The Quiet Art of Mourning

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The Quiet Art of Mourning

Kanza Javed

Thesis submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts of
Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

The Quiet Art of Mourning

Kanza Javed

The Quiet Art of Mourning is a novel that captures the lives of masters and servants in Lahore, Pakistan. The themes that are featured in the manuscript include treatment minorities, class division, power dynamics, gender roles, relationships, politics, alienation and trauma. It is a novel about the growing tensions between Muslims and other minority groups in Pakistan. And amidst this, an ecocritical study of Lahore. A death of a city by the hands of its fervent seasons; a heatwave, flooding monsoon rains and the arrival of a new kind of fog (smog) in winter.
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Critical Preface

Motivations

Three years ago, I was running away from everything. I was truly unhappy. I was at an age where I should have been married, or engaged at least, should have been steering towards settling down and starting a family. I should have been bowing down to the strict cultural doctrines I was spoon fed all my life. I already had an MPhil. I had travelled to the U.S. twice for research grants. I had just published my first novel and attended the Jaipur Literary Festival for its launch. I was granted permission to do things that otherwise the women in my family were not permitted to do. Simple things. Choose a husband. Travel alone. Be featured in newspapers. But still, now and then, my mother would remind me that my success was only half because I was actively depriving myself of a phase of life that should come naturally for every woman. Marriage and then, children. I was told that there might be something wrong about me, unnatural almost. I was advised to see a therapist or a psychologist, any third person who could eradicate my fear of commitment and normal traditional pursuits and help me get more excited about the prospect. I left home for a writing program that really wanted me and felt that some time away from the societal pressures and emotional blackmail might be able to find my next story. It had to be inside me.

Now, I transcend two dreary worlds as a writer. In America, I am free but am utterly alone. I am aware of my minority status in a very white state. In Pakistan, I am a left-over woman, a source of depression for my aging parents and once again, my minority status as a liberal woman weighs heavily on my mind. *The Quiet Art of Mourning* was born out of this realization, of what is it like to be a minority, what it is like to run away from things, what it is
like to look for home in a new place and how to survive in a country that keeps worshipping regressive belief systems.

**Place**

The most important character in my stories is *place*. My mind gives birth to a setting first and then the characters develop around it. My first novel, *Ashes, Wine and Dust* was a tribute to Lahore. It was a love letter to the city I grew up in. The first year in West Virginia was especially troubling for me as I was unable to write. I could not find my place, and by that, I mean physical space.

I tried the library, a coffee place, a friend’s balcony, my own living room but the setting seemed unnatural to me. How was I to write about Lahore when I was thousands of miles away? I could not smell the scents. I could not see the streets and the people. Mind and memory are treacherous things. My trips back home helped me immensely. I soaked in Lahori winters when I went for Christmas breaks. I immersed myself in the monsoon when I went home for the summer. I kept a diary where I wrote every flower, tree, fruit and vegetable I saw in my garden, the kitchen and the parks. I kept bringing Lahore back with me in bits and pieces to Morgantown. But it was hard for me to ignore that there was something different about Lahore now. With each trip, I got a rather dismal portrait of the city. It never seemed to prosper. It was stuck in time. Where I spent my hours researching and taking about creative ideas in America, I found myself listening to long, dull conversations on clothes, fashion and relationships in Pakistan. I was deeply disappointed by each visit.

On an environmental level, Lahore was altering too. Trees were being cut down. Birds had disappeared. Air pollution was out of control and something called *smog* had suddenly made an appearance. The flights kept delaying. There was an increase in road accidents. New illnesses
emerged. *The Quiet Art of Mourning* turned out to be an *anti-love letter* to my beloved city. On the socio-political front too, a lot of horrific events occurred in Pakistan in these three years. Slowly but surely, through this rubble and chaos, I was able to pull out my next story. It had to be about Pakistan. It had to be about Lahore.

**Themes**

The manuscript, for now, is divided into three “seasonal” sections: Summer, Fall and Smog. Although there is no time stamp anywhere on the manuscript, but in the mind, I have chosen the years 2013 and 2014 in Pakistan. A lot of socio-political tensions arose during those years that I mention in the book. There was rise in violence against women, children and minorities in Pakistan. Pakistan’s biggest child abuse scandal in Kasur gained national and international coverage. Around 280 children were sexually abused in a village by men of a political family. There was an increase in the number of acid attacks. There was a terrorist attack in a school in Peshawar that killed 140 children. It scarred the nation. A Christian woman, Asia Bibi, wrongly convicted of blasphemy by her Muslim neighbors was acquitted by the court and this ignited war. A man raped a seven-year-old girl who was leaving home for a Quran class and dumped her dead body in a pile of trash. Pakistan became a city that was falling apart.

My goal was to bring to surface what it is like for a nation to slowly lose its children? What it is like for a nation to suppress its women and silence its minorities and give power to only men? And I intended to write about the plight of minorities in a land where the percentage of minorities is less than 5 percent. I want to ask, who are these people in power who are fermenting this chaos?

**Literary Influences**
My literary influences have mostly been the classics. I admire the works of Woolf, Lawrence, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Orwell. I also find myself drawn to works of contemporary South Asian writers like Arundhati Roy, Anuradha Roy, Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam, Jhumpa Lahiri and Amitav Ghosh. The music of Winged Victory for the Sullen, Anoushka Shankar, Ravi Shankar and coke studio Pakistan has helped me immensely in writing this book.

Craft and Challenges

In this newer work, I retain my Victorian sensibility. I am loyal to long descriptions of monsoon and mangoes, street hawkers and crammed alleys. Time is a floating, free thing in the manuscript. I can’t contain it. It is unnatural for me. A constant struggle for many western readers but a quality that is deeply praised by the South Asian reader.

The West, I believe, is battling with an invisible OCD. It likes to put things in boxes, has names for everything. For example, I discovered in a saloon in the US, there is a wax expert, a color specialist, an eyebrow technician…so on. God forbid, a wax expert gives advice on the shape of my eyebrows. It is taboo. “I’ll go call Bri, she is our eyebrow technician.” Back home, we have one woman in a beauty parlor who is skilled at everything. She waxes. She cuts hair. She does eyebrows. She gives you gossip. And she gives you marital advice. The West does not dilly dally. The West does not have time. It does not have time to read my long paragraphs where a character just walks and walks around Victoria colony looking at dead birds and trees. Of course, I understand there is nothing wrong with the preferences of both readers, but I do often question myself, who am I writing for? Who am I pandering? Who do I obey?

My limited definition of audience expanded after I read Claire Vaye Watkins controversial essay, “On Pandering” and after I received feedback from different writers in fiction workshop. It is safe to say that in my MFA journey, I have evolved and developed a sense
of understanding about what to keep and what to eliminate in my work. I have begun to understand that if my main theme is lost, buried under heaps of beautiful metaphors and details, I have fail somewhere as a writer.

There is something Jhumpa Lahiri says in her interview to Lit Hub. She talks about this “pandering” and this idea of keeping the reader in mind. She believes it is a dangerous thing and it contaminates the writing experience. I whole heartedly believe with this as I experienced it firsthand. The writing of the first book was easy for me, it is the second book and the awareness about everything that gives me depression and anxiety. She says, “This sense of expectation is a heavy burden, and takes away my appetite for writing. I would rather find another job. Because to me, writing means freedom, and therefore when I find myself in a cage, in a trap, or in front of someone who tells me “No you have to write like this,” it gives me a very unpleasant feeling.” This has been my challenge so far. To have people constantly tell you in workshops what they think you are doing wrong and then not having the power and understanding to change that aspect of your writing. Sometimes in the writing process, I believe ignorance is bliss. In my revisions, I can stay more in scene, control and ground time, trim down the adjectives and limit my meandering. It is a slow process, but I am getting there. I am moving on with the plot.

Another challenge that I have been encountering is the burden of having too many characters. I would not call any one character as primary in this book. They are all integral. They all represent and symbolize something. Whether it is Rodger Messiah, a Christian student, who is accused to murder, rape and blasphemy, or whether it is Pammi, the trans person, who is studying to get her Matric degree. With a lot of characters, it is hard to intersect all their lives, and to pay attention to them individually. My goal is to conceive an event, an external conflict, that somehow ties them, binds them all together.
Three years, I am still running away from things. I am running away from Pakistan. I am running away from Morgantown. I am running away from having a singular identity. I am running away from cultural norms that hinder my growth. But I am not running away from my characters. I am not running away from nine-year old Zakariya who is navigating a childhood where his parents are emotionally absent. I am not running away Yasmin who is breaking barriers by seeking divorce in a place where the stigma is real. I am not running away from Mehrunisa who is dealing with depression after losing a child. And I am not running away from the Cat and Rodger Messiah, my two important characters who represent the minority, the marginalized people living on the fringes of the society. If there was something I was meant to do in this life, it was to tell their story.
Twilight in a Bungalow

From the curtained window, I watched him take down the tree.

There was something unnatural about the act. There is something frightening about cutting down a tree. Things should not die in a garden. It remains a place of birth, the gardener told me. A sacred ground of reincarnation. Soon enough, the jamun tree will come back to us. In the petal of a marigold. In the image of a sparrow. In the shadow of another tree. But it will come back, he promised me. And he promised himself. Things that are meant to stay, always return.

Things can rise out of the ashes. No fire consumes everything. No flood drowns everyone. Something good emerges from the ruins. It was a splendid, hopeful thought to be fed as a child, that dead things are never really dead. Even dead children.

~*~
June,

1.

The Museum of Time and Memory

Zakariya

We spent that second summer after my sister’s death clambering over the high wall with green creepers and pink rangoon flowers. My cousin and I would sit on the brick wall, chattering, our legs suspended in midair as the hot breeze beat upon our backs. All through the slow afternoon, we heard nothing but the sweet sharp cries of the koel birds, and the unceasing cawing of crows. Dust settled on our faces and hair. Beads of stinging sweat glided down our backs. But nothing mattered after she and I ascended.

Often Meherbano would carry in her trouser pocket a square biscuit that she had stolen from Grandmother’s saucer the same morning. The delight smelled heavily of eggs and butter. She waved it in the air before my nose. I would pass her a long look. Her face released a deep frown and split the treat into two untidy halves.

As always, I was granted the smaller piece, the portion with fewer raisins and nutty surprises. But before there was a debate on her unfairness and insolence, she quickly gobbled down her piece, wiping off the traces from her fingers on the front of my shirt. She grinned widely. Her front two teeth displayed traces of sugary disloyalty. I was told nicely that my portion contained more butter. Her intention had been pure.

We hobbled and drifted vaguely through that summer. The expectations remained mild. The adventures pushed to a minimum. The rainfall was not enough. Men and women remained subdued in hot air. Sweltering under the sun. Withering in the dust. Scouring desperately for a
shade and other cool respites. Anything, everything, that could quench the thirst. A tall glass of sweet red squash or a lemonade to replenish the body.

In the humid afternoon hours, everything seemed to shift and melt. Mama’s face, for example—the running kohl in her eyes and the cracking foundation on her skin—no longer a luminous wonder of Lahore, but more like the work-in-progress of an unskilled sculptor. Nanni Amma, our Grandmother, also distorted into a numb thing, a big lump of flesh resting under the thrashing ceiling fan, her fingers working mechanically on the wooden rosary and her eyes closed as she waited for the cool evening to unfurl outside her window.

Everything that June was stagnant, on a standstill, deadened. Time remained the only living, breathing thing. For some, it went by quietly. But for others, every second hissed. Every part of the body mourned in the raging heat.

As a child, time held little meaning. I counted it by looking up at the grown-up’s faces. When Papa yawned at dinner, I knew it was time to sleep. When the maid drew the curtains in the morning, it was time to get washed for school. When Mrs. Khan’s pink lipstick lost its color, it was the last period and the school bell would ring any time. Chand Baba, our gardener, would arrive in the white Toyota Corolla with Papa’s driver, Samandar Khan, at the school gate to pick me up. On days when Mama became morbidly quiet, I knew the medicine was working and she wanted to be left alone.

My cousin and I made a time capsule. We stole a half-empty achhaar jar from the kitchen table and washed it. Bano made me do most of the washing as she said my smaller hands would deliver more promising results.
Once we scrubbed away the sticky mustard oil, once we washed away the fennel seeds and garlic cloves, the green *ambi’s* and the thin carrot sticks; the glass was clear as day. And we began to build our own garden.

We collected flowers, leaves, grass, twigs and stones. Everything we found beautiful, we preserved.

First, the flowers drooped. Then, the leaves began to look dull and unhappy. The grass too became dry and shriveled. No matter how much water we sprayed, the world inside the glass jar kept withering and falling apart.

Bano found a wandering tiger butterfly and trapped it. We made holes in the golden lid for the air to pass. Now, the butterfly remained the only breathing thing in our dying world. It fluttered here and there. It spoke to this dead flower and that yellowing leaf. Upon its arrival, the jar certainly brightened for a day. Things began to look up with the movements of this wonderfully alive creature.

We did not know when the butterfly finished her last journey. We did not know if she meant to go so early, if it was her time, or we had brought a certain suffering on the insect, separated it from a place it should have remained a fragment of, but we found her brittle wings on the base of the glass jar one morning. Her body was curled and dried up on a side.

My cousin and I opened the lid to release the soul.

All night, we drew conclusions about the untimely departure of the butterfly. We tried to console our little hearts. Bano said that perhaps it was the unbearable, lingering smell of Nanni’s mango and carrot pickle that finished the butterfly and everything else in that world. Or maybe we had separated the poor thing from its beloved flower in the garden. While all these remained
a possibility, I said something else. I said maybe she just was not happy in someone else’s world. She did not feel free in a world created by someone else.

    “Things are born in one land. They fall apart in another,” said my mother once the news of the tragedy reached her ears.

    Meherbano advised that we wash the glass jar again. She advised that we wash the jar and never speak of it again.

    And so, we did. We scattered the dead and half-dead things to the dusty loo wind that blew over the garden, freeing ourselves of the guilt and the burden of the rubble and the wreck of this fizzled country. We tossed everything away like it had never existed.

    Our time capsule had captured a different time and memory than we had anticipated. The jar was a museum of dismantled realities. Of our own hurt and the things we hurt. But still, we learned to move on quickly.

    That summer, we learned that there were many ways for things to die and for us to kill them.

    ~*~
In Plain Sight

Zakariya

It had never been easy to climb the colossal wall in the garden, but after several failed trials, Meherbano and I had mastered the art. There were holes from where the bricks had fallen with time and now where the rangoon flowers and leaves grew in profusion, concealing from plain sight the ugliness and the damage.

Our bungalow had seen one hundred and ten years of Lahore. Age had begun to wear it down. Things were always falling apart, inside and outside. Like a sick child, the house wailed for attention, my mother’s attention, and she remained persuasive with fixing it. But after one problem was erased, others surfaced. The paint peeled from ceiling and fell on the carpet leaving little white flurries. The walls became damp during monsoon and released a musty odor. The termites ate the cupboards, the shelves and Papa’s books in the study. Mama tried to hold everything together, but the house remained disloyal in many ways.

Even with its decrepit surface, its flaking yellow paint, the missing red bricks and black soot, the wall in the garden stood tall and sturdy. It was Meherbano who discovered these wide, gaping holes in the wall one afternoon during our frenzied game of badminton. She had reinvented the rules to the game. Now, there was not one but a two-point penalty if we hit the net or any other obstructions. We were granted by Mama an hour of leisure after we finished three pages of our summer work. It was either bickering over Bano’s version of badminton or convincing Chand Baba to field for us in a game of cricket.

I jumped high to hit the feathery shuttlecock and it flew away from us, far away, to the other side of the wall. Looking at me encouragingly Bano hoped to instill in me some sense of
chivalry or shame. But what her eyes sought so keenly was never in me, the ferocious audacity expected of boys my age.

She wanted me to climb the nine-foot wall and fetch the shuttlecock. We had never climbed the wall before and I harbored no intention of yielding. I was wary of what slept on the other side.

I was a demure, little thing with no sweltering itch or wondrous passion driving me to test my invincibility. I had never jumped in a puddle or come home sporting a grazed knee. There were no triumphs or trophies on my shelf. So, I stood locked in my position and looked at her.

Bano glared back. I did not lift a foot nor make a sorrowful remark stating the loss of our last shuttlecock. This upset her and eventually she took on the daunting task of retrieving it. She threw her racket on the grass and shoved me in anger as she walked past.

“Such a child! You’re a little boy, Zaki! Be a man!”

“Chand Baba will get us more shuttlecocks on his way back from the Friday prayer. The mosque is right near the market.”

*Who knew what lay on the other side of the wall? What flying phantoms or sinister witches rested behind the bricks?* Life is too precious, and I carried this realization since a young age, since my sister Jahanara died two years ago.

Only Bano could have taken such a blind risk. She had never been still, not even as a child. Nanni Amma said that she had been a restless baby and a wandering toddler. They had to keep an eye on her all the time. Raising Bano had always been a serious, serious matter.

“Please, don’t climb that wall,” I said.

“Are you scared of the story?” she turned to ask.
We had heard a strange story about the place and for a while, we believed it completely. Adeel, our older cousin, claimed that there was a dumpster behind the wall, a secret place where homeless men tossed the bones of children after they had chewed on their flesh. They found the kids on the streets, enticed them with candy and stole their bodies in jute bags. They removed the hair and peeled off the skin. In the evenings when we sat in the garden with our Grandmother to have tea, we could smell the aroma of a freshly cooked meat from the other side. Bano and I would exchange glances as Nanni sipped her chai with an unsettling indifference. The scent of cooked meat never seemed to bother her. She split the biscuit, dunked it in her chai and enjoyed the treat, willfully oblivious to the horror that lay next door. And then after the sipping and the chewing, she resumed her evening ritual of arranging her old black and white family album.

Her enormous figure gently swayed back and forth as she pulled out photographs of unfamiliar people and places from the plastic sleeves with the help of Mama’s tweezers. She cleaned the photographs with the corner of her shawl and studied the men and the women looking back at her with their solemn eyes.

This had been her hobby all summer, to sort out the pictures to organize the family albums, to ask herself which memory was significant, and which was to be buried, to decide who in the photographs was worth remembering and who was to be forgotten.

In a book, Bano had read a story about witches eating children and making scrumptious porridges in giant black pots. One night, she took the brightly illustrated book out of her bag and showed me pictures of women with long noses and giant hats. Ladies on brooms. Ladies enticing children into deep, dark woods. Ladies chuckling and singing.

“Maybe there are witches on the other side,” she said. “Maybe we can hear them chanting if we listen really closely.”
“I don’t think such witches exist,” I challenged. “I have never seen a house like that.”

I held the book to her face and showed her a picture on another page with a house with a chimney and cobblestone porch.

“We don’t have houses like this. Look at this lady, have you ever seen a nose like that?”

“You don’t know anything. Books have so many lies. Has an old woman ever lived inside a shoe? Have you ever seen a genie? Or a flying carpet?”

I looked at her sneakers and pondered. All the carpets I had seen in my life were very still, and all the old women, less than interesting.

“You are the silliest eight-year-old boy ever,” she said.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I am nine.”

She grunted. She was eleven.

To rest this burning case, we finally disclosed to Grandmother what cousin Adeel had told us.

“Maybe there are dumpsters with bones of children in the town where that boy lives. Not here, not in Lahore,” she had said in a fit of irritation. “But don’t climb the wall. You will fall and break your legs.”

That was that.

Still, that afternoon in the garden Bano climbed the wall to get back our shuttlecock.

She fell down once and scratched her arm.

She got back up and continued. I watched in horror.

There are memories from that summer, hazy but very real memories of when Bano’s actions and words had left me completely bewildered. Her spontaneity knew no restraint and she had a dark spirit that no stern warning could suppress. Each day her world expanded. It knew no
borders or barricades. She soared from one place to another, from one abstract idea to another. Some conversations with her were purely unanticipated, and some moments, truly dangerous.

She told me how strong monsoon winds could blow away my family’s bungalow and if that happened, there was no space for us in Karachi where she lived. All summer long, I prayed for nothing but sun.

She also claimed there was a great chance that the ghosts of British officers were still lurking in the corners of our old house. I told her repeatedly that the officers returned back to England and died there, in their own country. So they ought to haunt places in England. Not Lahore. Not my Victoria Colony.

“They came once, you don’t think they can come again?” She replied.

The summer before that one, Bano had again come to stay with us and told me a big, family secret. A secret that the elders had kept away from us. It was meant to reach our ears later in our lives when we were older. I did not sleep for days.

It was a habit Bano had cultured inside her mind, to bless me with one piece of wild news after another, to do one wild thing after another. And her climbing the wall that afternoon was another wild thing that made my heart throb madly in my chest. I trembled in fear as she went on climbing in front of me.

Her sneakers made a shuffling sound, struggling to mount the pink and green sea-leaves, and the rangoon flowers.

Higher she went.

“Come down, please!” I cried, but somewhere between the ground and her feet, my plea evaporated.
So much could have happened. She could have fallen down and broken her leg like Nanni Amma warned. She could have never returned to our side. The lady with the long nose could have swept her away without a sound. And I would have had to explain to Mama what had happened.

Her breathing got louder as she climbed higher. Finally, on top of the wall, she embraced the sunshine and her eyes glistened as they quietly absorbed the other reality.

She laughed uneasily and looked down at me.

I walked a little closer.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It is nothing, you coward,” she said in her shrill voice, “this is where they live. This is where all the servants live. It is the quarters. That is why we smell food and hear voices. That idiot Adeel lied to us!”

“How can you see our shuttlecock?”

“They’re so small, the quarters. There’s a girl sleeping outside on a charpoy.”

“Who is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but she is older than us. There are many small houses.”

There was a long pause.

“It’s nothing. Just houses and people.”

“No dumpster? No witches?”

“Not yet.”

I touched the crisp creeper and plucked a flower. I dismembered its pink petals and then looked up at Bano.

“Nothing will happen if you climb, you chicken. Come up,” she mocked loudly.
I looked at her, affronted. Her taunting hit me. I removed my shoes and socks and began to climb up just like she had.

I imitated her every step, fixed my feet in every crack like she had, and went higher. She grabbed my arm and pulled me upwards to the other world.

She was right. No witches. No forbidding spirits. Just three quarters, very small courtyards and crammed rooms.

“See?” she said.

“But… where is our shuttlecock?”

Our eyes searched for the shuttlecock but landed on something else. A figure. Half-concealed in a dark corridor, behind the sleeping girl. It had disheveled, cropped hair. Man, or a woman, we could not tell. The figure crouched, and its hands worked on a piece of cloth.

“What is that?” I whispered.

The figure turned to look at us.

Its face was badly disfigured. There was no eye where the left eye should have been, and its lips were swollen to a strange degree. Its face appeared melted, like candle wax, like an old wallpaper peeling off a wall, chipping from places and revealing discoloration. There was no expression on its face. Just a bland, vacant look. The world dropped dead for us.

We silently watched it. It stared back.

This was the first time Bano had nothing to say. Then, the thing rose and walked gently towards a small object on the ground.

The shuttlecock.

We did not wait. Our exploration ended with both of us shrieking and vaulting over the wall.
Back to our side.

~*~
3.

*Trespassing*

**Zakariya**

All May and June, the gardener moved lazily in the garden with the blue watering can. He muttered to himself, speaking to the flowerbeds, almost the same way a mother speaks to her child; sometimes tenderly, in good humor and other times, irritably and impatiently. The children, the flowers, too had formed their individual replies. On good summer days with a little bit of wind and rain, they fluttered and flourished and on other days they hung low and appeared distraught under the midday sun.

The fiery marigolds, the yellow and orange zinnia flower, the droopy coneflower and the araliya that Bano said looked like a fried egg, all part of a delicate system that Chand Baba had built so tenderly, so carefully over the six years he had worked for us.

Sometimes he picked me from school and we stopped by Queens park just to look at the blooming gailardias and daylilies. We watched his favorite amaltas tree flirting away with the wind. A gust of wind would sweep over the garden, scattering the frail yellow blooms, the golden fragments would fly up in the air, in our hair, in our palms and near our feet.

He collected jasmine flowers and handed them to me. I would put them in a bowl in the living room because I knew Mama liked it. It would make her day.

In the blinding heat, when the trees, the buildings, the canal, the tunnels, appeared like abstract false illusions, objects hung in a mirage, Chand Baba remained very real for me.

