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A Little Slice Of The Moon: Stories

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A LITTLE SLICE OF THE MOON:
STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

A Little Slice of the Moon: stories is a collection of short stories that explore the struggles of various characters to find their place in the world. And the world, despite its familiarity, can be a hostile place. The characters in this collection learn that families are a fragile lot, that every desire contains a paradox, that the Road of Life can seemingly be grasped by the horns, but that the future twists and turns, yet never escapes the past. And it is the past that haunts these characters' lives. One word, one act, impacts a lifetime.

In *A Little Slice of the Moon*, Khalid traces the devastation of his 'new' life and his alienation to everything around him back to a youthful error. In *The Thousand Trees Orchard*, the arrival of Mahjabeen, Laddo's deranged and possibly dangerous sister, teaches Laddo the difference between fleeing the past and embracing it. In *Dead Woman's Pass*, Priya tries to outrun her malevolent *qismet*, and in doing so, almost loses herself as well.

Isolation, physical or emotional, is a primary element in many of these characters' lives. Whether the isolation is self-imposed or results from circumstances beyond their control, these characters realize that where they are matters less than what they've done. They learn that confronting themselves—who they are, who they were—is the only way to break free from the past and make peace with themselves and with the world around them.

For Haroon,
Who survived spaghetti and peanut butter

Umar, Raniya, and Afeefah,
Who babysat while they themselves were babies

Muneeza, Sufia, Kinza, and Zahrah,
Whom I'll never exchange for a bushel of words.

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A LITTLE SLICE OF THE MOON

On the plane, flying toward a country he's turned his back on for twenty years, Khalid remembers what he has never really forgotten. He remembers how he left Paposhnagar at nineteen with the stink of fish radiating from his hands and hair, his nose and lips bleeding from his mother's fists. "Go die like a *ghoons* in the gutter," she screamed the last time he saw her. Her hair, prematurely gray, swung about her face as she flung books at him, then plates, porcelain flowers, a footstool, whatever came to her hand. His father and brothers tried to quiet her. *Don't curse your own son. A mother's words strike like an arrow, deliver like a promise.* But the words and fists flew no matter what. "No one needs a piece of misery like you. *Dafa hojaw*. You've been nothing but trouble since you were born."

And trouble was his middle name, Khalid told his wife Shagufta, years later, when they were newlyweds, when Abdullah floated inside Shagufta's womb, multiplying by millions of cells each minute.

"I fell off roofs, dived off a cliff once and almost drowned," Khalid said. "Once I tried to clean this stray cat with gasoline and she caught fire." He spun his tales with a storyteller's instinct, molding them into escapades worth laughing about. And Shagufta laughed, about the

twelve stitches on his scalp, the broken ankle, the motorcycle accidents, his teachers in grade school begging to be fired unless he was expelled.

He didn't tell Shagufta why he'd left home, of course. That knowledge he kept tucked inside him, like a broken tooth wrapped in a dirty handkerchief. Shagufta assumed he'd come to America for the reason all *desi* illegals did: money. Money to send back for siblings' educations, debts, a better house, sisters' weddings. In a survey of *desi*s, sisters' weddings would no doubt top the list, Khalid thought.

But Khalid had no sister to worry about. Not anymore. So when he backed away from his mother and stalked out of their white-washed concrete home, her words drove him, not necessity. "Did you hear what I said? I'll bury you with her. You, your future, your fishing rods—"

He slammed the door behind him. He didn't imagine then that twenty years would pass before he saw his mother again. He didn't think further than the end of the street, or maybe a friend's house, or the *chai-wala's* at Paposh Plaza. Boys from respectable families didn't leave. Not if they married, not if they won the lottery. So Khalid imagined he'd slink home at nightfall, avoid his mother for a while. Then one day, he'd clutch her feet and beg her to forgive him. All things blew over, he thought.

But as he plowed down the street, whispers and furtive stares stirring in all directions, his father came after him, kicking up a plume of dust. He grabbed Khalid's shirt and brought him to a standstill. Khalid watched as his father struggled for breath, leaning heavily against Nazar the Tailor's dusty maroon Toyota. Age had ambushed him. This morning he'd left the house humming *Iqbal*, reeking of Brut cologne, a lunch tin stuffed with *paratas* swinging from his hand. Now his skin sagged and so did he. When Khalid pictures that day across a distance of

twenty years, he sees himself, a lanky boy all elbows and jeans, facing his saggy-skinned father on the sun-baked road. He wills his father to grab that boy by the nape of the neck and drag him home.

In reality, his father straightened and pulled a bundle of ill-stacked faded rupees out of his *khameez* pocket. “It’s not your fault,” he offered, holding out the money.

Khalid froze. His father thought he was leaving. And that knowledge jarred Khalid more than his mother’s fists. A few lines from his father’s favorite book, *Idioms and Quotations*, rambled through Khalid’s mind. *Some storms are best left un-weathered, a road once walked can never be un-traveled*.

“Three *lakh*,” his father said. “It’s your brother’s college tuition. You can pay it back when you get to America.”

America, the Land of Milk and Honey. Where the streets glimmered gold, the stars shone during daytime. And Khalid had begged to go, hadn’t he? Begged and nagged his parents since he’d finished Intermediate. So many boys had gone ahead, and the dollars they wired back showed in the cars their families drove and the hoity-toity way they spoke.

But being *sent* away was another thing entirely, even if it was to America.

Later, when Khalid told Shagufta how he’d entered the US, on foot across the Mexican border, she didn’t believe him.

“That’s crazy,” she said, lying behind him, one leg slung over his, on the *multani* coverlet in their moonlit bedroom. Her skin stretched, bluish, across her stomach, and Abdullah kicked through it, drumming Khalid’s back. “*Desis* don’t do that. I mean, why didn’t you just buy a fake visa?” She knew all about fake visas, having arrived in the US on one herself. But unlike Khalid,

Shagufta had immigrated at the age of four, with her parents and several siblings, so her English didn't suffer from a *desi* accent like his.

"I thought that's what I was getting, a US visa," Khalid said, "and the next thing I knew, I was on a plane to Mexico." He gave her the impression that he'd been a naïve teenager, hoodwinked by crooked men. The truth was, his father's three *lakh* covered nothing better than a Mexican crossing.

But when his father held out those rupees, they appeared enough to accomplish anything. Or perhaps on a day like that, nothing. Khalid didn't whoop like an idiot or shake hands with every man he knew, or jump on his Honda 125 and take off to celebrate at The Pink Panther with his friends. A day earlier, he might have. But the world twisted around him in a distorted dream, like life viewed through a shard of glass. He stunk of fish and sea water, Khalid suddenly realized, and something else, harder to pinpoint and define. His little sister Syra lay lifeless at home on the drawing room couch, the turquoise of her jumper running and staining the white brocade. And his father was crying, head bent under the beaming sun, holding out a bundle of faded cash.

The money repelled Khalid. It frightened him like a snake rising out of water. But he pocketed it and walked away. In one quick motion, just like that. "You don't have to go," his father shouted after him. The words, hollow yet desperate, followed Khalid all the way to America.

And now they follow him 'home'. Khalid slumps in his seat, remembering. Two caplets of Benadryl fog his brain as he reluctantly races towards the country he abandoned twenty years

ago. Around him, in the cabin of the airplane, the mood is strangely festive. Khalid's fellow passengers—all men, all deportees—joke and compare jail times. Six months, three and one half, eight. They pace the aisles restlessly, banging Khalid's elbow this way and that. They pick apart personal histories. *You used Bhai Wajahat, that* dhokay baz*? I heard his visas weren't worth the ink he stamped them with…. I was okay 'til this registration shit started up…. They put me in solitary. With a name like mine, you might as well pin 'Osama's brother' on my back …. Man, I mortgaged my arms and legs, even my parents, to get to America….*

America, the Land of Milk and Honey. The land that swallows people whole. Transforms them into thin voices lurching over cheap phone lines, and then belches them out at random.

And what did these particular men pine for while mired in the quicksand of America (because once you get kicked out, that's what it was all along, wasn't it)? Khalid listens to them recount lists of favorite haunts and foods. Chicken Jalfrezi at The Pink Panther, one says. Agha's mango shakes. Kite-flying and camel-rides at Clifton Beach. The *adhan* waking them for morning prayers.

"They have the *adhan* on loudspeaker in Queens too," interjects Khalid, "at the mosque on 168th." The other men ignore him. Nothing positive about America on *this* flight. Besides, they've entered a new discussion now: Family. Yes, family is what they missed most. Tears pop into these men's eyes at the mention of family. Some, like Khalid, haven't set eyes on their parents and siblings for decades.

Maybe, one young man ventures—waxing spiritual all of a sudden—deportation is a kick in the ass from God. *Go home to your parents, you* nadans*, before they die. Give them your time, not your money.* Several others nod fervently. Anything to latch on to. Yes, the INS has done

them a big favor, plucked them from a bog of mindless labor and flung them back where they belong—Allah be praised—into the bosoms of their families.

My family, Khalid starts to say, is in New York. But the thought of Shagufta, left alone in Queens with a mountain of legal bills, their son, and a pregnancy to worry about, silences him. She sounded frightened when he spoke to her before boarding the plane this morning. She kept telling him—or maybe herself—not to worry. A month, she said, two at the most. She'd sell the house and join Khalid in Karachi before he knew it. And then she cried, for him or herself, he couldn't tell. And he imagined her slumped over the kitchen counter, her short choppy hair slicked back from the shower, shaggy robe folded over her barely swollen belly.

Where is she right now, Khalid wonders. In their sage-green bedroom, packing, or across the hallway perhaps, curled up next to Abdullah on his race-car bed. She's been sleeping there even though she hates that bed. It festers like a thorn in her side because Abdullah refuses to let go of it. "You're a big boy now," Khalid remembers her saying. "No second-grader sleeps on a toddler bed." But Abdullah loves that bed. Before Khalid's arrest, when Shagufta left the two alone sometimes—while she and her sisters shopped at the Indian boutiques in Jackson Heights—Khalid and Abdullah perched on the bed, side by side. They pretended they were at the Grand Prix, racing head to head, flying around the track at 200 miles per hour. Abdullah always let Khalid 'win'. "Because anyway," he said, "I'm going to win a real Grand Prix when I grow up, Baba." Khalid nodded. He nodded although the idea of his son racing—or riding a motorcycle, or even a roller coaster—made Khalid want to pick up his box of tools and build a padded world where his son would always be safe.

Now the thought of that son walking alone to school in Queens floats heavily here and there in Khalid's chest. He presses the airhostess's idea of a pillow into his stomach. A month is too long, he thinks, two an eternity. Fatherhood has taught him many things. That your own child's diapers are rarely as disgusting as another's. That it is possible to survive a sixteen-hour shift laying roofs after a sleepless night. That spoiling a child is easier than unspoiling one. That love can crush your heart as well as fill it.

But diapers and sleepless nights cannot teach a man everything, even about fatherhood. And it was four months of INS detention—deprived of Abdullah—that opened to Khalid the darker side of parenthood, that offered him a glimpse of what his mother felt. What he did to her that day when he returned from fishing at Kimarhi with a brown-legged body dangling out of a turquoise jumper. Syra, but not *really* Syra, because Syra had drifted out of reach somewhere between the child-sized fishes of Kimarhi and the nets that lie in wait for them.

Gone though she is, Syra's presence has colored every word Khalid has exchanged with his mother for the past twenty years. Before his arrest, before he complied with the INS registration order for all Pakistani males and was detained, Khalid dutifully phoned Karachi every week from his home in Queens. He pretended, as did his parents, that he'd abandoned Paposhnagar for the reason other men do. "I wired Habib Bank the money last Tuesday, but you know how slow they are."

And in recent years, his father replied, "You've earned enough, Khalid. Come home. I'll lose my mind or the rest of my hair, listening to your mother jabber about you day and night."

Did she really, Khalid wondered. Now that his mother finally chimed in through the speakerphone, after years of brief, stilted Salaams, she spoke of little more than dollar-exchange rates, Eid festivals, or impending monsoons and the swarms of crickets that swept in with them. Then she asked for Shagufta, or Abdullah, her *chand ka tukra,* her little slice of the moon, she called him. And she always went silent when Khalid's father imparted his standard farewell. "Let us know when you'll be here. We've added another floor, so tell Shagufta not to worry about privacy."

"It's not privacy I'm worried about," Shagufta told Khalid once. She lounged on a bar stool at the kitchen counter, her eyes watering from the onions Khalid sliced. Sunday was his day to cook, and the calls invariably occurred on Sunday. "Once I go, I can't come back. I can't ever see my parents again. Do you have any idea how scary that is?"

"What do you think?" Khalid said. He banged about pots and lids, peeled ginger with unnecessary force, slicing thick layers of flesh along with the skin. "Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've seen *my* parents?" He swiped the ginger peels into his palm and tossed them into the garbage. "But I guess the world revolves around you, doesn't it?"

Shagufta hopped off her stool. "I don't know how you can take it," she said. She began to crush garlic, the act an apology in itself. "I'd go crazy."

Khalid maintained his sullen expression as he sprinkled coriander and cumin into the simmering curry. The upper hand was hard to come by in this household, and he didn't mean to relinquish it just yet. But the truth was, his family was like an old album locked in a file cabinet. Almost forgotten. Hidden away—or kept at bay —in the recesses of his mind.

Because America had grown on Khalid by then. Or perhaps he'd grown out of himself in America. He'd left behind the old Khalid, the-boy-who-had-drowned-his-sister. Shed him like a skin somewhere along those four miles of Mexican dirt, before crawling through the neatly snipped fence and into America. So it was the new Khalid—self-assured family man, proud owner of a house in Jamaica Estates, Queens and a roof-laying business—who scowled at his wife to let her know the discussion was over.

"You take it because you have to," he said. "Besides, why do you need to make a big deal out of everything? You know we're not going anywhere."

But he was wrong, wasn't he? And now, on the plane, the new Khalid chomps peanuts and jokes with the other men while the old one raps on the door of his consciousness, trying to slip back into being. *No one needs a piece of misery like you…. I'll bury you with her. You, your future, your fishing rods….*

Those words mean nothing now, Khalid reminds himself. His father's constant nagging is proof of that. "We're teetering into our graves here, Khalid. Your mother cries all day about how she'll die without seeing her youngest again."

But he's not really the youngest, Khalid wants to remind his father. Syra was. That tiny surly-eyed creature with the precocious tongue, the-flower-of-her-parents'-old-age. At the age of five, she'd shouldered the responsibility of waking her seven older brothers for breakfast. She dragged them out of bed at six, even on Fridays. Their only day off, they begged. The sun, barely up, crawled in from between the curtains, lighting up the tired green walls. Khalid and his

brothers slumped around the *dastarkhan*. They yawned and grumbled while Syra, apron sweeping her feet like a sari, served them cold tea.

"Ammi-jan," they teased her, "how about some eggs too. And *paratay* if you don't mind."

"I mind, I mind," she scowled, mimicking their mother perfectly. "Just be good boys and drink your tea." She made sure they drank it, that evil-tasting thick brown liquid that swirled in their cups like muddy water.

If Syra had lived, she might really be a mother now. She might be waiting down there at Karachi International with Khalid's parents and brothers, her own children milling about her. Waiting to greet him, and he'd step off the plane a different man, definitely different. Still a deportee, sucked clean and spit out like a peach pit, but ready to meet his mother's eyes without fear of what he'd find.

It amazes him how much he fears her now, when as a child he feared nothing. If anything, his mother feared him. She feared his tendency to swing from balconies and aggravate older boys. She feared his swims at Hawk's Bay, where waves swept in the size of killer whales. And she feared the phone calls from irate relatives, neighbors, and schoolteachers.

"What did he do now?" she said, her face paling at the mention of his name. She slapped him in the presence of school principals, promising she'd straighten him out. She threatened to disown him when she found out he drag-raced his Honda 125 on the SuperHighway, weaving between traffic that traveled in no apparent order. And once, while shopping at Paposhnagar Bazaar, she heard reports of a boy crushed beneath a truck and, convinced it was Khalid, scoured

every hospital in the area. She returned home sunken-eyed, hair awry, and found him in the drawing room, playing Ludo. She froze. Stood still for a while, just inside the lime-green double doors, watching him, saying nothing. Then she flew into the room and swatted his head as if it had all been his fault.

Those double doors are no longer lime-green, Khalid notices when he alights from his brother's Datsun. His brother—the one who drove him from the airport—is no longer a stubbly-jawed, broad-shouldered boy. And Paposh is nothing like Khalid remembers. Yet it is the same. The *dhobi*-shop at Chandi Chawk, full of clean clothes waiting for their owners, Nazar's Tailor Shop, except Nazar's former apprentice is the one cutting cloth with swift strokes of his oversized scissors, the convenience store—once a stall—across from Khalid's childhood house. And the house itself has sprouted two floors. To Khalid, it appears burdened, as if his old home is holding someone else's on its back. Children—his brothers', no doubt—cluster at the barred windows. They shout excitedly when they catch sight of him, and Abdullah springs to Khalid's mind. Flows into him like a tidal wave, washing away the kernel of happiness bouncing around in his chest since he stepped off the plane.

Still, when the children, followed by Khalid's parents, stream out of the house a few moments later and surround Khalid, he manages to smile and tuck the standard hundred-rupee notes into their hands. Though this is his first time back, he knows what is expected of the Relative-From-America. Money sprinkled about, the suitcase full of toys and gifts, bolts of cloth from Jamaica Ave, plastic bottles of honey and olive oil, cell-phones and cameras, tubes of toothpaste, a dressed-up account of his occupation in the US, humility befitting a son of

Paposhnagar. This last demonstrated through the placement of the bulging suitcase, and thus its distribution, in his mother's hands—not his wife's—to show that his mother still remains the authority over all that he is, all that he owns.

Except that Khalid owns nothing here. Little money, no wife, no toys from which the 'made in China' stickers have been carefully peeled, no bulging suitcase. Nothing to support a performance of the Returning-Relative, the obedient son untainted by America. So it is another kind of performance Khalid and his mother offer their family. They embrace. Relief breaks like a sweat through Khalid's father's skin. But Khalid senses the tension in his mother's arms, the stiffness in his own, the valley that stretches between them, carved by a tiny child in a turquoise jumper.

The day Khalid left Paposhnagar, so long ago that it now seems a dream, the turquoise of that jumper bled onto the white brocade of the only sofa the drawing room then contained. Now three sofa sets, none of them white brocade, line the walls, and the drawing room is twice the size it used to be, vast enough to accommodate the entire family. Khalid, his parents, his brothers and their wives, and a temporarily quiet hodgepodge of children. Two nights after Khalid's arrival, they sit cross-legged in a giant rectangle around the *dastarkhan*, plates and glasses lined up before them as if at a banquet. Steel fans vibrate overhead. Any moment now, Khalid thinks, one might break free from its base and shear off the remaining hair on his head. His brothers, like him, are curly-haired and half-bald. His parents appear faded, dried-up, like henna-topped raisins, dressed in cotton . Khalid tries not to dwell on the women and children. They remind him of Shagufta and Abdullah.

"When is your wife coming?" Khalid's mother hands him a plate piled with *murgh cholay*. She tucks a *roti* into his hand. "I bought some clothes for Abdullah." Their eyes meet for a moment, then slide past each other's as they've done for two days.

Khalid's father slaps him on the back. "You see how women are, Khalid? She's been crying for you all this time. And now that you're here, she's moved on to Abdullah."

"Probably next month," Khalid says. He eats slowly, tearing pieces of *roti* and wrapping them around the chicken and peas with unnecessary concentration. He feels awkward, unnatural, like a bus driver in a boardroom. And his parents notice this, he thinks. His father insisted on driving him around Karachi today, to the homes of his old friends, men who embraced Khalid and pumped his hand, then dwindled within minutes into the strangers they now are. And his mother has drifted behind him through the house since his arrival, wearing a long white *chador* and an awkward smile, trying too hard.

How about nihari *for dinner tomorrow? Or maybe you want to go to The Kabana…. Show me those pictures of Abdullah again…. Why are you sitting here alone? Is that why we all live together? So people can sit around alone?*

But the night after he arrived, when he came down for a drink of water, Khalid found *her* alone. Tucked into a corner of the living room, the furniture looming over her in the dark. The smell of her tobacco *paan* wafted up to where he halted on the stairs. She didn't notice him, and he retreated quickly, not wanting her to. He knew where she was. Lost. Sucked willingly or not into the memories he'd brought back with him.

“She’s too *chulbuli* to be on a boat,” his mother had said when Khalid suggested Syra go fishing with him. “She moves around too much.” She buttoned her *burkha* and twisted her thick hair into a braid. She was only forty-seven then, but cords of gray wound through the braid, and deep grooves lined her forehead. Most likely from worry over him, Khalid thinks now.

But back then, as he watched her push out the door, her oversized purse weighing down her petite frame, a stab of annoyance shot through Khalid. He’d promised to let Syra tag along if she let him sleep late. And now she crawled under their parents’ old four-poster bed, singing *Rub a Dub Dub*, searching for her boots.

Khalid cleared his throat. “Ammi said you can’t go.” It didn’t come out as matter-of-fact as he’d hoped. A disheveled, cobwebby Syra emerged from under the bed, her bottom lip sticking out. Her thick bob waved in all directions. “I’m *going*,” she said. She tugged on her boots and pulled a boat-shaped pin from her pocket. She carefully fastened it to her turquoise jumper. “I’m going,” she repeated. “Or you’re a liar.”

Only one person ever called him a liar after that. Shagufta—a few months after their marriage, when she learned he didn’t have a Greencard. And because she, a woman whose family had lied about their illegal status as well, had no right to call him anything, Khalid slammed a hole into their dining room wall, barely feeling the impact on his fist.

But when his sister called him a liar, years before Khalid even dreamed of Shagufta, Khalid scooped her up. He spun her around, this surly-eyed angel his mother had conceived at the age of forty-one, fourteen years after her youngest son was born. Abort, her friends had advised. The pregnancy endangered her health, they said, and the family’s image. People tittered

behind your back when you went around—at that age—advertising your bedroom activity on your belly.

After Syra's birth, those same friends called Syra an unexpected-gift-from-God. A blessing, the-flower-of-her-parents'-old-age.

The problem with such flowers was that they rooted themselves so deep, you couldn't bear to see them wilt. So Khalid plopped down in the drawing room, pulling Syra down with him. He pushed a video into the VCR. "Let's wait until Ammi gets home," he said. "Remember you wanted to watch Bhai-jan's wedding?" He winked at his brother's wife and she shook her head. *This isn't going to work, Khalid.*

She was right. The moment Khalid slipped out the door, Syra screamed and stumbled after him. "You lied, you lied." She grabbed the front of his t-shirt, her boat-shaped pin bumping against his jeans, and bawled until he picked her up. "I'll take you some other time," he said. But she twisted his shirt into her eyes and his heart twisted as well. His friends, waiting for him in their rust-colored pick-up, honked and yelled. *Hurry up, Khalid*.

And he'd like to say now that he hesitated. That he considered staying home for Syra's sake, forfeiting his fishing jaunt with his friends. He'd even like to say that once they'd reached Kimarhi, once their boat floated far from shore in the murky yellow-green water—everything a tangle of lines, hooks, busy fingers, and bait—that his arms and his eyes never left Syra. Not for a moment.

That day branded him. Don't Trust This Man. He never told Shagufta about Syra. Still, she hovered whenever he held Abdullah. *Watch out for his arm…My God, Khalid, stop it, you'll*

make him throw up…Don't swing him like that, do you want his elbow to come out? And when Abdullah got older, started Kindergarten, Shagufta claimed Khalid indulged Abdullah too much. Abdullah was too young for remote-controlled cars, she said, and too old to crawl into their bed at night.

"You don't know how to say no," she said. Which wasn't true because Khalid did say no, to a backyard pool, horse riding lessons, school trips to the beach.

But some things weren't worth saying no to.

"Can I tell everyone you're an alien?" Abdullah asked once. Who could say no to a question like that? And then Abdullah went around swearing on the Qur'an—complained his teacher at Al-Huda Academy—that his father had descended from the sky. When a classmate called him a liar, Abdullah punched him in the stomach.

"He's turning out just like you," Shagufta told Khalid. She confined Abdullah to his room, confiscated his TV and Nintendo. "An alien? You're teaching him to lie. What were you thinking?" Like Khalid could have predicted Abdullah's intentions. But by then, Shagufta viewed Khalid through the lens of the stories he'd told her. "Do you think you're still a kid in Karachi?" she'd say. "Terrorizing your teachers, doing God knows what, thinking nothing of the consequences?"

He knew more about consequences, he could've told Shagufta, than she ever would.

The next day, Khalid requested permission to speak to Abdullah's class. He took along his expired Pakistani passport and Abdullah's American one and explained to the class why he was an alien. An illegal alien. Descended to earth in an airplane, not a spaceship, but an alien nevertheless.

Here in Karachi, Khalid is not an alien, but Karachi is alien to him. He aches for the familiarity of New York City, *Crown Fried Chickens* dotting almost every corner, city buses shouldering their way up Hillside. He continuously calculates time differences, imagining Shagufta and Abdullah about their daily routines. Curled up together on Abdullah's bed, raking the leaves which carpet their lawn by now, Shagufta showering, Abdullah playing Nintendo in his room when he should be doing homework.

At times, the images leap so intensely in his consciousness that Khalid believes Paposhnagar is a dream. He inhabits his parents' home like a stranger, a guest or a ghost. He makes small talk with his brothers, avoids his mother without meaning to. He breakfasts before she does, picks up a magazine if she enters the room. To escape, if only for a short while, he paces the road between his home and Paposhnagar Bazaar, or the beach at Clifton. Occasionally, Khalid's father walks with him, but the silences stretch like taut rubber bands. Sometimes Khalid drives to Sadar and scouts possible locations for the electronics store he plans to open. Almost every day, he calls Shagufta. She says 'today', 'tomorrow', and then, 'after the baby is born'.

"You think they don't have doctors here?" Khalid says.

"It's a Third World country," she answers. "My parents think I'll die or something."

Is your mother dead, Khalid is tempted to ask her. *Or mine? Between them, they turned out thirteen children in Karachi, didn't they?* But he fears angering Shagufta, so he holds his tongue, pushes a hot pickled mango into his mouth to stifle the words. "After the baby, then," he says when he can speak. "But at least call me every day."

“Khalid, you’re not thinking straight.” Shagufta’s voice seeps impatience. “Do you have any idea how expensive that’ll get?”

He has an answer for that one too. Phone cards. Some as cheap as fifteen cents a minute. Times have changed, he tells Shagufta, his anger finally pushing through. This isn’t ’84, or even ’94, when calls to Karachi burned four dollars a minute. And when you desired something better, you rode the subway to Grand Central Station in Manhattan and stood in line, holding out a twenty dollar bill, until some black guy in a leather jacket with a toddler hanging off his shoulder dialed you a connection to Karachi, using a stolen credit card.

That’s how things worked when you chose the wrong route into America. The crooked path never righted itself. Still, Khalid’s mode of entry outshone others’ in one way: it made a good story. He didn’t embellish when he told it because the story needed no embellishment.

An hour before daybreak, Bhai Wajahat’s men picked Khalid from his motel in Mexico and plunked him down four miles south of the US border. He peered around him at the shadow-filled terrain, the shrubs cloaked in darkness. Fear rose like bile in his stomach. “Are you kidding?” he said. Shut up and listen, he was told. Bhai Wajahat’s men ran through a list of landmarks, drilled precise instructions into his head.

Here, you’re on your own. Don’t make noise. Lie flat on the ground if you see anything move. When—and IF—you cross the border, don’t dawdle. Go straight to Maria’s Bed and Breakfast. And run. Run like you mean it.

So Khalid ran like he meant it. Those four miles, dodging shrubs and imagined sentries in the half-darkness, brambles snagging his ankles, he sprinted like a madman. Like a world class

runner, he told Shagufta once. Heart banging, lungs constricting, rasping, begging, as if one moment of hesitation, one look back, and everything he'd left behind might overtake him, transform him, feet upwards, into a pillar of salt. When he glimpsed the border—a wall of wire rising out of the darkness—relief sizzled through Khalid like lightning. There ahead of him lay the Land of Milk and Honey, where new lives bloomed from the wreckage of old ones washed ashore. That instant, that first glimpse of US soil, Khalid imagined for many years, was the happiest moment of his life. Terrible, excruciatingly terrible with the threat of discovery and disappointment, yet *aching* with profound promise.

Once he'd crawled through the border, Khalid kept running until he reached town. Then he slicked back his hair with sweat and followed the mental map provided him by Bhai Wajahat's men. He found Maria's Bed and Breakfast, a surprisingly clean establishment manned by a shockingly masculine Maria. A room, a suit, and another list awaited him there.

Don't leave your room for three days. Sleep as much as you can. Got to rest, it'll scrape that illegal look off your face.

On the fourth day, Khalid shaved and Maria gave him a haircut. He donned his snazzy new suit, stuck a local newspaper under his arm—*so you look like you belong*, the list advised—and caught a taxi into the heart of Texas.

And that, Khalid thinks, should have been that. But life has a way of turning the page when you least expect it. Khalid learned this long ago when he looked up from the monstrous, slippery, scaly fish he'd just wrestled in, and realized that Syra was gone. As if she'd risen from the plank she sat on, stepped off the boat, and walked away over the yellow-green water.

For how long had he looked away?

