to politics and globalization. In the novella, "Voices," the protagonist reminisces about childhood and early adulthood spent in Lahore to makes sense of the loss of people that populated her life. Homecoming in this novella is a navigation of memory that returns the protagonist to a community lost to time. As can be gleaned, the theme of temporal and geographic displacement holds personal resonance for me. After a brief return to a rapidly changing Lahore following my college graduation, I moved to Nashville to begin my MFA at Vanderbilt. After my master's, I am likely to continue an itinerant life away from home. The stories in this collection are thus inspired by the love of a lost home, one willfully abandoned for personal independence.

These are the questions my stories interested in: What is it that we owe to the world, to our families, our communities? How do we reconcile our own individual desires with our sense of moral duty to the collective? How do we choose to exist in a world that's constantly shifting, is violent and socio-politically unstable, evolving at a staggering pace with globalization, the rise of technology and the Internet? At the same time, what are our legacies, our histories?

The theme of duty vs. desire is important in all these stories. In the three short stories, the collectivistic culture of home and Pakistani society shifts when the protagonists move to the US and encounter a collegiate culture that promotes and provides resources for individual growth and ambitions. Upon the characters' return home, they battle with questions of collectivistic duty vs. individual desires. The framework of their families, their religious and social beliefs, instructs them

to submit to the greater good of a hegemonic system, in which each individual is valued by what they can bring to the benefit of the collective. Failure to provide value or conform to a preestablished hierarchy results in shame and guilt. While navigating these clashing desires and their shame, the characters are asked to make moral choices that are complicated due to the conflict the characters feel between opposing codes— they ones they have inherited from their community and the ones they assimilated into in while abroad. For example, in the case of Younus, the protagonist of "Permanent Garden" the choice to return to Pakistan comes from a sense of debt inculcated by his parent's wish for cohabitation, and his own internalized desire to be part of a male social world that provides a sense of connection and community. This is contrasted by a desire for personal success symbolized by the return to the US for his PhD and abandonment of his community. By choosing to return to the US, he must wrestle with the knowledge that by shirking what is expected of him in the collective, he will impact others in the system, in this case, his sister. In these homecoming narratives, I am interested in exploring who is allowed to come and go, and who suffers as a result.

Often, it is women who suffer. Women's ability to navigate the world of these stories is far more limited than men's. This is a reflection of the realities of Pakistani society, where women's mobility on all levels is not only restricted by men but is also threatened by male violence. While the male protagonists wring their hands over the difficult choices they have to make in these stories, I wanted to be able to find oblique ways to hint at the much more complicated and caged agency women operate in. And of course, gender in turn is further complicated by class, education, sexuality, and religion. Musa's unnamed fiancé in "Permanent Garden," living as a disabled woman in an economically depressed village, and embroiled in the much more elaborate collectivistic network there, is far less able to exercise any agency, while Younus's sister, who is educated and in a

relatively liberal nuclear household has been able to navigate and carve out a space for advancing her career and individual interests despite her father withholding her from attending College abroad.

I also felt it was important that female characters in this collection do not become reduced to victims and are only present in the narrative as illustration of the consequences of actions men make in the stories. It is not uncommon to find stereotypes of oppressed Muslim women in fiction and media, and often their plight is used merely to invoke pity from the reader and a judgement against the patriarchal systems those women are entrapped in. In the novella "Voices" I tracked the voices of my grandmothers, and their stories, the various complications, tragedies and moments of joy in their life. While I am wary of writing a female centered story using the first person, I chose to do so in order to capture the "I" of oral storytelling that my grandmothers relied on to pass down stories. In the domestic sphere, it is frequently our grandmothers, often outliving their husbands, who possess the vantage point and the authority to tell multigenerational stories, and I was attracted to the freedom with which a character like Naseem might choose to cast her own life and that of her community. In the novella, I was less interested in delineating the difficulty Naseem and other female characters face in a patriarchal, collectivistic culture, but rather wanted to parse out their commentary on it, as well as their ability to negotiate those moments. Women's lives are often segregated from men's in Pakistan based on differing gender roles, and so in a traditional multigenerational household, their interaction with other women in the domestic sphere is often far greater than with the men, and the interplay of power dynamics at play between women were more complicatedly interesting to me when writing the novella.

Homecoming narratives imply a reunion, a return to order. In "Permanent Garden" Younus returns to appease his parent's ideas of a consolidated household. In fact, in many of these stories, the domestic sphere is fragmented to begin with. In "All the Best of Luck," for instance, Rahim's

parents have recently divorced before the start of the story. The idea of coming back home to a home that continues to disintegrate helped me in collapsing the protagonist's illusions of harmony and reassimilation. But it also frees the protagonists to relieve themselves of collectivistic guilt and become more forgiving of themselves, since the system is shown to be at times, unequitable, hypocritical, and dysfunctional in and of itself. Constructing broken patriarchies also allowed me to depict matters of ethnicity and class which deepen fissures in the household, as they do in larger society.

Some of this interest comes from my own experience of growing up in a broken household, with daily skirmishes and blow outs over the most trivial matters, days of stony silence woven in between moments of conjugal mirth. My mother was ostracized by my aunts. Their husbands maintained a polite distance. No one except my grandmother and my father, my siblings, and I talked to mother in a friendly way. My mother was from a more traditional, working class background. She was born in a Punjabi village. My father's family prided itself on being educated middle-class Muhajirs. The conflict in my household became subtly coded with ethnicity and class, one that I have tried to render in some of these stories. I was inspired by many of Mavis Gallant's short stories that are invested in depicting the interplay of lives of French- and English- speaking Montrealer's in Canada. In stories like "The Doctor," the narrative can subtly hold the nuances and tensions of the everyday life in a multiethnic community. Ethnic difference, while contentious and sometimes even violent, in Pakistan, is often not commonly depicted in fiction involving the domestic sphere, and while I didn't want the focus of these stories to center on ethnicity, I wanted the stories to be able to present them, nonetheless.

Another concern in these stories is the construct of masculinity and how those who choose to move back home contend with that identity. In "I'm Sick But Missing You," Faraz's passivity and

secrecy around his sexuality grants him the ability to code switch and benefit from his gender but it costs him the chance to integrate the distinct aspects of his identity and thus resolve his internal conflict. In "Permanent Garden" Younus also codeswitches to integrate himself with his cousins, resorting to a sort of casually sexist misogyny that exemplifies the gender hierarchies set in the story. While Faraz chooses to make himself vulnerable to his cousin Momina and thus opens himself to reckoning with his identity and how it impacts his relationship with home, Younus participates in the male social bonds with his cousins while maintaining his distance, benefitting from the superficial sense of camaraderie without allowing vulnerability or introspection, thus sealing himself from change.

A few weeks into my freshman year, the film adaptation of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was screened for Parents' Weekend at my liberal arts college. A Q-and-A round was organized with the film's director, Mira Nair. I asked her some senseless question about audience, who the film was for, etc. I lied and said I'd seen the movie in my hometown of Lahore (where the movie is set), in my eagerness to be seen as someone who knew the world of the film. I praised the movie although I had, in fact, disliked it. The usher forgot to collect the mic from me. A few more people asked questions. Then a man across the aisle from me spoke. He was a white, upper middle class, well-educated, liberal. He said, "We so often hear about the war and American soldiers in the Middle East. It's refreshing to see how the other side sees us." After rambling some more, the man asked the question: "I wonder, why do they hate us? Why do you think the other side hates us?

He turned and looked at me. I was the "other side" (though Pakistan is not a Middle Eastern country), sitting literally on the other side of the aisle. I still held the microphone. Everyone in the auditorium looked at me. I imagine there was some nervous laughter.

Mira Nair's amused, vaguely British voice found me across the room, "Well you may as well say something since you're holding the mic."

That sentence has haunted me for a long time. Engrossed in my own shame, the glare of an audience, I had forgotten that I held a mic. and could say whatever I wanted to a room full of people who wouldn't have known any better. As I continue to write in the US, I think often of my position and authority as the writer writing about people in Pakistan and also consider the audience that will consume their narratives. I have protagonized three characters in this collection who have held a similar life trajectory as my own even as their lives are incredibly different than mine, thinking that I am more capable of signaling my relationship to them to an audience. As for the novella, which continues to grow in my mind, I am left pondering how I can stand aside and let Naseem talk, while also acknowledging the hand that writes her words.

What kind of loyalty do I feel towards the people in these stories? As I continue to extend my separation from home, they have replaced the real friends I had in Lahore, the neighbors, the servants, the teachers, all the people I chose to forgo, lost touch with, the people who died. All those people I knew have become a cast of characters in my memory and in the following stories, in the people you will read about, I wished to instill my own sense of loss.

Permanent Garden

In Lahore, a season of smog set in with the new year. Mornings became a milky haze swirled through with a fistful of turmeric. In this haze, my cousins Shams and Qamar crouched on the lawn, transplanting marigolds into beds of dried dung and river loam while my uncle shouted instructions from his wheelchair. I carted pots of seedlings I confused the names of—gazanias, petunias, mausummery, phlox— and smashed them on the concrete next to the lawn. From the scatter of soil and terracotta I separated sprouts, sorting them on the sod. My throat itched. My eyes stung from the smog. Around noon, the imam began the Friday sermon by coughing wetly from our mosque's loudspeaker. Through sallow air rang Arabic guttural with phlegm.

My uncle yelled at my cousins to finish in time for the prayer. He yelled a lot more now, a consequence of his accident, or perhaps old age. He'd also grown religious, likely for similar reasons, but managed to retain his playfulness—sometimes he beckoned his sons in a mock qirat, theatrically reciting the holy verses they'd been named from: "Wash shamsi wa'zuhaha. Wal qamari iza talaha!"

By the sun and its brightness. And the moon when it follows…And what was *my* place in this solar system? When we were growing up, I was whatever followed the sun and the moon. A diurnal flower. A bulb that flickered on with dusk. I was a year younger than Qamar, two years younger than Shams. The three of us, along with my sister Aisha, had grown up in this house, played badminton in this lawn, made mythical staffs out of branches found in the street. Here, not that long ago, Musa would come by and we'd take turns riding his motorbike. My father moved us to our own house the year Aisha and I turned thirteen. We were enrolled in the O-level wing of our school and a few years later, I left for college in America. The cosmos had shifted, and yet here I was back home after graduation: so, what about now? Now I might be a comet, I thought as I arranged uprooted seedlings, dusted my chinos. A hurtling visitor dragging its eager tail but soon to curve back in its orbit.

What reprieve did I find by entangling in such calculations? Allah outwitted the angels by asking Adam the names of things and not the place of things. If *things* themselves were discrete, there'd be less confusion; relationships could be singularly drawn, e.g. when we chanted in nursery school: *A is for apple, B is for ball*. Later that very day, however, the script would change. In the song sung during Urdu class the same phonics were embodied by Allah and bat: *alif se Allah, bey se balla, pe se Pakistan!* Even this early, language muddled, reference points became relative and inbred. Allah after all made the apple that banished his lovely boy, and bat and ball…this is a multilingual cricket-playing nation. And yet! In those months back home, how I longed to distill life and all its global trundling down to some relatively reliable pattern. If I could discern even one corner of that pattern, I felt I could create a legend for how to belong in the world. It probably wouldn't have relieved me from the sickening feeling I had that, at twenty-three I was fully formed and irreversible— an irreversible, phony cunt— but it could've eased my passage into the future. So I believed.

After planting, we sprinkled grains of urea in the flowerbeds. Qamar's phone buzzed while he watered limp seedlings. He turned on the speakerphone.

It was Musa's uncle calling from Dera Ghazi Khan. His voice splintered across airwaves stretched poor over the hard-scrabble villages of the Derajat, asked if we'd heard from Musa recently, then told us our friend was missing. Two days earlier, donning his army camo, Musa had gone fishing on the Indus with his brother, and around sunset, spied migratory mallards sunning on an islet of silt. He sent his brother back to the village with the day's catch, grabbed his rifle, and waded to a clump of reeds for a clear aim.

No one had seen him since. Musa's new heavy bike stood in the driveway next to the lawn. He'd left it with Shams and Qamar for safekeeping before taking the bus to D.G. Khan. The voice on the phone crackled. "You know, he's going to marry my girl?"

"Bosom pals" my uncle had dubbed them— Shams, Qamar, and Musa. In days that followed the phone call, Shams contacted several people in Musa's regiment, even getting ahold of the lieutenant general. He said the military was "on it." Qamar kept daily contact with Musa's family in the village, his friends in the army, hospitals and police stations and barrage keepers of D.G. Khan district. The village sent out search parties. In the base of river canes, they found a military-issued Wellington filled with mud.

We'd met Musa at Pisa Piazza ten days earlier, on New Year's Eve 2015. My cousins and I had become regulars here since my return to Pakistan six months earlier. Musa texted that he was running late from mess duty, so Shams, Qamar, and I ordered our usual Tikka and Fajita pizzas, waited for him in the same booth the three of us occupied every Friday night. The ruptured Rexine seats sank like bread to accommodate us— with a satisfying crack. Qamar, squat and muscular, took off his shoes, stretched his bulging legs across the booth, his gym socks reeking of cheddar. Shams, baring his braces said, "What kind of animal are you?"

"The animal that fucks your ass every night," Qamar replied.

Shams managed a call center. Qamar had dropped out of college and sold leather jackets on Instagram. My aunt wanted to get Shams married soon. And yet, whenever my cousins began to bicker, transforming into a slapstick duo in a Punjabi stage drama, one short, one tall, one beefy, one lean— the years stripped back and there we were, boys who lived together in the old house, who busied one another in childish passions. My cousins and I hardly talked when I was abroad, but as soon as I returned, we resumed the montage, cracked the dirty jokes we'd inherited in seventh grade. Old Boyhood, et cetera. I sometimes edited out Aisha from these scenes.

Musa entered the pizzeria swinging his motorcycle helmet on his wrist, and when we hugged, he rested the cold helmet in the curve of my spine. He said, “Looking sexy these days, Scientist.”

At the age of thirteen, Musa had moved by himself to Lahore and joined Shams’ section of eighth grade. There was a distant relative who housed him while he finished school. After that, he was able to rent a flat with other village boys who followed him to the city. Fresh in Lahore, Musa had the look of a mongoose about him, hungry and alert. He was so scrawny that the biology teacher made him take off his shirt so she could point to his ribcage and explain the mechanics of breathing to the class.

But now, twenty-five years old, Musa had filled out. When we embraced in the pizzeria, I sensed heat emanating from his cheeks, the flab of our stomachs rubbed through layers of fabric. I shuddered—I too had been skinny once. Musa sat beside Qamar, didn’t let go of his hand after shaking it.

“I’m starving!” he declared. Using his free hand, he grabbed a flyer out of the menu. “‘Winter Special. Black Rohu…’ Let’s order fish!”

Qamar laughed. “Saeen, it’s a pizza place. I didn’t even know they had fish on the menu.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Musa said. “It’s fish season. Fish is what sells in fish season. What do you think, Adult Braces? My treat if you stop fingering your wire.”

Shams pulled his finger out from his mouth. “Your treat? All my life, I’ve only seen you mooch off others. You all right?”

Not exactly. Earlier that day, Musa had received orders for his transfer. Come spring, he’d be stationed at the military base at Siachen Glacier. Even if there was no skirmish at the Kashmir border, no landslides or embolisms from the altitude, soldiers returned with sunburnt faces, frostbitten toes.

“I’ve been getting fat in Lahore,” Musa said. “Will be good to shrink this paunch.”

“Have you told your family?” Qamar asked, concerned.

“Not yet. I’ll tell them next week when I head down to the village.” Musa looked at me, perhaps because he thought that in my time away, I’d forgotten his life story. “My mother and sisters will cry. All my close family lives in the village and I’m the youngest, so they get scared. On top of that, I’ll have to tell my fiancé.” I nodded. I *had* forgotten about the fiancé. I tried to imagine her. A head covered in a chadar, a silver nose pin, and clean little teeth. I blushed. The summoned face belonged to the woman who came to clean my parents’ house.

“I’ll break the engagement,” Musa continued. “I don’t care if it causes a feud. Scientist, they’ve been filling her head about me for so long. We’ve been engaged since we were newborns. Newborns! And then she got meningitis— lost her voice, never went to school after that, never left the village except to go to a hospital. And still she strings some gibberish together and texts me love notes. I had to block her on Facebook. You know, she’s deaf and dumb?” In his Siraiki accent, Musa pronounced it “dafe en’ dum’.”

The sole waiter of Pisa Piazza came out of the kitchen with plates, cutlery, sachets of ketchup, and a bottle of Coke. He served our pizzas on bread boards, sprinkled with oregano and smelling of what my college friends would call “curry.” Musa asked him about the fish.

“Sorry, sir. We haven’t launched the fish yet,” the waiter said. “Our fish chef got delayed because of the Attack. Inshallah, next week we’ll launch.” Launch? I imagined an eel shedding its fins and blasting into outer space. Old Musa would have ribbed the waiter. Old Musa stole sandwiches from boys’ lunchboxes. But this soldierly, grown-up version was capable of sobriety and bourgeois distaste. “Pathetic place,” he said in the waiter’s earshot. “What does the APS Attack have to do with

frying fish? You two made me ride my bike all the way here— they didn't even spell 'pizza' right! What's piazza?" He snorted. "Piyaz?"

"Actually, Younus found this spot," Shams said gleefully, hoping Musa would rag me. But Musa only said, "Thought you'd have learnt better, Scientist," and went on slathering ketchup on his slice. For Musa, I must only have been an America-return, a mummy-daddy city boy. Though the two of us rarely met, he knew I'd returned home primarily to appease my parent's wishes, that I was already applying for PhD programs in the US. He knew I worked at an international school, taught IB Biology to children of foreigners and the unimaginably wealthy. The principal would call me to the office to meet worried parents. Here's our young Biology teacher, freshly minted at Yale. These parents pressed me to reveal my secrets. They offered me incredible bribes to write their kids' college essays. I refused to align with them. I haggled down the fare with rickshaw drivers and ate buy-one-get-one-free pizzas at Pisa Piazza with my cousins, complaining about the rich, those foolish people who would've flocked to M.M. Alam or Defence on New Year's Eve to throw money at fancy restaurants just to make a statement. To be hoodwinked into paying more was a marker of the gullible, of those who'd softened. I was held suspect of that very weakness by Shams and Qamar, from the day I won a scholarship to an elite high school, and then another one to Yale, till the day I returned home with my degree, discovered Pisa Piazza and introduced it to my cousins. I wanted to prove that I was still obedient to lessons of the middle class.

Musa spoke as he ate pizza with a fork and knife. "Scientist, you come to my village and I'll feed you fish right from the Indus. All three of you should come with me next week. Younus, you haven't seen our mountains. You'll love Fort Munro. We'll drive up dusty valleys and suddenly there will be pine trees and waterfalls in the hills. If you're lucky, snow." In the same voice, I'd tried to sell

Pakistan to my American friends. I'd shown them pictures of the Himalayas, the Mughal architecture of Lahore. No one had visited.

"It's a poor man's Kashmir," Qamar joked. "Murree for Saraikis. Rundown hotels around a dirty pond— a prissy little burger like Scientist would be miserable there."

"Why keep so much soldiers posted in Kashmir!" Shams said. He'd been tearing up the flyer listing winter specials into tiny squares. "What's the point of pushing soldiers up glaciers to their death? What good's come out of that?" The more Shams had become leftist, the more his brother renewed his support for the army. Musa, of course, was brainwashed by profession. He contested that we'd be singing a different tune if terrorists found strongholds in our city, the way they had in Waziristan.

"Then this Shams will be slurping my balls, getting my pubes stuck in his braces," he said to Qamar. They slapped each other's hands. Shams flipped them off and pointed out that the Mujahidin-turned-Taliban were a creation of the US and Pakistani militaries. Shams touted this factoid in every political conversation as a sort of an "aha!" trump card. Wagging his finger, he said, "You can laugh, but these are the dead realities!"

Earlier that December, a handful of TTP terrorists had broken into Army Public School in Peshawar and gunned down 132 schoolchildren and a dozen staff. Pakistani military and media would milk this event for years to come—of all the violence we've lived through, somehow the propagandized memory of this one has buried deep into our national consciousness. But I remember, even that very December, after a few weeks of hush and heightened security, Lahore *had* reemerged into some semblance of its winter glory. Wedding tents were pitched on street corners and strung with fairy lights. Concerts, the Lahore Literary Festival, were postponed but not cancelled, Aisha's BFA thesis display only delayed by a month. We'd grown up in difficult times and knew that everyday concerns of life tenaciously held sway under almost all circumstances. My uncle had been shot in the

head by a mugger in our own neighborhood; while he was stable but still comatose, Qamar had driven me to the US embassy in Islamabad for my visa appointment. We'd stopped at Raja Bazaar to buy pashminas for our mothers because the rates were a bargain.

Sitting in Pisa Piazza, then, I'd felt no alarm for the volatility of our world, or concerns for Musa's life. To deescalate the conversation, I cracked jokes about soldiers buggering each other at the Siachen base camp to stay warm. That set Musa off, relating gossip about boys in his platoon who'd slept with their superiors, used plastic bags as condoms.

When Musa went missing, I was surprised to find that I was wracked with worry. I kept reminding myself that it *was* concerning news. For although I'd known Musa since sixth grade and felt a brotherly connection with him, we'd never been close, had never met each other outside the company of Shams and Qamar. Since Musa had remained friends with my cousins for over a decade, perhaps I sponged *their* anxiety and made it my own, feeling it was required of me to hold others' grief and seek hope for their sake. I stayed up nights scanning headlines from D.G. Khan District on my laptop. I texted Shams and Qamar any relevant details that might help them divine Musa's fate.

Traditional Horse and Cattle Show Kicks Off in D.G. Khan

Two Taliban Terrorists in Hiding Killed by Special Forces

Body Builders Flex Muscles for Mr. D.G. Khan, South Punjab, Mr. Olympia Titles

A week after Musa's disappearance, I received an email from Columbia, applauding me on my admission into their Biostatistics PhD program. I didn't tell anyone of *this* news, not my cousins or colleagues, not even my poor mother who'd have wept over dinner, mourning my loss, claiming that though she was a meagre housewife, it was due to her prayers, her devotion to our education, and the

beatings she delivered in our childhood that her son had earned this great success. Aisha, instead, would sulk for weeks despite my father's cajoling. When I was accepted on a full ride at Yale, she'd received a similar offer from a women's college in Massachusetts. My father had persuaded her then—forced her, in Aisha's words—to remain in Lahore and apply for universities abroad when it came time for grad school instead. Now, with news of my admission offer, they'd beg her to stay home again.

The next night, as I scrolled through news articles (*Kot Sharif: New Polio Case Reported)*, taking swigs from a bottle of bootlegged gin I kept stashed under the bed, I received an email from my future supervisor asking me to acknowledge receipt of their admission offer. I turned off my laptop. Blue Sapphire burned in my bloodstream. My armpits exuded sweat in cold air.

I envisioned myself emerging not from JFK, but out of a Metro-North train from New Haven. In the July stench of the subway, holding the worn steel banister, I would drag my luggage up the staircase, pushed by the perspiring crowd into Grand Central's marbled halls. Botticino gleaming with warm light. Blast of air conditioner, foreign languages on the escalator. The sky cubed through grilles of arched windows. My legs would weave around bands of tourists from East Asia and the Midwest, teenagers loitering for Wifi by the Apple store. My eyes would find it— the barreled ceiling traced with figures of gods and heroes etched in constellations. Paled turquoise speckled with gold. Recalling that image, composed as much from memory as movies and computer screensavers moved me to tears, spoke of a grandeur I'd longed for my whole life but had failed to find at home.

Who was I trying to fool? Though I cracked crude jokes and ate at Pisa Piazza with Shams and Qamar, napped between my parents in the afternoons and handed them half my salary, I would've abandoned any of these people to get what I wanted. Oh, none of them were saints! But at least they seemed sure of their love. Only Aisha saw through me. She barely accommodated me in her glittering

artsy life, failed to invite me to her exhibitions and open mics. Days I cooked dinner, she often ate out with friends or remained locked in her studio, claiming to work on her impending thesis.

Everyone makes their own life. But simply because I was smarter or more driven than my cousins, because I born a man, born in a city, because I spoke better English, who was I to think I was owed more of the world? I was so selfish in my hunger, and yet I knew I couldn't remedy myself no matter how much I tried to compensate.

But I tried. The days after Musa disappeared, I'd take a rickshaw to Shams and Qamar's house straight from work. I wanted to appear to them in my office clothes, rushing to their side the moment I could escape. My aunt heaped pulao on my plate. My uncle veered his wheelchair room to room to gather and display in his lap chinaware he collected from Sunday Bazaars. I fingered the porcelain, only to scratch off charity shop tags when my uncle wasn't looking. I listened to Shams and Qamar piece together theories about Musa's disappearance from bits of new, conflicting information, and offered alternative narratives. Maybe Musa was taken hostage by local gypsies? Maybe he'd be found once the army combed through the area?

No, they said. They told me I made no sense.

By late afternoons, thankfully, Shams and Qamar became amenable to forgetting their friend. Then I called their younger brother, boiled chai, dealt cards on Shams' bed and we played Rang, ganging up on fifteen-year-old Fasih, breaking allegiance and turning on our partners, calling each other words I'd be ashamed to utter around my female friends, until hours passed and hunger dug into our stomachs with twisting pain, until one of us threw his cards and exclaimed, Cocksucking sisterfucker! Another day had emptied into an evening greasy with smog.

Then we drove to Moon Market and shivered at rickety plastic tables outside Pisa Piazza. The fish chef had finally arrived. We waited for him to spoon out gutted bodies of rohu from woks of

black bubbling oil and leave them bleeding on newspapers. As we speculated about Musa yet again, constructing more scenarios in which he could still be alive, we tore fish skin crusted with spices, ripped out the spine, searched with bare hands for flesh embedded under fat, dipped chunks of it in chutney, scooping out horseradish and tamarind pulp with handfuls of rohu. Our tongues searched for needle-like bones in our mouth, and our fingers picked them off the tip and smeared them on the table. We grabbed glass bottles of coke with greasy palms and washed down the bolus lodged in our throats. We belched unforgivingly.

This is what I cherished—this feeling, edged with crisis, of being home.

We were at Pisa Piazza when Musa's uncle called Qamar and said, "Musa's been found." In a marshy end of the Indus, a fisherman had discovered a waterlogged body wearing one wellington. I could hear the uncle crying over the phone. "It's Musa, no doubt about it."

"Have you seen the body?" Qamar had asked him.

He hadn't. The army was "on it" and didn't allow family involvement. In fact, the infantry general wanted to bury the body immediately. Musa's father had begged them to wait for us. *For us?* You were his closest friends, his brothers, the uncle said. After much pleading, the army relented, took the body to prepare it for a soldier's funeral. Shams pressed Qamar to inquire if a postmortem would be conducted. Postmortem? Musa's uncle was confused. The boy had drowned. The prayer would take place in Musa's family home at 0700. Qamar cut the call after mumbling the prayer for the dead. We repeated the prayer, threw away the fish, and got to our feet.

In the car I remembered Musa teaching me to ride his shabby old Yamaha when I was in eighth grade. He was in tenth. He sat behind me on the bike and instructed me to push the kickstart

harder. Slowly release the clutch. No, slower. Now turn the race handle. Just a little! The bike sputtered and stopped. With his encouragement, I repeated the process. The bike roared alive, jerked, zigzagged, and slashed forward down the narrow street. Steady yourself, he said. I kept trying to brake, but Musa wouldn't let me. He was whooping, then slapping my thigh, shouting, Avoid the gutter! Stop! Stop! When I abruptly halted at the end of the lane, Musa said, You're a natural, bro, better than those cunts anyway, meaning Shams and Qamar, whose figures I could see walking toward us through the dust. I knew Musa was being kind, obviously and almost pityingly kind. I was the nerd who sucked at sports, who couldn't manage basic hand-eye coordination really, and though I laughed off my classmate's jokes, I was acutely aware of my deficiencies. I should've been embarrassed by Musa's praise. In fact, I was touched. For a long time, I was grateful for that kindness.

"I can't believe this," Qamar said now, eyes on the road as he navigated through a blanket of smog. "How could he have drowned? He was his regiment's swimming champion."

"Sometimes there are powerful undercurrents," I said.

"No, the water isn't deep in the winter," Qamar said. "I swam there with Musa last November. Even then, you could wade through most of it."

The story also sounded suspicious to Shams. This far south, the Indus becomes lazy, miles wide. Why would it take so long to find the body in calm and shallow water? Did someone dump it later? To whom had the fisherman reported his discovery? Shams was convinced the army was covering up Musa's death. There had been news of Taliban hiding in the area, I told them, and Shams snatched at this news. He created a scenario in which terrorists abduct Musa, having deduced from his camo that he was a soldier, then kill him in retaliation against the gutting operation being conducted in Waziristan.

"Why wouldn't they perform a postmortem?" Shams said. "Why bury him so quickly?"

“That uncle of his is a two-timing bullshitter. Musa never liked him,” Qamar said. “He cheats the villagers when he inseminates buffaloes. Injects poor sperm and doesn’t even take out the dung.”

I leaned forward to rub Qamar’s neck as he cried. “I should’ve been there with him. He’d invited me,” Qamar said, choking, forgetting that all of us had been offered an invitation. “I just can’t believe this.”

“Musa’s heavy bike is at the house,” Shams said. “What should we do with it?”

“I can’t believe this,” I parroted. But I did. We’d grown up studying from textbooks crammed with stories of war heroes, the TV broadcast anthems in the voice of bereft mothers urging soldiers to march toward glorious death and avenge the nation. Each Friday, people congregated in mosques and raised hands to pray for the shaheed killed by terror attacks, by drone strikes, by India, plane crashes, train accidents, earthquakes, whatever. Oh Allah, grant our martyrs their place in your paradise.

The fickleness of life was always believable. Regardless of how he’d died, Musa’s death would always be mentioned with sorrowful pride, his name always uttered with the epithet of shaheed. Even if he died of drowning while on vacation, no one would think him less than a hero. That was the only comfort here, so why not reach for it? Why not suspend our queries, our disbelief in the army, and fantasize that somewhere in the Indus, past sandbars crowded with migratory duck, there was a permanent garden for our friend?