I watched him plant the faithful gailardia. Trim the rangoon creeper. Pluck out the weeds. Cut down the edges of trees. And then, repeat the hot and cold sentiments with his flower
children till the sun dissolved and the sound of Magrib, the evening prayer, unfolded from the minarets of the small colony mosque.

There was a rhythm that Chand Baba had created in his life, a method he had given to his living. There was no room for confusion, no place for anything extraordinary, anything unfamiliar and new, and he did not seem to mind.

As Bano and I leapt down from the wall, she took a tumble and scraped her knee. Chand Baba whose disappearance from the garden was duly noted before we began our forbidden venture suddenly emerged on scene. He dropped to his knees and examined the burning wound warily. A look of distress arrested his face.

“Children, children,” he said, “if anyone were to see this, if your mother were to see that you were climbing walls and trees, all hell will break loose. All hell will break loose.”

He repeated his words distinctly and shook in his head in disapproval. I knew what thought unsettled him. It was the fear that the grownups in the house would find out. Mama’s voice bellowed in my ears. Dread gripped my face. I was afraid for Bano.

“Only walls. Not the trees,” Bano cleared and stood up, dusting the dirt and blades of grass off her skirt. She placed her hands on her hips, a steady sign that she dismissed everything that concerned the gardener. She was alive and okay.

“Our shuttlecock went to the other side,” I exclaimed cutting the tension.

“The other side of the wall? Into the quarters?”

“Yes, it’s in the veranda of the servant quarter behind the wall!” Bano pointed to the creepers.

He lifted a badminton racket from the ground and dusted its handle with his kameez, “I will get you more tomorrow. Now, let’s go ask Bilquees to find a band aid for that cut.”
Bano nudged me, and I continued prodding,

“We saw something there! Behind the wall, we saw something scary there!”

The gardener’s attention shifted from my cousin’s scraped knee to what I was saying.

“What?”

I struggled to describe the mysterious disfigured face. Bano just burst open with details.
She told him how carefully we had climbed the wall and what we had seen. She described the
figure in details that were disconcerting for both, Chand Baba and myself.

“It was a witch! A witch! Ask Zaki. Zaki, tell him!”

I nodded in assent, “Our cousin told us there are witches on that side of the house.”

All this while, Chand Baba’s expressions remained unchanged. He peered down at the
ground after we were done. His forehead glistened with sweat. He turned around to pick the
other racket. The back of his kameez was also drenched in sweat from the heat.

He studied the racket contemplatively and then handed it to me gently. I had carved the
letter Z on the wooden handle.

“Now, who lives there in that quarter?” asked Bano.

A silence followed. It was a known fact in the neighborhood that Chand Baba knew the
answer to everything. What flowers bloomed in monsoon. What shop near Victoria colony sold
the freshest curd. What new salacious gossip was brewing in the servant quarters of our
bungalow, and the next bungalow and the next one. But he retained his silent stance and did not
answer us.

“There’s nothing on that side. No witches. No monsters,” he stood firm in his belief.

“Don’t climb the wall again, you will hurt yourselves.”
Nothing more was said, no plea, not another word of caution. A silent understanding formed among the three of us. Nothing about the climbing was to be divulged to anyone in the house. And no walls were to be climbed in the future.

Bano and I went inside through the kitchen door, and Chand Baba wandered off doing his daily errands for the remainder of the afternoon.

Inside, Bilquees, the new kitchen maid, scoured a burnt steel pan under running water. Flecks of tea leaves bejeweled the sink. She lifted the clogged tea strainer and wacked it on the side of the sink to release the tea leaves that were stuck in the delicate steel mesh.

On the marble counter top near the fridge lay a bone china tea set. On the dainty cups and the saucer plates was the design of a delicate peony, a flower Mama wanted blooming in our house, but Chand Baba had never been successful in fulfilling her desire. It was a difficult flower, he said.

Bilquees looked at us and we looked back, both parties still seething in the early phases of a relationship. She was a recent addition to the household staff and did not know how much she could talk to memsaab’s relations, and we did not know if we could trust her with our own secrets. So, without a word, we left our dirty shoes on the floor and ran inside to the living room. Our bare feet pattering on the eggshell colored kitchen tiles.

Bano crept upstairs to find a band aid and change into a pair of trousers. As I waited for her in the living room, I looked at the garden wall from the window. The sight of the witch still twanged at my nerves. The fear was to hold me all night. I knew what we had seen. Nothing could alter that. No word from any adult could alter that.

Chand Baba continued working. He continued moving in his garden. No sense of curiosity choked him. He did not pause for a single second to reflect on our discovery.
I thought maybe Bano and I treaded a world that was different, a world where witches and ghouls could exist, another wild dimension had revealed itself to us and no adult was to be a part of it.

My rapt stare continued to follow him.

In a weather where no butterfly fluttered, and no sparrow was perched on any branch anywhere, Chand Baba moved and moved. Subdued in his own thoughts. Picking dried leaves from the grass, plucking wilted flowers from the bushes, removing all things that could not survive the heat, making certain the place was pristine for Mama’s tea party the next day.

He ran fingers through his scruffy beard that changed color often. Some months, it would become red from henna, a deep, deep fiery red, red like the zinnia flower. That happened only if his wife kept the henna on his hair for too long. There was a sunnier orange-red colored beard on other days when he remembered to wash on time. Both reds would make him look boyish, infuse his face with a childlike glow. In the more languor months, however, the beard changed color again. It became salt and pepper. The transition almost dried him up inside, reducing him to an old man again.

From the window, I watched him collect plants that could not survive the weather and toss them into a plastic bag. Now, everything in the garden was exactly how he wanted, alive and thriving. It was only once that I had seen him take down something living from that garden. It was the jamun tree from where Jahanara had fallen and died.

A nauseating feeling of déjà vu gnawed at me as I continued to watch him. I slipped into a different time, a different season and a very particular memory.

It was the cold winter two years ago. I was seven and she had just turned nine.
She was made to cut her long, dark brown hair because a teacher sent home a note about a lice epidemic at her school. Mama opened a barber shop for her in the guest bathroom.

I remembered strands of dark hair on the pale blue tiles. Jahanara cried as Mama gave her a short, short bob. She whimpered and sniffled, covered her eyes with her hands and sobbed, and then she noticed me standing at the door of their barber shop. She turned around to look at me. There were tiny hairs pasted all over her neck. She asked me how she looked.

“Like a boy,” I said.

That made her cry more. My sister did not eat dinner that night. My sister did not eat dinner because of what I had said.

I was not there when she died, when she fell from the tree and hit her head. I do not know who found her. I do not know how much it hurt her and for how long. She slept on the hospital bed for a long time.

My memories of her, of everything that occurred between her living and dying, remained foggy. I was only seven.

Even as a child, when you cannot see everything, when you do not understand much about life, death and what falls between the two, you can still feel when there has been a death in the house. The air becomes still and heavy. The color of mourning is different. Pain permeates in the air like a thick smog, silently choking, quietly smothering, and grownups can act normal only for so long before they too combust and collapse.

When you bury a child, you bury many other things. The casket is full of invisible things. You bury the hours of the day. You bury the seasons. You bury time. You bury the final chapters of your life. You bury your essays on hope and books on future generations. You bury the letters
of healing and reasoning you exchanged with God. There is no sadness worse than knowing you have outlived your child.

Many people die with the death of a child.

Father stopped talking. Mother’s mind took a voyage of its own. Jahanara’s death was bigger than anything.

Two years were far too few to mourn for a child who has died, my grandmother would tell me on days I felt I was disappearing for them. I did not have to anything for her to say this to me.

The only sound I recalled during the mourning days came from Chand Baba’s axe as it cut down the tree from where she fell.

I had stood by the window, just the same way as I did then, watching him take it down.

_Thud. Thud. Thud._

The loud noise rang in our ears. Mother’s ears. Father’s. Grandmother’s. Mine. And then, the last fall. Surprisingly, the final sound was light, less disturbing than I imagined it would be. A lot of crackling and rustling of the leaves and branches as the jamun tree gave its final bow. It still did not cease to exist. The ground where the jamun fruits had fallen was stained purple. And it remained purple for weeks.

Bano sometimes sat on the dead stump to catch her breath during our badminton game. The stump, a reminder, an echo of her passing, something that even Mama could not erase.

I always felt uneasy when Bano stood on it and declared her victory after she won at cricket. She swung her fist around and then, waved the cricket bat in the air as if waving at an audience. She thought my quietness stemmed from my loss at the game- an awareness that I was never better than her at anything, but it was something else. It was always something else.
Jahanara was there, my mind would sing. Jahanara was there once.

One day I asked Chand Baba if we could remove the stump, grind it down, pluck it out of the ground like an unwanted weed, like a dried plant he no longer wanted. He replied that we could only negotiate with nature to a certain degree.

“Memsaab will have to make her peace with that.”

Bano galloped down the carpeted stairs, calling my name. Chand Baba climbed on his bicycle and rode out of the driveway. He became smaller and smaller, and then vanished from my sight.

I made a leap through time, pushing the gardener and the stump and the wretched jamun tree to the back of my mind, arriving back to a place where the air was light, and there were sounds, many sounds, of plates clinking, Bilquees humming a tune in the kitchen as she did the dishes, the water running and my cousin’s familiar footfall on the staircase as she descended, calling my name over and over, Zaki, Zaki, Zaki where are you?- my sister’s image blurred in my head like she was a friend I had lost touch with.

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It was a little after twelve the next afternoon when the guests imposing in pastel colored saris and smart dresses sauntered into our garden.

All night, the skies had roared and howled, promising the city a much cooler morning. Chand Baba’s paradise glowed after the rain making it a perfect setting for Mama’s tea party. Every petal and leaf now suffused with dampness and color beamed in the crisp weather. All the windows in the house, the narrow ones and the wide ones, the frosted and the clear, were opened for the fresh air to circulate. Curtains billowed out of my bedroom window that overlooked the ceremonious garden. The scent of rain colonized every bit of the room.
Bano lay on the twin bed. Her hands were up in the air holding a book.

She quietly lay, half in this world, half in another, her mind submerged and her eyes consumed the picture of the faraway tree on the page. She had just finished reading a detective novel and was displeased at the way it had ended. She had guessed earlier that the neighbor was the real cat burglar.

Her black hair was tied up in a messy pony tail. She had taken off the silver ribbon Mama had deftly tied that morning. Because of the party, we could not dwell freely in the garden and this had infuriated my cousin. She hated staying in the room or worse having to stroll in the garden amidst the glimmering guests who asked us the most redundant of questions, like who was our favorite teacher at school and why.

I could never decide who my favorite teacher was—Mrs. John— the English teacher whose lipstick stained teeth demanded more attention than the list of pronouns she was compiling on the blackboard or maulvi Habib, my Quran teacher, whose anger rattled every bone in my body. Bano, on the other hand, had often very publicly expressed that she had no favorite teacher.

Sounds of women giggling and cheering over someone’s big announcement floated in from the open window. Someone had finally found a husband.

Bano heaved a sigh that arrested the room’s attention. I stopped coloring my book to look at her. It was not the guests at the party she could rely on for her entertainment but Miss Blyton’s vivid imagination on paper.

Outside the window, the tea party continued. Women ate sweets and over-ate gossip, and shared secrets they would regret later. Mama ordered Bilquees, the maid, to bring in more sandwiches.

Bano suddenly sprang up from the bed as if ready to take on the world.
“Let’s go down to the kitchen and make Roh-afzaah,” she said and sauntered out of the room.

I was seized by an urge to follow.

The gazebo was too small to contain all of Mama’s chirpy friends and the garden was still dewy. Expensive heels kept sinking in the grass. The tea party was moved indoors.

Mother walked across the scarlet room, ethereal, gracefully draped in a diaphanous gold sari, with a dash of pink on her lips and supporting a pair of pearl earrings in her ears. She walked with her usual tranquil grace, her melodic charm and her carefully measured walk. She was pure poetry: an alluring heroine from an old Hindi film or one of those fictional women the hero remains infatuated with but never wins over.

“Oh Mehrunisa! You are the life of the party,” said a frail woman with a long thin nose. The words fell pleasantly on Mother’s ears but even she knew that her guest was exaggerating.

From the stairs, through the delicate black railing, Bano and I watched Mama float between two worlds.

She was contemplative. Discreet even at her own party. Anything but the life.

She stood there. She listened. Moderate in her expressions. Quite liberal in her movements. Sometimes with the crowd that discussed the latest lawn prints and the softest silk in the market, sometimes with the group that discussed Manto and an upcoming literary festival. Rarely though, she lit a cigarette as she discussed Tagore, Maugham, and, Woolf’s letters to Lady Robert Cecil. The cigarette was only lit when she was certain no one from family was present in the room. It was her little secret that everybody knew.

That summer, Mother also did not know what she wanted but she never stopped moving either. She was redoing all three bedrooms in the house and had just finished redecorating the
living room. From the color of the walls to new carpets and rugs, the smallest of things was given care, everything was slowly being scratched and new places were going to be born.

The summer she had requested a gazebo in the garden. Chand Baba was not amused by this idea.

All sixty bungalows looked the same in Victoria colony. It was not an obligation, they just always did. The changes, if any did occur, were minute and passable. A swing here or there for the officers’ and bureaucrats’ children, an ugly fountain that always existed and was never removed, an archway somewhere, lawn chairs and garden lamps, nothing was major, no one cared for making drastic changes but Mama.

It was too much work, Papa thought. It would take away a significant space from the garden, Chand Baba protested. He was trying to grow a Jasmine bush there.

Mother stared at Father when he told her for the third time that it was a bad idea. She quietly waited for him to stop reasoning, and then placed the gazebo designs that she had printed off Google on the table next to his plate of pulao. She said very coolly, “Even if all the houses and gardens must look the same, the people inside and their worlds and stories are always going to be different. These were not meant to be houses anyway, they were offices for snooty British officers. We turned them into houses. And I will turn it into the kind of house I want. If no one has a gazebo in this colony, no one has a child who has died either.”

The metal spoon clanked as Father placed it on his ceramic plate. He did not argue after that. He could not argue after that.

Much to Chand Baba’s dismay, a wooden gazebo was finally erected in the corner of the garden. I did my homework there when evenings were cooler. Nanni Amma had tea there, Papa
too spent his Sunday mornings reading under the shade, listening to bulbul’s singing in the trees. It was only *she*, the originator of this project who seldom used it.

Mama circled the gazebo while strolling, stood inside it but never really sat in it. All my childhood, I never quite understood why.

After Jahanara’s death, Papa busied himself with work and Mama took on another hobby, reading. She submerged herself in the world of Victorian poets and modern writers. A parallel world unfolded before her, histories of other places, a complex universe of warfare, plagues, madness and monsters. None of her life seemed strange once stranger, much impossible things stretched before her.

I wondered if over the two years, the pain might have diffused. Not completely but still, a little maybe. My parents never spoke about it. Not to each other and not to me, their living child.

Mama fought her little wars. Some with Papa for things she wanted, some with the characters in the books, and many, many silent wars she fought only with herself. She had her quiet moments of lamentation.

Come downstairs children,” Mama’s voice rang in the tea party as she spotted Bano and me, “Meherbano, Zakariya, come meet all the lovely aunties.”

We reluctantly walked downstairs into the party. Bano and I skipped. Walked past women chewing on snacks and gossip.

Mama quickly redid Bano’s hair and asked her where the ribbon was. She hopped away without giving an answer.

As Mama’s friends left one by one, the house restored its original shape and part-time dullness. Mama felt like a small but significant amount of weight had been lifted from her
shoulders. She picked up a dirty tea cup and handed it to Bilquees- a sign that it was now her
duty to finish the rest of the cleaning.

One wondered if there might have been a simpler way for Mama to please all her friends
but really, there wasn’t. Most women in her group did enjoy an afternoon of good food as long as
the talk accompanying it went only skin deep. Even if Mama did not cook or dust the cushions
herself, she did think and overthink about the party all week. It was a task that was arduous and
also necessary in her life.

How else would she pass the hours, the long dreary hours, day after day, summer after
summer?

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4.

Metamorphosis

Beyond the Wall

The Cat

I was the witch the children saw. I was the animal on the other side of the wall. I call myself the neighborhood cat.

A creature living between sounds and stillness, a thing lurking in the corridors during invisible hours, and gliding in and out of the lives of others. Day after day, tiptoeing under the sun with feeble steps. Making no sounds and leaving no traces. I lived behind veils. Breathed under veils and behind shadows. Conscious that I should not be seen or heard by men. Men, I said. Women are different.

My transition into a cat was terribly slow. In between being human and animal, there was a time of sterility and relapse. A long, empty time when all dreams drowned. A vacancy when I loathed what I had become. The shameless mirror stayed my worst enemy. A melted face looked back at me. A foul version of myself. A burnt reflection.

It took me a while to realize what that nothingness was. What that sterility and suspension was. It was a part of becoming free, the shedding of human skin. To become an animal is to become free.

Metamorphosis.

Magic was happening.
I was leaving my human form and the baggage that came with it. Expectations. Regrets. Desire. Grief. Everything and anything that corrupts the soul. But as I was disappearing from one world and self, I was appearing in the next.

Being a cat meant being quieter. And the quieter you are, the more people trust you. The more they talk. And that is what I needed to pass my hours, to drown in stories of other people, the lies they have entrapped themselves in, the regrets they carry, the loves they had to leave behind and the loss they could not forget. Women started to tell me everything for my mind had become an illimitable space, a place where all their woes and stories sank.

The tailor’s sister who planned to run away with her lover on the night train told me everything weeks before they fled. The milkman’s wife who slept with another man cried as she gave me the details. She did not regret anything. The gardener’s daughter told me how much she detested her olive skin and how no whitening cream in the world worked.

I listened and listened as they sang their tales.

With me your stories will be safe, I told them, I will take them to my grave. No other soul will know.

They did not seek answers from me, or any form of reassurance. Just a patient ear and a tongue that is gentle and not sharp. People are unkind. Their words can cause irreparable damage. A stray cat does not threaten a soul. She exists but hardly. She belongs to no one but herself.

I read in a science book that before there were humans, there were animals. Crawling from one ground to another. Falling from one cloud to the next. Gliding from one mountain to another. Small, delicate creatures. Big, majestic beings. Moving through life. Hunting. Breeding. Trespassing. Dwelling in places.
Deep down, I believe before there were humans, there were fewer riddles. There must have been fewer disappointments and regrets in the jungle. There was suffering, surely, but it was not relished. The humans have mastered the art of being unhappy, of not leaving things behind, of drowning their souls in glasses of whisky and poetry. Falling asleep every night with an invisible weight. But in-between the desperate drowning, empty ashtrays and cheap alcohol, they miss out on life and the meaningful moments that could have made their day. Moments that could save them.

Being human is tragic. All this, I realized after I became an animal. After I became alone, and after I lost everything.

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Strange Matters

Zakariya

The day after Mother’s tea party, Bano and I walked up and down the garden. Her eyes
scoured the dirt and the spot where she had deposited the dead creature, and in her hand was a
stick that was to be used to dig up the little grave. The ground was still soft and here and there,
where Chand Baba had dug holes to plant new flowers.

Bano squatted next to the garden lamp where she claimed she had bid the final farewell to
the dead kitten. Her eyes were wide and wondering and her lips kept repeating, “it was right
here. Right here.”

Chand Baba, who was a few feet away, pretended to pay no heed to the bustling
animation that was my cousin. He continued to work. Like a good sport, I pretended to look
around but was not as keen as she had been to see what the kitten looked like after a week of its
burial. Bano urged that it must be a sight worth seeing.

After a few more minutes of fruitless searching, we abandoned the hunt. No pivotal
moment for us. The little animal was meant to sleep in peace.

Bano sank in one of the lawn chairs, disappointed.

“Chand Baba?” she called, “remember that kitten you buried near the lamp? Where did it
go?”

“Maybe the angels took it,” he replied and ruffled my hair.

“Maybe the angels took it,” I repeated.

Chand Baba winked at me.
“The angels have better things to look for, I’m sure,” she grunted and threw away the stick.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Children who are too good for this earth, Grandfather’s soul, Grandmother’s biscuits but let me tell you what they did not take…. the kitten.”

“Then, where did it go?”

Bano grunted again.

“I am older than you. I know more things,” she said. “And you believe everything anyone tells you.”

“Chand Baba is older than us, Bano,” I said.

“He lies the most. Older people lie the most, Zaki.”

I looked back at her, a little disconcerted.

“They always lie the most,” she crossed her arms over her chest as she callously dropped this revelation on me, “you don’t get sick if you eat a lot of ice-cream and the television doesn’t suck you in if you watch it past nine.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No silly. I have tried it all.”

I leaned back in my chair and looked at the clear sky. Bano did not end the conversation there. She kept burdening my mind with other suspicions.

“And remember when he said there is no witch on the other side, but you and I saw something! Liar Baba!”

My mind was now excited as it pondered the theory about lying adults. Bano often liked to share with me her unusual philosophies. Her mind was different from that of most children.
There was nothing child-like about it. It was extraordinary, wonderful, and a little terrifying. She could tell me the saddest, the most painful things with complete composure.

Once, she told me that my school was built on a graveyard and if I sat down without moving, I could feel the ground beneath my shoes quiver. It was the restless souls of the dead knocking and demanding attention. For a week, the ground trembled for me and the souls shrieked in my dreams. Bano also said that Chand Baba was going to leave us soon as he had found a better job in another officer’s garden. A feeling of betrayal had seeped into my little heart and I spent days convincing the old man why he should stay with our family. He just looked back at me, perplexed, “I’m not going anywhere, my son. I like it here.”

Bano was my mother’s older sister Yasmin’s only child. Like I was now my Mama’s only child. This was the genealogy I was preached till Bano dismantled my entire sense of the family tree by leaking a big family secret the summer before.

It was June 2013. Mother was fixing the kitchen tiles. Aunt Yasmin was fixing her marriage in Karachi. She brought Bano to Lahore.

Bano and I were sitting at the dining table one afternoon finishing our falsa juice. The plum colored liquid fell on her pale-yellow shirt. Mama came up quickly and wiped it with a tissue paper. The stain froze.

“Go wash it in the kitchen sink. Why are you always so careless, Meherbano?”

“It wasn’t my fault!”

“Go change your shirt.”

“It wasn’t my fault!”

“Why must you argue?”
Bano looked at her intently. Controlling her temper, she left silently. Mama eventually calmed down too. After noting my cousin’s long absence from the table, I followed her footsteps only to find that she had escaped from the kitchen door to the backyard.

I could see her sitting on the ground. Her dark hair cascaded about her shoulders. She was sitting in front of the large cage Papa had bought for the fancy pigeons. There were the gentle seraphim, the fluffy fantails, the Danish tumblers and the grey teddys.

Bano sat quietly, oblivious to my presence, so beautifully tranquil and raw, sitting as if an invisible painter was trying to capture her essence on a canvas. I sat down beside her.

“I will tell you a secret, but you must never tell anyone,” she began suddenly.

She remained very still as she told me everything she knew.

She told me Mama was happier years ago. This revelation was not met by a string of confusing questions as I had seen photographs of Mama beaming in the gallery in Papa’s study. There was a photograph of her in Grandmother’s album sitting in a garden in white uniform and sneakers. Her hair swaying with the wind. Those were her college days. And another photograph where she sat on a sofa with two babies, one in each arm. There were tulips in a jar by her side, her favorite.

According to Bano, in her arms were my older sister, Jahanara and herself.

Twins.

Mama’s first babies.

She told me that she was not my cousin but my sister. Mama gave her away to Aunt Yasmin who could not have children of her own. And that is why God punished my Mama by killing my older sister.
Her eyes said nothing. She remained detached, so unemotional, as she released from her mind an abnormal weight, a weight I believe must have been smothering her.

We sank into an uncharacteristic silence, not from the lack of things to say but because there was so much to say. The news hit me with a force. A conflict had set in my heart.

I gazed at her—her curly black hair and small hands that were playing with a fallen feather of a pigeon. I wondered what her hands had looked like, and whether if Mama had let her grow her hair out it would be just as curly and wild as Bano’s.

The silence must have begun to swallow Bano too. She began again,

“Don’t you see how your Mama always behaves with me? She is always scolding me. She never scolds you.”

“But I have never spilled anything on my clothes,” I said. “I never brought mud on the carpet.”

“You don’t believe me, do you? You think I’m a liar? You don’t believe your own sister?”

There was anger in her voice. Her heart broke as I refused to accept her. I just watched the pigeons shift, flutter, and coo. She waited for me to answer but soon realized there was nothing I could offer.