The sky, Khalid surprises himself by recalling, spilled like a jug of aqua paint into the horizon that day. *Sit still*, he'd told Syra. Her turquoise jumper stuck to her in the heat. Sweat glistened on her forehead and fuzzy upper lip. She leaned over the side of the boat, trying to touch the water, and she talked too much.

Are there snakes in there? How come the water's so yellow? Can I fish too?

"Shut her up, *yaar*," his friends said. "Did you have to bring her along?"

And then, without warning, Khalid's fishing rod leapt from his hand and he scrambled for it. And when he looked up again, no turquoise jumper caught his eye, no Syra.

"Where's Syra?" he yelled, the fish spilling from his arms.

His friends, startled, jerked about, peering into crannies too small to hold a turtle. Khalid dived into the water. His breath fizzed around him like a hopeless prayer. Where to look? Which way to go? He burrowed—lungs exploding—halfway into the bowels of Kimarhi before he saw her, before he glimpsed the turquoise jumper drifting near a bed of seaweed below. And when he burst to the surface, he pulled Syra with him.

Who knew CPR in those days? Khalid and his friends thumped Syra's back. They pumped her chest. Held her nose and breathed into her mouth. Screamed and lashed out at each other. Sobbed. Rowed back to shore. They pulled the oars swiftly, frantically, though they should've known that time no longer mattered.

But now, waiting for Shagufta and Abdullah, time matters more than anything to Khalid. And time in Karachi lives as languid an existence as the city's inhabitants. Days saunter by on

stunted legs, it seems. Khalid's store is up and running, pulling in a decent income. He whiles away his time there, driving home later than he needs to. He dreads his mother's watchful eyes, her insistence on speaking constantly of Abdullah, her attentiveness during his calls to Shagufta. He dreads the inevitable question that follows--*Are they coming yet?*--and when he shakes his head, the expression, that ghost of the 'what has he done now look' that flows into her features before she turns away. So he calls Shagufta less and less. By his fourth month in Karachi, he calls her twice a week instead of every day. Then once a week, and finally, in a burst of anger, not at all.

It is finally Shagufta who calls him late one evening. Khalid tucks the phone between his shoulder and ear. He is alone on the third floor, hunched on the saffron-colored carpet, busy assembling a crib for the room his children will share. He drops the screwdriver when Shagufta says "Here, listen to this". Then he's listening to a baby cry.

"What do you want to name her?" Shagufta asks.

"Syra." Before Khalid can pluck the name back out of the air, Shagufta latches onto it. Nice and short, she says. Easy for Americans to pronounce.

A cold fist spreads open inside Khalid's chest.

"When are you coming?" The question is quick, almost reckless.

Shagufta is silent for a moment. "When things get a little less hectic," she offers, and Khalid detects the lie in her voice.

"You *are* coming, aren't you?" His anger surges ahead of his words.

"Give me a break, Khalid." The anger Shagufta aims for is bleached with uncertainty. "I'm in a hospital bed here. What do you want me to do, kill myself for you?"

Khalid wants to plunge his hand through the phone line, through that invisible winding tunnel of shuttled words, and kill her himself. “I’m asking you a straight question, Shagufta.”

This time the silence stretches longer. When Shagufta speaks, her tone is subdued. “All I know about Karachi is what you’ve told me. And I don’t know, Khalid…I just don’t know if we can depend on you.”

“Is that so.” He wants to say more, much more, but footsteps sound on the stairs and Khalid knows from avoiding her these past months, that they belong to his mother. When she sees his face, she stops at the door to the room, one hand braced against the doorframe.

“Is something wrong?” she asks. Khalid shakes his head. On the other end of the line, Shagufta talks faster and faster.

“We can use web cams.” A tremor runs through her words. “And pictures, I promise. And when they’re older, I’ll send them to visit. Because they’re citizens….Are you listening to me, Khalid?”

He nods as if she can see him, but he’s really gone. Evaporated from the room. Rematerialized somewhere just south of the US border. Then he’s crawling back into his old skin, the skin he shed as he ran towards the Land of Milk and Honey.

He places the phone softly onto the cradle. His mother follows him downstairs to the kitchen. Watches him as he gulps down a glass of water. “Is something wrong?” she asks again.

“No,” Khalid says. *No one needs a piece of misery like you.*…He closes his eyes and he’s back in Kimarhi, plunging through the yellow-green water, searching for the turquoise jumper. He places the glass in the sink. He doesn’t tell his mother about the baby. If he does, the next

thing she'll ask is the baby's name. And 'Syra' is not a name Khalid's lips can form in the presence of his mother.

It is finally his mother who voices the name some days later, drops it into the conversation as casually as a lump of sugar into her tea. She has cornered Khalid as she often does on his return from work. They're seated in the kitchen, watching rain pour into the dark courtyard, going through photographs of Khalid's life in America. Khalid's mother hands him a snapshot of Abdullah.

"Abdullah looks a bit like Syra in this one," she says. She stares Khalid straight in the eye as if daring him to look away. Khalid nods slowly, though it isn't true. Abdullah looks nothing like Syra and they both know it.

"I'm sorry." His mother says after a moment, her words barely audible. "I wanted you to come home, but not this way."

Several seconds tick by on the sunflower-shaped wall clock before Khalid understands what she means. *A mother's words strike like an arrow.*...

She has that look on her face again, that 'what has he done now' look that for the past months has tormented Khalid, has reminded him of everything he was, everything he'll ever be. But that look, Khalid suddenly knows, is not for him. It has been pointing at *her*, asking 'what have I done.'

"No, no." Khalid clutches his mother's hand. "Every man shoulders his own destiny." He's quoting his father's book of idioms, he realizes, pulling words off a page he read twenty years ago. And he cries, crushing his mother's hand in his own.

THE THOUSAND TREES ORCHARD

In the sprawling loneliness of a Florida morning, shortly after the miniature mosque on my cherry nightstand erupted into its predawn call to prayer, my sister slipped into my bedroom with a knife in her hand. I heard her breathe before I heard her move. Despite her obesity, her once-graceful gait hindered by swollen blue-veined arms and legs, Mahjabeen rivaled her shadow in silence and stealth. So no rustle of cotton *shalwar khameez* announced her arrival, no creak of hardwood floor. Just the hiss of her breath brushing my ears as I stood at the open window overlooking the woods behind my home.

I turned and Mahjabeen's hulking form was creeping toward my bed. Perhaps she imagined I was asleep. But I had not slept any more than she had. All night, thoughts of Mahjabeen had crowded my mind. Before her husband had deposited her on my doorstep yesterday, I hadn't seen either of them in fourteen years, and for Mahjabeen, I'd heard those years had been littered with depression, drugs, and psychiatric institutions.

"I can't take any more. She's your responsibility too," Rafiq had said the night before, thrusting Mahjabeen's bag of medications in my hand. As he strode to his car, I ran after him,

stumbling in my anger, over both my feet and my words. “She’s your *wife*, Rafiq,” and when he ignored me, “What would your mother say?”

He spat into the grass then, narrowly missing my foot. “What do you care?” He threw a glance at Mahjabeen, or what had been Mahjabeen and was now a grotesquely distorted version of my sister, in both body and mind. She stood silently under the arch of my front door. “Make sure she takes her meds,” Rafiq said, and I caught a glimpse of hesitation. A glimpse of worry perhaps, a hint of the man who’d long ago stood watch over me in a deserted orchard. That man disappeared as Rafiq turned on his heel and walked away.

Mahjabeen was silent after Rafiq left. She didn’t respond to my nervous chit-chat, didn’t speak at all. As if the dozen languages that once flowed like clashing currents through her speech had gone dry, or lay dormant perhaps, behind a wall of potent white pills.

As I prepared her room, Mahjabeen followed my movements with pale green eyes, embedded pebble-like in the swollen flesh of her face. Her expression exuded a ghastly mixture of indifference and hostility. Fear, an unfamiliar feeling, crawled along the back of my neck. It crept into bed with me and stayed all night. When the *adhan* alarm sounded, I rose, relieved, to perform the *tahajjud* prayer, and now I stood at the window as I often did, awaiting *subah-sadiq*, the moment the line between darkness and dawn thins into a sliver of spreading light, when night births day and with it, the illusion of a new beginning.

“Mahjabeen?” The word escaped me, and when she swiveled, the knife took shape in her hand. I clambered out of the window then, knocking the screen and myself to the dew-slick grass. The hair covering I’d donned for prayer snagged on the cracked wooden sill, almost throttling me. Mahjabeen was suddenly there, pushing away the chenille curtains, one massive

leg arching toward the ground. I abandoned my scarf and stumbling to my feet, ran, feeling naked despite the cover of trees and my full-sleeved flannel nightgown. Though I didn't dare look back, I knew Mahjabeen was behind me. She was as swift and silent as she had been when we were children, when we were sisters and not yet wives, lovers, or even women, when the lush estates of Mallapalli, India had stretched, seemingly, to the horizons of our lives.

It was in Mallapalli that Mahjabeen and I were conceived and born, far from the cramped clamor of Bombay or the rickshaw-and-oxen congested streets of Hyderabad. Surrounded by the fruit trees of our father's estate, we unfurled out of our childhoods and into our *muqaddars*, our predestined paths. While I twisted my hair into shining plaits and hung out of windows, dreaming of boys, Mahjabeen devoured my father's library. She was older than me by only eleven months, but by the time we were twelve or thirteen, Mahjabeen knew every tongue spoken on our estate—Hindi, Telgu, English, Farsi—as well as languages that no one, not even my father, could identify or understand.

Mahjabeen and I shared many things during those years—clothes, secrets, the stigma of breasts and hips in a family deprived of male heirs. But despite her superior knowledge of what was then, and perhaps will always be, a man's world, it was I who shrugged off my shroud of feminine guilt and burrowed into my father's heart.

Yet, Mahjabeen was the *achi bachi*, the good girl, the quiet one since we were toddlers. Unlike her, I kicked the walls and screamed when denied something I desired. I pinched and harangued the housemaids until they bribed me with lumps of sugar. Once I slapped my mother as I'd seen my father do, and she smacked my face, leaving the imprint of her hand.

Still, she and everyone I knew favored me above Mahjabeen. I couldn't understand why until one day I heard Sajjadi Begum, the widow of a wealthy landowner and my mother's closest friend, remark that Beauty must have been drunk or distracted the day it brushed against Mahjabeen. And then I noticed that Mahjabeen's cheekbones were high, chiseled, but lopsided. Her eyes, green and immense, sat deep in their sockets, bleached and dull. I fled to my room and scrutinized my reflection, searching for flaws.

There were none.

And because it was beauty that the world coveted, guests to our ancient, time-weathered stone *hawayli* ignored Mahjabeen and placed their palms on my head, stuffing rupees into my hand. Sajjadi Begum enveloped me in her *banarsi* saris and winked at my mother. "Reserve this one for me," she said. She pulled me into her lap and I brushed my brow against her chin, demanding glass bangles and *shahi* shoes. They invariably arrived the next day.

Sajjadi Begum was not the only one who indulged me. The Hindu servants who plowed my father's fields brought me string-tied packages of syrupy *mitthai* and tobacco-less *paan*. Laddo, they called me, and eventually so did my father despite my mother's protests that she had not named me Kauthar, Fountain of Paradise, so that I could be reduced to something so common as a split-pea sweet.

"Shut your rubbish," my father said, backhanding her when she complained for the hundredth time. "You give me daughters and now you tell me what to call them. Come here, Laddo." He pulled me onto his knee and slipped silver bangles onto my delicate wrist. My mother stamped out, slamming the door, and my father ignored her. "Sajjadi Begum sent these

for you. She's going to Bombay tomorrow. Do you want bead embroidery on your *lahanga* or thread?"

"Why won't she take me with her to pick it out?" I said. "I won't wear it if I don't like it."

My father laughed, throwing back his head. Crinkles appeared around his eyes. "Giving your mother-in-law trouble already?" he said. "She'll take you to Bombay when you're married to her son."

"I won't marry him if I don't like him." I jumped off his knee and my father stopped laughing. "That," he said, touching his finger to my nose, "is not up to you."

And so, because it was not up to me, a girl of twelve, a girl who drifted like a twig, as did Mahjabeen and all of Mallapalli, down the relentless river of our *muqaddars*, I began to dream about Sajjadi Begum's son Iqbal.

Iqbal hovered in my memory as no more than a shadow from my toddler years, but I decided he would bring me silver *payzab* when he returned from his studies in England. He would fasten them around my ankles, caressing the smooth skin of my feet with his thick hands. Unlike his mother, he would know without asking if I wanted thread or bead embroidery on my *lahangas*. We would eat mangos together in the Thousand Trees Orchard where a thousand trees rose out of the earth, each laden with a different variety of mango. My grandfather had planted that orchard as a wedding present for his wife, and Iqbal, I decided, would plant a hundred such orchards for me, and pluck apples and guavas from his father's trees and present them to me with rose milk for breakfast.

By the time Madame Sajjadi's *lahanga* arrived two weeks later, I was more an inhabitant of my dream-life than of Mallapalli, India. Ashamed at not having shared my thoughts with Mahjabeen, I offered to let her wear the *lahanga* first. She shook her head, smiling her grimace of a smile. "Clothes do not make the man," she said, speaking in English as she often did nowadays. Then she hooked me into my new outfit. And while I sashayed downstairs and through the following days and months, basking in the glow of my secret love, Mahjabeen shrank, day by day, into her own shadow. She emerged only when she and I were alone, walking barefoot together, the dirt of Mallapalli sifting between our toes.

Despite the silence of our parents on Mahjabeen and her prospects, the walls of our home whispered, and Mahjabeen and I knew that the future of half our father's estate lay in jeopardy because Mahjabeen was not beautiful enough to marry well. Perhaps my parents didn't like to be reminded of this. Or perhaps it was Mahjabeen's stealthy movements that unsettled them. Whenever Mahjabeen spoke in their presence, slipping up silently behind them as was her habit, my mother started and my father swore. They barely noticed when Mahjabeen tucked herself into a servant's corner, reading our father's books for days on end, until her skin stretched sallow across her lopsided cheekbones and her pale eyes sunk even further into her head. I pulled her out of her corner then, begging her to play with me, pretending I desired her company. In truth, I feared that left alone, she'd disappear altogether.

Often, for a panic-filled moment or two, it seemed that she had. "Where are you, Mahjabeen?" I yelled more times than I can count, suddenly alone in the stables or a field of freshly plowed dirt. She slipped out of nowhere, a pen behind her ear, a notebook under her arm.

"You want to hear what I wrote." It was never a question and I never answered. What she wrote was always strange, in languages that jarred my ears, and I retreated into my daydreams after a while. She clutched my arm as we walked, her eyes on the notebook. She read aloud, her tongue spurting out clumsy words and slipping over smooth ones. I navigated, skirting the irrigation ditches that crisscrossed our father's estate, this land as familiar as our names.

Sometimes Mahjabeen tugged my arm and I tumbled down from my perch in the sky where a cloud had been my cushion and Iqbal my attentive companion. I stared at Mahjabeen blankly as she pointed out a banyan tree from which an ancestor had swung during the Hindu worker-riots, or a pagoda on which the former Nizam of Hyderabad, once the richest man in the world, had sipped iced tea along with the British Viceroy. That was before the British had chopped up India, Mahjabeen told me, leaving our grandfathers a mere fraction of what had once been theirs. And though Change was the imprint of Time, said Mahjabeen, this did not absolve the British of what they had done.

To distract Mahjabeen from her lectures, I guided her to the field laborers' homes. We wandered among the huts thatched with mud and grass, surrounded by brick stoves, steel pots and pans and women in dirt-caked saris with burnished skin, gold nose-rings, and dark naked children. We spun the children around on a makeshift tire swing. Sometimes we crouched around a stove, stirring pots of boiling clothes or chili-reddened *dal*, chewing pieces of bread hard enough to chafe our tongues. The women laughed at us but glanced worriedly over their shoulders toward the stone *hawayli*. What would the *begum-sahiba* say if she saw her daughters cooking at a laborer's stove?

When the sun began to dip, Mahjabeen and I stole past the head-caretaker's cottage to the main well, an immense hole the size of small home, plunging through the center of a bowl-shaped clearing surrounded by pineapple trees. The well was bottomless, according to our father, and we were forbidden to come near it. One forbidden act leads into another, our father often said. Mahjabeen and I tied ropes around our waists, lowered ourselves in and washed the smell of those honey-skinned women and their boiling pots out of our clothes.

One day, while we washed, Mahjabeen untied her rope and ducked deep into the well. I treaded water, swallowing the screams that rose in my throat when she didn't come up. Then she was behind me, pushing me in, holding me under for what couldn't have been more than several seconds. Time stopped, muffled by the roaring in my ears. I clawed the surface of the water and Mahjabeen's hands before she released me.

"That's what marriage is like," she said as I came up, sputtering, gasping for breath. "I thought you should know."

I slapped her and yanked her braids, too angry then to pay attention to her words. I recalled them years later in the dead of a monsoon night, while rivets of rain hammered the walls and my new husband's body covered mine like a shroud.

But before I married out of my ignorance, before I stepped, willingly or not, onto the path that had been laid before I was born, I craved romance even more than I craved the tobacco *paan* my father had forbidden us to eat. On our black and white television, I watched Sri Devi swear her undying love to Anil Kapoor, and in another film, to Amitabh Bachan. That, I decided, was

how my love-life would be. Not like my parents' who existed in a cocoon woven from my father's anger and my mother's martyrdom.

"What do you think?" I asked Mahjabeen once. "Do they ever actually touch each other?"

"Besides when he hits her, you mean?" Mahjabeen said. She was perched on a stone slab reading, the Arabic alphabet reflected in her eyes, as we waited in the Thousand Trees Orchard for the *qurbani* to commence. Seven goats were to be slaughtered in honor of the Eid-ul-Adha celebration, and Mahjabeen and I planned to watch from the cover of the trees.

I sighed. The sound of knives being sharpened cut through the trees and I covered my ears at the rhythmic, screeching sound. "I wonder if they ever loved each other."

"Love," Mahjabeen said, her eyes trained on her book, "is an illusion. If you read a little, you'd know that all the great lovers—Shereen and Farhad, Romeo and Juliet, Laila and Majnoon—all died before their love could be tested through marriage. I, for one, am never falling in love or getting married." She lowered her book and stared at me, her eyes anticipating the thought that sprung uninvited into my mind, that no one would marry her anyway.

"I think you should," I said feebly.

Mahjabeen pushed her book away as if impatient to convince me of something I was too dense to understand. "You know what marriage is like?" She pointed past the trees, toward the scuffling and grunting of men and goats. I stared at her, silent for once.

"I think they're starting," she said then, and I thought I saw her shiver. "Are you sure we should watch?"

I didn't answer. I was running to the edge of the orchard. Mahjabeen followed and we stood shoulder to shoulder, peering from between the trees. We watched two men grasp a goat by the horns and legs and pin his head to a table-sized tree stump. The knife swished against the reddish brown skin and blood sprayed, dotting the men's faces and white shirts. The goat jerked and twitched.

We watched all seven *qurbanis*, and I flinched with each spurt of blood. Mahjabeen's face was dark, impassive. After the men had left the clearing, carcasses strung from thick poles, Mahjabeen and I inspected the bloodied tree stump.

"Look," said Mahjabeen. "They left a knife." She picked up the long, sword-like tool and dragged the ruddied blade across the base of the stump.

"Stop that," I said. The clearing was eerily silent after the killings. No insects or birds chittered or chirped.

"You might as well put your head on that stump right now," Mahjabeen said. What little color there was in her eyes seemed to leach out.

I backed away, staring at the knife. "You can play here if you like," I said. "I'm going home."

And then I turned and fled through the Thousand Trees Orchard. Fled as if my feet were on fire, as if in the dull glint of the blade Mahjabeen held, I'd glimpsed the tangled road that would one day bring Mahjabeen to my doorstep in Florida. As if in Mahjabeen's bleached eyes, I'd foreseen the three hundred pound woman who now swept up a hill toward me, knife clutched against her mammoth breasts, face hard and hostile as a stone god's.

Where were the *sitafal*, mango, the pineapple trees? Where were the banyans of Mallapalli, solid as swarthy sentinels? Around me, unfamiliar trees stuck out of the earth, spindly and knobbed, like the naked limbs of Hindu laborers, the laborers who had fed me *mitthai* and called me Laddo when I was a child. I imagined Mahjabeen uprooting these scrawny Floridian trees with a swipe of her swollen hand.

The sun burst from the horizon as I stumbled to the top of a hill. For a moment, it seemed as if I was not the pursued, but the pursuer, leaping to embrace the sun. I paused, breathing hard, and glanced over my shoulder. A few seconds before, I'd looked back to see Mahjabeen forging toward me like a human bulldozer. Now the woods were silent. Mahjabeen was nowhere to be seen.

Below me, I could see my home, the pasture where my goats grazed, and the stump-littered clearing behind it where a half-finished structure stood. It was to be my prayer-room. A place to retreat into five times a day, away from the demands of life. I planned to decorate the interior with candles, verses embroidered on hand-knotted rugs and depictions of the Ka'bah, the House of God. A painting of Masjid Aqsa, the Mosque of the Dome of the Rock, rose to my mind. I'd seen it in a Muslim Grocery store in Orlando a few weeks ago. It would make a good centerpiece for the one windowless wall of the room, I thought distractedly in the instant before Mahjabeen grasped my shoulder.

I screamed. I wrenched away from her, and then I was tumbling down the side of the hill, through the trees and into my neighbor's yard. I lay there, splayed in the mud, sobbing, awaiting the knife that would surely pierce my skin. After a while, I lifted my head. I glimpsed Mahjabeen retreating into the trees. My neighbor stood over me, his excuse of a beard dangling below his

open mouth. He had never seen me up close, let alone without my head covering and *abaya*. Now he avoided looking my way while staring at me just the same.

"Holy shit," he kept saying, "holy shit. What was it? A bear? A fox?"

He extended a hand, but I rose to my feet unaided. I adjusted my nightgown, wrapped my arms around myself. "Can I use your phone?" I said.

Later, the police told me that when they entered my home, Mahjabeen perched quietly on my leather couch, her bag of medications nestled in her lap. She extended her wrists before the officers could ask for them.

"Are you sure it was a knife?" I was questioned, again and again. "She said she tried to ask you where the tea bags were and you jumped out the window."

"She spoke?" I said, and the officers stared at me as if I was the crazy one. As if I should be the one cuffed and stuffed into the back of a police car and transported to the psychiatric ward of the nearest hospital.

Perhaps they were right. After all, it was I and not Mahjabeen who had walked, in our childhood, the finer line between sanity and wishfulness. Despite the doses of reality Mahjabeen administered, I had been the irrational one. The one who constructed a lover out of a shadow and dreamed of him day and night. The one who believed that Mallapalli was the world, with nothing beyond it. The one who betrayed and was betrayed, who left her husband—or was kicked out, it was never clear which—and was now here alone in Florida, with only God and goats for company.

And come Eid-ul-Adha, even those goats would be gone, slaughtered and skinned, frozen in ziplock bags in my customer's freezers. Because that is what I did now for a living, reared goats and slaughtered them. And I no longer flinched at the spurt of blood. My stomach hardly lurched when the spray dotted my face and hands. Because I was no longer that child who'd watched seven *qurbanis* and decided—for a short while, true to her capricious nature—that she'd never eat goat again.

"Why not?" My father had appeared simultaneously bemused and amused when I'd announced my decision at dinner that night so long ago. "You eat chicken and cow and fish too, don't you?"

"Never again." I'd picked up the cubes of beef from my plate and deposited them on my mother's. "No meat."

"Of course you'll eat meat," my mother cut in. "We're not Hindus. And you're a skeleton as it is."

"Leave the child alone, woman," my father snapped, jerking his chin in her direction. It was the harsh equivalent of a wink, a wink that might have said, 'she'll change her mind sooner or later.' He peered at me over a rack of roasted ribs. "It's a sacrifice, that's all, and not without purpose," he said. "All that meat is going to poor people."

He turned to Mahjabeen then, and looked at her, looked at her longer than he normally did, as if by peering into her eyes, he could finally ferret out the key to the chambers of her mind. "Why did you take her to watch, Mahjabeen?" he said. "Mizra said he saw you swinging a knife. Is that true?"

Mahjabeen opened her mouth and closed it. She had swallowed herself as she invariably did in my father's presence. I looked from one to the other.

"We were just playing," I said.

I wouldn't have defended her if I'd known that one day, she'd stare at me—almost contentedly—through those sunken sockets as I defended *myself* against her to a group of doubtful police officers.

I never watched the *qurbani* on my father's estate again. Neither did Mahjabeen. At least not while I knew her, and as time passed, I knew her less and less. I began to worry about sunburns, mosquito bites and dirty toenails. She took to wandering alone in the orchards, her notebook in her hand, and for a while I worried that she'd lose her footing and plunge into an irrigation ditch. But then Sajjadi Begum's son Iqbal returned from England and I stopped thinking about Mahjabeen altogether.

Iqbal had brought his brother Rafiq back with him, but no silver *payzab* to fasten around my ankles. In fact, he'd brought nothing for me at all. I shouldn't have been disappointed. I shouldn't have cried in my room, ranting my anger to my mother and Mahjabeen, because who could expect any different from that puffed-up, pudgy anglophile? The man who turned my insides the first time I met him.

Iqbal plodded through my father's estate, admiring the trees rather than my eyes. While my father and Rafiq wore crisp white cotton *khameez*, he sweated in a navy suit, the coat of which barely buttoned around his considerable waist. He plotted, on a notepad, the land that

would pass to him on my father's death, pacing excitedly under the mango trees, calculating and recalculating acreages until my father's face tightened and Rafiq's reddened with embarrassment.

At dinner, when I descended into the drawing room, swaying in a yellow silk sari, gold dust threading my hair, Iqbal's gaze lingered on me for barely a moment. He did take my hand, however, and press his soggy lips to it. I wiped my hand on the *pallo* of my sari while Iqbal glanced around, expecting approval for his English manners. "Pleasure to meet you, Madame," he said, although he'd already met me that afternoon.

Mahjabeen snickered somewhere above me, and I turned sharply. She stood on the landing, leaning on the rail. I stared at her. Had she been laughing at me? No, not Mahjabeen. Her smile withered when she saw my face. I escaped the room then. I slipped into the moonlight, not caring that the otherworldly *jinns* that inhabited the trees might descend at any moment and possess me.

I was crying, wiping my mascara on my sari, when Rafiq found me. "They're looking for you," he said.

I turned my back to him. "Surely not your brother. I don't know why I got all dressed up like this. Mahjabeen's right. This is just stupid."

"No it's not," said Rafiq. "You look beautiful. Now come back in." His voice was coaxing, indulgent, the voice of a man speaking to a spoiled child. I followed Rafiq, willing to endure Iqbal's company for his sake, but for this one evening, no more.

That night, I screamed and cried. I banged my arms purplish against the walls. I broke my bangles and threatened to pierce my arteries with the shards. My father shook his head. “Do you think Iqbal had a choice? The contracts have been drawn up,” he said. “We need this marriage to bind the estates together.” Mallapalli was breaking up, he said. The vultures circled. Pritha Shah and company, land developers, were plucking up tracts of land and selling off pieces as commercial development areas. The estates had to be protected or Mallapalli would turn into another Hyderabad.

“Let me marry his brother then,” I said. My father burst out laughing.

“You’re a silly child,” he said. “You’ve been betrothed to Iqbal since you were eight. Besides, he’s the older brother.”

If Mahjabeen had married Iqbal, I could’ve married Rafiq. Then I caught myself. I was wishing that stodgy anglophile on Mahjabeen. Fresh tears welled in my eyes. “Quiet her,” my father said before he went to bed, “or she’ll look like a ghoul at the wedding.”

My mother kissed my hands and I was reminded of Iqbal’s soggy lips. “Iqbal is a good man,” she said. “Not as handsome as Rafiq, perhaps, but he’ll take care of you.”

Had marriage taught her nothing? I broke free from her and retreated to my bedroom, wild escape plans jostling through my mind. Mahjabeen crept in some time later. She climbed under the bedcovers with me. I sobbed, my back to hers, and she listened.

It had been a long time since she and I had shared a bed or even our thoughts. I was afraid she’d tell me I’d been a fool, that she’d remind me of what she’d said about marriage as we awaited the *qurbani* in the Thousand Trees Orchard. But when Mahjabeen spoke again, it was of something else entirely.

“Should we run away?” she whispered. “Should we drown ourselves in the well? Both of us, together?”

I turned to face her and saw my thoughts mirrored in her washed out eyes. Unlike Mahjabeen, I did not have the will to leave, whether through the door or through death.

And if I’d nodded then, if I’d risen from my bed and followed Mahjabeen through the darkness of the only world I’d ever known, past the laborer’s huts, the pineapple trees, past the caretaker’s cottage to the main well, would she have jumped with me? *For* me? It was a difficult question to answer.

Almost as difficult as the one I now, years later, struggled with. What was to be done about Mahjabeen? The woman who had hunted me with a knife at dawn, though no one wanted to believe it.

The hospital staff insisted, as the police had, that some misunderstanding had taken place. Mahjabeen posed no danger to me, to anyone. The doctors and nurses raised their eyebrows at me, communicating their annoyance at my paranoia, or rather, at my desire to unload my inconvenience of a sister, as they saw it. “She’ll be fine as long as she takes her medications,” they said. “And she’s demonstrated her ability to do so without assistance.”