Whatever worry I’d siphoned off my cousins evaporated. To be honest, I never had any real hope of Musa’s recovery and was relieved I needn’t pretend anymore. Was I wrong not to have expected miracles for my cousins, and to now wish for them to settle for the convenient delusion of martyrdom? How could such desire for cognitive dissonance be chalked out to pragmatism, let alone a marker of my love? In any case, there are always people whose most desperate hopes are rewarded.

My uncle had survived brain injury only when my aunt had visited holy men in squalid shrines, begged dead saints to intercede with God. How joyful she must've been to not have listened to those orthodox clerics, those statisticians, those rational doctors trained to slice body after body until life was little more to them than a corded machinery of membrane and bone. This country was filled with people like my aunt. Even if their faith was rewarded once in a lifetime, they were better off than me.

Shams and Qamar dropped me home, told me to get ready in ten minutes. My family was gathered in the lounge around the TV, watching a Turkish soap opera. My sister slumped next to my mother who provided sarcastic commentary on the heroine's Botox while scratching my sister's scalp. While gazing at the screen, my father gripped a quartered pomegranate in his fingers and beat the wooden handle of a knife against the leathery rind. Seeds gathered in his cupped hand. He emptied them into a bowl in his lap, threw the hollowed fruit into a plate, licked his palm. His eyes still riveted on the TV, he nudged the lip of the bowl against my mother's shoulder and grunted.

"Musa passed away," I said. They whipped their necks toward me as if we too were in a telenovela. "I'm going to D.G. Khan with Shams and Qamar tonight."

Questions, prayers. My mother had never met Musa in person. There was a distance in her concern which provided solace. She fretted instead about us driving in the smog, quoted the number of people recently killed from highway accidents. The motorway would be closed because of weather conditions, I reminded her. We'll take the G.T. Road.

"That's even worse," my father said. "Tell Qamar not to be a rash driver. And watch out for the lorries. Those bastards overload them with hay and they topple on the road."

“Tomorrow is Aisha’s display,” my mother said. She spat chewed up seeds on the side of her plate. “I’d have told you but you’re never at home these days.” The impudence of her love made me want to cry.

“He can see it later if he wants to,” Aisha said. “Tomorrow’s the defense. But the display will be up for three days.” She looked up at me: “Younus?”

“I don’t have time.” I hurried into my room, unwilling to let Aisha thaw toward me because of Musa’s death. I stripped, leaving my cardigan, polo shirt, chinos on the carpet. Shivering, I slid on a white fitted kurta, stretched on a straight pajama, and draped a black shawl across my shoulders. I put on thick glasses, ruffled my hair, and viewed myself in the mirror. I looked handsome, a hipster pretending to be a goatherd.

Behind my reflection, I noticed a FedEx envelope resting on the bed. It was neatly ripped along the dotted lines. I pulled out my acceptance letter and felt a rush regarding the white spaces. No indignation at the opened envelope or reminder of Musa’s death could suppress this rush. The words in expensive ink formed a bas relief on thick monogrammed paper. There was a knock on my door and my sister entered the room before I called her in. I hid the letter behind my back.

“They’re waiting for you outside,” she said. For New Years—or perhaps her display— she’d shorn her hair into a pixie cut. My mother had burst into tears when Aisha returned from the salon. I was still unaccustomed to her haircut, couldn’t determine how much of it was an act of rebellion and how much an assertion of chic. The haircut fit other aspects of her personality of which I knew little. Her artist image, her activist band, her Twitter feminist pose.

“Congratulations,” she said, pointing at the envelope still on my bed. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t help but open it. But I haven’t told anyone. I’m proud of you.”

“Look,” I said. “You can make whatever happen for yourself no matter where I am.” I was afraid she’d respond, so as the doorbell rang, I said, “I should go.”

She looked at me. Like twins everywhere, we too had been routinely dressed by our mother in matching clothes. Then one arbitrary day she abandoned the ritual.

“Yes,” Aisha said. “You should go.”

Qamar chain-smoked and drove for seven hours straight on G.T. Road, barely aware of the world outside the smog, trailing the brake lights of vehicles ahead of us. This road was graveled over an ancient route that had carried armies and caravans all across Asia. How many had trooped down this road in their passage from East to West, West to East? Asoka, Babur, Alexander the Great—one would’ve expected some vestige of former glory. In areas where the smog thinned, we glimpsed fields of rice stubble that had been set on fire to clear way for potatoes and coriander, slums reeking of sulfur from open waste channels, followed by gated suburban colonies with names like Sun Valley, Jinnah Gardens, Pak Eden Villas. We circumvented crowded towns, our headlights glinting off mileposts, revealing absurd names glittering in reflective paint. Chichawatni. Mian Channu.

At one point, unable to see the turn for the bypass in the fog, we entered Harappa and were lit by sodium lights and the rush of the central bazaar, alive even at midnight. This town shared its name with a nearby Bronze-Age ancestor that had developed into the world’s first city with a grid and sanitation system. I searched for a museum as we drove through the market. Driving past cube-like auto shops, grubby snooker clubs, stores and restaurants named after Mecca, Medina, Lahore, Karachi, we approached a glass-front clothing store, four stories tall and towering above the town. Pictured on the billboard atop the building: A model with hair like my sister’s posing with a wiry actor in the

English countryside. Both wore trench coats and tight khakis. Behind them in the distance was a thatched cottage with an exposed lattice of timber beams, its stone chimney chugging smoke.

"English Fog Collection," the board read. "Up to 30% Off."

Women in heavy chadars clamored down granite stairs holding colorful bags. We crawled through traffic. At a red light, a beggar who carried a rhesus monkey tied to a fine chain pushed his animal onto our windscreen. The monkey's hind paws gripped the wiper, matted belly and furred penis exposed to us.

"Sa'ab, I've to get milk for this bezuban," the man said. "He's sick."

Qamar threatened to spray the monkey with the wiping fluid.

"You cruel bastard!" Shams said. "Why did you capture this monkey if you couldn't feed him?" I didn't know Shams' political passions included animal welfare.

"Please give a little in Allah's name," the man pleaded. Nevertheless, he yanked the monkey back onto his chest. I looked at the rhesus clinging to the man's shirt, the underside of its foot a grotesque version of a human's, scrambling to find the shirt pocket. We exited the town.

After rejoining the G.T. Road outside Harappa, Shams again offered Qamar to switch driving duties, but Qamar refused to let go of the wheel. He chugged Red Bull and smoked menthol after menthol, clouding the interior with a minty smog of its own. The car was overheated to dispel vapor on the windscreen. From the back, I cracked open a window periodically to let in frigid air and release some smoke. I suffered quietly. I hadn't learnt to drive. I wished Qamar would blast EDM as he usually did when driving. The booming bass, the sudden beat drop, I thought, would tease a sense of purpose out of me. However, when Qamar finally did play music upon my request, all I felt was vacuous apprehension, a vague dread rising with the electric drumbeat. Queasy from the smoke, I

thought again of Grand Central Station. How could my mind go on scraping such stock images! What about cramped rat-infested subways, rows of bodegas, immigrant loneliness, gutters belching steam…

Outside Multan the smog became so dense we had to stop. We pulled over at a tuck shop where a naked bulb formed a weak orb of fluorescence against the opaque sky. It was 4am. The weather bar on my phone showed three grey curlicues and underneath, instead of "cloudy" or "clear:" *Smoke.* Qamar took out another Marlboro Ice Blast and lit it. The smoke trailed like milk in water, slowly suffusing into the air.

"I'm going to call Musa's uncle," Qamar said, handing me money. "Get me two packs of Ice Blast." There was ash in his beard.

Shams and I purchased cigarettes and a tube of broken Pringles, then headed to pee in the bushes by the road. We stood an arm's length apart and began to urinate. I heard Shams' piss hit the ground, then my own pattering on broad unctuous leaves. The whiff of our concentrated urine mingled in the night. Even this felt like Old Boyhood.

"I wonder what happened to Musa's poor cousin?" Shams said. "The deaf and mute one." A car screeched behind us on the road. I heard a clash of chains.

"What about her? I said. "They'll have to tell her, I mean…"

"Do you think he broke off the engagement before he died?"

Head beams cut through the smog, reflecting on particles of dust shifting like sheets of rain. A line of lorries broke through the haze, jangling with bells and chains. The lorries were painted brightly with mountains, birds, missiles, bad couplets in intricate calligraphy. Their backs ballooned

with hay covered in white fluttering tarp, bursting outside their frames six feet in each direction, making them look languorous, like ticks bloated after a meal.

"We're next to a huge sugar mill." Shams explained. Wasn't it hay they were carrying? My O-Level Geography book had informed me sugarcane was a summer crop, but I didn't contest my cousin, knowing he'd be right about these sorts of things, although after all, he was also just a city boy.

Qamar honked.

Shams said, "Isn't it weird that, in a way, things are easier for Musa now that he's dead? He doesn't have to worry about his old parents, the motherfucking army politics, going to Siachen, the fiancé he was going to marry. It's terrible for us he's gone, I mean. But in a way it's easier for him." I was surprised by Shams' words. He would never have said anything of the sort while Musa was missing. Or maybe he would have, if I ever sought him out, if I tried to see him outside of what he was to me, part of my family, one half of a comedy duo, a finger-wagging caricature.

Qamar pressed the horn for longer.

"Come on, stop pissing like an old horse," I said. "Qamar's having a break down."

Musa killed himself. I saw it watching the lorries pass. Musa wearing the mythical youth conferred by a soldier's uniform with… stones in his pockets and in his Wellingtons, checking to see if his brother had left, before wading into the river…Maybe all of us had wondered about the possibility of suicide, then buried the thought away. Voicing it would be the cruelest act we could commit with Musa's memory.

From Multan, we switched to a poorly maintained four-lane road. On a clear day, we could've completed the journey in just over an hour. But we were stuck behind the line of lorries. I fell asleep.

When I woke up, dawn light blurred on misted car windows. Qamar, cigarette wedged between his teeth, was talking to Musa's uncle, begging him to delay the funeral prayer. An overturned lorry had spilled its load of cane across the bridge spanning the Indus. There would be no passage until the authorities woke up, brought a crane and hauled the lorry upright. We had to turn our car back and take a potholed two-lane, go due north and hope to make the crossing there, then drive down south again to the village. Shams made another offer to drive, but Qamar waved in refusal.

Of course, it had to be like this. If for no one else, then for Qamar's sake, it had to be a challenge against the odds. "Please, just tell them to wait a little," he was saying on the phone. Musa's uncle reluctantly agreed. What a fool this Qamar was. All he wanted was to participate in this ritual of death. He had to be the chauffeur. He had to pay for the snacks. He had to be whatever he thought was to be a man. Did he think he could prove something? Remedy something? Part of me refused to admit that he could love so deeply.

We didn't make it to the funeral prayers. Musa's uncle, that two-timing bullshitter, had lied.

Qamar had grazed the bumper of his car, twisting it in the narrow unpaved streets of the village. There was not a single person to be seen. We parked at the end of a path, hurried past mud walls splattered with cow pats, fields of mustard extending behind them, only the first row of yellow blossoms visible in the fog. At the end of the path was the only house constructed of baked brick, funded, no doubt, with Musa's remittances. Two soldiers stood outside as guards. Shams kept calling Musa's uncle but he didn't pick up.

My cousins talked to the guards in Punjabi. They told us the prayers concluded a short while ago. The funeral party was now en route to the graveyard in Kot Sharif. There was an army ceremony planned before the burial.

Qamar turned away from the guards and sat down on his haunches. He cried and his muscled back heaved, his fat neck stretched over vertebrae. Shams forced his brother to his feet, walked him back to the car.

I distracted myself by looking at Musa's home over the boundary wall, at the courtyard with an old acacia growing in the middle. I smelled livestock. There wasn't much rustic charm here. How had Musa felt leaving his hometown at the age of thirteen? No wonder he barely returned to his family, and even then, preferred to bring a friend. The difference between this world and Musa's life in the army was starker than the difference between Lahori middle class and the Ivy League. But I tasted that same betrayal. How cruel it is to become a part…a part of—Uh! Someone was wailing.

Not Qamar—the sound came from inside the house. It was an awful, shattered voice, faint, but growing stronger echoing and breaking on the bark, the leaves. I paused and listened, keeping my gaze fixed at the scraps of sky suspended in the tree's branches. I tried to attach a face to the weeping. Musa's mother, sister, his fiancé, the woman who worked in our house, the woman on the billboard in a pixie cut.

The car roared behind me.

"Scientist, get inside," Shams yelled from the driver's seat. Qamar had finally yielded to his brother. Although we've never talked about this change in duties, I know that in his secret narrative, Shams credits himself for accomplishing the final feat.

I jumped in and we sped. No one explained our motive but of course it was clear. We were going to drive to Kot Sharif and hope to make it to the burial. I sat in the back thinking of the women mourning in Musa's house, not allowed to participate in the prayer or the burial. And here we were, outsiders with only one obstacle: time. No match for our big car. How lucky Qamar must have felt,

spending all his savings, the trickle of money he received when my grandmother died, on this refurbished Prius, when his mother had begged him to invest in the National Saving Scheme.

After the mucky village track, we sped through the countryside. The town of Kot Sharif opened up as ugly as any other Pakistani town with a big bazaar spilling from its center, dense conurbation of one-room shops with tin shutters painted with ads, the spate of men and donkeys, qingqis and motorbikes speeding in all directions. Right then in Lahore, Aisha must be getting ready for her defense. I tried to spot women in the streets and finally, I spied a cluster of them in white burkas with caps like Hershey's Kisses buying oranges from a donkey cart. A flock of goats had blocked the road up ahead. Shams pressed hard on the horn and didn't let go. It got no better until we reached the graveyard.

I lurched out of my seat. I had never beheld on any continent a sight so magnificent. In the boundaries of the old shrine spangled with concertina wire, the dusty graveyard spread far and wide on hills brilliant with patches of dandelion and morning glory, visible from all corners of the town center, an opening of flowering acres pushing apart the population boom. Dappled in the mild but generous sun of Southern winter, it undulated the way I imagined the French Riveria or Napa Valley to spread—"playground of the rich" the phrase that sprang to my mind, despite the litter, the waft of garbage, hardened mud paths, the haphazard mongoose mounds and human mounds and goats grazing between mismatched grave heads.

There, on the top of one hill, around a flag of Pakistan, was a collection of men in somber beige, black, white, cream, a thick band of hundreds— soldiers, civilians, villagers— that from a distance looked shrunken in the graveyard carpeted with trampled wildflower. A military bugle sounded, and soldiers stamped their feet on the earth in unison.

Qamar rushed ahead of us.

"Well, shit," I said. Shams chuckled dryly and I saw his tongue move beneath his skin to find an unreachable place under his braces. By the time we climbed up the hill, the ceremony had almost ended. After this, an army-issued cleric in strange robes would read a prayer. And then, like a feast opened at a wedding, men would rush to fill the grave using their hands. I will watch Qamar gather fistfuls of soil and shower it in the six-foot deep hole. Within minutes, the hole will be packed and the grave heaped into a raw mound, then covered with rose petals and marigold.

But while the last moments of the whole bugle affair were carrying on, I turned away and studied the graveyard. I'd been somewhat deceived. The flowers had looked more pervasive when approached from the crowded town. Viewing from the top, I spied many splotches that were already parched and unable to hide the bald red earth, the flat shale. The goats would graze them away in two days. No one seemed bothered. For the people of the town, the real spectacle must be the complicated military ritual set to brassy music. I saw young men from the market walking up the hill toward us, curious and excited, some laughing, friends holding hands. A few had taken out their smartphones and documented the scene, their cameras pointed at us.

If this was one of those TV shows where a reporter and cameraman roam the streets, stopping pedestrians to ask a question, to make them sing, to trick them into becoming fools for a large and invisible audience, if one of these boys approached me with his smartphone and asked me to say something for the viewers, I'd have obliged, I'd have been his chump. I'd have told him of the weeping. How, at first, I assumed it was a chorus of women, the women of Musa's household bawling in the morning emptied of men, beating their chests, mourning the boy while soldiers tooted a horn on his body in Kot Sharif.

But, closer, I heard from deep within the compound the voice of only one woman. I want to tell you I'll never forget it. It was a singular barefaced howl, repeating without pattern, mouth gasping underwater, unaware of itself or the ripples it caused.

It must have been her. I waited for my reckoning. But she wanted nothing to do with me or my shame. Hers was a voice braying and raw, the cry of a voice that had forgotten to speak.

All the Best of Luck

To simulate conditions of the jungle floor, Sameer's father would crowd tropical plants in a dim corner of the house, thus trapping humidity in the foliage. The jungle floor: dark, muggy, windless. Such was the environment in the NADRA Office during the scheduled power cut, bodies crammed and squirming in the stagnating room, saturating the air with evaporated sweat. Agitated limbs waited for electricity. Some people left in protest. Sameer only persevered by recasting the ordeal into a test of his autochthony. After all, before he left Lahore and was taught the language of *personal space* by the glare of foreigners, he could've wrangled his way through crowds with ease, finding it natural to fling himself into a multitude of men and not even notice their hair, hands, clothes brush across him. So why would he run home now like an ABCD, instead of battling through the masses?

He was lying to some degree. Though he knew the crush outside the school canteen or the airport, Sameer had never stepped inside a government office before that day. In the past, his father would bribe a clerk to create the required paperwork or told the driver to deal with bureaucratic affairs on Sameer's behalf. All his life, Sameer had been kept indoors like a houseplant, shepherded in air-conditioned cars with sheets of tinted plastic glued to their windows.

So then, in the end, hadn't he shown them he was hardier than they'd imagined? He had proven to *them*—or rather only to himself—that he was still a native of his city. For his self-cajoling had succeeded. At the appointed hour, electricity flooded through the grid again, flickering on the monitor screens in the office. Almost two hours of pushing and sweating among angry and desperate people, staying alert to the line cutters, there he was at the front of the line at Counter 3, moments away from receiving his new National Identity Card. Being alert was the key. After all, it was due to a lapse of attention that he'd lost his ID in the first place, dropped it somewhere on campus during freshman year, and then, owing to a longer lapse, forgotten all about the loss until his arrival home,

when his mother demanded he produce the card. She needed it to apply for an educational grant from her Benevolent Fund in his name. He remembered the look of exasperation she'd given him when he finally confessed he couldn't locate the card, one tinged with relief for she could then haul out the old motherly complaints and erase the year he'd spent away from home.

It didn't matter how anything was lost, Sameer thought crossly. In a matter of minutes, all would return to order.

But oh— there was a shift in the movement behind him. A hand yanked his shoulder and before Sameer could turn his head, a man had elbowed his way through the crowd and wedged himself in the six inches between Sameer and the marble counter, his hips thrusting onto Sameer's pelvis. The man fixed his stare at the official behind the glass shield. In the glass, Sameer noticed the man's nose, the same kind Sameer's mother and grandmother possessed and prided themselves on. Perhaps it was that mark of familiarity that prevented Sameer's outcry. Or perhaps he was exhausted—after two hours, he had no fight left in him. It's fine, he told himself. This was the final trial. And along it came a sign: the Kashmiri nose. That's what Mama would call it— pinched below the bridge, sloping straight and severe, a remnant of beauty looming over an otherwise squashed face. To create a passage of air between their bodies, Sameer twisted his torso and jammed his shoulder against the man's back. From the stink of the man's perspiration rose a heady smell. Sandal? Jasmine attar? Something like that.

As soon as the official squinted in his direction, the man spoke in Punjabi-warped-Urdu, "My daughter just received her ID card, but they've misspelled her name. Is it possible to correct it? Madam? Madamji?" He knocked on the glass shield.

The NADRA official, a middle-aged woman with a dupatta pinned to her hair, didn't look up from her computer. The man shook his back to free it of Sameer's rigid shoulder, and glancing back, caught Sameer's eye. The man faced the counter again, and switching to Punjabi, repeated his

daughter's case— anecdotally this time. Tahira had just received her National ID card two days ago and had noticed the 'a' at the end of her name was missing, which was funny because that made her name the same as Tahir, her elder brother's.

"Oye, Uncle! Get in line!" someone yelled from the back.

Sameer, his eyes glazed from weariness, regarded the reflection of the crowd in the shield. He imagined being back in his college darkroom in Willough, dipping photographic paper in a trough of developer, watching the blurred crowd emerge on drenched paper, the Kashmiri nose shining in the clarity of a low depth-of-field.

"You need to get a new ID made," the official finally told the man, her eyes still on her monitor.

"But then, uh, the money—"

"Go to Counter 1, they'll give you a token for free." The official pointed to Counter 1, and the long line that stretched in front of it, its tail meandering outside the door of the Office onto College Road. The man turned and left the building.

Meanwhile, the official returned to Sameer, and finally, after clicking her old-fashioned mouse, opened a drawer, then closed it. She told Sameer that his ID card hadn't arrived yet.

"But I got the notification text," Sameer groaned, clutching the counter. His hamstrings ached. There must be languages with neologisms for the anger and despair caused in bureaucratic offices. German must have a word for that. And Japanese…

He'd turn it all into a joke for Monica when he'd Skype with her that night.

“There was an issue with one of the delivery trucks,” the official said, nonchalant. “It should be here tonight, maximum by tomorrow morning. Come aroun a little before the office opens. The mob isn’t too wild then.”

Sameer jostled past the crowd and exited the door.

College Road, named in recognition of the two public colleges along its length, ran through the lower-middle-class neighborhood of Township. Sameer’s mother taught Urdu at one of these colleges. But the road was perhaps better known for its cheap wedding halls and CNG stations, a park called Ideal Park, and numerous construction supplies stores whose front walls were tin shutters painted with ads and pulled up during open hours. In between the two lanes of the road ran an open sewer canal carrying muddy refuse from surrounding neighborhoods. When Sameer stepped out of the NADRA office onto College Road, he breathed in the essence of the road: the sulfur of warm sewage gas, dust, exhaust fumes, a whiff of something sweet. Sameer imagined a foreign writer describing a humid July day like this as “sweltering monsoon.”

Buses hooted a jarring singsong to attract pedestrians. Refurbished Priuses and Prados zoomed past donkey carts. Motorbikes weaved between them, disregarding the lanes and red lights. Whenever the traffic stopped, beggars— boys with missing limbs, khwaja siras with makeup sweating off their faces, young women swaddling babies—swarmed the cars, tapping at the windows, asking for change before the light turned green.

Willough’s streets were narrow and paved with cobblestones. The shopfronts gleamed with glass, painted wood, and an Old-World charm found in used bookstores, lobster shacks, and artisanal olive oil and vinegar stores, but not found anywhere in Lahore, though Lahore must be a millennium

older than any inhabited city in America. The crowds in Willough—what a joke to use that word while walking on College Road—dissipated at nine p.m. but lights were left on in the display windows all night, illuminating the signs ("Oil Catch You Later!" "Check Out Our Tasting Room. It's a Vin Vin!"), the Pompeiian amphorae of balsamic vinegar, and Sameer's own reflection when he'd stroll off campus and enter the town, talking to his mother on the phone as she drank her morning tea and prepared to drive to College Road for her class. It felt strange to speak Urdu in front of his roommates. They called him Sammy.

Sameer started walking home, two kilometers down College Road from the NADRA office before taking a right, away from the sewage canal and into one the upper-middle-class residential areas outside Township. He could've called John to pick him up, but he'd begun to feel uncomfortable asking servants for help, and besides, he hadn't walked on College Road since he'd left for college in New Hampshire last year. Not that College Road, with its potholes, noise, and pollution, invoked any pleasant memories. As a child, Sameer would pinch his nose while his mother drove past some of the worse sections of the road on the way to visit his grandmother.

But after a year away, here were the images he hadn't remembered, hadn't even known he'd yearned for. Something about their familiarity returned the feeling of home. He didn't mean these strangers, but the archetypes they inhabited… an emaciated dog limped and collapsed outside a roadside restaurant, where an assembly line of boys kneaded, rolled, and baked naan sprinkled with sesame seed in a tandoor. A man in a dairy shop next to the restaurant hauled round earthen trays of yoghurt and fanned away flies from their rim. Weren't these trays of yoghurt, that tandoor, just as exquisite as terracotta amphorae? Across the street, behind a jumble of electric wires, a four-story store called Euro Mart proclaimed from a banner: *Euro Standard Desi Prices. Hamari Guarantee.* How meagre and rich, brimming with verve and humor—any image could be framed and hung in

Willough's lousy art galleries for well-dressed people to gawk at. How foolish those Americans would look, examining with a dumb expression, then nodding enthusiastically to descriptions such as, "the hybridity of the modern and traditional," "ordered chaos," etc. while Sameer stood beside them arms crossed as if to say, Mine! Mine! The joke was on them, certainly not on him! He gaped at the hot air, the asphalt pooling with mirage. He'd hustled in the NADRA office to no avail, but the journey had given him this walk, and that felt predestined to him now. He was sweating, he was famished, and yet the moment made Sameer smile and think, It's good to be home, it's good to— Wow. This happened, was happening right then: two beggar girls sat under the trees lining the sewage canal, broke and sucked yellow flowers from a bush. The world had responded to his reverie. Here was proof—of what? It didn't matter of what.

Of course, he was being silly. He'd been home less than a month. It was unbearably hot, there was load-shedding, poverty, pollution, corruption on all levels, the system was equal parts bureaucratic and inefficient as exhibited by his trip to the NADRA office, his parents had divorced and his father would now more or less exit their life, and so on. But none of this marred Sameer's giddiness in the moment. This was the consequence of distance: the joy of unexpected reclamation.

Not that the divorce destroyed a more intimate image of home. His parent's separation, finalized only two weeks earlier, would only bring stability. For most of his life, Sameer's parents had slept in separate bedrooms. His mild father, travelling often to manage the family nursery in Pattoki, had been a ghostly presence in front of the cracked TV when back in Lahore, surrounded by his plants, not uttering a word for hours. Only when the Yellow Voice proclaimed to him would he transform. Then, all the air of the house would be sucked by the vacuum inside him. He'd throw dishes and shout at Mama, sometimes brawl with her if his anger couldn't find words. But that man—hater of porcelain, destroyer of mind-controlling electronic devices he otherwise loved—

wasn't Sameer's father. It was another man thawed out of his father, rampant and insistent on claims to prophethood, awed to hear the Yellow Voice and then furious that no one believed him. They— Sameer, his mother, and his younger brother— had weathered through the worst of those days by fleeing to their grandmother's house, driving through the stench of College Road's open sewer, Sameer holding his nose. From the age Sameer was six, the three of them had fed his father meals with pills ground up in them. They didn't refer to him in the honorific plural, even to his face.

Monica had said it once. Honorific Plural. That was the term.

Yes, it would be a relief to walk to a house emptied of his father. The city, in fact. For Sameer's father had moved to Pattoki to live with his elderly parents. In this case, too, distance might be a palliative balm. Sameer could always visit him on subsequent visits home. When Sameer was in the US, his father only sent effusive messages on Whatsapp. He was too timid to call.

Sameer passed by the Gourmet Bakers on College Road. He'd find respite in the cool interior, and maybe purchase one of their chicken breads. He was famished. Mama had cautioned against eating from Gourmet Bakers since a video of rats skittering about in one of the stores had gone viral. But even that, buying a chicken bread or a lemon tart or a chicken patty (which would be called a "chicken puff pastry" in New Hampshire!) felt appropriate to the moment, spoke of evening teas at his grandmother's, her knotted fingers scratching the scotch tape off orange Gourmet Bakers boxes. Glad the sun had started going down, he entered the shop, one big room with long glass counters on each side displaying baked goods, packaged snacks, soda, eggs, and bread. The smell of syrup from the sweetmeats and the odor of spiced meat seemed tamed into their appropriate counters by icy blasts from the six-foot tall air conditioners that stood in each corner of the bakery like palatial guards.

Sameer lingered in front of the AC and breathed in cold, delicious air, then approached the uniformed boy behind the counter.

Sameer ordered. The boy took a chicken bread wrapped in cling foil and microwaved it. He carved the loaf, revealing the meat-filled cavity inside, then packed it in an orange Gourmet Bakers box. The heat from the microwave had made the cling foil pliable and it stretched under the knife before getting cut. The sliced segments resembled a caterpillar, the tattered cling foil, remnants of an old stage of its life cycle. *That guy gave no fucks about carcinogens*, Sameer imagined saying to Monica.

Sameer decided he'd dump the chicken bread in the trashcan outside the bakery. While he was paying, he saw the man from the NADRA office standing in Gourmet Bakers' parking. The man held a bunch of bananas in both his hands and stood inspecting his open trunk. Sameer paid and left the shop. Immediately he began to sweat again. But instead of going back inside the bakery and calling his driver, Sameer walked closer to the man's car, a white 2009 Suzuki Cultus— the same car Sameer's mother had— with a large dent in the side of the bonnet.

The trunk was full of baby bananas, shrunken clusters still attached to the stem, green except for dried tips. The fruit looked like a colony of marine creatures nestled under a reef. The man tucked the bunch he held into an empty corner, closed the trunk on them, abruptly turned to Sameer, and said, "Wapda Town Roundabout? How far is it?" A fleck of spit fell on Sameer's face. He hadn't realized he'd ventured so close. He looked at the man's nose and said, "Wapda Town? Oh, I live right by it. You go straight down until Amin Chowk, take a right, then go straight for, uh, half a kilometer." The man was about to get into the car, when Sameer said, "Uncle, would you mind? Dropping me off somewhere along the way?" Once the heat hit him in the Gourmet Bakers' parking, Sameer lost all desire to walk home. Especially when a banana-filled car was passing on the same route—what a story that would make for Monica.

"Were you in the NADRA office earlier today?" the man asked.

"Yes! I was getting a replacement. I lost my original ID card." Sameer said the words "replacement," "original," and "ID card" in English, like most people in the city might, and was struck yet again by the extent to which colloquial Urdu was peppered with English words. Were there no neologisms in Urdu, only loanwords? He kept thinking of other examples of such words.