Many questions suggested themselves, but I remained mum, and then very quietly, my sister left. She closed the screen door behind her and disappeared into the kitchen. And just like that, a new relation had come into existence. Just like that, I was asked to absorb this new information, asked to forget all that had been taught to me.

Maybe I could have said something to her, could have offered my new sister a few kind words, could have knit a thoughtful sentence about being a family and the new meaning of life.
But we were too young. The revelation was heavy. Even as children, we realized that sometimes silence is enough. Silence can be loud and complete.

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Bano’s confession left me oddly restless. The kind of restlessness that could not be soothed with toys or a trip to Lawrence gardens.

The insatiable, dangerous kind.

And I could not speak to anyone. Breaking a promise I made to Bano meant spending the remainder of my summer holidays subjected to her cold stares and insensitive remarks. To avoid this emotional division between me and my cousin-sister, I took another route in the pursuit of truth. I decided to trick Nanni Amma to spill the family secret (if there was any to begin with) and if it did not work, then perhaps to confront Aunt Yasmin when she returned from Karachi to pick up her daughter. The latter did not fear any confrontations or truth.

If Bano were really Jahanara’s twin, then a part of me was relieved that Mama decided to give Bano away when she was a baby. I could not imagine her with me. Every hour of every day with this creature of innate superiority. In school. In gardens. In Grandmother’s room.


One morning, to my great joy, I found myself alone with Grandmother. She and I sat in the garden and watched men work on a gazebo for our garden, I asked her plainly,

“Nanni Amma, do I have any other brothers and sisters?”

The question appeared mild and innocent. She took the last sip of her tea and placed the cup on a newspaper filled with pictures of Lollywood actresses. The back of the cup stained an actress’s painted face.

Grandmother lifted a knife and a potato.
“Do you want another brother or sister?” She began peeling.

A strange question had been tossed my way, neither here nor there.

“If I already have a brother or sister then I was wondering, I don’t need another one,” my voice rumbled in my throat.

“All your schoolfriends are like your siblings. All your cousins are like your brothers and sisters. And what’s that boy’s name? The one who lives in the neighborhood…the one with the dog that died…”

“Real brother or sister…or sister…nanni,” I said.

My grandmother stopped peeling and asked, “what have you been hearing?”

I bit my lip and shook my head and said it was nothing. The interrogation ended.

I walked around the garden. The workers were now sitting on the grass drinking red sharbaat that Chand Baba had just served them.

I thought maybe if I walked around dramatically, Nanni would call me back and ask me what was bothering me. She sat there, unaware, peeling and peeling.

Bano resumed her summer life as if nothing had happened. I became wild in my observations. When Aunt Yasmin came to pick Bano up and spend a week with us, I noticed Mama’s behavior with her and Bano. It all seemed normal. The way she spoke to them was normal, the way she poured milk in their chai at the breakfast table was normal. Their jokes as they sucked on mangoes seemed normal.

Questions hung over me. Is it that easy to give a child away? Does Mama miss Bano? If she was still my sister, would she also die soon like Jahanara? Would Mama ever ask for Bano back?
Aunt Yasmin gave Bano and me English lessons. We sat in the study with our grammar books and wrote lists of nouns and adverbs.

During one of the lessons after Bano finished her sentences and skipped away for a fifteen-minute break, I asked Aunt Yasmin where Bano had come from.

It was a peculiar question. So, it made her laugh.

“Does it matter where Bano has come from? From my belly or your Mama’s, fallen directly from the sky or the angels dropped her in Grandmother’s lap? She is your family, your sister, just like I am your Mama. We’re all a family, are we not?”

“But Meherbano said she is really my sister.”

Aunt Yasmin looked at me for some time. I don’t know what she was looking for, what she was thinking then, but her face revealed signs of obvious concern. Then, as if almost compelled, she replied,

“Yes, she’s right. She is your birth sister.”

Before I could tell her how utterly devastated I was, she said, “It shouldn’t change anything, darling. We are all a family.”

“She doesn’t look anything like Jahanara...I remember her what she looked like.”

“Not all twins look alike. Still, Zakariya, this should not change anything.”

But it did change everything. There was a tumult in my heart. I sunk into visions of the new family tree. Bano was telling the truth all along. I wondered what else she told me was correct. Did Chand Baba lie about leaving? Was my school built on a graveyard? Would our house wash away with the monsoon rain?

Bano was on the swing in the garden when I told her where my discovery had led me.
“See, see, see,” she sang as she soared—each kick bringing her a little closer to the sky, and a little farther from my reach.

I sat on the ground, looking up at her. I looked at her in a different way now. She was part of my Mama. She was also part of my sister.

“I was telling the truth, Zaki!”

I wondered for how long she had known this for her to be so normal. And how much did it hurt when she found out. Or maybe it did not hurt at all, maybe Aunt Yasmin was a better parent. Maybe Karachi was a better home. Maybe the beach she spoke about so fervently was better than my Lawrence gardens.

“I’m your sister! Your sister! Your sister!” She spun on the swing. Her little hands clutching the ropes tightly as they twisted.

“Okay, I’m dizzy now,” her sandals scratched the ground as she stopped the swing. She jumped off.

She stood still to regain her balance and then walked towards a flower pot. She pulled out a marigold and waved it in the air like a sword. Then, she jumped up on the stump and reiterated her victory.

An anger swelled inside me.

“This still doesn’t make you my sister,” I said loudly, “You don’t live here. You don’t call my Mama, your Mama. She gave you away. Away. That makes you my cousin.”

She paused and jumped down to the ground. The flower fell on the grass. She walked over it as she made her way towards me.

“Do you know what is inside our body?” she held my palm and squeezed the center with her thumb.
My mind wandered over the things my science teacher taught in school.

“Bones,” I said assuredly.

She shook her head. I had failed.

“Blood, you idiot. We have the same blood. Nothing can change that.”

She let go of my hand and I kept looking down at my palm. I ran my index finger over it as if waiting my skin to disappear and my blood to reveal itself.

“Come on, little brother!” she sang. “Let’s go look at pigeon’s eggs. Maybe they hatched this morning.”

She skipped away to the cages. I prayed they did not hatch. I did not want Bano to get that gratification. She could not win two times in a day.

I followed her slowly but unwillingly this time.

My mother now belonged to Bano. My father was also hers. She also had Aunt Yasmin. She had more parents than I did. Like always, she remained superior in every way. A stinging feeling of jealousy entered my heart.

Everything I had now belonged to her too. I felt it was now her father’s study, her Chand Baba, her garden and her rangoon flowers.

~*~
When my Mother and Aunt Yasmin were little girls, they played a game. 

_Ghar-ghar_.

They took Grandmother’s _dupatta_, pulled the bedsheets from her bed, and tied it to the bars in the window to build a house. They pretended they had husbands. They pretended they cooked meals for them. They pretended they had children. It seemed easy then. But with the sound of Grandmother’s command, the cotton house collapsed, their imaginary lives ceased to exist and they were reduced to being carefree children again.

Our real house was not built from cotton bedsheets, but bricks that had stood for a long time. Nothing perished with anyone’s thundering voice.

Things remained. Everything was real.

The house, its walls, its twilight, its people, their bleak moments, and long silences.

Mother would have still lost her daughter, whether it was dawn or dusk, whether someone was there or not, and Aunt Yasmin would have still chosen to close the doors on her fourteen-year marriage.

Both the sisters married young. They married men that were deemed fit for them by their parents and relatives. Everything was good on paper. Yasmin moved to Karachi. Mother stayed in Lahore. Nanni oscillated between the two after Nanna’s death.

_Nanni Amma_ made sure that unlike other women in their family, like the female cousins and wives of male cousins who never acquired any formal education, her daughter went to
college and knew what they wanted to do with their lives. She also made sure they married good men. Good men who had bungalows in Lahore and flourishing clothing businesses in Karachi.

For Mother’s Day, our art teacher Sara made us draw cards. I used water paints and drew two little figures in a house.

Mama said she liked the painting very much. She also liked the bloom I picked from the school and placed in the card. She looked at my drawing for a long time and said, “I used to draw too, Zakariya. I used to draw too in college. That’s all I did when I was a little girl, paint, paint little tiny men and women in fortresses. I drew elephants and peacocks and deer.”

“Elephants?”

“Yes, elephants in forests. Elephants being led by big emperors.”

“In the forests?” I asked.

“In the forests,” she replied. “Your sister drew too, you know.”

My mind flew promptly to Meherbano when Mama said the word sister. I hated that. I hated that my mind chose her before Jahanara.

“I’m happy to see that the artistic gene travelled in my children,” Mama patted my head.

My mother got her degree in Fine Arts. She majored in miniature paintings and spent most of her late teens and early twenties painting the Mughal dynasty. She painted lovers dancing in moonlight and caught in windstorms. She drew noblemen hunting deer and great emperors laying siege in Indian forests.

Now, her work slept somewhere in Nanni’s old, abandoned house, and the miniature artist in her hibernated. It leapt forward, now and then, compelling her to make wild, artistic decisions. Like changing the color of a wall, adding a wallpaper to some room, buying a
gramophone at a thrift store or building a gazebo. Her canvas had merely shifted from stained paper to the colonial bungalow.

Mother hated empty spaces. She was almost afraid of them. Like miniature paintings with their intricate details that could only be painted with brushes made of a single hair, our house did not have a single undecorated corner. She had filled every one with a vase, a flower pot, a salt lamp.

Aunt Yasmin had a lot to say about her younger sister’s passivity for things that once mattered in her life. She did not like the fact that my mama did not paint anymore, and that all she did was trying to hold together an old house that was always falling apart.

Yasmin believed the passivity in Mother arrived long before Jahanara died. It arrived after she married my Father and decided to stay indoors, throwing parties and supervising the house staff for the rest of her life. It was kind of a betrayal for my aunt.

Mama would tell my aunt that she might have left painting, but she had taken up other things, like reading. She had never read for leisure before. She knew her poets and writers through my aunt who was a student of literature. They shared a bedroom when they were young. Mama would just lie and close her eyes as Aunt Yasmin read her passages from Austen and Woolf.

Aunt Yasmin was the most well-read, dangerous creature in the family.

Now, Mama read everything. Manto. Chugtai. Tolstoy. Hemingway. Dostoevsky. She had spent her college days sneaking out in rickshaw with her friends during class, smoking in hostel rooms and watching films at the cinema. She was in college for her mother, that was all. Her choosing Fine Arts as a major was purely accidental. That was the only thing she was good
at. When her friends wore *patiala salwars*, so did she. When her friends married early, so did she.

Mama had told her college secrets of sneaking out during classes to Nanni very late in their life. Now Mama was above the bar of judgement.

“Oh, Mehrunisa,” Grandmother laughed and said. “One could never suspect you were this naughty. I can expect this from Yasmin but never you.”

“No, you don’t know me Ammi.”

We might grow up to be very different people. She did not refrain from telling me that her own daughters were a lot closer before they were married. It might be the cities that changed them or the men they had married too, or perhaps just the way their lives and losses unfolded. Distance and heartbreak mar people. Whatever it was, Nanni did not know how they had all become such different people.

In that summer, as Mama was preoccupied with finding the right color for the living room walls, Aunt Yasmin was preoccupied with the heavy task of disappointing the family. She was now filing for divorce as soon as she returned from her conference in London.

Karachi, the city that she loved, had begun to swallow her. Lahore, the city she escaped to in hopes of healing her heart seemed to shrink each day. A two-week stay in London to read a paper on Lawrence, and perhaps to be around friends who did not measure her worth by how early she married and settled down with children was what she thought she needed.

Bano had chosen to stay with us.

She knew everything about her mother’s separation and decision to divorce, but she never spoke about it to me. I had overheard her and Nanni talking about it. The latter telling her to convince her mother to stop being childish and go back to her husband.
Bano never told me anything about her family. That was the thing about her. Even as children, who have limited subjects of discussion and often boast about themselves and their families, Bano never really talked about herself. She talked about everything else.

It was not like Aunt Yasmin hid anything from her. Unlike my mother who had a quieter existence and tip-toed around feelings, Yasmin spoke about everything and anything that hovered in her mind.

It was one of her qualities that many detested. Liking my Aunt Yasmin was an acquired taste.

Since leaving her husband and her city, Aunt Yasmin now felt orphaned in so many ways. There was nothing more painful than to feel you have everything, yet you don’t own a single thing. Not even your own child. And for a woman who had remained unafraid all her life, this sentiment was new and perplexing to her.

Everything was too much. The leaving. The separation. The beginning of a new life. Where? She still did not know. Possibly in Lahore, a city that was already devouring many women like her, the left-over women, women who rode away, women who walked away from their marriage, women who chose to exist alone. She wondered if she could still live in Karachi, a city whose love for her was paling. A place that asked her too many questions or a place that was steeped in memories.

Can a city frighten you so much? Lahore terrified Aunt Yasmin.

“Marriage is a long affair,” she had said to Nanni the night before she left for London. They sat on the bed pulling stiches out of an old quilt, “You know I tried, Ammi, you know I really did.”
Nanni mumbled something under her breath. Even she could not deny that Aunt Yasmin was correct about trying.

Aunt Yasmin had married in her early twenties like Grandfather and Grandmother wanted her to, and she had married the man they had found for her. She did try to be a good daughter. She did try to love her husband. And when the relatives said, a child would fill that void in marriage, she did try conceiving. She could neither love her husband nor bear children.

When Mama married and got pregnant with twins right away, Aunt Yasmin did try feeling delighted for her, her sister who married a man of higher standing, and whose only job was to entertain the wives of her husband’s friends. Bake cakes and watch pigeons rustle their feathers in their cages in the garden. Aunt Yasmin tried and tried.

Aunt Yasmin said she was now making pilgrimage to her heart. There were rooms in there she herself did not know.

“Not all pilgrimages end with freedom and enlightenment,” Nanni said the same night. Aunt Yasmin was ready to head for the airport. Nanni continued, “Sometimes people lose their way in between this journey. They find no strangers that can rescue them. They find no signs or trains or light. They just circle and circle till they understand that they are stuck somewhere in the middle. They can’t move forward, and they can’t go back to the place they had left behind.”

The lines on Aunt Yasmin’s forehead deepened. She answered, “And sometimes being shielded inside the pretty walls of a big beautiful house is not the answer to everything.”

This was followed by a startling, ruminative silence from both parties. Nanni did not preach anymore. With the silence thrown her way, Aunt Yasmin must have contemplated and suddenly felt ashamed about her blatant insensitivity toward her sister in that impulsive moment.
Surely, Aunt Yasmin was dealing with a loss. But losing one’s own child is a different thing. It is a permanent enslavement to grief.

“Whatever it is Ammi jaan, I do not think you will ever be happy with me and now at thirty-four, I am okay with that,” Aunt Yasmin pulled out the final stitch from the blanket and began folding it so her mother could keep it away. She added feebly, “In case of a fire, you would extinguish me last.”

~*~

There were a few mornings, when, as I lay stirring in my bed, I could hear the rattle and clatter of dishes downstairs.

I knew it was Father having breakfast, and then, leaving for work. Of all the adults, he remained the most elusive. The women, from time to time, did reveal themselves. From their utterances and movements. From their noisy, splendid eruptions to their solemn moments, they often released what their minds harbored. Never completely, but still, they had learned to give themselves away in bits and pieces.

Grownups in mourning have their own subculture. Their hearts beat at a different rate. They are spectacles, dispersed in time and space, arriving, disappearing in the vast, foreign blankness of the world. Sometimes full people. Sometimes just hollow bodies. Floating. Finding sense in abstractions and banalities.

Since her fall, Father too floated here and there. In his office. In his study. Sometimes completely the man of the house. Sometimes a very tired man with no mind or say in anything. His mind had allied with secrecy. He believed in the principle of preserving his emotions. No matter how wicked the sea. No matter how perilous the winds. It was not like father to take his
anguish somewhere. This vagueness of his nature was never addressed. It was accepted as an ordinary thing.

Nanni often told her daughters men were somewhat of an enigma. It was better to let them be than trying to figure them out. If a lot of pressure was asserted on a man, he would drift. And then, it was too much work to bring back a man who has already drifted.

That is the word she used. Drift. I did not comprehend it. I began to imagine father as a kite rising in the wind, drifting over our house, our garden, the Victoria colony and drifting over Lahore as Nanni and Mother struggled to bring him back to the ground. Mystery about father reigned in the colonial house for some time.

Father kept himself to himself. But no matter what mother complained about, and what grandmother taught us, I knew in my little heart that he was not a man devoid of emotions, for I had seen him cry.

It was at the funeral. I watched him and three uncles lift the wooden coffin. The men slowly walked from the wailing house to the silent graveyard. The small casket must have felt heavy on their shoulders.

Tears filled Father’s eyes. And then, he whimpered like a child. My father whimpered like a child stricken with grief.

Father lived a quiet, uninterrupted, self-centered life. Fettered somewhere to his professional and domestic responsibilities, he existed in my childhood but barely. He did not exhibit any interest when Mother showed him colors she had in mind for the walls, grey cashmere or a strange color called cheating heart. He had his books. He had his study and work. Sometimes, he had me and Bano to give him company. That, I believe, was everything for him.
There had been moments when I felt unutterably close to him especially, on Sundays when he and I sat in his study, and I asked him questions that had remained unanswered that week. How far is the sky? How does an airplane fly? When will Bano visit again? When will Bano go home and leave us alone? Why did God take my sister away?

My emotions for my cousin-sister were many and varied. But Father carried a singular emotion. He was not keen about the prospect of Bano leaving soon. And now I knew why that was. She reminded him of his late child. Living. Cackling. Romping in the garden.

I never told him I knew everything. I was afraid to say it out loud myself. I thought if I did, if I declared loudly that Bano was my sister, it would become very real.

I did not want to share my Papa: whatever little of him was left, it was mine. Jahanara had already taken the rest away.

Whatever I did to console myself, the reality was Bano could give him what I could never could. A sense of comfort. Even if it was fleeting, it was there. And it was real.

Father worked at a government office. He had a watchman, a driver and a cook.

We had two cars. A Toyota and a white carry daba that the office had given to Papa. Sometimes when the Toyota came to pick me up after school, Mother came too. We shopped for groceries.

Mother made the driver sit in the back while she practiced driving. She would drive on the crammed, bustling streets of Chauburji and Garishahu. From the back seat, the driver who was holding on for dear life, praised her,

“If you can drive here baji, you can drive anywhere in the world!”
Mama smiled, extremely vigilant about the donkey cart that almost grazed my side of the car, and the motorcyclist who almost knocked off the side mirror.

I placed my hands on the glass and looked at the donkey and the ton of bricks on the cart tied to its back. I looked at its eyes that were cast down. The man whipped the animal and they slowly moved forward.

Once, Mother and I surprised Father at his office. I spun the small globe on his desk as they conversed. Round and round it went, emitting a low creak. The kind of sound our metal gate made if Chand Baba had not oiled it in a long time.

I stopped the globe from spinning by placing my finger on random spots. Africa. Australia. Russia. Father said whichever country my finger touched, I would go there when I grew up. I did not know where any of these places were. I only knew of Victoria colony, Queen garden, a place by the sea called Karachi and the graveyard where my Grandfather and Jahanara lived.

But it was not the old books in his study at home, and the whirling globe in his office that fascinated me, it was something else. It was the crystal sparrow that sat on a shelf in his office. Its head was looking up at the stars. Its stiff body, glistening, enticed my fingers to touch it. Father said it was a gift from an old friend, and it cannot be touched by a child.

I had seen these small sparrows in the garden, in the trees and at the school pecking their beaks in leftover food but their bodies were dull, not so glistening.

I told Bano about the crystal bird. She bet if she asked Papa he would give her permission to take it down. She boasted about her power.

She began to knit a story about the bird. She said it was real once, soaring high, bending its wings, flying through the Autumn and Spring trees, and sailing through the monsoon wind.
Then one day, the bird met a strange, old man in a jungle. The bird wanted to make a nest in the biggest Banyan tree.

Bano had drawn the picture of what the old man looked like. The old man had a long, silver beard and he wore a green turban. His beard was longer and had more volume than Chand Baba’s and Moulvi Habib’s. She drew jewels on his turban.

She said that the old man told the bird to go away nicely but the bird did not listen. The bird began collecting straws for her nest. He told her again and again and again, but she continued finding grass and leaves.

“Why didn’t he want her to live there?” I asked Bano when she paused. I ran my fingers over the old sage’s turban and the jewels she had drawn. The crayon colors blended. The turban and the jewels now became a smudgy, green blob.

“Because the tree was his house and he had his own servants, the jinns, living on the branches.”

Bano said at night as the bird slept peacefully, the jinns conspired to get rid of her.

“There was a thunderstorm one night and the jinns were very frightened. They began to tremble and shake. The Banyan tree could not save them from the lightning and the pouring rain. The bird woke up and saw the jinns in pain,” the story continued.

The bird offered her nest to the jinns and spent the ghastly night watching over them. She spread her wings over them and sang lullabies, so they could rest.

When they woke the next morning they could not find the bird anywhere. Then, the old man found the little sparrow dead by the trunk of the tree. The poor thing had died from fatigue and cold weather. The jinns did not have the power to bring her back so they immortalized her by making her into crystal.
I wondered how Bano knew so much, and if I would know so much when I turned eleven. Bano said I would not. She was just smarter than me because her mother was smarter.

I had begun to watch the crystal bird intently in Papa’s. I also asked him bluntly,

“Papa ji? why did the jinns give you the crystal bird?”

His face showed signs of perplexity. He shut the car door, so the Khan driver could drive Mama and me back home.

“You know I am a big boy. Papa should trust me to touch the crystal bird,” I said to Bano as my resentment towards my father brewed.

We were in the garden on the swing when I said that. She pushed me to make the swing go higher.

“No, you will break it. Your family is stupid. You are always breaking things,” she said, derisively.

“Like what?” I inquired.

“Your mother broke her promise to me and gave me away. You guys broke the tree. Look at your house, it’s all falling apart! Have you seen our modern house in Karachi? It is next to the beach and…”

A wave of rage swept over me. I stopped the swing with my slippers and interrupted her loudly,

“At least I have a house! You’re always here! Go back! Go back to your house!”

She scowled and didn’t move. Her bottom lip trembled as she fought back tears. I instantly felt ashamed. She must have been missing her parents. She still did not know to whom she would belong after the impending divorce.
She got back at me before we went inside. She ended the frosty silence with a gentle reminder,

“I would have landed on my feet if I had fallen down that tree. Survival of the fittest. I learned about it in my Science class.”

I looked back at the lonely stump, and then at the porch where Mama stood, watching us come back inside.

Playtime was over. It was getting dark. The call for *maghrib* prayer echoed and floated in the air with the bulbuls, mynas, woodpeckers, kites and pigeons. They were heading homewards too.

Ever since Bano opened the doors to this tainted, secret world of our parents, we remained children no more.

~*~
Aunt Yasmin always said that we all have our place in this universe. It was designated before we were even born. Like there was a reason we were all born on this side of the wall and the witch lingered over there, in the quarters. There was a reason I was born in the bungalow. There was a reason Bano made it to Aunt Yasmin’s lap and Mama chose Jahanara. There was a reason she wanted to climb that tree that day. And a reason she was neither on this side of the wall or that, she was somewhere up in the heavens.

These were places and events we could not have changed. They simply had to occur. Aunt Yasmin continued to say, “and then, there are places we choose for ourselves.”

Chand Baba’s chosen place was his garden. Mama’s place was inside the walls of the colonial house. Aunt Yasmin said she belonged in Oxford where she studied for a year. Grandmother chimed in to say that her place was the village, not the urban mess where she had to move after grandfather’s death. Her paradise was the open sky, the blooming fields and living among people who knew her name. Her place was in the greens, under the tamarind and the banyan tree, in the bundle of straw, wisp of wheat and the dust of her ancestor’s graves, not in the illusions and empty lights of the big city and house.

Things remained in Chand Baba’s control in his little paradise. The garden remained the place where he was always happy. The flowers remained his children. If he gave them nourishment and attention, they also gave him something back, a promise to bloom and wither when the seasons demanded.
Once outside his chosen place, the garden, Chand Baba became a different man. He often picked me up from school on days Mama could not.

The young driver, Samandar Khan, and he went on and on about all kinds of grim subjects. When the car jumped over a pothole, they spoke of the government and their failed promises. When the car was overtaken by a young, enthusiastic motorcyclist, they addressed issues surrounding road safety, traffic police corruption and bribery. I also learned other not-so-political things in these car rides. Like how to tell if a melon is sweet from its color, smell and firmness. And how some fruit vendors were sly enough to inject mangoes with syringes full of sugary water to make them taste sweeter.

