

The Half Life of Gems

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Abstract

The Half Life of Gems follows two cousins in the Haidar family, Nadim and Abrar, during their summer visit to their ancestral home in Ujjalpur, Bangladesh. Abrar Haidar is the son of Zohair Haidar, a successful RMG (Ready Made Garments) manufacturer. Abrar is struggling to find the courage to tell his father he doesn't want to run the family business. Moreover, he hopes to marry Sadaf, but he is clueless about her feelings towards him. It doesn't help that Sadaf's father dislikes Abrar, and is critical of the exploitative nature of the garments industry. Abrar's cousin Warda holds him responsible for ruining the Pan Art Competition at school, and greatly affects his summer holiday. Soon he realizes a man is stalking him, and he learns that his father had history with Qazi, an infamous war criminal.

Meanwhile, Nadim Haidar plots revenge against Abrar due to past grudges. Nadim aspires to be a detective and the story of a robbery during the Bangladesh Liberation War inspires him. One night as Nadim lays in wait for Abrar, Nadim spies on a servant named Shakil hiding something in the forest surrounding their house. He becomes obsessed with trying to solve the mystery. Abrar gets involved against his will and realizes the situation is more sinister than it seems. He is torn between confronting and protecting his father as he delves deeper into the past.

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Chapter 1

It has to be done, he thought.

With his eyes shut he tried to regain the boundaries of his body. An ant or a termite crawled on his leg, around three centimetres away from the place where he imagined his ankle was. *It has to be done*. The thought javelined through his nervous system. A second later the alarm clock went off. Stretching, he shook off the last shackles of sleep. He stared at the fluorescent hands of the clock. The darkness was dense as clouds, and adjusting his eyes took some time. An insect scuttled across the roof of the mosquito net. He dangled a foot out of bed and searched for his sandals with his toes. Snatching the clock, which he kept next to his pillow, he sprang out of bed.

A pair of wings fluttered away from his sandals as he slipped them on. A moth, he guessed. Endless hours of power outages meant there wasn't sufficient light for the moths in the house.

River sounds owned the night. The river meandered northeast, beyond the forest that sprawled towards the north. He was in his paternal grandparents' house, at the edge of the town. To compose himself he breathed in time with the river's rhythm, until a cicada's song cut through the air. He rubbed his birth mark. It was oval, below the thumb of his right hand. Other scars, which were his trophies from old fights, had more interesting shapes and histories. But it was the birthmark he rubbed at tough moments.

Tick tock, he thought. Father was getting older, and he should give him sufficient time to absorb the shock.

He lit the stub of a candle that was waxed onto the chest of drawers. In the far corner a blue sheet billowed over a medley of furniture that was too old fashioned to be

used. There was a bed, wardrobes, suitcases and decades old chairs stacked on top of each other. But the furniture was made of quality mahogany and teak, so his relatives kept it. Suddenly, the room felt too crowded. Generally, he enjoyed having a room to himself – most of his relatives were sharing. *Cool it, kid*, he told himself. He opened the top drawer and pulled a out white shirt. This summer he had brought all his white clothes with him from his house in Dhaka. He smiled to himself.

Wearing white was a newly acquired compulsion, and it was related to *Her*. A vision of her tracing her fingers on a misty window flitted across his mind. It was an old memory, and bleached because he kept replaying it. The writing on the glass was important, and not being able to remember it bugged him like a paper cut, mild but persistent. *Of course there are greater causes for concern*, said the mocking voice in his head. *Stop*, he told it. For the past few weeks he had been waking up before dawn feeling courageous, ready to tell his father. Then thoughts of her would whirl around his head, until his heart beat as though it had taken a shot of epinephrine. Then he would start doubting he ever felt courageous. It was an indulgence he couldn't afford now.

His fingers lingered on the third button of his shirt; it was loose. He put the button in the pocket and pulled off the shirt. Mother and all three of his sisters were in Dubai, visiting his two-month-old nephew. One of his aunts would have to stitch the button back on. It irked him now that he had never learned any dull, domestic skills, because soon he would be flying off to attend university. Exhilarating as the idea of living alone in a new city was, he prevented himself from pursuing it. A golden moth with brown speckled wings hovered around the candle.