"Yes, I think I saw you there," the man said. "Sorry yaar, I was in a hurry. I just wanted to ask a question from that woman. They're so rude in there. Okay, sit in the front, I'll drop you off."

Clutching his box of chicken bread, Sameer climbed in the car. The back seat was filled with more bananas, and shopping bags full of groceries.

"Don't think I'm strange," the man said, and laughed. "This boy by the petrol station had fruit that had been cut too early. These still need ten, twelve days to ripen, and they're far too little, you see? So I got them cheap." He turned on the AC and pushed his seat back. Sameer bet the man would mention the Tahir, Tahira anecdote, and complain about NADRA. But he only said, "What's your name? I'm Mr. Kausar Masood, M.B.A."

"I'm Sameer." The man didn't respond. Good.

Of course, there were words like "botal" and "bulbula," Sameer thought as his unfocused gaze settled on the running edge of the road, words that were corruptions of English ones ("bottle and "bubble" respectively) that became incorporated into Urdu long ago. Would those be neologisms? Perhaps, there were no alternatives for the word "bottle" before European plants began manufacturing glass bottles on Indian soil. But it's also likely that such words replaced older words after the decline of Persian and Arabic in the Subcontinent.

Regarding the black waters of the sewer canal, Sameer gave a lecture to his friends from college—Ramon, Monica, and Lily— all private-school kids from East Coast cities, who indulged his didactic streak and listened intently whenever Sameer rambled into one of his speeches.

"For instance," he told them right now, "after the British cut off funding to madrassas, secular studies in philosophy and mathematics at those institutions were starved off. Plus, people were pressured into enrolling their children in Anglicized schools, so 'madrassa,' which had meant, as you know, 'school' in Arabic, was reduced to a 'religious Islamic school' and its usage became rarer. Because of the prevalence of British education, slowly, the English word 'school' was incorporated into Urdu, transliterated as 'askool' or, later, simply 'school' to replace 'madrassa.'"

Monica Fernandes, Indian American, had studied both Introductory Arabic and Photography 101 with Sameer spring semester, and would appreciate such insights. Her family was Christian—"Goan Catholics" she'd always clarify. Sameer had never seen light-skinned Christians like her in Lahore. When they started hooking up a few weeks before the summer started, they'd lay in bed and she'd often ask him questions about life in Lahore and compare it to summers spent in South Mumbai, which she insisted on calling Bombay. Monica would fall asleep to the sound of his voice in bed and he'd wake her up in the morning with his kisses, joking that he'd single-handedly cured her insomnia. If it were a Sunday, they'd go to Mass together in town—though both of them were fairly agnostic. She liked the feeling of familiarity the ritual gave her. He enjoyed the spectacle. The ominous bells. The light refracting through translucent saints.

"Are you a student?" Kausar said abruptly. "Where do you go?"

"Yes, I study at a university in America. Close to Boston," Sameer said, then to ward off the follow-up questions, added, "on a full scholarship. I'm doing a double B.A. in Asian Studies and Visual Arts."

“Oh, wow!” Kausar changed languages from Urdu to English. “Very nice, my good man. Boston is the busy city. My brother lived there for twenty years. He was working in a barber shop there. Now he is back and opened his own shop. It is called The Boston Scissors.” He pronounced it “Booston.”

But aha! Here was the problem, Sameer thought, this man here, struggling but speaking English. And him, him too, thinking in English, forever addressing an audience that spoke English. Will he even be able to articulate all these thoughts in Urdu? Right now, he couldn’t even think of the Urdu word for “replacement.”

“Oh, cool. Boston’s neat.” Sameer also shifted to English. “I often try to stay there for a few days if I fly through Logan. I’m actually an hour outside.”

“Mashallah, your English is very good. You’ve become American, with real accent.”

It was better to keep quiet than to assert that English has become indigenized in South Asia (Monica’s family, even those in Bombay, spoke to each other only in English), and that there wasn’t any “real” accent, but Sameer had to recognize that Urdu had also stopped growing because of a hierarchy of languages in the region, English being considered superior *because* it was associated with the British and, later, the Americans. So of course, American accents would be considered legitimate. Colonial hangover and all that. Everyone knew this. His thoughts weren’t revolutionary. But wasn’t it sad that people like this man weren’t critical of imperialist structures, and even Sameer himself, despite recognizing such constructs, eventually conformed? Why didn’t he talk to his mother in his own suite? In his first semester in College, ashamed that no one understood what he was saying, he’d flattened his cadence, he’d taught himself how to stick his tongue out when saying “th-,” to unroll his r’s, to distinguish between v’s and w’s. He said to Mama over the phone, I thought there was a

very warm walrus waiting there for me. And she repeated after a chuckle: I *th*ought there was a wery warm vaalrus waiting tere for me!

At this point, Sameer felt pressure on his leg, the man's hand creeping up his thigh. Sameer froze his muscles, as, when being massaged lightly with fingertips, one steels oneself from feeling ticklish. The man moved to the slow lane, trailed behind a tanker carrying petrol, letting other cars and rickshaws, even qingqis, honk their horns, and overtake it. The petrol container was oblong and white and made of metal, painted with a small red skull and the word, "Inflammable."

"Why so quiet?" Kausar said, smiling as he scratched Sameer's inner thigh, his tone still pleasant and conversational, his English language likely learnt in Urdu-medium schools with raps on knuckles. Sameer resolutely examined the passing traffic. Soon, he'd be home and would join his mother for tea. The hand crept into the cuff of his shorts, stroked the groove where his thigh met his groin, inched and cupped his testicles. Sameer brushed the man's hand aside. Kausar said, "I said to you, 'What does your papa do?'"

"He's a professor of linguistics at Punjab University," Sameer said. Why did he say that? His father, only BA pass, had no interest in education. His main source of knowledge, his only passion—in days the Yellow Voice was silent—seemed reserved for delicate prayer plants, knotted bonsai and trellises of ficus he imported from Thailand to sell wholesale to nurseries in Lahore. His family was a family of farmers and businessmen until Sameer's generation, when some of them moved to the city and enrolled their children in English-medium schools. His father's voice, his family's journey—Sameer heard it in Kausar Masood's English.

"Oh, good, sometimes I wish I was a professor." Kausar said. "I liked political science in college, got best marks, but MBA has more scope." His hand started its slow spider crawl up Sameer's leg again.

"Mashallah, you're very smart boy," Kausar said absently, unbuckling his own pants with his other hand. He tried pulling down his underwear but failed since he was sitting on it. He grabbed the steering wheel just in time to avoid hitting the petrol tanker. A grocery bag toppled. The smell of bananas in the car was sickening.

Don't look down, Sameer told himself. Don't look down and don't acknowledge. The sun burned orange in his eyes. He counted the trees by the sewer canal. Eucalyptus, hibiscus…mulberry. There, beyond the mulberry, was that a dog? A donkey, a horse, a walrus? How did the line go? I *th*ought there was a *v*ery warm walrus, I *th*ought there, *th*ere—But what if the man decided to speed up and drive him somewhere unknown? If Sameer screamed for help, which language would he yell out in? If he stuck with English, he'd scream "Help!" but in Urdu, "Save! Save!" The man's fingers opened Sameer's belt and pulled down Sameer's zipper. Do something, his mind said, but Sameer didn't move when Kausar persisted.

The man cleared his throat. "Why so quiet?" His hand was slick and, surprisingly, Sameer felt himself turning hard. Sameer blinked. He only saw the blurred reflection of the man's profile in the passenger seat window, then through the glass dirty with dried raindrops, the honking wagons, rickshaws, cars, swerving motorbikes swirling and mixing with air, as in a long exposure photograph, the traces of where they were moments ago still visible to Sameer. Moving through the crowd at the NADRA office earlier, he'd resigned to its ebb and flow and then no longer resisted someone's breath on his neck, chest pressed against his back, an arm against his leg. The hand felt far away. It would be over soon.

The traffic was slowing and clogging the road. The horde of beggars, workers, khwaja sira, lurched on the street in reclamation, and at the same time, the hand left Sameer's penis and

grabbed the steering wheel. Brakes screeched, the car jolted forward, and almost bumped into a pickup van. The orange box of chicken bread on the dashboard sprang into Sameer's lap.

He got out of the car in the middle of the traffic holding the chicken bread. He zipped up his pants over his bulge.

Where do you live? I can drop you off at your house." The man switched back to Urdu.

"I can just walk from here."

"Okay." Then in English: "Study hard, my good man! All the best of luck to you!"

This entire incident happened in ten minutes. Sameer hurried down the road. He was only a block away from the turn towards NESPAK Society, where his house stood. Study Hard! What a slap! Sweat itched in his scalp.

Across College Road, there was a small Christian graveyard with goats grazing among the crosses. Next to it, the ramshackle Christian colony whose name Sameer couldn't recall opened up as the College Road's canal met a larger open sewage line that ran into the slum. The banks of the canal were covered with a lush growth of local plants whose names he didn't know, vines so wild they completely wrapped around each branch of the trees they coiled on, tall grasses rising six feet high and strewn with garbage, bushes like robust limbs entangled in each other. There were houses looking over the vegetation at the river of sludge, their bricks exposed, unplastered and unpainted. Were these waterfront shanty houses considered better than those that hid behind them? Sameer knew nothing about this part of Lahore. And yet Sameer's housing colony lay just next to it, on the road that turned the opposite way from the open channel towards the houses that employed servants from the Christian colony. Between them the sewage and stench and rush of the city. His mother wouldn't let the servants eat in the same dishes as the family, and even the

Muslim servants didn't want to share their bowls with John the driver. Sameer would never tell Monica this. He'd never tell her that not two years ago, a mob in Lahore had burned down a Christian colony resembling this one. Christians Sameer had seen were dark. "Pitch dark," his mother would say, "just like your father." They cleaned sewers. Even Monica probably didn't want to associate herself with them. She was "Goan Catholic," after all. Her family only spoke in English in "Bombay." That name itself—Monica. When he'd call her tonight, what *would* he tell her?

For a second, he thought about crossing the street, cutting the graveyard and entering the Christian colony, seeing what he had only ever imagined, or in fact, had never even tried to imagine. When he thought of the word "Christian," all he could think of was Willough's parish tolling its bells. For Easter service, he'd accompanied Monica to that church, stood in pews and sang from a binder of hymns. He'd eaten the Eucharist with no guilt or epiphany. He didn't believe in anything. He knew he'd never tell his mother about this. He already never told his father anything. His life had cleaved from life at home.

In the end, he took the right turn from the butcher's shop, leaving College Road and the Christian colony behind, entering a narrow empty road with a green belt on one side and houses on the other. The trees in the green belt hid the sewer canal from view. The sun had set but the streetlights hadn't been lit. Thousands of birds hidden in the trees sang in cacophony, with a few crows cawing here and there. In the sky hundreds of kites, whose numbers, Sameer had heard, had dramatically risen in recent years, soared in search of an evening meal. Sameer no longer looked around for Kausar's car.

"He was harmless," Sameer said out loud. Anyway, it didn't matter now. He was safe and almost home. But what had he been thinking getting in the man's car? What had he been thinking

losing his vigilance, letting his mind wander to some far unreachable place? He couldn't exactly recall how his musing had grown from the words "original," "replacement," and "card." It didn't matter. He just liked hearing his own voice in his head.

In any case, here he was, fifty feet away from his house, when the call to Maghreb sounded across the city. Sameer saw the gate of his house, at the end of the street. John was spraying the road to settle the dust. Even from afar, it smelled like rain.

John dropped the hose. "Chotay Bhai, where are you coming from? Did you walk all the way back?" He sounded amazed. "Sir, you should've called me."

"Tomorrow you should just wait for me at the office," Sameer said. "The I.D. wasn't ready."

Sameer passed through the gate. His mother's Suzuki Cultus was parked in the carport. In the windscreen of the car and the curving metal of the bonnet, Sameer saw his distorted reflection. He imagined the back loaded with bananas. He called in John and handed him the chicken bread: "For your children." John gratefully accepted the bread and said, "You should've just called me, Sir. Yesterday, a thousand people died in Karachi from the heat. This is not Amreeka where you wear sweaters in June."

Amreeka—a neologism or a loanword? What about John, Monica, and his own nickname? Sameer opened the main door of the house and left John outside. There was nothing to be said even if his mind never ceased its churning, could not grant him a moment of peace. Through the foyer's glass door he caught a glimpse of his mother having tea in the lounge. She wore a purple shalwar kameez and looked out the window, her gaze unfocused, the steam from her cup rising into the dusty glow of mauve light. Her eyes looked swollen, maybe only from the effect of a deep afternoon nap. Where did they rest, those eyes? In what patch of wall or flicker of trees did they find rest? His own

eyes had leapt out of Kausar Masood's car, searching in the snarling rush for anything to latch onto outside his body, anyone who would look at him in his own city and see his plight. A friendly face, a familiar nose.

The TV behind Mama was blank, its screen cracked. In a corner, prayer plants huddled together, breathing soundlessly into each other. Recalling the rainforest, their leaves moved with the damp of the coming night.

I'm Sick But Missing You

My father was killed in a hunting accident. At the funeral, he lay in a wooden cot with a bandaged head and cotton balls stuffed up his nostrils. I was five years old at the time. After the funeral, my mother and I moved to 'Pindi to live with my grandfather and so my mother's childhood home became my childhood home.

My father's death is fixed in one image. The year that followed is harder to retrieve. Whenever I recall my early months in 'Pindi, I first enter a hot afternoon. Laundry has crisped on the clothesline; bare feet blister on the concrete. Always, I'm outside. I remember sitting on my grandfather's blue scooter and arid gusts slapping my face on the way home from school. I remember in the park only one kind of flowering bush bristled with fat, solemn-faced locusts…their jaws creamy with sap… paper-thin wings rustling into flight, swarming and stitching themselves into the clean laundry, into the thrum of the water motor, the mildew and stucco and asphalt of my childhood. A season of searing afternoons which I have to peel away each time to enter the house.

Inside the house I belonged to my mother and my grandfather, and in a more convoluted way to my uncle and aunt. Outside, I only belonged to myself. Around two, languorous with heat and lunch, the adults would withdraw into dark rooms to sleep. Awake, I was free to wander the empty streets alone, despite my mother's warnings, past shuttered down shops in the bazaar. A fatherless child in a new city. The afternoon expressed harshness and solitude that probably resonated with me at the time. The air itself seems to buckle over the road in a fainting spell, stirring dust as it breathed, collapsed.

But I wasn't alone. On the street, in the park, there were children of all ages. Girls who'd retreat indoors later in life would be out playing, boys strolled hand-in-hand with their friends. There were teenagers and servants too, all of us orphaned by the afternoon slumber of our keepers.

In this afternoon landscape, they enter… clapping with splayed hands, calling in brash voices, clanking the metal gates, going door to door to demand money… Children scamper at their sight or follow them at a safe distance, watch them joke among each other, retouch the makeup sweating on their faces. Their chests heave theatrically— the only cleavage I saw until I left Pakistan was theirs, gathered against the top of tight, low-neck shirts.

They flirt with the servants gathered by the street to talk, or tease teenagers playing cricket or football, until they produce from them an embarrassed smile or a roguish smile, maybe a five rupee note. Sometimes *they* were the ones teased, ridiculed and driven away.

They undid something in me. They filled me with curiosity. Returning home in time for my Quran lesson, I imagined asking my family the questions I pondered over but knew I should keep to myself. I didn't want to appear dumb, for one, and—oh, even then I knew there was something perverse about the spectacle of their appearance and something perverse about me for having followed them.

Finally one day, spotting them on my way back from the tailor's, I entered my living room, mustered the greatest semblance of nonchalance, and asked Aunty my question.

"Boy or girl?" she said, brandishing the shirt I'd fetched for her. "You silly boy, they're hijras."

The term *khwaja sira* hadn't been popularized then. Through their NGO, my uncle and aunt knew some of the hijras who visited the neighborhood and chatted with them normally in the lawn of our house. They weren't invited inside. With my uncle and aunt, the hijras dropped their performance and became boring like the other adults I knew, droning about business, body pains, financial woes. One of them was called Hajji Sahab. He had long dirty-orange hair clumped around a bald spot and his red teeth looked like anardana, whittled and sour. He used to sit on his haunches

in the grass, draw a dupatta over his head, and talk gravely like my grandfather's engineer friends. Unlike other hijras, Hajji Sahab largely referred to himself in the masculine, something to do with the fact he was "retired" or with his religiosity—often he'd tell us how he'd snuck into Mecca dressed as a man.

On his way back from the market one day, my grandfather spotted me playing with Hajji Sahib in front of our gate. He marched up to me, yanked my hand and dragged me inside the house. The clear bag of vegetables swung and smacked against my side. My grandfather pushed me into the foyer. His anger, his vise-like grip, surprised me. After all, my grandfather knew Hajji Sahib. He knew Hajji Sahib had worked with my uncle, that he paid a visit to my aunt every month.

"So you want to be like them?" he began. "Is that what you want? Abandoned by family, selling your body, begging in the streets?" He warned that hijras kidnap little boys and if I wasn't careful, they'd kidnap me and turn me into one of them. Mere contact could make me develop their affliction. My grandfather made me promise I'll never talk to a hijra again. This was perhaps the first lesson I received on how I must guard and earn my masculinity. That evening, my grandfather rebuked my aunt and uncle, telling them their clients and NGO staff could no longer visit his house.

I hid behind the curtain in the room I shared with my mother while my grandfather erupted in the living room. I could hear my aunt talking back with polite defiance. My uncle stammered, trying to mediate between his father and his wife. My mother must have stood nearby, but she didn't utter a word.

Disembodied voices reached me behind the curtain and declared the fate decided for me. To their voices would join the voices of teachers, neighbors, strangers, friends, men who spoke from the television, textbooks, online chatrooms, loudspeakers of mosques. No one could escape these voices, not my widowed mother or my "liberated" aunt, my cousin Momina who was only two at

the time, nor, when it came to it, my own grandfather. Not even the hijras, though they continued to clap their hands while promenading down the street, laughing over the leafy afternoon.

Curled behind the curtain, I cried for being wicked, always erring and making life difficult for my mother. Then grew angry and wailed from that childish feeling of being wronged and mistreated, until eventually, I exhausted myself and fell asleep.

When I woke up, they were still fighting outside. My mouth was sticky. A hive had formed where my cheek rested against the carpet. I itched my face and the itch grew—the hive hardened, the insides of my cheeks felt hardboiled and began to produce a sour drool I couldn't swallow down fast enough. The rush of disgust and panic I felt in my body overlapped with the voices of my family and turned into a nausea towards *them*—their large sweating bodies, hairy toes and stained teeth, my *gaurdians,* who had left me to weep behind the curtain while their voices gaveled on my head. Who'd created me, brought me here, claimed to love me and because of these facts, proscribed the boundaries in which I could exist. And before I could fathom, before I could negotiate, I promised to their terms, they told me I'd already promised.

***

Eighteen years later, I was in St. Louis, or rather, I was at the cusp of leaving St. Louis. Until the very end, I was sure I'd land a job. I had recently graduated with honors in Business Management from a good university. I didn't love the States—even after four years of college I felt acutely aware of my foreignness, and especially after the events in Ferguson, deeply cynical of the "American Dream." Still, I wanted to stay away from home and earn good money. And as soon as I found a stable job, I vowed to enroll myself in therapy and "unpack" whatever that had kept me from fucking men my entire time in College.

The morning of July 15th, 2016, when social media star Qandeel Baloch was found strangled to death in the village of Shah Saddar Din, I accepted the inevitable. Until then, I'd existed as indifferently, as apolitically as possible and had excelled in life by reserving all energy for quantitative progress. By attaining conventional success, I'd thought I could live life on whatever terms I wanted. Well, the complications of my "nonresident alien" visa status had won, and America had shown me the door. And Qandeel's murder confirmed what I knew anyway, that for some people there was no escape after all. There beneath the fluff and dust of the years was the inevitable return to reality.

I'd already bought a refundable one-way for Islamabad a few months ago. With little time left on my OPT, I ceased my job search and whiled away my last two weeks in America shacked up in a hostel next to Forest Park, then flew back to Pakistan forever. "I'm probably going home *forever*—" That's how I'd declared it to myself in the weeks after my college graduation, and in each variation of the soliloquy, this word, "forever," had provided a great sense of drama but no meaning. After Qandeel's murder that "forever" took on a specific value: the finality of doom. I read news of her death on social media and didn't breathe a word of it to the assortment of people I encountered in the hostel. I lived in silence. I typed replies under articles my cousin Momina shared on Facebook. I studied Qandeel Baloch's videos, watched her dance clumsily in a negligée, badger a middle-aged man into blurting she was sexy, beseech Imran Khan to marry her. When my 8-bed dormitory emptied of all others, I soundlessly masturbated on online cam sites.

One of those days, in a dire attempt to empty my mind, I plucked a hardcover from the bookshelf in the lobby and dragged myself to Forest Park. Teenagers, dogs, children, tourists, and parents were amassed around a stone fountain. I sat on a bench close by, opened my book and found a postcard wedged inside as a bookmark. Printed on the back of the card was a photograph

captioned, "Sonoran Night After Rain," a long exposure shot that milked the Milky Way and suffused its green light over a desert plateau, the mesa punctuated absurdly with saguaros in bloom.

I remember looking at the multicultural display of life by the fountain and thinking, "I've never allowed myself to love before." I had never entered a relationship. I had no close friends. For in in the discovery of the postcard, I recognized my sudden fixation with Qandeel as a singular passion. It felt like an unaccountable emotion that had been budding secretly within me long before I knew of her existence, for ten, twenty years, and then on the night of her death flowered like the first waxy blossom of a saguaro. It had rained in the desert. Then it was undeniable, oozing from my pores like cactus milk, sprouting from my ribs arms ridged with spines, bisexual flowers alluring moths from the damp night. In this outflow of passion, I would later write and read about Qandeel, attend vigils for her, ransack the trove of Facebook videos she left behind, the songs, the interviews, the news bulletins. I cried for her, raged for her, I thought I loved *her* because of the turmoil of emotions I felt whenever I coaxed my thoughts in her direction, in the postcard image of cacti blooming by galaxy light.

I've never seen a saguaro or a desert. All the symbols I've ever created, found in found objects, epiphanic images, make zero sense in retrospect and contrary to the purpose of symbols, only confuse life's meaning. They are thus naïve and even dangerous misreadings. This I realized upon my return to Islamabad. The birth of my emotional and political awareness, my so-called passion for Qandeel, was a collective fever dream. I was one among hundreds of thousands of middle-class urbanites who had developed an obsession with Qandeel Baloch after her murder. A generation that knew her as a vulgar clown of social media, who then, after she was killed, began to view her work as an act of political and sexual defiance in a violent patriarchy, and subsequently wrote books on her, filmed documentaries, demanded justice for her, lambasted media vultures for

feeding on and exposing a working class woman to violence, cut out masks of her face to wear to Aurat March. Many of my Facebook friends replaced their profile pictures with Qandeel's image. Only after she was sedated and strangled by her brother did they carve out of her a symbol of a migrant's life on the margin, the plight of women in Pakistan, the defenseless, the outspoken and the brave.

I was no different. In Qandeel, I found a symbol to embed what I had buried with shame from myself, my family, a symbol for my troubled relationship with my country. Once I could speak of my desire through this idol of my own making, I felt the panic of my life closing upon itself. I read into my fate a strangulation.

Home no longer existed the way I remembered it. The three-bedroom house I'd grown up in had been sold in my two year-long absence, as soon as death had finally delivered my grandfather from Alzheimer's. My mother was now completely at the mercy of my uncle and aunt; social workers who had long supported us on their salary, they'd pocketed all of my grandfather's measly inheritance, and moved the family to a one-kanal house in a gated colony called Naval Anchorage. Guards at every gate ensured no beggar, no vagabond or khwaja sira entered the colony. The tiny mall here was called Anchor Mall, the sports club Anchor Club, and the mosque Anchor Masjid. Forty minutes outside the neat grid of Islamabad, there was nothing to anchor us here except the nameplate of our house. The place felt empty even though there were many houses in the colony, more or less the same kind of middle-class cubes painted either white or some shade of dun. Wild boar terrorized the Muslim garbage bins at night. The empty lots were taken over by thorny grass and wild cannabis. *In Pakistan, weed is literally a weed!* I joked to no one.

Now the family lived in a two-story house as ugly as the rest of them, despite my family's Muhajir claims of sophistication (my Urdu, my aunt had always said, was polluted by my father's Punjabi). This new house was named "Chughtai Residence" like its predecessor, just as its occupants—all except me—had inherited the name, Chughtai, from their ancestors, the line stretching via Babur and Taimur to Genghis Khan.

The furniture of my childhood looked lost in bright empty rooms. The walls smelled of fresh paint. The kitchen *didn't* smell of food because most of the cooking occurred in an outdoor kitchenette (Where's my mother, I often thought in those days). My uncle and aunt slept on the first floor with the twins. I slept upstairs in the guestroom instead of sharing the bed with my mother as I'd done for most of my life.

Where's my mother?

She'd disappear. I couldn't find her for hours at a stretch. At first, I thought she was hiding in the many rooms of the house or had retreated to the kitchenette outside. To venture beyond Naval Anchorage she'd need a car and, except for running errands, my uncle only begrudgingly allowed her the use of his ancient Toyota. She was a housewife: I associated her with the house, the kitchen appliances, with the mauve presence curled next to my sleep.

"Have you seen Mama?" I asked my uncle on my third or fourth day.

My uncle fumbled with his wireless earpiece, then furtively glanced at the ceiling, as if to indicate my mother was hung up there from the fan. In the days after my father died, Mama would wail that specific threat as she lay next to me in the bed. She'd shed her garb of resilience in the bedroom. She'd bite her nails and say, I'll hang myself, I'll take sleeping pills. When she didn't follow through with her plans, I grew unafraid of her. In fact, continuing to love her, I became wary of her

words. For otherwise all the lamentations of deprivation and promises of a happy life that she in turn uttered to me in the dark would've left me defeated and heartbroken.

"She'd be around here or there," my uncle finally said, lying like a schoolboy and unable to meet my eye. I never had much respect for him, though his money bought my bread, paid my school fees, provided my mother with a roof over her head. This was done with endless sighs and reminders of his magnanimity. If he wasn't such a spineless, dumpy man, if he hadn't been the sly yet insistent debt collector, perhaps I'd have felt gratitude towards him. No, he wasn't a kind man. I remember his fat palm clamped on my mouth once when I had cried inconsolably.

"I sent her to the tailor's to pick up the children's clothes," my aunt spoke in her knife sharp voice from the indoor kitchen. This knife voice, this scissor voice, this *Qaf ke sath qainchi* voice I associate with the Muhajir women of my family, a voice that can haggle through life. With each successive generation, the voice gets blunter. Will the twins retain any of it, I thought, when my aunt emerged importantly from the kitchen to repeat her words, her long braid swishing behind her. Aunty was the first woman to work in our family. Her expression was of someone who'd wrangled all she could out of a boorish world but was unhappy with the effort it had taken her and the little she'd gotten. She was my uncle and mother's first cousin and could have been mistaken for a sibling of theirs. A small woman with the curved beak molded in our ancestral town in U.P. Bihar, she never apologized for anything and licked her wounds in private. The aquiline symbol of our nobility twitched its approval over each expert opinion she pronounced, on matters spanning from gardening to Sharia, fashion to Palestine.

"She should be getting back soon," Aunty said.

"But the car is here," I said.

Aunty shot me a look, a knowing, almost mischievous look. "I ordered a Careem specially for her comfort," she said. "You thought they only existed in your America?"

Following my aunt's braid, Tina appeared holding a bowl of mashed bananas. In their early forties, after enrolling Momina in college, my uncle and aunt had produced a set of twins my mother had secretly dubbed Yajuj Majuj. The couple busied their middle age spooning mashed bananas and Cerelac into the toddler's mouths or shouting at Tina to fetch the milk feeder, the rattles and diapers. My mother had found them this thin, timid Christian girl from a slum outside Rawalpindi to help with the children. She couldn't have been older than twelve and staggered when she held the formula-fattened children. Tina was the one who'd opened the door when I first arrived at Chughtai Residence, quickly pulling a large dupatta over her head when she saw me, her eyes filled with fear and curiosity. Who are you, those eyes said, though they must have known, must have been expecting Shaila's son, back home from America— whatever "America" evoked in Tina's imagination. She must have dusted the large framed photographs on the TV trolley, and noticed among them the overexposed picture of my parents and I in front of a snow-covered church in Nathiagali, the photo of my grandfather and I posing on his scooter years before he forgot how to drive, and the recent one of me receiving an award at a debating competition from the Education Minister. She might have wondered as she wiped the glass with the hem of her dupatta, Who is this? Perhaps no one had told her of my return.

My mother returned hours later, wearing the makeup I'd bought for her in Boston and carrying a whiff of a perfume different than her usual (did they finally discontinue Charlie?) I took her bags upstairs to her room. At fifty, she looked healthier than I ever remembered her. A treadmill in her room hinted at a transformed life, or at least the attempt at one, and then Mama gave me another

clue. She told me she was taking aerobics classes at Anchor Gym. This would later become the explanation for most of her absences. As she took off her earrings at her deco dressing table, the one from her dowry, she asked me to congratulate my aunt and uncle. Without knowing what I was to congratulate anyone for, I understood that she was asking me to behave in my uncle's company. My mother, who never had a reason to reproach me or make demands of me, had long relied on a code to voice her maternal wishes.

"Your aunt talked to me about Momina," Mama said. I looked at her reflection in the dressing table mirror.

"And? Now you want me to marry Momina? I haven't returned for two days and you're hatching a marriage plot?" I hadn't meant to get this angry. "They didn't give you a penny from the inheritance and you want to place me in their jaws?"

"Uf, Faraz, you talk just like your aunt. I didn't say anything to her. She was saying that you two used to be very close when young. She said you called her your girlfriend."

"I was seven or eight then! Your father encouraged those jokes. I had no idea what I was saying."