Chand Baba also had concerns with how certain things were operating inside our house. He did not like having a Christian cook in the kitchen.

One day when Mama and I were in the kitchen he said something about purity, food, and religion.

Roshan, the cook, was not present at that moment when the gardener began preaching. I sat on a little dining table in the kitchen and dunked Marie biscuits in my tea.

“He is a hardworking man, and he is a good cook. That is all,” said Mama and handed Chand Baba fifty rupees so he could bring yogurt for lunch.

He frowned as Mama walked away without fulfilling his request to make the Cook recite the Qalma every time he prepared food. I also frowned as the biscuit melted and got lost in my hot tea.

If Chand Baba made jokes in the car, Samandar Khan made sure he guffawed, exposing his teeth that were reddened from the naswar which he chewed daily. He was just grateful to be on the almighty gardener’s good side.
Once, during our way back from a shopping trip, we saw a Rescue 1122 ambulance and an Edhi white van parked by the canal. Two men with bright red and yellow vests were pulling a dead body from the murky brown waters.

Samandar Khan slowed down the car so we could view the spectacle. A crowd gathered around the man’s body. The man wore a white vest and salwar. His face was grey, and he was not breathing.

The subject of how and when the stranger drowned remained untouched by the loquacious men. They did not think that the death of a stranger would leave any emotional residue in a child’s heart. They did not think it would hit a nine-year-old with any forceful impact, and strangely, it did not. They were correct.

I learned of things and their impermanence at a young age. My own childhood had begun recognizing what death meant and how it changes your parents. It had begun with Moulvi Habib teaching me dua for the departed.

_Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un._ And I knew this dua before Nanni and Moulvi Habib even taught me how to pray, or before Miss Kaneez, my Islamiyaat teacher from school, took quiz on the words of azaan.

We drove back home quietly as the sirens wailed, and the Rescue 1122 men tried to pump the canal water out of the man.

~*~

A week after Mother’s party, Chand Baba, Bano and I went for a stroll in Queens park. The mighty sun had returned, and it reigned viciously over the city.

We scudded along heaps of garbage. Chand Baba pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat off Bano’s and my faces. Then, he broke into a passionate
monologue about the rubbish that littered the front of Queen’s park. It was an ordinary sight, but his rant was extraordinarily long.

Disenchanted, he droned on about how the park was slowly dying, and soon the city would also wither. Everything would perish. There would be no blooming gardens and lush lawns but miles and miles of empty wastelands and big, concrete factories. There would be no bones and blood in our bodies but smoke and dust.

From what I learned, he was not a frequent visitor of the park, but he would come now and then, like a drifting wanderer, to release the mind of its secret pressures. He would sit under a neem tree and pass his afternoon. He conversed with nobody and nothing. An hour, or two, in a month, when he was no one’s father, no one’s husband and no one’s servant. A momentary release. He still, however, remained a gardener. His worries wafted up in the air as he walked among the flowers and rested beneath the shaded trees. Such quiet, singular hours were the only luxury his needy heart sometimes asked for, a quick replenishment before he returned to his worldly affairs.

Outside the gate of the park, two men were sprawled half-asleep, almost done, on the concrete pavement. Their clothes and bodies were dirty, but on their faces was a strange sense of calm. Between all that dust and filth, an unusual sense of peace. A few feet away, unmoved by the sleeping spectacle, stood a vendor selling chaana chaat and French fries. A rickshaw driver, whose teeth were stained red from the pan, chatted merrily with the vendor. The vendor licked his finger and shuffled through the money before handing him his change. Off he went, in his crackling rickshaw, into the bustling streets.

Chand Baba grumbled and ran a hand over his balding head. He said people were lighting fires around the city, and soon there would be no Lahore but a tremendous collection of decay
and ashes. He spoke of the city as if it were a child inflicted with a prolonged illness. An illness only he and sometimes Nanni and my aunt could understand.

Mama often complained that the summer days were becoming hotter than usual. They were hotter than when she and Aunt Yasmin were little girls. She said this when there was an electricity cut around the house and we had to sit in the garden and fan ourselves with newspapers. The generator gave up on us. Lunch was served outside where there was air.

“Everybody loses their mind during summer,” Grandmother said suddenly. “Have you seen how much drivers honk? I can hear it in my bedroom. All day. All night. The city cries and cries.”

She said if they keep cutting the trees and building more towers, soon the people will begin to devour one another. Fresh air would not reach our body. Smoke and dust will slither inside our lungs. We will start eating plastic and begin to enjoy it.

“And this is how we will all go mad.” By the time she finished, Mama found a small piece of wire in her rice.

Aunt Yasmin and Nanni were seldom on the same page about things, but the madness theory was something even the former agreed with.

I looked up at the Queens park behind the black gates. It seemed to be alive and breathing.

The trees stood tall and undaunted over the flower-beds. The flowers, some wrought, some tolerant of the blistering heat, were also alive. There were no fires. There were no ashes. No death. I thought maybe Chand Baba’s mind grasped something mine did not. So, I said to him, in the sincerest of tones, that if anything were to happen to Lahore, we would move to
Karachi and settle in with Aunt Yasmin and Bano. He scoffed, and then smiled as he patted my head without an answer. A certain warmth transfused in his aging eyes.

By then, I had also learned that grown-ups use the word death rather irresponsibly. When Aunt Yasmin’s divorce reached Nanni’s ears, she said loudly, “this decision will cause our ruin…. Yasmin, you will be the reason for my early death.”

I had checked on Grandmother the next morning. She was alive and eating her porridge. Even the morning after that. And after that.

“Being unhappy in a marriage for a long, long time, that is an early death, mother. Not this, never this,” Aunt Yasmin replied.

None of the women had died. Their use of the word death had not made sense to me.

Chand Baba’s grip around my wrist tightened as we neared the entrance. Bano, who was on his other side, kicked an empty plastic bottle as we waited for the family in front of us to walk through the metal detector.

“It wasn’t like this when I was growing up,” Chand Baba said softly, “there were no barricades or police outside shrines and parks.”

The bottle hit the toe of a child in front of us. He turned around timidly and looked at Bano who in return scowled at him. He hid behind his mother’s cotton dupatta.

We walked through the gate and Bano instantly expressed a desire for a baraf gola, snow cone. Chand Baba fished out change from the pocket of his kameez and the vendor handed us two bright red treats.

“Don’t tell your mother,” said Chand Baba as we continued walking.
We passed by a group of young students standing under a jamun tree. A boy picked up a large stone and aimed at the fruits. The stone hit a branch and boomeranged. There were roars of laughter.

Away from the picnics, clutter and roaring students, at the edge of the park, sprayed with sunlight, almost near the roadside, stood a thick neem tree.

“That tree must be a hundred-year-old, children,” Chand Baba said as if introducing an old friend. “Imagine the things it has seen. After a few years we never know, there might be no park; there might be no nature receiving us.”

He shook his head, unhappy.

Chand Baba remained unhappy about many things. Once he expressed a desire for an air conditioner for the colony mosque. He told Father how during the summer days, the mosque was like a heated oven, making it difficult for the men to pray or breathe. Especially during Friday prayers when men suddenly remembered the existence of God and the wrath of judgement day, and the congregation was huge. Father and another officer chipped in for an air conditioner.

Peace was restored.

A week later, there was unhappiness about idle young boys from the servant quarters, whom the gardener referred to as “loafers.” They were neither interested in building communion with God nor reading the Holy Book, instead they wanted to use the cool air to escape the scorn of the hot streets.

Father did not seem to mind such pettiness, but the loyal servant got his way. A notice in Urdu was pasted outside the mosque warning the loafers.
Chand Baba, a deeply well-informed man, held religion and tradition in both his hands. He had served in the Victoria colony for many years. He was good at his job and building relations with other masters and servants.

After singing songs of glory for the neem tree in Queens’ Park, we went our separate ways. Chand Baba was left alone with his mind.

Bano and I sat on the seesaw. She went up on the swing and stretched her hand as if trying to claw at the sun. Then, I went up and tried to do the same.

It had been a week and a half since we had climbed the wall and saw the disfigured face. Bano had vowed to climb again, even after promising mother she wouldn’t. But lately, her plan seemed to get postponed a lot.

“Nanni Amma is sitting in the gazebo so I can’t climb today,” she had said one morning.

I asked her the next.

“Mother is strolling in the garden, can’t you see?”

Two days later, I reminded her again of her pending mission.

“It seems like it might rain. What if I fall? Will you buy me new legs? Do you have that kind of money?”

I asked her how much money she was talking about but she walked off angrily.

Days melted into a week. There had been no wall climbing and confrontation with the terrifying face on the other side.

I knew she was afraid. I knew that the thing had scared her. Something had finally scared Bano and a little part of me could not be happier. I wondered what it was that had truly frightened her, the thing reaching and grabbing her off the wall, or breaking a promise she had made to mother. Bano remained opaque.
If last summer was going be the anniversary of me finding out Bano was my sister, that summer would be remembered for Bano being scared out of her wits.

“Maybe it was a witch,” I said as we sat and sketched on the ground with sticks of the finished baraf gola.

“Maybe,” she said as she sketched a tree. “Maybe not.”

I made a smiling sun on top of her tree. She told me she did not like how I drew the tree and erased it with a fallen leaf. She rubbed the leaf on the ground as if it were a duster for a chalkboard.

“Draw it again,” she suggested, “don’t make it smile. The sun does not smile.”

I drew another blob over the tree and shaded it. When she looked away to see if Chand Baba was still sitting where we last saw him, I drew a faint smiling face for the sun again. My sun would smile.

“It came in my dream you know, the thing,” she turned back and said suddenly

“The witch? What did it want?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t understand.”

Really? What language was she talking in?”

Her revelation bred a thought of concern, but her attention gave away. She stood up, leaving me squatting over the unfinished picture. She dusted her hands off and skipped to the gardener who was crouching as he examined a fallen object on the ground.

“Come here, Zaki, look!” Bano called, “it’s a dead bird!”

I walked swiftly to the sight and there it lay, a giant, glorious, dead eagle. Bano poked it with her stick but the gardener gently held her hand as a sign for her to stop. The bird seemed to have been dead for days. Insects now inhabited the stiff body.
“We must not bother it,” Chand baba said.

“But it’s dead,” chimed Bano.

“Can we bury it?” I asked.

Chand Baba tsk-tsked. “We should. Such a sad task.”

I moved back and watched from a distance as the burial was being performed. Bano found a bigger, thicker stick and began digging a hole. She scooped the dirt up carefully and made a mountain on the side. Her eyes scanned and measured the body and made a rough estimate of how much space it would need.

I stood away, a little uneasy with the passivity that poured from the burial committee. Chand Baba lifted the bird with the front of his kameez.

Bano seemed so uncaring, so natural at burying dead things. Of accepting truths in our childhood. Like she was someone else’s child. Like she shared a womb with another baby who no longer existed. Like she had to call her birth mother, Khala Mehrunisa, for the rest of her life. She took on things bravely as they came at her.

The gardener, comfortable and familiar with the earth, cupped his hands and gathered dirt. Bano patted the ground to seal the bird’s final resting place. No prayers were said.

“Is there a heaven for the dead birds?” I asked Chand baba.

He smiled. “Of course, there is. There is a heaven for everything. There is a heaven for everything on this earth that dies.”

After the unceremonious departure of the bird, we walked around the park. We saw men, women, children, all drifting in different directions. The children towards the swings, the women after the children and the men ambling behind the two. There were straying voices of vendors outside the park, selling roses, newspapers and food. There were caretakers and guards of the
park, wandering here and there, conversing with this person and that, doing this job and that.

Tired students. New, besotted lovers. Lonely strays. The park was home to many.

“What happens to the park during night?” I asked Chand Baba.

“People go home. It closes like your school and the shopping plaza.”

Bano swung from the other side of Chand Baba, poked me on the shoulder and loudly whispered, “and then, the witches come out.”

A shiver ran through me. Chand Baba had heard my cousin-sister’s whisper.

“There are no witches in the park, Zakariya sahib.” There was reassurance in his voice.

“There are no witches anywhere.”

As we approached the exist of the park, I thought of the bird again. Now, soundlessly asleep under the ground. Under the city Chand Baba insisted was on fire. Away from the smoke and the noise it would neither see nor hear.

When Jahanara was buried in the ground like the bird, Father took me to meet her after many days. He thought I was ready, and he was afraid I was young enough to forget her if I did not see her buried in that soil.

Her name, Jahanara Mehrunisa Malik, and the same prayer I had memorized was written on the marble tombstone.

Papa did not say much that day either. We just cupped our hands and I repeated the prayer and many other prayers with him.

There is an art in burying a dead body. It is a complicated task that involves the time and sentiments of many people.

There is a person who finds the body. There is a person who tries to bring it back to life. There is a person who drives home the dead body. There is a person who gathers the material. A
white cotton cloth. Soap. Buckets of water. A coffin. There is a person who rinses the body, and the person who places the last fistful of dirt on the mound of earth.

“Rest in peace, dearest dead bird,” Bano said loudly. “May no ghosts, witches or upset mothers bother you in your heaven.”

We walked out of the black gates of the park, and Chand Baba ran into an old caretaker who told him that not very far from where we stood, they were making a bullet train that would run through the city. The government had begun digging the land and taking down the trees.

“Such a fascinating thing it will be,” he said.

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“You know what I was in my previous life?” asked Bano days later, on the afternoon, she finally climbed the wall again. “I was a wolf. I have heard they’re very smart.”

She and I sat on the stump in the garden and watched an orange stray cat drink water from the earthen bowl that Mother often kept for the birds.

After a quick replenishment, the stray jumped, deftly walked on a narrow wall, and jumped again to the neighbor’s house, vanishing from our sight.

I traced the cracks in the stump with my finger and brooded about my past life.

“Do you think Jahanara was a wolf too in her past life?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, almost annoyed. “I didn’t know her.”

I nodded. She had a point.

It was another hot day. It seemed as if a newer, more fiery sun had emerged over our heads. The promise of a good monsoon lay somewhere suspended in the heavy, dusty air.

It was the afternoons when we had the most freedom. Like the flowers, the grownups too seemed to wilt under the midday sun and retired for naps. Mother made sure Bano and I were cooped up in my room before she went to sleep.

Naps during summer were carefully planned. It was an hour or two when there was no chance of a power cut.

Bano and I always crept out. Walked around the house. Played in Father’s study. Sauntered in the garden and returned to the bedroom before anyone awoke.
Even in her sleep, Nanni mumbled and prayed for better weather. She cupped her hands and from her wrinkled, brown lips rose a prayer for the rain. The other times I had heard such sincerity and devotion in her voice was when she asked God to feed some sense in Aunt Yasmin’s mind.

Nanni still owned some land back in the village. Every year, the farmers harvested the crops and she received money. She said if there was no rain, there would be no crops. There would be no money for the farmers, and there would be no food in the cities.

The kitchen maid, Bilquees, had borrowed money from Mother to buy a pedestal fan. She said she and her two children slept in their charpoys in the courtyard, as did the other servants in their quarters, with their rotating pedestal fan. The rooms inside were like a burning kiln. No man in his right mind could sleep indoors.

Chand Baba frequently washed his face and hair with a hose in the garden. He took breaks during work where he sat under a shaded tree and amassed his spirit.

The cook, Roshan, often complained about the long spells of unannounced load shedding in the servants’ quarters Victoria colony.

Once I heard Chand Baba tell him that it was hotter in hell, where most of us were going anyway. This was a preview that God was showing man about the fire that was waiting for him.

“Man must prepare and get used to it,” said the gardener.

“That’s like cheating God.”

He wiped his hands in the front of his apron that said, *I’m cooking up a storm.* Chand Baba grumbled under his breath, offering no clear answer to the young chef. He sat on a chair in the kitchen and watched Roshan knead dough for the rotis.
“I don’t understand, Chand Baba, why your God is always so angry?” said Roshan. The gardener stayed quiet.

Bano stood on top of the stump. I looked up at her and asked, “How did you know you were a wolf in your last life?”

She jumped to see if she could look over the wall which was behind us. Her ambition went in vain.

“I know what I was before. I can feel it,” she said.

“What do you think I was in my last life?” I asked.

“Nothing. This is your first life.”

She jumped one last time and craned her neck to see if she could spot the witch. I looked at her dirty sandals on the stump.

We wandered around in the garden. We collected leaves of different shapes and colors. We plucked flowers and dismembered the petals. Amid the assembling and the dissecting, I observed how silent Bano had become. Her eyes casted down. A stillness presiding over her as her fingers removed the green stem from the rangoon flower. A pink petal fell on the ground, then another and another, till there was nothing left in her hand anymore.

We were all praying for different things that summer. We were all singing different symphonies. Some were praying for closure. Others were praying for rain. Some were praying for pedestal fans. And others were praying for gentler gods.

I knew what Bano was quietly praying for. She wanted her mother to return home. I had heard her crying in the guest bathroom. The same place where Mama smoked her cigarettes in secret.
When Bano removed her shoes, and prepared to climb the wall again, I did not stop her. I did not join in to climb like I had done before.

Moulvi Habib said human beings are made of clay and water, and that may be true for the rest of us, but I knew Bano’s anatomy was different.

Meherbano was built with fire.

She signaled me to join her in her quest. I shook my head instantly. She pulled out four pink Rangoon flowers from a cluster in the creeper that covered the wall and tossed them in my direction.

“Here, put these flowers in your hair like a girl while I solve this mystery,” she said in a peevish tone. “I want to see it again. The witch! I want to see that animal on the other side.”

I remained defiant to such a degree that I sat down firmly and watched her go higher and higher. After a few moments, I took off my sneakers and followed her.

~*~
9.

_Burning_

_The Cat_

Every house has its demons. Its own essence and stories, legends of joys and defeats, tales of boundless desires and exhalations, of sacred secrets and sacraments, of strange men and petty women; something that gives a house a body, a soul, an intention to persist long after nations collapse, and men, they wither away with short breaths.

The house next to ours belonged to Khala ji. Her house was remembered for the Vyjayanthimala songs that boomed from the Sony cassette player, and her furrowed eyebrows that only relaxed when the sky would burst open and pour.

She was a sixty-year-old seamstress who arrived on a promise for one summer in a single bedroom servant quarter. That was five summers ago.

With a temperament that changed fervently like the seasons, and a story of an affluent family that neither wrote to her nor visited, she occupied the status of the most intriguing person in the servant quarters.

Everyone had heard of the time she held a thief, who tried to rob her of her beloved television set, by his collar. The young boy dropped the TV. The screen cracked. Khala ji lifted her slipper and smacked the living day lights out of him. All this was done before a live quarter audience.

She also spat on the dudh-wallah’s face when she caught him mixing water in the steel milk container. Never was any character so clamorous and haughty in the Victoria colony. It was believed that both angels and jinns were wary of stepping foot inside Khala ji’s threshold. One never knew what disposition she garnished herself with that day. The thief had returned to her
quarter the next morning with a gift for causing nuisance in the dead of night, a flat screen brand new TV. The milkman had given her free milk since the incident.

Next to Khala ji resided the Christian brothers, Roshan and Rodger, who kept to themselves. They swirled their tea in silence. They did their laundry in silence. Their house released the kind of quietness that is expected of only people who are either immensely dull or have passed through a hateful time. My cat sensibility and sharpness voted for the second. I sensed they were anything but dull as the older was a cook in the bungalow and the younger one went to college. They were bound to have interesting lives. They just never spoke them.

Against the noise of malicious, insensible gossip about masters and servants, rents and droughts, their irreproachable demeanor unsettled me. I often found my thoughts dwelling on the lives of these boys; the only still beings in this vivacity.

Amid this animation, a new family had slipped into our world. Bilquees and her two children. They began to inhabit the last house. No one knew their story yet. No one knew what they would be remembered for. No judgements had been passed on the strangers. They seemed like experienced travelers. They settled as soon as they arrived. They were friends with the Tonga wallah who helped carry the furniture from their old house. They only wanted to learn the important information; what was the time for the water and power cut during those hot days?

Not a lot of weightage was given to the systems and traditions of the place. Who lived where? Who did what service at the bungalow? Why was the alley light always on, whether it was morning or rain? Why didn’t any flower grow in the quarter park? As the people speculated, the woman and her two children displayed little interest in mingling.

Ours was the faithful gardeners house, Chand Baba, the man’s whose summons were always answered, my doting father, the holy man and his holy fevers. Cozy in our humble abode,
the gardener, my mother, sisters, brother and I led a life of morbid simplicity. Things could not be that shabby for the master’s favorite servant. Even on the worst days, there was enough food on the table and many ears to sympathize with the family’s sighs. My father could exude a sense of power in this other kingdom of god.

If there was any failure the man had endured, it was from my hands.

If on some nights his shoulders sagged with tangible weariness, I was to be blamed. If there were moments when his mind lapsed into a state of inertia, it was because of what I had done a year ago.

His pride at being the king of a high rank officer’s flourishing garden, a man who had witnessed the Malik family’s ups and downs would come crumbling down if he saw me scuttling across corridors. He was reminded of the betrayal. The humiliation I had brought upon our family.

It is common to take a passionate interest in other people’s lives and ponder their misfortunes and sins. To light a cigarette and simmer in great details about disloyal husbands, shameless daughters, untimely deaths and corrupt grandfathers. To feel better about one’s madness and mistakes, to take a breather from sadness or guilt that resides in the heart. This momentary superiority.

Invincibility.

In small cities and towns, the stories you are trying to forget have a way of returning to your ear, to your life and then to haunt you. The tragedy you are trying to escape bounces back into your lap in other grimacing forms. The versions, the words, always exaggerated. And they never release you from the pain. This whimsical display of unbridled, insolent tongues humored
me after I transceded into a cat. But my father was still a human. He had relinquished. I had found a hidden place.

If Khala ji’s house was known for stories of her feverish temper and the boys were remembered for celebrating Christmas in silence, our house was remembered for the story of a man throwing acid on my face. Nothing else mattered to anyone.

Beyond this, we ceased to exist.

~*~

From the rooftop of my house, I watched many worlds collide. I traveled in and out of many lives. The world beyond the wall stretched and stretched. Nothing was invisible. Pain walked free. The sun was a sullen friend. Monsoon left holes in the ceilings. And the winter was crippling.

There were nights, the world and its people shrank and collapsed, and then, there were those gloriously bright hours when everything repaired itself and blossomed again. Lives remained untidy. People, restless and unpredictable. Desires were plenty and varied in the servant quarters of Victoria colony.

Some people longed for simpler, attainable things. A glass of milk every night. No power cut in the hottest day of summer. The rest harbored stormy and unfathomable desires. Ripples were forming in these beguiling waters. Seeds were being sown. It always remained wonderfully noisy over at our side.

Unlike the big, glass houses where sometimes between the men, their women and the nearest neighbor rested a vast garden, a corridor, a space where all madness dissolved, the grief from losing a child, the long years of duty and piety, lives often intertwined and collided in the quarters. Pain could be shared, communicated, felt and in my case, observed and absorbed.
Inside me, time was stationary thing, but around me, days passed dutifully and nights wheeled in. Men and women fell in and out of love, men found new drugs and reincarnated, and children sparked revolutions. I relished stories that were told to me by the wearisome and the sullen, and through those tales, I peered into different lives. I travelled to places I had not been to in a year. I sat in a rickshaw and sailed through the roads and bazaars like I did before. I went to Fairy Beauty Parlor with my sister. I frolicked in my father’s favorite Queen’s park and sat under the shade of the neem tree. I sat in the berth with my friend and her lover and we watched the crowded platform from the train window. The recluse cat would no longer be in a physical custody.

Life was different for me when I had a face. And what a beautiful face I had. Women’s eyes glowed with jealousy. Men longed for my attention. But now the women prayed for my suffering, and I stayed away from men.

I read quite enough and knew that in my body, there were bones, there was blood and there was a soul. The soul is what mattered. This is what every poet and sage sang. Skin is a superficial thing. Man is familiar with this celestial voyage. The journey to recognize himself, to leave the worldly pleasures, and to look beyond the skin. But a man’s love affair with beauty is a dangerous one. Man is inherently corrupt. He desires what pleases the eye. This sacred quest for the soul only lurks in great poems and books.