He reached into the drawer again. The next white shirt was from the rejected lots of shirts sewed in Father's garment factory. The brand designer had wanted pockets on the left, but someone in one of the production lines had misheard the instructions. Fifty shirts had been produced with the pockets on the right side before someone noticed the mistake. These complications would become his career challenges if he took over the Haidar industries. He slammed the drawer shut. Shoved between piles of magazines was his jar containing *miswak*, a neem tree twig. After softening the bristles of the *miswak* by sprinkling water on them, he brushed his teeth with it. Then he brushed his beard and his thick hair until the comb scraped his scalp.

The flame was about to go out as the wax that had piled up on one side started caving in. He salvaged it. Molten wax singed his thumb as he molded it into a pyramid. The moth sat on his birthmark. He had heard somewhere that a moth's wing will dissolve in a person's mouth. *Now wasn't that something*, he thought. *To cease existing in a matter of moments*. His pulse quickened. *I have eternity to look forward to*. He nudged at the moth and it hopped onto an interior decor magazine. He wondered why the moth wasn't flying towards the glowing alarm clock, and then realized he had set the alarm half an hour earlier than usual. *Strange*, he thought. He was sure he had set the alarm right last night. Father would wake up around dawn and finish urgent work. Dawn was still three quarters of an hour away. Trying to go back to sleep would be pointless, not that sleep came easily to him. It was the last third of the night. The time when Allah sees which worshipper sacrificed sleep to seek Allah's pleasure. *Allah is closer to me than my jugular vein*, he reminded himself.

He asked Allah to help him to find the best way to tell his father that he, Abrar Haidar, the only son and heir of Zohair Haidar, had no intention of running the family business. He had been accepted into the engineering faculty at a university in Georgia. But Father was under the impression that he would pursue a major in Business and a minor in Physics. His father was an RMG, a 'Ready Made Garments' manufacturer who took orders to sew outfits from international clothing brands. The RMG sector was one of the most important and profitable industries in Bangladesh. After the death of Abrar's grandfather, Father had started off as an importer and exporter of frozen foods and then branched out to the garments industry. After years of trial and error, and a point of near starvation, Father finally owned four factories and enjoyed great wealth and success. He expected nothing less from Abrar than outshining him.

Abrar rolled up his sleeves. His muscles were as rigid as a rock.

To Abrar the factories were no more than glorified tailoring shops, where the owner didn't have the job satisfaction of designing and cutting fabrics with their own hands, if such a skill was satisfying at all. As an owner, his responsibilities would include securing clients in a highly competitive market and haggling for a profit margin of five cents per shirt. He would have to scour Hong Kong and Shanghai for textiles that met the specific requirements of the buyers, draw up letters of credit over the colours, sizes and styles of outfits, and safely get the freight on board a cargo ship. He found these pursuits mind-numbingly boring. Worse, meeting production deadlines and paying wages at times when the factories were running on loss brought the threat of bankruptcy ever closer. The challenge might be worth it if he was in complete control, but success depended on the

sweat of thousands of workers. *Forgive me and my family, Allah,* thought Abrar. It was too early in the morning to think of the real reason he loathed the business.

The only problem with the industry that captured Abrar's interest was the power outages. Locally known as load shedding, electricity would be cut for hours at a stretch. Workers simply waited in the heat for the power to return. Although it was expensive, Father had fitted powerful electrical generators in the factories, so that production could resume without too much delay. Abrar often fantasized about finding a way to supply uninterrupted electricity to every corner of the country. Gas and coal could sustain the country for the next century. There were three billion tons of coal in the Northwestern regions, but it had to be extracted by open pit mining, which ruined farmlands and farmers, and released lung damaging debris into the atmosphere. Despite all the hazards, nuclear power was the most efficient way of generating electricity.

Abrar slammed the drawer. It thoroughly irked him that India and Pakistan were nuclear powers, and Bangladesh wasn't. *That won't do anyways,* he thought, pushing further thoughts aside. Although he considered renewable energy resources something akin to fluff talk, he often found himself thinking of generating hydroelectricity during floods (somehow cars and huts being washed away, and chicken, cows and goats drowning were missing from his fantasies). Solar power also appealed to him, but he didn't think it was reliable on a grand scale. *In hybrid cars though...* he thought with a familiar tingling in his stomach.