“But look at her,” I said. The doctor followed my impatient glance toward the table at which Mahjabeen slouched, her expression blank as she relentlessly spooned spinach soup into her mouth.

“She’s eating,” he said. “Is there something wrong with that?”

“I don’t mean that,” I said. “I mean…she’s all swollen. And the way she—”

“A weight problem doesn’t translate into a mental problem, Mrs. Deen,” the doctor cut in, and I wanted to scrub, with steel mesh, the smug expression off his face. “Of course, we know she’s sick,” he went on, “but her illness is under control.” Then he smiled the smile of a smitten man. “The things she knows,” he said. “And how she draws. We’ve never had anyone like her. When she talks, there‘s nothing you’d rather do than listen.”

So Mahjabeen had learned, in the years we’d been apart, what I’d forgotten, how to beguile strangers. And now I was the only person who remained deprived of her charm. No matter how long I hovered near Mahjabeen’s chair in the psychiatric ward, she never spoke to me. She only stared, her sunken eyes washing me in hostility from head to toe.

“She’s ready to be released,” the doctor assured me.

He couldn’t imagine that I’d take Mahjabeen home with me. But there was no one else. Cold crept through me at the thought of Mahjabeen prowling my hallway, her shadow blotting the light that seeped into my bedroom from beneath the door. I imagined her pacing, back and forth, faster and faster, the way she’d paced long ago, the night before my wedding to Iqbal. I’d lain awake that entire night. I’d watched Mahjabeen’s shadow flit back and forth as she waited for me to respond to her invitation. The invitation she’d extended earlier in a note slipped beneath my door. It frightened and excited me as I read it again and again. *Let’s run away.*

But Laddo, the girl I was then, was not brave enough to run away. Even if staying meant marriage to a man like Iqbal.

So I married Iqbal and endured his clumsy attempts at romance, and then his neglect. He wasn’t a cruel man, but I was unhappy nevertheless. Sajjadi Begum flitted around me, bird-like,

fretful. She made henna moons on my palms and rubbed olive oil in my hair. “Tell me what’s wrong,” she said.

When I shook my head, she assuaged her anxiety by drifting behind me with platters of apples and guavas, mangos and rose milk, things I’d once desired from a husband. My husband, meanwhile, spent his days working and his nights snoring, and for that I was grateful. Occasionally, he had me apply mustard oil to his back or legs, and as my hands slipped over his hairy thighs, I marveled that I could touch a man’s skin and feel no desire. Mahjabeen had been right, I decided. There was no love. Love was an illusion, as flimsy as a thought that evaporated the moment it was voiced.

While Iqbal slept at night, I swept my hair and shoulders into a shawl to discourage *jinns* and stole out of the house. I tried my best not to disturb the household, but Mahjabeen was the shadow-girl, not I. I must have awakened Rafiq. Almost every night, he followed me into his father’s moonlit orchards. The first few times he hovered a distance away, slapping mosquitoes against his pajamas, smoking, until I went back inside. I pretended not to notice him.

Then one night, Rafiq tossed his cigarette on the ground and strode up to me as I slumped on an upturned metal pail, watching the moon. “How long do I have to keep doing this?” he said. “You shouldn’t sit outside alone at night. It’s dangerous. There’re *jinns*, animals, bad men.”

“Don’t speak to me like I’m a child,” I said coldly. “And it’s none of your business.”

“It’s my brother’s,” he said.

“He doesn’t care.”

“My mother does,” said Rafiq, “and she’s worried sick. You could try, for her sake at least, to be happy.”

There was no happiness in marriage.

I remained quiet for a while. Rafiq stood next to me, shifting from foot to foot.

"My sister," I said finally, "thinks there's no such thing as love." I turned to look at him. "Do you think she's right?"

He frowned. Then he crouched down on the ground, facing me, his features shaded in the moonlight. "Your sister's a strange girl," he said. "Sometimes she frightens me, I don't know why."

I rose swiftly, knocking over the pail, and stalked to my room. Though I'd seen his thought in a thousand different eyes, even our parents', the voicing of it wrung my insides.

Rafiq followed me out the next day, apologizing for the night before. And then our meetings became a habit for him as well as for me. Soon, it was Rafiq's company I sought, not the moon's. If I'd known that one day, he'd abandon her on my doorstep, I wouldn't have forgiven Rafiq his words about Mahjabeen. I wouldn't have told him my childish fantasies and accepted the pair of silver *payzab* he brought me one night. If, somehow, I could have flipped ahead through the chapters of my *muqaddar* and foreseen the turns this road would take, I wouldn't have shivered with desire when Rafiq's fingers caressed my neck and trailed down my back. At least, that's what I believe now.

I knew even then that it is forbidden to touch, or even shake the hand of a non-*mehram* man, a man who is neither husband, brother, father or son. One forbidden act leads into another, my father always said. Rafiq's lips followed his fingers, and before I knew it, my skin breathed fire. My heart had never been a fortress. Mahjabeen was wrong, I decided as Rafiq's hands

traveled my body. Not about marriage, maybe, but certainly about love. Love existed. It was a sweet burning sensation that pulsed through you and scattered you across the sky.

When I pulled Rafiq down for the first time into the dirt under a banana tree, he hesitated. Hesitated in much the same way he did years later while washing his hands of Mahjabeen.

"This isn't right," he said.

But even then, his hands wandered the buttons of my nightgown. He didn't protest when I pulled it over my head. "How can it be wrong," I said, "when we love each other?"

Rafiq smiled and brushed his lips against mine. That night, he taught me a language even Mahjabeen didn't know.

Sajjadi Begum's desire was fulfilled. I floated, light as the silk of my saris, through my husband's home and the rock gardens that bordered it. I became generous with my purse. No hawker who passed by was disappointed; fish, safety pins, frying pans—I bought everything. The beggars who had once repulsed me with their bandaged stumps and rotting fingers and toes now prickled my heart and eyes, and Sajjadi Begum gave me a pouch of one-rupee coins so I could toss them money through the front gates.

On my next visit home, I rushed upstairs, wanting to tell Mahjabeen that she'd been wrong, but my father waylaid me. He led me into his library, the damp, dust-coated room that had in our childhoods been more Mahjabeen's than his. He closed the door. "I have to talk to you without your mother around," he said.

Pritha Shah and Company were advancing, my father told me. Our estate could be next. Money was flowing out of the orchards faster than it could be recouped. My half of the estate was safe because Iqbal handled expenses, but Mahjabeen's could go anytime.

I pretended to listen, the words flowing into one ear and out of the other, until he mentioned Mahjabeen.

"Iqbal wants to buy the Thousand Trees Orchard," my father said. "But rightfully, it belongs to Mahjabeen. And a marriage would be better for both parties. It would give Sajjadi Begum all the land from Mehdiputnam to Saghirabad."

He said he was going to speak to Iqbal and I should talk to Sajjadi Begum. Persuade her. And then, looking anxious, my father told me Mahjabeen hadn't been well lately. "Maybe marriage will cure her," he said.

My Rafiq with Mahjabeen? The thought didn't make me jealous. How could it? It was impossible to imagine them together.

Rafiq was a man who thrived on beauty. Delicate figurines fashioned from elephant tusks lined his shelves. The floor of his room, which I now surreptitiously visited from time to time, was carpeted with a hand knotted oriental rug. While together at the market once, I'd seen his attention snag, again and again, on Taj Mahal replicas, hand-crafted jewelry, and though I preferred not to admit it, striking girls. And when we were together, lying on a single banana leaf under the silver-flecked sky, he traced me with his fingers as if I was the most beautiful thing he'd ever known.

Numbly, I walked upstairs to Mahjabeen's room. She had gained some weight, I noticed when she hugged me. Her skin no longer stretched thinly over her lopsided cheekbones.

Notebooks littered the floor like mangos after a windstorm, and Mahjabeen had a feverish look to her. “I’m writing a book on the role of women in Indian genocide,” she said, picking up a yellow bottle and tapping a tiny white pill into her hand. She was barely seventeen then, and I, even younger, had no idea what this English word ‘genocide’ meant.

“What’s that?” I pointed at the bottle.

She shrugged. “Something Baba gave me. To keep me calm, he says.”

“Baba wants you to marry Rafiq,” I blurted out.

“Marriage,” she mumbled. She picked up a notebook and leafed through it. “Even if I thought marriage was a good idea, I wouldn’t marry Rafiq.”

“Assuming you have a choice,” I said.

She slid me a glance from the corners of her eyes, pretending I hadn’t spoken. “Because you have a thing for him,” she said. “I can see it.”

I flushed. “That’s ridiculous. He’s my husband’s brother.” A half hour ago, I’d been clamoring to tell Mahjabeen the very thing she now told me. But suddenly the distance that had stretched between us for some time widened, pushing me further away from her.

“So do you want me to talk to Sajjadi Begum or not?” I said.

I already knew her answer, of course. She contemplated me with those watchful green eyes. “You don’t have to pretend with me,” she said. “Maybe if it wasn’t *his* brother you’re married to….Who knows, you could have gotten a divorce and married Rafiq. I’ve seen him staring at you too.” And then those eyes gleamed, impossibly, for an instant, like twin lamps glowing at midnight through murky green water. “But then he’d stare at a stick in a sari, wouldn’t he, as long as it had long eyelashes and a *khari* nose.”

Not my Rafiq, I wanted to tell Mahjabeen. But I feared she'd shake her head and smile her grimace of a smile. Besides, Rafiq wasn't mine. And if I hadn't hoped that one day he would be, perhaps I might have heeded Mahjabeen's parting words. Perhaps.

They say that the *muqaddars* of every man, woman and child were recorded and preserved millions of years before the creation of Adam and Eve. Who was I to believe that I could have bypassed the path that was ordained for me?

And now that path, the path that had seemed so full of promise when I'd left Mallapalli years ago, stretched before me as bleak as the color of Mahjabeen's eyes.

Mahjabeen was silent as ever on the drive home from the psychiatric ward. Her rasping breath chafed my skin. Her massive hands rested on her knees, and I imagined them on the steering wheel, twisting the car into oncoming traffic. The doctors who insisted Mahjabeen was harmless didn't know her as I did, or had once. They had not seen Mahjabeen—a sane Mahjabeen—looming over a tree stump, swinging a knife.

If I died at her hands, no one would care. Insanity would absolve Mahjabeen. Even in God's eyes, the fact that our deaths had been written before the beginning of Time would release Mahjabeen of culpability.

I trembled by the time we reached home. When I tried to carry Mahjabeen's bag, she snatched it away from me and strode up to the house. I watched her unpack her things—her clothes, some jewelry, her medications. Bundle after bundle of drawings.

Using scotch tape, Mahjabeen began to tape her drawings to the wall. Soon, the living room, kitchen and hallway were obscured beneath a layer of thick paper.

But it wasn't the paper that troubled me. It was the men and women who sprawled across it. Mahjabeen had captured them in every lovemaking pose possible. Hands on breasts. Tongues licking mouths. What if someone, anyone, a customer, even a Federal Express messenger dropped by? My head covering and *abaya* would prove useless against the slander of the images that papered my home.

My gaze fell on one in which a man stood over a woman, ready to penetrate her. I reached out to rip the vulgar drawing off the wall, but Mahjabeen was suddenly there, her hand gripping my arm. And I could do nothing then but leave the drawing where it was. I feared God, certainly, but He was surely more merciful than Mahjabeen.

I carried the phone outside and dialed Iqbal, the man who'd once been my husband.

"Where's Rafiq?" I demanded. "He can't do this to me."

Iqbal refused to give me Rafiq's number. I imagined Iqbal at his office desk, stodgier than ever, his stomach drooping in folds over the front of his pants, his chin quivering as he shook his head.

But he was as polite as he'd been when I first met him. I yelled at him and he only said, "Mahjabeen is a grown woman, Laddo. Turn her out. Turn her over to the State."

"Why should *I* have to do these things," I said. "She's Rafiq's responsibility."

"Too much of a responsibility," said Iqbal. "Do you have any idea of the things she's done? A few months back, she came to Rafiq's office wearing nothing but a necklace and socks inside her coat. Can you imagine? And before that, she bought nearly a hundred books from Barnes and Nobles on Rafiq's credit card. Then she burned them in a bonfire in their backyard."

“I hope she read them first,” I said, and Iqbal gave an offended sniff. He’d never had much of a sense of humor.

“Don’t bother Rafiq,” said Iqbal. “The poor boy’s suffered enough.”

That poor *boy*, I almost told Iqbal, made love to your wife behind your mustard-oiled back. But that would mean slinging mud on my own face. Besides, I feared unfolding the past, the past I’d crumpled and tossed away when I’d washed my hands of Mallapalli, India.

But that didn’t mean I’d let Rafiq off so easy.

“A week,” I said. “Tell Rafiq to get down here in a week or I’ll report him for abandonment. And tell him to bring Mahjabeen’s money. She has a right to that money. I’ll find her an apartment by then, and he can leave after he settles her there.”

A week. I watered the plants to distract me from Mahjabeen’s pebble-like eyes, dusted the books that lined my shelves, polished the cabinets and scrubbed the sinks. I avoided glancing at Mahjabeen or at the walls while I prayed. I tensed every time Mahjabeen crept up behind me, every time she brushed my clothes in passing. I locked my bedroom door every night and slept fitfully, awakening at the slightest sound.

More drawings appeared on the walls almost by the hour. Some of the newer ones, I noticed, were of children instead of men and women. They captured my attention despite my efforts to look away. A slip of a girl sitting on a man’s lap, shadows looming grotesquely around them. A slender girl leaning over a tree stump, her neck bared, while another girl stood over her with a long knife. A naked boy stirring a boiling pot, the face of the girl beside him contorting as she tested the contents with her toe.

On the third day, I was peeling eggplant for dinner when I noticed a black and white etching taped to the fridge. I leaned closer, drawn to something I couldn't define.

Two figures, a man and a woman, surrounded by trees, a full moon above them. But this was no lovemaking scene. The woman was crying. The man stood over her, his hands poised to push her away.

I sank onto a kitchen stool. The man was Rafiq. The woman bore a strong resemblance to me. And Mahjabeen had imagined the scene as if she'd been there herself, as if she'd been a moth or a mole, watching from the shadows the night Rafiq and I met for the last time in the darkness of my husband's orchard.

That same night I'd returned home from my visit to my father's estate, my mind teeming with Mahjabeen's words. *Who knows, you could have gotten a divorce and married Rafiq*, she'd said. And why couldn't I? So what if my husband was his brother?

I stole out into the orchard some time before Rafiq was to arrive. The moon hung low in the sky, and when I faced the other way, its cool eyes bore into my back. I removed my slippers and walked barefoot, the dirt of Mallapalli burrowing into my toenails. It was land, that's all it was, my husband's, my father's. Like any other land on any other piece of the globe.

But this land pulled at me like a mother's womb. And the thought of never again sucking a juice mango under the foliage of the Thousand Trees Orchard brought an ache to my throat. Although I didn't know it then, this longing for something not yet lost was my first taste of true love. It was an attachment that ran deeper than any feeling between a man and a woman.

Still, when Rafiq arrived, I pounced on him. “Let’s run away,” I said. He pulled me against him and laughed. His laugh reminded me of my father’s on the day I’d asked to marry Rafiq instead of Iqbal.

I pushed Rafiq away, my gold bangles clanging violently. “I’m serious,” I said. “I’ll divorce Iqbal. I want to marry you.”

He retreated into himself almost as swiftly as Mahjabeen did in my father’s presence. “You’ve lost your mind.” He began to walk away. “Go to bed.”

I ran after him. I tore at his shirt, and he swung around and grabbed my arms.

“Don’t you love me?” I said.

He looked at me much like Mahjabeen had as we awaited the *qurbani* of the seven goats. Half-pityingly, as if I were a stupid child in need of patient explanation. Then Rafiq took my face in his hands. “I do care for you,” he said. “But think of the orchards. We can’t carry them out on our backs.”

“We can sell our share, can’t we?” I was begging and Rafiq was shaking his head.

“I can’t leave my mother. She’s done nothing to deserve this from her children.” His hands slipped away from my face. “Her happiness is the most important thing in the world to me.”

Before I could ask him if *my* happiness meant nothing, Rafiq thanked me for opening his eyes. “I’m grateful to you, Laddo,” he said, “I really am.”

I should have thanked him as well. Thanked him for teaching me a lesson that would thrash and foam, for many years, like a wild animal in the cage of my memory. But at that

moment, all that struck me was that I'd been as wrong as Mahjabeen. Love did exist, but it wasn't sweet. It was a burning of wanting, hate, and helplessness, of hands tied behind your back when you most needed them.

Rafiq avoided my eyes after that night. At times, I felt his gaze slide over me as I passed him on my way in and out of my bedroom, the room where I now spent almost every minute of my day. Sajjadi Begum took to trailing after me again, bewildered. "Is it because Iqbal's so busy?" she said. "Maybe he should take you to Kashmir, to the mountains. You haven't had a honeymoon."

I assured her I couldn't leave her alone, not even for a honeymoon with Iqbal.

"I want you to be happy," she said. "I want all my children to be happy." She searched my face anxiously. "Iqbal wants Rafiq to marry Mahjabeen," she said, "and he would if I told him to. But I don't know…"

She looked toward Rafiq where he stood on the veranda speaking to a *maasi*. The girl's hair was pulled into a bun. Her delicate face tilted toward Rafiq as he spoke, and her neck arched as she swept the veranda with a straw broom. Tendrils of black hair curled around the girl's face. They brushed her high cheekbones and she pushed them back with long slender fingers. She was smiling and Rafiq smiled back. And perhaps Sajjadi Begum saw what I did, in Rafiq's eyes the desire to trace that girl's face, to feel the delicate bones that sloped and curved, that glowed beneath the girl's skin.

The *namazkhana* was perhaps not the best place to cry over a lover, but it was the closest empty place I found. I sprawled among the prayer rugs and wall coverings depicting Qur'anic verses and the holy city of Mecca and sobbed until Sajjadi Begum found me.

She tried to pull me to my feet, but I sagged to the ground. She sat down and I nestled into her lap as I'd done when I was a child, when I knew too much and nothing, all at the same time. I thought of Rafiq's eyes tracing the *maasi's* features and cried harder. It wasn't me he'd loved, it was my bones and skin. He'd moved on, uprooted me out of himself as easily as if I were an *ajwa* palm, too difficult to nurture, too expensive to maintain.

"Are you upset about Mahjabeen?" Sajjadi Begum stroked my back. She bent down and peered into my face. I didn't know what else to say, so I murmured through my tears, "I don't know what will become of her."

She rocked me quietly for a while, my head on her chest, and I was grateful to be a child again, if only for a moment. "Do you want Rafiq to marry Mahjabeen?" She sounded anxious, uncertain. "Is that what you want?"

Her words seared my heart. Mahjabeen and Rafiq?

And then it surged through me. An awakening, a newfound sense of purpose. So it was beauty Rafiq desired, was it? I thought of Mahjabeen, her lopsided cheekbones, her sunken green eyes. "She frightens me, I don't know why," Rafiq had said. Well, let her frighten him every day of his life. I nestled deeper into Sajjadi Begum's lap and brushed my brow against her chin.

"I don't think he'll marry her." I sniffled and wiped my face with her sari. "No one will marry her, and then when Baba dies, the orchards and everything will be lost."

Sajjadi Begum patted my back. Agitation creased her voice. “Don’t worry so much, *gurya jaan*. I’ll talk to him.” She nodded as if to herself. “He’ll listen to me.”

Rafiq and Mahjabeen married that year. She kneeled on a velvet stage, rubies around her neck, watching me through her kohl-rimmed sunken eyes.

And though the orchards were saved for a while, everything and everyone wasted away. Mahjabeen shut herself in her room, consuming pills like beetlenut candy. The pineapple trees became infested with fungus and rotted. The monsoons came in early and destroyed the crops. Rafiq weathered away, becoming more and more like Iqbal, and when Sajjadi Begum died, he moved to Canada with Mahjabeen. And fourteen years later, when Iqbal had sold Mallapalli to the vultures, and when I’d divorced him—or he’d divorced me—and the Thousand Trees Orchard had been picked clean by Pritha Shah and Company, Rafiq abandoned his wife on my doorstep. And now she prowled my home with her pale-green eyes, papering the walls with her contempt for Laddo, the girl whose beauty had reduced her from the Fountain of Paradise to something so common as a split-pea sweet. And as for Laddo, she cowered inside me while I scoured the classifieds for an apartment in which to dump Mahjabeen, my only sister.

As if we’d never wandered Mallapalli together, never been friends at all. And I was to blame. Even when we were children, Mahjabeen had read through my smooth skin the language of my thoughts. She knew as well as I did what part I’d played in the shaping of our *muqaddars*.

I crumpled the newspaper I held into a ball. I tossed it in the wastebasket. I carried the phone outside and dialed Iqbal again.

“It hasn’t been a week,” he began when he heard my voice.

I cut him off. “Forget about Rafiq,” I said. “We just want the money.”

And then I went inside and began tearing Mahjabeen’s drawings off the walls.

Mahjabeen leapt from the couch and lunged for me, a mountain of a woman, features carved in sallow stone. I eluded her. I ran from room to room, ripping at the walls right and left. She caught me, finally, in the kitchen. Her fist swung into my shoulder blade. I fell, knocking my head on the countertop. Blood dripped down my face as Mahjabeen grasped my arm and dragged me outside. I noticed, through a fog of pain, a hatchet clutched in her other hand. It was a small, sharp tool with which, after slaughter, I split open the heads of goats to remove the brains. Mahjabeen pulled me like a rag doll through my grazing pasture and into the clearing where my half-finished prayer room stood. With or without verses of the Holy Qur’an adorning its walls, it was an appropriate place to die, I thought.

Mahjabeen shoved me into the dirt in front of a tree stump. With the silent grace of the sister I’d known in Mallapalli, she descended to her knees. She stared at me through the washed out green of her eyes, her breath hissing through her nose. I didn’t flinch. I didn’t try to run. But I shivered when Mahjabeen leaned down and pressed one lopsided cheekbone against the stump. Baring her neck with one hand, she held out the hatchet with the other. And then she spoke to me.

“Finish what you started,” she said.

In the years that followed, I learned not to scream when I woke in the dead of night to find Mahjabeen looming over my bed. I learned not to flinch when she brushed by me while peeling an orange with a paring knife. I learned not to care when she related to my neighbor the

history of Mallapalli, India, and favored me with no more than a necessary word. I learned all this and more, willingly.

Because the night after I ripped Mahjabeen's drawings off the wall, the night she swung a fist into my shoulder blade so she could offer me her head, I drew a picture of my own. A *lahanga*-garbed girl plunging feet-forward into an immense well. I taped the drawing to the fridge and the next morning, there were two girls in that drawing. Holding hands, tumbling into the well together.

THE POUTLRY FARMER'S WIFE

The lawyer's office assigned Laila a new persona: The Battered Wife. It was a fitting addition to the assortment of labels Laila had accumulated during the two months since she'd left her husband. Labels such as Abusive, Scheming Wife, Unfit Mother, Runaway Wife, Discarded Wife, Sponging Daughter, Evil Daughter-in-law, and as Laila's mother now constantly reminded Laila, Soon-To-Be-Divorcee/Blight-on-the-Family-Name. Laila's family had not suffered a divorce since the time of Adam and Eve, or so Laila's mother claimed. What was 'Battered Wife' in comparison to such impending dishonor? In India, the land of their forefathers, battered wives were more common than cows. It was a humiliating label, no doubt, said Laila's mother, but the services of Melinda Crowley were worth a little humiliation.

"She usually charges two hundred bucks an hour," the woman at the Legal Aid Society had said after Laila explained her case. "But Crowley likes this kind of work. I bet she'll take you pro bono."

A few days later, Laila had found herself in Melinda Crowley's spacious office facing Melinda across a desk that resembled, not unlike its owner, a beautified rhinoceros. Laila and her mother fidgeted on the overstuffed leather loveseat while Melinda leafed through Laila's divorce

papers—those frightening, densely-worded court documents Laila had been served four days ago.

Melinda peered at Laila from under heavily shadowed lids. "Before I agree to represent you, we need to establish some things." She waved the papers she held. "Are any of your husband's allegations true? For example, that you stole your mother-in-law's jewelry?"

Laila shook her head. Only an idiot would steal her mother-in-law's jewelry when she'd left her own behind. Laila had never intended to stay away. When she'd packed a bag, bundled her three-year-old son into his Spiderman jacket and walked out of her husband's Boonton, New Jersey home, Laila had meant her leaving as nothing more than a picket sign. *This marriage has a husband-shaped hole in it, Aftab, and I'm sick of falling through it*.

"Her husband is a liar," interjected Laila's mother in her heavily-accented English. "Terrible, terrible man. Did bad things to my daughter."

Melinda leaned forward. "What bad things? You need to be more specific." She poised a pen over a legal pad and nodded at Laila. "In the four years you were married, did he ever hit you? Any type of physical abuse at all?"

Laila shook her head.

Laila's mother surreptitiously pinched Laila's arm. "I'm sure there was *some*," she said.

"None," said Laila firmly. She squinted past Melinda to where dozens of drawings, newspaper clippings and certificates covered the wall. Some were university degrees, but one drawing depicted a 'deadbeat' husband being hauled out of the 'Sea of Deadbeat Husbands' with a fearsome hook. Another declared Jesus unworthy of worship, 'seeing as how he was a man' ,

and one certificate proclaimed Melinda ‘An Angel of Mercy’, and recognized her for ‘ten years of exceptional service’ in favor of The Friends of Battered Women Association.

“What about verbal abuse?” Melinda pressed on. “Did he belittle you? Or threaten you or the kid?”

Laila sighed and shook her head again. This was a waste of time. Aftab couldn't threaten an inch-worm. Though the divorce papers carried his signature, it was obvious that they'd been devised by Aftab's father, The-Lord-of-the-House, the man who controlled the purse strings and everything else.

"Aftab's not like that," Laila said. "It's just that he was never home and when he was, his parents—"

“What about the sex?” Melinda interrupted.

The sex? This woman fired questions like bullets and without a clear sense of target. “What *about* the sex?” said Laila. She glanced at her mother who turned pink and studied her fingernails. “It was just sex. Infrequent. And boring, mostly.” Enthusiastic sex had never been a priority in Laila's marriage. Not with Aftab's parents—the Twin Ghouls, as Laila called them—in the next room, their presence reminding Laila of the pall they cast over her daily life.

Melinda shifted in her seat. Her patience was running thin, it was clear. She pulled open a desk drawer, and removing a set of boxing gloves, slipped her ring-laden hands into them. “Well, we can’t sue him for being boring in bed, Hon,” she said. “I meant was he abusive during sex?”

Laila shook her head.

“Coercive? Selfish?” Melinda jabbed at the air. Laila’s mother followed the gloves’ movement with her eyes. She pinched Laila’s arm again. This was the woman who charged her clients two hundred dollars an hour? Allah have mercy on the clients of those who charged less.

“No,” said Laila. Then she paused. “Well, there was this one time, right after we were married. Maybe the first time, because it hurt and I must have screamed or something and he covered my mouth with his hand.”

Melinda stopped jabbing. She jerked off a glove and slammed her fist onto the desk. “*That’s* what I’m talking about. Coercive sex,” she proclaimed, scribbling on her legal pad.

Laila’s mother, sensing hope, jumped in. “He was a bad man,” she said. “Made my daughter a slave. Cooking and cleaning for his parents and brothers. They wouldn’t let her drive, wouldn’t let her stop breastfeeding. They wouldn’t even let her lock her bedroom door.”

“Inhibition of freedom. Invasion of privacy.” Melinda’s pen moved across the paper almost as fast as Laila’s mother spoke.

If they’d offered Laila a window of silence, she might have clarified to Melinda certain things. The bedroom door for example. The lock was broken, and Laila’s husband had balked at fixing it and thus implying that his parents might barge in without permission.

But Laila’s mother and Melinda were intent on their mutually satisfying conversation. Laila’s explanations would've only intruded. So Laila sank further into the jacket she’d borrowed from her sister and contemplated her shredded life.

Just two months ago, she'd been The-Engineer's-Wife. *What does your husband do, desi* women had a habit of asking, and Laila had always had a ready answer. Now everywhere she

went, she'd be introduced as Poor-Laila the-Divorcee/Homeless-Single-Mother. And it was all Aftab's fault.

When she'd left him, all she'd intended was to teach him something that apparently a lifetime in the US had not. That his parents might originate from India, the land of dowry-deaths and dutiful daughters-in-law, but that no woman living in America could be expected to staple her mouth shut and swallow whatever her in-laws dished out.

A week deprived of his wife and son, two at the most, Laila had thought, would jolt Aftab into his senses. But maybe the man contained no sense. Maybe his brain, the engineer's brain that regularly churned out award-winning automobile designs, had deteriorated from the oily *paratas* he consumed every morning. Because when Laila had called Aftab's office, less than a week after she walked out, to negotiate a return, Aftab's secretary had relayed interesting news.

"He says his father has forbidden him to speak to you," she'd said. Her voice, Laila noticed belatedly, dripped with embarrassment.

"*Excuse me*?" Before Laila could think of something worth saying, the secretary had continued. "And he says," she'd coughed and lowered her voice, "he says you're not to return home until his parents consider you properly punished."