When I burned my skin, or woke up with an unfamiliar wound, I would watch it for days, months. I would rub my finger over it. It would change its color, texture, and depth. Every scar would look different as it healed. There was a round, dark spot on my hand where the hot iron had touched. There was a long cut left on a finger from cutting meat. And something called a hypertrophic scar near my thumb.
I counted. It took six months for the spot on my hand to fade. Three months for the cut from the knife to transform into another hypertrophic scar. The map on my skin changed every day, giving hopeful promises that perhaps someday maybe the skin on my burnt face would also heal. My face would also come back to me. But it never did.

There is a smell of burning skin. There is a sensation much deeper than the agonizing physical pain, the realization that everything is now being engulfed, stolen from you and the hours to come will now be different.

My left eye never returned. My nose never healed like my scars. But my soul repaired itself. It took me a while, but I eventually did return to myself.

~*~
These Violent Delights Have Violent Ends

Zakariya

We were wrong about Chand Baba’s world. We believed it ended as he left the bungalow on his bicycle, going away from his work, away from all of us. In fact, his world stretched and stretched. It started from the rose bush in the garden and expanded to the biggest two bed-room servant quarter behind the house. It stretched from the dense talks he had in the car with Khan, the driver, to his hushed courtyard behind the wall where two of his daughters sat, oiling their hair and chattering.

The young girls often sat in the courtyard for fresh air after their father left for work. When Bano and I climbed the wall together and peeked over, one of the gardener’s girls was sleeping on the charpoy and the other sat in the shadowy corridor, stitching a piece of cloth.

It wasn’t an it. It was a she. It was no animal or witch that Bano and I had seen, but Chand Baba’s elder daughter with a burnt face

I had seen Nanni’s siblings with inexplicable illnesses come visit her at the house. One of her sisters who lived in Shahdara had no hair. When her hairs did grow, it was so frail and soft like cotton candy, it came off in chunks between the teeth of a comb. She would ride the red metrobus with her daughter-in-law just to talk to her older sister about her balding head.

Nanni’s older brother, whom I called Mamo Hafeez from Faisalabad, could not speak or move after his body went into paralysis. He made strange sounds and spoke in a tongue that only Mama and Nanni comprehended.

I did not like sitting in the same room as Nanni’s siblings, but still, something about their bizarre conditions, even as a child, made sense. They were old. They were weak. Things happen
to your body. Nothing about Chand Baba’s daughter made sense to me. It was as if she was an
unfinished thing. It was as if something about her face was left incomplete during the crafting
process. Like God ran out of clay while molding her.

Bano and I finally trusted Nanni with our secret. We unleashed our raging turmoil and
confusion about the mysterious girl with the scarred face.

Grandmother narrowed her kohl-rimmed eyes and listened to Bano blabber on about how
we had not seen her once, but twice, which meant she did exist. It was not our collective
hallucination.

“That is Chand Baba’s daughter,” said Nanni. “She burnt her face in an accident. You
must not call her or anyone a churail or an animal. That is wrong. That is hurtful and wrong.”

The same night, Bano and I slept in Nanni’s room and heard her whispering to Mama
about Chand Baba’s family’s secret life,

“The girl had a lover she hid from her family. The father found out and stopped her from
going to college. She was doing her BA. The jilted man threw acid at her face for leaving him.”

“I know, ami, this happened a year ago. The poor girl was in a clinic for nine months. I
paid for her stay. Chand Baba did not even want to bring her back home. I forced him to.”

“If she knew how strict the culture was inside her house, she should not have had a
boyfriend. Why did she stray? She destroyed her life and the family’s.”

Here, Mother ruminated for a moment and said,

“We are ruining our men by giving them too much.”

“What does that mean?” said Nanni.

“First, a mother gives and gives, and gives in to his son’s demands, then the sisters and
then the wife. We spoil them into believing they can have whatever they want. And when things
don’t go as they want, they break and when they break down, they break other things too.”

“Not all men are like this. Look at the men in our family,” boasted Nanni.

“Didn’t one of your brothers break up his engagement with his fiancée in a telegram?”

“Oh, just shut up!” chided Grandmother.

Mother laughed, knowing she had clearly won the premature argument, and turned on the little green night light before she left the room.

The next day, in the garden, Chand Baba walked around with a hose and satiated the thirst of his beloved plants. He seemed a little aloof, irritated almost. He kept muttering to himself. Usually he would say a word or two to me, pat my head or gossip with Grandmother in the gazebo or Mother in the kitchen, or the driver sitting under the shaded garage. I realized Grandmother must have asked him about the burning episode to calm her bubbling curiosity about the lives of others. An old, concealed wound had resurfaced in the gardener’s heart.

When boredom struck that afternoon, I asked Mama if I could go on a ride with Samandar Khan in Papa’s Toyota. It was a common request. She gave me a twenty rupee note for cotton candy or corn and asked the driver to take me around the Mall Road. Bano stayed back to give her doll a bath but the brooding gardener tagged along.

We drove past the Avari hotel where Aunt Yasmin’s wedding reception was held many years ago. There were photographs of the event in the album. I looked at the zoo from the window and crowds of people outside. I thought how long it had been since I had seen Suzi, the elephant, lumbering in the zoo alleys. I wondered what she was doing right then. If she felt the blazing heat as much as we did, if the Zoo also had power cuts like the rest of Lahore and if she complained to Moti, the puma, about it at night after everybody left.
“Pinky died,” I told Samandar Khan one day as we were driving past the zoo. I felt he had a right to know.

“The monkey?” He said. “How do you know?”

“Grandmother read from the newspaper. Juliet monkey also died.”

“She died two years ago,” he reminded with an obvious tang of sadness in his voice. It was as if we were discussing the untimely demise of relatives.

“Jahanara also died two years ago,” I added.

Khan did not answer after that.

Theaters with posters of caked stage dancers gyrating in puffy salwars and tight blouses came next. We passed old white buildings and shoe stores. I bought an orange ice pop for myself and Khan. Chand Baba was not in the mood.

As I got busy with the ice-cream, the two men began their own conversation. The discussion was serious and heavy. That time it did not encircle social issues like police bribery and political corruption, but personal, private matters that the gardener had long encased in his heart.

Chand Baba poured out his heart to the young driver. He had been fortunate in his profession but never in his family matters. He said he did feel pity for his twenty-one-year-old daughter who lost her life and face in a matter of seconds, but he also felt a deep betrayal when he looked at her. She had taken everything away from him too.

He had an eighteen-year-old son, Bilal, whom, he said was good for nothing, and another nineteen-year-old daughter, Gulnar, whose marriage he was fixated on. Suitors steered away from their house because of what his eldest daughter Ismat had done. Her actions had labelled
Gulnar and even the youngest, twelve-year-old, Mehak, as *awaara*, immoral girls who were risky to take as someone’s wife.

“Oh Baba ji, that’s why people say to have lots of children, so when there are disobedient ones, there are also a few obedient ones, good children who hold on to parents when they fall. Why did you put a break after four?”

The gardener was silent and Samandar Khan answered his own confusion,

“I can understand your dilemma too. How can plucking weeds and planting *motiya* flower feed more than six mouths?”

I began to think about our own small family. And Meherbano’s small family. I wondered if Bano had stayed with us, and if Mama had more children, would she be any different? Would she have healed any sooner?

Chand Baba began, “I sent Ismat to college to study. I wanted my children to study. I did not know she tossed away her burqa in college and called boys’ mobile phones,” said Chand Baba with disdain.

“Wearing a burqa does not guarantee piety, Baba ji,” Khan said, scornfully. “All whores wear burqa in the red-light street when they leave for work. I see so many young girls sitting with boys in race course park in a burqa….”

“Astagfar,” was all Chand Baba could say. He looked back to see if the ice-cream and I were doing alright.

There was no place in the gardener’s heart for his disobedient daughter.

Just as Mama’s sick Mamo Rasheed spoke a different language, so did the rest of the adults in my life. Mother spoke a language of deep sorrow. Father’s language was always
secretive. Aunt Yasmin’s tongue was free and unbridled. Nanni’s tongue was loyal to cynicism and Chand Baba had a very bitter tongue.

We stopped at the last traffic signal before Victoria colony. A man with a leashed monkey on his shoulder approached the Toyota.

The monkey wore a pink shirt and a shimmering collar around his neck. The man said, “challo challo!” and the monkey looked straight at the windshield and saluted to Chand Baba with its little hand.

~*~

Later that day, Bano and I watched Sridevi, the actress, writhe on the floor like a snake on TV. The Her snake charmer dance partner swayed the flute as he tried to control her. The famous dance number Main Tere Dushman went on.

We sat on the carpet while Mama sat with her feet on the living room sofa. Only she was permitted to put her feet up in that way.

Her gaze was fixed on the television screen. Sridevi now became more animated. She danced with her radiant silver jewelry and emoted with her blue-green eyes.

Mama’s eyes could also change color like that. Many times, I had watched her insert a small transparent disk on her eyeballs before she went to parties. Her eyes instantly changed from brown to green. She told me they were called eye contacts. With her new green eyes, she became a different person. A lighter, happier version of herself. She would become Victoria Colony’s Sri Devi.

Bano stood up and imitated the dancer. She cupped her hands and raised them, and then swayed her body back and forth to do a snake dance. Mother released a repressed laugh.
Roshan and Bilquees prepared lunch in the kitchen. We could hear the clinking of the dishes. Nanni had taken Chand Baba to the flower nursery to look for some black roses.

I propped open my summer holidays workbook and found the easiest lesson. Under the Urdu grammar section, I stared languidly at the lesson prepared on the masculine and feminine gender words; *muzakar monas*.

“Larka is a boy,” I read out loud and sharpened my pencil. “Larki is a girl.”

Mama tsk-tsked from her sofa, a reminder that the shavings from my goldfish pencil were destined to land in their chosen spot: the waste paper basket in the corner of the room.

Bano gave me her candy wrapper from her éclair as I was in the process of gathering other trash. I saw Mother’s empty medicine bottle in the basket lying on top of an old electricity bill, banana and orange peels and my jetsport ice-cream cover from my mini road trip.

I looked at Mama. Her eyelids were heavy. Her hair was tied in a loose braid. She lay on her side, now barely watching anything. Sridevi, Bano or the dust bin. Her mind doing its own writhing and tumbling and dancing.

“Well, I have tried everywhere, every flower nursery in Lahore,” exclaimed Nanni as she entered the living room. “There is no such thing as a black rose.”

“Well, I’ve told you a hundred times. This is not the season for any kind of roses, not even stems,” Mother said aloud and finally changed position. She sat up on the sofa.

As Nanni and Mother continued to talk about flowers, Aunt Yasmin’s arrival from London, Sridevi, and old films, Bano and I slid out of the room.

In the kitchen, Roshan was preparing koftas. Nearby, Bilquees was scrubbing the dishes. We sat on the little table near them.

Roshan was shaping the minced meat into little balls for frying.
“Do you want to help, chotay sahab?” he asked me and wiped his hands over his apron.

I walked over to him, looked down at the meat and said, “yuck.”

“Step away, step away,” he said as he began to fry the koftas. The oil sizzled.

“I will bring my daughter Meena to meet you kids,” Bilquees chimed. “She is closer to Bano baji’s age.”

I heard a car start. I went back to the living room to find Mother gone. Nanni said she was visiting her doctor.

I stood by the window and watched Mother trying to reverse the car. Khan driver stood near the back of the car, trying to coach her. Chand Baba stood on the porch silently watching the drama.

“You know,” Grandmother said as she changed the television channel. “Your khala Yasmin was the first one to get a parking ticket in our family.”

There was a loud crash outside. I directed my attention back to the window. The front tire of Mother’s car had smashed a large flower pot.

She quickly escaped.

Khan driver chortled.

I did not dare to look at the gardener.

~*~
11.

Neither Here nor There

The Cat

I stepped out of the quarter to call after the milk man.

The narrow alley, lined with charpoys and parked bicycles, metamorphosed into an illimitable, frightening space.

Once, the same alley was my road to freedom, to the college, to the wide free streets of Lahore, to the chand raat celebrations at a friend’s house and to the bench in the park where he sat after college and waited for our day to begin.

A little boy came into the alley dragging his small bicycle. The metal chain was hanging loose. He leaned it on a wall and squatted down to examine it. He amused himself with the deadened chain and the tires.

I fumbled with the hundred rupee note in my hand. It was the fee for the milk man. I fixed the dupatta on my head and veiled the left side of my face.

I walked fast so I could flee before the boy’s eyes met mine, before they landed on my face and he recognized who I was. I walked nervously. My feet barely made a sound. The boy, now, unimpressed by his own mechanical skills, stood up and scratched his head in bafflement. He looked to the other side, where he probably lived, and then slowly, he turned to my side.

I turned my face away. My body was now paralyzed. I waited for the boy to walk away or to scream in horror or the world to burst into flames and disappear forever. I do not know what I was waiting for, but I stood still in fear and waited.

He stared for a while. His hand was on the black seat of his bicycle.
I looked at him. The *dupatta* slipped from my face. Even if it had not, it did not matter. Everyone had heard my tale.

There was no scream. The heaven and hell did not break lose. The boy opened his mouth and said, “*churail.*”

A witch.

“Churail,” he repeated promptly but clearly, like a rehearsed chant, like a preached doctrine, like his mind did not stop for one second and think on its own, comprehend on its own, reach the deepest, untainted recess of his heart and hunt for sympathy and pity and confusion that a young mind his age should feel.

I crumpled the note in my palm.

A smug look was cemented on the little child’s face. He disappeared from me. The alley, too, evaporated. Only the taunt. Only the chant. Only my personal failure remained. I went into trepidation and waited for another blow.

The door of the nearest servant quarter flung open and a voice came, sharp, loud, thundering, “*Oye haramkhor!* Run away from here! Have you no sisters and mother? Didn’t anyone teach you to respect?”

It was Khala ji, towering over the boy like a mountain. A thin, orange *dupatta* hung on her heavy shoulder. Her grey hair was tied in a loose bun.

She scowled again and uttered a few more curses. The boy picked up his useless bike and lurched away.

Ashamed? I do not think so. Just afraid of the colony’s goon.

“Come in, Ismat,” Khala ji opened her door for me.

I did not know she knew my name.
There was a charpoy in front of an air cooler in her courtyard. I imagined she was resting her eyes when she heard the boy. The entire Victoria colony knew how sharp her eyes and ears were.

I sat on the foot of the charpoy, the uncomfortable area. She sat with her back on the bolster. The cooler blew cool air yet Khala ji kept fanning herself with a film magazine.

The air was changing. It was not that hot anymore, but Khala ji’s body and its temperature had always been different from the rest of us.

There was a joke around the colony that if you did not know what the weather was like, just study Khala ji’s mood and behavior. On severely hot days, she erupted like a volcano. She threw rotting tomatoes at vegetable vendor’s faces. She threw her rubber slipper like a frisbee if someone cut her way. She roared and howled if the children knocked at her door to retrieve their cricket ball.

Her face, her neck, her cotton shirt would soak in sweat and nothing, nothing could cool down her body and temper.

“Mullah ji, reham! God have mercy!” She sang on such days and fanned herself with newspapers, electric bills, and magazines.

And when it rained, her whole body celebrated. Her mind went in a trance. She put on ghazals on her speakers, sat under a shade, lit up the hookah and ate pakoras. Once, she even sent a tray to our house.

“Don’t eat it,” said Bilal, my younger brother. “She might have poisoned them.”

I played with the bill in my hand and Khala ji quietly smoked her hookah.
“They would have still called you names, you know, even if you had everything,” she said and continued fanning herself with one hand. A thin vein of sweat ran on her forehead. She wiped it with her cotton dupatta.


I looked at her, at loss for an answer.

“At least a witch is a magical thing,” she said.

I wondered about her name. No one knew what it was. She never told. She had always been Khala ji, an aunt. Children called her Khala ji. Women her age called her Khala ji. Men older than her called her Khala ji.

“Women crumble fast in this world. Men get away,” was the last thing Khala ji said to me that evening. “Men always get away.”

The air from the cooler dispersed the hookah smoke. Everything was blurred in an instant. Through the haze, her eyes were able to find me.

I looked at her. She looked back, squinting. The woman never smiled.

There was a clanking of metal plates inside the house. Khala ji turned around and hollered.

“If you break anything, Pammi, I am not paying you a single rupee.”

There was another loud noise. Khala ji’s eyes were concentrated on what seemed to be the kitchen.
A figure emerged from inside. Tall and a little burly. Dressed in vibrant pink salwar kameez and yellow kolapuri chappal. She removed her dupatta and shook the dust off. Her glass bangles clinked.

It was Pammi. But like myself, she had another name too. A name that children shouted when she came strutting into Victoria colony to entertain with her songs, jokes and gossip. 

Khusra. They called her.

“Khawaja sira,” she corrected. “I am a Khawaja sira.”

Pammi often dropped by our quarters and many other quarters, unannounced. She made sure she and her friends were part of every social gathering, the birthdays, the Eid parties and weddings. She was never invited but she always thought she was expected.

“Look at this!” she turned to me and continued. “I came to Khala ji to borrow some money, but she made me clean all the dishes!”

I looked down at the ground and smiled coyly, making sure I was not asked to pick sides in their playful banter.

“A deal is a deal, Pammi, and there is nothing wrong with helping an old woman with her chores,” replied Khala ji as she fished out a hundred rupee from her bra.

Pammi laughed and kissed the note. I saw in her eyes that she was satisfied with the bargain. She turned her attention to me.

I was looking at her now, and she was looking right back. I waited, waited for Pammi to say something about my face. To make a scornful or wistful remark, ask me if the boy was in prison, ask me why the boy was not in prison, tell me she would pray for me, call me a bechari, a poor little thing, give me a list of ointment, oils, creams that could heal my scars, my skin, my
heart, my soul, but Pammi said nothing like that. She reached and removed a stray hair from my face and pulled my cheek as if I were a child.

“Do you study, baji?” Pammi sat down on the ground, right near Khala ji’s feet. Khala ji, suspended her legs so that Pammi could massage.

“I have done one year of BA, then I left college,” I replied.

“I am sitting privately for my matric exam,” she boasted. “The Christian bhai said he will help me.”

“She has been sitting privately for her matric exam for two years now,” jeered Khala ji.

“Next year, I will!” That was Pammi’s promise.

Khala ji shook her head as Pammi explained how her new teacher, Rodger, thought she could pass the English and physical education exam very easily. Rodger Messiah’s brother, Roshan, was the cook in the bungalow.

“I like your chappal,” Pammi looked down at my feet. “Is it imported?”

I said I did not think so.

She said she thought so.

The two women began to talk about the quality of shoes and different kind of stitches. In between the talk, I do not know how Pammi was able to convince me to give her my Bata chappal. It almost fit her. She said she would squeeze in her toes.

Khala ji let me walk home in her shoes. I was to return them soon.

“I came to borrow money,” said Pammi. “You made me clean all the dishes, and now, I am going home with a pair of imported shoes,” chuckled Pammi.

“Celebrate these small victories, Pammi, celebrate these small victories,” I heard Khala ji telling her as I stepped out of the house and walked back.
The women who fell neither here nor there remained in the courtyard. There was talk of making chai.

~*~
July,

12.

Mercy

Zakariya

When it finally rained that summer, Aunt Yasmin had just returned home from London. While the rain released the captive, Yasmin just brought back with her in a suitcase more heartbreak and madness.

Grandmother said that the women in her family had a habit of leaving things behind. This revelation put both her daughters who were present in the room in an invidious position. Nanni said that this strange habit of abandoning things had developed over time. Her own sister had forgotten her in a village fair when they were younger. This was led by a dramatic reenactment of the event that took place in the fifties.

Her arms moved wildly as she described how tall everything, the rides, the food carts, the people, appeared to her, a petrified girl. She explained how she darted hither and thither with her little feet to find her older sister. How her shouts dissolved in the roars of the merry crowd. Crowds that were immersed in cotton candy, jalebi’s and swings.

The gold bangles on my grandmother’s wrist clanked as she continued to move her hands, reliving the horror of that burning afternoon. Then suddenly, she became still, a look of anguish running across her face. She became the frightened girl again. I wanted to pull grandmother out of that fair, out of that memory, that horrible memory that might have still haunted her, but she left that story there, and began a new one. Returning to the main point; the women in her family.
Stories kept releasing. One after another. Someone left her children and married an English man. Now, what kind of a woman would do such a thing?

“A very sad one,” Mama said meekly.

Another woman left a task she had been working on for months, a sweater.

This.

That.

She.

Her.

Stress was laid on the fact that not all women have been so indecisive and impatient. My grandmother and my mother Mehrunisa, for example, had somehow “miraculously, by the will of God” dodged this trend of lunacy. They had held everything together in their lives. Mother joked that she was only pretending.

They were the crows, Nanni said. They were the *crows* in the family.

Bano and I knew why Grandmother was so chatty the night Aunt Yasmin returned. She was displeased by the way her older daughter had left her husband and home behind.

Aunt Yasmin took a sabbatical from the college in Karachi where she taught literature and was now in hiding in our guest room in Lahore. For Grandmother, her daughter could be remembered as the family’s new mad woman.

“Such bitter humiliation!” mumbled Nanni.

Aunt Yasmin was towering over her suitcase and unpacking. Bano was busy looking at the books and candies she had brought for us. And I sat with mother on a divan studying the tension that arose from grandmother’s unswerving stance and analogies, and my aunt’s peculiar silence.
The words must have been graven on my aunt’s mind but she uttered nothing.

Grandmother must have expected some reaction. A spurt of fury. Some melodrama. A cathartic moment. She knew her daughter. But Aunt Yasmin granted her nothing. Not even a mellow sigh. She continued emptying her bag.

Clean clothes were being folded in an untidy pile on the bed. The dirty ones were tossed in a corner of the room.

I don’t know how Aunt Yasmin remained so steady. Even I had a lot of questions. Starting with how long do we have to watch my aunt unpack to why Nanni called mother and herself crows? There was nothing endearing about that particular bird.

There was a fable my grandmother told me one day when she and I were sitting in a garden watching a crow eat seeds and millet from an earthen bowl. The pigeons seemed uneasy upon the arrival of the black bird. I rose to brush it away.

“Shoo! This is not your home! Shoo!”

With a swift movement followed by a raucous caw, the bird flew from the scene and landed on a branch. It cawed again. A warning maybe.

Nanni said I should not have shooed it away for the bird might also be hungry. Then, she told me the story of Kaalu, a very thirsty crow that flew miles in search of water. He found a pitcher with water inside but the opening was too narrow. He found pebbles and tossed them in the water.

One after another.

The water kept rising, and the clever bird quenched his thirst.

I remembered this story because she said crows were very intelligent and could solve any problem. Crows do not give up easily.
Just when I thought my grandmother had built a strong case for the bird, the crow that previously perched on a branch returned to the garden, dipping its beak deep in the bowl.

I knew other stories too. I remembered another about a crow and its chilling tenacity.

A boy in my school accidentally picked up a fledgling crow. The playground after recess was a hub for hungry crows and sparrows. They devoured leftover samosa, chat and naan. The mama bird swooped and pecked the boy at the back of his head. His walks in recess were careful and measured. He had access to limited spaces. The mama bird always found him and attacked.

There were a dozen birds in the playground. On the benches, swings and the tin roof of the small canteen. And somewhere among them was the bird whose heart the boy had broken. She lurked.

“You shouldn’t have touched the fledgling. Birds don’t just fall from their nests,” the science teacher said in class as the teary-eyed boy voiced his dilemma. The rest of the children laughed at him. They reminded him of another possibility. What if the mama bird followed him home?

The boy sniffled. His mind now whisked in another fear. He could not recognize the bird, but the bird recognized him. He sniveled and then wiped his nose with his white sleeve of his uniform.

I had a good seat that year, the one that grants you omnipotence, the one that every student wants, right by the window. It overlooked the playground. I would watch the custodians clean the mess we had left behind after recess with big brooms and dustbins. And the birds quickly stole away whatever they could get their sharp beaks on.

The teacher kept consoling the boy and said that birds were forgiving creatures. She gave the incident a fable like spin. She said that animals, birds and trees are smarter than we think.
Some children kept giggling, while others were a little perturbed by the notion that birds felt too. I kept watching the playground being colonized.

We had never thought so much about birds. We never knew their small bodies carried so much.

No forgiving act occurred. The boy had to change schools.

The crow badgered the boy just like grandmother was then badgering Aunt Yasmin. Like the invasive crow in our garden, Nanni urged incessantly that her daughter pack her bags and go back to Karachi to make her marriage work.