"There's no need to fight, Baba," my mother said. I apologized. She came and sat next to me on the bed, nudged my head into her lap. Only when I touch her do I realize the love I feel for her, as if it's sealed in her skin smell—though how much can one rely on a tableau of childhood to accurately predict where one stands with their mother? Stroking my hair, Mama said, "Always so quick to anger, my little boy." I changed the subject before even my anger could be attributed to my aunt, my grandfather, Genghis Khan…

We gathered for tea in the ground floor lounge. My mother displayed sets of embroidered rompers she'd picked from old Master Sahib and we took turns rubbing the fabric and inspecting the stitching. Yajuj Majuj played dodgem cars in their walkers a few feet away from us, bumping into each other with delighted squeals. My aunt broke the good news. The NGO she ran with my uncle had won a big project grant from the Punjab Government. They'd work with Rawalpindi's khawaja sira sex workers in a harm reduction campaign, screening individuals for HIV and handing out clean condoms and syringes. They'd been working with local trans communities for decades now, their humanity extended, I've always believed, to help those they find are far beneath them. If I had announced over tea that *I* am attracted to men I'm sure my dear uncle would have thrown me out of the house.

Regardless, I congratulated the couple. My aunt was quick to remind me, "Remember you used to be so afraid of them? When our clerical staff would come over, you'd burst into tears. You'd say, 'Why is this man dressed like a woman!'

"That's not true!" I said.

"He was scared by the way they teased him," my mother said. "He was a little boy."

My uncle said, "The money will help us raise our salaries. Rearing these two devils in our old age isn't easy," motioning towards his children. Old age? He was forty-five. "And of course, because you're back, we would spend more on food and bills." There it was. The first stab.

Aunty said, "Once we save some money, I'll decorate this place."

The family regaled me with stories of the move the summer before, my aunt's plans for renovations ("fall ceiling" had been appropriated by the "lower gentry," but the discerning were still gluing textured wallpaper in their drawing rooms). My mother filed her nails with her small, even

teeth. She stole glances at me as she murmured praises of the new house. Was she proud of me? Was she surprised I came back home to hear snide remarks? My aunt interrogated me on sofa designs popular in the US. My uncle cut in—and what were my plans for the future? Did he fear I'd live off his coins after graduating with honors from a renowned business studies program? In Pakistan, I could have my pick of any job— or so I thought. My uncle advocated applying for a government consultancy position he had read of in a newspaper ad. A government job is stable, my mother agreed. My aunt said with the same knowing look she'd given me earlier, "Did I tell you, Momina's coming next weekend?" I felt sickened. "If only your grandfather was with us, the family would've been complete." She had—I suspect they all had— forgotten about my father.

Teatime was disrupted when Yajuj knocked over Majuj's walker. Babies crying! What commotion! All of them rushed in great panic. My aunt picked up her son and rocked him. "Shaila, this girl you brought is useless. Tina!" I put my cup down and wiped the sodden tea leaves from the corner of my lips. No one had mentioned Qandeel, though my family loved debating on current issues. She had died not even a month earlier and the media was obsessively covering the murder proceedings.

In a video, Qandeel soaps her legs in a bubble bath, moving her selfie stick around without breaking eye contact with the camera, her cheeks pulled in, lips pursed, then pouting. She doesn't speak. In another bathtub video, she hummed what sounded like a lullaby. I wonder in moments like these, did she think of her son, the infant she gave up at the shelter in Multan? She'd been barely eighteen then, a runaway wife. I'd seen the picture the news stations found of her from that time. She's standing holding her own arm alongside her middle-aged husband. But, when I imagined her fleeing, I saw her not as the girl from the frozen picture, but a composite of her adult self and as the furtive Tina my aunt was screaming for. Qandeel's voice from a phone interview after media

channels unearthed her history, her real name, and asked about her son: *My family married me off when I was seventeen. I wanted to study. I wanted to make something of myself. They married me to a brute. He would beat me, he'd burn me with cigarettes*. I imagined that flight, the first escape from the village in early morning light, the dirty bus in which she fed the child under her burka, the diesel fumes, the anxious glances at the open door whenever the bus stopped. Finally, the heart of Multan, the anonymity of crowds, unnavigable city streets where the accent changed but the language was still Saraiki. At the shelter, the child became sick. *They said, he'd kill you if anything happened to the baby.* She traded her boy off for a divorce. She changed her name and started a new life. She became a stewardess in a coach service.

Eight years later, escaping death threats, she'd flee again, this time from the city back to her parents' house. Her brother would kill her a few days later. On that final bus ride to the town she'd run away from, did she ever think of her son, or the ghost of her own young self riding that same bus line in the opposite direction? In the end, those hard city years, the glimmer of fame, the public outrage and humiliation, the awkwardly learned English—what had the trade-off been worth if she was only headed back home to her death? Did she think of all she had lost in the name of—survival? Freedom? In the name of what?

Encouraged by my aunt's kneading, my little cousin whimpered into silence. Without transition, my family began arguing about the Panama Papers case ongoing in the Supreme Court; my mother and uncle not so much defending Nawaz Sharif as railing against Imran Khan.

"He's a pet dog of the army," my uncle said, his voice echoing in the room. His wireless fell off, and he wiped the sweat collected in his ear. The only time my uncle was animated was in mock fights in which no one won. He tapped my mother's shoulder, "Isn't that right, Shaila?" Shaila always agreed with her brother. After all, years ago she too had fled home with her son on an inter-city bus, and placed him right into the decorated laps of her brother and father.

Ever the contrarian, my aunt gesticulated with her one free arm, the other still holding my young cousin. "You're both senseless children! Hansel Gretel and stupid as breadcrumbs." It was clear to her that Sharif brothers had been sucking the country dry "since Day One."

"Since Day One, they're selling the country piece by piece, building mansions in London worth millions and billions of pounds! Can you two even imagine that sum?" she said. "Any money they *do* put in the country goes straight to Punjab!" She yelled for Tina again.

"You've been living and working in Punjab for decades now!" my uncle cried. "Don't pretend to be a Karachi memsaab anymore."

My aunt retorted that Chughtai Residence lay in Federal Territory and that my uncle better learn basic geography before he orated on politics.

"Faraz, eat some nankhatai," my mother said to me, the act dropped for a moment, "Your uncle went all the way to G-9 to get it for you." And before my uncle could harp about the perils he'd risked to buy nankhatai for me, I informed the room I had tried some already and it was delicious.

They resumed their shouting. My family always loved debating like this, splitting into parties and exaggerating their beliefs so as to win against the other. Agreement was never reached— that would spell defeat for all. Instead, the argument would be merely abandoned when it didn't entertain anymore. They claimed this to be a family ritual learned from the older generation in the family house in Karachi, along with ghazals, old Bollywood songs, snippets of Muslim history. Momina and I too were regaled by our grandfather with stories of Babur charging into India, how he killed a rhinoceros in the Peshawar Valley along the way to destroying Ibrahim Lodhi's elephant army at Panipat and then installing himself as the emperor of India. "We are from that blood," my grandfather would say. "This is how we got here."

How outraged they'd be if I told these people the illustrious founder of their clan pined for young men all his life, probably had them fuck him up the ass. I had imagined the argument that would break out after I'd quote from Babur's journals how love for a market boy drove him to insanity. My aunt would vehemently protest, clarify that Babur was only a pederast, cultivating fondness for boys a common, even noble, practice in those days. What did she know about "those days?" Being a pedophile would be better than whatever I was.

After years away, I had difficulty following the disjointed arcs of family screaming. Was it just a lifetime of cohabitation that provides a sense of family? I could never comprehend how I came from these people, bickering around me in circles, but now I understood that the central desire we all shared in life was to prove others wrong, was to shake your fist at the heavens and spit your own mother in the eye if it came to that.

I scrolled my phone for news of Qandeel. The brother was in jail, and the parents refused to pardon him. The Sharif government was planning to pass a women's protection bill. There was hope for retribution, though what is the justice for the dead? I looked at other news. Optimism despite all precedents! Terrorism was mostly eradicated in major cities, Karachi was safer than it had been in decades, the economy too seemed to be growing. The news read like an old man pleading for comfort in a wild-eyed mania. Like my family, I too tried to pick an exaggerated side. I desperately wanted to believe better times were ahead. I discovered a group of clerics had just declared hetero-presenting trans marriage legal in Islamic law. Did my uncle know about this? When I lifted my head to interject with this information, I saw Tina standing in the kitchen doorway, looking at me. She averted her face and came in. My aunt said, "Where were you? My throat is hoarse from shouting. Did I hire you to make my life torture? Go away. I've put him to sleep myself."

For the first time at home, I had a room to myself. That night after tea, and then many nights after, I locked the door, took off my clothes, and sat on my bed, placed the laptop between my legs, turned the camera on, and chatted with strangers online. Years ago, I'd figured out a specific angle, exposing to the webcam a curated slice of my body—from the curve of my nostrils, my lips and jaw, down my narrow neck, my Adam's Apple, my shoulders and collarbone, my nipples peeking from thick chest hair, my elbows resting on my thighs, my pubes trimmed in a rough rectangle. The tilt of the laptop enlarged my lower torso and penis while my jaw looked slender and more refined.

But how I presented myself on the camera had less to do with personal aesthetics than what arrangement yielded the most favorable results while maintaining anonymity. I had begun "chatting" with strangers online during my sophomore year in college. Unable to find women at my technological university who were interested in me— though I knew there was some self-deceit involved in this explanation— I had turned to a webcam chat site. These were mostly the haunt of men, though occasionally a woman also flashed across the screen. It wasn't my fault, then, that it was mostly men who found me attractive. I borrowed the tired lingo, told myself "I was going through a phase." That was enough. For years, not dating, not hooking up, I jerked off with strangers across the world, often men with bodies of all kinds, clothed and unclothed, most of them concealing their faces. I discovered people with fetishes, curiosities, stories. They were so many of us lurking behind the web! I would never have had the courage or ability to find this dazzling variety in real life. Online I met sexy muscular men who asked me to breed them all night, some who yearned to connect with me again, there were others who typed long rape fantasies, subjecting me to whatever whim they desired. A man from Saskatchewan offered me $100 for my soiled underwear. Looking at my body, some presumed I was Black, some that I was Arab. Latino? Indian? *What are you? Where are you from?* I was an unknowable place. I invented names, I changed stories. I spent hours online. Fuck America, only on this chat site did I ever feel free. I sucked in my stomach, I spat

on myself, I stuck out my chest. I made demands of other bodies. I greased myself in front of an Iraq War vet while he smoked meth. A Texan mechanic showed me his girlfriend's nude photos for forty minutes as I jerked off, an old woman from Italy told me she loved "cazzo nero." There were exhibitionistic couples here too, trans men and women, and also men, groups of teenage boys who flipped you off, laughed at your body and called you a faggot, a pussy, a sandnigger. It didn't matter. I forgot most people I met almost immediately— like one forgets people at a party. That's how I quelled the disgust that's been sliming my bowels for so many years. By not integrating my life, I could dispel anxieties of doom. I could exist outside myself and say, this is not me. It's not the boy who'd developed crushes on his fourth-grade best friend and played "Circumcision" with him behind his couch, not the boy who sat in his grandfather's lap every afternoon to learn to pronounce the Quran's Arabic but wasn't taught its meaning. And whenever his grandfather reached inside the boy's pants and said, "What's this?" it wasn't me who replied: Flower.

What's Flower doing?

I don't know.

Is Flower sleeping or awake?

Awake.

Is she now?

She is, she is.

Badmash! She's always awake, isn't it?

That night I turned off the camera after ten minutes. The internet reception was shit. I scrolled on YouTube for Qandeel's videos instead. After the story of her death had made international news ("Kim Kardashian of Pakistan killed by Brother for Honor—" how daft the West

can be in attempting to see everything in context to itself), her Facebook page had been deactivated by whatever authority in Palo Alto deactivates the pages of the dead. YouTube, on the other hand, had been banned for three years in Pakistan and had only been legalized at the beginning of 2016. There wasn't much Qandeel Baloch content on YouTube as a result, although individuals had begun uploading some videos on it since the Facebook page was taken down. I found a video titled, "I Am Sick But Missing You."

It showed Qandeel Baloch in her bed. She was wearing her black mini-dress, pouting and speaking in her usual seductive and campy way, like a twenty-year-old begging a man for candy. She sniffled as she announced how terribly she burned with a fever.

"Yesterday you guys made so many requests, so many requests, saying 'Qandeel make a video, Qandeel make a video,' that's why I'm making this video. It's not like I like making them."

Then her voice turned acrimonious. "You're the ones who abuse me, malign me, yet you're the ones who request, 'Qandeel we need videos, we need videos.'" She looked at the camera with narrowed eyes. "How disgusting you double-standard people are. You like to watch my video, and then say 'Die! Why don't you die, Qandeel!'"

She sat up, played with her hair a little, "Listen. If I die, no other Qandeel Baloch is gonna come here, you won't get another Qandeel Baloch for another hundred years. You guys'll miss me then," she said. Her voice changed, and she leaned forward towards the screen. She blew a kiss to her fans: "Okay, I have to go now. Okay, bye!"

"May you die soon," a fan had commented in March of 2016.

I played the video from the middle and looked at her face, fluttering in the bad internet like a flower forcing itself open. Her eyes were like those of the Moroccan boy. I watched the video again.

As it played, I imposed the data I had collected, the facts of her life onto the video. I wanted to know the words and also the meaning—though I too was incapable eventually of seeing her outside of my own context. I imagined again the bus journeys back and forth. And the conclusion I extracted was to serve myself. She'd been killed when her life had been integrated, the day her real name was excavated and publicized. Only then did honor come into question.

Chatting online, I'd found the boy from Morocco. After a two-hour session involving much dirty talk, posturing and requests, all of it pinned onto a guileless confession of our mutual attraction, we showed each other our faces. What I remember are his narrow eyes and dark red hair, the shock of it, because it seemed impossible in my imagination for someone from Morocco to be a redhead. But he explained his family came from the mountains and then it made sense—I was thinking, of course, of the people in the northern mountains of Pakistan. He typed, "I love u, sexy" and I felt flattered by his unoriginal lie because he was gauche, a child, though he claimed to be married. When we were finished, I told him I was a virgin and wasn't out to anyone and he said, Yes, he was the same, and we both started laughing. The boy wanted to add me on Facebook, but I never asked his name. When he persisted, I nexted him without a goodbye, and though I had no desire to continue browsing, I let the website connect me to person after person until his face blurred with his with his with his.

It was Momina who told me the deal with my mother. Twenty-one years old, Momina had moved to her university's dorm and came back to visit every other weekend. She was conducting summer research with a well-regarded nuclear physicist. This would later lead to a PhD in Germany, and then a job at CERN. At the end of my first week home, she arrived with a blue fondant cake which read, "Con-grad-uation Faraz!" We sat at the covered end of the flat rooftop enjoying the evening

thunderstorm drench Naval Anchorage. Momina cut me a slice of cake. Her parents were still taking their afternoon nap. My mother had slipped out before the storm and hadn't been back yet. She'd told me she had an appointment at the hair salon.

"You know, Shaila Phupo is thinking of getting married," Momina said, the inherited belligerence in her voice making it sound like she was daring me to challenge her. "They didn't tell me but I heard Mama discussing it with Papa in the car. I think the man is Papa's friend who lives in G-Block. Pervaiz Uncle." She gave me a sympathetic look, and added, "I was so shocked."

She didn't say "re-married" or "married again." Momina had only ever known my mother as the widow who lived with her parents, eating off their plates and hearing occasional comments about it. Something between her nurse, mother, the changer of her grandfather's diapers and supervisor of servants, the driver who shepherded her to school and MUN conferences.

Wind lashed the trees. I looked out at the dark sky, one corner of it emptying into pale gray. "They really want her out of the house, huh?" I was taken aback but I knew. Of course. After my father died, the subject of remarriage had been thrown about in almost a gossipy way. My grandfather had put his foot down then. He'd declared openly and loudly for all to hear: "My daughter will live with me forever. She'll always be welcome in this house." Twelve years later, he wouldn't recognize his daughter. He whimpered when she took off his clothes and guided him into the plastic bathtub.

Momina vacillated in her loyalties. "Well, I don't think anyone has put pressure on her. She has lived with us for eighteen years. I don't think Mama and Papa have ever really wanted her out of the house even when finances have been hard. I think after you left and Dada died, and then I also left for college, there is very little left for her to do, you know? And I wonder if she's finally considering, Why shouldn't I also live for myself?"

"Aren't you turning into a feminist," I said.

She laughed. Putting a rubber band between her lips, she said in English, "I've always been a feminist for your kind information. I fought over the girls' uniform at school, remember?" She flipped her hair over her face, gathered it at the nape, and spoke from the void, "I think it's *you* who's becoming a feminist. I saw you changed your Facebook DP to Qandeel Baloch's picture." She tied her hair in a high ponytail, herself looking like the cartoon of Qandeel circulating on the Internet.

"I don't think you have to be a feminist to feel outraged at murder," I said sheepishly. I'd never felt this outraged at any murder before this, however. A month before I landed in Islamabad, when I was still in the US, fifty people had been killed in a gay nightclub in Orlando-- allegedly by a closeted Muslim man. Even *that* news I'd consumed like any other tragedy in print.

"Faraz, do you know there are millions who'd say she deserved to be killed? Even though 'respectable' people might not engage in the actual act of killing, so many propagate this mentality. Like Mama, who, despite all her social work, said, 'I'm not saying it was good what happened but ye sabaq lena chahiye ke apnay daairo se bahir na nikla jaye.' And I said, will you kill me if I put a photo of myself in a bikini and she started shouting at me that I'm an atheist blah blah. This country makes me sick."

"America isn't all that great, either, you know."

"I don't care about America," she said flatly.

"We used to make fun of Qandeel Baloch." I couldn't help but remind her. "You sent me that video of her claiming she'll strip dance if the cricket team won against India."

Momina squeezed her eyes and shook her head in frustration. "It doesn't matter what I thought. It doesn't matter what she did. She was an entertainer. She squeezed her boobs. She told her viewers to shower with her. She shook her ass in a music video. Everyone was fine with that. All of that made her a joke or a slut or whatever, but that didn't make her brother kill her. The moment she exposed Maulvi Qawi for meeting her in a hotel room, the maulvis were out to kill her. The moment the media revealed her real name to public, made bulletin news exposing her family name, her brother squeezed the life out of her. Her family was okay taking her money but the moment she was a threat to the system. Do you see what I'm saying?"

I didn't really. All my life, Momina had been stumbling in my footsteps. I used to do her homework for her, I prepared her for her exams. They'd put me in a cheaper school than Momina's until I won a scholarship for my O Levels for the same institution as hers. Despite my situation, the sympathetic glances of teachers, the empty afternoons when my mother picked me an hour late because she was chaperoning Momina in afterschool activities, I came first in class. No one could deny my intelligence. Even with extra coaching, Momina couldn't match me. My aunt alleged I cheated on my exams. This was my slap back to the world. Unlike my mother, I refused people's pity and I welcomed their resentment. After I won a full ride to my university, once I became an honored guest, only then did my aunt succumb. Now, over tea and rusk, she pushed getting me and Momina married. How preposterous, I had thought, to expect me to marry and bed the girl who symbolized the inequality of my life, not to say, the girl who I had taught to solve long division sums!

Now here *Momina* was, university-sharp, expecting answers.

"I doesn't matter who I am!" Momina said, reaching an arm out into the rain. "I cannot survive unless I am tied to a man and conform to his ideas about me. If my father lets me wear jeans

or go to a university, that doesn't mean I'm free. Qandeel tried to be a free woman, and you saw what they did to her. And I don't mean free because she showed skin."

I thought, Momina, your father can't make a pipsqueak without your mother. And then I felt ashamed for trying to find arguments against her.

"Do you feel like Qandeel?" I asked her.

She looked a little surprised, and she shook her head again as if to indicate my incompetence. When she spoke, however, her voice was slow and clear, as if she were giving a testimony, or perhaps talking to a dunce. "I know I'll never know what her life was. I come from a well-off family, comparatively. I'm educated. I live in a major city. They haven't married me off yet. It's totally fine if I get a job. But yes, when I found Qandeel was killed, I felt pain you will never understand. I won't be killed by my father, I know. Or by you." She laughed. We looked at each other and laughed, the way we would have when sharing a funny video.

Momina went on. "But I thought of your mother, actually. When I found Qandeel Baloch died, I thought of Shaila Phupo and I couldn't stop sobbing in my laboratory. The lab assistant was so alarmed. Shaila Phupho's life is supposed to be good! She was widowed and her father and brother took her back in. Her son will make good money, Inshallah. This is the best that she was expected to have, and what is it? She could not be allowed a minute to live outside someone's mercy. Qandeel Baloch refused that mercy. But imagine if her husband had been kinder? Would her wanting to make something of herself not be justified then? Shaila Phupo can't even say, the world has treated me badly so I want to do whatever the fuck I want."

In the days after I met the Moroccan boy, I'd thought, if my mother dies, I will owe nothing to the world. If my mother dies I can disappear to any part of the planet.

Momina took out a tissue from her purse and smeared cake off my face in a rough, parental way. "Yes, I'm ashamed I made fun of Qandeel. I can only do better going on. There's a vigil they're holding for her in F-9. We can go together? It's also to show support for the bill they're trying to pass."

For a moment a thought like a mosquito entered my mind and then I quashed it. The mosquito hummed: If you marry Momina, things won't be bad. The idea lingered in my mind as I watched my cousin speak, lick icing off her fingers. I saw myself as the master of the house, cancelling all renovation plans, telling my aunt at the dining table to shut up, wielding my stick, raising children, baby cousins, holding meetings, throwing tantrums, breaking plates in great fury. No, there could be compassion mixed with my deceit, my variety of tyranny could be mild like my uncle's, and over the years, it could be confused with love. Where I'd feel guilt, where I'd fail, I could substantiate with money, objects, lively banter or dependable companionship.

I came out to Momina on that rooftop, and doing so, I handed her some power over me. She did not balk; she did not question me. Her outpouring of support shamed me. Only a minute before, I was ready to sell her, and sell myself to the same instinct that had left me sickened when I was a child, when I had hidden behind the bedroom curtain and cried hearing my family argue about what should be done with me. Oh I had mastered their tricks. I was as repugnant as any of them, except circumstances left me unable to conform entirely to their morality. It wasn't any virtue of my own that caused me to stray from murder.

The bickering voices muffled into the curtain, the stillness of a child's body wrapped in sleep, his face turned over and wet against the carpet. There I was again. My mind's fingers had run over this image, they had polished it down to nothing a long time ago. And those afternoons, thick and mysterious, could only offer a feeling of nostalgia, a tenderness for the child-I-was beginning to

grasp life's cruelty. What was left in them now? The score of years, my own sentence: the bitterness I squeezed into the rest of my life.

Then I was walking down the market alone, down the afternoons hadn't adults didn't like to enter, into pall of smog forming over the familiar houses, the stretched line past the old 'Pindi house and the scooter parked in its lawn. And then I came closer, rambling through Naval Anchorage, passing through the broad irons gates easily… the guards continuing their smoke break after a cursory salute… I followed the unpainted houses next to Anchor Masjid, Anchor Graveyard, the numbered streets in which children had come out and were splashing in the flooded streets. I moved in the direction of the colony water tower, the rooftop, its concrete dark with rain, where Momina sat engaged with my phantom. Behind me walked my mother, returning from the salon, her hair cut short and stiff, streaked with gold. I entered Chughtai Residence with her, moving through the tea times of a lifetime, the rooms, the rooms and staircases. I climbed through them all and what did I have to show for it? I left my mother in her room stooped in front of her dressing table, and walked out on the rooftop.

I was drenched. Momina stared at me, and noticing her averted gaze, the man that was in front of her moved. At first I saw his body and then he looked over his shoulder, and I saw his face.

Voices

When I woke up on August 16, 2012, to find Jaleel dead, his arm flung over my body, more than four decades had passed since our marriage. His frame didn't rise for air. His lungs didn't rasp for breath. The ceiling fan whirred above, but the morning felt mute. We were cocooned under a fluttering mosquito net. The mesh broke sunlight soft and flickering on the bridge of his nose, his grooved sunken cheek, the stretch of teeth visible in the half-open mouth. My eyes travelled down his face and rested on his arm, watching it move on my belly as I inhaled and exhaled. A branch on a breeze. I held my breath, and the arm stopped there. My eyes read the lines on Jaleel's upturned palm, the dry and flaking moons of his fingers edged with ripped triangles of skin. Hard lines ridged yellow nails. I let out my breath, and the fingers uncurled slightly, the thumb jutted out. It was worn smooth from years of sandpapering. I gently pushed his arm off of me. I stifled a sob.

For whatever reason, Jaleel had died. Fifteen years younger than him, I'd been prepared for this day, had rehearsed the drama of it for decades. Still, feeling his warm body, how could I believe that I was lying in bed with a corpse, how could I believe that he was already gone from this world, and that my days now would be empty of him? I had lived in this room for forty-three years. My vision of the room was tunneled by the web over us. I turned on my side and faced the window. Outside, the street buzzed with life. Whoosh of motorbikes and sputter of rickshaws, waft of Pushto from a young boy's throat, someone laughing in response, shutters of the neighboring shops juddering open to let in new light.

The raddiwallah then. Yelling for recyclables in singsong, pedaling his bike door to door to buy old newspapers, plastic bottles, Dalda cans. He'll be back the next Thursday, I thought, just as he had for years. Today, the shops would sell furniture as before, and the vendors would fry

samosas. Routine would carry out without any awareness of what had happened in this room. No one would think of me.

I turned toward Jaleel and called his name, observed my voice gain pitch and panic. Was this voice mine? It felt false, like it was borrowed from a film. I pressed my palm over his heart but felt the pounding in my own ribcage. I pinched his flesh, punched his chest as if to force a breath out, pawed the folds of his deflated belly, feeling the thick abdominal hair under his shirt. Did I intend to rave against fate with dramatic gestures? I was panting by then. The smell of my own sweat rose from the bedsheets. We were so close and swaddled we could have been children hiding under the net, playing a game. So, this is it, I thought, not bothering to wipe my tears, this is it. How little I have in the end.

Not looking at Jaleel, I pushed off the mosquito net, got out of bed, and grabbed the cordless. I readjusted the net over the body to keep flies off, then rushed out to the bathroom. The song of the raddiwallah followed me there, then dimmed away. Even if the radiwallah had lingered outside my door as he usually did, expecting me to emerge with tin cans and yesterday's news, my absence would have meant nothing to him. I was alone. What should anyone make of an old woman finding her husband dead on a Thursday morning? One doesn't imagine them, but thousands of wives must wake up to mornings like this.

By the sink, I dialed my daughter's number. Sunlight dusted the windowpane. Faces emerged in the grain of marble tiles. I looked at the mirror as if expecting a response, listened to the pulse of the dial tone and thought, When Meher picks up what will I tell her? What will spill out of me when she demands, What happened?

What happened? Who can answer these questions? These days, I ask myself: *How are you here? What happened?* And I reply, Didn't everything happen. Once, there was a carpenter named Jaleel who lived with an old barren wife. Razia who swam with the snakes. There was a sister of mine who disappeared before I was born, another who eloped to the slums of England. The river Ravi vanished. A boy named Rauf ran away from his village. There was my brother Shezzi who lost his life to the quails. My one-eyed father trapped in his room and my dear mother always lying on the charpai in the courtyard of my memory, asking me to massage her knees. What happened to them does not matter to anyone on the street. They are forgotten people buried in the many crowded graveyards of the city. Five years after Jaleel's death, only I am still thinking of these dead, muttering their stories to Meher's children, who skitter away when they anticipate a retelling. That is their right. They are free and unburdened. As for myself, what can I do but tell that same stories of the same people again.

***

The first story is the story of my parents.

My mother's family sold traditional medicines in Sangrur. They had been established in Jind State for centuries, part of a small Muslim hakim class that found favor with the local Maharaja. My father's family prided themselves on being Afghans, Afghans who had settled in India in the late nineteenth century, generationally serving in the Indian army as sepoys. No one remembered a word of Pushto or Farsi. My father likely spoke better Burmese. He'd fought the Japanese outside Rangoon during the Second World War. When the military was divided at Partition and renamed, my father automatically became part of the newfangled Pakistani infantry. It's not the same, he'd say for the rest of his life. The discipline was gone. The strictness was gone. Officers were lazy and corrupt and power hungry. My father encouraged my brothers to find civilian professions.

My parents and my siblings—all except my oldest sister Naseem— migrated from Sangrur to Lahore in '47, escaping a series of perils they never detailed to me or Shezzi, so over time, film depictions of caravans, barefoot families on oxen carts charging across dusty fields, and short stories of raped women, drowned women, trains filled with dead bodies, eventually superimposed on the sketchy family accounts of hijrat. In Lahore, my father registered a claim for property compensation for the family home left behind in Jind. Due to his army connections, my father was allotted an abandoned Hindu house in Shahdara, on the west bank of river Ravi.

The house was a series of rooms built around an open courtyard. Damp walls puffed with mildew. We would run our fingers across the seelan and say we're making it snow. Peepal saplings sprouted out of the cracks in brick. The ceilings were high, studded with roshandans allowing ventilating air and light, rickety fans whose hanging rods drooped six feet from the ceiling. At the beginning of our occupancy, the gate of this house bore the name of its former owner in Hindi: "Mr. Rakesh Bhatt." *Bhatt being the caste of goldsmiths,* my mother clarified in some versions of this story. She could read the script. When I was a child, my mother would entice me with tales of gold coins the goldsmith had buried under the house.

No doubt, if there was any gold, my father would have found it. Out of all of us, he lived the least number of days in that house, but he was quick to establish himself as the commander of these few rooms. Men in my family love to seize authority, but only for the heroic gesture. They are, in that way, quite romantic, and terrible administrators. My father tore the nameplate bearing Rakesh Bhatt's claim to the house and replaced it with a marble plaque engraved with his own name in slanted Urdu. Muhammad Parvaiz Agha. Through dubious genealogy, my family claimed its descent from the Afghan conqueror Mahmud of Ghazni.