Laila had laughed then. Mirthlessly, she liked to think. Darkly, ominously. The truth was, she'd laughed to lessen the burn of humiliation. She shouldn't have bothered. A truckload of humiliation was traveling her way.

Now the insults that flew between Laila's parents and Aftab's were all that remained of Laila's marriage. Rumors floated through the *desi* grapevine like confetti at an Eid-*milan* party. Rumors that Laila had once rollerbladed down Main St. wearing a v-neck and a mini-skirt while

her husband scurried behind with a shawl, trying to cover her up. That Laila had emptied an entire pot of roast chicken onto her own plate and left her ailing mother-in-law the bones. That she'd tried to potty train her son when he was six months old and spanked him when he peed on her boutique-bought dress. Once in a while, rumors about Aftab brushed Laila's ears as well, but those originated from Laila's side of the family, no doubt. The most memorable involved Aftab perched in his mother's lap, sucking his thumb.

"Emotional and psychological abuse," Melinda was saying now. "Clearly a battered woman. And the husband did nothing to prevent it. Isn't that right?" She raised a querying eyebrow at Laila.

"That's right," said Laila dully. That's why she'd left her spineless thirty-three-year-old infant of a husband. Because he'd done nothing. Nothing but provide her with food and father her child. That's what you get for marrying into a *Hyderabadi* family, her mother often said. They were the scum of the Indian earth, obsessed with education and male offspring. They weeded out any inconvenience—including an uncooperative daughter-in-law—that barred their way, and they'd walk a mile to save a broken penny.

"According to your husband, you don't deserve alimony." Melinda said. She gestured to the papers on her desk.

Laila reddened with embarrassment. The papers painted her in the cheapest light possible. They claimed that Laila worked around the clock, pulling in wads of tax-free cash. That she managed a deli, cleaned bathrooms, applied henna designs for twelve dollars a hand and washed dead bodies for fifty dollars an hour. And in her absence, the papers said, Laila's son languished

in his maternal grandmother's cramped house—quite unnecessarily, because in Boonton, a spacious home, a fenced-in yard and a heartbroken father awaited him.

Laila buried her face in her hands. "I'm not working at all," she said. "They're just trying to make me look bad so they can get my son."

It was the most Laila had uttered since she entered Melinda's office. Melinda's approval registered in a broad smile.

“Not they. He," she said. "You've got to recognize the enemy, hon." She patted Laila's hand. "Don't worry. I’ll get you the kid, the alimony, child support, you name it. We’ll flatten your husband like a rodent on the Garden State Parkway.”

They’d have to peel him from beneath his father’s feet first, thought Laila. Besides, a man as flat as Aftab could hardly be flattened further.

Laila was scrubbing vegetables at her mother's kitchen sink a few days later when the phone rang. As usual, everyone ignored it. They expected Laila-the Blight-on-the-Family-Name and thus The-Girl-Best-Tolerated-While-Wielding-a-Dustbuster-or-a-Dishrag, to somehow stretch her arm halfway across the kitchen and take care of it. Laila ignored it as well and the answering machine clicked on.

Laila, are you there? Aftab, the Wife-Batterer. *Call me at my office. Please.*

They hadn’t stirred a hair when the phone rang, but now they all stared at her. Laila’s mother, her sister, her two brothers, even Choti, the obese white Persian Longhair Laila’s mother insisted on spoiling.

Laila, her hands full of dripping spinach leaves, turned slightly away from the expectant expressions and tried to make sense of this new development. Two months had passed since she'd last heard her husband's voice, and filtered through the answering machine, it seemed weak and uncertain, even flimsier than Laila remembered it. The words wobbled and drifted in different directions as if Aftab couldn't hold them together once they'd left his mouth. Melinda had pounced. No other explanation existed for Aftab's sudden desire to speak to Laila.

"That shameless *naamard*," muttered Laila's mother. She strode across the kitchen and jabbed at the answering machine with her elbow, deleting Aftab's message. "The nerve of him, calling here." She studied Laila. "You're not thinking of calling back, are you?" When Laila didn't answer, her mother frowned. She dug floured hands into a bowl of spiced ground meat and began shaping perfect oval patties. "It's too late for phone calls," she said. "Think about those papers he sent. Besides, that man's father insulted your father the last time they spoke. He called him an uneducated bagel vendor."

Laila's father *was* an uneducated bagel vendor. An obscenely successful one. He sold a mountain of bagels every morning from his tiny cart across from the Federal Plaza in Manhattan. He was a *Maiman*, and no one knew business like *Maimans*. They considered education a waste of money, and it was said, as Laila's in-laws had reminded her on several occasions, that a *Maiman* would sell his sister to turn a profit.

"You should've married that nice taxi driver," Laila's mother said. "*His* family wouldn't have looked down their nose at us."

But that's why Laila had turned down her *Maiman* suitors and married Aftab, a *Hyderabadi*, in the first place. Because money, despite its place, lacked the prestige that

education offered. Because she was sick of being the daughter of Mr. Mojawala, a surname that meant, quite literally, sock-seller.

But life had thrown her relatively simple dream into a washing machine and churned it inside out. Laila finished mincing the spinach leaves, and grabbing a handful of grapes, retreated into the bedroom she presently shared with her son and sister. Faisal, Laila's son, crouched on the floor, surrounded by a pile of blocks. If he'd been older, Laila might have solicited his advice. *This concerns you and me more than anyone else, kiddo. Do I call your father back or not?*

"I'm building a fort," Faisal said when Laila plopped down next to him. She twisted a lock of his hair around her finger and tugged.

"Ow." Faisal swatted her hand away. He was a miniature replica of Aftab, and that, Laila thought, prejudiced Laila's family against Faisal. Whenever Aftab's father sent one of his rambling letters or left a message demanding his grandson back—'because by God, sons belong to the father'—Laila's mother pestered Laila about giving Faisal up.

"No one wants to marry a girl with a kid," Laila's mother said. "And if you keep him, you're tied to his spineless-scumbag-of-a-father for life." Then she glanced at Faisal and wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Looks just like them, doesn't he."

Outwardly, the shape of him might resemble Aftab, but Faisal was Laila's. She'd breastfed him for a year—of her own choice despite what her mother had told Melinda—and he was as affectionate and focused as Laila had been growing up. Besides, Faisal was all Laila had. At night, he curled his thin frame against hers, pressing his feet into her stomach, his pulse so close, he seemed once more a self-contained part of Laila's body. Often, he fell asleep before she did, his hands clasped around her neck, and Laila was reminded of Aftab. Aftab who'd barely

carved out a moment for Laila during his waking hours but had held on to her so tightly in his sleep.

“Faisal.” Laila waved a block to snag Faisal's attention. He was jamming blocks into place, his brow furrowed in concentration. “Hey, kiddo. Do you miss your daddy?”

Faisal, his eyes still focused on his fort, wiped his hands on the front of his plaid pajamas. “The spineless scumbag?” he said.

Laila nearly swallowed a grape whole. Faisal couldn’t know what the words meant. No doubt, he'd heard Laila's family talking and picked up the term. She'd have to tell her family somehow to stop disparaging Aftab in Faisal's presence. But how could she? The battle lines were now clearly drawn. In a culture in which most marriages, Laila's included, were arranged, loyalty ran through bloodlines. Marriage—and divorce—were family affairs, Laila's mother often said, and if this were the old country, Laila's father might have relieved Aftab of some vital parts of his anatomy by now. And any word by Laila in Aftab's defense would've been considered a betrayal.

The walls of the Mojawala home were lined with ears. So Laila dialed Aftab’s office from a payphone the next day. This time, the call was promptly forwarded to Aftab. She’d been right, Laila learned with a vague sense of disappointment. Melinda’s papers had triggered Aftab’s call.

“Why should I have to pay child support when I want Faisal here in *my* house?" said Aftab. “And for God's sake, when did I ever *rape* you? Or make you iron my brother’s clothes?"

He sounded upset. For himself, thought Laila. For himself, not for her. "I haven't washed any dead bodies lately, either," she said.

"You *know* I didn't write that stuff," said Aftab.

"Well, you signed it, didn't you?"

"Only because I wanted to make you come home somehow," said Aftab. "I can't believe you actually hired a lawyer. How could you think I really wanted a divorce?" Laila was marveling at the unfamiliar assertiveness—not to mention the denial—in Aftab's words when he added, glumly, "There's no hope for this marriage now. My father's going to flip when he sees these papers."

Laila sucked her teeth in exasperation. "Well, then don't show them to him," she said. "Can't you do *anything* without his knowing?"

"I'm calling you, aren't I?" said Aftab.

So he was calling Laila without his parents' permission. A thirty-three year old man who needed permission to speak to his wife.

Still, it was a step forward.

"You know what," said Laila. "I dare you to meet me in person."

Silence descended on Aftab's end. "I don't know," he said finally. "In Boonton? Someone might see us."

"And tattle on you?" Laila shook her head. "I'm running out of change, Aftab. This might be the last chance you get to see me before the divorce." She wanted to know if he'd do it. If now that he'd stepped a baby step off the road sanctioned by his parents, he was capable of traveling any further.

“I‘ll think about it,” Aftab said finally. That was what he'd always said whenever he wanted to stall one of Laila's demands, especially a demand that contradicted his parents' wishes. What did he do while he was supposedly thinking, Laila had often wondered. Go and beg his parents' approval, no doubt.

“Call me tomorrow." Aftab said. "I'll think about it 'til then."

Laila made a face into the mouthpiece. Let him think about it. Forever, if he wanted to. She doubted that seeing Aftab would do much good anyway. And if he decided not to meet Laila, decided to remain the Twin Ghouls' little toady and allow the divorce to smoothly run its course, Laila stood to lose nothing.

Except her status as The-Engineer's-Wife, whispered the little voice in her head.

Laila frowned and banished it. There were other engineers in the world. Besides, no engineer was worth the liability of parents who hovered like vultures over their son's marriage. Parents who tagged along on every dinner date, who rapped on the bedroom door during every marital argument, who would sleep between their son and his wife if they could, thought Laila.

Maybe that was what Laila would get from meeting Aftab, maybe that's what she wanted. Revenge on the Twin Ghouls. If Aftab agreed to meet, maybe Laila would drag her sister along and have her lurk in the shadows, snapping pictures to send to them. *Your son is seeing his wife behind your back.*

To Laila's surprise, Aftab had drummed up the courage to meet her by the time she called him the next day. Of course, the condition was they'd meet somewhere out of the way,

somewhere his parents wouldn't dream of wandering. Some place like the dingy old Friendly's in Morristown.

Laila found Aftab hiding in a tiny booth in the darkest corner possible. Dark moons circled his eyes. He was studying a scrap of paper when Laila slid onto the bench across from him.

“Wait,” he said. “Don’t say anything.” He covered her eyes with his hands. “My heart is the sea,” he whispered. “And you are a tidal wave traveling across it.” He removed his hands. “What do you think?”

“Tacky,” said Laila. “Definitely tacky.”

“Your opinion about me in general, if I remember correctly." Aftab shoved the papers into his pocket. “I was thinking, maybe we can patch this up without lawyers. I miss you.”

A week ago, he'd signed divorce papers. Now he wanted to get back together.

Laila resisted the urge to poke a straw in Aftab's eye. Didn’t Aftab know that fear of Melinda Crowley, or rather, fear of her desire to extract money from Aftab, was written all over him? The *Hyderabadi* mentality at work. When the wallet’s at stake, forgive the wayward wife.

"In case you haven't noticed," said Laila, "our fathers are at each other's throats." Aftab appeared tired, older than he had when she'd last seen him, and Laila, despite herself, felt a twinge of pity for him. "So *your* father's okay with this working-it-out-ourselves idea?"

Aftab picked at a paper napkin. He shifted in his seat. "I don't know," he said.

Laila couldn't believe it. He was talking about reconciliation without considering his father's reaction. Perhaps Laila's leaving had jolted some sense into Aftab after all.

“You’d have to rent me a separate place,” Laila said cautiously “I’m not living with your parents.” Now she couldn't believe herself. She was negotiating. She was actually considering going back. Back to being The-Engineer's-Wife, the little voice in her head piped up again. Back from the existence of Laila the Slave, The Blight-on-the-Family-Name.

Aftab shook his head. “I can’t afford two places.”

A pang of disappointment sliced through Laila's budding optimism. She should have known. There was little point to the past two months' indignity if Laila's sole reward was to be a return to her in-laws' dictatorship.

“Well, I guess I’m wasting my time here then," Laila said. She swallowed the sudden heaviness in her throat and rose to her feet, waving away the approaching waitress.

Aftab wriggled out of the booth and barred Laila’s way. “We can work this out,” he said. “Let’s do this again."

Embrace your role, Melinda had said. Recognize the enemy. Laila should shove Aftab out of her way, ditch him, let Melinda slurp him down like dogfood.

But there would still be the question of Faisal. Faisal who needed to know his father as more than the spineless scumbag, the shameless *namard* who had, according to rumor, once been sighted perched on his mother's lap, sucking his thumb.

"I want to see Faisal too,” Aftab said, as if reading Laila's mind. "So do my parents."

"Over my dead body," said Laila.

Aftab's face tightened. He shoved his hands into his pockets. "They miss him. So do I." He hesitated. “How is he?”

“He’s fine," said Laila. "He doesn't miss you at all." Malicious satisfaction twisted her soul when a pained look washed across Aftab’s features.

It was the unpleasant memory of that pained look—and of her own momentary malice—that compelled Laila-the-Bleeding-Heart to arrange a meeting between Aftab and Faisal the next day. They met at the park during Aftab's lunch hour.

"Don't get used to it," Laila said brusquely when Aftab thanked her.

Aftab's eyes darkened slightly. But he said nothing, only nodded as he leaned down to deposit his briefcase and newspaper on the bench next to Laila. He walked away, clumsily navigating the sandy play yard in his suit and dress shoes, to push Faisal on the swings, and shame crept through Laila.

Aftab had a right to see Faisal. He'd always been a good father, a better one than Laila's, certainly. A gentle man by nature, Aftab had always been patient with Faisal. He'd never scolded him, never raised his voice. Come to think of it, Aftab had never raised his voice to Laila either, never uttered a harsh word in the entire duration of their marriage.

On the other hand, maybe Aftab's gentleness wasn't a positive trait. Maybe it was just a component of his wimpiness, his inability to stand up for himself. Even now, as Aftab pushed Faisal on the swing, he frequently glanced over his shoulder toward the parking lot. As if, Laila thought disgustedly, the Twin Ghouls would forgo their afternoon nap and, by some warped coincidence, show up at the park at noon.

Laila shook her head and snatched up Aftab's newspaper. If she didn't distract herself, she'd end up fuming all afternoon.

Seething with anger as she was, it took Laila a moment to realize that she was distracting herself with a giant pig. Aftab's newspaper—if three folds of chalky paper could be considered news—had pictures of various animals splashed across the front page. The feature article proclaimed: *Hogs, Hormones and Hope For Tomorrow*. *Organic chicken feed, come and get it*, the classifieds pleaded. *Horse manure year-round*.

Laila couldn't believe that Aftab actually read this stuff.

And then Laila remembered a conversation she'd had with Aftab a year or so before she left him.

"I hear you can get sixty acres for a dollar in some parts of Pennsylvania," he'd said. "What do you think about you and me moving there and running a poultry farm?"

Laila had burst out laughing. When he didn't join in, she stopped and stared at him. "You mean raise chickens?"

"Raise them, slaughter them, sell them." Aftab rose from his seat and started pacing, walking faster and faster as he talked. "There's a huge demand for hand-slaughtered *halal* chickens." His parents had chosen engineering for him, he told Laila, but engine cylinders and PCV valves were really not his thing. "I'm saving some money on the side," he said. "I ought to have enough in a year or two."

Laila had imagined Aftab covered with chicken feathers, his overall-clad frame leaning against a battered pickup. Then she'd imagined herself and what that would make her. The-Wife-of-a-Man-Who-Gutted-Chickens-for-a-Living.

"If I wanted to live on a poultry farm," she'd said, "I'd have married a *Maiman*, not a *Hyderabadi*."

Aftab had stopped pacing. Had he appeared disappointed? Laila couldn't remember. She did remember that as she turned back to her TV show, she'd heard him say, "It was just a thought."

Just a thought. And now, a year later, he was walking around in a suit and tie, carrying a newspaper that advertised *chickens, dead or alive.*

"Mommy!" Faisal jumped off his swing and ran to Laila, Aftab trailing behind him. "Let's play Telephone."

"Here. Eat this first." Laila handed Faisal a granola bar. She waved Aftab's newspaper. "You're still thinking about this?" she said as Aftab plopped down next to her and pulled Faisal onto his lap.

Aftab shrugged.

"What's the point?" said Laila. "Your father'll never let you run a farm anyway." Aftab's father would pop an artery at the mere prospect of a poultry farmer for a son. And Laila couldn't for the life of her imagine him, The-Lord-of-the-House, sharing space with chickens.

Aftab took the newspaper from Laila and stuffed it into his briefcase. "I don't know, maybe he would," he said. "Especially if I quit my job first and *then* tell him." His brothers, Aftab said, would move back home when they were done with school. Two more engineers in the house should console his parents. But more importantly, with Aftab's brothers there, Aftab wouldn't have to worry about his parents being left alone.

So he had it all planned out. And he'd never told Laila. Or maybe he'd tried to and she hadn't listened.

But even if she *had* listened to him, it would've made no difference. Aftab could plan all he wanted. But a man terrified of being seen with his wife could never pull off such a harebrained scheme.

"You know how I got this whole idea in the first place," said Aftab suddenly. He threw Laila a quick, almost embarrassed glance.

"How?" said Laila when he didn't continue.

Aftab ran a hand through Faisal's hair. "It was after our first big fight and you said this marriage was doomed if we didn't get away from everyone. I guess you were right." He looked at Laila again. "Anyway, I thought, what better place than a farm, a million miles from everything. I didn't know you'd hate the idea so much." By the time he learned of Laila's aversion, he'd researched poultry farming in depth, he said. Laila wouldn't believe how exciting it'd turned out to be.

Laila could believe it. She'd believe it as long as she didn't have to live it. What she couldn't stomach was the thought that she'd laid the foundation for Aftab's pathetic, provincial dream.

Although Boonton—and New Jersey in general—brimmed with *desis* who all seemed to know each other, Laila hadn't expected to get caught so soon. As it was, a scandalous report reached Laila's mother's ears that very evening. A friend of a friend had observed Laila, the Soon-To-Be-Divorcee, kissing a man. The report wasn't exactly accurate. The snitch had obviously witnessed Laila, Faisal and Aftab playing Telephone at the park. Laila hadn't been kissing anyone. She'd been whispering in Aftab's ear.

The news arrived through the telephone-powered grapevine while Laila and her mother cooked dinner. Laila's mother, her expression bruised and ugly, slammed down the phone.

"Are you having an affair?" Laila, her hands sticky with chapatti dough, backed away as her mother, voice rising with each succeeding syllable, advanced on her. "Aren't you done trashing this family?"

Fortunately, Laila's father was still in Manhattan, installed in front of his bagel stand which sold falafel sandwiches for dinner. But Laila's sister, her brothers and, to Laila's dismay, even Faisal came running at the sound of Laila's mother's voice.

"Here." Laila's mother suddenly changed tactics, dropping to her knees in front of Laila. She began to wail, beating her brow with the turmeric-covered spatula she held. "Is this what you want? For me to beg you to behave like a decent woman?"

"Stop it, Ammi." Laila tried to pull her mother to her feet. "The neighbors can hear you."

But her mother, once started, was impossible to contain. She ranted and raved, screamed and cried by turns. Laila's antics would doom her sisters to spinsterhood. Drive her mother to her grave and her father out of business. The stain on the family name wouldn't fade until Angel Israfeel blew his trumpet, ending life on Earth. Is this how Laila intended to repay the parents who'd given her life? Who'd raised her, and now--despite being dissolved of responsibility due to Laila's marriage--paid for every morsel she ate?

Laila's mother would've continued all night if Laila hadn't divulged the identity of the mystery man. As it was, Laila's confession switched off her mother's tantrum, but the silence that followed the revelation buzzed with all the contained power of an electric saw.

"Your husband?" Laila's mother said finally. "That…that *lie*-factory?"

Laila grasped the edge of the counter. She took a deep breath. She was about to defend the man who had—intentionally or not—taken a sledgehammer to her parents' honor. But she had no choice.

"I'm doing this for my son," Laila said. "He needs to know his father."

"His father," Laila's sister cut in, "is a piece of *Hyderabadi* shit."

Something—the fragile control Laila had navigated on since she'd left her husband—snapped. She lunged for her sister. "No he's not." she said. She grabbed a fistful of her startled sister's hair and yanked it hard the way she and her siblings had done to each other during their childhood. It'd been an unrefined childhood, a childhood spent standing, after school, around their father's bagel cart.

Laila pushed her sister away and faced her family, her hands balled into fists at her sides. "I won't have you calling him names in front of my son," she said. "And I'm done being your slave. I'll get a job and pay my way in this house, if that'll make you feel better."

Melinda's assistant called Laila later that week and asked her to come in. Melinda appeared full of something, as if she'd burst at the seams any moment.

"I hear you've been looking for a job," she said.

Laila nodded. Melinda rubbed her hands together. "That's good news," she said. "Paints you in a positive light." She paused and studied Laila. "Your mother called me."

Laila held her breath.

"But before we discuss your husband," Melinda said, "I want to show you something." She picked up a large manila envelope and held it out to Laila. Laila took it from her and slowly

emptied the contents into her lap. Pictures. Pictures of jewelry, every piece of jewelry Laila and her mother-in-law owned.

“We froze their safety deposit boxes,” Melinda said. “We sent a photographer down to each bank to document the contents, and lo and behold, in your father-in-law’s box was the jewelry. The jewelry you described, the jewelry they described, all the jewelry they claimed you stole.”

Melinda leaned forward in her chair. “Do you know what this means, Laila? It means their credibility is ruined.” She slammed her fist on the desk, so suddenly that Laila jumped. “This is what I can do for you. But you have to trust me. If I say your husband is a weasel, you have to believe me. If I say no contact, no visitation between him and the boy, you have to *obey* me. Do you understand?”

Laila slipped the pictures back into the manila envelope. "He's Faisal's father." She rose to her feet.

Melinda extended a flamboyantly-ringed hand and pushed Laila back down. "That may be so. But he's still a skunk who deserves to get his lying tongue ripped out."

"It's not really him," Laila said. Aftab was an ingenious engineer, but the infamous *Hyderabadi* cunning had passed him by. "He's really not like that."

Melinda sighed. Out came her boxing gloves.

"Oh, it's him," she said. "It's always him." She jabbed at the air. "You battered women are like alcoholics. You live in denial. Believe me, I've seen it a million times. He sweet-talks you and then," Melinda's glove smashed into her cigar-shaped pencil holder, "he lands you a fist."

Laila swallowed and stared at the pens and pencils littering the fluffy maroon carpet. All lawyers couldn’t be like this. Melinda had to have a screw loose somewhere.

"You don't believe me?" said Melinda. "Well, guess what we found."

The list of dividable assets Aftab’s lawyer had sent over contained, besides the house, little of significant value. But Melinda’s own research—or her assistants’—had come up with a savings account in Aftab’s name. An account with a seventy-two thousand dollars balance.

“Imagine,” said Melinda. “He thought he could hide his money from Melinda Crowley.”

Laila shook her head. Melinda must be mistaken. Laila would know if Aftab had that kind of money.

And then it hit Laila. It was Aftab's poultry farming money, the money he'd told her he was saving on the side. No wonder it hadn't shown up on the list of assets. He was hiding it not from Laila, but from his father, the father to whom he'd have a hard time explaining the sudden appearance of so large an amount. Aftab's lawyer, the man who'd drawn up the list of assets, happened to be his father's buddy. And no doubt, anything divulged to him would've filtered down to Aftab's father.

But if Melinda went after the money, Aftab's father would learn about it. Laila tried to quell the dismay rising in her stomach. Aftab wasn't her problem anymore. Melinda was right. Aftab had offered Laila nothing so far and Melinda was offering the world. Because of Aftab's spinelessness, Laila had traveled all over town the past few days, applying for menial jobs. Grocery-Bagger, Waitress, Window-Washer. Positions far removed from that of The-Engineer's-Wife. Aftab deserved no more sympathy than his father did.

Still, because she was such a bleeding heart, Laila had agreed during their meeting at the park to spend Saturday at The Bronx Zoo with him. "Just for Faisal's sake," she'd told Aftab. "Don't think you can soften me up. I'm not calling off my lawyer."

"I wish you would," Aftab had said. "Then my father would call off his, and this whole thing might end."

Well, it was going to end all right. If Melinda had her way, it was going to end with Aftab-the-Engineer's transformation into Aftab-the-Pauper. Maybe he didn't deserve Laila's sympathy, but she could at least meet him one last time and warn him. Warn him to brace for the fist that was poised to descend.

The Bronx Zoo held no new treasures for Laila. She'd visited it a million times. But that Saturday, Faisal, radiating excitement, scampered from exhibit to exhibit. Laila followed, frantically shouting his name the moment he disappeared into the hordes of schoolchildren and tired-looking adults. Faisal was a small child. “You could lose him behind a stop sign,” Laila’s sister often joked.

“Calm down,” Aftab said, taking Laila's arm. But he appeared just as jittery. Every few seconds, he threw a glance over his shoulder. A stab of sympathy pierced Laila. If he feared the Twin Ghouls so much, how would Aftab deal with his father discovering the existence of seventy-two thousand dollars? And seventy-two thousand dollars lost to the evil daughter-in-law at that.

Laila's stomach churned at the thought. She sank onto a wooden bench. "Let's rest," she said.

They'd already passed through the Congo and the snake house, not to mention raced around Tiger Mountain, but Faisal's energy level seemed only to have heightened. He shifted and fidgeted between Laila and Aftab. "Are we done resting?" he asked every ten seconds.

"No," said Laila.

"Can we play Telephone then?"

Laila and Aftab groaned simultaneously. Telephone was Faisal's favorite game. The problem was, he insisted on repeating the words "Blue's Clues" throughout the entire thing. Before Laila had left Aftab, the three of them had played the game on the rare occasions when Aftab was home. After a few rounds, Laila and Aftab invariably deviated from Faisal's instructions. *Did you pay the cable bill?*, Laila might whisper to Aftab. *Don't forget Faisal's doctor appointment tomorrow*, he might say. *The Karims invited us to dinner, there's a white hair in your moustache. You've got one sexy ear*, Aftab had said once.

"Pleeeease," said Faisal. He clambered into a kneeling position on the bench and stage whispered in Laila's ear. "Blue's Clues. Now say it to Daddy," he said.

Laila leaned into Aftab. "You should've been a poultry farmer," she whispered.

Aftab jerked a little away from Laila and squinting in the sun, stared at her. Faisal tugged at Aftab's pants.

"Hurry up, Daddy," he said. "It's your turn."

"Really?" said Aftab, still staring at Laila. "Why?"

Tears prickled Laila's eyes. "Because I wouldn't have married you then."

Aftab, his eyes still fixed on her face, reached for her hand. "Laila," he said.

But Faisal was tugging at Aftab's pants again. "You're playing all wrong. BLUE'S CLUES," he shouted in Aftab's ear. "You go first this time, Daddy."

Aftab, his hand still wrapped around Laila's, leaned over her. "I'm glad you married me," he whispered, his breath brushing her ear. "No matter how things turn out."

Laila pulled back from him. Coming here had been a mistake. She needed to get away from Aftab, needed to clear her mind. She jumped to her feet, so quickly that her shin scraped painfully against the bench. "I'll be right back."

Aftab stood up and caught her arm. "Laila, we need to talk."

"Talk about what?" said Laila. "Can you promise me I'll never have to set eyes on your parents again?"

Aftab sighed. He released Laila's arm.

"Well, until you can, we've got nothing to talk about," said Laila. "I'm going to the restroom." Aftab hesitated, then nodded. A quick, curt nod, and in Laila's mind, something knocked. Something soft, but insistent.

A few minutes later, when she pushed out of the graffiti-stained restroom door and returned to the bench, Laila remembered that knock. She remembered it because Aftab was alone. He slumped on the bench, holding Faisal's blue hat.

Panic gripped Laila. "Where's Faisal?"

Aftab rose to his feet. He appeared upset, bedraggled even.

"Weren't you *watching* him?" Laila yelled. When Aftab didn't move, Laila spun in a circle. She ran, blinded by a sudden stream of tears, one way and then the other, shouting Faisal's name.

Aftab came after her and grabbed her arm. “Laila, stop.”

His voice, not his words, made her freeze. Aftab pulled Laila close, almost into a kiss. Laila focused on his lips, the salt of her tears stinging her tongue.

“Faisal’s fine," Aftab said. He released Laila slowly. "He’s…they’re waiting for me. I didn’t want to just leave. I didn’t want you to worry.”

He didn’t explain further.

Laila stood back. Her mind, numbed for an instant, filled with a terrible clarity. A clarity that stemmed the tears.

They were waiting for him. *They*. Aftab had never gone behind his parents back. Not when he'd called Laila, not when he'd agreed to meet her. It had all been one big charade. *Hyderabadi* cunning at its best. Butter up the girl, make her blind.