“Women who leave things behind carry ghosts on their shoulders,” she said. “They are leftover women and not a lot of men take on such women.”

I did not see the trouble Grandmother saw in her daughter. I did not care for crows and disillusioned relatives. All I knew was that Aunt Yasmin had brought back with her some rain.

Bano crawled towards me and poked me on my ankle. A sign for us to dash out of the grey world that choked the adults.

We left the room. We were children again.

I don’t know what they spoke about once we left the room, or if Aunt Yasmin spoke at all. But I heard mother say to grandmother, “Mother, you must not say such things in front of the children. You’re so careful around the help, but you say everything when the kids are around. I’m sure they understand more than we think.”

I imagined Nanni’s wrinkled face droop in a frown.

“Well, what can we do except beg God for mercy?” Grandmother continued. “God show us mercy and pull us out of this dark hole.”
I did not worry much about God showing mercy to Aunt Yasmin because I often heard from Moulvi Habib that He is quite merciful. I had once confessed to my Quran teacher that I had lied to my teacher in school, and he made me pray for forgiveness. I was assured that I was forgiven for God believes in mercy. From the grownups, I learned the opposite. They can sometimes be not so merciful. Like the unforgiving crow at school.

Aunt Yasmin was a smart woman. She was not going to let anyone carry the cross for her. Her plight was hers. She was not afraid. At least not in front of us.

After dinner, the topic of Aunt Yasmin’s new life was still in attendance in my parent’s room. As Bano slept with her mother, I also decided to sleep in my parent’s room.

Papa was worried for my aunt. He said if Aunt Yasmin was trying to find out who she was post-divorce, she must find something to occupy her free time. Otherwise, Nanni’s self-imposed wisdom and negative thoughts would hover in her mind.

Mama agreed.

She then told Papa the men who will paint the living room walls will come next afternoon. She had finally decided on a color.

He went to sleep in his study and closed the door after him.

The next morning, it was decided by the family that chicken karhai was to be prepared for Aunt Yasmin and monsoon’s great arrival.

The cook, Roshan and I reached the Tollington meat market with our umbrellas. We jumped over several puddles on our way. The bottom of the cook’s salwar was now soiled in mud, and my sandals and feet too became home to filthy stains. I wriggled my toes, irritated by
the dirt lodged between. I instantly regretted not listening to Nanni when she asked me to wear sneakers.

The city that had yearned for rain all summer did not take it so well once the sky grumbled and poured. Just like Aunt Yasmin’s new, free life came with a price, so did the monsoon rain.

In the new weather, there was an urge to rise out of the lair and sit in a veranda and suck on mangoes. There also dallied the real trouble, the peril of walking and driving down flooded roads and surviving the unexpected power cuts.

Our car could not slide inside the narrow road where the meat sellers and butchers sat and performed, so Roshan and I had to walk a bit to find his favorite shop.

The young cook refused to purchase meat from a fancy place where the job of selecting the meat and cutting was done for you. He liked to pick his chicken and instruct the butcher how it should be done.

The young family chef knew vegetables, spices and meat.

Mama had hired Roshan a year ago. His religion had always been an issue for my grandmother who sometimes created a ruckus for having a non-Muslim make food, but she still sympathized with the poor man who had to leave his sick mother in the village to work in the city. So she asked mother to give him other odd jobs around the house. He would clean the fans, sweep the porch, remove cobwebs from high ceilings, and massage Father’s legs on Sundays. Meanwhile mother hired a less skilled woman for the kitchen, her only other option, to soothe grandmother’s bigoted nerves.

It was not until grandmother accidentally tasted the *chapli kebab* Roshan had made that she decided to loosen her principles. She realized she had been chewing on mediocre food.
I did not know enough about the cook’s life then. I had heard from someone that he had changed his Christian birth name to Roshan, a Muslim name, not too long ago. He switched names only when he introduced himself to new people. On paper, Roshan remained Reuben Samson Messiah.

For a man who still attended church services, took Easter off, went to his father’s grave in Gora Kabristan with his brother, Rodger, and hung a Jesus calendar in his living room, changing names was his meager attempt to stop the servants from pronouncing his name wrong.

Rooobin. Robun.

He did not like the sound of his sophisticated English name on a brown tongue. At least that is what he told my mother.

Why else would a man push himself through this cruel ordeal of changing names?

The small meat market, in all its raw splendor, greeted us with a hostile odor of blood, guts and death. The butchers stood in their shops proudly displaying the squealing fowls crammed in metal cages and the carcasses of their dead friends suspended on metal hooks by their long necks.


Roshan asked me to watch my steps. A man in a motorcycle behind me advised the same but in a more aggressive tone. Behind on his passenger seat rested a wooden cage where more birds stuffed inside. Together, they made their way to the altar on the bumpy road. They watched me and I watched him.
In a shop, a boy just a little older than I turned on a water hose and sprayed away the blood, feathers and scraps of meat. A black stray lurking in a corner seized a trimming and jumped on a tin roof, savoring the food. More hungry cats appeared, inspired by the stray’s valor.

“Here he is!” exclaimed the butcher as he saw Roshan. “Merry Christmas!”

Roshan chuckled. That was the man’s way of saying hello to our cook. They spoke in their tongues about goats, chickens, prices, and of course, the much-needed rain. Both men enthused over scores of chickens flapping madly in their dirty cages.

I peered inside the chicken coop as the men continued to talk about the arrival of inauspicious injections that were being given to chickens to grow them faster. The butcher promised his father in law ran a clean poultry farm.

As I stared at the chickens, I felt dozens of them were staring back at me. Their movements were rapid. Their eyes darted at a rapid pace. A few stayed seated, deep in a reverie or maybe they had given up entirely. Many stood, frazzled, staring into my soul.

A chicken squawked in another shop. I wondered if they were restless by nature or they smelled what was coming their way. From their cages they could probably look at the crows perched on the shades of the shops. Their steady, beady eyes locked on the leftovers. I wondered if the chickens wished they were crows instead. One flap and they could fly away from everything. In our gardens or playgrounds. They could make a warm nest in a little boy’s hair.

Roshan patted my head and introduced me to the butcher as a “big officer’s son.” He took more pride in that boastful introduction than I did.

Then, I was asked by the sweaty butcher and my beaming cook to pick the fattest chicken for the man to slaughter. The butcher cleaned his knife on a block of wood and waited
for the deliberation. It was my call. It was the first time I wished Bano had agreed to come along rather than staying home. She would have been quick and excited.

“We don’t need to have chicken today, do we? Aunt Yasmin loves other dishes too,” I said. I presented him with a list of dishes that did not require any sacrifice.

The men laughed it off and asked me to be a big boy. A minute elapsed, and the mighty butcher took the wicked task upon his bloody hands. He pulled out a bird from the cage by pinning its wing on its back. The bird let out a cry. A plea that was to remain unheard in the valley of death. He placed the creature on the wooden block.

I hid behind the cook, refusing to even glance. Life, death and a martyr ground lay right before our eyes.

With a loud “Allah o akbar” and a swing of his knife, the deed was done. The bird was gone.

When Chand Baba gave Jahanara’s jamun tree away, it did sing a little before falling down. The bird remained very quiet.

Roshan watched the dismembering with patience. I cast quick glances to see how much longer we were to stay.

When we took the route back to the car, Roshan held my hand firmly so I did not trip in wet ground. In his other hand, he carried the chicken. All its squeals and short life trapped in a plastic bag.

We walked briskly past vegetable vendors and a woman in tattered dupatta asking for money. Roshan shooed her away with the hand that carried the chicken.

After a day of drizzling, it had started pouring heavily again. We drove back home.

Samandar Khan, Roshan and me.
The car drove on the canal road towards Victoria colony. Since school closed for that summer, I seldom left the house. I regretted leaving that afternoon looking for adventure.

“Zaki sahib?” Roshan looked behind from the passenger seat. “Is your aunt a teacher back in Karachi?”

I nodded and looked outside the window at a bicycle man selling small packets of the reddest meat I had ever seen. The packets hung on the handles of his bicycle. Dozens of crows and eagles circled the cycle man.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Oh that!” Roshan chuckled. “This is mercy meat. You buy a packet and the hawker feeds the meat from you to the hungry birds. This way no trouble can crawl near you.”

I leaned on the window to watch more closely. There were several more meat selling hawkers now. The tenderness and naivety I saw in the captive chickens or in the eyes of that dead eagle we had found in Queen’s park was missing in those meat thirsty birds.

I thought maybe my aunt could benefit a little from mercy meat. She could circle it around her head to keep away Grandmother’s jibes and bad omen.

“Chotay sahib, can you do me a favor?” Roshan said, turning around to look at me. “Ask Aunt Yasmin to pay a visit to the school for children of the servants in Victoria colony. The school is failing. She might find it interesting. She is a teacher, you said?”

My sympathy for the chicken was inconsequential in a city that was hungry for karhai and more. The car kept moving. The suffering of the bird stayed with me.

~*~
13.

Floating

The Cat

I learned of Rodger Messiah through my sister, Mehak. I had been observing him from my rooftop ever since. He tutored several children from the servant quarters whom she was friends with.

In the mornings, I prepared Mehak for school. I ironed her white uniform and grey sash. I braided her hair the way her class teacher preferred and made an omelette with tomatoes and onions. I packed her bag, keeping in mind her daily class schedule. Social Studies on Mondays. Islamiyat, double period on Fridays. And as she waved and walked out of the door to her school van, I rushed to the rooftop. I peered from behind a pillar, in such a discreet way, that I remained invisible to the rest of the world and only my sister knew I was watching her.

A yearning slithered inside my heart as her van sped away to the school, to the world. The girls made dull morning conversations in the van. Some slept with their heads against the glass. A few, masters of writing in moving cars, finished their homework. How madly I wanted to be one of them.

Right then, the Christian brothers’ door would swing open. A tall, lean, pensive Rodger Messiah would begin his journey to his college. He would secure his blue bag on the back seat of his bicycle and slowly disappear from the alley, then the street and then the block. Mehak said he was finishing the last year of Masters' and he wanted to do something for the small school in the Victoria colony.

“He’s teaching that Pammi khusra also,” Mehak snickered one day as she, Gulnar and I sat in our bedroom.
Gulnar roared, “What will she do with a matric degree?”

“At least something,” I said crossly. “She is free. She has ambition. You will do whatever your husbands will dictate for the rest of your lives.”

The girls looked at each other and continued to laugh. They had made peace with that holy principle of life. And when I was like them, so had I. When I was complete, when I was a woman, a human, I also believed a man’s companionship was all that I needed.

When Mehak returned from school, so did the rest of the Victoria colony. It would be afternoon. I would be taking down the dry clothes from the laundry line on the roof.

The van with a “this is all because of my mother’s prayer” sticker on its back window dropped my sister back home. A rickshaw dropped Gulnar from her college. Khala ji would be returning home from god knows where. Roshan Messiah would be taking a break after serving lunch at the bungalow. And Rodger would return on his cycle. His shirt would be drenched in sweat.

As I folded the clothes to take them downstairs, my mind wandered to the different places everyone had gone during the day. The schools. The colleges. The bazaars. The restaurants. The auto shops. The parks on cooler days.

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14.

In God’s Other Kingdom

Rodger Messiah woke up to a power cut. He would often wake up startled and sweaty if the fan stopped moving but the change in weather had taken away that particular jolt. He had carried on with his nap and woke up naturally that very, very late evening.

The sound of the prayer rose from the minarets of the Victoria colony mosque. The bleating rain blanketed the mullah’s call but still could not drown the music that boomed from Khala ji’s speakers. Rodger recognized the mullah’s voice. He had been hearing it five times a day for the past year. He also recognized Lata Mangeshkar’s voice. His mother used to play her songs on an old cassette player.

The rain battered the tin shade underneath which the brothers often had dinner. The clouds had not given up in the past four days and would not bow down to any preacher’s voice. Rodger realized he had slept an extra hour. There was often enough time for him to read in the veranda before sunset and the Maghrib prayer. He followed strict rituals. He read a little, had his usual two cups of strong chai and a stroll in the quarter park where nothing grew. Somedays children from other quarters arrived at his doorstep, clutching their homework copies, demanding attention. They sat under the shade because it was still too hot. They understood long division. They understood what nouns and pronouns meant.

There was a flash of brilliant light preceded by a long rumble from a very tired sky. The prayer ended with the mullah coughing into the speaker. Before the microphone was turned off, another sound found its way into the air, a deep sigh by the dismayed cleric who knew no amount of passion in his voice could convince the worshippers to hike up their salwars and glide
through the muddy waters. On stormy days, God existed inside. He existed inside houses and buildings, inside shops and cars.

Rodger was still seated on his bed. He sat brooding, suspended in that languid phase when the body regains consciousness and commands discipline, but the mind is still soaring elsewhere in other private realms. The first few vulnerable minutes after one wakes up. His mind stood silently in the last place it had visited in the dream, the church where his father was shot last monsoon.

The rain had washed away the dust from the trees, washed away the dirt from the faces of children playing in the streets, washed away the mud from the laborer’s skin, rain that had sunk a pedestrian bridge on a main road and killed two women, rain that had stripped the city of its filth and gunk and muck and piled on a different kind of agony, a different kind of abuse, a watery battle with the gods and the government and the law, rain that had so much power, could not wash away any memory, could not sink any dreadful thought that hovered in Rodger’s mind.

Everything was vivid in his head. Everything about the death day. The church walls were just as plain and ugly as he remembered. He would stare at them on Sunday service, an event his mother made sure both her children attended. The pastor’s voice was as croaky as he last heard it. His brother’s name was still Reuben Samson Messiah. He was not hiding behind the name Roshan.

There was a tick, tick sound of the cassette player behind his bedroom door in the other quarter. A new song now played. He knew that artist too, and the song. He assumed their neighbor was nostalgic that day as she played Reshma’s song about separating lovers and torment. He barely spoke to her and she barely spoke to him, but still he felt he knew a lot about
her from her taste in music and the kind of food she cooked. The aroma of the food filled their home too.

He walked to the kitchen sink and splashed his face with water. The dream lingered. He stood motionless as his mind took another voyage, and then a dangerous plunge into the room where they had brought his father’s body.

He knew a thing or two about untimely deaths. When he was ten, he had found a black kitten in the auto workshop where his father worked. The frail, little thing was hiding behind the tires of a dusty yellow Volkswagen foxy. He and his older brother Roshan often sat in the car and pretended to drive around Lahore.

“And that’s the Minar-e-Pakistan on the right. Wave at it!” Roshan said as he steered the thin steering wheel.

“But we went there yesterday. Now, let me drive you to Billo mami’s house.”

“We should buy this car when we grow up,” Roshan said as he pretended to park the permanently parked car at the garage.

“We should buy this car when we grow up,” Rodger agreed.

He tossed Rodger the imaginary keys.

Their mother did not like the fact that they had brought home a black kitten. There were so many other strays roaming about in the neighboring meat shops and garages, white kittens, orange kittens, semi-orange kittens, why would they bring a black cat? It was bad omen. But she had let the boys keep the pet. The kitten had died a week later. Without an illness. Without a warning. It had pained Rodger’s young heart.

When he was twelve, a boy in their colony died from electrocution. He had touched a utility pole during rain. His death was mourned in darkness. There was a blackout for the next
two days. It seemed like all the electricity had gone inside his little body and then into his little grave.

There was no serenity on Rodger’s father’s face although the mourners in the house insisted there was light. They assured his mother and Roshan there was a glow on his face. *Noor*, they called it.

Light from God.

A word, although misplaced and misused, Rodger had found relief in momentarily. No one uses the word *Noor* for a Christian.

There was nothing noble about the way Samson Messiah had died. A gunman had raided a church and shot all nine praying men and women. Their father had never stepped inside a church. That day, he did. They found his body lying in a fetal position.

Rodger forgave the mourners for this wrongful portrayal. He knew people said strange things at funerals, anything to make themselves feel better. They say things that may never be true, things we can never really know. There is much sentimental discourse on the ephemerality of life, martyrdom, angels and better places. Such subjects irritated him. He began to believe that sometimes people painted death as a surreal thing, as a portal from a shipwreck to a place of absolute wonderment, an escape from a world of predicaments to a rose-colored space. Anything and everything to console the hearts in mourning.

No death is beautiful. No dead thing radiates beauty. Not even the mummified mighty pharaohs in the valley of death. Death is death. It is the end of everything. And that is all.

Rodger drew in a breath and whispered in the room that smelled of parched earth and dampness,

“Abbu.”
He called for his father. He did not know why he had called for his father.

For a while only the rain answered, and then, another living thing offered a response. It was the stray dog that had been patrolling the quarters for the past few weeks. The children had named him Barsaat.

Barsaat barked continually. Rodger took an umbrella and cautiously ventured outside. He whistled. He doubted the dog knew its name but still, he called, granting the stray an identity.

"Barsaat! Barsaat!"

The barking grew closer. The wet dog splashed rainwater as it trotted towards its caller. It had learned its name quite fast, like it had been yearning for a name, an identity, a center.

Rodger welcomed it by stroking its head. The wide-eyed, droopy eared Barsaat who had received mixed reactions upon his arrival by the residents was appreciative of yet made uneasy by Rodger's sudden touch.

"I was wondering who would give this creature shelter," said a voice.

Rodger looked up at the speaker under a bright red umbrella. The first thing his eyes landed on was the mud-splattered salwar and then the frizzled, salt and pepper beard.

“Chand Baba,” said Rodger.

He was presumably on his way to the mosque. Neither was excited about encountering the other.

"So, you heard Barsaat cry too?"

"So, that's what the children in the quarter are calling him? Barsaat?" Chand Baba looked down at the refugee dog.

He knew Chand Baba alone managed the affairs of the quarter. The whole place ran under his strict surveillance. Rodger sometimes met and made small-talk with his son Bilal at the
outside the colony or ran into little Mehak chattering with her friends in the alley outside the quarters. Rodger had also heard that although Chand Baba had his eyes on other people's woes, in his private life he too was wallowing in a state of despondency.

"Everyone must have heard the poor thing cry yet nobody opened their door. Not even you. There, I heard your door is open for all god's things."

"All pure things," Chand Baba was quick to respond, "you know a Musalmaan can't let a dog in his house. And besides, I have young children. Do you remember the stray dog that bit Halima's six-year-old?"

Rodger knew the story. Barsaat quietly crept inside the servant quarter.

“The child had become rabid. I buried the boy with these hands. Right there in the graveyard, you know Miani Sahib graveyard,” Chand Baba’s face remained stoic as he pointed in the rain to where the graveyard should be.

“Have you ever buried a young child?” he continued.

Rodger shook his head.

“I have buried two.”

Chand Baba tailed off into silence. His mind delving into its own terrible memories the storm and the rain could not wash away.

“I have heard about the little girl in the bungalow,” Rodger said.

The old man nodded his head, “Fatima. Her name was Fatima.”

They were interrupted by the sound of Barsaat knocking something over in the kitchen. It took a few seconds for Rodger to register what it was. It was the pot of milk resting on the kitchen counter.
“The colony municipal authority is looking for that dog,” began Chand Baba. “It’s better to get rid of him. A wild animal does not see if a man is wearing torn chappals or imported sneakers. It has no favorites.”

There were several strays strolling in the colony that Chand Baba and other residents had gotten poisoned or shot over the last few weeks by informing the authority. The motive was to protect from rabies the officer’s wives who jogged during evenings in their Nike shoes and the servants who slept under the sky on charpoys at night.

“It’s about human life,” said Chand Baba. “We must put it before anything else. In a place where bridges are falling, the leaders are stripping the land bare, we must pick our battles. Sacrifices must be made. Some things live. Some don’t. We can’t control the corruption, but we can control a dog killing a child.”

A smile emerged on Rodger’s face. His eyes did not yield. He looked straight into Chand Baba’s face. He knew of this selective sacrifice. He had also seen photos in a computer in his college lab, of rows and rows of stray dogs killed in the streets of Karachi to save human lives. Shot and poisoned to cleanse the city.

Seven hundred dogs.

Eight hundred dogs.

One thousand dogs. One paper re-counted the bodies. Their eyes open. Their mouths spilled. Their guts lay on the boiling streets.

Chand Baba continued walking towards the mosque. Rodger closed the door behind him.

A rage welled inside of him. New thoughts emerged. Who do we even consider a man, a human, someone worth living? Samson Messiah was killed like a stray dog, like an unwanted,
flee-infested, rabid, nonbeliever, Christian, filthy stray dog by a sectarian militant group when he was praying inside a church.

~*~
15.

Small Bodies

The Cat

It had been raining for four days now.

And it was only my father who waded through the waters and walked to the mosque when there was a call for prayer.

His back ached and he said that he wanted to stay home the evening when he ran into Rodger in the alley, but when the Maghrib reached his ears, he gathered the physical strength and moved.

Usually after a prayer, my father felt lighter. For a fleeting moment, all his sorrows and unease seemed to melt off his body, but that day as he walked back dodging pools of muddy water, his body remained heavy. His heart seemed to sink. He knew what it was.

My sister’s suitors were arriving after the namaz. A new family was going to emerge at our doorstep.

Gulnar was to sit before them dressed-up like a doll, waiting to be devoured, waiting to be scrutinized for her face, height, and weight. Her follies, the families’ follies, her shortcomings, the family’s shortcomings were all going to be discussed until the biscuits were eaten, and the tea was finished. Like always, nothing was going to come out of the ordeal. Another evening wasted, another night spent in ridicule and disenchantedment.

Many men had come to our house with their parents for Gulnar. Most never followed up. Many demanded extraordinary dowry that made a shiver of rage run down my father’s spine. Some had shady reputations but inflated egos. A few didn’t like her brown skin and a few she
rejected based on their lack of skill and unimpressive means of livelihood. But most had heard of my burning and brought it up in conversations.

With each question, something died in my father. Hope. Belief in better endings. His love for me dimmed more and more.

For my sister Gulnar, I was the vessel in which all her longings and secrets were deployed. Like most twenty-year-old girls, she had her dreams and desires. Before our father sold our television, calling it the devil that led young women astray, we watched many Bollywood films. We listened to songs about lovers, love, the monsoon rain and making love. Now, the only music that satiated my romantic appetite floated from Khala ji’s faithful cassette player, or from Gulnar as she sang in our bedroom the songs she had heard in college with her friends.

We watched films where gallant heroes romanced their timid heroines in rain, on hill tops and in forests. They made love seem so easy, a lover’s mind so simple, and destiny seemed like moldable clay. Real life and real love are quite different. Gulnar did not know any better.

She did not just want a husband: she wanted a husband with some substance, a strong character. She wanted her man to dress up well, to work somewhere decent, and most importantly, to speak in English. I agreed with her.

“Not a factory or a kitchen,” she said blatantly one early evening as I dressed her up for another family.

I pinned her hair away from her face and began threading her eyebrows. After a few exclamations of pain, she continued, “You see, like maybe a man working at an office or a departmental store or pharmacy. Perhaps a man who is a teacher. What do you say?”
I nodded and did final my touches by snipping the stray hair with a small scissor mother sometimes used to open packets of cream.

“I can’t end up with a man like our father. I can’t end up with a same life. I have my own mind and my man shouldn’t be frightened by it.”

I blew on her forehead. The strays flew.

“I want to have a big television set.”

This was her last line of argument. She got off the bed and walked to her cupboard. She opened the steel cupboard with a handle shaped like a wheel. Pulling out a small mirror, she studied her face closely. She raised her eyebrows and danced them as she inspected by threading job.

“You left a hair here,” she pointed to a small, unwanted hair near the arch. I asked her to return to the bed, under the lamp so I could see clearly.

“Make them like Rekha in that film. What was the film?”

“Jeevan Dhaara,” I replied.

“Jeevan Dhaara,” she echoed.

Before us lay an open vanity box. I took out the whitest foundation she had and began applying it with my fingers. I pressed it on her round cheeks, over the tiny mole she had on her chin, on her nose she said was very hooked.

“I want a man who can whisk me away from this small quarter life.”

I was familiar with these eccentric festivities that erupted in her little heart, these subterranean moments of ecstasy, of rebellion, of dangerous passion of hurling everything in the wind and being free. Of thinking this is freedom. Of thinking, hopelessly believing that the right man is the cure for her insubstantiality, for the raw darkness that surrounded her. He was the cure
for sleepless nights, for bland days when mother did not cook anything delicious or when Khala ji did not play music to color our mornings. Of load shedding and gas cuts. Of blazing afternoons that choke you and vile rains that stripped the city bare. A man was the reason to enjoy the smell of the motiya flower that sweetened the night, or to apply henna on your palms, or to listen to Ghulam Ali or Mehdi Hassan. People in love are fools, but people who have no idea about love are bigger fools.