In the story my father related, Mahmud of Ghazni slaughtered 50,000 Hindu devotees on an expedition to the temple of Somnath. In the heart of the temple, an enormous statue of the moon

god floated above ground. The priests beseeched the general to let their god live in lieu of innumerable riches, but Mahmud proclaimed, "I am an iconoclast, not an idolater", and struck his blow. From inside the dismembered statue showered gold coins, rubies, the enormous diamonds of old India. These Mahmud salted away to Ghazni.

Like Mahmud of Ghazni, my father fancied himself an iconoclast. In the courtyard of the Shahdara house, the Bhatts had erected an altar to Lord Shiva. *Agha Sahib picked a hammer and destroyed the shiv lingam with his own hands*, my mother would tell us with a dastan teller's flair in her voice. I wouldn't learn what a shiv lingam was until decades later, suddenly unlocking a new meaning in my father's conquest. By a simple act of destruction, my father converted the Hindu house into a Muslim one.

Unlike his ancestor, however, my father found no treasure in the altar. My mother filled the razed foundation with soil and grew a jhumka bail that would straggle out of the courtyard to reach the roof, and formed a partial canopy over it in the later years, drooping clusters of pink flowers Shezzi and I would suck the nectar out from or string into rings and necklaces.

In this new house and this new country, my parents believed their fortunes would turn. But, a few months after my family, the first war between India and Pakistan broke out, and my father reported for duty. Abba was happiest when away from home. My mother and the siblings who were alive at that time—Ali, Aftab, Riyaaz, and Salman, who was only seven or eight at the time—didn't see him for another year.

After ten years interrupted with war, famine, and upheaval, my mother conceived another child. I was born in the Shahdara house in 1950 or 1951, sometime in the record-breaking cold of that winter. Amma remembered the season because my father had been posted in Kashmir and when he returned, one of his eyes had been eaten up by frostbite.

My mother had named me Mehrunnissa, the birthname of the Mughal empress Nur Jahan, who was buried a mile from our house in Shahdara. I have no memory of being referred to by that name. When my father returned from Kashmir and first saw me, he, in the words of the family myth, *cried out of his one living eye*, and changed my name to Naseem. He had received a vision as he lay recovering in the military hospital in Abbottabad. In a dream, my eldest sister had appeared to him and brought news of a daughter's birth. The next day, he received my mother's telegram. With heroic panache, Abba vowed to name me after his firstborn.

This older Naseem was a famed beauty in Sangrur, heralded to be a mirror image of my Afghan grandmother. *Slender as a cypress*, my mother always said when describing her. These weren't her own words. It was a stock phrase I'd later encounter in several historical romances, and so my older sister, who I'd never seen, began to image in my mind as all the beauties in those novels and digests, and usurping also, all the other epithets of beauty I hungrily collected. Pearl eyes. Alabaster limbs. Moon face. Gazelle neck. Fragrant Skin. Slender as a cypress, the girl started receiving marriage proposals when she was as young as twelve. According to my mother, who was prone to her own exaggeration and romance, Apa Naseem caught the eye of the Maharaja's vizier, a lusty old Sikh, who would have acquired her *by hook or by crook*. So, the family quickly arranged to give Naseem's hand to some far relative of my father, a newly-minted chemical engineer from Jamia University. She was fifteen when the man took her to Shimla, where he was posted on the premises of a fertilizer plant. That stupid engineer, my mother would lament later. *That stupid engineer cost me my daughter*. My mother's woes were always the fault of others. The engineer, Congress sympathizer, didn't leave Shimla even when the troubles came to a boiling point. He was convinced Shimla wouldn't see riots on account of it being the summer capital. God knows what happened to my sister and her husband in the chaos.

Likely, they died a grisly death, the kind TV dramas and memoirs recount. My family, however, imagined various fates of miraculous survival and changed identities for Naseem. As a child, I had hoped the older Naseem would arrive at our door in Shahdara one day. Perhaps she would come in disguise and reveal her identity after putting us through a trail of character in which I would succeed. How mythical she was to me, how she cast a mysterious shadow over my life. Even as young as six-years-old, I remember thinking that when I grew up, I would morph into this older sister, and my life would follow her own trajectory. Did I expect the country to part again? I didn't care as long as I became that moon-faced gazelle-necked cypress sapling wending toward the river!

Amma kept sending letters to the Shimla address for many years. It was the only way in which my mother could imagine her eldest child alive.

For my father, his lost daughter was alive through her namesake, although quite early he decided I wasn't a worthy vessel for Apa Naseem's memory. I was too dark for his Afghan blood, and frail, with a nose that looked outsized on a girl's face. I fainted easily. Much doted upon by my mother and my sister Riyaaz as a baby, I threw tantrums as a young child. In a story my sister and mother often recounted as an omen of all my teenage rebellion, I once insisted on wearing a velvet frock to a wedding in June and bit Riyaaz when she tried to force it off of me. I fainted in the tonga enroute to the wedding.

Who gets married in the middle of June? I don't remember any of this. I was never rebellious, either. I was the younger sibling, younger by decades, closer in age to Ali and Aftab's children than to my own brothers and sisters. They considered me part of a younger, ungrateful generation and made stories about me before I had learnt to defend myself. Later, my defenses only proved my guilt.

Unlike Amma, my father had no patience for insolence, real or imagined. *He was a man of his time*, we would say after his death, to excuse his sternness, his cold detachment. If you misbehaved,

he made you stand in the corner of the courtyard, facing the wall. The boys, even as young men, would be punished by being ordered to "become roosters"—squat on the ground with their arms reaching under the knees to hold their ears. My father was one of those old-school army men and he never broke any rules of the stereotype. I have no memory of him picking me up. Though he wasn't a commissioned officer, a mere sepoy, Abba maintained all the airs of a general. Whenever he entered a room, we'd jump to our feet and dared not sit until he was seated. When speaking to him, we lowered our eyes in deference. Riyaaz and my sisters-in-law would cover their heads. If he arrived with company, we stood up, greeted the guests, and evacuated the room. During his visits to Shahdara, Abba would cloister himself in his bedroom with the bamboo shades drawn, keeping books while Mukhtar Begum played on the gramophone. While he was away, his room remained locked, opened only by my mother when it needed cleaning.

If he was in a rare garrulous mood, or merely because he missed his soldier friends, my father invited my two older brothers, Ali Bhai and Aftab Bhai to his room. This was after they had married. They chatted about army or politics or business, something of that nature, but the younger children— Shezzi and myself as well our brothers' growing broods— were forbidden at all costs. We stood outside the door trying to eavesdrop, snickering in our mischievousness, daring one of our nephews or nieces to knock on the door. Then burst out laughing and run away before one of our brothers came to shout at us.

When I met Rauf later in life, I wondered if my father had been like him once. I suspected a shyness under the staunch demeanor.

With my mother, my father retained a certain boyishness. Not that I remember them laughing together. But she would take his arm when they went to the cinema— how peculiarly English that seemed to me. How peculiar it all felt being told that we had a queen only three years before my birth. There was a formal reserve to the parents' relationship, as if the early days of

courtship had never ended. My mother often said, "Soldiers remain young far longer than men who live with women." After my father died, and my mother shrunk her personality to the mere fact of widowhood, she'd often say things like this. My father always looked old to me, dated, from a time that could only exist in history books, in phrases like, "The Plague of 1920," "In the day of the Second Great War," "During the British Raj," "In pre-Partitioned Hindoostan."

Upon my father's visits home, my mother would fall sick from fatigue. They went to the Gymkhana or the cinema every other night, my father spending hours grooming his mustache, and dyeing his hair black. Amma always made sure we looked presentable and well-behaved in front of Abba or hidden away from his sight. We were a projection of her, and if we misbehaved, my mother too got a scolding on our behalf. Whenever he returned home on vacation, we lined in the courtyard to greet him, bathed and decked in good clothes. He would bring something for each of us. For Shezzi and me, it was always sweets. On Eid, he'd give us an 8 anna coin to split between the two of us. His grandchildren only received an anna apiece. Abba believed in hierarchies. Those sweets and coins were the only tokens of love I collected from him.

Listening to the stories of my parents, my daughter is convinced my father was tormented by mental illness brought on by his years on the warfront, the unspoken journey to Lahore, the loss of Old Naseem and later, Shezzi. But I still believe it was just how fathers were in those days. My father died of a stroke while away on duty in the summer after my ninth-class exams. This was during the 1965 war. He wasn't on the front. My father never died, as he had hoped, a martyr for his country, and yet we have called him a shaheed all of our lives.

My brother Ali wasted no time mimicking my father's authority. In the months succeeding my father's death, he replaced the marble plaque bearing the family name with another one that read in English: Agha House. Underneath was his name in bold, Ali Agha, followed by the home address.

At the bottom, "Aftab Agha Salman Agha" was squished in one line. The girls, as well as Shezzi, were left out.

Get the girls married, Ali Bhai commanded my mother. He was a teller at Habib Bank. In those days you needed a simple BA to become a banker (bankaar nahi, bekaar hain aap, I once yelled at him, and he boxed my ear in response). He kept moaning about not having money, the burden of feeding so many mouths unbearable on a banker's salary, even as he bought mutton for his wife and took her to pleasure trips up to Murree each summer. The wives of my brothers, demure under my father's reign, grew more and more despotic, taking a cue from their husbands. *Get the girls married*. But "girls" applied solely to me. Riyaaz, nine years older, had a B.Ed. and a leg crippled from polio. She was given up for spinster at a young age, and thus allowed to work as a hygiene teacher at the local secondary school in which I was enrolled. A third of her salary she handed to my mother. Another third my brother stuffed into his wallet. Salman was still in medical college at the time of my father's death and moved to the university hostel to prepare for the exams that he continued to fail. Ali Bhai never complained about Salman's hostel and tuition fees. Aftab Bhai's only job was getting his wife pregnant. Only my presence in the house seemed to cause an immense drain on the household economy.

I didn't return to school after my father's death. School would have delayed Ali's plans for my wedding. I cried and pleaded with him, asked my mother to intercede. I begged them to at least let me sit for my Matric exam and pass secondary school. In reality, I didn't care for school. The only reason I wanted to pass secondary was because I had no birth certificate. When you registered for the provincial matriculation exam, you were entered into the official system and whatever name you provided on your form became your legal name. I dropped out the year I was supposed to sit for my Matric Exam, the year I could have changed my name. For days I refused to eat in protest of

being taken out of school. Aftab and Ali's wives mocked me for imitating Gandhi. I had not grown up in their times. To me, Gandhi was nothing more than the name of a dead man from a distant past and this ignorance only exacerbated my rage.

There were campaigns conducted in those days to educate women. A band of society ladies did rounds in public schools, arriving at annual functions dressed in expensive clothes and pungent with industrial perfume. They made speeches about female education. Quotas were increased to hire women in the workforce. Nothing, they claimed, would hold back educated girls from standing "shoulder to shoulder" with men in Pakistan. Even Liaqat Ali Khan's widow once came to our school, the largest girls' secondary in Shahdara. Her hair was coiled into a stiff bun with a dupatta elegantly pinned atop it. She ran a women's NGO and joined us at a school assembly. That day, instead of queuing the classes according to height, each class was headed by the class prefects. She shook the hand of each prefect, moving slowly, her large eyes puffed and dark under her makeup, the rest of her doll-like even in middle age. When she took to the dais, she offered every girl who passed Matric with first division free admission into the college she had formed for women, APWA College.

Where were those campaign women when I was pulled out of school? No one advocated for me. Where were my teachers who harped on about the values of education, even for housewives? They were quiet, because their colleague Miss Riyaaz made no comment on the matter. News had spread that Miss Riyaaz's sister was dropping out of school. This wasn't all too uncommon. Even in sixth class, a girl called Fatima Zahra had been taken out because her father didn't see any sense in her studying anymore. She was married and shipped to her ancestral village, where they had neither electricity nor phones. But because I was associated with the prim Miss Riyaaz, the girls gave me glances of pity befitting Fatima Zahra's fate, and the teachers too were sympathetic and kind in a manner that infuriated me. They pitied me, they thought it was terrible that a decent student, one

particularly good in both Arabic and Persian, should be taken out before even having sat for her Matric Exams. And yet they kept quiet.

So years later, on that phone call from England when Riyaaz complained of my mother's cruelty a decade after the old woman had been put in her grave, I thought of her silence, her complicity, and even eagerness at Ali Bhai's designs to get me married.

"What to do with old resentments?" I had asked her. "You didn't step up for me, either. I would have become a doctor or a professor. Not that I have complained. You can say it was God's will. In the end, things have been better for me. And so much time has passed, so why grumble about things now?"

In the end, it was my mother who betrayed me. Though we didn't have much money after Abba's death, she cooked plates of korma, pulao, baingan bharta to entice me through my fast. The smell of beef sizzling on the tawa filled the house and billowed out the roshandaan. I felt weak from my desire. I missed my father and cried for him then, creating stories of his resurrection that would see my brother cowering into the courtyard's corner. Had my father lived a year longer, I could have had my old name restored, or even given myself a name of my own. What then? I could have passed with First Division and entered APWA College with this regained identity, or even Kinnaird College. The fashionable girls of Lahore, the dresses I would wear to class! The thought of a badminton court or a swimming pool. I had only read about those luxuries. I could have lived a different life outside Naseem's shadow.

I never claimed orphanhood the way my mother claimed widowhood. The father who changed my name, remained a mystery. His entire generation of idealistic soldiers are now dead. In the web of these stories, in their heart is the question I will never answer. So, instead, when I unravel the stories and find myself at this part, I say this is the story of my name.

I distinctly remember one time when my father called my name. His voice carried a pressing urge. I was back home from school and playing marbles with Shezzi in the courtyard. I don't remember where my mother or my older siblings were but I remember that my mother had braided my hair and tied them with a red ribbon that morning and Shezzi, who was at most three and had just learnt to string words in sentences in his stuttering Urdu, told me, Abba bula ra, Apa, Abba bula ra. I think I was wearing my school uniform. I ran to his room, secretly nursing the hope he might give me sweets or maybe a coin.

He didn't notice me when I slowly pushed the door open. I found him in the darkened room, his desk lit by a kerosene lantern, the flame kept low (Was it out of nostalgia, or perhaps it was easier on his eye? We had electricity in the house). My father's monocle gleamed with flickering light as he read from a book. The gramophone was crackling in its dim corner. A song had either ended or was yet to begin. I looked at Abba's face for a long moment. The muscles in his face were relaxed, the frostbitten half covered in shadow, save for a bow of bright cheekbone and the glint from his glass eye. I was trembling and couldn't speak. In one recollection, I tugged the frayed edge of my ribbon. In another, I was gripped by the desire to douse his face in electric light with the flick of the switch a foot away from me. It exhilarated me and terrified me to allow myself an act that felt forbidden. And in my perturbance, I looked behind him at the lantern, and saw all of him, the bright monocle, the glass eye, the dyed mustache, the old muscles of his face, the full lip and straight neck, his civilian clothes, all of him minuscule and distorted in the lamp's curved glass, a ghostly fish in its illuminated bowl.

I don't know how long my eyes shifted from him to his miniature reflection. Then I finally spoke. "Abba? Did you call me?"

He doesn't gasp, but slightly jerks his head back. He turns and looks at me evenly. Light pools over his cheek, fractures at the mineral tips of hair. He looks perplexed in one memory, lost as

if looking beside me, through me. Perhaps, it was a look of resignation. In one memory, he is crying *from his one living eye* and light blazes the tears. Each tear holds all of the lamp in one bright point. The record sputters. My father says, "No, no, I didn't mean to call. Go play outside."

There was a vision of beauty I had been seeking my entire life. I don't simply mean physical beauty, though I have always loved makeup and stylish clothes. It's more accurate to say that I always believed I was deprived of some grandeur and felt I must yearn, must remember at least, to salvage it from the past. For a long time, even when I was young, I felt horribly wronged by some invisible hand, then it became the hand of my brother, Razia's hand, Jaleel's, my own. Before, I suffered alone from this condition, but later I realized everyone in the household had inherited this disease. My mother would lament that the mangoes in Lahore didn't taste like they did in Sangrur (why was it always the mangoes, and not bananas, melons, watermelons, guavas, jamuns, mulberries or lemons?). Linen *here* was of cheap quality— for years, she would ask the cloth vendors for "Indian stuff." *Here* was both Lahore and the decades after her youth. My father too was caught in the nostalgia of the British Indian army, the most disciplined and valiant in his mind, and yet at the same time, the expeditions of Muslim generals who had conquered "half the world" before being brought to their knees by the English. What was my name but an ode to a better past? The whole country was built on a nostalgia of who we were once and tried to convince ourselves we were free now to regain that glory.

When my mother first told me the story of my name, I thought my life would have been more capable of finding that lost beauty if I'd remained Mehrunnisa. By the time I was ten, I had already convinced the man at the corner store to rent me Mughal romances written by one Shahida Yusuf (years later, it was exposed that Shahida Yusuf was the pseudonym of a struggling policeman). These cheap publications had garish, tantalizing covers displaying large bosomed royals under lurid

fonts. They had to be hidden from my family, especially Riyaaz, who had first-hand knowledge of what was corrupting the girls at school. Many of these romances were about noble-born but destitute courtesans and concubines who overcame hardship to ascend in the harem and court. It is now humorous to consider that bureaucracies of the police station might have inspired tales of harem politics. In one of these series, I read the dramatized story of Emperor Jehangir and Mehrunnisa. I grew convinced that I would have been remarkable, if someone had looked at me and seen something worth cherishing in me the way Jehangir had seen in Mehrunnisa. Perhaps my mother did, but she capitulated to my father, and later, to my brother's designs.

As a child, I thought of Mehrunnisa as the most powerful woman in Indian history, expert at chess and poetry, striking witty conversation and imparting wisdom to courtiers. Jahangir became infatuated with her even though she was a widowed mother, a fallen handmaiden. He had recognized her worth and beauty, and married her against convention, renaming her Nur Jahan. This is what I learned: Exceptions could always be made for those who were exceptional. I imagined Nur Jahan and Jahangir on deer hunts with their pet cheetahs and hounds, Nur Jahan riding on her own horse. A black horse, its coat sheening as she rode him into the Ravi, her hands in his wet mane, her clothes rising in the water. And by the shore, Jahangir, frozen in the tableau of this sentence I chiseled in my mind, *he watched the perfumed hem of his queen's caftan dissolving in the river*. If only Riyaaz hadn't been secretly concocting her own affairs, she would have quickly discovered how much my mind *had* been corrupted by these florid digests.

I began to abhor my name. In class eight, we read a poem in Urdu class that mentioned the lover's arrival as the gust of the morning breeze. "Baad-e-Naseem—" a stuffy phrase to the ears of the Punjabi girls. They started calling me "Paad-e-Naseem, Paad-e-Naseem," and made farting noises whenever I entered the room. Even when I encountered one of them decades later in a vegetable market, she called out, "Paad-e-Naseem, is that you?" She was in a burka and had to pull

her niqab down so I could recognize her. A child rested on her left hip. As soon as the words left her, she laughed with embarrassment. "Sorry," she said. "When we were little, we were so stupid."

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On winter mornings, the boys of our street marched the three furlongs down to the river, armed with catapults, to hunt starlings that arrived—from Russia, it was said. I don't think the meat is edible and I doubt any of them ever made a meal of starling. But even with river pebbles lodged in their catapults, the boys found killing tilliar an easy sport. The starlings appeared in murmurings so large they blotted out the sky, the birds churning in a raincloud, executing arabesques, *tilliar, til-liaar*, speaking their own names, as if to remind the Ravi of their return. They sounded like machinery set loose from a broken clocktower. Starlings dotted the eucalyptus trees black. The road speckled white with their droppings, muddy potholes greasy with feather and oil after their baths. The bridge over the river was hammered with splattered bodies of starlings. In our street, the rooves of the houses were adjoined so when a big flock flooded the sky, Shezzi and I would skip from rooftop to rooftop following the chatterings. I want one, I want one, I'd say, trying to capture a tilliar whenever a few landed on the parapet, and sat careening their iridescent feathers in the winter sun, dipping their entire head in the water tray we left out for birds.

I never did catch a starling, but I managed to ensnare a baby bulbul the winter I was seven. After a long summer, a season of rain had set in and temperatures plummeted at once in the November of that year. I climbed to the roof one day to fetch woolen blankets Amma and my sister-in-law had lain on charpais to sun out the damp odor of the storage trunks. Near the jhumka bail, I heard a panicked cheeping. Sunlight made the leaves of the vine translucent, so when I crouched, I spied under green shadows the maroon head of a young bulbul huddled on its dull

brown body, the open mouth a vibrating pink. An adult bulbul was keeping watch, swooping to the floor as if to encourage the fledgling to fly, then fluttering back to the parapet.

I approached the bird with caution. The mother bulbul noticed a predator in me and began to squawk immediately but flew away when I came closer. She hovered at a safe distance from me, screeching in mid-air. She didn't attack me, however, just shrieked and followed me as I scrambled to scare the baby bulbul into a corner of the roof. The chick couldn't fly yet and lurched out of my reach, but he was easy enough to capture once he had hopped away from the green recesses of the jhumka bail onto the bare concrete. When I grabbed him finally, the bird didn't bite. He seemed to have given up all attempts to escape, even as his mother continued to screech, following me halfway down the stairs, before finally flying away. I felt guilty separating my bulbul (for in my mind, he had already become mine) from his mother, but this feeling dulled once I returned downstairs and looked at the baby bulbul at the front of the house, where the sun shimmered in his dull fluff, the dark head stark against the ugly pale lips. I smoothed the feathers around his face with my finger and he closed his eyes when I touched his cheek.

Just as the boys of the street hauled home killed starlings to boast of their hunt, I rushed to show my bulbul to my family. Riyaaz, Madam Hygiene, wagged her walking stick at me, screamed about infectious diseases and fleas. Ali Bhai's wife, cooking chicken shorba in the kitchen informed me it was a sin to capture wild birds and that I would suffer for my cruelty on the Day of Judgment (hiding away chicken drumsticks for her husband and son, I told her, wouldn't land her in heaven either). Shezzi, of course, was delighted at the prospect of a pet, as was Ali's three-year-old son, Awais. They trooped around me, unable to suppress their envy, and begged me to let them hold the bulbul. I refused, but they followed me, part of my retinue now, attaching their desires to something I owned. I gloated and looked for my mother. Early in my childhood, almost nothing that occurred to me, no event that struck me, was real, was but a dream, until I had confessed it to my mother.

Bolstered against a cylindrical pillow, Amma reposed on a charpai in the courtyard. Next to her sat a low brazier over which she warmed her hands. The smoke from the charcoal slanted into the coils of the jhumka bail, and upon it wafted the earthy vegetable smell of crackling green channay. Though roasting chickpeas was more hassle than buying them from any corner store, my mother could not allow a winter fire to go unused. After baking the channay, she would separate the pod from the beans, combine them with sugar-coated makhanay, and store the mix in an off-white ceramic container sealed with a brown lid. If us children behaved well, ran an errand, or simply begged her, Amma might call us to her room, and reward us by pouring out the white makhanay and yellow channay into the cup of our hands.

She had looked up at me then when Shezzi and Awais thronged in, shouting in excitement. Her face wore an expression of slight irritation, apparent in her tired eyes despite the wan smile. The bird was limp in my fist. I could feel his throbbing heart against my palm. I held him out for Amma to see.

The Mother of my Childhood looks like a small bird, a bulbul fluffed up on an electric wire in December. She is enveloped, in winter memories, under the dark Kashmiri shawls my father gifted her on his trips home, shivering when I find her hand behind the pashmina. In a summer memory, she's wet and flushed from having washed the floor and is lost in thought, one hand on her hip, the other toying with the gold pendant of the Kaaba she wore aroundher neck. If I close my eyes and think of the mother of my childhood, I see her in a frozen image. She's freshly risen from an afternoon nap, with beautiful sleepy eyes and clear wheatish skin, and is wearing a dark blue kurta embroidered with tiny yellow stalks. She looks tall in this memory, when in fact she was under five feet and was skinny save for a slight paunch like that of a man. She was quite blind by the age of forty and begrudgingly wore thick glasses, which she claimed made her eyes cartoonish and her nose appear more crooked. Her hair she curled with rollers and fluffed out with a pick comb. Einstein

hair, Riyaaz would joke. Crimson lipstick Amma smeared on her cheeks for rouge, sometimes accidentally marked the peak of the fleshy mole on her nose. I had inherited my mother's beaklike nose (but thankfully not the mole, I'd tell her). She would playfully pinch my nose and scrunch her own at the same time. *Pakora naak*. She read beauty columns in *Urdu Digest* and suggested clipping cloth pins on my nose bridge to shape it straighter. Hair was to be combed exactly a hundred times each night and nourished with amla oil. When my skin flaked with dryness, Amma applied rosewater mixed with fresh cream on my face and then instructed me to scrub it off with a batter of besan and lemon juice. She was full of such advice concerning beauty, the body, food, household tasks. I sometimes catch myself spouting the same advice to others.

I followed her as a child. In fifth class, I wanted my nose pierced like her. I fainted when she punctured my nose with a heated needle. She indulged me and for that I loved her, and I was ashamed to love her for so selfish a reason. As if to compensate, I dedicatedly claimed to love all that my mother claimed to love. For instance, the color orange, and fruits of all seasons. Mangoes she was most enthusiastic about, but in my clearest memory, I see her sitting in the kitchen, slicing striped melons after dinner, putting the "brain" of seeds aside to dry and roast for later. She liked to hum as she worked in the kitchen or swept the floor with the maid. She was either constantly engaged in work or lying exhausted on the charpai, sighing dramatically, begging me to press her knees and walk on her back. No weather agreed with her. Amma was overheated in the summer, fanning herself with a cane fan and sprinkling her face with water. Mosquitoes love my blood because I eat fruits, she'd say. She'd pray for cooler, mosquito-free days then and yet, when it was wintertime, she'd say the cold was settling in her bone marrow, clotting her blood.

When I held out my bulbul for her to see, she shivered a little and tilted closer to the coals. I could tell her desire was to remind me to fetch the blankets I'd forgotten on the roof. What I remember is that when I showed Amma the bulbul, she gathered a solemn pomp and started singing

a nursery rhyme about a girl who had a bulbul which flew away and never came back. Her voice shifted into the singsong imitating a child.

Shezzi, that gummy fool, chortled at my mother's theatrics and fell to the ground. "Don't let him fly away!" he said, laughing, and climbed into Amma's lap.

"Of course, I won't," I retorted. I cupped the bulbul tighter, until my palm felt clammy from his heat. My mother inquired how I'd found the bird.

"Naseem Begum, didn't you feel evil taking him from his mother?" Amma asked, but then continued to report how in Sangrur, her uncle had once found an abandoned baby bulbul by the lilypond by her house, and fed it crickets and chickpeas. Over time the bird became so tame, it flew wherever it wanted but always returned when its master whistled.

"Amma where should I put him?" I asked. My mother pinched my nose and imitated my wheedling voice. She loved to tease me, but almost always gave in to my demands.

Years later, when Amma was long dead, Riyaaz spat on an international call from England that Amma doted on Shezzi and I because we were *children of her old age*. "She was much harder on me. You have no idea." This was the only time Riyaaz and I ever talked after she disappeared from Shahdara. "Amma would rap my good leg with a bamboo stick she kept by her bed," Riyaaz said.

Not having a birdcage for my bulbul, Amma dug out a rat trap cage to house it in temporarily. I doubled old newspaper and spread it at the bottom of the cage. At night, my mother boiled chickpeas and together we mashed them and made little pellets. I tried to feed my bulbul, but he was too scared and wouldn't take the pellets from my finger. I smeared them on the calligraphic headline of the newspaper.

"What should we name him?" I asked everyone at dinner and collected suggestions. We were gathered in the small sitting room, and the bird was in his cage, under my chair.

"Put that rat cage away right now!" Riyaaz ordered in her schoolmistress voice. "It's filthy." My older sister-in-law, bringing roti fresh off the griddle, agreed. "This one never listens."

"Amma, you've spoiled her rotten," Riyaaz said.

"I will throw up if you don't put that nasty little bird away. It stinks!" gasped my younger sister-in-law. She was pregnant again and nothing agreed with her when she was pregnant.

My brother Salman took the cage and placed it behind the old sofa. "Just leave it there. The poor thing is scared. It will shit all over my notes."

"It'll stay warm there," he said when he saw my anxious little face. "I'll cover it with a cloth at night." When Aftab got married earlier that year, Salman, the youngest above me, had given up the room they shared and moved to the sitting room, sleeping on a mattress he spread on the floor at night. He was the most ambitious out of any of us and was studying hard for his FSc. exams. He had dreams to enter King Edward Medical College.

In summers, all of us slept on charpais on the roof, but in winter we had our designated rooms. My father's room, as I have mentioned, was always locked. After his death, Salman and his wife would occupy it briefly before leaving for America. Ali and Aftab had taken over the biggest rooms as soon as they were married. This luxurious privacy afforded them and their wives ample opportunities to multiply their progeny. Poor lame Riyaaz had a room so small she complained she lived in what had been the Hindus' servant quarters. Shezzi and I slept in Amma's room, me next to Amma on her large Sangrur charpai, Shezzi in a cot. My cot had been given over to Ali when Awais was born.

The day after I caught my bulbul, I woke up at dawn out of excitement, slowly shifted my body out of the charpai without making the ropes creak. The sky was mauve. The azans had subsided. I opened the door and, barefoot, crossed the cold courtyard floor to the sitting room,

tiptoed around Salman's mattress, and leaned over the sofa's back. My torso hung towards the floor. There it was, the birdcage. I swung my arm and pulled the cloth off it.

A giant rat screeched from exposure to light, then rattled against the bars of the cage, its front teeth exposed and gnawing. The bulbul was gone, but I knew, of course, the implied narrative. It was the first time I had seen anything vanish, just cease to exist, and for a second I hung there, my torso, my neck suspended in nothing, my arms recoiling, groping the air, my legs buried into the grimy flower pattern of the sofa.