Abrar was certain he could design solar powered cars. All he needed was to learn more theory. *They will teach all the cool stuff in the fourth year of university,* he thought. The first few years would be all about electronics and gears. He laced his fingers together

and stretched, the tips reached the ceiling. As far as he knew, students could build jet engines, artificial limbs and amphibious robots by the time they reached their Masters degree. He craved the nervous and euphoric moment before his future inventions would be switched on. *Would algorithms flash before my eyes?* he wondered. Excitement exploded in the pit of his stomach. There was so much he wanted to invent. *Ahem*, his inner voice intruded. *Father will scoff, and say I am an overgrown boy who wants bigger toys.* He spun on the balls of his feet and untied the ropes that hung the mosquito net. *Or not*, he thought. Perhaps he was giving Father too little credit. Although Zohair Haidar was strict, he was known for his benevolence.

The mosquito net was cuboidal. Abrar knew people who rolled the mesh on the sides and piled it on the top of the net, and left it strung up all day. It was a habit he found irksome. Spaces had to be somewhat measurable for him to find them beautiful, and a floating net just sliced across the column of air that reached up from the bed to the ceiling. He stuffed it under the mattress.

After spitting on his fingers, he pinched the wick of the candle and extinguished the flame. A dimly lit lantern illuminated the corridor outside his room. Brass pots holding plants glinted in the light. Purple tovara leaves darkened as Abrar's shadow fell over them. He was on the third floor of the house, which contained several bedrooms. Abrar sped past the slumbering people. There was a washroom at the end of the corridor. He did *wudu*, ablutions that were necessary before prayers. He washed his face, hands and feet, and let the cool water drench his beard. The living room, which was in the central section of the house, was spacious, and he decided to pray the voluntary prayers there. Kid's toys were scattered all around. A jolt of annoyance shot through him as he

picked up one of the toy geese. They were popular amongst the Haidar children. Each goose spun, quacked loudly, and laid cheap plastic eggs when turned on. He resisted the temptation of taking away the batteries.

Abrar spread a prayer mat and set it in the direction of the Kaaba. He hadn't seen the Kaaba yet. Prophet Ibrahim had been commanded to build the Kaaba in the valley of Makkah, as a symbol of the oneness of Allah, and then to call people to visit the house. At prophet Ibrahim's time Makkah was in the middle of nowhere. Despite his confusion Ibrahim obeyed the command, and people came on pilgrimage to this day. A water drop trickled down Abrar's throat. He remembered that prophet Ibrahim was a nation unto himself. *Now isn't that something, man enough to be a nation by himself*, thought Abrar. *Why are you suddenly thinking of the prophet Ibrahim*, asked the mocking voice in his head. *Ah, you find him inspiring? Come on kid, let's be realistic here. You aren't even man enough to have a heart to heart with Daddy dear*, the voice in his head jeered. *Shut up*, Abrar told himself. He stared at the geometrical patterns on the mat, trying to concentrate. It didn't help. Taking a deep breath he remembered the intentions of prayer. He thought, *One: Allah, I pray to earn the reward of praying voluntary prayers. Two: I pray to receive the special blessings of this hour. Three: I pray to earn the rewards of following the messenger. Four: I pray to be closer to You in each prostration*. Reciting verses of the Quran, he prayed until his edginess wore off. When he finished there were still twenty minutes till dawn.

After moving the centre table, he started doing burpees. His heels kept bumping into the leg of a sofa, so he rearranged that too. On average, he could do twenty-three

burpees in a row. He pushed on, and stopped after his muscles felt sore. Adrenaline surged through him.

Jumping up from a squat, he went to Father's room, which was in the west wing of the house. Abrar was just shy of six feet but the wooden door still loomed above him. He balled his fist, ready to knock. *Just work your larynx*, he told himself. Beating about the bush wouldn't work; he didn't have time to waste. Soon white light would break the horizon and the Fajr *adhan* would ring through the town. Then Abrar would have little time before he had to leave for the mosque. He glanced at his toes; his nails needed cutting.