She did not know love can burn you out completely. She did not know that it is never enough.

She did not know what it feels to open yourself to another, to be so naked and vulnerable that once it is over you know there is no going back. And then, if it is all over to be asked to stitch yourself back again, to sew those cracks and mend those crevices in your heart.

“No one should be this hungry or desperate for love,” is what I offered her as a reply that evening. “Begin to love and be happy in yourself. That is something no man can take away from you.”

“Why must we talk about him leaving me?” There was an intensity in her voice. “What happened to you won’t necessarily happen to me.”

We locked eyes for a second. She looked away, ashamed of her outburst.

“Ismat?” She called my name.

“Yes.”

“Did you like working at the saloon when you did?”

I put kohl under her eyes, “It was a good job to do after I finished matric and waited for my BA admission.”

Her face was now whiter than her neck. I began to powder her neck to match.
“Do you hate that I make you dress me up? That I talk about my college and friends, and the markets, cinema and the boys?”

Gulnar believed my life had been reduced to nothingness. She did not know that a reclusive neighborhood cat is the freest being of all. A slave to nothing and no one.

“All the people tell me things; does it mean I hate them all? I enjoy listening to these stories.”

“You know what my friend Nargis tells me,” she began. “She tells me that we are just small, little bodies in this wide universe. And there are around seven different people in other parts who look just like us. They must be looking for different things in life.”

I smiled.

“I wonder about those twins you know. One of them might be in England living her life. One of the twins could be in India praying in a temple. And I’m here praying for a TV.”

I opened the cupboard and took out two cotton salwar kameez.

“Do you want to wear the maroon one or the yellow one?”

She pointed to the maroon suit.

“Do you sometimes think your twin in the other world is having a better life?” she asked.

I felt her eyes watching me quietly as I smudged a pink lipstick on her cheeks. A wave of silence surged up inside her as she studied my face so closely. I knew what she was looking at. I knew what she was thinking. She was afraid to say it aloud. And I was afraid to answer if she asked anything. I shook a bottle of dried mascara and began applying it.

Soon enough the silence swallowed everything.

~*~
It had been two hours since the power was gone. The fourth night of rain was turning into the fifth.

After the suitor and his family left, Gulnar and I cleaned the room. I swept the floor with a broom. Gulnar took a milk biscuit from the plate on the table and grabbed the broom from my hand to finish the task faster. She thought I was very slow.

“There is no need to be so poetic with the broom,” she said as she ate the biscuit with one hand and swept with the other.

We packed the rest of the biscuits and nimko. The sugary delights and salty snacks went back into their jars. They were to be reused for the next guests. Then the next. Then Bilal would cycle to Ahmed & Sons Grocery Store to buy more. Mother would fry more pakoras and kebabs. The performance of a happy family and dutiful children would be repeated till a man eventually labeled my sister as marriage material.

Four years ago, when I turned nineteen, the search for a husband began for me too. I had openly resisted the idea of entertaining these men and their families at our house. I hated the idea of elegantly bringing chai in a room and then pouring it as everyone looked on. I knew the boy’s parents looked at everything. My hair, the placement of dupatta on my head, the color of my face and then the color of my neck, hands and feet to see if everything matched, and if everything was how it should be and where it should be.

I became an object, a thing, a goat being paraded in a goat market before Bakra Eid.

Once during such a meeting, when the parents were not looking, I told the boy that I was visited by jinns every night. He sweated profusely for the remainder of the afternoon. When I bent to pour tea for his family, he kept studying me. I looked at him with a teacup in my hands and gave a slow smile. The guests never returned.
I could get away with such things. My father never created a fuss. I was his favorite then.

My sister Gulnar was numb to the whole drawing-room-entertaining experience. Even after what happened to me, she believed love conquered everything. No matter in what form or way it reached you, alone under a greenwood tree or in a drawing room full of eyes.

Now, we both lay on a charpoy in the small barasati on the rooftop. Even after the change in the weather, it was unbearable to sleep downstairs without any electricity. There was never enough air in our bedroom.

There was a musty smell in the barasti. There was mold and mildew on the walls. Every wall had a different pattern, a new shade. The room was filled with some new and some discarded household items. There was Bilal’s old bicycle, my father’s suitcase, a broken shoe shelf and a steel trunk. The trunk contained new blankets, quilts, pots and pans, a sewing machine and a juicer. Items Mother had been assembling for years for my wedding dowry and now for Gulnar’s.

Singer Nayyar Noor’s ghazal colored Khala ji’s courtyard and our rooftop. She turned up the volume to compete with the undefeated, growling sky.

I stood up from the charpoy and walked out of the room. It was drizzling now. I leaned over the parapet and looked down at Khala ji’s house. A single candle burned under a shaded area where she slept with her silver and blue Sony speaker by her side.

Four nights of rain were a nuisance, even for Khala ji. The flooded streets had restricted her movement. She could not wander in the bazaars and she had not been visited by Pammi in days.

I looked over at the rest of the Victoria colony soaked in darkness. There were just a few lights here and there, scattered in different bungalows.
During blackouts, you look at the city differently. You light a candle or an emergency light and write elegies. For the city. For the country. For its leaders. For its bridges and monuments.

“Who do you think Khala ji remembers when she plays ghazals like these?” I heard Gulnar’s voice. She joined me on the parapet. She did not mind the mild rain. She often created a ruckus when she was asked to move the charpoys and the laundry from the clothesline when it began raining.

“She does not have to remember anyone to listen to these songs.”

“A few days earlier she was listening to that love song from that old movie…what was it…”

“Heer Raanjah,” I finished her sentence.

By now Gulnar, myself and the whole neighborhood knew every cassette Khala ji ever owned. There were jokes of gifting her a CD player or a computer with newer, modern music. It was only talks. No one dared to approach her because of her temperament.

“So, you do not think she misses a lover when she listens to such songs?”

Gulnar did not wait for me to answer.

“Well, I would have definitely listened to these songs if I were in love,” she said and sang a few wrong verses of a song from the film Heer Raanjah.

She swayed her dupatta, rocked her hips and dance around on the rooftop like a love-struck Bollywood heroine. Now, the ghazal and Gulnar’s voice were both in an unharmonious chorus.

Heer Raanjah, a popular tale of two young lovers separated by society. Khala ji played so many tragic romances.
Heer died from poison. Sohni died by drowning. Anarkali got entombed inside a wall. Sahiba took an arrow in her heart. Sassi vanished into a crevice of a mountain. All those women in the folklore perished for the sake of scorned love and rebellion. And their lovers and the love could not save them.

I wondered what happened after the pair arrived in heaven. There were no disgruntling families. There were no condescending Mughal emperors there either. Nothing could separate them anymore, so did they still long for one another? Or did they wander off after other promised, limitless bounties? Did the women retain their senses?

There are terrible things in these stories, things ignored in shayri and ghazals.

Heer’s choking throat and changing color, Sohni gasping for breath, the water entering her lungs and Anarkali’s darkening world, all buried somewhere in the soft rhythm, sunk in the waves of the melody. The pain is diluted in poetry. Never completely felt. The world wins, and the lovers must perish to exist again.

Heaven must be a different thing.

“I know more old songs than any girl my age,” Gulnar’s voice brought me back to the roof. “It’s almost sad.”

I asked her if she liked her suitor from earlier that evening.

“His mother did most of the talking. I do not want a man who still has his umbilical cord attached.”

I did not know if she expected me to stay solemn or laugh.

“No, I am serious, Ismat,” she began as she saw me smile. “He did not say one word. It was like she had clipped his tongue before arriving. I was not sure who I was going to be married to, him or his mother.”
She said the boy’s mother asked about me, *the other sister*. She said that she was one of those sly women who had inquired everything about our house, family history and limited wealth before arriving.

“It was almost like she wanted to see you. She kept asking and asking,” Gulnar said, not looking at me.

I wanted to tell her I was sorry, but I stayed quiet and let her lament her tired luck.

It was not the first time such a thing had occurred, that a guest who had come over to look at Gulnar has been so persistent about seeing me. I wondered if they were just curious to see if I did really exist or was just a mythological character created by the *mohallah* to teach their liberal daughters a lesson. Or maybe they just wanted to see the map of my face. They had seen rich NGO women on TV rescuing women like me, freeing them from everything, handing them jobs and a life, and they wanted to see one for themselves.

When it happened, when the lover for whom I resisted all my arranged drawing room proposals burnt my face, my story was featured in two English newspaper and one Urdu. The English paper gave me half a page. The Urdu granted me only a quick column.

The milk man’s wife said her cousin had a big TV and heard my story on a news channel. The news report showed no face and name, but the TV anchor called me a young college student.

*A young college student was injured when a young man threw acid on her face as she was leaving for home in a rickshaw.*

The rickshaw driver made remarks for the television camera. There was a glint in his eyes. He was happy to be on TV.

The milk man’s wife’s cousin knew they story was about me. The cameraman had captured a footage of my father crying outside the hospital with the police constable.
The following week, a few more columns were written. I was now called a different name. A young acid attack survivor reveals the attacker’s name.

Survivor. The news report called me a survivor.

Lahore acid attack survivor will not resume college.

Young man charged with acid violence arrested.

Youth released on bail.

Young man’s father plans on calling a press conference on wrongful claims and defamation.

Young acid attack survivor refuses to talk to media.

They forgot about me soon after, and I thanked God for that. But they forgot about him too.

Nayyara Noor’s voice now pierced my ears. Gulnar’s off-key singing, the skies warning that it was not over, that heavy rain was going to drum soon, the sound of my own throbbing heart, all like a dissonant ghazal pierced my ears.

I placed hands on my ears and hummed a Ghulam Ali ghazal that I had been hearing on Khala ji’s speakers for weeks. I knew the words by heart.

I began to sing loudly. I could not go back there. I could not go back to the rickshaw and the ambulance. I could not become a column in a newspaper. I could not become a lesson for everyone in the colony and college again.

“What are you doing? What are you doing?” Gulnar’s voice reached me. Clear and loud. She was shaking me to break the spell.

“It’s hailing! It’s hailing!”
Hail began pelting the rooftop like bullets. We took our pillows and dupattas and headed downstairs. There was a scuffling sound in Khala ji’s house as she moved her charpoy and life indoors. Nayyara Noor went to sleep too.

Gulnar held my hand and led the way through the dark. I followed her and descended the staircase, pushing behind the repellent thoughts of love and burning, newspaper columns and burn units. I pushed them deeper and deeper in the farthest recesses of my mind, in that foreign country where reality is forgotten, where the pain is diffused, where Gulnar stops talking of love and finishes college, where Khala ji gets a brand-new CD player, where the walls in the barasati have a fresh coat of paint and where the acid does not burn that much.

~*~
July,

16.

Leakages

Zakariya

Mother gave Meherbano and me a very important task the morning it finally stopped raining. She handed us a notebook and asked us to make a list of things around the bungalow that were falling apart. Rain leaves behind remnants in old houses.

On the first day of rain, Papa found a hole in the drawing room ceiling. The rainwater had leaked and drenched one of the sofas. Mother and Bilquees tried to dry it with a blow-dryer. On the third day of rain, the wooden doors in Nanni’s room magically swelled and would not shut. A carpenter was summoned to trim the bedroom and bathroom doors with a hand plane. On the fifth day of rain, there were brown water spots on the kitchen ceiling. The ceiling Mama had just gotten painted a few weeks earlier.

That did it for her.

“The more I try to fix this house, the more it falls apart,” she said to Aunt Yasmin on the fifth day. “I can’t wait to move to a better place after Iqbal’s promotion.”

Both the women stood with their hands on their hips and looked at the dark map on the otherwise immaculate ceiling.

“They’re building new houses in the colony, you know,” Mother said.

“Yes, I heard the colony administration is taking down trees,” responded Aunt Yasmin.

“They will be smaller houses,” said Mama. “But cleaner houses, new houses, not old ruins. Colonial houses are only fancy from the outside.”
Mother said she no longer cared for the stains, the leakages, the damages, the roaches and lizard population that never seemed to deplete, the termites that ate every wooden shelf, chewed on every classic Father’s library housed and never seemed to get full. She said she would not spend a single rupee on anything anymore. Enough was enough.

Aunt Yasmin said they would see. She joked that even after Mother died, her spirit would return to fix the bathroom sinks and loose cupboard doors. She enjoyed being Iqbal Malik’s begum, the begum of the bungalow.

On the sixth day as the rain ceased, so did Mother’s determination. Bano and I were free before she assigned us with the list making activity.

It was a simple morning. Bano and I were drinking mango juice and hunting for insects on the wet porch and garden. We looked around for squirming earthworms, snails, frogs, slugs and other new things that had crawled out of soil because of the unrest. Unearthed, uprooted by days and nights of heavy rainfall.

On rainy days, Bano and I had limited outdoor activities. We stayed mostly inside and looked at pictures of different bugs in our encyclopedia. We wondered which of those creatures we could find in Chand Baba’s garden.

I had placed my bet on a toad and Bano was sure we could find a snake if we looked really, really carefully. It was not a wild dream, for Victoria colony had many snake and bat sightings.

“Wait till the sun comes out,” said Bano as she poked a reddish-brown earthworm with the straw from my empty juice box. “Wait till the sun comes out and then, they’ll all dry. There’ll be hundreds of dried insects everywhere.”
I squatted and looked down at the worm. It was a strong little thing, moving on, gliding and wiggling, undaunted by Bano’s constant intrusion.

I pointed at another squiggly worm behind a flower pot, and then at another one slithering down the porch stairs.

“Do you think they have families?” I asked, a little concerned. “What if this one is looking for its mama?”

Bano pondered as she sipped her mango juice. She bent down to examine the backstory of the worm she was previously poking and playing with. It was as if she was listening to it and it was talking back to her.

“I think this is the mother,” she said with an utmost certainty. We both exchanged worried looks.

Summer in Lahore is a funny time. When it is hot, it seems as if there is a glass dome on top of the city, sucking the life out of it, suppressing all things underneath. And when it finally begins to pour, no prayer can curb the sky’s temper. A reverse praying cycle had begun in our house. The elders spoke of Lahore as if it had crumbed under the glowering clouds.

Earlier that morning, at the breakfast table, Aunt Yasmin read aloud news about a sunken bridge. Unfortunately, it was not the bridge that took us to school. Two men and a donkey had died after being buried under the rubble for hours. The donkey died under the weight of its own wooden cart and the bricks tied on top of it. Aunt Yasmin recited a prayer for the poor donkey knowing no one else in the city would.

A roof collapsed somewhere, killing a family of three, Father read. Grandmother added that she received a phone call from a farmer back in her village. The cotton, rice, and sugarcane were almost wiped out.
Nanni said this intense change in weather was a sign that the day of judgement was close. We were becoming bad Muslims. We were caught up in westernizing ourselves. As she paused to sip her chai, my aunt chimed in with her philosophy:

“No Maa, we are just becoming bad people. It is a reminder that there are other things and other people in this place besides good Muslims.”

Aunt Yasmin said that there are birds, animals, and trees being harmed silently over the years.

Bano narrated aloud at the breakfast table the story of that time she, the gardener, and I had found a dead bird in Queen’s park.

Like the sun and the clouds that held nothing back from us that summer, the grownups held nothing back from us, the children. Aunt Yasmin’s new single meaningless life, Mother’s frequent nightmares, Grandmother’s financial loss, Father’s take on government corruption and election, everything was laid out in the open on the breakfast table like the buttered toast and Michell’s strawberry jam Bano and I ate. The only thing the grown-ups hid well was who they truly were.

After a while, Bano and I got bored with the earthworms. There was nothing amusing about the lost creatures. I did not find a toad but there was a frog Bano spotted. She did not find her snake either.

Bano held her juice box tightly in her hands and slurped aloud. I told her that was bad manners. She continued to slurp. I told her my class teacher said it was bad manners. She came closer to my ear and slurped more loudly.

“It’s finished, now stop it,” scolded a voice.

It was Mama.
She gave a gentle smack on the back of Bano’s head and threw our boxes in a trash bucket that Chand Baba had left near the stairs. He was cleaning the garden after a long time. The bucket was full of leaves, twigs and trash that had blown over to our garden by strong winds. Now, we could see him in the garden trying to lift a branch that had fallen near Mother’s gazebo, missing it by just a few feet.

Next, Bano and I trailed from room to room to find things that were falling apart. I cautiously picked up a fleck of peeled off paint from the carpet of my bedroom. It crumbled into a million specks. It was now a mess that could only be sucked in by a vacuum cleaner.

“It looks like dandruff,” I said.

I scribbled down the problem, bad piant and Bano highlighted a spelling error in the word paint. We moved forward.

There was nothing ever wrong in Papa’s study. The room was as quiet and proper as he was. He read in there. He worked in there. And he remembered Jahanara in there.

There were no pictures on any wall around the house. Even the calendars had photographs of seasonal flowers and fruits. July was the mango and peach month. Nanni Amma and Moulvi Hafeez said very strictly that it was not allowed to offer namaz in a place where there were pictures of living things. And Jahanara was a living thing.

As Bano inspected the study, I walked over to a little framed photograph on the shelf. Jahanara and my Papa sat on the porch stairs. The same stairs where Bano and I had found an earthworm a while back.

“Do you think she looks like me?” Bano leaned in and asked.

She did not. Aunt Yasmin had said not all the twins looked alike. I hesitated to answer. I did not know what she wanted to hear.
We heard a commotion coming from the living room. We left Jahanara on the shelf and the list on a table and followed the noise.

Yasmin, Mama, Roshan and Bilquees were huddled around the gardener who lay on his back on the living room carpet. He had slipped on rainwater and hurt his back. Roshan and Khan had carried him inside. The clustered crowd inquired about the intensity of the pain and suggested a trip to the hospital.

“No, no, no need for a doctor,” Chand Baba shook his head. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

No one seemed convinced, not even the gardener himself, but then he kept repeating. I had never seen Chand Baba like that, sprawled before everyone, weakened, grimacing in pain. The man toiled under the merciless sun. He toiled in the foggiest of mornings. He toiled when he got stung by a bee. He toiled when a dotted mosquito bit him and everyone in the bungalow and the quarters thought he was going to die from dengue. He toiled last year when his daughter was in the burn unit. No weather, no bite, no horror could stop Chand Baba.

“Chand Baba, if it is the doctor’s bill that is bothering you…” Mother began to reason. She knitted her eyebrows. She was worried but also, slightly irritated by his stubbornness.

Chand Baba continued reassuring. “The pain is almost gone. I just need some rest.”

My aunt brought pain killers. Bilquees brought a glass of water. Mother found a pain relief cream in Nanni’s drawer.

“What if he dies?” whispered Bano. There was nothing mischievous, nothing savage in her voice. it was a genuine question that had risen in her mind.

“He is not going to die,” I said a little sharply.
Chand Baba tried to get up on his own but failed. Roshan and Khan reached to help him get back so he could retire for a few days. He staggered to his feet, walked a few unsteady steps and still managed to amass the energy to kindly dismiss Roshan of his service by a wave of his hand. Only Khan was to walk him home.

Bano’s valid question on death began to leech at my heart. I began to worry if he would ever come back. I asked myself, would Chand Baba die? Just like that. Just so easily. One day, here laying on the living room carpet and the next day, buried under heaps of soil. The adults around him certainly did not think so, but they also did not think Jahanara would die.

I reached for Mother and asked her if I could also go with Khan to drop Chand Baba in the quarter. She nodded gently. Her hand was on my head and her eyes on Chand Baba’s back as he slowly walked out of the room.

Bano did not flinch. She stayed back. I did not understand why until I was halfway down the road to the quarters.

“Is he going to die?” I heard Bano ask again.

“Of course not,” I heard Mama’s reply. “No one dies by falling down.”

A piercing silence followed. I wondered if she realized what she had just said and how wrong she was. I looked back at her. She was running her fingers through Bano’s dark curls and patiently listened to her tell her about the things in the house that needed repair.

I left Mother combing through the damages, the temporary and the permanent.

My steps began to falter as we began to walk inside an alley where the quarters were located. Children scampered around. A man stopped his bicycle to inquire what had happened to Chand Baba.
There was somebody else in the gardener’s house that I had completely forgotten about. Somebody I was not sure I was ready to see so closely. I thought of all the times Chand Baba was there for us. He was there when Bano scraped her knee, he was there when my head got suck in the railing in the staircase, he was there to lift Jahanara’s body from under the tree and he was there to cut the tree when Mother had her first nightmare. It was too late to turn around and run back to bungalow. I was not going to be disloyal.

I heard Khan ask Chand Baba why he would not go to a hospital. Chand Baba whispered that he had become afraid of the place. He could not forget the image of his child tossing and swaying on the stretcher, screaming in pain, in frenzy, as her body was on fire.

~*~
That Place Between Light and Darkness

Yasmin picked up the dead sparrow from the pavement and put it on wet soil nearby. Its little body was stiff. Its eyes pressed shut, its feet curled and raised up in the air. She bent to look down at the details. Any slight movement, a hasty flutter, a twitch of an eye, a sign that it may still be alive. A vein throbbing, a single cell breathing somewhere. She did not want to bury it so soon.

When Yasmin was twelve and Mehrunisa was eight, their parrot Rajah died. First it grew bald, then it stopped squawking and imitating their grandfather and then, it died. Its body was just as stiff and quiet as the sparrows. The family was gone for the weekend when Rajah crossed over to the other side. The maid who was in charge swore living things could die from broken hearts. Their parents never explained if that was true or if that had been the case for their dear Rajah, they just left their hearts to believe and heal for themselves. The parents never thought a bird’s death would affect the sisters for very long, but it did. Yasmin still remembered how much it did. It was the first living thing around them that had died.

It is a fallacy to believe children don’t carry pain, that they are unfettered and free, that they forget and heal and carry on. They waited a whole year before they got the green and orange lovebirds. They put them in the same cage Rajah once whistled in.

Mehrunisa had held a two-day funeral for Rajah. Many children from the neighborhood were in attendance. The girls had hosted a doll’s wedding a week earlier and now, a bird’s funeral. The mothers of their friends who had walked them to the house, made small-talk in the living room while the children processed grief in the garden, all by themselves.
Things stay with children.

Things stay inside children.

Yasmin knew that, and she understood it. And she saw it in her own daughter who asked her new questions every day. Like when she asked what the word *divorce* meant and why she was leaving her papa? Yasmin replied that it was possible for parents to live apart and be happy. Bano had also asked why *Nanni* was so unbearably cold towards Yasmin? What had she done that was so wrong? Yasmin said that it was because Nanni loved her a lot and the lively banter between them kept her alive.

Did Lahore have a beach? She asked.

It did not.

Was she to start school in Lahore after summer? Were they to leave Karachi behind?

“Probably yes,” Yasmin answered. “It would be good to leave for school every day with Zakariya. Don’t you think so?”

Bano had given a dreary little nod.

Yasmin did not know how much her daughter understood but she made sure to always answer, to always say something back. She even said something two years ago when she took her to the graveyard to see Jahanara’s grave. That was her child’s twin right there, buried under heaps of soil.

“What do you want to recite a *dua* for your cousin in heaven?” Yasmin had asked as she cupped her hands for prayer.

In response, Bano had begun to scratch her arms and neck wildly and said that she felt itchy and tickly all over her body. Yasmin watched her scratch and leave thin streaks on the skin on her arms. It was as if hundreds of roaches were crawling up and down her body.
Yasmin held her hand. Bano, who did not understand the origin of her mother’s terror, let her escort her away from the grave. Yasmin feared that a shadow would come out of the dirt and take Meherbano with it, or she would ask her a question she would never be able to answer.

She escaped one fear. The other accompanied them. Bano asked a question.

“What is happening to her under the mud?” Bano asked. Yasmin never took her back to the graveyard and for the first time, she was never able to give an answer.

Leaves crunched beneath their sandals as they walked away. The wind rustled through the shedding jamun trees. They walked over the fallen, crushed fruit. Suddenly Bano stopped and picked up a few fresh, ripe pieces from the ground and slipped it inside the pocket of her cotton kameez.

The sparrow on the soil remained frozen. Even after several minutes, there was no movement. Yasmin thought that a stray cat would gladly feast on the poor thing, so she dug a hole with a stick and buried it. She was the one who buried Rajah too.