“They've been following us around all morning, haven't they?” Laila said. She licked a tear off her lip and stifled the convulsive sobs rising in her throat. “Waiting for you to…do what? Give them the signal?” She laughed. Not darkly or ominously. Not even bitterly. She laughed with sorrow maybe, a disappointment she despised herself for feeling.

Aftab tucked his ears deeper into his collar and stared at the ground. She’d been wrong about him. He wasn't the boneless patsy she'd made him out to be. He was a rat. A despicable, double-crossing rat. As cunning as the next scum-of-the-earth *Hyderabadi*.

Laila lunged forward and slapped Aftab. "Now you can tell them you’re a battered husband,” she said.

The police were appropriately sympathetic and absolutely unhelpful. As long as the living conditions were fine, their hands were tied, they said. The kidnapping, if you could call it that, was Laila's word against Aftab's, and until custody was established, Aftab had as much right to his son as Laila did.

"You reap what you sow," said Melinda. "If you'd listened to me, this wouldn't have happened."

Despite her words, Melinda appeared almost pleased. Pleased, if not with Laila, with the results the child-snatching had produced. Laila now rested on her proverbial knees. And if Laila could play the repentant sinner, then Melinda, the ‘Angel of Mercy’, was generous enough to rise to the position of savior.

“There, there." Melinda curled a muscled arm around Laila and patted her back. “It’ll take a month or so, but I’ll get him back. And don't worry." She clenched her teeth and nodded ominously. "We'll nail that husband of yours. We'll flay him alive."

For the next few days, Laila made a mess of her new grocery-bagging job. She packed apples with bread, eggs with cans of vegetables. She dropped a jar of tomato sauce onto the conveyer belt and closed her eyes, awaiting unemployment, while the sticky red paste and broken glass ground into the corners of the cashier’s table. At night, Laila slept with her arms wrapped around Faisal’s outgrown Spiderman jacket, trying not to think of Faisal’s feet pressing against her stomach. She imagined him alone in his roomy bed in Boonton, lonely without her. What had they told him? Something evil, no doubt. Something like ‘your mother doesn’t want you anymore.’

She'd just returned home from work on her fourth day without Faisal when the phone rang. As usual, no one stirred, but Laila's numbed, fatigued brain dredged up none of the usual anger. Laila-the-Slave was no worse than Laila-the-Grocery-Bagger, Laila-the-Battered-Wife, Laila-the-Fool.

The answering machine clicked on before Laila could reach the phone.

Laila, pick up.

Aftab the-Rat, the man who'd double-crossed her, who'd stolen her son. His voice was clipped, almost authoritative. Melinda, and the cloud of wrath she was capable of invoking, hovered almost tangibly around Laila. She pressed her eyes shut and battled the urge to answer. Melinda had been clear. *I'll get you the house,* she'd said. *The house and half the savings account*. Enough for Laila to stop grocery-bagging. Enough maybe to see her through college, so she could be an engineer herself instead of The-Engineer's-Wife. But no contact, Melinda had said. No consorting with the enemy.

But the enemy had Laila's *son*. Melinda might unleash Hell on Aftab in the following months, but right now, Aftab held the bargaining power.

Laila lunged for the phone.

"No!" Laila's mother screamed. She rushed into the kitchen and grabbed the phone from Laila. But by then, Laila had heard all she needed to hear. "Friendly's," Aftab had said. "In half an hour."

Aftab sat in the same booth Laila had found him in the first time they'd agreed to meet. At first Laila didn't notice Faisal, the boy was so tiny, tucked into the darkest corner of the

booth. Then Faisal burst out of his corner and clambered over the table. "Mommy," he yelled. "I found you!"

Glancing warily at Aftab, Laila gathered Faisal into her arms, almost squeezing the life out of him.

“Hey,” he said, pulling away. “You want some ice-cream, too?"

"Sure." Laila set Faisal down. Keeping one hand on his arm, she let him spoon pistachio ice-cream into her mouth. She hated pistachios, but all she could taste right now was the feel of Faisal's skin under her fingers.

Aftab’s syrup-swathed sundae sat untouched in front of him. He pushed it over to Laila, but she shook her head. She stared at him, ice-cream dribbling down her chin, and tried to make sense of the situation.

Was Aftab returning Faisal? He had to be. He'd know that Laila would smash his head through every window in Friendly's before she'd let him take Faisal now.

A thought struck Laila. Perhaps she herself was responsible for Aftab's abduction of Faisal. She'd refused to let the Twin Ghouls see their only grandchild. *Over my dead body*, she'd said. Aftab's parents must have stumbled around for hours on their arthritic knees, following Laila and Faisal around The Bronx Zoo, just because they were desperate to see Faisal. For the first time since her marriage, Laila saw the Twin Ghouls in a different light.

“You can visit every weekend," she said, still clutching Faisal. "Your parents, too."

Aftab smiled. He was staring out the window. Outside there was only darkness, nothing to be seen.

“How about we run away?” Aftab said suddenly. “The three of us together.”

A muscle twitched below Aftab’s eye. And although he still smiled, his expression held a miserable, homeless look.

And then it dawned on Laila. She pulled a napkin from the holder and slowly, deliberately wiped her chin. “They don’t know you’re here, do they?”

Aftab’s eyes remained trained out the window. He shook his head. “I told them I was taking him to Friendly’s. For ice-cream.”

“Well, you didn’t lie,” Laila said. Faisal, oblivious to the tension fogging the booth, was swirling his spoon inside his half-empty sundae cup. “He’s eating ice-cream, isn’t he?”

They sat in silence for a while, the only sound the scraping of Faisal's spoon against his cup. Aftab turned away from the window finally and faced Laila. “If I seriously asked you to come to Pennsylvania with me—alone, without my parents—would you?"

Laila looked away from Aftab. He couldn't really expect her to say yes. Not after he'd double-crossed her. Not after he'd demonstrated that his boneless facade housed a considerable quantity of *Hyderabadi* cunning.

But then again, he'd defied his parents and brought Faisal back. He'd relinquished his son, his *male* offspring. He'd done this, knowing full well he'd have to return home and face his father.

When Laila didn’t answer, Aftab shoved his hands into his pockets and stared out the window again. "I guess I don't need to tell you this," he said. "But you probably shouldn't let me see Faisal again until the custody hearing."

Melinda nearly flipped out of her chair when Laila dropped in the next morning and told her what had happened.

"Obedience school," she said, her gloves bopping the air. "That's what you need. I told you no contact."

"Didn't you hear me?" said Laila. "He brought Faisal back."

"He's fucking with your mind," said Melinda. "Besides, a woman deprived of her child has serious leverage in court. You just compromised that leverage."

Without police reports and physical evidence of abuse, they needed all they had, said Melinda. The more leverage, the more money they'd get. At least half of Aftab's account. Maybe even all of it.

“Melinda,” Laila said slowly, “I know you won’t like this, but I want you to leave his account alone. Pretend it doesn’t exist.”

Melinda froze mid-jab. "Out of the question."

"The house is enough," said Laila.

"No, it's *not*." Melinda smacked her gloved hands together. "You don't want the money? Give it to me. I'm busting my butt for free here, in case you haven't noticed."

Laila shook her head.

"Stop meddling." Melinda enunciated each word slowly. "And let me do what's best for you."

Laila rose to her feet. "I think I know what's best for me." Did she? Melinda would surely drop her now, and Laila would be left grocery bagging forever. It was a scary thought. But Laila

was tired of being told what to do. The way she'd been pushed around these past weeks, she didn't feel like a battered wife. She felt battered, period.

Laila grabbed her bag and started for the door. Melinda clambered out of her chair and followed.

"He treated you like shit," Melinda said. She was breathing hard.

Laila tried to pull open the office door, but Melinda blocked it with her considerable frame. "He let his parents walk all over you," Melinda said. Her voice rose until it bounced off the walls. "He kidnapped your son. If I were you, I'd want to *nail* his coffin shut. I'd want to douse him with gasoline and dump him off the George Washington Bridge."

"Well, I'm not you," said Laila.

"You ungrateful bitch." Melinda swung, and the next thing Laila knew, she was on the maroon carpet, one hand raised to her rapidly swelling lips. Melinda stood over her, gasping for breath. The boxing gloves trembled at her sides. She looked as horrified as her client.

"Just explain one thing to me," Melinda said. Her chest heaved convulsively under her navy jacket. Melinda was sobbing, Laila realized through the blur of pain. "Explain why you won't let me help you."

And even if Laila had wanted to, she couldn't have explained what she herself didn't understand. That as Aftab had stared out of the Friendly's window last night, Laila had seen something that had been in him all along. She'd seen The Poultry Farmer. A man who could and would live up to his dream. And for the first time, Laila had wanted him to.

KAHKASHAN

I.

Maree is a tiny village balanced precariously like a dilapidated bird nest on top of Mount Kahkashan. Despite the locale—no-man's-land in the northern regions of Pakistan—tourists ebb and flow with the regularity of the seasons. The *desis* who come to vacation are mostly honeymooners. But every year thousands of foreigners—Germans, Indonesians, the stiff-demeanored Brits—also find their way up, some lured by the promise of a cheaper Switzerland, some by the thrill of gliding above the lamb-strewn valleys on the new government-funded ski lift, some by the hopes of restoring a dying marriage in the mind-altering thin air, and some, like Kahkashan Davis, by the pull of Fate, to be lost to the thread-like roads snaking treacherously up and down the mountainside.

She was the daughter of a wealthy *zamendar*, I was told, and had absconded with half his treasury of jewels at the age of sixteen. Kahkashan had fled the village her father governed in order to avoid marriage, but at some point in her meanderings across Europe, she had married a white man. And it was *his* wealth which she brought to Maree as the new mistress of Karamat House, the stately *hawayli* hewn from stone long before my grandfather was born.

I was struck by Kahkashan's beauty when I first met her at the train station. Old age—unwelcome guest of all women I knew—rested comfortably upon her. Her beauty was enhanced by a sadness which perched among her features like a black crow on a snow-capped mountain. It was not a sorrow she shared with the neighbors over goat-milk tea and *chini-paratas*. In the two years I knew Kahkashan before Reshma entered our lives, whenever I dared approach it, the sorrow flapped its wings and flew away, leaving me standing with arm foolishly outstretched like a blind man.

They sent me to collect her because I was the only one who spoke English. Or at least, some form of it. I expected to find another Madame Salamat Ji, our hawk-faced and dagger-tongued former mistress, who two months earlier had chosen to step off the side of the mountain and tumble 1,300 ft. into the village of Muzaffarabad. Instead I found a rumpled old beauty with *mehndi*-colored hair and piercing blue eyes. Her smile was like an embrace that lessened the bite of the bitter morning.

"I suppose I should be sorry," she said, "for making you drive down here before dawn on a day like this." She cocked her green-scarved head, looking disconcertingly like Mitthu, the parrot my mother raised along with me for nineteen years. "But I'm so happy to be here, I can not be sorry about anything."

Kahkashan, I later learned, was an M.D. who once sawed open a man's chest and massaged his heart back to life. In many ways, she gave me new life as well. Before she came to Maree, I was a tired boy bypassing manhood and sliding into middle-age. Mountain-living does that to you. It takes you by the heels and drags you down the road of time, your head banging against every rock and stone, without ever reaching the future. No government-installed ski lift

can change that. But Kahkashan, who had been named after the mountain she was conceived upon, pulled me aside and set me on a new path before I reached the bottom.

On that first morning, however, as we circled and ascended into the fog, the tires of my weathered jeep squelching through the road muddied with melting snow, I, in my rabbit-fur coat and snakeskin shoes that my mother had fashioned before she passed into the next world, saw only a rich old woman pretending to seek solitude. Another pathetic *budhi* whose children didn't want her around. For the locals of Maree, she was a patch to fill the raggedness that plagued us between tourist seasons. And though we despised her even before she arrived, as we did all of them for their wealth and the conceit that came with it, because we were dependent, we knew Kahkashan must be kept entertained, flattered and happy.

Things didn't turn out as we had hoped. The women of Maree did not like the new mistress of Karamat House. Salamat Ji they had understood. One had only to weave baskets out of corn *bhusa* and fill them with offerings to dislodge her standard ill-humored expression. Sweets like *gulab jamun* and *dal ke laddo* coupled with sweeter words were often enough to gain entrance to Salamat Ji's moldy satin-lined silver purse. Which was convenient when a woman wanted to purchase a new set of dishes or a jade necklace, or the men needed money for that trip to Islamabad which their daily livelihood would never allow.

But this new mistress was a different *kahani* altogether. She preferred not to be scraped and bowed to, and in fact, turned the mottled pink of a spoiled guava at any attempt to flatter her. She did not open her house to calls from the villagers and offer *rupees* in exchange for deference.

Instead, she hid within the walls of her courtyard and was only occasionally glimpsed by a passing goatherd, pacing her barren garden like a ghoul in the middle of the wintry night.

What use to them, wondered the villagers, was the school Kahkashan built on that little tuft of earth overlooking the town. It was a benefactor they needed, not a tiny square brick building with green and black boards and wooden desks that would remain empty long after Kahkashan was gone. These men and women who survived on the charm a lost world exerted on city-worn minds, could not appreciate the cables, pipes and power lines with which Kahkashan scarred our already beaten landscape.

At first I kept away from the talk and lived as I always had. I swept the stone terraces of Karamat House, repaired cracked shingles, and bought groceries from the tiny stalls wedged in the cramped market-grounds. Having done the same for Salamat Ji, I knew where to acquire the best of everything. Garlic, guavas, black seed, dusty-green *sitafal* pods. I lugged them up the steep pathways and deposited them on the kitchen floor which had once been lined with red stone. A month after she'd arrived, Kahkashan had replaced the stone with black and white marble tiles.

Kahkashan's kitchen was twice as large as the cement house my mother left me, and often, if it was empty, I pocketed something that could be easily sold but not easily missed. A can of black olives. A small bottle of olive oil. Occasionally something bigger, like an American-made steak knife. During Salamat Ji's reign as mistress, I had managed to finance an entire year of English language classes on the proceeds of such acquisitions. But in those days, the red stone had absorbed the signs of my wandering feet and hands. The black and white marble was an accusation—a reflection of Kahkashan's presence though she rarely entered the kitchen.

But that is where I found her one day when I arrived with an armload of sugarcane. She sat on the floor, all of her contained within a single black tile.

As always, she smiled when she saw me. But this time she spoke as well.

"Do you know why you are standing on white marble?"

I glanced down quickly as if the answer could be found at my feet. Before I could speak, she answered her own question.

"Because I am sitting on a black one. This is the balance of life." Then Kahkashan stood and stepped onto the white tile closest to mine.

"Now I have upset the balance," she said. "What will you do?"

I have always known that if an elder asks, one must reply. But I did not know what to say. So I stepped back onto the black tile behind me. She nodded, her eyes approving.

"Yes," she said. "Do not be afraid to restore the balance."

After that, she often invited me to share tea on her terrace, a privilege the cook or the *maasi* never received. She asked about my family, my schooling, my hunting in the crags and valleys that dipped unexpectedly between the peaks of Mount Kahkashan. I talked of the rabbits I trapped and skinned, selling the hides to be made into coats and gloves. I told her about the English classes and the small collection of English novels I had purchased from a used book store in Islamabad. I showed her a faded picture of the father I'd never known, who had driven off the mountain, his jeep and body swallowed by a gorge too hazardous to reach. For the first few months, I was careful not to let her see the claw-marks on my left forearm—the souvenirs of a leopard-hunt. You never knew about these Anglo-*desis*. Hunting the *barfani* leopard had not been permitted since the time of Zia-ul-Haq. But a man had a living to make.

When the sparrows circled, impatient for the crumbs, Kahkashan and I retreated into the Persian-carpeted drawing room and watched television. She was the only inhabitant of our village with a satellite dish. And as the colors of the world spun before my eyes, Kahkashan related details of her travels to the very places I saw now through this magic box. A little café with unbearably strong coffee down the street from the Aswa Mosque in Paris. A pink and white ostrich slurping fish at a zoo in New York City. A perfect white pearl discovered among the grains of sand on a beach in Bahrain. And I felt the bitterness of the coffee on my tongue, the flash of feathers before my eyes, the glide of the pearl's smooth skin between my fingers.

As Kahkashan and I became something close to friends, I found myself searching for a meaning for her constant sadness. She rarely spoke of herself, but her sorrow lapped below the surface of her guarded smile. Eventually I came to know her as one who dispensed kindness like a pharmacist does medicine—in suitable dosages. And she made it clear she did not consider it a suitable dosage to dispense her rupees directly into the hands of the villagers.

This I tried to explain to my people. But it was difficult. Among our people, to speak directly of financial concerns is considered tasteless. So although the villagers grumbled at Kahkashan's refusal to be a proper patroness, their hackles rose when I spoke of money.

Was I implying, Baghawat Khan, the *mochee* demanded as he hammered new soles onto his customers' shoes, that they craved that old vulture's *bheak*, her dirty charity?

But despite his words, he and I both knew that was what we all wanted. Salamat Ji, and those before her, had spoiled our expectations of mountain life. Though we still farmed, as our ancestors had, the plateaus irrigated with mountain springs, and hunted rabbits, pheasant and

sometimes the leopard for his skin, we were not content as they had been, to exist on the meager earnings our living provided us.

The villagers' pride shamed them at putting their disgruntled feelings into words. So they grumbled on and on without a clearly articulated purpose. Until, as often happens, they found an appropriate way to channel their resentment.

Two years after her arrival, Kahkashan began a nightly recitation of the Qur'an. Every evening after the *Maghrib* prayer, her voice rose from Karamat House like a flower unfolding its petals, and wafted up and down the steep angles of Maree like a hauntingly familiar perfume. Like nostalgia of another life lived in another time, it altered the balance of this already tilted town.

Some of the villagers, mainly old men and women who had lived their lives, and now scrubbed their foreheads against the earth in prayer and fear of *Malkul Mawt*, the Angel of Death, recognized the pattern of the recitation. The word was whispered through the streets until it caught my ear in passing. Kahkashan was reciting the Manzil, a collage of verses designed to ward off trouble.

But as it was, Trouble was already ascending the mountain, strolling gently upwards with her shoes in her hand. When the Manzil drifted down to her, Reshma stopped and listened. And when I turned to watch her as I passed in my jeep, I imagined I saw her ears lift like a sheepdog's, to trace the sound to Kahkashan.

Although it is our instinct to distrust foreigners—and foreign women who smoke in particular—barely two days passed before Reshma ingratiated herself to all of Maree. She was

decidedly not *desi* despite her fluent Urdu and the demure *dupatta* wound around her shiny hair, and smoke rose constantly from her as from a brick chimney in winter. But the villagers warmed toward her and her easy way of speaking. Everyone except myself and Kahkashan, that is, who slammed the door in Reshma's face and shut herself in the darkness of her room for an entire day.

As far as the people of Maree were concerned, Reshma had descended from Heaven to confirm all they had ever suspected of Kahkashan. It never occurred to them that Reshma might be wrong in what she claimed. Or that she might be lying, perhaps, like a child does, with no trace of deception in her innocent face. Reshma's heavy black hair plunged like an inky waterfall to the back of her knees and her small brown eyes glowed against the cream of her skin. Like the other boys and young men, I too might have trailed behind her like a moonstruck dog. But I had drunk too many cups of Kahkashan's tea, watched countless hours of television at Karamat House. I could not believe that the woman who conjured a world from images and words as does a magician rabbits from a hat had spent twelve years in a *pagalkhana*, a mental institution. I could not believe that she had crept upon her husband while he slept in Reshma's mother's bed and smashed his head with an iron frying pan.

II.

Have you ever killed anyone? Kahkashan asked me over tea and *aloo samosas* the day after the elders of Maree demanded she vacate Karamat House within the week. No? Well, I didn't think so. I am old enough to look a man in the face and know.

There are times, and I am ashamed of them, when I dream of killing that girl's mother although she is already dead. She died in childbirth as I watched and cried, *actually cried*, though she didn't deserve my pity, cunning as she was. But of course Zakiyya was very young. And it was less her fault and more Kamal's, perhaps even mine, that things happened the way they did. She was not yet born the day I stole my dead mother's diamond *har* and *jhumkay* and the thick gold coins in the small wooden chest under my father's prayer rug, and crept away through the honey-scented grass.

Leaving was not hard. My mother's memory had faded from my mind as she died shortly after my first step. And my father—revered by the peasants who farmed his land—was known as a generous man, but not in the giving of love. Most people will tell you I ran away the night before my wedding was to take place. What they do not know is why I had been promised to that slovenly lecherous *zamindar*, Shujat Dada Lal Khan.

In those days, a peasant girls' beauty was a curse. The *zamindars* sampled whom they pleased. But I was not a peasant girl, I was a disobedient one. A girl who roamed the grasslands like a boy, who dressed like a peasant, defied her father and ventured past the borders of his village. Who, a week before she ran away, gathered a skirt-load of ice-pink roses and walked alone to the house of the only mother she knew.

Shujat Dada's *ghundas*, the thugs who policed his territory, mistook me for a village girl and kidnapped me as I walked to Murad Bi's house. She was my mother's sister—the only survivor of seven—and I loved her as only a mother-less girl can. That day, when the *ghundas* snatched me off the dusty road, the bundle of roses flew open. As the men swung me into their wagon, their grimy fingers smashing my lips against my teeth, the wind whisked the crushed

roses into the air. Like tiny ice pink birds, the petals flew away while Shujat Dada's *ghundas* twisted my arms back and tied them.

Shujat Dada was a powerful man—almost as wealthy as my father and older by some years. He had two wives, a silent shriveled woman who shuffled two paces behind him when she dared venture out, and a crazy one who, it was rumored, ate her own hair and had been locked up since the morning after their marriage. Even if Shujat Dada had not raped me, who can blame me for not wishing to be the third?

The day of my abduction, I was delivered to him bound and gagged. As I struggled, I saw the old wife watching silently from behind a curtain that separated the rooms. Her face was half-hidden behind the grape-colored damask. Her eyes burned into mine with an anger that terrified me more than her husband's groping hands did.

By the time Shujat Dada realized the mistake his *ghundas* had made, the damage had been done. And honor demanded that my father seek retribution. Murad Bi, her screams echoing through the stone rooms of our home, demanded that Shujat Dada be sliced to pieces and fed to our dogs. My brother, a student who had returned from England for his holiday, took up a blunt ax and headed for the door. My father stopped him.

"If you go to Shujat Dada's fortress in anger," my father said, "who do you think will be dead at the end of this day?"

It was a fitting question. And if my father had shared the lava-like blood my brother and I inherited from my mother, he would not have asked it. But his ancestors had migrated from Sawaat, a region as cold as its inhabitants. My brother swung the ax and the floor cracked, the fissures reaching into the corners of the room.

“By God, Shujat Dada will die for what he has done.”

My father took the ax from him.

“Do you know what will happen if the fighting starts? The *kisans* who serve us will be killed. There will be no one to tend the fields, and their wives and children will starve. Our village will be destroyed.”

My brother buried his face in his hands and sobbed.

“Let it be destroyed,” he said. “This family is destroyed. Kahkashan is destroyed. Not even a dowry of a hundred villages can buy her a husband now.”

As it turned out, I did not need a dowry to buy me a husband. My father was not only cool-headed, he was a skilled negotiator. Shujat Dada Lal Khan agreed to restore my honor by taking me, dowry-less, as his third wife. As additional reparation he offered my father a hundred acres and a thousand head of sheep. Not a bad bargain for a soiled daughter, my father said.

I clutched Murad Bi’s *lahanga* and pleaded for her help.

“That *budha* can’t touch me again.” My thoughts could not escape Shujat Dada’s hands. “I’ll lose my mind like his *pagal* wife.”

Murad Bi wrapped me in her shawl and pulled me into her lap. She stroked my hair and tried to soothe me. I would be a rich man’s wife, she said. I would have servants, more clothes and jewels than even my dead mother had had; Murad Bi would see to that. But as the day turned into night and I did not stop crying, Murad Bi’s voice gained an edge. And the edge grew sharper and sharper until she wielded it like a sword.

“Do you care nothing for your family?” she said. “Do you wish to roam the village like a prostitute while men spit at your back and your father hangs his head in shame?”

That was the first lesson I learned in love. And though I suddenly saw the future with eyes more weary than any sixteen-year-old child's should be, I decided I would not be a third wife to that man. I thought of his wife's gaze and shivered. Death was a better bargain than Shujat Dada Lal Khan.

And I came close to dying many times. From typhoid, malaria, even a bullet wound, as I traveled first through India, Afghanistan, and then through the swelter of Africa and the flamboyance of Europe. When the Partition occurred and my father and brother lost everything and died in the mass slaughter, I heard and cried, my tears lost in soap and hot water as I scrubbed pots in the back of an Indian restaurant in London.

Eighteen years and four continents had passed beneath my feet by the time I met my husband, Kamal Davis. I was in medical school, working as a translator to support myself. One morning while trying to convey an Arab Sheikh's reluctance to commit more funds to an American CEO, I noticed Kamal watching me from the far end of the conference table. He wore a *topi* over his brash brown hair and held a glass of wine. The contradiction—that he flaunted his religion while breaking its commandments— disturbed me.

It was that time of year in NYC when spring has arrived but winter has yet to leave. As I walked to my apartment after the meeting, a white Mercedes pulled to the curb and the driver called to me. It was Kamal, offering me a ride.

During my travels, I had been offered rides by many men. Some talked too much, others too little. Some tried to rape me and others observed my chapped face and tattered shoes and

stuffed a crumpled bill or two into my hand. Kamal just asked me for directions and then drove me home. When I thanked him, he shrugged his wide shoulders.

"You looked cold," he said.

And that is why I married him despite his taste for wine and his mixed-breed lineage—half-Syrian, half-white—because of his desire to protect me from the cold. The cold of the snow, the strangers that walked past in the streets without smiling, and the cold that seeped into my feet as in my dreams I still slogged on and on and on.

Zakiyya, Reshma's mother, was born in Damascus a month after I married Kamal. While Kamal gently softened the scabs that crusted my mind and heart, on the other side of the ocean grew a woman-child with curly black hair and honey skin, who would one day steal his heart away. If I had known this, I would not have let him massage my shoulders after a twelve-hour surgery, or comb my hair every night before bed. I would not have pressed my back into his chest and slept, for the first time since Shujat Dada's hands had touched me, like a carefree child.

"*Habibti*," Kamal said to me when a year had passed without pregnancy. "Let's pray *salatul-haajat* and make love. If we have a boy we'll call him Ali, and if it's a girl, we'll name her Ayesha."

Ali, Ayesha. We rode the bus and then the subways to work, to Ellis Island, to the Empire State Building, repeating the names like a mantra, a prayer that would make Ali and Ayesha magically appear. I cut into other people's children to keep them alive, and on our weeks off, Kamal and I trailed through Nigeria, Italy, Canada, the Amazon. We embraced as the winter Alaskan landscape attacked us with its biting winds and scratched each other's mosquito bites in

Brazil. Kamal surprised me with a trip to what had been my father's village, and men and women with anxious eyes and five, seven, even eleven children turned to watch us pass in our long, shiny car, and we looked away, too tired to toss them the coins from our pockets.

The years inched forward and we had neither Ayesha nor Ali. And eventually, no hope as well. But despite the lack of a child twenty years into our marriage, we held hands when we crossed the street and stole kisses in empty elevators.

Every Eid and Christmas, Kamal and I purchased a truckload of toys—Lego building blocks, train sets with miniature towns, baby dolls, yellow construction trucks with bright red stickers on the sides—and distributed them in children's wards in hospitals in Manhattan, Brooklyn, The Bronx and Queens. We gazed at them hungrily—the cancer-ravaged girls and boys with shiny heads, the ones with IV tubes sticking into their arms, the too-small babies in their tiny cribs—and wondered how it would feel to conceive one of our own.

I, of course, will never know, and neither would have Kamal if Zakiyya had not sashayed into his office one summer morning. She had curly black hair and a dimple in the right side of her chin.

"I am the new secretary," she announced. "And like you, I am from Syria. So if I make the mistake, you must not fire me."

The first week in her new job, Kamal invited Zakiyya to dinner at our home. She was pleasant in a honeyed-way and quite courteous. She complimented me on the *mulaqiyya* and the *biryani* I cooked, but all the while her eyes darted from the gold plated utensils to the crystal chandelier and lingered the longest on the uncut yellow diamond at my throat—the one Kamal had gifted me for our twenty-second anniversary.

Zakiyya was a sloppy office worker who mislaid files, lost messages, and once shredded the only copy of a Moroccan oil contract. I could not understand why Kamal tolerated her incompetence. Then one day, for the first time in several months, I stopped at his office on my way to my medical practice and saw the glow of her face and the swell of her abdomen. But more than that, I saw the triumph in the tilt of her chin as she glanced my way. I did not cross the *waadis* of the Himalayas on foot not to recognize the breath of a predator on my neck. I knew.

I did not sleep that night.

"Zakiyya is pregnant, isn't she?" I asked Kamal the next morning as we lay in bed, his arm around my waist. "Has she married?"

"Yes," he said, after an almost imperceptible pause. Kamal was a man unaccustomed to deception, and even with my back to him, I knew his face was turning red.

The hot blood of my mother caught up with me. I wrenched around and scratched his face, his neck, his arms, leaving long red welts that would never have the chance to fully heal. In my mind's vision, I saw the grape damask curtain and the burning eyes of Shujat Dada's shriveled wife. And they were *my* eyes, burning from her face.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" I screamed. "How dare you lie to me?"