Two years after having me, my mother gave birth to a son. She was thirty-eight at that time. She said he was a "cannonball" and she had lost a lot of blood while birthing him. She attributed the decline in her eyesight to his birth. When she saw him, the plump boy reminded her of her own father. She named him Shehzan Saddiq, after the hakim of Sangrur, the grandfather I never saw.

We called him Shezzi. He was only a year and half younger than me, but I decided early on in my life that he was my charge. My mother, Riyaaz and I would dress him up as a bride in the courtyard, drape her red chunri around him like a sari. I would be the groom and hide in my mother's room, then come back when she called me, slowly, a lock of my hair wedged between my nose and my plucked-up lip to make a mustache.

I took this game seriously. Because we were "married," I wouldn't let Shezzi leave the house without my permission and walked him to the boys' school holding his hand. When the older boys made fun of him for his lisp after school, for his girlish manners, I fought them. Once, I remember they had ganged up on him in the corner, putting him in the center of their ring and pushing him around, forcing him to speak words he stuttered over—ghubaara, kaghaz, gamla. I still feel the rush I felt in my blood then, how I picked up a stone and dashed at the ring, screaming. The boys saw me and scattered like a pack of jackals.

“Shezzi!” I cried. He wept with his arm over his face. His shirt pocket was hanging by a few stiches. His hands were balled into fists. I pried them open and there were blades of grass and dirt inside. “Get up,” I told him.

“Why do they do this to me? Why are they so mean?” he said. Sometimes I still think of that question. Why are they so mean? I had never considered the cruelty of others. I just accepted it. Riyaaz’s dark moods, my sisters-in-law’s jabs, my father’s coldness, my teachers who rapped our knuckles with a metal ruler. How could their motives matter? I only believed in steeling oneself through the punishment and surviving through it.

Come on, I told Shezzi, and took him down to the river. I wished I still had the 8 anna coin I’d found the week before in our street, but I had spent it to buy bits of lace and to rent books from the corner store. If only I had even two paisas left, I’d have bought him an andrassa, crusted with jaggery and sprinkled with sesame seed. That would have been enough, even that was enough in those days to make us forget the agonies of our childhood.

Shezzi died when a truck ran over him. He died walking to the same spot I had taken him to by the river. Had I not been homebound, I would have been there with him. He was nine. No war, no disease, not even the bullies I was constantly vigilant to keep him safe from— it was just a truck that killed him, just a pickup truck transporting quails from the farm by the river to the market. Thousands of live quails that would later be killed, skinned, and roasted for rich people. Tiny quails with charred bones so soft you could crunch into all of them, especially the pliant neck, and make smooth paste of them in your mouth. I picture Shezzi being drawn to the birds chirping from the open back of the truck, his eyes wide with joy. He was imagining lying among the soft plumages of camouflage, the color of low bushes that lined the river.

The years of my early life are summed up in these few memories. Not exactly memories, but rather stories that reposit fragments of memory in their acquired tone, repeated details, gestures, and stock words—*slender as a cypress, Baad-e-Naseem*—that then conjure up images, images which substitute the original memory, the person beheld, the object once touched, tasted, the day passed, horror lived. And I find that it is from these new images (which are suspectable to photographs, lines from books and films, and the invasion of other people's stories) that my mind chooses, has chosen already and arbitrarily in the decades of reflection on my early life, one representative, like the facing card of a deck, one scent from a long walk, one image that stands in for swaths of time, freezes people I knew into miniatures, reduces the most elaborate of events and the most banal dramas of childhood into singular illustrations.

Abridged thus in my mind, Shezzi is a bride in red chunri waiting for me, Amma a figure waking from her charpai, Abba a reflection trapped in a lantern, the house an open courtyard, winter a horde of starlings. When I try to widen my scope, pan out to the entirety of my time in Shahdara Bagh, the sprawling mess of it, the years 1951 to 1969, I flit in my mind's eye from fragment to fragment, image to image, expounding each into stories, but unable to build an uninterrupted stream of memories, I envision an actual stream, not unlike the open sewer line that ran by our mohalla, carrying muddy black sludge, but cleaner and shaded with old weeping willows and eucalyptus trees such as the ones that grew in the park by our house. It is this imaginary stream then, that, gaining other tributaries, sounds, colors, sediments, sweeps and floods down the land of Shahdara and enters the river Ravi. Riyaaz is a bent girl shaking her stick at me, class eight is an endless school assembly of girls singing the national anthem for Liaqat Ali Khan's widow, the mohalla is exposed brick and sky over the jhumka bail, dust and hot air. And childhood— all it is when summed up in one image, in one word, is Ravi, the river Ravi murky and deep and wide with possibility. And though, unlike the stream coursing through the old neighborhood of my mind, this image of the

river is not entirely fabricated, it is a false symbol for my early days nonetheless, for though I had always loved the river and the river breeze, I didn't spend an ample time by the river, and almost entirely stopped venturing down to it after I became, at the age of ten or eleven, a *woman,* as Amma called it, and was thereafter largely confined to the house.

But the river remained, however, a physical barrier that cut us away from the rest of the city, and so gave us our own distinct name, such that sometimes when we said "Lahore" we referred not to where we resided, but rather to the settlement that we reached by crossing the river, that larger town that lay parallel to us, and was thus the opposite of us. Except for ten days, I have spent all my life in the district of Lahore and yet, when I crossed the Ravi to live in Jaleel's flat, that river crossing (though I had made that journey on countless other occasions before) sealed away the past as if it were a different city, and has always felt distinct since then. The river too had already changed by the time I left Shahdara, had already dried up and become the polluted stream it is today— sometimes utterly dry, sometimes watered, always stinking of sewage and chemical. In 1960, Pakistan signed off the waters of the river to India. All fish died. Childhood is not this depleted riverbed, but the river I remember in a constructed memory— my first memory, I am convinced, of water, when Amma walked down to the river on a pleasant windy evening holding me in her arms, and I looked, from my perch, out at vast openness of the river and calculated the arc of ferries shuttling between Shahdara and the lit-up buildings of Lahore on the other bank and noticed the waves cut by the oarsmen that caused the garbage strewn at the corner to gently sway in the scum. I revisit this moment, this open river punctuated with ferries, and the life before I met Jaleel returns to me, the days before my father died grow clearer, and from the surface of the river, I haul some semblance of an old life, that unbeknownst to me had always been living parallel to the one above.

In some memories that ripple out of the first image, when the fishermen would row out toward the middle of the water, their bodies naked and dark, they pulled frayed nets shimmering

with "billa rohu," the fish twisting and gasping in the dreadful air. In some memories, the island disappears.

In between Lahore and Shahdara is a small island, much closer to our side of the river, upon which Kamran ki Baradari stands by itself. This royal pavilion is claimed, I'd later find out, to be the oldest surviving building in the city. Before the river changed its course and cleaved it away, the pavilion and the entire garden complex in which it stands, had once been connected to the land of Shahdara, erected in what must have been a bustling peninsula as clogged as the rest of Shahdara, carved out of narrow streets and houses piled upon houses in a choked mohalla of wooden doors and windows, rooftops with pigeon lofts, a symmetrical sanctuary—four elephant gates in a square of walls, a quartered garden at whose center rose the twenty arches, and inside them, the twelve-doored pavilion, three doors to each face— where royals could escape from the crookedness of their realm.

Or, perhaps, there was nothing at first, only land wide and flat, fertile land reclaimed from the river, that Prince Kamran built his baradari on, a lonesome bright building spied upon by merchants rowing their barges up the river. As time went on, more land might have been reclaimed, more havelis clustered on the new riverside, and the pavilion and its garden might have become slowly submerged in a coil of streets, submerged such that the baradari, falling into disrepair, might even be hard to see or approach in later decades and lived on only in the name of the neighborhood that had grown around it and choked it, Kamranpura or Kamranabad or Kamranagar, punctuated with mosques and gurudwara and gardens more gleaming than the dilapidated baradari itself, temples and shrines of unknown saints holy to all religions adjoined with graveyards that themselves would have attracted mourners, singers, tourists, devotees, merchants, and would have thus, as in other parts of the city, overtime become loci of commerce, given birth to markets selling specialized goods— rows of vendors selling prayer beads, rose petals, glass bangles, a whole alley for the selling

and buying of brocade, a district dedicated to copperware, or cottonwear, arcades filled with Arabian attar or heaps of spices stacked on the ground, a bazaar selling racing pigeons, talking parrots, imported pheasants, or wet markets haunted by cats and the smell of old animal blood, carcasses of goat hung on hooks, lobes of liver, chopped hooves and skinned heads splayed on the tables.

Did one day the river flood through this slice of Shahdara and claim the land back to its bed? I imagine it sweeping through the new mohalla grown ancient, and finding in its heart the baradari, its garden long destroyed and encroached upon such that the twelve arches looked not on water and horizon, but with dim eyes, gazed on rubble and brick.

This is, of course, the kind of fantasy of the old royals I would delight myself with reading, trapped in my own house, not allowed to venture alone beyond the street and the school. I learnt early that for some people, imagination too became a kind of memory. That Old Naseem, however dreamt of, in whatever guise, was truer to me that the girls of my school. The actual streets of Shahdara, especially when I reduced my visits outside, were less real to me than the fantasies I read of Shahdara in my novels and created in my head. And the "orchards of Sangrur" "the Twin Pools," relinquished to an enemy nation, those phrases would always bring up a romantic pang of nostalgia to me, just as they did to my mother who had actually sat by the pool and walked through the orchards, and just as in a children's tale, been driven out by the gardener for stealing fruits.

In the monsoon, the river would burst its banks, flooding the island that contained Kamran's Baradari. After one storm, the river ate the northern wall of the pavilion. The city authority had to rebuild the escarpment. For days before the new wall was constructed, we could stand on the shore and peek at the gardens overgrown and lush. Months later, after the river receded in the winter, children found slivers of sixteenth century tiles, fragments of stone fountains pebbled in the dried swamp.

Amma's words: *bacha Raj*. On summer afternoons, when parents shut themselves in their rooms for their siesta, the children ruled the streets. I remember rushing out of our cluttered mohalla in the quietness of many summer afternoons, out of the clogged streets into the expanse of the river. Below by the bank, acres of reeds rustling with crickets and mice and river breeze— I will always love tall grass fat with seed. Movement and marsh. We'd sit by the bank, Shezzi and my girlfriends and I, watching the louts getting drunk, the masseurs jangling bottles of oil to attract men. Down by the river's edge, herds of wallowing buffaloes muddied the water, white egrets perched on their hides, scaling for lice and disturbed fish. In the deeper edge, the boys we would giggle at, the thin beautiful boys, hurled themselves into the river, again and again, pushing each other in, their shalwars ballooning comically around their narrow waists.

It's easy to strain out the disappointments of our childhoods from the memories of us gathered by the river. What did we do there? We'd laugh, play games, buy roasted corn. It doesn't matter what we did. I just remember that feeling, a texture of laughter and light, sound of reeds brushing against each other. The rest is gone.

The river, as I've said, has also vanished. A new double bridge carries traffic over the vast riverbed to the motorway headed toward Islamabad—a city that didn't exist when I was born. Of course, with the water gone, and the river a site for factory spillage, fewer and fewer birds stop by now, at least in the stretch between Lahore and Shahdara. I don't think the starling visit anymore. Instead, at the edge of the banks, hundreds of gypsies have erected makeshift tents, despite the government's efforts to shoo them away, tying their stinking camels in the reeds, their naked children bathing in residual mud ponds. When India opens the floodgates, the gypsy colonies get inundated and many children are swept away and drowned. This happens every other year, and then the gypsies are back again, repopulating the drying silt channels, entering another cycle of life and displacement and death.

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By the time I met Jaleel, I had been out of school for four years. I had seen more than twenty, thirty suitors in the year I dropped out of school. We had no relatives in Pakistan, save for an estranged branch of my father's family in Karachi. The Sangrur family had stayed back in India, and we gradually lost touch with them. If we had more kinsfolk in the country, my brother would easily have married me off to a cousin. But despite his grumbling, his complaints that my mother and I were being choosy, I found that he himself held a mistrust of people. He had inherited my father's idea of family grandeur. Old Mahmud Ghazni was brought up, the claims of a lost genealogy chart brandished to apathetic guests, who demanded land, or inquired about my ability to cook and clean. He would say, these Punjabis demand dowries larger than their heads. These Lahoris are sly and vulgar. They aren't even real Lahoris—most are upstarts from Amritsar. Everyone in the house agreed that their accents were abhorrent, even me, who had grown up around Lahoris, and had acquired some of their tongue.

Other times, my family blamed me for being insolent when the guests came to look at me. Riyaaz, putting away the crockery after a failed meeting with a Gujjar family with a thriving milk business, grumbled, What prince did I expect was waiting for me? In these moments, I kept quiet. I knew I would get married one day. I was never as worried about the future. I wondered if any of them ever missed Shezzi and Old Naseem like Amma and I did.

"I didn't say a word," I reminded Riyaaz. "Amma was the one who said he stank like a water buffalo."

"His mother asked you what you did to help out in the house, and you said 'Nothing special.'"

I told her she could marry the water buffalo if she was so interested.

"You're so cruel," Riyaaz cried. "I've always put you ahead of myself. I am just wasting my time here."

"They can see her churlishness even beneath all the makeup she cakes on," Ali's wife said, bringing in a plate of samosas.

"Don't speak like that about my daughter," my mother warned from the charpai. "I won't just hand my girl off to any milkman on the street."

At this point everyone knew such defenses from my mother were only uttered to protect my pride and maintain balance in the house. She may have agreed that there was some failing in me, or even that my marriage would save the economy of the house.

"She's not churlish," Amma said. "She's just dreamy. Absent-minded like a poet."

She had been trying to involve me more in cooking, but here too, I seemed to be talentless. I was distracted, and this was a seen as a sign of disobedience or a sly tactic to escape work. My sister could chop a sack of onions without shedding a tear. How was it my fault that I was decades younger than all of them and had never been engaged in housework?

"Madam has never lifted a ladle. I was cooking for the entire house since the age of eight. At the age of eight, I'd go all alone and fetch water from the well." Aftab's wife said, her eyes on the ground as she soaked tapioca in milk for her child's porridge. Was it my crime to have been born in a city with running water! Aftab and his wife were usually too busy with their long coveted newborn son to care about issues of my marriage, but my second sister-in-law would offer her own theories at random, and Aftab, whenever involved in the issue by Ali Bhai would lazily suggest, Wouldn't it be easy to marry Naseem into an army family, among Abba's acquaintances?

But these army men looked for large dowries or women that were efficient housewives, possessed fair skin and a tall build. I was pretty good looking, I thought, even if I weren't some

Anarkali, a 7ft chambaili, or pale Kashmiri blossom. Mehrunnisa, after all, had been known for her wit before her looks. My mother's clothespins did not stop my nose from growing large, and my complexion, despite remaining indoors, grew a barley brown.

The talk of my wedding faded after that first year. Perhaps my brothers realized that our conditions weren't desperate because I was eating my share of daal and rice, but because they themselves failed to make something of their lives. Before long, they got busy in other pursuits. Ali had another son after two daughters. Now, he had a litter of four. Aftab, that brainless duffer, was nagged by the household into completing some sort of a diploma course and found a job as a telephone operator in PTCL. Salman finished medical school after failing his anatomy course twice, and, after several attempts, passed a foreign equivalence exam. The same month announced *he* wanted to get married.

While my family fussed over my match, as if finding me a husband and getting rid of me would have solved the issue of Kashmir, Salman Sahab had been romancing the neighbor's girl on our adjoined roof. Since becoming a doctor, Salman, who'd slept on the floor of the living room, snored while rats crept around him and devoured young bulbuls, rose up in the ranks of the Agha barracks. The yellowed marble plaque bearing my brother's names was dug up again, and a shinier one in pure sang-e-marmar installed instead. It read, "Agha Bungalow. Dr. Salman Agha (MBBS). Ali Agha. Aftab Agha." Any money saved for my wedding was spent on Salman's wedding, and another sister-in-law crowded the house.

My mother suddenly grew older, devoted to being a widow. It was a committed project. She left her hair undyed although she continued to curl it, forwent makeup, whined about her diabetes or the abscess in her mouth. She worked less in the house. She yapped and yapped like an old fool from the charpai, simultaneously telling the prayer beads she carried now. The two of us still slept in the same room, but she couldn't sleep as much now, and rose to say her Tahajjud prayer, then read

the Quran until Fajar, finishing the entire book in three days only to start again. In the middle of the night, her whispered devotions grew loud and wet with spit in a way that made me rub my hand over my ear and wake up. Once, I heard her say to a cloth seller in the bazaar, "No, no, brother, these colors are too bright. Show us the stuff for grandmothers like us. Indian stuff." She might have said it in the mocking voice middle aged women adopt, along with a greater freedom to banter with salesmen. I glared at her. She was bent over, mussing a deep tangerine velvet, the fabric stretched out and casting on her face a sallow glow. It was true. Her body had responded to her new vocation. Her face was a worn flag. Her skin had turned colorless and exuded a stale smell of kerosene, her bones were shrinking in her neck, her gall bladder busied itself in extracting stones from her blood.

Salman left for America with his wife almost immediately after engraving his degree on the address plate and briefly taking over my father's room. That was in 1968, around the time when America had begun allowing in Pakistanis, especially doctors, and the words on everyone's tongue were America, America, our dear friend America. America, the kindly-stern man in the posters, dressed in a circus master's suit. After Salman's departure, the focus fell on me again, but now everyone was tired. I was a weed growing among the jhumka bail. They would have left me alone in a corner of the house just as they left Riyaaz in the Hindu's servant quarters, content with more money, more children, and yet still greedy at the thought of remittances from our dear friend America.

But God intervened. The names of my oldest brother, his wife, and my mother were selected by a lottery in mid-1969, their application approved for performing Hajj on a subsidized government scheme. They would train at Hajji Camp with their respective group, then set off for Saudi Arab for forty days, leaving in mid-January of the next year. This news had reignited the fervor to marry me off. My mother led the effort this time. Centuries ago, before steamer ships, and certainly before

airplanes, people left for Hajj in caravans that trudged for months through difficult terrain to get to Makkah. Ever looming was the threat of bandits, disease, hostile clans. Many hajjis never returned home. Amma must have clung to this ancient image, for as soon as her application for pilgrimage was approved, she was convinced she needed to settle her earthly responsibilities before departing for the House of God. Her only remaining earthly responsibility, she claimed, was seeing me married.

"You're flying there," I reminded her. "You'll be back in a month." November was already here. Though we didn't know, that was the day we would meet Jaleel. We were walking down the bazaar on our way to the tailor shop to pick up clothes. Amma was getting a few abayas stitched for her journey, and I was making a small collection of shalwar kameez suits, nothing fancy, just nice clothes to wear around the house when guests came. This ad had been running in *Nawai-e-Waqt* for three weeks: *Girl, 19, Sunni Muhajir, of good family, good looks, good personality seeking a suitable match with good man of good income, good man with good income. Sunni Muhajir preferred. Marriage bureau don't contact.*

"But what if God calls me, Naseem?" my mother said. "Some people die there each year. Every year there is a stampede. And this year there were incredible floods. I showed you the picture in the newspaper— all the courtyard under four feet of water and the children climbing on their fathers' shoulders. Wouldn't that be the most glorious death, drowning in the water pouring off the roof of Kaaba?"

We covered our noses with our dupattas as a wind carried the stench of inglorious death from the river. I looked at my mother, and the growing sense of pity I felt for her since my father's death made me retch.

"Naseem, you're so sensitive to smells," my mother said fondly, grabbing my arm. We went down an alleyway where an ox, hitched to a cart, stood with blinds over his eyes. We squeezed past the beast. My mother was not yet sixty. She said, "If you die during Hajj, you go straight to heaven."

A little while later, Amma said, "Look at this bazaar, how muddy and ugly it's become. And everything is so expensive. Those truants should be at school, not loitering around the cinema, calling after women." Then, out of nowhere: "I was remembering the twin pools. Ay, Naseem, who knows if I'll see Sangrur again? By our old house where your siblings were born, there were two ponds, Twin Pools we'd call them, one clear and blue, one green and full of lotus." She had always been nostalgic. Now regrets crowded her mind. A little while after we had walked away from the cinema and the group of boys in school uniform who had bunked class to watch *Andaleeb*, Amma said, "Naseem, if only I knew you wouldn't get married in a year, I wouldn't have let Ali take you out of school."

"Amma, it's not your fault my brothers are so selfish." Of all the people, I missed her the most.

Amma nodded, content that my loyalties still lay with her, even though we both understood her complicity, her altered state that demanded more pity than respect. She made a face, pulling her lips in and bunching her eyebrows together, that seemed to plead, Oh, I am just an old widow. This is all I could do for you.

A breeze blew from the river that day. It tousled Jaleel's hair as he stood by the bank. He told me he had ventured down to the water on his motorbike before coming to my house. He said he had never been to the river before. The sun was sinking. Ravi was a wide canal of black sewage the city poured into the section of the riverbed between Shahdara and Kamran's Baradari. The putrid reek was made more unbearable since a nearby poultry farm had found the stream to be a convenient dumping site for dead broilers. The street dogs and the dogs of the gypsies that now populated the riverbed ripped the chicken carcasses, leaving the sandy bed littered with guts, blood, and dirty white feathers. Towards the Lahore side rose mounds of landfill and between it, a trickle of

actual river meandered like an earthworm journeying across salt. The sky was full of scavenging kites, crows, even a vulture or two gliding in circles without beating its wings.

Here, in the ruins of my childhood, Jaleel stood and looked over wasteland, out at the city where he would take his new wife. The sun melted into the sound of the gushing sewage stream and something of that sound and the smell of human waste made Jaleel's fingers twitch for a cigarette.

In his mind, then, he reworked the marriage proposal into a rescue, which romanticized the whole affair and redoubled his resolve to extract a yes from me and my family. It was a manly, foolish notion. He didn't even know me. He had never saved anyone, not his nephew who lived with him at that time and would later run away, nor Razia, who was driven out of her village since her marriage to him, nor his own self, searching for women in the *Nawai-Waqt* classified.

He said he had cut out my ad and put it in his wallet. He took it out and reread it, paused over the printing error doubly insisting on goodness and income. He concluded that he was, at least, a good man with a good income. In that moment by the river, he felt life, despite its convolutions, was manageable, was even straightforward if one threw enough effort and faith into it. Happiness too was simple to achieve. At the end was a sea wide and calm. He was a good man with a good income.

Now that I think of it, he may not have smoked a cigarette… to keep his breath fresh for meeting my family, but this is how I remember him, imagine him from what he told me later, standing and smoking by the polluted river where Nur Jehan had, in another imagined memory of mine, commandeered her horse to wade in pursuit of a deer. Jaleel threw the butt into the water and climbed back on his motorcycle. He looked young when I met him, though he was already thirty-five, my brother Aftab's age, will longish hair, limp and silky, and combed to the back after a bath. He wore a clean, cream-colored shalwar that day instead of western clothes because he said he

wanted to convey that he was from a humble, decent, even good, family. I know he also wore that color was also because it complimented his light brown eyes.

Ali Bhai got the door when the bell rang and asked Jaleel his business. Jaleel, taken aback, said he had come inquiring about the ad.

"You came alone?" my brother said, feeling indignant that the Agha name was worth nothing. Mahmud of Ghazni had destroyed Somnath for nothing. "It's not a decent time to call."

"My parents are dead," Jaleel explained. "I am the eldest in my family. All of my other relatives live in our village. I should have phoned before coming, but I just came straight after work."

When Riyaaz told me to come out to meet Jaleel, I was sleeping, all dressed in a white chikan kameez I'd fetched from the tailor earlier that day, and in my excitement, worn immediately upon coming home. "This ad is the trail of my life," Riyaaz said as she rubbed my neck and stroked my earlobe. "They just show up the door without warning. Come on, wake up. Go make some tea, Naseem. I have exams to check."

I had been dreaming of Shezzi. He had been returning to me in my dreams as a grown man. He would appear in the middle of some other dream, shifting its course and rendering everything that had happened before meaningless. He touched my shoulder and said, Aunty, can I get the cricket ball? It fell in your yard. He said something like that to fool me. What ball, I asked in surprise, looking around, and he started laughing, slapping his thigh and tearing up at his prank. Suddenly I recognized him and a storm whipped up in my breast. I wanted to scream with joy. I thought, But I knew! I knew it was you. Yet I couldn't say it. I pushed in my sleep to smile, but my mouth remained closed.

I walked to the kitchen still thinking of the grown Shezzi whose face already evaded me, my mind reaching instead for the familiar Shezzi in uniform, or him dressed in red. In such thoughts, I

was oblivious that someone had come to ask for my hand in marriage. I poured water in the pan to boil, struck the match and lit the stove. The smell of an ignited match sharpened in my nostrils long after I had extinguished the flame. I scrubbed my face with a little chickpea flour in the kitchen sink, then poured tea in three teacups. I set the teacups on the glass tray with grooved edges instead of the steel one we used in the house, and paraded into the sitting room, following the civil but supercilious voice Ali Bhai used with suitors, and the obsequious one my mother adopted to counteract it.

"As I have mentioned, I've an older wife," Jaleel said. Those are the first words I heard out of his mouth and my face burned in embarrassment for all of us. But he didn't sound sheepish. His voice sounded sleepy but clear, solemn, as if each word had been mulled over. I set the tray on the table in front of Jaleel without offering him tea and sat next to my mother on the divan. Jaleel fidgeted. "She's much older than me and keeps to herself. She isn't any trouble. We were married in the village when I was a teenager. There are no children, but I have a nephew I'm educating who also works and lives with me, and who I love like a son." His voice wavered as I entered in the middle of his sentence. I did not look up, but I could tell he was gazing at me.

"With apologies, Jaleel Sahab, we aren't looking for people with such complications," my brother said, his politeness a sign of growing anger. "My sister has rejected plenty of matches for far less than that."

"How old is your wife?" My mother said, cutting off my brother, her hand thumping the air, to say, Wait, wait, calm down.

"She must be forty-five, fifty." Then, gaining courage, Jaleel said, "I am a good man. I have my own woodwork store in Main Market. I have built my house on top of the shop. It has everything you need. A fridge, a TV. You can ask anyone in Main Market, and they'll tell you I'm

hardworking, a good craftsman. I make good, clean money. I don't need a dowry. I don't even need money for the wedding. I'd like to start a family. That's all."

My brother's ears must have pricked up like a dog's at "I don't need a dowry." But he continued in the same haughty voice, enquiring about Jaleel's village and his education.

"We value education in our house," Ali Bhai said. "My brother is a doctor in America. Dr. Salman Agha. He's a famous surgeon in Astamford, Cannaitycut."

"Agha Sahab," Jaleel said. A sharp note entered his slumbering timbre. "I am only Matric pass which is the most anyone in our village has studied. I do better than most educated people, even doctors. I meet a lot of people from all kinds of worlds and I've learned from them. You believe me, when I have children, they will go to the best schools in the country. My wife and children will not lack for anything."

"That's not the point." Ali said. "Money isn't the point. That's the thing people don't understand, that my father and our elders were so firm on. Education is worth more than money."

"Agha Sahab, *with apologies*, but how much were people in your family studying in your father's generation? It must be said, with apologies, that Naseem isn't even Matric pass. If we look back enough, we were all uneducated villagers. Education is a new concept. But we— I— have moved to the city for a reason. I will make sure my sons *and* daughters will all become doctors and engineers. I won't let any of them touch my trade. They'll never pick a saw or a hammer." His nobility, his wagering on the future, was beginning to sound stupid to me. He sounded like a preachy hero from a PTV show.

"We have never been villagers," my brother said, grabbing a teacup from the tray with great relish, as if he had entangled an opponent into checkmate. "My mother's family lived in the court of Sangrur. My father was an Afghan with our roots going all the way to Mahmud Ghazni. Do you know who Mahmud Ghazni was?"

“But Jaleel Sahib is right. It’s true that education is a new thing,” my mother said. “I have educated my older daughter. We never did that in the old days.”

Jaleel clutched his teacup, drained it, then put it down with such unexpected force, he missed the center of the glass tray, and hit its lip instead. The plate flipped and slid off the table, crashing onto the terrazzo tiles and splitting into three large segments.

“It was such a beautiful plate!” Jaleel said as soon as he realized what had happened. He might have been hot from the tea he had just gulped, for he went red in the face and started sweating from the temples. He began to apologize and gather the shards, and it was such a strange sight to me, to see a man apologize over a broken tray, detailing all the finer aspects of what was a pretty but cheap factory manufactured product, mentioning the grooves and pattern of lines that made stars and triangles in the thick edge, the gently curving lips, the clarity of the glass.

“I can glue it together and bring it back,” he said. “I have industrial glue in the workshop. You wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.”

My brother was confounded. My mother appeased Jaleel, saying, the tray wasn’t special, just bought from Ichra for five, ten rupees. “It’s only glass. Naseem, get the broom and sweep the floor.”

I rose and tried to take the large pieces from Jaleel, but he hesitated.

“Stop it! Enough,” I said, looking at his face directly for the first time. “Give it back. It’s broken and that’s that.” I’d spoken to him like Riyaaz spoke to her students.

He wilted. This villager’s son who had been contesting the mighty Ali Agha’s notion of the world, this man handed me three slices of fractured glass and stood there, looking at me, as if expecting a judgment or a punishment. “I will throw these out. Watch your feet,” I finally said, embarrassed again, and left the room. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps I was insolent and churlish. My chest seemed to thump with a rush of reeds, a flow of water, river and molten glass. In the

courtyard of the house, I regarded the open sky that had deepened into the last shade of violet before nightfall, the spreading branches of the jhumka bail crowding their violet shadows above my head. The wind blew through the vine and shook out dried leaves. A leaf fell, then another, and I imagined the courtyard flooding with water, rain pouring from the top of the Kaaba and flooding the courtyard of the Haram, sending waves to the marble pillars in the farthest recesses of the only mosque where women walked freely among the men. Above the Kaaba, the hundreds of thousands of pigeons that cooed hymns and circumambulated the black velvet cube, were coiling in a storm of their own, like starlings once had over Shahdarah. Below the flutter, people—stupid , dazed, ecstatic men wearing their ihram like saris, gathered their anchals and rushed to the Kaaba, to fills their eyes and mouths with its overflow, pushing each other down like the boys of the river, gasping, screaming prayers, perhaps in their shoving, knocking a child into the knee-deep water. A woman among them looked at the child thrashing below the flurry of pigeon wings, but cut off from him by the crowds of men, crouched in the water and waited for her own death, closed her eyes and thought of the Twin Pools of her childhood, the water parting into two eddies on each side of the Kaaba, one side calming in a deep blue, the other green and blooming with lotus.