Neither light, nor the sound of paper shuffling escaped from Father's room. *No*, Abrar thought. Pressing his ear against the door he distinguished a soft snore. Disappointment hit him. Rubbing his birthmark he wondered if he should wake Father. If he kept delaying his confession, he might lose his nerve. But Father had a long day ahead: he had planned a gathering with local businessmen and a tour of the clinic he was funding later on in the day. Abrar's hands hung limp at his sides.

He would have to try again later.

Abrar walked to the staircase, narrowly avoiding a brass pot. The house was old fashioned, and the stairs were flatter and wider than those of a common staircase. As a child, Abrar used to climb up the filigree railing, estimate in the dark the distance to the second floor landing, and then jump from halfway up the stairs. One day Abrar had climbed on the railing and it swayed as it always did. Then he hadn't felt the cool metal beneath his feet anymore. He had grabbed the edges of the stairs. Hanging, he had watched the metal flowers smash to smithereens and disappear into the abyss between

stairways. Only after he had seen the tightness around Father's mouth had Abrar believed he might have fallen and crushed his skull. The new railing had a heavy metal lattice. It was child friendly.

Abrar had to wake his cousins Nadim and Ridwan for Fajr prayers. *What trick will that pest play today*, he thought irritably. His cousin Nadim had taken up pestering Abrar with great zeal. *Something stupid*, Abrar thought. Nadim's pranks revolved around throwing things at Abrar or trying to make him trip over things. Abrar was starting to wish Nadim was away at sea with his parents. Nadim's father, Zohair Haidar's youngest brother, was a marine engineer. Although it was summer vacation Nadim's parents had left him behind, because Nadim had a tendency to be seasick. On the last voyage he had gotten severely dehydrated.

The lanterns blazed bright in the second floor corridor. Money plants slithered down the walls. Abrar smirked. Two nights ago, Nadim had gathered potted plants and formed an obstacle course in front of Abrar's room. His cousin's toddler had been nearby. When the toddler had wanted to return to his mother he came across the inexplicable jungle in the middle of the corridor, and had howled with the fear of all lost souls. After half the family had gathered, Dadu berated Nadim for half an hour straight. She hated anyone touching her precious plants. It had amused Abrar to watch the pest trying to reorganize the plants according to how much sunlight they required. *Huh*, thought Abrar, pushing a tricycle out of the way. He realized Nadim had already played a prank today.

A rooster crowed.

In the oddest way, it soothed Abrar that sound waves would only ever carry energy, but no mass.

Nadim

He didn't go to the garden as I expected. He turned north, towards the forest. It's very late in the night. I have been sleeping haphazardly during the past two weeks, because I can. One of the filthy habits I learned from school is sleeping early and waking early. I will sleep when my eyelids won't stay open and wake up 'as nature intended', as the grownups say. Tonight I am extra alert, because I have a trap set for Abrar. I hate Abrar. He is a good-for-nothing, meddlesome moron. Nobody gave him what he deserved for getting me suspended from school over the phosphorus thingy. Now I am squatting on the windowsill in the bedroom, waiting for the moment Abrar walks into my trap. His alarm should be snoozing. I set it early, you know, just in case. Outside is the unpolluted darkness of the countryside. So when the man comes out with the flashlight, its beam shines unnaturally bright.

I can see it is Shakil; the glistening baldness of his head gives him away. He always keeps it oiled, no doubt in hopes of tempting his fallen hair to grow back. There is a large sack over his shoulder, tied with a dangling rope. It looks like Shakil's tail. Shakil slouches under the sack's weight. Whatever is inside it, it has a bumpy surface and sticks out as though the sack's got chickenpox. I've had chickenpox, nasty stuff. You can't scratch away the boils. But I got to miss two weeks of school. What is Shakil taking into the forest this late at night? Can't be potatoes, and it's too dark to be spreading dung in

the garden – not that Shakil is an enthusiastic gardener, at any time. Some criminality is going on. I just know it.

Shakil works for my father's brother, Zohair chacha. Everyone agrees Shakil is an oddball, but he has been with the family since before I was born. I am Nadim Haidar, and I was born eleven years, eight months, and seventeen days ago. I would tell you the minutes and seconds, but then I might lose sight of Shakil. Zohair chacha has a big heart (literally too, the doctor said so), and he keeps Shakil around to do errands.