If only he had been lying. Zakiyya *was* married—to my husband. Of course, living in NY, legally Kamal could not have more than one wife. But he had persuaded a *molvi* to perform the ceremony. He showed me the *nikah-nama*, holding it aloft so I would not tear to pieces the only proof of his second marriage.

Kamal left that day—gathered a haphazard armload of belongings and moved into the penthouse he had months before purchased for Zakiyya. I was left alone. And for a story like mine, that would have been a fitting end.

But stories do not end so easily. Kamal had forgotten a key to Zakiyya's apartment in the bottom drawer of his desk in the family room. I found it while searching for scissors to cut up his clothes. All I wanted, I told myself, was to see if her back fit against his chest the way mine had. That is why I went there that night.

III.

Reshma smoked her third cigarette within the hour. It was a habit she would have liked to kick, but after six years of smoking, the last two of them, two packs a day, she supposed it was too late now. The nicotine had seeped into her lungs. If cancer was destined to kill her one day, it was inevitable. But God help her, she would not croak before that old hag up in that stone palace met her face to face and answered some questions.

To have your peace of mind dependent on one crotchety old woman, and your father's murderess at that, thought Reshma. It was not an ideal situation.

She followed the stone-paved streets with her eyes, tracing them up to the *hawayli* where Kahkashan had barricaded herself since Reshma's arrival. In four days, Reshma had made seven fruitless visits to Karamat House.

"Old woman, old woman, let me in," Reshma chanted under her breath, "or I'll huff and puff and blow your house down."

It gave her satisfaction to know she *had* blown down Kahkashan's home in a way. The board of elders was throwing her out of Maree, and Kahkashan was due to leave by the end of the week. But the question was how to pry her open before she left.

Kahkashan had been with Zakiyya when she died. She was the only person on this planet who knew Zakiyya's last thoughts, words, wishes, whatever. She was the only one aside from Molvi Shabbir, that withered old cleric who had married Reshma's parents, who had known something, *anything*, no matter how unsavory, of Zakiyya. And Reshma felt the need to *know*. It was a human need, thought Reshma, to know your mother.

But what if your mother was not worth knowing? That was what Molvi Shabbir seemed to think. It had taken Reshma more than a year to track him down, and then all he'd done was shake his head, avert his eyes, and suggest Reshma get on with her life.

"I was there the night your mother died," he said, scratching his scraggly white beard and never looking up from the sheaf of papers he held. "She died while giving you life. Be grateful and live it."

When Reshma pressed him for details, he reluctantly pointed her towards Kahkashan.

"She knows more than I do. More than I am at liberty to say." He must have read the doubt in Reshma's eyes, because he stopped her as she turned to leave.

"You do know," he said slowly, "that by Shariah Law, you have a right to your inheritance. What Kamal left is yours as fully as it is Kahkashan's. The American courts will not favor you. But remind Kahkashan Davis that Allah is watching."

And how on earth was Reshma to remind her of anything if the old witch refused outright to see her? The only person who got any close to Kahkashan was that quiet man with the

mocking eyes. Whenever he encountered Reshma, on foot or in his jeep, he gazed at her coolly before turning away. The day after she arrived in Maree, when she tried to speak to him, his sharp words had sliced through hers.

"I have only one thing to say to you, Mademoiselle. Go back to where you came from."

But Reshma could not leave without finding out what Kahkashan knew. Otherwise five months worth of savings scraped from low-end jobs like waitressing and telemarketing were down the drain. And if she stayed longer than planned and ran out of money, there was no way her adoptive parents—that miserly Bihari couple that Reshma could never think of as mother and father—would assist her with anything besides angry words. Though they had managed to run through the proceeds of Zakiyya's penthouse and jewelry without much scruples, where Reshma was concerned, her adoptive parents had never been generous with either money or love.

No, she couldn't afford to let herself down. Reshma swung her purse-strap over her shoulder and started up the street. This time she wouldn't knock at that monstrous stone door. Every time she stood there waiting for a response, Reshma felt as if she had retreated into her childhood nightmare—the nightmare in which she entered the story of Jack and the Beanstalk and waited outside the ogre's castle for him to come out and eat her. This time, Reshma decided, she would sneak into Kahkashan's garden and surprise her on her evening stroll.

That is, if she could get past that group of boys lounging by the barber shop without their giving her away. As Reshma passed, she heard a whistle and cringed. A high male voice started singing that infernal song she could not escape since she had come to Maree.

Reshma jawan ho gayi

Teer kaman ho gayi

More voices joined in, and an entire chorus of off-key serenades followed Reshma up Kahkashan's walk. If they had seen her sweep the floor at McDonald's with her hair in an ugly knot at the back of her neck, thought Reshma, they wouldn't give her the time of day. They certainly wouldn't compare her to a love-laden arrow that pierced men's hearts and skewered their senses. To them, she was the girl from America, the Land of Milk and Honey, where no one ever needed anything. They couldn't understand that right now Reshma needed them to get lost.

As she tiptoed past the patch of *chilgoza* trees, her fears were confirmed. The quiet man with the jeep had heard the noise and discovered her presence. And he stood there, arms crossed, legs planted like trees, he and his vehicle blocking her path. A wave of despair washed over Reshma and she turned to leave. And as she turned, her eye caught something in the back of his jeep.

IV.

"Well, well, well." Reshma stared at the leopard skins I had cleaned and prepared only this morning for shipping, "What have we here?" She looked at me sharply, shrewdly, her eyes glinting. They glowed like chips of amber in the sun.

I pulled a piece of black tarp over what she had seen. "What do you want?" My voice was harsher than I meant it to be.

Reshma leaned against my jeep, her long hair swaying like a curtain in the breeze.

"That woman killed my father," she said. "The least she can do is speak to me." Her voice became uncertain and began to sway like her hair. "What I *should* do is drag her to a cliff and push her off this stupid mountain."

"Haven't you already?" I climbed into the jeep and slammed the door. "She has to leave because of you. You refuse to let an old woman finish her life in peace."

Reshma stood with one foot against the front wheel, preventing me from driving away. Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes. "If you don't help me," she said, "I'll report you for poaching." Her words were hard, but her voice was weary.

Although there are days when I think otherwise, I know it was not the leopard skins but the weariness that compelled me to play the part I did. She was not a mountain-dweller then, but Reshma's eyes held the quiet despair of my people. The despair at having your head banged on every stone on the road of life. Later Reshma told me that Kahkashan did not speak so much as listen. For a while, she sat in the shadows with eyes hooded, making clear that only my intercession had gained Reshma admittance. But as Reshma's story—and Reshma herself—unraveled like a ball of yarn, Kahkashan seemed to unravel as well. And Reshma realized that she had traveled half-way across the world to Kahkashan's house not to listen but to tell—to learn not the story of a well-aimed frying pan, but to relate what the frying pan had done. Meals alone while the Bihari parents entertained. Their pursed lips and stinging tongues. The strap kept hidden behind the fireplace wall. No birthday parties for this daughter of an Arab whore; no friends. Chores that would make a modern Cinderella cringe.

When Reshma shook with the first sobs that had escaped her since childhood, since the nights she muffled her cries for a dead mother with the thin sheets under which she shivered, Kahkashan drifted to her side and stroked her back. Perhaps Murad Bi rose to her mind, stroking her hair on the day when the path of Kahkashan's life had so sharply turned. And when finally

Reshma's torrent of words slowed to a stream and then a trickle, Kahkashan offered her *pathisa* and warm honey-milk, and covered her with a blanket as she drifted off to sleep.

I waited outside the entire time. I wondered if Kahkashan thought I'd betrayed her for a few leopard skins. The sun almost touched the horizon when the heavy stone door of Karamat House creaked open. It was Kahkashan and she was alone. My sudden thought must have leapt to my face because she smiled.

"Don't worry," she said. "I don't even have an iron frying pan."

I watched her put on her blue-knit hat and her leather gloves. "Would you like me to drive you somewhere?"

She turned to me, and it was then I noticed that the sadness no longer perched between her eyebrows.

"Would you like to know," she said, "why I spent twelve years in a *pagalkhana* with unhinged *diwanays* who spoke to themselves and imagined they could fly?"

I wanted to tell her I already knew. It was because she was not a murderess. She had been like wounded prey. The American doctors must have known it was not revenge she sought, it was balance. I wanted Kahkashan to know that whatever she had done, I could never think any less of her.

But like that day in the kitchen when she asked me about the white marble tile, I did not know how to put my answer into words. And once again, she answered for me.

"Because as Zakiyya bled to death on the birthing table, the midwife plucked the baby, covered with blood and squirming, from between Zakiyya's legs and placed her in my arms. And

then it rose in me, that which I had vowed to never feel again—a love so strong and sharp, it gnawed into my heart and threatened to crush my insides."

I did not understand then, but Kahkashan did not seem to think I needed to. She took a yellow envelope from the pocket of her wool sweater and handed it to me.

"I would like to go for a ride." She opened the door of my jeep. "By myself. It has been a long time since I've taken a ride by myself."

I was afraid she might have forgotten how to drive. But she pulled away quite easily. I did not dare ask where she was going.

When the jeep disappeared from view, I went inside. Reshma slept on a velvet sofa in the drawing room. Flames filled the brick fireplace, and the room was warm. And while a few miles away, Kahkashan drove to the edge of the mountain road and into the air, I squatted on the hearth not far from Reshma and read the contents of Kahkashan's envelope.

V.

I, Molvi Shabbir-ul-Hassan, write these words on behalf of Zakiyya Davis who has not the use of her hands due to the proximity of death.

It is true that I have not been the best of women. I have stolen another's husband. But this is the way of things. Life is a road of many tragedies, and do I not know this myself? I shall die today and leave an orphan behind me.

For this reason, I must explain why I have asked Kamal's first wife, Kahkashan, to come here.

When Kamal became my husband, I dreamed often of Kahkashan standing over my bed at night. But one night after he had left her and come to me, I awoke and she was there, and it was not a dream. A fire burned in her eyes. The terrible sadness in her face frightened me.

Before coming to bed, Kamal and I had eaten dinner in front of the fireplace in our bedroom. We had spread a *mai'da* on the floor and laid the dishes and the pots on it and placed lit candles in brass holders. To celebrate his coming to me, I made a beautiful *karahi* dish and a baklava. While we ate, Kamal was quiet. I could see the thought of Kahkashan in every mouthful he raised to his lips.

I had been his wife for eight months now, but in all that time, he spent not one night with me. What I received were the stolen moments of a mistress. And now, when we finally ate dinner together as a husband and a wife, Kamal's heart was not with me but with Kahkashan.

I could not sit there with her shadow between us. I rose swiftly. The baby in my stomach upset my balance and I stumbled. Kamal caught me and tried to help, but I pushed him away. I lay down in the bed and turned my back to him. He followed, trying to calm me, and we fell asleep, leaving the *mai'da* spread as if awaiting a guest.

When I awoke, Kahkashan was there. She stood on the other side of the bed, over Kamal, staring down into his face. I was sure she had come to finish us. I silently reached my hand to the floor and felt for something to use against her. I was afraid she would see my movement, but she only looked at my husband. Not for one moment did she turn her eyes away. My fingers closed on the *karahi* frying pan. It was made of iron and I could barely lift it with one hand.

Straining with all the effort I could summon, I grasped it and swung. I swung at Kahkashan. If you have never had an eight-month child in your belly, you do not know how it

changes you—how it changes the balance of your body. I swung at Kahkashan but the frying pan hit Kamal. And where a moment before his face had been, there was something like the smashed body of a dog I had once seen on the road. The side of his head was like a cave, and blood bubbled out as if from a mountain spring.

Kahkashan lunged at me to take the frying pan away. She didn't need to. I had already dropped it. Her fingers closed over it and for a moment, I thought she would kill me—almost hoped she would. Because even as I dialed the phone with shaking hands, and we both screamed and cradled Kamal by turns, kissing what was left of his face, I knew there was nothing more for anyone.

I do not know what happened for many hours. There were people I did not know and they would not let me come near my husband. Finally two men in black suits came to me and asked what had happened. I opened my mouth to tell them I had killed the father of my child. But then the baby moved inside me. A mother will do anything for her child. So I lied. I told them it was Kahkashan who had destroyed us.

And they believed me and not her, of course. Not even her lawyers believe her. They say when Kamal left her, she became maddened with grief. They are trying to save her, but we all know when the trial ends, Kahkashan will go to prison for many, many years. That is why I have called her to me, to confess and ask something in return.

Perhaps I do not have the right to ask anything of Kahkashan. But she knows that if she had not come to my room in the night, Kamal would be here to hold and love his child. So I ask that she do what I cannot, that she raise my baby. Not as the child of Zakiyya, the hated second wife, but as the child of Kahkashan and Kamal.

I, Molvi Shabbir-ul-Hassan, swear to fulfill the wishes of Zakiyya Davis and place this document in the hands of Kahkashan Davis who stands beside me. And I swear to testify, if called upon, to the contents herein.

VI.

When the jeep tumbled into a gorge, the leopard-skins and Kahkashan were consumed by a gasoline-fueled explosion. Some time later, I learned that Kahkashan had left to me all she had in this world. I could have left Maree with my fortune and traveled, as Kahkashan had, to the far corners of the globe. I could have sipped the bitter coffee of Paris and taken photographs of pink ostriches in New York City. But I stayed.

And now the villagers, they come to me. But they do not need to offer deference for my *rupees*. They bark at me the way they always did, and we crack *chilgoza* nuts and chew tobacco *paan* as we relate to each other and our children the stories of Salamat Ji and those who came before her. We speak of everyone but Kahkashan. Perhaps they know I still carry her with me like an open wound. In the breast-pocket of my sheepskin waistcoat, I keep the document she hid away for twenty three years. Because she was afraid to love. Because she felt safer in the courtroom and the *pagalkhana* than she had with a squirming infant in her arms.

But in her way, she was a wise woman. I have not forgotten the advice she gave me as she stood on the black and white marble tiles.

“Do not be afraid to restore the balance,” she said.

And so when Kahkashan disappeared from our lives, I restored the balance in my own way. I asked Reshma to stay. Now, every morning, as the sun leaps from behind the world and

nimbly climbs Mount Kahkashan, Reshma leaves Karamat House and walks down to the village. There, outside the schoolhouse Kahkashan built, the children of Maree await her, tiny forms playing hopscotch in the heavy morning fog.

SHEREEN'S TREASURE

Omar and I found the suitcase one night while searching for a cricket under Shereen's bed. Or rather, Omar found it, because although Shereen was *my* mother, it was he who slid, belly-down, into the cobwebby darkness to silence the shrill chirp she so hated. I crouched behind Omar, the ends of my long braids brushing his protruding heels, imagining the cricket hopscotching to freedom through his groping fingers. I feared it would scurry into the gap between the wall and the wooden bureau and chirp all night, and then Shereen would pace the room instead of lying in bed and telling me stories.

I nudged Omar's ankle. "Are you dead under there?"

"What's this?" He slowly backed out from beneath the bed, pulling a small black suitcase with him. It was faded, ugly with age, the leather ashy and eaten in more places than not. And it was locked.

The cricket forgotten, Omar and I poked and prodded the suitcase in the dim light of the room. It was hard to believe that we'd never noticed it before. This tiny home that Shereen, my grandmother and I shared had long since divulged its paltry secrets to Omar and me, or so we'd thought.

We were trying to pry the suitcase open with a screwdriver when Shereen, her thin frame wrapped in its usual housecoat, happened upon us. And that was when she slapped me for the first time in my eight-year-old life. Slapped Omar as well, though he was the son of our Benefactress and thus should have been unslappable, according to Dado, my horrified grandmother.

"Have you gone mad, Shereen?" Dado said, bursting out of her corner. Her long neck wobbled as she folded Omar in her arms. "Who'll pay for Lia's schooling if you carry on like this? Here, have some candy." Dado pressed a lump of sugar-laced tamarind into Omar's mouth. "Don't tell your mother. She won't understand. She's not like our Shereen who's had only one man and has never forgotten him."

Omar rubbed his cheek and sucked tamarind until his small eyes squinted and his lips puckered. But I knew he wouldn't have told his mother anyway. Even then, he was more mine than hers. And she was less a mother than she was Kinza Khan, love child and only heir of the late sugar-baron Gulzar Khan, a woman who adorned the pages of the Karachi Times, swathed in translucent saris, a new man on her arm in each new picture.

Kinza's blood pulsed through Omar's veins, but Omar's soul had long since grafted with mine. He and I were bound by the stares of strangers, the questions of classmates, by the knowledge of a past that festered in the air we breathed. We had both been rendered fatherless before birth, on the same day, on the same platform at the Karachi Train Station. Before he himself was shot, Omar's drug-addict-of-a-father had killed mine, and had this not happened, my grandmother had told me, Omar might not have been born. When I contemplated life without Omar, I was almost glad to be an orphan.

Almost, because of my mother, Shereen, who now cradled the black suitcase like a baby and glared at Omar and me. Shaking her fist at us, she left the room and Dado shook her head.

"Hopeless, that girl, wasting her years pining for a dead man. Your father was just as *juzbati*, Lia. When he saw Shereen at the girl-viewing, he said 'Ammi, if I can't marry her, I won't marry at all.' So even though your Nani and Nana were *pat'hans*, a class below us, I asked them for their only daughter and ruined your poor mother's life."

Omar and I pressed into the folds of Dado's soft arms, hoping for more. She was a woman with a loose tongue, a fount of things Children Should Not Know. Things like tales of *jinni* queens who possessed men and spirited them away, or the fact that women avoided cemetery grounds because the dead could look up and see everything, or the advantages of being an orphan rather than a bastard, even if the bastard was wealthy and beautiful like Omar's mother.

Once a bastard, Dado told us once, always a bastard. Money could elevate Kinza Khan into the loftiest branches of society, but could not cleanse her of her parentage. It was that dirty parentage that had allowed Omar's father to humiliate Kinza at the train station the day my father, Dado's only son, had died.

"Imagine," said Dado, relish lacing her features, "the great Kinza Khan, crumpled like a beggar on that mud-caked, urine stained platform, her hair sweeping up goat dung and crumbs of the *puris* and *samosas* those people sell there. My poor Faraz. He could never bear to see a woman in trouble. Being beaten in public, no less. What could he do but try to help?"

The thought of the beautiful Kinza bloodied and bleeding horrified me. “But why was Omar’s father so angry?” I’d asked, then clapped my hand over my mouth. Posing a question to Dado was like shaking her awake.

“Only ill-mannered children desire to know things they shouldn’t,” she said, immediately folding into herself like a book closing its covers.

So when Shereen left the room clutching the black suitcase to her chest, Omar and I pretended we desired nothing more than tamarind candy. But we rubbed our cheeks while the tamarind soured our mouths, hoping the gesture would jog Dado’s memory and dislodge the story of the suitcase. Dado’s memory was ungenerous that day. All it gave us was the love story of Shereen and my father, a story Omar and I had by now grown weary of hearing.

Later that night, I crawled into Shereen’s bed. I slept with her though Dado insisted *jinns* would nest in my room if I left it empty. Perhaps they already had. Once, I’d woken to a woman praying by the foot of my bed. I’d called my mother’s name, and when the woman turned, her face had been empty like the mouth of a cave. From then on, I’d slept with Shereen.

Omar hovered for a while, and I nudged Shereen, hoping she’d invite him into bed with us. When she didn’t, Omar drifted onto the roof to sleep on the wooden *charpai* with Dado.

Shereen laced her fingers through my silky hair. Her fingers were chapped from washing people’s clothes and my hair snagged on them. “Which one do you want to hear?” she asked. Though she hoarded the memory of my father, rarely speaking of him, she liked to tell me stories of legendary lovers, stories her mother had told her. I listened to them only because the telling lulled *her* to sleep. For me, the stories had long since blurred into one tragic tale.

Majnoon—or was it Ranjha—had wandered the desert, half-naked, drifting into madness as he searched for his Laila, a woman darker than the night. And someone--perhaps Farhad--had dug a canal, toiling for years, channeling a spring of milk to his beloved's door. And was it *his* beloved or was it Heer whose hands blistered when her lover's were caned by the schoolmaster? And did it really matter? They all died anyway, like my father had.

"I want to hear a different story," I said. "One you haven't told me before."

Shereen yawned. "I don't know any new ones."

"How about the story of the suitcase?" I spoke carefully, holding my breath when her fingers stopped moving in my hair. Would she slap me again?

Shereen sighed. "It's just a suitcase, *ghurya*."

"But what's inside?" Emboldened by her mild response, I hoisted myself onto my elbow and peered at her in the dark. She smiled.

"Treasure," she said. That's how she always spoke to me, like I was a four-year-old, still playing *jinns and jalparees* with Omar.

"If it's treasure," I said, "why do you keep it locked up? Why don't you use it?"

She pulled me down onto the pillow and adjusted the blanket. "I do use it," she said, "when I need to."

If she'd ever used it, I certainly hadn't noticed. Our furniture was weary, the walls of our home worn, and the first of every month saw both Shereen and Dado scouring their purses for rupees to pay the milk-*wala*, the *qasai*, and the rest of our creditors.

Kinza's white Mercedes crawled into our alley-like street a few days later. From the roof, Omar and I watched stray cats and children scatter out of its path. Kinza alighted in front of my home, one of several faded cement structures fused together like a row of aging Siamese. Standing out there on the street, she glowed like an ember in a heap of ashes, and for a moment, I wished she was my mother as well as Omar's. Her slender white arms shone through the yellow georgette of her sari. But when I looked at her hair, I imagined it sweeping goat dung off a mud-caked platform.

Omar and I ran downstairs as Kinza pushed open the front door. Although she'd once dropped in almost every weekend, it had been some time since Kinza's last visit. Still, she came in as she always did, laden with toys, chocolates, and paper-wrapped packages for Shereen and Dado.

Shereen, her frizzy black braid hanging down her back, was kneading dough in our closet-sized kitchen. When she glanced up and saw Kinza, displeasure spread across her dough-flecked features.

Kinza ruffled Omar's hair and enveloped me in her sari. "The housekeeper told me Omar was here," she said, looking at Shereen.

Shereen punched the dough without pause. "Since last week," she said.

Kinza flushed. "I'm sorry," she said, "you should have called me."

Omar and I pretended not to notice the exchange. Omar inspected the fingernail he'd cracked while helping me clean the pigeon cages on the roof. I tugged at a plant growing from a crack in the wall. Why did Shereen have to do this? She was the reason Kinza no longer visited.

"*I* should have called you?" Shereen said. "He's your child, not mine."

“And Lia is yours.” Kinza flared suddenly. “Maybe you should remember that when the tuition for Mama Parsi’s English Medium comes due next week.”

Shereen stopped kneading and scraped dough from her hands. She looked up at Kinza and smiled. It was an odd smile, one I’d never seen before. A smile full of sadness and anger and strangely, a hint of gloating. “The children found my husband‘s suitcase,” she said. The words were almost a warning.

Kinza’s face whitened a degree, but disappointment pricked me. I glanced at Omar and knew he was thinking the same thing. *That* was the story of the suitcase? Heer and Ranjha, Romeo and Juliet, and now, Shereen and Faraz. Suffering lovers and the strange things they did. One heartbroken fool—Ranjha, or perhaps Majnun—had embraced a stray dog because it had passed through his beloved’s street. Shereen’s mangy old suitcase was probably empty.

Dado descended the cement staircase, her head swathed in her prayer *dupatta*, fingers skipping from bead to bead on the *tasbeeh* she held. “Kinza!” she exclaimed, “Beautiful as ever. Omar says you’ve been visiting France.”

Relief colored Kinza’s features. She hugged Dado, lingering in her arms longer than necessary. “Omar has been very naughty, Ammi Jee,” she said. “He seems to think this is his home.”

“And it is,” said Dado. She ignored the angry clang of Shereen’s spoon against the pot of curry. “And yours too.”

After Kinza and Omar left, Dado wrinkled her nose. “Does she bathe in it? Even a whore wouldn’t use that much perfume.” She looked at Shereen who still crouched in the kitchen, her ankles a dusty blue, her eyes blank as she squashed a passing cricket with my dead father’s

slipper. “You should start using perfume too,” Dado said. “And makeup. A wife’s grief is four months and ten days, not nine years.”

But Shereen’s grief, as Dado called it, was like a long road with no exit ramp. The lipsticks and *kajal* Dado insisted on buying her dried up and were discarded. And later, even before I’d grown old enough to wear makeup, they were promptly passed on to me. So were the gifts Omar brought Shereen on his visits—a hand-embroidered *dupatta*, Gul-Ahmed rayon *shalwar khameez,* American-made shoes with pointy toes. “Ammi sent this for you,” Omar would say as he handed Shereen a package. Shereen took it without a word while I hovered, willing her to thank him. She never did.

So I thanked Omar for her. Not through words, but by conceding him the better firecrackers on *meraj* night, the thicker chapattis at dinner. When we played The Name Game, I let him get away with ‘hagfish’ for woman and ‘honeycreeper’ for man. I waited until he’d fallen asleep on Dado’s *charpai* before I crept down to Shereen’s bed. And when we read about King Suleiman’s treasures and resolved to find them, I took the first shift at the cemetery without protest, leaning against a gravestone at midnight, waiting for a *jinni* serpent to tap its tail on my shoulder.

It wasn’t King Suleiman’s treasure that Omar and I actually desired, but the wooden staff folklore claimed had been buried with it. The staff had empowered Suleiman over all *jinns*. A *jinn* under one’s thumb was a useful thing, Dado had told us. Homework, housecleaning, even travel, could be completed in the blink of an eye.

If the *jinni* serpent led us to the staff, Omar and I had decided, we'd lull Shereen to sleep every day and wake her thinking that *she*, and not a *jinn*, had washed the clothes and scrubbed the bathroom. The *jinn* would take all of our tests for us. And if Kinza sent Omar to boarding school as she often threatened to do, the *jinn* would transport him to my roof every night so we would never be apart for more than a day.

But a staff that bestowed such powers was not bound to come easy. The gravestone pressed rough and cold against my back. I sat still, barely breathing, the way Omar's book had instructed. Sounds of the night surrounded me, and the clashing of cricket forewings sent shivers through my spine. Omar waited at the edge of the cemetery, clutching a turned-off flashlight, and I was silently berating him for not offering to go first when I heard him scream. I jumped up and stumbled through the cottony darkness, following the sound of Omar's voice. The moon slipped out then, from behind a cloud, and there was Omar, arms thrashing as a dark figure held him by the neck.

"The *jinni* queen," he yelled when he saw me. "Run, Lia."

I might have run, leaving him behind, if Shereen's voice hadn't filled the air then. "You two have done it this time." She sounded more tired than angry.

We walked home, Shereen's hand clamped on my elbow, Omar following us. Shereen's cheeks glistened in the moonlight. After a while, she let go of my elbow and slipped an arm around me. "Did you want to see his grave?" she asked. She fell back a little and put her other arm around Omar. "I'll take you in the morning," she said. "Both of you." Then she noticed the book Omar was holding.

"What's this?" We were at our door, and Shereen took the book from Omar and read the title out loud. "*Jinns and the Art of Jadoo*." She hurled the book on the floor and slapped me for the second time in my life. "You," she said to Omar, "are going home tomorrow."

Dado was awake, and though it was late, she offered us tamarind candy when she saw the imprint on my cheek. Omar and I shook our heads. We were eleven now, and a soured tongue no longer consoled us.

Dado noticed my skirt and yelped. "*Ya khuda*! Don't you know the dead can look up and see everything?" She patted the wooden *charpai* and we sat down beside her. "I had a friend in school who was engaged. One day she cut through the cemetery wearing a skirt. The next morning, her fiancé broke off the engagement. He said his dead father had come to him in a dream and told him that my friend's pelvis was too small to manage childbirth." She put her arms around us. "You shouldn't have gone there anyway. *Jadoo* is evil. It's for girls who want their mothers-in-law to shrivel up and die, and men who want to steal other men's sweethearts."

"We weren't doing magic," I said. "We were looking for a *jinni* serpent."

"To help us find King Suleiman's treasure," Omar added.

Dado clucked her tongue. "What do you need treasure for?" she said to Omar. "Your mother has more money than the prime minister does in his Swiss accounts."

"Money isn't treasure," Omar said.

"Of course it is," Dado snorted. "There're all kinds of treasure. Children are treasure too, sometimes in more ways than one." She patted Omar's arm. "Did you know your mother's name means treasure? Gulzar Khan's mistress named your mother Kinza because she knew your

mother was her ticket to Gulzar's fortune. Bastard or not, Kinza was that old lecher's only child."

I looked at Omar. He stared intently at the carpet, his thick brown hair half-concealing his black eyes. Not too long ago, he'd told me that the boys at his new school pasted dirty notes about his mother on his desk.

"But no fortune is worth giving birth to a bastard," continued Dado, and my chest tightened.

"Not even the treasure of King Suleiman?" I asked, winking at Omar.

Dado retracted her arms from around us and frowned at me. "In my day," she said, pushing us off the *charpai*, "such a question would've warranted the switch."

The switch, and not just the mention of it, might have saved Omar and me. But Shereen's slap, and then her silence, had little effect, and Omar and I continued to do as we pleased.