I look at this moment, elaborated and embellished by memory, and see myself immobile under the jhumka bail, with shards of glass in my hands and a yellowed leaf in my hair, standing and unable to speak, unable to even smile, thinking, I knew! I knew of course.

Jaleel would laugh at my foolish talk now, my attempt at creating drama and memoir from an uneventful life. Sometimes I imagine his voice mocking me. Ha! Ha! In his old age, he'd developed a hacking laugh, rising through a chest full of phlegm. His lungs were destroyed from inhaling sawdust and smoking tobacco. You did well to not marry an old man, he would tell our daughter. Look at your mother—I've drained all her mirth. Ha! Ha!

Jaleel was a short man with a thin muscular body and hands as large as saucers. His face was unremarkable except for large brown eyes with drooping lids that gave him an appearance of doleful sleepiness, a mustache that he groomed once a week, right before Friday prayers. Even when I met him for the first time, Jaleel looked slightly weathered. He had begun dying his mustache with henna. My mother thought he was shy, quiet, respectful, even, but that was only true when it came to customers, outsiders, especially other men. In the house, he was mischievous and sly. At first, I couldn't tell when he was joking until I would see his smile break across his face. Then I would realize he had been pulling my leg the entire time.

After Jaleel's first visit, Ali Bhai and Aftab visited Main Market and made inquiries about Jaleel at various shops, and satisfied with the reports, dusted their hands of the whole matter. They met Razia too, briefly, and reported she was quiet but welcoming. The ad was pulled out of the classified section. The pace of things quickened. Dr. Salman and his Mrs. were notified over the phone. The wedding dates had been set at the end of December, before the training commenced at the Hajji camp. Riyaz and my mother were organizing a mehndi at home. The biggest surprise was Riyaz. She softened towards me, and would say, "This wife of his will keep you in check. You'll be running back to us each week," and once even, "Seeing you get ready to leave makes me want to get out of here." She applied for a M.Ed the following year, and won a scholarship to a university in Britain.

Jaleel's visits to our house increased. At the end of November 1969, on his fifth visit to the Shahdara house, he requested we be left alone in the sitting room. He began talking in his hesitating, solemn way, apologizing for the hastiness of the whole affair, and the simplicity of the events given that it was his second wedding. He then began to inquire about the dresses I would like to have made. I had already submitted my designs to the tailor, I told him. Before he could bumble further, I

said, “You have to tell me about your wife. I haven’t seen her or met her. You never mention her to me.”

Razia was Jaleel’s cousin; she was ten years older than him. At her birth, her hand was promised to Jaleel’s older brother, who had been born a few days before her. Jaleel told me this was done to keep the family property— a handful of rice paddies and wheat fields— consolidated. Razia grew up knowing exactly who she would marry, but two months before the wedding, the boy was accidently shot by the chaudhary’s son while hunting teetar in the chickpea fields. The chaudhary gave the family some money and grain in compensation, and a dispute rose among the family over whether Razia’s family deserved a share in the money or not. Eventually, the elders of the family decided to finish off the dispute by honoring the marriage pact and marrying Razia to the younger son.

This was before Jaleel had moved to Lahore, of course, and the family still lived in a village close to Chiniot. Chiniot is famous in all of Punjab for its traditional furniture and woodwork, and Jaleel’s father, the only skilled worker in a family of farmers, had a shop in the city, where Jaleel was an apprentice. They would spend the week in the shop and return to the village for Fridays and Sundays. Jaleel was thirteen years old when his brother died. At their wedding, both Jaleel and Razia sat quietly; some distant relative spread the rumor that the boy was mute. Jaleel told me he didn’t even have a mustache at that time, but Razia was a full woman, every curve of her robust, which was considered beautiful in those days. That night, when the family escorted them to their temporary bedroom, Jaleel saw two charpais had been pushed together, covered by plush bedding, and decorated with rose petals and garlands of marigold.

Razia started sobbing once the family left, and Jaleel lay awake that night in his marital bed, listening to her wail his brother’s name in the darkness. The sobbing continued over the next few weeks and eventually turned into fits. One day, while Jaleel was at the shop in Chiniot, his mother

found Razia writhing on the ground. She had bit her tongue and blood oozed from her mouth down the front of her kameez. This was in the 40's, before Pakistan was born, before I was born, and there were no paved roads, electricity, no phones in the village. The only hospital was in Chiniot, twenty miles away. The family, convinced Razia was possessed by jinns, had her exorcized by a fakir. After the exorcism, the fits stopped. Razia's tongue healed, but she never gave birth to a child.

I remember Jaleel and I sitting alone in my house the day our wedding date had been set. When he had told me about Razia, I stared at his large eyes, light brown in the sunlight, into his twitching pupils. Our fates are the same, I thought then, we are both tethered to someone we would never possess. Why did I feel that I would never possess him— even before our wedding? Was it only his age? Was it because I assumed our marriage was likely motivated by the pragmatic need to produce a male heir? Or maybe I had never possessed anything in my life, not even my name or a bulbul, before eventually giving them up one day.

Two weeks before my wedding, Razia paid a visit to our house. She was a tall, heavy woman with two pock marks on each cheek, small eyes, and a deep philtrum that had ripped up and sealed with a scar. Her hair was parted in the center and braided in the back. She arrived at our house in a rickshaw. I watched her from the grille of the kitchen as she hobbled off the back, talked to the driver while adjusting the dupatta over her head. The rickshaw sputtered leaden-blue smoke. A flash of parrot green paranda revealed itself under the dupatta, woven into her hair. Eid-ul-fitr was a few days away, and my sisters were out shopping for supplies. Awais, home early from school opened the gate when Razia knocked, and she trailed behind him into our small courtyard. Amma was sitting on a charpai making a paan— she'd fallen ill in the final ashra of Ramzan and was no longer fasting. I heard Razia introduce herself. Before I could be summoned, I scrubbed my hands with

dish powder and walked out into the courtyard myself, trembling, like I had trembled when my teacher caught me cheating on my exam in fifth grade. Razia sat beside my mother on the charpai.

"Salam, Baji," I said. I leaned to her shoulder level upon approaching her.

Razia patted my head, then made me sit next to her, holding my hand.

"I've come to see my sautan," Razia said. A tooth poked out of her smile.

My mother gave an uneasy chuckle. "God willing, Naseem will be like a little sister to you. She's a nice girl, does all the housework, and, praise to God, she sews so well I was telling her she'd make a great tailor."

"Don't worry, my sister, I'm not here to pick fights with your daughter," Razia said. "Jaleel asked for my permission before he said yes to this match. I was the one who encouraged him to find a wife that could bear him a child. There's no competition between me and your girl." She rubbed her knee while she talked.

"Come on, Naseem, massage your baji's knee," my mother said. I got off the charpai and squatted in front of Razia, began pressing her hard legs. After a moment, Razia protested.

"No, no, sit up, I'm not that old now. Come sit with me. Or, if you can, bring me a cup of tea."

And before my mother could say anything in the frantically obliging way she talked in front of guests, I got up, nodded, and went back into the kitchen.

When I was making the cup of tea, I heard my mother asking Razia to stay longer, then the sound of feet shuffling. The gate opened and slammed. Through the kitchen grille, I followed Razia as climbed back into the rickshaw that had been waiting.

"What did she say!" I said, rushing to find my mother. "I saw her leave in a huff."

"Nothing! She said she just came to give you this," my mother said, handing me two threadbare brown velvet pouches with golden drawstrings. "For the wedding."

I emptied the velvet in my lap. The first pouch, bursting at the seams, revealed a gold set, old fashioned and heavy, the drooping gold necklace to be tied in the back with a dirty golden rope. In addition, matching the necklace were six bangles, long jhumka earrings, a ring, and a large tikka in the shape of a teardrop. In the second pouch was a simple silver set, and a sleek choker in gold, set with rounded kundan glass beads backed with silver so they reflected the light on our faces as we twisted them between our fingers.

"I like the gold one. I'll wear that to the walima," I said. "The kundan is simpler. I can keep it for the nikah."

"Kundan!" my mother said. "Stupid girl, these are diamonds. And I can tell you this is old stuff, Indian stuff." I heard a younger version of my mother say, *The enormous diamonds of Old India* from the story of Mahmud Ghazni, and *Agha Sahib smashed the shiv lingam with his bare hands*.

Amma said, "We should put all this away before your sisters-in-law see it. Their tongues will come rolling out." She laughed. In the reflected light of the diamonds, my mother forgot about her earthly responsibilities, the impending pilgrimage. She sounded like her old self despite the croak in her voice from her flu. She was vivacious and full of local knowledge on the healing properties of diamonds. But all I was thinking about was Razia. "That bizarre woman, bringing so much jewelry in the back of a rickshaw! Maybe that's why she dumped it all in these tattered sacks."

Jaleel and I got married soon after Razia's visit. We went to his village for the wedding, all of us—my mother and siblings, their families, Jaleel, and his nephew Rauf— squished in three adjacent train compartments. I remember looking across the berth at Jaleel several times that day thinking about him being my husband. I wasn't afraid of him. There was something gentle about Jaleel's face, a shyness that reflected in his downcast eyes when he talked to people. It was a façade, I'd find out. We started bantering in the train, and I realized he could be playful and unlike my banker brother,

grew amused whenever I mocked him. He was already fond of me though I barely knew him. He's a man, I thought, who would take care of me without asking.

At the wedding, Jaleel's face was hidden behind the strings of tinsel dangling from his turban; the brocade border of my dupatta framed my forehead. We were composed on a little stage for all to see.

"Are you afraid?" he asked from under his sehra, keeping up the bantering tone from our conversation on the train.

I was looking down in my lap, as instructed by my mother. "No."

"I am," Jaleel said.

"Why? Because Razia will beat you up? Well, think about what she'll do to me!"

"Silly!" he said and laughed. "Razia's nice. She didn't come to the wedding because people in the village will make fun of her."

"Well, I wish I wasn't here, either. These people think I am a fast city girl. I saw them looking at my bellbottom shalwar yesterday like I was a dancing slut from Heera Mandi. Why couldn't you just marry another girl from the village?"

"Razia said she couldn't stand it if I did."

"Did you have any say in your own marriage? Are you Razia's son? You sound like you're been forced against your will!"

Jaleel brushed the tinsel away from his face and looked at me. "I saw you one day crossing the street with your dupatta clutched in your mouth. I thought you looked like the actress Shabnam," he said.

"That's not how it happened! You saw my ad in *Nawai Waqt* and came knocking without as much as a phone call"

"Razia thinks you're pretty too."

"Really? So then, why are you afraid? That you married someone poor? They say you make big money, but you're just a farmer's son, I tell you!"

"I'm afraid that you won't get along with Razia. The last thing I want is constant household squabbles. My mother always fought with my grandmother and aunts and I used to run and hide in the fields because I couldn't stand it."

"Why will I fight with Razia? She scares me. She's so huge, she can just sit on me and crush my bones."

"So, you are afraid," he said. He chuckled as if he had won a game.

I felt warm knowing Razia approved of my beauty. From the peripheries of my vision, I saw my mother arranging her legs under her borrowed silk lehnga, looking over at me, wiping her eyes every now and then, chatting with guests, enjoying the attention she received as the bride's mother. Riyaaz sat next to her, her mouth drawn into a line. I've done my duty to God, I heard my mother say, I've gotten all my children married. Now I can go to the Kaaba and die with peace. My ears burned at that. She had forgotten about Riyaaz. I told myself I'll never become my mother, I refuse to become that woman. The Old Widow. Give her the shroud now, and she'll jump in the grave, content.

The smell of charcoal, of slightly burnt korma, steaming potatoes, and mutton pulao, filled the room. Dinner was served, causing a chaos as guests rushed to fill their plates, all except Riyaaz whose leg probably hurt from the train journey, though she hadn't said a word. Jaleel's stomach groaned like a cat whining for food. I laughed at him, the silk of my blouse felt so rich luxuriously rustling against my stomach. Jaleel elbowed me in the ribs to stay poised. In that dusty village I had never been to, among people I had never met, I felt as if I was perched at the brink of something exhilarating, like the feeling in your feet when you stand up on a swing, gaining momentum, thrusting it faster, faster and higher, preparing to jump.

Jaleel's carpentry business was well established when we got married, and he had taken Rauf as an apprentice that summer to help finish orders in time. I remember they were making a magnificent dining table set when I moved to the house. It was for the dowry of an industrialist's daughter and could seat twenty people. Carved out of the darkest sheesham rosewood, the table filled the width of the workshop— the workbench had to be moved into the backyard. On the longer skirts, scrolls of clouds unwound over hills. Lithe grapevines and apricots drooped from the shorter aprons and climbed down the legs. I can still remember how my fingertips ran smooth over the sanded top before they caught on the inlaid camelbone that edged the border. That first month of my new life, whenever I saw that table, I had a wild desire to own it, although I had no idea where I would put a thing like that. I imagined it sitting in a room on a blood-red kilim, with no chairs no tablecloth or anything, nothing but that table and light coming through long windows.

My own dowry didn't consist of much—some pots and pans, a dinner set, good clothes, little jewelry, a hand-operated sewing machine, and a biscuit tin filled with spools of threads, needles, bobbins, spare parts. Jaleel had insisted that he didn't require anything, but my mother had saved up a little money, and coaxed some more out of my brothers, maybe only out of Salman. While my sisters-in-law sneered, my mother declared in the courtyard how she refused to let her youngest daughter leave her house emptyhanded. She believed having possessions of my own would give me power, as if things were amulets that could protect against the evil eye. She told me because I was becoming a second wife, people would always associate me with scandal and villainy.

"You'll have many enemies, Naseem," she said. "Never ask Jaleel's first wife for anything. My daughters-in-law run their tongues like scissors. They tell the neighbors that I'm marrying you off to an old carpenter for money. But if you play the game right, you'll know why I said yes to your match. You'll see. Tomorrow, we'll go to Ichra and buy some fabric."

I nodded then, thrilled at the prospect of new clothes and the idea of making a stash of things entirely my own. From the corner store, instead of renting the new Shahida Yusuf romance, I bought last week's *Akhbar-e-Jahan* and explored the new fashions. At the bazaar the next day, vendors unfurled at my feet thaan after thaan of velvet, sweet pauplin, georgette, organdy, organza, jamdani, chikankari, chiffon. What rush of excitement I felt then! But weeks later, touching the dining table Jaleel was carving, I felt my face crumple, holding back tears.

That night, I decided I would sit on my haunches next to Jaleel while he worked on the table. I might say, "Haye, Jaleel, please make one like this for me too. A small one. Day and night, you slave for other people's wives while I sit here without a footstool to sit on." I practiced wheedling, complaining in the way women did in films, to embed my desire in joke, in the ridiculousness young wives were afforded in their first days.

But in the end, I never made such a request. So what if he could make beautiful things? Even then I knew people like us weren't meant to have them.

Jaleel and Razia lived on the roof of the shop, where they had built a few rooms. They slept in the big room; on the other end were a kitchen and a bathroom and a small room where Rauf slept. The rest of the roof had been left as a terrace. Soon after our match was set, Jaleel began building a new room for me beside the kitchen. It was unpainted, and the laborers had left a hole for the window that looked out on a vacant lot people dumped their garbage on. A flap of tarpaulin hung over the hole, billowing in the winter wind.

My room was infested with wasps. A swarm hovered in one corner, urine yellow and soundless. Tens crawled on the door frame. When we returned from the village, Jaleel showed me to the room and immediately noticed them. He yelped and had Rauf smoke the wasps unconscious and stamp them when they fell to the floor. Afterwards, the boy broke down their dried mud nests from

the corners of the ceiling, squashing the sheeny larvae inside. Jaleel had a window installed in the open frame a few days later. But for many weeks, my room and new clothes smelled of smoky wood.

Rauf was maybe seventeen years old then. He passed his Matric exam but instead of enrolling in college, left his village, accompanying Jaleel to Lahore when Jaleel was returning from a visit back home. Rauf was tall and slim and, since moving to the city, only wore Western clothes—even to bed. After cleaning out the wasps, he brought in blankets Razia had left outside.

I had still not talked to Razia. She greeted me at lunch, but we had eaten in silence. I thought it was only appropriate that she should welcome me into the house. This first silent lunch set the tone for the long hours at home in the day, Razia and I subtly avoiding each other until Jaleel and Rauf returned from the shop.

"Chachi, do you want help setting the room?" Rauf said.

He referred to me as his aunt, even though we were close in age. We had joked in the train to Jaleel's village, but now the reserve had crept back in his voice.

"No. What does a desi babu like you know about playing house? A city gentleman should only do refined manly things. Why don't you go send this letter for me?" He had grown irritated when I first called him desi babu in the train .

"Just because I wear pant shirt doesn't make me a desi babu."

"Well, yes, you actually need to be educated. And speak English. But you'll always be our poor man's desi—"

"Oh, shut up."

"What a shameless boy! Don't you know how to talk to your aunt?" I gave him a little shove. Rauf laughed and pushed me away.

He asked, Who is the letter for?

"For one of my many admirers. It's a pity I have to break all their hearts now that I'm married. But hush, I don't want your uncle getting jealous." I winked at him.

He grabbed the envelope from my hand and read it. "To My Sweet Mother Darling," he read, and gave me a wry smile.

In a conspiratorial whisper, I told him it was a cover up.

"Maybe I should I write to my mother, too," Rauf said. "When I was a child, she'd sit me down on the floor and massage my hair with mustard oil then bathe me. Every Friday before the prayer, she made corn roti with the fresh desi ghee I love, sliding more under the table to me because I was her favorite. But," he paused. "Well, there's no point in writing. She's illiterate, you know?"

There was silence. Then Rauf made some joke about his handwriting being illegible anyway and left with the envelope. How I wish this was the only way I could remember Rauf, tugging at his shirt pocket and talking about his illiterate mother in his boyish voice, trying a city accent as he cried about her. A year later, when he turned eighteen, Rauf ran away to join the army. Before his training ended, the war with East Pakistan broke, and he was called to fight.

That first night at Jaleel's house, I lay in my bed, unable to sleep, I kept thinking about Jaleel and Razia in the big room. A draught through the window-hole brought in the smell of rotting garbage, of a dead animal. Close to dawn, after the sky had exploded purple with the azan for fajr, I heard the door open, and Jaleel came in. He closed the door.

"Now you remember me?" I asked him. "Haven't had your fill for the evening? Am I second helpings on my own wedding night!"

"Oh, are you awake? Did I wake you up? God, it stinks in here. I'll have the room fixed tomorrow."

I turned away after cursing him. I heard Jaleel tiptoe closer, felt the fleece of the blanket slink over my back. Jaleel's cold hand started massaging my shoulder, kneading the muscle between the bone in its coarse palm.

"I only came to wake you for prayer," he said, and kissed my shoulder. Then he moved next to me in bed and pressed his body against my back. I ignored him. His trembling hands slithered to the front and rubbed my stomach. I felt his mustache bristle against my ear. Heavy breath on my neck.

"Get off me!" I said. "I'm not a bitch to be bred for your mongrels. You haven't bought a slave girl. Do you know that? Don't forget you brought me from a respectable family."

Jaleel's body went limp and he fell on his back.

The tarp fluttered. The sky had reddened, and a lone winter bulbul trilled in song.

"Razia's sick," Jaleel said. "She hadn't been taking the medicine when we were in the village. She has all these stupid ideas about how it makes her lose sleep and get headaches. In the room earlier, she fell on the floor and burst her lip. She was flailing her arms when I picked her up, like a motor had been switched on in her. I had to stuff her mouth with my shirt and tie her to the bed. We didn't do anything like that."

"Is she still possessed? I thought you said the fits stopped" My surprise overcome my anger.

"For a while, they did. It's not a jinn. The doctor says she has epilepsy. They've medicine for it now, though. It's not a problem if she keeps eating her pill every day."

Jaleel didn't touch me that night, or for months after that, although he started sleeping in my bed, coming in after Razia dozed off after dinner. Sometimes, if he was working long nights in the workshop, he would come straight to my room. Regardless, my mother had been wrong. Neither had Jaleel married me to fulfil his middle-age lust. Nor, as Razia might have thought, had he been on

the search for a fertile womb. Jaleel made me a sautan so I could nurse his aging wife until she fell on the floor one final time.

What happened? How are you here?

I am older now than my mother ever was. I often think of the dead.

Nothing happened and still a whole life was filled to the brim with strange and glittering objects. The first time I saw Jaleel's workshop, I felt I had entered Ali Baba's cave. The shop was one windowless room, cool and dark, smelling of sawdust and varnish, housing finished projects—table-sets of threes that fit into each other, Rajasthani almirahs, dovecotes, chess tables, carrom boards, tea trolleys, Chinioti beds with hidden shelves, dowry showcases, things I had no idea people populated their lives with. Side tables—who knew of such a thing! There was no space, not a spare inch to shed a grain, a single sesame seed, without something or the other falling off. Tables stacked on tables until they touched the ceiling, cupboards placed between their padded feet, stuffed with balled-up newspapers. The shop stood in a row of furniture shops, their entire front walls tin shutters that were pulled up during the day to compete for sunlight and customers. Open sesame! Furniture spilled out of the mouths: contents of someone's private bedroom, some hoity upper-class lady's boudoir dragged out on dusty frenzied street, inviting daydreams of luxury, spacious white bungalows.

At the back of the shop was Jaleel's workshop, dominated by two workbenches, which led out into the backyard scattered with planks and plyboards, cans of paint left open and caked dry, glass Coca Cola bottles with thinner in them plugged with gauze. During the day, our chickens and ducks roamed free here among the debris, pecking in the wood shavings for grub and dead flies, sometimes waddling up the bare brick steps that led to the private rooms upstairs.

To me, the shop always felt dark, even when they lit the bare 60-watts, but especially when entering it from the backyard. As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I would fumble until my fingers found the grain of wood, edges, curves, table legs that turned into a lion paws, cold metal, a different grain now, another surface, polished and unpolished, painted and unpainted, raised carving and hollowed space for inlay. The smell of sawdust and lacquer hung on the shadows. Nothing seemed separate or finished. And yet, as my eyes adjusted, I could make shape of things even from the little that was exposed, I could recognize utility and form, the story behind something. What was for an office and what was for a dowry, what was for the newly rich and what for the foreign-return, what was commissioned by the traditionalist, and what was for the lovers of curios. Every object, dark and gleaming, crammed in the workshop, a prop by vocation waiting to unravel and offer its utility to the world.

My life is the opposite. My life has grown inward. Incapable of making furniture, I have gathered all the chipped tables reeking of spilled food and sticky with chai stains, the verandah chairs rusted after many rains, housed the chipped bits of wedding furniture, and bars of the crib my child outgrew, the worn threads of charpais that sag into mysterious shapes where hips and shoulders filled them each night. I have stored these entangled objects of my memories, kept shoving them into the storeroom. The workshop is full now. Nothing can make sense by being dragged out under the streetlight. I walk from room to room, reexamining what can be discerned, what has accumulated into a different shape of meaning, hearing the commentary of a voice lost in the shadows. Unlike my mother, I don't think I need to settle the score with life now that Jaleel's dead, but I do feel lonely the way Amma must have felt.

It was Amma who used to say, I'm sixty years old, Naseem! Sixty! When all those I loved best are gone, what's the point of living longer? And I would get angry and say, Well what about me? Don't you love me?

The day Jaleel died, and I ran to the bathroom to call my daughter, waited for her to pick up the phone, I thought, Except for Meher, the ones I love best are dead.

My daughter isn't churlish. She's absentminded. Like a poet.

The first few weeks after I moved to Jaleel's workshop, I stayed in my room, decorating, reading, or watching the TV Jaleel had bought at the time of our wedding. Sometimes I walked to the Main Market and used the phonebooth to call Riyaaz. I missed her stern voice and I could tell she felt lonesome in the house emptied of me and my mother. She probably even missed Ali and his wife.

I told her about the area, Main Market built around a roundabout, busy but not chaotic, and filled with shops that felt so unlike Shahdara—chandelier shops, florists, bookstores. I would linger after my phone call, walking the arcades, enjoying the wider streets, the streetlamps, the wealth of trees. Then, I would move toward the narrower streets of Chick Bazaar, find Jaleel's workshop, pause and chat with the boys, then retreat to my room.

If Razia left lunch in the kitchen, I would make myself a roti and take a plate of food to my room. Razia handled most of the domestic chores. She fed the ducks, swept the terrace, and prepared the food. In the first few weeks of married life, I expected to be catered to. When Rauf and Jaleel came upstairs, I would emerge and dart about, organize the terrace, ask Rauf to make repairs. Jaleel would spend an hour or two with Razia in her room after dinner, then come over and sleep in my bed. He would wake up early to the smell of ghee sizzling on the griddle, the sound of Razia frying parathas. I stayed in bed, pretending to sleep.

"You have to take over some of the cleaning and cooking," Jaleel said to me on one such morning. "Razia gets tired easily now, even if she won't say it."

"Why can't we get a maid?" I said, my eyes still closed. "There is a bunch of them who go house to house and clean the whole place in an hour."

"Razia would never be comfortable with strangers in her house."

"Why are you her messenger?" I moaned, since I didn't have anything else to counter him with. "Can't she talk to me herself?"

"Is that what you'd like? To become childhood friends with Razia?" He laughed. "Go ahead. She's prickly at first and secretive, but she loves very deeply when you gain her trust."

Since my initial fight with Jaleel on my first night, I had convinced myself that Jaleel thought of Razia as an elderly aunt. I told myself they didn't sleep together in the hour they spent each night in her room. In fact, I thought they probably had never slept together— there was no child, after all. Still, it was painful to hear my husband tell me Razia loved deeply. Even the silence of those early months was painful. I was used to children crying and shouting, my mother talking in the courtyard, my sisters-in-law tittering in the kitchen. Silence was what I associated with the stern indifference of my father, his visits home.

Actually, it would have been better had it remained that way. But silence could not continue in a house that narrow and empty. Once, while Jaleel and Rauf were away sourcing wood in Chiniot, I left to visit Shahdarah. Jaleel had told me to stay at the house, but my mother had just returned from Hajj. I was gone for five hours. When I returned in the early evening, there was no sign of Razia. Dinner had not been waiting for me as it usually did at sun fall. I turned on the TV and the radio.

I cooked some masoor ki daal and left it in the kitchen for Razia. The next day I saw she still hadn't come out of her room. The daal was uneaten. I warmed it, made two rotis, and trudged to Razia's door, holding the food. I knocked on the door.

“Razia Baji?” I called. There was no reply, so I opened the door. “Razia Baji, I brought some daal.”

It was dark inside, the window covered with a bamboo shade. It reminded me of my father’s room, except here, as my eyes adjusted to it, I sensed chaos. There was a smell of urine. Clothes littered all over the place, a large clay pot lay shattered. In the bed, Razia lay staring up at the ceiling, the dim light settling on the curve of her eyeball. She hadn’t given me the slightest indication that she had noticed my entry. I came closer to her, nervous she was unwell. My bare feet stepped on puddles of water. When I was at her bedside, looking at Razia’s shape in the dark, I put the daal on the small table next to her bed.

She picked up the plate and hurled it on the floor.

“Get out,” she said. “Who gave you the permission to enter my room?”

“Are you all right?” I said, pulling the blind a little. She gave no reply. She looked at the ceiling. I noticed there was a dried blood on her face. I imagined the Jinn that possessed her, curving into her chest, feeding on her lungs and nerves.

She had a seizure in front of my eyes. I didn’t understand it at first. Her jaw moved, as if she were speaking or chewing, but there was no sound. She blinked normally, but her eyes were moving. Her mouth was filling with spit and falling out as her head went up and down. Her hands twitched, but the rest of her body was still. Her eyes, they were soft, what I imagined drugged eyes looked like. She looked away.

I didn’t know what to do. It was quiet and I dared not speak a word. I was transfixed, watching Razia. The floor was wet. In one moment, I suddenly wondered if the floor was covered by Razia’s drool, before realizing it was probably the contents of the broken clay pitcher. Razia suddenly looked towards me. She hiccupped. I almost jumped. She continued to hiccup, even as her head fell back and she slowly stiffened. Her face still trembled. I rushed to bring water.

When I grabbed the other pitcher in Razia's room and held its lip to her mouth, she looked at me when a strange sloppy grimace. It reminded me of a neighbor who had facial paralysis after a stroke and couldn't move half of his face. Rabia gurgled and I realized— she was laughing, she was laughing at me.

I stood there holding the earthen pitcher like a village girl at a well. Razia tried to speak but meaningless sounds came out. Then she put her hand on her face and laughed and said in a garbled voice. "You look like a ghost."

"I thought I saw a ghost," I said. "You!"

"I'm very hot." Razia said. It was mid-February, a beautiful spring day. The sky was full of Basant kites.

I opened the window and sat by Razia. After a while, she began to speak normally.

"You left me," Razia said. "Even though I had asked Jaleel to convey that I needed you. You are selfish and only interested in your own pleasures. You think you love Jaleel, but that's only because he buys you things, and says nice things to you. You take freely, but you don't even have the consideration to give back. The minute you do something for someone, make them daal or bring them a cup of water, you expect praise. You think you're doing so much for us all by flirting around and arranging the hen coop to your desire. But you only do what's easy and exciting for yourself. This is not love!"

I looked at her, my anger and shame in equal parts. "Jaleel didn't tell me you were sick. I didn't know I was expected to be your nurse."

"Girl, you're the one that needs a nurse. I cook for you and clean for you while you flit about like a butterfly, going up and down, or hiding in your room. Men tire of women easily when they don't take care of them."