She continued her evening stroll around the colony. The tempest from days earlier had left a mess. It would take the cleaners and sweepers days to clean the roads and the front lawns and driveways.

Yasmin noticed how all the bungalows in the Victoria colony looked alike. Old, beautiful, incredibly spacious and a little eerie after dark when the bats appeared and flew from one branch to the other. The bungalows were like fragile little colonial artifacts, singing tales of the British raj and Queen Victoria.

There were sprawling green lawns with eucalyptus, and lemon and mango trees under which the women from the ladies’ club had their kitty and committee parties. There was also a colony club where the administration met for their monthly meetings, where officers enjoyed
tombola and musical nights in pleasant winter months and where the children played badminton and tennis.

Yasmin thought about her own flat in Karachi. She thought about small it was, how cramped. She thought about Karachi and how cramped the city generally was. When she first moved there, fourteen years ago, she had found it hard to breathe. She did not know anyone or anything. Not her husband, not any building, not any road. She passed that first year by telling herself that, like people, places also come around. Her ex-husband made good money with his textile business and she was content with her job as a literature professor. It was a mutual decision to not buy a big place. She did not want to be a begum of a big house. She did not want to worry about the number of rooms, the help, the duties, the paint on the walls and the furniture. But it was not long after that she began to suffocate in that flat.

Yasmin wondered how big houses and many rooms let one hide for a while. They grant you few quiet moments when you belong to no one and nothing but yourself. You can disappear in a hushed corner and return, replenished, brand-new. You linger more in relationships. You pretend more. Yasmin thought that that was a continuous web of horror and she wondered if she would have ever left her husband if they had lived in a different place.

She accidently walked through a puddle. It stained the bottom of her yellow cotton salwar. She looked down at the mess. Realizing there was nothing that could be done at that point, as she was already very far from the bungalow, she continued her stroll. The mess irritated her but she carried on.

There were flats on one side of the guarded Victoria colony next to an all-boys private boarding school. Yasmin looked at the flats. She had spoken to Mehrunisa about moving there with Bano. They would not be so far away from the bungalow.
On a small terrace of one of the flats, a young girl was taking out clothes from a bucket, wringing them and hanging them on a clothesline. She was a few years older than Bano. Fourteen, at most. Yasmin watched her for some time.

The girl finished hanging the laundry and dumped the water that was in the bucket. She began to use a plastic wiper to clean the floor. Her lips moved. Over the hum of the traffic, over the sounds of the crackling rickshaws and zooming cars, Yasmin could not tell if she was singing or just talking to herself. After wiping the water away, she looked down at the moving cars silently. Yasmin wondered what she was thinking about.

They had a young girl like that who worked for them when Yasmin and Mehrunisa were in their late teens. Sobia was sent to Lahore on a train, on the hottest day of summer, from her village near Narowal. Her village was also Yasmin’s parent’s village and fourteen-year-old Sobia’s family had been serving them for years.

For the first few years, Sobia enjoyed her life in the city. She liked sitting in the car as they went for groceries. She also liked to sit in the front with the driver every morning as he dropped the sisters to college. She cleaned Mehrunisa’s paint brushes and collected Yasmin’s old papers and books for the monthly scrap-collector. This was a larger life for her. City was different than her village.

After, what seemed like every few months, Sobia told Yasmin that her younger sister who was back in the village was pregnant with another child. Yasmin stopped counting and congratulating after five. The news had become mundane.

When Yasmin and Mehrunisa were in their early twenties, Sobia was still working for them. She was no longer naïve. She had become wild in the city. One time she had run away with the driver. The couple was spotted by a policeman in a rickshaw parked outside a
McDonald’s. Another time, Yasmin had caught her in the *barsati* with a boy from the neighborhood.

Their mother sent her back to the village. She was afraid the young girl would run away, get raped, or killed. It was a one-way ticket for Sobia.

A few months later, news of Sobia’s father’s death reached the family. Money was tight in the house of ten siblings, so Sobia returned to Lahore, unannounced, pleading for a job. The Sobia who had returned was a different woman. There was henna on her palms and feet. Glittery glass bangles jingled on her wrists. She had been married to a cousin and she had brought the lean and useless man along with her.

Why did Yasmin remember Sobia after so many years? Because Sobia knew something no one else did. Sobia knew when Yasmin’s heart was broken for the first time.

When Yasmin and Mehrunisa were in their early twenties, marriage proposals began to arrive at their house. It turned into an open drawing room for bachelors and their families to come and study the young girls. Most proposals were for Mehrunisa. She was more collected and graceful. She was daintier and had a fairer complexion. The mothers of the men liked her more. She was always the first choice.

Sobia and Yasmin would snicker in the kitchen as they prepared tea for the few suitors who did come to see only her. It was Sobia’s mission to note as much as she could about the boy as she served Pepsi and Sprite. She was to report back to Yasmin who was eagerly waiting in the kitchen.

“He’s too tall,” she said once about a man.

“He’s too talkative,” she said another day about somebody else.

“His mother seems cunning. She’s looking at every nook and crack.”
“He has too many sisters and they’re all here. We need more tea cups.”

“His mother asked about your height and weight.”

“And she must be wondering if I am fair-skinned,” Yasmin shook her head. After Sobia’s keen observations, Yasmin entered the drawing room with a prepared frame of mind.

There was one suitor Yasmin had really liked. He was their father’s friend’s son and had just his sat for his Superior Service Exam. They had met in the drawing room, under the scrutiny of four prying adults, but had warmed themselves to the idea of going out for lunch dates, alone, in restaurants on Mall Road.

She liked him for his sensitive nature and intellect. He liked her for her boldness. Their dates would begin with eating naan and chapli kebabs and end with them strolling through a Sunday book bazaar.

After a few months, the boy’s mother had a change of heart. He cleared the CSS exam and she thought that her government officer son could do better. It was just as quick and flippant as that. Yasmin was replaced within days.

A week later, Yasmin stood in the kitchen and watched the tea in the saucepan come to a boil. She turned down the fire and watched the tea simmer. Flecks of tea leaves appeared everywhere. Sobia poured tea in fancy cups for the guests. Yasmin silently watched the blue and orange fire dance on the stove.

“He wasn’t that good anyway, baji,” said Sobia as she wiped off the tea stains with a tissue paper from the tray and the tea cups. She fixed her dupatta to cover her baby bump.

“You just finished your BA, you will get anyone else in a matter of seconds! Forget him, baji, forget him.”
Yasmin told Sobia to quietly finish her work and there was no need to fill the long empty spaces of silence between them. Sobia heaved a long sigh and left the kitchen with the tray to serve tea to the guests.

“How do I look?” exclaimed a voice.

Yasmin turned around to see a beaming Mehrunisa standing at the door. She wore her new salwar kameez. Her hair was untied, and it cascaded down her back. There was a rim of kohl underneath her eyes. Yasmin nodded her head in approval.

“Is it too much lipstick?” she asked.

Yasmin shook her head.

They were silent for a few moments. Mehrunisa fixed her jhumka earrings all the while looking at her older sister. They heard voices and laughter coming from the drawing room.

Sobia returned with an empty tray. Mehrunisa left for the drawing room where she was expected.

“They’re pretending like nothing has happened,” reported Sobia. “They’re pretending like they never broke your heart.”

Yasmin turned off the fire. She sat down in a chair and ran fingers through her hair. Sounds kept coming from the drawing room- voices chattering, the clinking of the glasses and cutlery.

“When you guys sent me back to the village, I thought it’d be a happy time. I had not been home in long, but I was a burden for my family. Another mouth to feed. An unwed daughter. After a week, they got me married off,” said Sobia.
Yasmin moved steadily towards the kitchen door. In the background, Sobia continued talking, “My own family, Yasmin baji. They married me off to my druggie, useless cousin just to get rid of me.”

Yasmin turned the knob and opened the door gently so she could peer into the drawing room. The jaunty meeting was in procession. Mehrunisa sat on a sofa with the CSS man. With her CSS man.

“Danger is never where you think it is,” Sobia said.

Yasmin and Mehrunisa’s parents would have never let go of such a good proposal, even if it meant breaking one daughter’s heart and choosing the other.

Just when Rajah died, and they said nothing, they said nothing to her that day either. They left her to heal for herself.

The sound of the Magrib Azaan rang from the colony mosque. Yasmin turned around to return to the house. That was enough walk for one evening. She arrived at a vacant piece of ground in between bungalows. Two men in beige salwar kameez and white notepads stood near a pile of rubbish, examining the space and two lowly trees, the only occupants in the space. They measured. They chatted and scribbled down details on their pages. The trees were to be taken down soon, Yasmin could tell by their hand gestures.

Yasmin asked if the administration was planning on building a new house there, like her sister said. The men turned around, trying to trace the origin of the voice.

“That’s the plan, baji,” replied one of the men. “But the Christians from the quarters wants to make a church. They are putting up a fight.”

“Or a graveyard,” added the other.

“Or a graveyard,” echoed the first.
“A Christian graveyard.”

Yasmin did not say anything. She continued walking back. She looked at the purple sky and watched birds heading home. She heard the men discuss when to bring a chainsaw to take down the trees. Space was needed, whether it was going to be a bungalow or a church or a graveyard. Yasmin wondered if the dead sparrow she left could be buried in the Christian graveyard.
They Die Quietly

The Cat

There was a scent Khala ji carried with her. It came from her hair, her dupatta, her skin, her bones- a fusion of rose petals, mustard oil, attar and Fair and Lovely cream.

She sat with me on the bench of the bumpy rickshaw as it marched on, puffing and purring. We left behind the hushed Victoria colony and entered the streets. Lahore opened her arms and pushed us towards her smoke-filled crowded roads with whirring cars and school vans. On Khala ji’s lap, under her shawl, rested the blue and silver Sony cassette player that had suddenly stopped working. She believed rain drops had played a major part in causing her ruin. Her solemn expressions through the ride testified to the seriousness of the situation.

I played with the wallet in my hands. It contained two hundred rupees. The money was for Father’s medicine. Bilal had made it clear that morning that he had no time to bring any medicine or groceries. He said he had found a new arduous job at a mechanic workshop and there was no market or dispensary nearby. Mehak was at school and Gulnar at college. The task was eventually bestowed on me.

It was midafternoon. I was removing laundry from the clothesline on the rooftop when Khala ji called my name from her courtyard. She wanted me to toss down the slippers I had borrowed last week. She was going out to Abid market to get the cassette player fixed.

“Can you hear this? Can you hear this?” She stood in the center of her small courtyard with the speaker by her ear. She increased the volume and the device cackled. She lifted it in the air so I could hear it too. The sound of static interwove with the music, louder and louder, until the singer drowned behind the reverberating hiss.
“It didn’t do that before, did it?” She asked anxiously. She knew the answer too. I still replied and said that it did not. I said I was sure and the mohallah, the whole neighborhood, would agree that it did not make that hissing sound. Khala ji released a heavy sigh. She was not going to be comforted by any sort of reply at that vulnerable hour. I let her be.

Downstairs, I told my mother that our neighbor was going to the market for errands. She asked me to go with her and bring a strip of Brufon capsules and Voltraren gel for Abbu’s back pain. I was excited by the idea of leaving the house for a little while. Inside the bedroom where he lay and rested, I heard my ammi reveal to him, “Gulnar is going out to get your things.”

He groaned and grumbled and said, “ask her to return quickly.”

“What else would she do? Go to the Safari park?” Mother shot back, agitated. “Of course, she will return quickly.”

“Why can’t Bilal bring it?”

“When was the last time he did anything for anyone? He is either sleeping up on the rooftop like a druggie or loitering around the colony. At least she helps.”

Abbu informed Ammi that my brother’s new work would keep him preoccupied and make him responsible. He had faith in his son.

My mother had begun doing that. She had begun snubbing my father when he lost his temper and got uneasy towards me. She gave him a cold stare when he would grimace in my presence like when I entered a room to do chores or when I put food on his plate on the dastarkhwan during dinner.

Day after day, Ammi and I were alone at the house, alone for hours after everyone had left for work. We cut vegetables and cooked together. We cleaned the house and did laundry
together. We listened to Khala ji’s music together. Sometimes she took me to buy groceries or visit the tailor. We had a lot of time to bond.

*Ammi* liked to pass her time after the errands were done so we walked around the colony and went to other bungalow quarters, so she could meet her friends. They were also home alone with their young children as the husbands went off to work. I made sure to wrap the dupatta around my face and head tightly when Mother and I went for our occasional walks. On hot days, behind the *purdah*, I suffocated and suffered quietly but I knew better than to just take it off. There were just too many men wandering around the colony on foot and on bicycles.

Mother’s closest friend was Rani. Her five children never joined school. They squealed and scuttled here and there in the colony and often greeted us at the door with their muddy faces and dusty hair. Majid, Rani’s husband, was a plumber. He was addicted to *naswar* tobacco and other strange substances. The whole neighborhood knew that the small packet of *naswar* was always readily available in the chest pocket of his kameez. Majid was also a master in the sport of pigeon racing, *kabootar bazi*. Rani said he made good money like that, more money than he did fixing running sinks and pipes around the bungalows.

I liked when *Ammi* went to Rani and Majid’s house but only when he was not home. I did not like when he looked at me. I did not like when I could not pull off my *dupatta*, wipe off the stinging sweat and breathe freely. Rani and her children had seen my face many times. It was an ordinary sight for them, but Majid liked to ogle. He liked to stare at my face, my chest, my legs, my whole body.

Their house had a large cage on the rooftop. There were dozens of restless pigeons and sparrows in there, cooing, twittering and flapping their wings. I watched them for a long time. Once, Rani’s youngest daughter joined me and said that every pigeon in that box recognized her
father’s face and voice. They had memorized routes. They could fly anywhere in Lahore and come back to the same rooftop.

“How lucky,” I had whispered to her. She did not understand what I meant.

One day when Ammi and I were walking back to our quarters, I thought about the pigeons’ and their luck again. The birds flew and flew and fluttered around the city, doing their daily rounds but always returned to the roof, to the quarters, inside Majid’s cage. They could not leap that far.

One afternoon as Mother and I sat in our courtyard and cut carrots and potatoes for lunch, she brought up the uncomfortable subject, the lingering tension between Father and me. She said that men can get hurt and bruised very easily. Their egos are fragile. They always have been. I had squandered my father’s trust and it would take him time to return to me. He was a man of big ego, she said, and he thought about his pain and reputation before anyone elses’. That is how he had always been.

“Bilal’s pregnancy was hard on my body,” she said. “One night I woke up and there was blood everywhere, on the charpoy, on the bedsheet, blanket, and my clothes. I was in pain. Your father refused to take me to the hospital until I washed myself up and changed out of my blood-spattered shalwar.”

Blood crawling down a woman’s private parts and staining her salwar was an unthinkable sight for my father, she said. I began peeling another potato as she continued,

“The respect, izzat, of the women in his family is everything to him. Our honor is just not ours. But I am a mother. You came out of my womb, you think I will abandon you? Just like that? Mothers don’t leave their children like that. Mothers always return.”

“Like the pigeons,” I said in a low voice.
“What?”

“Like the pigeons in Rani’s house. They always return.”

“Yes, like the pigeons.”

We were trying, all of us. Mother was trying to come back to me. I was trying to forget. And she promised Father was trying too, in his own strange way, but he was. And I took her word for it. I suppressed my sadness of losing him deep inside.

The rickshaw came to a halt at a traffic signal. It was getting hotter as the afternoon dragged on. I sweated behind the veil and looked over at Khala ji. Sweat had made an appearance on her face and body too. It was trickling down her forehead and down her neck into her bosom. She fanned herself with her hand.

The driver took the same route I did when I went for college a year ago. We passed by a tandoor and a group of men waiting in line for their order of bread. A young sweaty boy sat in the shop slapping fresh naans and rotis inside the clay oven. In the same shop, another boy cooked meat on long skewers over a BBQ grill. We drove by a handicraft shop. There were handmade carpets and wooden meenakari tables and stools displayed at the front window.

The Shahjahan wedding hall came next. The hall named after the glorious and decadent Mughal emperor was nothing close to grand. A glum looking chandelier hung outside. Rose petals and glitter littered the entrance, obvious remnants of a wedding from the previous night. An old caretaker swept away the dust and petals with a broom.

“Tch, tch! Who gets married in summer?” complained Khala ji. “Who wants to have a wedding night in this weather?”

I giggled behind my veil.
The rickshaw moved slowly by a guarded Urdu newspaper office. It was a tall guarded building with the paper’s name in Urdu written stylishly on the side. Two gunmen with protruding bellies and lit cigarettes between their fingers stood in front of a pedestal fan guarding the space. It was one of the papers that had written about me. I recognized it immediately.

Khala ji’s hair was now frizzy from the growing heat and humidity. The driver fidgeted with a cassette player at the front.

“You can install a cassette player, eh, but can’t put a fan in the back for the passengers?” She asked. Her patience was thinning. The driver said something about his dwindling income and the feasibility of the project but Khala ji asked him to just shut up and drive because the light had turned green and because she had ridden in rickshaws that had fans at the back. A gust of hot wind blew on our faces as the rickshaw moved steadily.

The driver grinned, unfazed by the short-tempered passenger and the sharp replies. I imagined that in his head he was also blaming the weather for Khala ji’s restlessness.

He looked at me from one of the many rearview mirrors. I moved nervously on the bench. I made awkward eye contact with him, looked away abruptly, and then looked back to find he was still watching. My head swirled. I wondered if he could see through the dark fabric of the shawl. And if he could see, how much could he see? Could he see my melted face? Could he see the scar crawling on my neck? Could he see how the long scar curved and flowed and folded, like a thin river, down my neck?

“Why do the rickshaw drivers need so many mirrors?” I whispered to Khala ji. I had taken them every day to school and college and it was not something that had bothered me before. I chatted away happily at the back with my girlfriends. Obvious. Happy.
“So, he can eye young girls and get away with it,” said Khala ji loudly so the driver could hear her warning clearly. “Ustaad ji, the road is in the front not here in our laps! Look ahead or you will bump into that donkey cart!”

She warned that if a collision may occur, she would not pay the full fare. The driver did not smile nor indulge in any conversation that time.

We passed by my former girls’ college and I pointed to show the place to Khala ji. She bent down in the small vehicle to look at the building more clearly. Gulnar attended the same college for a while until she decided to transfer to a different one. She said the faculty and the girls whispered about me. They pointed at her when she walked by them.

I watched young students in colored salwar kameez stepping out of the gates. Some girls chewed on corn. Some waited in line by the vendor to get corn. Some ate spicy channa chat. Some just stood under the shade of a tree waiting patiently for their drivers, frolicking among themselves. I did not recognize any of them. I knew my batchmates had graduated and moved on. Found jobs or left jobs and married. No one kept in touch with me.

“I was in my final BA year of geography,” I said to Khala ji.

“You should have finished college,” she said.

“I could not go back.”

“You should have gone and finished your degree,” she reiterated without any explanation. I told her that it was hard for me to even get into a rickshaw the evening I was finally discharged from the hospital. My parents had waited for me in the vehicle and I could not step inside. It brought back memories. It was outside my college where it had happened, where the boy had pulled me out of the rickshaw by my arm and threw the burning liquid on my face.
Smoke released from my face as it was now coming from the baked corn the vendor was pulling out of his cart. Silence descended on Khala ji.

We reached the market. I stepped out of the rickshaw and stood in front of an electronics shop displaying posters of all the new mobile phones. Models with their long brown hair and clear skin held the devices in their polished hands. Their smiles were wide. Their teeth perfectly straight and pearl white.

Khala ji bickered with the driver over the unreasonably high fare. The back of her kameez was now completely drenched in sweat. Her thick beige bra strap was suddenly visible to the world. A group of men standing at a sharbaat stall enjoyed the spectacle, the seminude show. They nudged one another and snickered. Even with her eyes and attention at the driver who was fumbling for change in his kameez pocket, Khala ji could feel the vile eyes devouring her wet back. She pulled the shawl from her neck and wrapped it around her body. The show was over.

“Here, hold this,” Khala ji thrusted her small cellphone in my hand. “Pammi is joining us. She will call.”

The electronics shop contained everything from washing machines to juicers to the latest computers. Khala ji put the damaged cassette player she was cradling all afternoon on the glass counter before the shopkeeper. He studied it for a while and brought a tool box to open the device all the while convincing her to invest in high-end gadgets that could never betray, not tape recorders and cassette players, but CD players. I granted them some privacy by moving away and walking around the shop.

I looked at the home appliances. I wondered how many things Mother had already collected for my sister’s dowry and how many were still left. It was a game I played when I read the newspapers and looked at all the home appliances commercials. We could never afford an air
conditioner or a microwave. Gulnar would have to heat her food on the stove and sleep under a fan unless she got a job and brought those things herself or she got married into a middle-class family. I knew my sister preferred the latter.

From the shop window, I looked at the pharmacy on the other side of the road. There was a sea of smoke-spewing cars, vans, rickshaws and motorcycles. On the pavements and on the sides of the roads sat vendors and hawkers selling mangoes, ice cream, sharbaat, umbrellas and sunglasses for the soaring temperature. It was a daunting task to cross the road without Khala ji, so I waited for her to finish.

The rickshaws crackled. The cars honked and screeched. Enraged drivers with their heads hanging out of their windows screamed at the slow-moving traffic. In that rush, chaos and dust, I saw Pammi, tall and broad, dressed in a bright yellow salwar kameez crossing the road. She was a bright speck walking through the frozen traffic. Men in motorcycles turned their heads to look at her. Pammi, who was used to the constant attention and snickering, just zigzagged through the vehicles. It was as if, in her mind, she was invincible. No gaze, no word could break her. And what could they do but just stare? People said her tongue was magic. If she put a curse on you, your world could split into two. She could set you and your family on fire.

Inside the shop, Khala ji’s wrath fell on the seller and his shop, on all seven heavens and hells. She was told that her cassette player would never work.

“Iska time agaya hai, aunti ji!” said the shopkeeper. “It’s time has come.”

She was presented with new CD players with warranty. She was not moved. She just stood there, looking down at her dead silver and blue speaker. Heat and fury pulsated through her blood, her body, her hair, taking over all the sweet, floral scents. She melted under the slow-moving fan.
“Show me all the CDs you have,” she said in a controlled voice.

Pammi greeted me at the door with a salam. She said she lived nearby in a house with eight other women like her. She had to go to Victoria colony for her tuition classes with Rodger.

The three of us crossed the road to get to the pharmacy. Afterwards, Pammi stuck her hand out to hail a rickshaw. Her glass bangles clanked as she waved for a vehicle to stop. Chingchi, the motorcycle rickshaw pulled in and the three of us squeezed in the back bench. Khala ji was quiet for a long time. By her feet was a plastic bag which had the CD player with a warranty. The speaker still occupied her lap and mind.

Pammi chattered away. She did not understand the severity of the situation. She did not mourn any loss. She kept telling us about how she had sent her matric forms and was looking forward for receiving her roll number slip. Without her roll number slip, she would not be allowed to enter the examination hall.

We bumped into one another as the rickshaw strutted through the old city. Construction was being done. There were holes dug everywhere. There were two big trucks with trees and rubble at the back, and a bulldozer ready to take down an old, abandoned post office.

The old rickshaw driver pointed at the building that was at the mercy of the bulldozer’s claw and said, “this was built in 1960. I was a sweeper there when I was a young boy.”

Traffic choked the road. Cars were turning away from the construction site and swerving through clouds of dust. Pammi said something to the driver, her voice dead behind the loud roaring of the trucks. “They are making a fast metro line with the Chinese government. It will take you to places very quickly. They took down a shrine in the old city for another rail line,” he said.

Pammi asked the driver if he thought the rail line would be ready by next March. Then, she could take it directly to her designated examination center in androon Lahore. The driver could not tell.

“The thing with cities is that they die slowly, and they die quietly. Their death is often left unmourned,” said the driver. “Soon there will be nothing left of Lahore and we would be left looking for God in dried canals, dirty trenches, and empty wells.”

We left the post office behind. The politician’s posters chased us around the city on different walls and billboards. I thought about what the driver said, and suddenly for once, my scars seemed so trivial, so small, so banal. We drove through clouds and clouds of musty and stale air. We drove past a crowded bazaar selling clothes, utensils and bridal dresses. A throng of worshippers piled out from a shrine. Children sat in school vans. And somewhere between the rush, the howling, the whirling smoke and the thick, sticky air, lay a city dying quietly.

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