Shereen's stories dwindled after that night at the cemetery. She lay silent, her eyes wide open, starting at the slightest sound. "Is that a cricket?" she said. She jumped out of bed and swatted at nothing, the shadows of her straw broom veering like unearthly arms. I coaxed her back into bed. I massaged her head and kneaded her feet, sometimes for hours. One day I fell asleep at school, while taking an exam, no less. The teacher complained, and Shereen remembered my room.

"Dado's stories have wilted your brain," she said when I protested. "Dado's husband wasn't possessed by a *jinni*. He left her for another woman."

Thus Shereen, the hoarder of secrets, told me something that Dado, despite her loose tongue, never had. Still, Shereen's words did little to comfort me. I huddled under my sheets, my eyes squeezed shut against the possibility of seeing the creatures that I was convinced wafted around my room.

I'd freeze with fear one night, I told Omar, and when Shereen shook me in the morning, I'd shatter. From then on, Omar pretended to leave after dinner. Then he snuck back into the house and into my room. Even when Kinza was in Karachi, home from her rovings across Europe and America, Omar came. He crawled out of his window after she'd gone to bed, and took a rickshaw instead of using the driver. My instinct propelled my feet to the door the moment Omar arrived. I let him in, hoping Dado's snores would mask any sound we made. Omar slept on the floor by the window so he wouldn't be seen if Shereen or Dado happened to open the door and look in. And he left at dawn, his footsteps disappearing into the sound of the *mu'adhins'* calls for prayer.

One night Omar arrived with a package under his arm. I gasped when he unwrapped it. It was the face of a woman, grotesque and green, the cheeks melting past the distended nostrils. A matching hand--almost a paw--rested under it.

"It's a Halloween mask," Omar said, and when I furrowed my brow, "from some American festival, my mother said."

I touched the mask and my fear abated. It was rubbery like my dead father's slippers. I stuck my fingers through the eye holes and dangled the mask in the air. Omar and I looked at each other, knowing, as we often did, what the other was thinking. We were growing older now, perhaps too old for pranks. But the possibilities this mask offered were too tempting to resist.

The next day Omar and I scoured the bazaar for a black *abaya* long enough to conceal the tallest woman in Karachi. And when night came, we took a rickshaw to Chandni Chawk. We ducked into a dark street. I pulled on the *abaya* and the mask and Omar slipped his hand into the fleshy green paw. Then I climbed on his shoulders, draping my legs down his chest. The *abaya* flowed to the ground, enveloping both of us.

We waited in the shadows for a worthwhile victim. The tinkling of a peanut vendor's bell turned into the street, the smell of the roasted nuts creeping past the mask and into my nostrils. Under me, Omar's shoulders shook with laughter. He stepped forward just as the vendor was passing.

"Peanuts," growled Omar, extending his paw. The man glanced from Omar's hand to my grotesquely grinning face and shrieked. Propelling his cart ahead of him, he fled, his bell ringing madly. "*Jinn, Jinn,*" he screamed as he ran. I tumbled down from Omar's shoulders. We ripped off our disguise, and hindered by convulsive laughter, ran home, occasionally joining in on the cries of '*jinn'* that echoed through the streets.

Omar and I were asleep when my bedroom door burst open. Later, I learned a neighbor had stopped by and advised Dado that a Jinni had been sighted in the neighborhood.

"Don't sleep alone tonight," Dado tugged my shoulder. Then she saw—or rather, felt—Omar. We'd been whispering together, rehashing our escapade, and he'd fallen asleep next to me. Now we lay tangled together in bed, Omar's body half-wedged under mine, my arm encircling his abdomen.

Dado switched on the lamp and caught sight of the mask protruding from the bag on my nightstand. She yelled for Shereen, and then Shereen was there, dragging Omar out of the bed. She shook him like a crazy woman while Dado and I tried to pry her hands from his shoulders.

"I've tolerated you for thirteen years," Shereen screamed at Omar before she pushed him out the door.

I heard her on the phone later that day. "I won't let your son ruin my daughter's life," she was saying, "the way his worthless father ruined mine."

If anything, Shereen should've blamed my father as much as Omar's. After all, it was my father who had insisted on marrying her and then left her behind.

Kinza sent Omar to boarding school after that. But before he left, she brought him to visit. Surprisingly, Shereen was calm and courteous to both her and Omar, and it occurred to me that she was happy he was being sent away.

Fading henna adorned Kinza's palms and she smelled like jasmine. She kissed me and Dado, depositing an imprint of her lips on our cheeks. She caught me staring at her hands and smiled.

"I got married. Did Omar tell you?" she asked.

A pang of longing—or was it jealousy—shot through me. Why couldn't Shereen be more like Kinza? I'd throw away that black suitcase. I'd drag it down from Shereen's *almari* and take a rickshaw to Clifton beach and toss it in the ocean.

Shereen frowned at me as if she'd read my mind. "Go get the tea," she said.

When I returned to the drawing room bearing a tray, Dado had one arm around Omar and one around Kinza. “So you’re taking Omar away from us,” she was saying.

“He needs discipline,” Kinza said. “And Lia won’t be there,” she pulled me down next to her as if to soften her words, “so he’ll *have* to make friends with boys.”

Dado laughed. “True,” she said. “In my day, girls didn’t play with boys. But these two…they’re together so much, they’re even starting to look the same.” She pointed at her long neck. “When my mother was pregnant with me, she went on an African expedition. All those giraffes! She regretted that trip whenever she looked at me.”

Shereen and Kinza exchanged glances and Omar and I rolled our eyes. Dado’s stories now hinged on absurdity. We’d begun to avoid her some time ago, and in recent years, when she cornered us on the roof or during dinner, repeating the story of her brave Faraz and Omar’s crazy father—who was now more *jinn* than human, with brick-like muscles and a gun the size of a cannon—we peppered her with questions until she went silent.

I’d be left alone with Dado and Shereen, I suddenly realized. Alone with two women whose wheels spun in the mud of the distant past.

The moment Kinza’s Mercedes turned out of our street, I cornered Shereen.

“Why can’t you get married too?” I said.

Dado was on the sofa, rifling through the bags Kinza had brought. “The girl’s right,” she said. “You could learn something from that woman, even if she *is* a bastard.”

We went on, Dado and I, pestering Shereen until she stopped stacking cups and plates and slammed them back onto the coffee table. “And what would I do with you?” she said. I

thought she was speaking to me until she turned to Dado. “You think a new husband would want me to bring an old mother-in-law along?”

Shereen had never before spoken so sharply to Dado. Dado fluttered her arms and smoothed her hair. “I could live alone.” Her voice fluttered like her arms. “Maybe Lia could stay with me.”

Shereen shook her head and swept the dishes onto a tray. When she’d left the room, Dado patted my head. “Don’t mind her,” she said. “She doesn’t like talk of marriage. After Faraz died and there was no money, your Nani and Nana wanted her to *zaya* you—imagine, kill their own grandchild—and marry another man. But Shereen knew if she did, Faraz would be lost to her forever. So she went to Kinza and asked for her help.”

I imagined my mother, a rounded belly on her thin frame, standing on Kinza’s doorstep and begging for money.

“She should have killed me and gotten married,” I said. “At least she wouldn’t have to beg from a woman she hates.”

Dado slapped my head. “*Battameez* girl,” she said. “How can it be begging when that woman owes your father her life? Besides, Kinza was glad to help, and she and Shereen were friends in the beginning. Your mother wasn’t such a bitter woman then. But one day, when you were three or four, Shereen finally opened your father’s suitcase. She thought she was strong enough. But when she saw his shirts and socks, the clothes she’d packed that morning for him, when she held them to her and smelled him, something broke inside her. She cried all night, beating her head on that suitcase. And since then, she can’t stand the sight of Kinza.”

It was fortunate, then, for Shereen if not for me, that neither Kinza nor Omar crossed our threshold for nearly six years. Like my widowed mother, I slept alone. And when I couldn't sleep, I read Omar's letters and cried. I paced the room, smoting *jinns* with the *ayatul-kursi*, an invocation for protection Dado had taught me. Sometimes I went up to the roof and perched on the edge of Dado's *charpai*, listening to her snore.

Once, as I sat there, raindrops began to fall. One plopped on Dado's nose and slid, glistening, onto her cheek. Dado stirred and stopped snoring as the rain quickened, but she remained asleep and I did nothing to wake her. I sat there, watching the rain fall on Dado and me, listening to the crickets scream.

Water was running down my head and into my ears by the time Shereen ran up the stairs. "Ammi," she yelled. Then she saw me, shivering and dripping, my clothes plastered to my body. She jerked to a stop a few feet away.

"Is she dead?" Shereen whispered after a long moment. I shook my head. Was it the dark, or perhaps my imagination, or did a strange disappointment cross Shereen's features?

Shereen shook Dado awake and we descended the stairs to Shereen's room. Shereen handed me a towel from her *almari*. "Why were you up there?" she asked.

I answered her question with one of my own. "Why do you keep the suitcase?" I pulled it off the *almari* and threw it on the bed. "Open it," I said. "I want to see what's inside." I wanted to freshen her memory. I wanted her to smell my father again, to cry for him the way I cried for Omar. She knew what it meant to have your soul raked out of you. Yet, she'd done the same to me.

Shereen pretended not to know what I meant. She lifted the suitcase back onto the *almari*. "You didn't know him," she said. "What will his things mean to you?"

Thus, Shereen kept my father from me, as if he'd been all hers, as if I never entered into the equation at all. Her words might have hurt me once, but now all I thought of was Omar. He was present in every moment of my day, in every page of my memory. I wrote him letters and he wrote back, envelopes marked with overseas postage and stuffed with thick folds of unlined paper.

I found one such envelope in the garbage and from then on, received the mail before Shereen could. I hid Omar's letters from her. Somehow, I knew she wanted me to forget the son of Kinza Khan.

But I could hardly forget him when a letter arrived almost every week from America. Omar wrote of his school, the rolling green fields garnished with red brick buildings, the pale-eyed boys who played baseball instead of cricket, the snow that carpeted the ground in winter the way it did the mountains of our Kashmir. *I still have the mask*, he wrote, *maybe we'll try that again sometime*. But I knew we never would. We were getting older, our bodies growing our separate ways. I'd begun to receive marriage proposals, and in the pictures Omar sent me, his jaw was stubbly, nicked from bungled attempts at shaving. Though he was still thin, his shoulders were broad, and he towered over the boys who posed next to him. Yet Omar's eyes were the same. They stared into me from the other side of the world. I'm thinking the same thing you are, they said. And he ended every letter with the same words: *if only we'd found Suleiman's staff*.

When I saw Omar again, we were both nineteen. The monsoons were sweeping through, and crickets swarmed like guests through the barred windows and open doors. Shereen stomped around the house in my father's now disintegrating slippers, squashing any and all crickets she could find.

The doorbell clanged, and Omar stood on my doorstep holding several shopping bags and a bouquet of roses.

"For you," he said, handing Shereen the flowers. She stared at him as if she'd seen a ghost, then accepted the bouquet. "You shouldn't have," she said. It was the closest she'd ever come to thanking him.

I led Omar up the cement stairs to the roof, my heart skipping ahead of me, past Dado snoring her mid-day nap, past the now empty pigeon cages we'd once cleaned together, to the corner where we once stood and watched Kinza's white Mercedes roll into the street.

Omar and I sipped tea, silently at first. We'd written each other so much, it seemed there was nothing left to say. But then the words came, spilling over the walls of our reserve, and it was as if Omar had never left and never would again.

I told him about Dado's failing health, the private school where I taught, the children who reminded me of what Omar and I could or should have been if our fathers hadn't died before we were born. He told me about the places Kinza had taken him on his holidays. Australia, a land so beautiful, your eyes ached for seeing it; Paris, with traffic so perilous, you crossed the streets by walking under them; Mecca, where the well of ZamZam flowed as it had done for thousands of years and Abraham's footprint engraved a stone in front of the Ka'bah.

But he was back in Karachi now, Omar said. He'd enrolled at Dow Medical.

"Cutting up dead bodies is really not my thing," he said, "but that's what my mother wants."

Before he left, he asked me if I was still had trouble sleeping alone and we laughed, but a lump lodged in my throat at the memory of Omar lying on the cold floor next to my bed.

After that, we met in the park every afternoon. We walked past the pool, half-full of yellow, mosquito-ridden water, and past the bedraggled blue peacocks. We climbed the hill and sat cross-legged on the grass, balancing plates of spicy chickpeas and sweet *puri*. The snake charmers played their haunting music and the snakes danced, lifting their bodies in and out of their clay pots, swaying their fearsome heads and forked tongues.

One day, while we sat there, side by side, Omar extended a closed fist toward me. Even before he opened it, I knew what was inside. The same way he knew even before I took it and slipped it on my finger, that I would accept his ring. That's why I'd turned down every marriage proposal that came my way. I'd known that Omar would be back for me. He and I fit together like Laila and Majnoon, Heer and Ranjha, all those legendary lovers who'd pledged their lives and their deaths to each other.

Omar kissed me and touched the ring on my finger before we parted that day. "I'll talk to Kinza first," he said. "She's bound to take it better than Shereen. Then we'll speak to Shereen together."

I'd left work and was climbing into a rickshaw the next day when Kinza appeared at my elbow. She'd recently returned from Europe, according to Omar, and her face glowed. I thought of Shereen's sallow skin and a familiar jealousy stabbed through me.

Kinza mumbled something about having to speak to me alone. We rode in her Mercedes to a fancy tea shop where thick carpets lined the floor and paintings of legendary lovers adorned the walls. I shook my head before the waiter could pour tea for me.

Kinza stirred sugar into her tea. Her hands were smoother than Shereen's would ever be, but today they trembled.

"Omar is betrothed," she said suddenly. "Since he was seven."

Her words surprised me, but perhaps not as much as they should have. "He never told me," I said.

"He didn't know," she replied.

We were silent for a while. Kinza sipped her tea. A fly buzzed around our table and settled on the sugar bowl, and Kinza set down her cup and waved at it with her sari-swathed arms.

"A betrothal can be broken," I said.

Kinza picked up her purse. She rifled through it and pulled out an envelope with my name scrawled on it. It reminded me of the ones she'd handed me on her visits when I was a child, envelopes stuffed with rupees and adorned with my name in Kinza's sprawling hand. How grateful I'd been then for those rupees.

She slid the envelope across the table. "I think you'll find it enough," she said.

I knew then why Shereen hated this woman. I shook my head.

She picked up her cup again. “Be reasonable, Lia. He’s the grandson of Gulzar Khan, and who are you?”

“Not a bastard like you,” I said, rising to my feet, and Kinza whitened. Bluish veins stood out on her forehead, above her perfectly arched brows. She carefully placed her cup back on the gold-embroidered tablecloth.

“After all I’ve done for you,” she said.

“After all you’ve done for me,” I replied.

I left her there, staring at a painting of Laila and Majnoon on the wall.

I took a rickshaw to Dow Medical, jostling through the traffic-infested streets. Dust rose as the rickshaw passed multi-colored buses with passengers hanging off the sides. As one pulled ahead of me, I found myself staring into the sightless eyes of a blind boy. It took me a moment to realize he wasn’t gawking. That he couldn’t see me, the rickshaw, the life bursting out of the shops that flew by, or the brilliant blue sky above him.

Omar was in class. I waited outside until he emerged. The moment he saw me, his brow creased. He strode up to me, and for a long time afterwards, I remembered him that way, bag slung over his sweater-clad shoulder, his anxious gaze spilling into mine.

But when I told him about Kinza, recounted the tea shop, the anger, the envelope with my name scrawled on it, Omar laughed.

“Did you really think she’d be happy?” he said.

The hallway we stood in was deserted by then, and Omar leaned over to kiss me. And that's how Kinza saw us. Omar leaning over me, his hands on my shoulders, his nose brushing mine.

Kinza screamed. Omar and I jerked apart and there was Kinza, flying toward us, stumbling over her unraveling sari. Fascinated by the contortion of her features, I stood rooted to the ground. Kinza lunged at me and Omar grabbed her, trying to contain her violent movements. But Kinza was beyond containment. She twisted in Omar's grasp, her face as ghastly as a *jinni* queen's.

Omar shouted for me to go home. "I'll come for you tomorrow," he said.

He didn't. I waited three days for Omar. Something was wrong, I knew it as certainly as if I were crouched inside Omar's body, skimming the chapters of his mind. What had she done to him? I imagined Omar, gagged and bound, locked in a room to which Kinza held the key. Or drugged and tossed aboard a ship that now sailed on a churning sea, far from Karachi.

But I was no longer a child. I no longer huddled under my sheets, my eyes pressed shut against *jinns* who wafted around my room. Even as I imagined Omar chained against his will, I knew it wasn't true.

I went to find him. The guards tipped their hats to me as I passed through Kinza's gates. I rang the doorbell. The sound echoed through the massive house that slumbered on the other side of the door. I stood there feeling like Shereen perhaps had when she came to beg. To beg for *my* life, the life that was now ebbing away.

The door remained shut. Wasn't Omar home? And if he wasn't, surely a servant should've opened the door. After a long while, I drifted back through the gates, intending to try again later. I might have if I hadn't turned then, as I climbed into a rickshaw, and glimpsed Omar at a window on the second floor. He was watching me. His eyes held something so terrible, so pained, yet cruel—grief laced with loathing—that I turned away.

That evening, I lay on the sofa, sobbing, Dado stroking my hair while Shereen stood silently, sternly by. I'd never been a hoarder of secrets like Shereen. Omar had listened to me all my life. But now I had no Omar. So I sobbed it all out. I gave Shereen another secret to hoard, Dado another story to tell. The story of Lia and Omar, a love story with a catch: the lover who watched his beloved with grief-stricken eyes, but refused to open the door.

"What else could you expect from the son of Kinza Khan?" Dado wiped my tears with her sari and pushed a lump of tamarind into my mouth. "Remember the time he frightened Nizam, the peanut-vendor, out of his wits? Thank God no one found out, or this house would've been blackened with shame."

Shereen said nothing. Her features appeared cast in stone. They hardened even further when Kinza burst in without knocking, her magenta sari crookedly belted.

Kinza's hair had a hurried look to it. She didn't bother to remove her shoes at the door. Ignoring Shereen and Dado, Kinza strode up to me.

I shifted on the sofa, turning my back to her.

"If you ever come near my house again," Kinza said, "I'll break every bone in your body."

"Get out of my house," Shereen said. She stepped between Kinza and me. "And tell your bastard son to stay away from my daughter."

Kinza laughed then. It was a crazy laugh, and if my entire world hadn't seemed tilted that day, I might have thought her mad.

"I've told him," Kinza said. "I've told him everything. And now why don't you tell Lia?"

Shereen's face tightened in something like fear. She glanced at Dado.

"I bet you still have it," Kinza said "that suitcase of his."

And then she was running past Shereen and me, up the cement stairs, and we—Shereen, Dado and I—were running after her. Kinza stumbled into Shereen's room and scrambled onto the bed. She pulled my father's suitcase off the *almari* and clutching it to her chest, made for the stairs. Shereen lunged for her and dragged her to the cement floor. Then they were fighting, Kinza and Shereen, fighting over an old, scuffed and cracked suitcase as Dado and I tried to break them apart. Kinza's sari unraveled. The magenta silk wrapped around Kinza and Shereen, snaking between them and tying them together at the same time. Shereen wrenched the suitcase away from Kinza and when Kinza grabbed at it, the leather ripped open. Shereen's treasure lay scattered on the floor.

Shirts, razors, pants. The smell of mold rather than the smell of a husband.

Kinza and Shereen scrambled through my dead father's possessions, each clutching whatever came to hand.

"You kept it all these years," Kinza said. Her breath came in whistling sobs. "It should've been mine." Her hair fell in long disheveled swoops to her back, and I imagined it sweeping up goat dung on a urine-stained platform.

Shereen froze at Kinza's words.

For a long moment, Shereen kneeled at our feet, her peppery hair falling about her eyes, her thin, leathery arms folded tightly over the contents of my father's suitcase.

Then Shereen opened her arms and all she held clutched to her chest—socks, a shirt, pieces of paper—fell to the floor.

"You can have it," said Shereen. She picked up a handful of socks. Before I, Dado, or even Kinza could stop her, Shereen had grabbed Kinza's neck and shoved the socks into her open mouth.

"There," said Shereen. "He's all yours."

I saw Kinza again many times after that day, but rarely in person. She still appeared on the pages of the Karachi Times, often on her husband's arm, occasionally on Omar's. Omar's eyes stared into mine, dull and dry, and I stared back, sometimes for hours.

As for Kinza, she still wore her translucent saris and diamonds at her throat, but the glow to her face was gone. As the years passed, she shrunk and shriveled as if sucked dry by the treasure Shereen hoarded for so long. Because the day she last entered our home, Kinza walked out with that treasure. She was sobbing. Black streaks snaked from her eyes to her chin. In one hand, she held the tattered remains of my father's suitcase, and a handful of razors in the other.

DEAD WOMAN’S PASS

Twenty-two years before Bilal, Priya's husband and the only man who'd ever loved her, died without warning, Priya knocked over a propane stove in her grandmother's *samosa* stall, igniting a fire that consumed half the vegetable market of Gharibabad, India. The next day, Priya's grandmother bought nine-year-old Priya a one-way plane ticket to New York. A ticket to the parents Priya didn't remember. The parents who'd abandoned Priya in favor of medical books and universities, and later, the scalpel, and who often sent back, along with teddy bears and Barbie dolls, pictures of tumors they'd carved from people's bodies. Priya's grandmother, Nani, collected those black-and-white images of harmless-looking lopsided lumps in an album she'd entitled Malignant Growths. Before Priya was old enough to understand the term, Priya had tucked the few pictures she had of herself into the same album.

"Family pictures?" Bilal asked Priya when the tattered remains of that album resurfaced a month or so before he died. Then, after flipping through the pages, Bilal rounded his eyes in mock horror. "Baby, those are some ugly-looking relatives you got."

And though he was kidding, they *were* related to Priya, those tumors. In malignancy if in nothing else. Even before she'd burned down the vegetable market, Priya had heard the whispers.

Bad *qismet,* people said, clung like a leech to this saucer-eyed, imp-like girl, pale as an eggshell. At birth, she'd torn her way out of her mother's womb, rendering it useless forever.

"They say an evil *qismet* is impossible to outrun," Nani told Priya before bundling her off from Gharibabad to New York. "But I don't believe it." Nani pointed out a skunkish three-legged cat perched on a charred pile of sugar cane. "Look at Mingu. She was born that way, that stub sticking out from where her fourth leg should be. But she flies from roof to roof as if the legs she does have were wings."

In the twenty-two years since then, since Nani pressed wrinkled lips to Priya's forehead and sent her away, Priya had flown too. She'd flown from one divorced parent to another, New York to Los Angeles and back again every month. When she was older, fresh out of high school, she'd cleaned out her medical school fund and flown back to India. There, she'd visited a grave instead of a grandmother. Then she'd flown some more, crisscrossing the Earth. The Amazon, Indonesia, the Island of Borneo. When Priya had finally returned to New York after a decade of wandering the world, her mother, as trim and chic as she'd always been, had walked right past Priya at the airport. Priya couldn’t blame her. At twenty-nine, Priya appeared closer to forty. Priya's waist length silky hair had been reduced to uneven chunks. Her skin, once smooth as the *malai* in Nani's morning tea, was mottled and scaly. It snagged on a tissue when Priya wiped her face, suddenly self-conscious at the prospect of facing her mother.

"My God," Priya's mother said when Priya approached her. "What have you done to yourself?"

Her mother couldn’t know that it wasn't what Priya had done to herself that mattered. It was what she'd done, period. Too late, Priya had discovered that in trying to decipher her destiny in the rainforests, she'd infected others with the disease of herself. The moment the realization hit, a panic had seized Priya. She'd plowed through the jungle towards civilization, crying all the way.

"Crying never did any good," Priya's mother had always said when Priya, as a child, cried for Nani, the only mother Priya had known for the first nine years of her life. When Priya persisted, her mother drove her to the hospital to visit the children's cancer ward. "This one's got a tumor growing in his ear," she said. "And this one's got one in his eye. Not even *they* cry as much as you do."

So Priya had stopped crying in her mother's presence. Even now, though she was thirty-one years old, Priya's tears froze in their ducts when they sensed her mother near. At Bilal's funeral service, held at the local mosque, mother and daughter stood dry-eyed while Bilal's sister and nephew sobbed along with the rest of the mourners. The nephew, Jilani, an undersized, curly-lashed fifteen-year-old, dipped his head into Bilal’s coffin and placed his dark face against the pristine white of the *kafan*, the unstitched cloth that covered Bilal from head to toe. When Jilani lifted his head, his eye caught Priya’s and Priya glanced away quickly, ashamed of her inability to cry.

After the ceremony, hundreds of people, it seemed, approached Priya. Arabs, Pakistanis, Indians like Priya, African-Americans like Bilal. Most of them she barely knew. She'd converted to their religion when she married, but to them, she was still the strange Hindu girl who'd

somehow snagged one of their better men. Though they approached with condolences on their lips, their eyes spoke a language Priya had last known oceans away, on the other side of the world. "This child spreads misfortune like mice spread disease," the villagers of Gharibabad had said, staring glumly at their burst pumpkins, their blackened squash, the smell of burnt garlic heavy in the air around them. Bilal's family and friends had no way of guessing Priya's past. But she'd sensed their disapproval the moment he'd introduced her to them.

"I hope you're not changing your religion just for him," Bilal's sister, Yasmin, had said some days before the wedding. "Bilal doesn't always think things through." Then she'd looked from Priya to Bilal who stood a few yards away, surrounded by a cluster of men who hung on his every word. A smile, indulgent like a mother's, had flitted across her face. "But he's a good man. I hope you appreciate what you're getting."

Eleven months was hardly enough to appreciate a husband. Less than a year after Priya and Bilal married, the ground had shifted. The 1969 Mustang Bilal had been rebuilding for years, bit by bit, slipped off the jack it rested on and crushed Bilal's chest—the chest Priya, after all her wanderings, had finally come to rest ashore on.

Who could Priya blame? When her mother's Sikh friend had been shot while driving a taxi, Priya's mother had blamed a number of people. The cab company, for not installing bullet-proof glass between the driver's seat and the passengers'. The Gurus of Sikhism, for requiring their followers to wear a headpiece that resembled a Muslim turban. Muslims, for crashing into the Towers and inciting hate in return. African-Americans, because no doubt, the killer must be a black man.

Unlike her mother, Priya had no one to point a finger at. Even the rain wasn't strong enough that day to loosen the dirt beneath the jack. Bilal had been alone, his only company the room-sized iron cages filled with brightly-plumed birds and a cassette player blaring recitation of Suratul Kehef, the Heart of the Holy Qur'an. Priya found Bilal when she ventured into the backyard to call him in to dinner. Bilal's legs protruded from beneath the car, and while Priya waited for the paramedics to arrive, she pulled off his sandals. She stroked his feet, her fingers alert to any twinge of movement, any sign of life. Even after the paramedics moved his body, she stayed that way for a while, kneeling in the wet dirt, surrounded by the calls of Bilal's birds.

While she remained still and silent, as if her soul had grafted with Bilal's and floated away, the birds screamed and squawked. The reds and greens of their plumage flashed in Priya's peripheral vision. Their beaks clanged against their metal surroundings, and in the clamoring of those birds, Priya recognized her own. The desire to be set free from the cage of herself.

And that desire, as powerful a predator as any Priya had encountered in the jungle, pursued her in the days after Bilal's funeral. Priya's mother dropped by a few times the first week. She perched on the leather sectional, the sofa where Priya had made love to Bilal more times than she could count, and suggested Priya get counseling.

"I have a friend," she said. "Susan. She's really good."

When Priya didn't answer, her mother's fingers, those fingers that wielded the scalpel day in and day out, drummed her designer-clad knee. "Well, here's her card," she said, placing it on the coffee table.

When her mother left, Priya crawled back into bed. An image of Bilal's brown hand resting on the bedpost burned her eyelids. She quickly pulled open her nightstand drawer and reached for a small pouch containing sleeping powder.

Outside, visible through the floor-to-ceiling bedroom window, the metal cages glinted in the sun. The birds strutted about inside them. Mealys, toucans, giant African Greys, tiny parrotlets with blue crowns and pink feet. Some birds were muted in color, dull green and pale salmon. Others sported black with splashes of red or sunflower yellow. Bilal had bred many of them from birth. He'd lined their cages with bare branches, hung colorful fruit and flower-shaped rattles along the ceilings. He'd spent hours among them, stroking their feathers, holding out honey sticks for them to gnaw. His favorite had been a parrot he'd rescued, a Lorie whose eye some kid had poked out with a pencil. Priya hadn't ventured outside since the accident, but Bilal's nephew, Jilani, who came to feed the birds, had told her that the Lorie was restless. It had started feather plucking. Perhaps it sensed that Bilal wouldn't be returning.

Now with Bilal gone, that Lorie and the rest of Bilal's birds would have to be sold. Priya lacked the energy to take care of them, and she couldn't expect Jilani to help her forever. Besides, the birds were a constant reminder of Bilal. Their squawking sliced Priya apart, one memory at a time. After all, it was that squawking, the sound of the familiar wild surprising the dusk of suburban Dix Hills, Long Island, that had first drawn Priya and Bilal together. Priya had tracked the sound half a block from her mother's backyard to Bilal's, and then she'd scaled, without the slightest thought, his chain link fence.