I looked at her, half of her mouth still tense. I wanted to say, “Why are you so cruel to me?” She laughed as if she’d heard my thoughts. She jerked her wrist, flinging her hand open, as if to indicate that I be gone.

I huffed and cried to Jaleel about Razia’s meanness upon his return. After this day, Razia began to talk to me more openly. She began to teach me to cook around this time. Razia was dying but I was too busy playing the young wife to notice. Every day her condition was deteriorating. Every day, some pain in her kidney or her spleen—she must have been able to identify some source with a degree of accuracy—everyday something was giving out. She felt it at once and everywhere—localized at points in the ache of her curving spine, or the right kidney when the blood rushed to in her sleep because of her crooked angle, or the constant throb in her right knee. I know now how it feels when the body is giving up, tiring, saying at last, I cannot continue this endless tirade. One day when we were eating, Razia couldn’t chew. I could tell from the wincing; from the mastication she was forcing on her left jaw. But she didn’t say a word.

When Razia saw me, I was flirting with her husband, I was arranging the furniture, washing the bright blankets from my dowry, eating plate after plate of food. She was too engrossed in seeing me eat into her life to realize that eating is only another means to feed towards death. I was blossoming in her eyes, vigorously taking root in a household that had ample alluvium, gentle protection of a gardener against the sun. Each day, I not only learnt the ways of their life, the odd arrangement of their life, but also grew the ambition to organize it differently. How was I that audacious, I now ask myself. How had I dared to breathe in the courtyard she had paved?

Now I look back her, the night before they took her away to Mayo Hospital. I killed her. It wasn’t my fault, either. I was merely the instrument. I was something lurking, dancing, moving with the shadow of time. I was the new excitable thing that would extinguish her. For what was I doing,

when I was putting away the beams that lay across the yard, when I was putting away the spices in neat wheel-like boxes, what was I doing, when I had Jaleel replace and reline the rusting hen coop? I was lining and marking her grave, the disorder she had imposed on the house, on Jaleel's life.

In those days, I believed happiness was meant to evaporate, but hurt always remained. Like salt. I must have read it from a novel. I told my mother once, all the awful grief of my life has accumulated, pressing down on me, staying with me. But the happiness I could never hold onto, the happiness just slipped out of my fingers. And she said, no, there is nostalgia that lingers. But nostalgia is sad too, I had protested, it just takes you back to what you have lost. But since Jaleel's death, I find myself looking back at my life with the simple fondness of remembrance. So, it passed. All of it. All the wars, the famines, the military coups, the deaths, the childbirths, the weddings, the periods, the curfews, the disastrous dinners, the monsoons, the winters. I lived through all that and still I look back at it with pleasure. Even Razia.

For God's sake, have a child with him, my mother pleaded every time I met her. Are you still a virgin? Don't you know how to entice a man? Don't you want to be a mother? That hag will keep ruling over you unless you're smart about it.

Forever told to guard my "place of shame," now that I was married, I was instructed to become the slutty concubines I read about in Mughal romances. Read this manual for techniques and positions, eat unripe mango for fertility, apply this attar for musk, make soups of ground beef to get him heated with carnal lust, dried dates to improve his sperm. Nothing worked. On my mother's insistence, I would open my hair from its waist-length braid every night on the terrace, massage it with jasmine oil, before heading to the bathroom to lather out the smell of fried onions with Lux

soap, scrub the crushed garlic from under my fingernails, bathe the kitchen off me, scrub my face with chickpea flour, anoint my skin with cold cream, perfume myself with rosewater, apply glycerin to my lips, and then wait in bed, until Jaleel came from Razia's room, smelling of her clean old smell, and the stench of food, lacquer, and tobacco, fell into the covers beside me. Sometimes, he'd kiss me, paw my breasts, suck on them, but rarely was he hard. He would say he was tired, he had to pray, he was too old for this. He would leave a trail of sawdust in my bed. The times he did mount me, he could never complete.

Was there anything I could do, I asked him? I even sucked him to try and keep him hard. He would go longest when he flipped me over on my stomach, rub his thing on my buttocks, then slide it down my perineum and push it inside my vagina. He was embarrassed by this, but I urged him to go on, to keep repeating this. The day after he first came in me, I was so excited— and naïve— I went to the telebooth in the market and called my mother.

"I think I'm pregnant!" I told her.

She said a prayer of gratitude.

"Let's pray now that you keep it. Let's pray it's a boy."

The last time I had tried to go to Kamran's Baradari, I was about seven months pregnant with Meher. It was Eid-ul-Fitr, a perfect November day. 1971. India hadn't joined the East Pakistanis in the war yet, but civil unrest in Dhaka had reached a boiling point. A telegram from Rauf had informed us that he was part of the army carrying out the operation against the Bengali Nationalists. The general atmosphere throughout Ramzan had been feverish with imams making long speeches urging prayer and Muslim unity, while at the same time vehemently opposing a Bengali nation.

At Jaleel's house, the mood was somber. My mother had died during the summer. Suffering from memories of Amma and severe bloat, I was no cheerful company. Since coming back from the mosque, Jaleel had removed his white kameez and sat in a wifebeater in front of the TV in my room, languidly digging his spoon into a bowl of seviyan kheer, picking out raisins from the pudding. The TV played PTV's Eid special. Sequestered in her own room, Razia was suffering from a depressive episode she was prone to around Eid.

Around noon, Jaleel jumped to his feet. "What's this! It feels like we're at a funeral."

"Tell your other wife to cheer you up. All she does is sulk in bed and expect us to serve her. I am no one's slave here. You better learn to respect me, or I am leaving like Rauf did."

"I am done with this nonsense," Jaleel said. "You witches want to be miserable, so be it! I am not going to be part of this." He left the room.

Razia and I had come to blows the week before. While cooking for Iftar, I had carelessly poured the pakora batter in hot oil, causing drops to sputter on Razia, who was chopping shallots next to me. Wincing in a theatrical display, she slapped my arm, called my mother a whore and stormed out. I ran behind her and yanked her bun, until the clip broke loose. Jaleel rushed up to separate us. We had avoided each other since then.

I took a nap. When I woke up, I was feeling better. I finally got out of bed and took a bath. Then I wore my Eid clothes, a baggy embroidered kaftan that helped hide my belly. When I emerged from the toilet, Jaleel told me he was taking Razia and I out.

"On the TV, they were showing how they'd decorated the Kamran's Baradari. People are going there for picnics. Let's go out. We can stop at the Chinese restaurant you like for lunch."

We never ate out. Sometimes Jaleel bought haleem from the store and picked up from naan from the tandoor for Sunday breakfast. They were such villagers, Razia and Jaleel, unable to try anything that wasn't some pungent stew or pulao that reminded them of home.

It was the perfect weather for soup. I had been craving Chicken Manchurian from Mandarin for so long, I immediately consented to go. Jaleel left to fetch a rickshaw from Main Market. I pulled on a sweater, and slowly climbed down the stairs, waiting in the workshop. A few minutes before Jaleel returned, I heard Razia's heavy shoe pound the metal steps of the staircase. We ignored each other. Jaleel came back with the rickshaw and kept the door open. Razia got in first.

"Climb in," I told him. "I'm not sitting next to her."

Razia muttered something under her breath.

"Please don't create a scene." Jaleel said. After some resistance, I got in and plunked next to Razia.

We never made beyond Gulberg. The rickshaw's motion and unfiltered diesel fumes made me so nauseated, I yelled at them to stop the ride, jumping out to puke on the road. Why? It couldn't have been due to the pregnancy, for I was too far along. Maybe it was just my natural susceptibility to the fumes.

Naseem, you're so sensitive to smells.

It was Razia's hand that had found me then, patting my back, moving my hair away from my face, telling me, Let it out, child, let it all out.

I began to cry. The pain in my stomach was so sharp. The pain was everywhere, searing through my chest.

"Oh, my mother! My mother! My poor old mother!" I was bawling.

Jaleel tried to shush me. He hated when women created scenes. But Razia told him to get lost, so he did. Razia held my shoulders. "I know your pain," she said. Nothing else could have made me feel better.

Not long after I had found her having a fit, Razia started teaching me how to cook so I could take over the dinner duties. She was losing her night vision, she said, and anyway if I hadn't mastered her style of cooking by the time she died, Jaleel would probably starve to death a month later.

"And then what'll be the point of you marrying him?" She cackled. I never knew whether to laugh back at these jokes or feign ignorance.

Razia prepared food people in the city don't usually eat. I would look at it in disgust at first—offal-heavy stews, pungent, laced with dark mustard oil, with chilis floating on top. But then I ate my snobbery along with the shorba when, lapping my bowl clean like a hunting dog. Liver, chicken feet, radish, plants I'd never seen, all of it went in her salan. In the winter, when we started our lessons, she was in full form, frying sparrows by the dozens for a family dinner— although she swore it was some slightly larger migratory bird from Gujranwala— flipping parathas stuffed with horseradish, onions, coriander seeds on the griddle. Every Friday morning, she washed the grit from fresh mustard leaves, spinach, and bathua, cooked them for hours with garlic, ginger, onions, chili flakes, to make the creamiest sarson da saag. But her masterpiece was kunna gosht, something we only had two or three times in the season, something I have not eaten since her death.

"Kunna is our Chinioti village specialty," she told me and anyone who would listen. Jaleel always ate lunch with Rauf in the workshop. When he had more furniture orders, he would forgo dinner with us too. Exceptions were always made when Razia made kunna gosht.

I can still hear her voice getting soft, almost musical, when she talked of kunna. Take the goat meat, now, cut it—with the bone, always with the bone— into large pieces. Pound the garlic and pound the ginger in the mortar, now crush the dried red chili pods, crush the coriander seeds, now crush the turmeric root. Like this, do it like this. Yes. Now get the onions, chop them narrow and fine, so they'll dissolve and melt into the masala.

"You have to cook it in the kunna for hours." Razia was always so critical. "This, this isn't the real taste. In the village I'd have buried the clay pot a pit and cooked it inside there. That's what a real kunna tastes like. The earth of the village." It was rare to see Razia excited like this. Usually, she seemed aloof in her independence, oblivious to my presence. When I gave her medicines, twice a day, she hardly looked at me.

But in the kitchen, Razia had tips on how to stop crying while cutting onions, how to mix the powdered wheat seeds with water to form a consistent paste, how to churn ghee out of the watered-down buffalo milk the doodhwalla delivered. She had learnt all these skills in the village, and in some ways my presence allowed her to relive her girlhood. She was living in exile in the dirty crowded city. How she longed to be back in the village but had been so harassed for being possessed, being childless, being married to a young boy, that she had vowed to never return. She hadn't visited the village for nearly twenty years.

While cooking, Razia would tell me about her life in her village, how she and her sisters secretly swam in the Chenab at night. How one night the moon was hidden behind clouds, and when it emerged, they saw two cobras swimming ten feet away, their curves rippling the water, cutting slivers of moonlight across the black surface. While she talked, her hands dove into shelves, digging out the clay pot, her body fluid as she lit up the fire, melted the ghee, poured the garlic and ginger paste, the onion and the spices, and then cascaded the goat meat into the pot and covered it, letting the mutton drown in its own juices, until it came soft off the bone, until the fat of it softened and pooled into rainbow hues on top of the soup. After half an hour, we added more water, green chilies, a tomato, a small turnip, salt, then let it simmer on the smallest purpliest flame for another three hours. Then, the crushed durum seeds to coagulate it. After some time, Razia opened the pot again, crumbled roasted black cumin on top of the thick stew, boiled it until it thickened, the

bubbles struggling to emerge from the viscous masala. Her eyes were fixed on the rich redness of it, waiting for the oil to separate from the soup.

"Now," she said, and turned off the heat, dipped a spoon in and held it for me to taste. I sucked on the tablespoon like a child being fed by its mother. I moaned in delight and spun around in joy. Razia giggled, and grabbed my arm, like I was her sister, and we had just swam the Chenab away from the cobras and into the reeds, shrieking with joy as we ran, shivering but safe and glad for our lives, glad to be living in the world that we were in, and glad to have been a witness for each other's story.

"See, the medicines you force on me, and the ones I concoct for you!" she said.

"Well, mine keep you alive on this earth, but yours sends me straight to heaven!"

"It's not done yet. Wait and see, my little girl."

Razia sliced up lemons, dribbling their juice into the oil that had gathered on top, then cut green chilies in rings, julienned ginger, and chopped cilantro, sprinkling them one by one. Steam rose from the clay pot, all the way to the roof, where it sweated on the whitewash.

Before I could go call Rauf and Jaleel, the aroma of kunna gosht had wafted downstairs and beckoned them. They came rushing up, boys of the village, eager for the food that took them home to their childhoods. That night we dragged the charpais out and ate together on the terrace. In the middle of the meal, the electricity went out, and we sat in pitch darkness, until our eyes adjusted, and we saw each other again, familiar silhouettes, a kind of family.

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Once in the spring of 1970, when I wasn't yet pregnant with Meher, a relative of Jaleel brought fresh sahl from the Chenab. Instead of caking it in spices and frying it, Razia made a stew out of the fish meat. Jaleel and Rauf were busy on a big project in the morning, making furniture

fittings for a lawyer's office. We would have had fish for dinner but since Razia couldn't see well at night, she decided to make it for the long break Jaleel took on Fridays to go to the mosque.

I was about to rush down the stairs and yell out to the boys that it was time for lunch, when I saw from the top of the stairs, down in the courtyard below, Rauf on a chair and in front of him the back of Jaleel's head. Both of them were shirtless. Their faces could not have been more than three inches apart. Jaleel cupped the boy's jaw and held it up towards the sky. I froze. Jaleel held a pair of gleaming scissors, tiny in his large hands, sharp stainless steel, and with it he snipped his nephew's mustache, the invisible hair lining his nostrils. As he shifted, Jaleel's hand left Rauf's neck and found the groove that ran between the hollows of the boy's cheeks and the dip under his lower lip. As Jaleel slowly snipped the hair above the beard line, his index finger moved up and down and covered the young boy's lip, tugged at it softly. I imagined it getting wet from Rauf's spit. Rauf looked stoic, his eyes finding something in the clouds. I longed to see the look on Jaleel's face. I imagined quiet dedication, the kind of intense but detached look he had when carving something delicate in soft wood, as if he's not looking at the object but what is past it. Not the lips of this boy, or the hair on his face but something embedded in the muscles and tendons of his young life.

Razia yelled my name. Something was coming loose in me, not arousal but something like it. Power. Right there I felt immense possibility of something wild and unbelievable, my man shaving his handsome nephew and me, me watching, feeding on their bodies, the corded strands of flesh in the naked shoulders of my man, moving, working, unbeknownst to my gaze.

Actually, I don't know how I exactly felt. What I do remember is that looking down at the boys, I remembered a picture I once saw of the Hindu god Krishna, a blue colored boy sitting in a tree above a river. His flute rested in one hand and he watched in the river several naked women, steam rising from their flesh, their hair slicked on their shoulders.

Razia called me again. “Ni!” A meaningless sound for addressing young girls, a sound to beckon them like chicken or pigeons. “Ni Naseem!”

What sound could I use to call these men upstairs? They were interlaced in private drama I dared not intrude.

“Coming!” I cried, loudly enough that Jaleel stopped grooming the boy’s face, and turned to me, his face a little unsettled, as if he had broken out of a trance. I suddenly felt like he was my father, looked unsettled like my father had when he had called my name and I had appeared, shocking him with whoever I was.

What did Jaleel see? His young virgin wife standing on top of the stairs? A stranger?

“Uh, is the food ready?” he said. “We were just getting ready for Jumma.”

“Yes. The food is ready,” I said. “Razia will severely reprimand you if you don’t immediately report for eating duties.” I tried finding Rauf’s eyes but he looked for something on the floor. He was quiet at lunch. A month later, he left.

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I couldn’t give birth to the son Jaleel wanted but Meher has been able to provide all the comfort and security a son would be expected to, not letting me sigh an “uff” of discontent. In return, she expects a meek subordination, speaks like a policeman or a general, in blunt, harsh words, no cow dung, none of the sweetness of shat-out hay. Jaleel used to joke Meher “became militant” because she was born during the Civil War. In the December of ’71, Indian troops had entered East Pakistan, assisting the rebels against the army. Lahore, on the Western border with India, was under immediate threat of invasion. There was no electricity for eight hours while I went into labor. The radio was on in the workshop. BBC signals we caught from the Indian side. Razia forbade us from going to the hospitals, saying it would be too dangerous.

“I’ll be the midwife. Get out of the room, Jaleel.” Her voice was firm. Jaleel could never talk back to her.

“I got some buffalo colostrum for her,” Jaleel said.

“Keep it on some ice. And slaughter a chicken. Make a soup with garlic, onion, and bones.”

Razia held my hand, told me to breathe, kept the room warm.

“I’ve helped some girls give birth in the village before. You don’t have worry.”

“Did you take your medicine today, Razia Baji?” I gasped out.

Razia was stoic. “Yes, I have. Relax, and breathe evenly, otherwise the child will have a deformed head. But breathe too slow, and he’ll be puny and weak.”

I cried for my mother during pangs of pain. She’d died a few months before, her breasts caked with black lumps when Riyaaz and I washed her corpse with rosewater, trimmed her pubic hair and clipped her nails, preparing the body for the funeral. I had thought I would give birth in her house, live with her for few months, as we had discussed, as is custom, but she had left me, left me with incomplete baby sweaters and caps she was still knitting the night before her death, left me with her voice in my head, “My little bulbul will come back to my nest.”

In one fell swoop, Dhaka fell. One half of a country was gone. In between my contractions, I heard a chicken chortling in the backyard, then the swing of the ax. Dull on the woodblock.

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Razia died a year after Meher’s birth. Even now I can hear my sisters-in-law accusing me of her death at the funeral. She died after a vomit of blood, didn’t she, I heard one of them say to the other. Poor thing must have eaten something poisonous, right, Naseem? Unlike my sisters-in-law, who were playing their part right out of a Bollywood movie, I sat on our terrace, surrounded by a horde of women dressed in white, unsure of my role. I had no tears left for this critical audience.

As I recall this now, I keep thinking how so much of my life has become that— at any given time I forget whether I'm a wife or a mother, a daughter or a sautan, a woman or child. Like everyone, maybe, sometimes I think I'm still a child, the same child in an aging body, none the wiser, although I have been to an adult literacy program, read the newspaper now, and serious books of history and literature. Some women grow old and they become the matriarchs of the family. People say they have seen more of the world, they are shrewd in the ways of life, they have earned this right by surviving their husbands. These women appropriate the funds their sons bring home, delegate the tasks to the daughters-in-law and the servants, decide who the grandchildren marry, what their professions will be. But me? I feel like I know even less than I did before. The world has gotten more complicated as it has grown, and I am slipping behind it.

I felt this for first time at Razia's funeral. Isn't this what my mother had prayed for every night, I thought, looking at Razia's body wrapped in sheets of white, cotton balls stuffed in her nose. For this to happen so fast, what a windfall! To find victory in outlasting. The last ones get to tell the tale however they choose to. When they took her body away in the cot, I followed it out to the gate, then stood there.

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After Jaleel died, I dismissed the apprentices Jaleel had at the time. I closed the workshop and moved into the small apartment Meher is allotted in the doctor's flats of Sheikh Zayed Hospital. Meher intends to sell the shops for several crore rupees—prices are expected to rise after the election. The family house in Shahdara is destroyed now, bought for pennies by the government to build the Metro Bus line. The old neighborhood where I grew up in has been gashed by bulldozers.

It was in her flat that Meher organized a gathering for Jaleel's second barsi. Only a few of Meher's colleagues and neighbors showed up— I didn't know most of them. Since it had rained the

last few days, and the weather was cooler, the men gathered outside the building next to the flooded greenbelt. You could peer out the living room window and observe them sitting cross-legged on cane mats borrowed from the mosque, thumbing through slender parts of the Quran, muttering prayers over heaps of date pits and tamarind stones.

The women congregated inside the apartment, sitting on white sheets spread on the living room floor. Some attempted to look serious and devout, while eyeing their phones from time to time. Some of them openly chitchatted, with their Qurans unread in front to them, pages fluttering under the ceiling fans. A pretty, young nephrologist who has just joined the evening clinic where Meher works, took an active interest in talking to me and inquired about Jaleel, what kind of a man he was, how long we had been married, what had our marriage been like, those sorts of questions. In her, I sensed a genuine compassion, and not the pity or condescension that young, accomplished people usually possess when they talk to old poorly educated women, and so I opened up to her and began telling her stories from my life. While talking to her, at one point, I said, "I've never known a man like Jaleel."

Though it had felt natural at that time, after the girl left, I realized how hollow my words had been, how I lie when I tell stories without even realizing it. I had been speaking like my mother.

We'd cleared the mats, bagged the prayer stones and stacked the siparas by the time the girls' father, Asif, came to pick them up. He has been living with his brother since the separation. Meher must have told him to come after everyone had left. When he entered the apartment, the girls ran and hugged him. It's clear the girls love him more than their mother. I smiled as he bent down to the level of my sofa, his silky hair falling forward and parting in the middle. I saw his scalp dusted with dandruff. And as I patted his head and blessed him— "Keep living, keep living—" I imagined his scalp to be lined with sawdust, sifting in my lap, snowing on my knee.

“Auntie,” is all he said. His sympathy summarized in one word.

“Can you return the bags and the siparas to the mosque?” Meher cut in, bustling in and out of rooms, still tidying, reciting information and lists of tasks regarding the girls. Asif dared not look at her face when she entered.

“Goodbye Mama! Goodbye Nani!” the girls said. I was dozing off by then, my body accustomed to its afternoon nap. They closed the door, and in their excitement, they banged it hard, so hard that I gasped out of sleep and looked up. I could hear their little steps running down the stairs— and the white door, it was still vibrating. Something inside me clanged in response.

I yelled out to Meher, told her to come sit next to me.

She was in the kitchen, the water running in the sink, plates clanking against each other. I called her again. When she emerged, she wore her usual look of exasperation. “What.” As she perched at the edge of the sofa and wrung her hands, her dupatta slipped from her head. Our eyes met. For the first time that day, my daughter’s face unknotted and smoothed plain, and suddenly my reflection in it was strong and surprising. I grabbed her palms and put them up to my lips and face, her palms that were still wet and smelled of dish soap.

Yes, this was the creature I had birthed on one terrible night with Razia and Jaleel hovering about, while the country burned, and I was sure I would die. And here was the proof of it: my face in hers, my mother’s too and Jaleel’s, even Razia’s. The ghosts were coming alive in the room, climbing my spine. I couldn’t bear their weight.

“What,” Meher said, but tenderly this time. She retracted her hands. “What are you thinking, Ammi. Tell me.”

That's when I begged her to take me to the river, at least as far down as Kamran's Baradari. There must have been something about how I looked on that Sunday afternoon, because for once Meher didn't object and tell me how there is nothing left to see there now, or that she has work tomorrow, how it was already too late or too hot, or that I would get tired. She dropped the martial tone for once andjust said, "Okay, okay. After I take a short nap."

We both made our way to her double bed and slept in it, facing each other. When she closed her eyes, I kept looking at her, this miraculous daughter of mine, until she felt my gaze resting on her skin for too long, and she frowned in shallow sleep and muttered, "Ammi, don't bother me, I am… I'm dying." But she didn't turn away from me.

When I was a child, I was told what my life would be. In fact, I had known what my fate would be even before I was told. When my mother played dolls with the children of her old age, dressing up Shezzi as a bride, and marrying him off to me, what did I learn? That the life I would lead will have familiar milestones as marriage, childbirth, death. There wasn't anything else expected or desired for me. A wish for happiness, of course, but happiness too needed to accommodate itself in these other plans for my ordinary life. I never rebelled against the set path.

At Kamran's baradari, I suddenly grew very tired and couldn't fathom going on much further let alone further deeper into Shahdarah Bagh. I was faint from the humid stasis of the air and the sun piercing through it straight to my bone. The ferry's movement over the river had caused some breeze to stir, but already the heat was getting to me. I had pulled my dupatta over my face to shade it from the glare on the water. When the boat jolted to a stop, hitting the edge of a wharf, I looked up and the walls of the Baradari towered above me. Now on the ground, not a leaf moved,

and my very breath felt strained. I almost fell on the wharf in a daze but caught myself on a dirty post. Something wet laced my hand. It was the yolk-like dropping of crows that swarmed the tiny island in enormous numbers, grown fat on the food picnickers left on the lawns of the baradari. So much for starlings. Luckily, Meher didn't notice me stumbling behind her. Having paid the ferryman and helped me jump out of the wavering boat, she was already rushing to get tickets, her large purse hiked up on her shoulder bouncing as her arms moved back and forth towards the ticket booth inside the walls. The entire place looked deserted. Everywhere I felt sweat sticking cotton to the crevices of my body.

I took my dupatta off when I got off the wharf, let it fall into the dirty water where it disturbed thousands of mosquito larvae from their rest. My mouth felt stuffed with boll.

Meher must have felt my absence because she turned and saw me far back, motioned to me to hurry up, but realizing my condition, her face lost its annoyance, and looking concerned, she strode towards me.

"Are you okay? Is the heat getting to you? I shouldn't have listened to you. Is your B.P low, you think? Low sugar?"

"No, no," I assured her. "I am fine. Just need some water."

"You're so delicate, but you want to run around the old city in the middle of August. Wait, sit here in the shade. I'll try to find their canteen. Normally there should be vendors, but I don't see anyone around today."

She dragged a plastic chair that must be for a missing guard and pushed it under a large acacia tree, the only one that grew outside the walls. I sat down on it, pressing a hand down on my chest, hoping Meher didn't notice my lost dupatta.

She seemed distracted. "Okay, you look out at the river. I'll get you some water and then we can go, okay? Enough sightseeing for today—you've seen the river now. Actually—" She opened her purse and found a pack of Spout. She wrapped two pieces of bubblegum, coated in a light sugar powder. "Chew on this gum, it'll keep your sugar up." She let the clear plastic wrapping fall to the ground. I nodded and obeyed. "Don't get a heat stroke, okay?" I nodded again. Meher went on the path towards the gate, occasionally looking back at me.

The river looked still, but occasionally air would waft over it towards me. I had turned away from the bridge, but the zoom of the traffic reached me. In the thick air, these sounds were lulling, even the cawing of the crows. I grew sleepy. The gum was also helping. I imagined I was a river cow masticating, finding tall grass. The water was muddy brown and stank of rotting vegetative matter in places where it had gathered in shallow pools. I looked out at the Eastern bank where Lahore was, at the shabby looking dinghies tied there. No one else seemed to be rowing up to the baradari, even though it was a Sunday and where else can poor people go in the city except these neglected sites? I remembered the ill-fated attempt at this journey Jaleel, Razia and I made decades ago, felt Razia's hands on my back, her voice saying, Let it out. Her voice merged with that of our boatman talking to another boatmen as they waited on their respective parties to return, but I couldn't see them. Where were the gypsies and their tents and camels roaming in the reeds of the dried riverbed? They had either been swept up by the swollen river, or driven away by the government's goons.

Finally, I felt less nauseous, and glad to be left alone. I was lucky the rains had caused the Ravi to look as it did when I was growing up (undoubtedly India had opened the floodgates recently), and with the return of the old familiar river, or perhaps because of the temporary reemergence of river, I felt that some old life too had returned.

I was thinking of Shezzi and I walking down to the river after school, or Razia swimming in the Chenab like a wild Sahl, my husband Jaleel, not as I had known him but as a child of the village jumping in the canals with his friends. Oh my life, all of its richness made from the river combing its fingers over it! What was it all for? It didn't matter in the moment. These were stories I was making up, and I was caught in their ebb and flow and I couldn't stop the deluge of past lived lives, all that I held choked inside me.

It was then that I heard the dog yelping. At first, it was quiet, lost below the hum and honking of traffic. Then I heard sharper notes of desperation, as if the creature was making her last efforts to appeal to the wide river. I tried to locate the source of the increasingly high-pitched cries. I got off my chair and walked to the edge of the railing above the embankment. It was there, just twenty thirty feet below where a dog was lying in the mud, shriveled into a carcass, giving out her last cries. Her skin had lost its fur to mange and from the distance I thought I saw the gape in her skull, cracked open by a hurled stone, as is the common fate of street dogs. But when she moved, dragging out her long, swollen, teats—somewhere she must have puppies—I realized that it was just a splotch of mud. The lower half of her body was also dark with river clay, and it was unclear to me if she had been washed ashore, or in a final act of will, herself chosen to find some respite in the muddy bank. Maybe she had belonged to the gypsies, who abandoned her when driven out of the flooded riverbed?

I was behind the railing above the cement escarpment and couldn't jump over it. I watched the dog, a struggling body against the landscape. Where was Meher? She would know what to do. The bitch was quiet now, taking shallow quick breaths, her snout resting on a stone, the lower half of her being lapped by the rocking river. She's slipping into her death, I thought. This is it.

My head was spinning. I clutched my chest, where a sharp pain was spreading. I moved to the edge of the railing, grabbing the hot metal chains with both hands. My lips were dry. I heard Meher's shoes clacking on the path, but I didn't look back. I have never been a savior. The dog lay there, barely breathing. Behind her was the impassive river, the city leaking industrial fumes, heaping hills of trash in the sludge. On the other side was my hometown, broken brick shanties, denuded of any former glory. Even the complex hosting Emperor Jahangir and Mehrenissa's tombs had been torn up to lay the railway lines, and now the lovers lay in desolate corners. Unbelievable things had happened, and city kept breeding, new children who will not remember.

"Ammi!" Meher said, jutting between the railing and myself. She shoved a juice box in my hand. "Why are you creating a scene? I told you to sit in that chair"

"No, nothing happened." I told her. "The dog is dead."

"What?"

She turned back, her face furrowed. She scanned for the dog and I saw her hand grip the fence tighter. For a second, I imagined her jumping over the fence.

"Come on, let's get you home," she said finally. "Why are you looking like that? What happened?" She put her arm around me.

The day Jaleel died, I had flung his arm off me and rushed into the bathroom. When I looked at myself, I wondered, what will life be for you now? And a strange excitement had filled my bones.