"This is private property," was the first thing Bilal ever said to Priya. He'd found her crouched next to one of his cages, stroking the beak of a slate-blue mealy, a parrot twice the size of a man's head. When she turned to face him, this man whose uncivil greeting poured like warm honey into her ears, a whiff of *Ud* drifted down to Priya. It was a fragrance she'd first smelled in the rainforests of Borneo.

Priya wanted to tell this man that the fragrance he wore derived from a fungus-infected tree. That the tree's immune response, harvestable only along with the fungus, produced the *Ud* oil that sold for up to a thousand dollars an ounce. But that in the rainforest, that explosion of green flourishing on a foundation of sand, *Ud*, if one encountered it, was free for the taking. There was no such thing as private property.

But Bilal, one hand resting protectively on the Mealy's feathered back, was already staring at her strangely. Something about him—a something that hopped away when she tried to grasp it—reminded Priya of a man she'd encountered in the jungle. Jadugar, the man who'd bitten her breast and saved her life and who now sent a boulder of pain crashing through her whenever she thought of him.

"I'm sorry," Priya mumbled and rose to her feet.

Tiny as a child and tiny still, she barely reached Bilal's shoulder. No more than a few months had passed since her return from West Papua, and Priya's skin was still chapped and red, her hair uneven. Barefoot and in her ashy nightgown—sewn by hand from a bed sheet her mother had discarded—she no doubt presented a disturbing sight.

"Wait a minute," Bilal called after Priya as she started to climb the fence. He hesitated. "Can you do me a favor?"

His teenaged nephew, he told her, was supposed to help him rearrange the food pans in the cages. Instead, the lazy bum was sprawled in front of the fireplace, reading Bilal's magazines.

"The boy's crazy about reading," said Bilal. Pride seeped through the irritation. "You can't get him to do *nothing* until he's read everything in sight."

He himself, Bilal said, was too large to fit through the narrow cage entrances.

Even then, Priya knew the favor was more for her than for Bilal.

"Sure," she said, after a moment's hesitation. A chill passed through her as she entered a cage, brushing against the brightly-plumed creatures inside, the first she'd encountered in captivity. In the jungle, one such bird, an Orange-Wing, had followed Priya for an entire day's trek. Her heart had ached, inexplicably, when it disappeared without warning.

"You really know animals, don't you," Bilal said when Priya had finished helping him. "Most people would be scared of birds this size." He stared at her, appearing mystified at she didn't know what. His eyes drifted to the ripped hem of her nightgown. "You can come back whenever you want," he said. "And you don't have to jump over the fence."

She did come back, came back so often that she finally stayed for good, her evil *qismet* along with her. But despite Bilal's words, she always climbed over the fence in those early days. A simple chain link fence was nothing when Priya had scaled trees that stretched endlessly into the sky.

During her years in the rainforests, Priya later told Bilal, she'd trekked for days at a time, sloshed miles through knee-high mud. She'd speared hostile boars with her machete and eaten leaves and insects when no food was to be found. She'd learned how to dance from women who

wore crocodile teeth around their necks and plastic watches on their wrists, how to hunt from naked men who smoked tobacco and only wore clothing when they left the jungle to trade twice a year. Whenever the urge to stop welled inside Priya, she'd hacked down brush and bamboo, and using vines to tie them together, she'd fashioned crude structures that sheltered her from the incessant rain. Sometimes, when the threat of a predator loomed, she'd shimmied up a *matoa* or *aquilera* and spent her night among the creatures of the trees.

In West Papua, the Island of the Fuzzy-Haired People, as a Portuguese governor had dubbed it almost five centuries ago, Priya had been sleeping in one of those trees when a poisoned wooden arrow landed on her chest. For an instant, she thought a death adder had bitten her. The lush green that surrounded her sharpened, then blurred. The next moment, Priya lost control of her limbs and tumbled through the foliage. The chink of sky visible through the forest canopy retreated for hours, it seemed, before she hit the ground. That's when Jadugar had pounced. He sank his teeth into Priya's breast and sucked the poison out. He smeared something into the wound, she was too far gone by then to know what. His gray, creased face was the last thing she saw before she sank into deep darkness.

The sleeping powder Priya took now, after Bilal's death, produced a similar darkness. So similar, in fact, that often, when she rose groggy from sleep, Priya believed she was back in the jungle, waking to Jadugar and his tribe. But now, each morning, only the pain of Bilal's absence awaited Priya, the pain of the screaming birds reminding her of what she'd lost.

When she'd awakened in the jungle, the pain had been more physical, more manageable. Priya's breast had burned under the layer of damp leaves spread across it. She lay in a *bivouac*, a

three-sided bush shelter. Natives in headdresses fashioned from the black bristle-like feathers of the giant cassowary bird surrounded her, and more of them crowded outside the entrance.

Priya wanted to ask them what day it was, but the bursts of rhythmic sound drifting between them were unfamiliar, different from the other languages she'd heard in her three years in the region. Besides, even if she could communicate with these men who'd tried to kill her and then saved her life, who knew their concept of time? In the lowlands of Borneo where Priya had lived before coming to Papua, the Penan had measured time not in days and hours, but by the quality of the moment. By how good or how arduous an experience was, how productive a hunt proved. Priya had learned, like them, to navigate the day by the movements of the insects. The sweat bees that emerged two hours before dusk, the black cicadas that screeched at precisely six in the evening. Even before the battery on her watch gave out, she'd stopped glancing at it.

When she awoke surrounded by Jadugar's tribe, that watch, a cheap Casio, long cracked and useless, still encircled her wrist. That evening, when Priya saw Jadugar scrutinizing the watch, she gave it to him along with a small log of fragrant *Ud*. She watched him tuck the watch into his headdress before he wolfed down a tin of her peanut butter. He licked the tin clean and presented it, almost ceremoniously, back to Priya. Later, a naked infant sprawled in her lap, she shared a Cuban cigar with Jadugar, a cigar she'd carried in her backpack for longer than she could remember. She wasn't a smoker, but inhaling the thick tobacco smoke dulled the pain in her breast.

It took a month or so for the pain to fully disappear. Every day Jadugar pointed to Priya's chest and cocked his head. Priya gave him a thumbs-up sign to indicate things were going well. At first Jadugar appeared puzzled. Then he copied the gesture, jabbing his own thumb upwards,

smiling back when Priya laughed. By the time Priya left Jadugar's tribe, her breast had fully healed, but the mouth of the wound encircling her areola remained crusty and cracked. The skin around it, almost her entire right breast, had darkened to a greenish-brown color. For a long time, whenever Priya looked at it while changing or bathing, revulsion rose in her throat. Not because beauty held any remnant of meaning for her, but because she saw herself, the reality of what she was, in that breast.

Before Bilal entered Priya's life and redefined her perception of her deformed breast, it was a silent reminder of the little girl from Gharibabad, the one who'd pasted her image into Nani's Album of Malignant Growths. Still, that breast proved useful once.

Some months after Priya met Bilal, but before she realized she was in love with him, Priya's mother sprung a surprise on her.

"It's about time you got married," she said.

Marriage? The idea seemed as foreign to Priya as Papua was to her mother. Briefly, Bilal, his gentle brown hands, his habit of rubbing his cheek with the heel of his palm, rose to Priya's mind. She pushed the images away. "I'm not getting married," she said.

"Well, then, what do you want to do?" Her mother placed her hands on her hips, the cream pantsuit she wore pale against the deep red of her nails. "You didn't get your education. You blew all your money on sightseeing. Even if you tried to get a job, the way you dress, no one would hire you anyway." She punctuated each sentence with a jerk of her head. "Do you expect to live off me all your life?"

Priya turned her back on her mother. "I wouldn't know how to be a wife," she said. The thought crossed her mind that her mother hadn't either.

"What do you mean?" said her mother. "All you have to do is cook and cooperate in bed. That's all they want."

Priya imagined lying in bed with some faceless man. She'd been with men before, but not since the poisoned arrow had pierced her breast.

"I don't think a husband would be satisfied with me. Physically," said Priya.

"Don't talk in riddles," her mother said. "Are you trying to say you're not a virgin? This is America, the twenty-first century. Husbands nowadays don't expect virgins."

Before she knew what she was doing, Priya had pulled her blouse open and exposed her breast. "Do they expect this?" she said.

Her mother, the woman who'd confronted the insides of people for almost thirty years, exhaled sharply and fell silent.

Later, a young Hindu man, a medical student with a lock of white splashed across his oily black hair, came to dinner. She'd already invited him and it was too late to cancel, Priya's mother explained, somewhat awkwardly. She looked away from Priya. "I'm sorry I haven't asked you about...anything," she said. "I don't know, maybe it has to do with being a doctor. You see so many things every day…."

During dinner, Priya studied the young man, slender, nervous and knock-kneed and not yet a doctor like Priya's mother. But he soon would be. One day, he'd see all that her mother had seen. And as the cobbler's children do without shoes, his children would have to do without him.

Bilal's children, Priya often thought before he died, would never have to struggle to fill the emptiness of his presence. Watching him with Jilani was enough for Priya to know this. Both before and after Priya's marriage, Jilani was constantly around. He devoured the mountain of magazines Bilal subscribed to and helped with the Mustang Bilal was rebuilding. It was a common sight to see Jilani bent over the hood, discussing toploaders, shaker hoods and spoilers, his brown curls tightly coiled against his acne-marred forehead. He handed out pliers and wrenches, a smile lighting up his grease-streaked face. He helped with the birdcages as well, discarding old newspapers and seed shells, lining the floors with the pages of magazines already read.

Even now, as the days since Bilal's death turned into weeks, Jilani still visited Priya every day. He came on the pretext of cleaning the birdcages. "Just to make sure everything's okay until you sell them," he said. But Priya knew it was more than that because, with increasing frequency, Jilani brought his mother, Yasmin, with him.

Yasmin was a nurse and she usually arrived in her whites. The first thing she did was yank up the blinds and throw open the windows. "Okay, girl. Out of bed," she said. "You got to eat something."

In her presence, Priya forced down miniscule pieces of bread, nibbled on fried chicken. After she left, Priya pushed the remaining food down the garbage disposal.

She'd never wasted food before. She considered giving some of it to the birds, but Jilani would notice. Not that he paid much attention to his work. He had his own key to the house, and invariably, he ended up inside. He hovered around Priya, sitting cross-legged on her bed while she lay there staring at the ceiling. He rambled on about something or other he'd read.

"Hey, Auntie Priya," he said. "Did you know there're twenty-thousand kinds of plants on this one little island. And check this out." He held up pictures for Priya to see. "This butterfly's a Godzilla."

When she nodded dutifully, Jilani swiped his cheek with his palm—the gesture so like Bilal's—and burrowed into some other book or magazine dealing with his latest interest. His most recent obsession was the concept of first contact, the encountering of a tribe that had never seen an outsider, never made contact with the outside world.

"Only about fifty such tribes left in the world, they estimate," Jilani said. "How about you and me go find one of those? I know you like stuff like that."

They could lead an expedition, he said. People were paying big money to go on first-contact expeditions.

How could Jilani know that every time he brought up first contact, he sanded away a little more of what was left of Priya? She knew all about first contact. She knew, for instance, that these tribes were only to be found in the rainforests, mainly in West Papua. She also knew that during the first year or so after first contact, entire tribes were wiped out simply from exposure to common illnesses such as colds and the flu. After all, Priya herself had single-handedly exterminated one of those tribes. Jadugar's. Priya hadn't stayed to watch her handiwork, but somewhere in the rainforest, a hundred graves recorded her guilt.

A child had vomited after eating her peanut butter. Jadugar had wiped his runny nose on a fan-shaped leaf, appearing as mystified as he had when he shared her Cuban cigar. An image had flashed through her mind. Her lips on the cigar and then his. And with a terrible certainty,

Priya had realized that these people had never known the outside world. She'd come in and infected them. That very moment, she'd hoisted her backpack and left.

Crying, hacking her way towards civilization, she'd come upon an animal lying dead in her path. It was a creature she'd never encountered before. One of those species, Priya realized, who were born in the treetops, who lived and died without ever touching the ground. Looking closely, she saw it had three legs, a stub sticking out from where the fourth should be. And she'd known then that her grandmother had been wrong. No matter how far you fly, you can never outrun your *qismet*.

Years later, sitting on Bilal's porch swing, Priya had told him she'd killed a hundred people.

"You're wrong," he said, caressing the white-throated toucan that perched on his shoulder. His hands moved gently over the bird's multicolored beak. He kneeled on the porch, almost at Priya's feet, as he later would when he asked her to marry him. "They're still in there," he said, "still talking about you."

But Priya knew they weren't. She, unlike Bilal, knew the laws of the jungle. She'd read all the advisories before entering the rainforest. Before Jadugar, she'd avoided those tribes, knowing full well what could happen if she didn't.

"You'll be a legend," said Bilal. "They'll treat that Casio like some tribe heirloom. They'll tell their children and their children's children stories about you."

"What if you're wrong?" she said. "What if they *are* dead?"

Then she told him things she'd never tell anyone again. She told him how, as a child, she'd burned down the market of Gharibabad. How, when she'd crossed the Peruvian Andes,

she'd lost a seasoned guide at Abra de Warminawusca, Dead Woman's Pass. How, the moment she was born, she'd damaged her mother forever.

"You didn't *do* any of those things," Bilal said. "Okay, maybe you knocked over a stove. But you were a kid. *Innamal a'malu bin niyyat*," he said. "Deeds are classified by intentions." That was the first Hadith of Bukhari, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, That what you meant to do defined you, not what you inadvertently did. Besides, Bilal said, sometimes when something bad happened, it meant God had averted something worse. "So your mother's uterus got messed up when you were born. But at least she's alive. My mother died having my sister."

He unwrapped the log of *Ud* Priya had given him that day. At first he'd refused to take it, a piece of fungus-infected wood, worth several thousand dollars. But Priya had insisted. It was the only thing she had to give and she could think of no one better to give it to. When Bilal removed the layers of plastic, the overpowering fragrance filled the yard. Priya knew that if you burned a few chips from that log, the scent would fill the neighborhood.

You had to take the bad with the good, the good with the bad, Bilal said. That's the way it was for everyone. "No fungus, no *Ud*, right?"

He'd almost managed to convince Priya there was nothing wrong with her. Love had made her blind. And Bilal as well. After he'd seen her childhood pictures blending so comfortably into those seemingly-innocent tumors displayed in the album of Malignant Growths, he should've carved Priya out of his life. After all she'd told him, he should've known better than to marry her.

But he *had* married her. And now Priya had to face Jilani and the sadness that seeped from beneath his quick grins and constant words. She had to face Yasmin who hadn't deemed

Priya worthy of Bilal in the first place. She imagined how they saw her, the interloper, hogging Bilal's spacious house in Dix Hills—the house that had been willed to Jilani before Priya's marriage—while they lived in a modest home in drug-infested Wyandanch.

Not that Priya held any desire to keep something she didn't deserve. On one of Yasmin's visits, she tried to sign over the house deed to Yasmin and Jilani.

Yasmin looked at her strangely. "What would I do with all them bird cages?" she said finally. She took the deed from Priya and placed it on a bookshelf. "Here. Eat this." She handed Priya a bowl of beef stew.

The smell nauseated Priya. She forced down a spoonful only because Yasmin was watching.

"Has your mother been in to see you?" asked Yasmin.

Priya shook her head. "Not lately."

She gave Yasmin her mother's number when Yasmin asked for it. She didn't tell Yasmin that her mother had called several times, leaving phone messages. Priya hadn't called back, because what would they talk about?

"Crying never did any good," her mother would probably say. And then she'd take Priya on a ride to the cemetery to show her the graves of a thousand women's husbands.

But when Priya's mother dropped by the next day, she didn't mention cemeteries or husbands or even the uselessness of tears. For a while, she didn't speak at all. She stood just outside the front door, surveying Priya's disheveled hair and pajamas.

"Yasmin tells me you've been sleeping all day," she said finally.

When Priya didn't respond, her mother's brow furrowed. "I brought a friend." She gestured toward the black BMW that crouched in Priya's driveway. "Susan. You remember I told you about her?"

Her mother should have known better. Priya had declined when her mother suggested counseling after Priya returned from West Papua. "I don't need some M.D. doing a cross-section of my psyche," Priya had said.

She hadn't needed it then and she didn't need it now. Priya stepped back and shut the door in her mother's startled face. After a long moment of silence, her mother knocked. Softly, then louder.

"Priya." She yelled as if Priya was not on the other side of the door but on the other side of the world. "You need help. You need a doctor."

Priya leaned her head against the heavy wooden doorframe. She'd had her mother all her life, hadn't she? That had been enough.

When the BMW purred to life outside, Priya retreated into the den and sank down onto the sofa. A whiff of Bilal's *Ud* brushed her nose. At her knees sat the ottoman imprinted with Bilal's feet, those unusually large feet with calluses the size of quarters.

Those feet, Priya had told Bilal more than once, should've been hers. They'd have served her well during her travels. On the Inca Trail in the Peruvian Andes, Priya remembered, one of her guides had had feet like Bilal's. Priya had admired the way he often walked barefoot, the soles of his feet slapping up the steep trail. When Priya tried going shoeless like him, the guide shook his head.

"American feet no good," he said.

Her feet had proven him right. By the time their group, giddy with excitement and lack of oxygen, achieved the highest pass on the trail, Priya's steps left pomegranate-hued stains in their wake. The cracked paving stones—no doubt smooth when laid centuries ago—had fairly shredded her soles.

It was still early in Priya's travels then. Early enough for her to believe that every search led to discovery, that every question held an answer. Early enough for her to revel in the riveting view despite her shredded feet. From where she stood, precariously perched on the rocky mountainside, the world below was a meld of crags and peaks, angular terraces and rolling grass.

She still had a photo of that moment somewhere, a Polaroid a fellow climber had snapped. In it, Priya posed ramrod straight, eyes widened like a startled child's, one arm propped rigidly on the signpost marking the pass. *Abra de Warmiwanusca*, the signpost read.

Later, before he lost his footing and toppled thirteen feet, twisting one ankle and breaking the other, Priya's guide had translated the words for her.

Abra de Warmiwanusca. Dead Woman's Pass.

Named after whom?

The guide had shrugged. "There are many stories. Who knows which one is true?"

And because he failed to elaborate, Priya's mind had conjured a story of its own. The details eluded her now, but the final image—a woman diving off the mountain, gliding effortlessly downward—remained imprinted in Priya's memory.

Since Bilal's death, that image had increasingly visited Priya's thoughts. Sometimes she closed her eyes and it was she and not some faceless stranger who drifted through the soft air and into darkness.

Of course, here in Long Island there were no mountains to climb, certainly none to glide off of. But there always remained other avenues of escape. In centuries past, countless Hindu women, Priya's ancestors among them, had surrendered themselves to the flames of their husbands' funeral pyres. And though Sati was now a rarely practiced tradition, it had once been an accepted part of Hindi culture.

Not that Priya was any longer a Hindu. She was a Muslim, and Bilal had told her that in Islam, taking one's own life was a betrayal of one's body and of the God who created it.

But then Bilal had told Priya many things. He'd told her that one day she'd have his children. He'd told her that there was nothing wrong with her. He'd told her that her deformed breast was a war wound. A badge of experience, of knowledge few others had.

He'd moved her hand away from that breast the first time they'd made love.

"Don't cover it up," he'd said.

Embarrassment, an emotion she thought she'd abandoned forever, had filled Priya. "It looks like a volcano," she'd said. She avoided his eyes so she wouldn't see the shock, the revulsion.

When she had their baby, Bilal told her as he stroked her navel, it *would* be a volcano. A milk volcano. "Imagine," he whispered in her ear, "a volcano spewing milk instead of fire."

She'd never looked at her breast in the same way after that.

Bilal had changed her. He'd emptied her of her former self, so thoroughly that she'd thought there was nothing left of the saucer-eyed, imp-like girl from Gharibabad, the girl who spread misfortune like mice spread disease.

Emptied of that girl, she'd found Priya, a woman. A woman capable of giving and receiving love. When Bilal had told her, quite abruptly, that he loved her, that she was the most unique woman he'd ever met, she'd understood what it meant to soar like a bird, it's vibrant wings spread above the jungle.

"I'd ask you to marry me," Bilal had said, somewhat awkwardly. Then he'd explained that his mother had been Muslim, his father Christian. That it had been difficult to choose, and when he had, he'd alienated half his family. "I never want my children to go through that," he said. "My wife *has* to be Muslim."

The moment he said it, she was a Muslim. Or so she'd thought.

Now she didn't know what she was, if she was anything at all. During her travels, she'd seen people worship the sun. She'd seen them worship fire, the earth, pieces of stone. She'd seen them worship themselves. What did it matter? They all lived, and when they died, their soul, if there was such a thing, flew off to some place that did or didn't exist.

Who knew where they were, those ancestors of Priya's? Those women who'd flung themselves onto their husbands' burning bodies and risen into the sky with them.

Heaven, Hell, somewhere, nowhere?

If there was a Hell, it couldn't be worse than an empty life. If there was a Heaven, it must be oblivion. The oblivion Priya had risen from in Jadugar's jungle. The oblivion produced by the sleeping powder she took. But one that never ended.

Perhaps it didn't have to end.

Perhaps that was the discovery Priya’s search led to, the answer to her question.

Not that Priya had ever given up before. In the jungle, she'd speared death adders with her machete, striking instants before she herself was struck. She'd rescued a Penan girl from a forest fire, losing her hair in the process. She'd battled a giant cassowary—the bird known to fillet prey with a slash of a single claw—and survived the experience. When the cassowary's claw had raked her arm, Priya had considered—in a fleeting moment of unbearable fatigue—the escape of surrender, of dropping her machete and passing through the doorway of pain into nothing. The next moment she'd banished the thought. Surrender to the cassowary would amount to surrender to her malevolent *qismet*.

But the cassowary—and Priya's will to resist it—had been before Bilal, before Jadugar, before a hundred graves in the jungle and a car that slipped like a toy and crushed a man's chest. It had been before cotton sheets that chafed Priya's skin worse than tree bark ever could, before food that clogged her throat like no leaf, no insect, no flying squirrel ever had, before days that refused to be navigated despite the clocks that, in every room, moved forward in time, pushing her further and further away from her life with Bilal.

Outrun your qismet, Nani had said.

Perhaps what Priya needed to outrun was not her *qismet* but herself.

Priya swiped her hair into a bun. She didn’t bother with shoes. Because she’d avoided the sun for so long, when she stepped outside, the mid-morning rays assaulted her. Shielding her eyes, Priya made her way past the birdcages to the wooden shed behind them. The shed housed Bilal’s toolboxes and a lawnmower. Surely it contained a can of gasoline as well.

A few minutes later, Priya, ignoring the birds' squawks of welcome, clutched the can of gasoline in one hand, matches in the other. Hands trembling, she raised the red can until it was poised over her head.

The can refused to tilt. Or rather, it was Priya's hand that refused to tilt it, refused to anoint Priya with the rites of impending death. It wasn't the flames she feared. After all, she'd once hurtled through a wall of fire to save a Penan girl's life.

Behind Priya, the birdcalls and rattling of toys rose to an unbearable crescendo. Priya's arm ached from holding the can aloft. Droplets of sweat dripped into her neckline.

Too much distraction. A pair of parrotlets swinging crazily, violently, blurred in Priya's peripheral vision. A ring of keys swung from a cage lock, clanging against the metal bars with each movement of the cage's Amazonian occupants.

Priya lowered the can of gasoline to the ground. Her eyelid twitched and twinges of pain shot up her neck. She needed to silence the birds first, to get rid of the distraction. She stuck her hand inside the parrotlets' cage, sending them into chaotic motion. One parrotlet pecked Priya's finger before it ducked into its nest. Ignoring her bleeding finger, Priya grasped the clanging ring of keys, intending to toss them on the ground. Instead, she found herself pulling open the cage entrance, clambering inside, and quickly locking it.

Before she could stop to think, Priya had flung the keys as far as she could into a clump of bushes. She was shaking. And crying, she realized. She still clutched the book of matches in her hand. But now, if she burned, the birds would have to burn with her.

Jilani woke Priya that evening. He stood outside the cage, bag of seed in one hand, bottle of water in the other, a perplexed—almost frightened—expression on his face.

"Auntie Priya? Are you okay?"

Priya shifted her awkwardly bent body into a sitting position. She dipped a finger into a pan of water and moistened her parched lips. Somehow, she managed a smile.

"I'm okay," she said.

Jilani pulled on the door. "It's locked." He hesitated. "You got the keys?"

Maybe throwing the keys away hadn't been the best idea. Priya hadn't considered Jilani when she'd locked herself in. Then again, driven by the terror of the gasoline can and all it offered, she hadn't considered much of anything at all.

"They're somewhere over there." Priya pointed in the direction of the bushes.

Jilani's gaze followed her movement. "Oh," he said after a moment.

Now he'd surely turn around, march inside and call his mother. Or Priya's. *Come quick. The strange Hindu girl has* really *lost it now.*

Priya imagined her mother arriving in a white van, accompanied by two white-garbed grim-mouthed men brandishing straitjackets and an electric saw to cut Priya out. Only to lock her up again somewhere else, of course.

Jilani turned back to Priya. He raised the seed and water as if in a toast.

"How am I going to fill the food pans?"

Priya held the pans close to the slats of the cage so Jilani could pour through them. "Thank you," she said as if he was serving her and not the birds.

The moment Priya set the pans down, the Orange-Wings shoved her aside and started feeding. Jilani watched them, shifting from one foot to the other. *You can go now*, Priya wanted to say, but it would be too much of a dismissal, and Priya had no right to dismiss Jilani. He'd been here years before Priya had set eyes on, let alone scaled, Bilal's chain-link fence.

"You want something?" Jilani said finally.

Tears rose from that infernal bottomless well inside Priya. She wanted so many things, she wanted to tell Jilani. Bilal back. Jadugar and his tribe alive again. Nani and Gharibabad and the oblivion of infancy. All things that neither Jilani nor anyone else could give her.

"Food? Juice? Anything?"

Priya scooped up some birdseed and dropped it into her mouth. She chewed until her tears retreated and she could speak without crying. "I'll be fine," she said.

Still, Jilani brought her a box of cheerios, a pint of milk and a peanut butter sandwich before he left. He passed them to Priya through the little window through which Bilal had checked the birds' nest for eggs during breeding season.

Priya tried to eat the sandwich, but every bite brought with it the thought of Jadugar. It had started to rain. The drops pinged against the metal roof of the cage, and when Priya closed her eyes, the aroma of peanut butter conjured up the moistness of the rainforest and its dime-sized raindrops, the pungent odor of the cigar she'd shared with Jadugar, even the sour smell of a pot-bellied child's peanut-butter vomit.

Priya tossed her sandwich into the birds' food pan.

The sandwich was still there the next afternoon when Priya's mother ventured into the backyard. She swung open the gate, almost tiptoeing. She had the air of an amateur burglar or a highly-aware trespasser. After a moment of obvious uncertainty, Priya's mother walked from window to window, peering inside Priya's house. It wasn't until she turned to face the birdcages—looking, with her bright yellow pantsuit and dyed red hair combed into a pointy peak, almost like a bird herself—that she saw Priya.

For a long moment, mother and daughter stared at each other, the metal bars between them casting elongated gray shadows on Priya's mother's face.

"Good lord," said Priya's mother. "What are you doing in there?"

How to answer such a question? *I've locked myself in and intend to live here for a while. Why? To protect myself from myself.*

Of course, that answer would send Priya's mother running for Susan the psychiatrist or worse. So Priya did what she'd done as a child when confronted by her mother. She said nothing. It was Jilani who spoke from somewhere behind them.

"She's cleaning the cage," he said.

The desire to cry once again swept through Priya. He was covering for her, this scrawny, curly-lashed child who—because of Priya—had lost the only father he ever had. And he was here early today. Priya hadn't noticed Jilani arrive, but he must have been here a while now because sweat—and oddly, dirt—stained his clothes and settled around the acne scars on his face.

Priya's mother raised a suspicious brow. She pointed to the food Jilani had brought Priya. "What's all that?"

“It’s for the birds,” Jilani said quickly. Maybe too quickly. He was a bad liar, most likely from lack of practice.

“The birds?” Priya’s mother’s eyes narrowed. She looked at Priya and frowned. “They drink milk?”

“Sure.” Jilani shot a pleading look at Priya. “Don’t they, Auntie Priya?”

His expression left Priya no choice but to answer. “Yes.” She swallowed several times to clear away the bits of birdseed clinging to her tongue and throat. She smiled at Jilani. “They’re like goats. They eat everything.”

It wasn’t true. In fact, it was ridiculously untrue, but the answer seemed to satisfy Priya’s mother. Or perhaps, it was hearing Priya speak in fairly normal tones that satisfied her.

Priya’s mother drew a deep breath. “Well,” she said. “I’m glad to see you’re up and about.” She reached between the metal bars and awkwardly patted Priya’s arm. “Don’t be a stranger. I’m just up the street, remember?”

After Priya’s mother left, Jilani dug into his pocket and extracted the ring of keys Priya had flung into the bushes. “If you need them,” he flashed Priya one of his sudden grins, “just yell.”

His eyes still trained on her, he settled down on the grass, his back resting against the wooden shed. He flipped open a book. For the rest of her life, even when Jilani was a grown man with children of his own, Priya would remember him as he was that day. A sweat-soaked little form tucked against the shed, sneaking hopeful glances in Priya’s direction as he waited for her to come out of her cage.