A note about doctors and other grownups: they lie, a lot. They say white lies, such as 'your face will freeze that way', and serious lies, such as 'don't write on your hand, the ink will poison your blood'. I had believed the latter, and ended up flunking a class test. My cheating strategy in school is better than my classmates, who crane their necks to see what's written on a script three desks away. Nerds always have small handwriting. What's up with that? I write answers on my tummy and peek at them through the gaps in my shirt. Not that I need to cheat much. I am already a grade ahead of the others. Anyways, back to Shakil. I don't what he does exactly. Once upon a time he used to go to Zohair chacha's factories and scowl at the workers. But then he picked fights with the factory supervisor.

Yes, yes. There was something involving cow entrails and a car. People talked about it for days in hushed voices. Instead of consulting me, the grownups chased me away whenever the topic came up. I made paper cup telephones. But they only work when a speaker talks directly into the cup; and the string between the cups has to be very straight. From hiding under beds and inside closets I gleaned that grownups didn't know what to do with Shakil. Trouble is that people shove their slippers under the bed and it

can smack your face. Not that such a thing has happened to me. In my detective duties I am always alert. Anyways, some grownups wanted to send Shakil away to the mental asylum in Pabna. Out of a scientific curiosity to see a madhouse, I would have seen Shakil off. I heard walking through the asylum is scarier than any horror train ride. But most voted Shakil wasn't crazy enough to be secured a spot in Pabna. I asked my cousin Warda for the whole story. She always knows everything, but she hadn't told me. I guess the timing was bad. That day I had eaten a bunch of grapes that were just lying on her desk. It turned out she had been painting them. She twisted my ears and accused me of criminality.

Another time, a border guard had given Shakil an official warning for smuggling bags of sugar from India. Some sweet tooth! Of course, there was some underhand business going on, besides the sugar-coated cover story of sugar smuggling. Had I been in charge of that investigation, I would have gotten to the bottom of it. When I grow up, I'll become a cop. I'll solve crimes during the day, and pursue criminals and rogues through the night, bringing justice to the city. So this night vigil is a good training exercise.

Shakil can't hold any regular jobs. He was a janitor in my school for two days. On the third, he wanted to go thieving under open skies rather than mopping up frog guts in bio labs. Thirteen Harpic bottles and window sprays went missing with him. I heard my teachers laugh about it. I am telling you he is full of criminality.

I can't see the light clearly anymore; it's flickering through the gaps in the trees. Shakil's moving fast for someone in a dark forest. I am good at sprinting myself. I am skinny, and although I am four feet five inches, when I run I can take leaps of five feet.

At school, I won all the hundred meter sprints, and all the high jumps. There's the light again. Shakil is moving north west, going nearer and nearer to the river. I can't see the river from here, only the squiggly reflection of stars on the water. Starlight took billions of years to reach earth. The star might be exploding right now.

What a destiny! Distortion and destruction at both ends.

I like it.

Suddenly, the flashlight goes out. Is Shakil dumping the sack in the river? Is it full of incriminating evidence? Five minutes pass, but it feels like a long time when you are the only person awake. I am sharing this room with my cousin Ridwan, who is snoring. My legs are starting to hurt from squatting. I stand on the windowsill. At the top there is a cobweb with a fly stuck on it. I wrap up the cobweb. The fly is still stuck. I toss it out the window. I can see the flashlight again. Shakil is retracing his steps. Wait. When he reaches a clearing in the forest, he stops. I crane my neck, but I can only see the flashlight as a pinprick of light. What's there? Until this moment the forest was just a lot of trees. Shakil rotates the flashlight. Is it an S.O.S. signal? No. It's probably a secret code.

The light goes out.

It's been nearly ten minutes, no sign of Shakil. Perhaps one of his eccentricities is his love for being bitten by bugs as he sleeps in the middle of the forest. If only I had Abrar's telescope! Abrar has a telescope that he has no use for. I offered to take it off his hands; unsurprisingly, he wouldn't let me have it. My cousin Ridwan told me it's because of sentimental reasons. Abrar said he saw the Swift-Tuttle comet. I don't believe it. He probably saw a firefly through his telescope and mistook it for the comet. But it had happened on the right date, the twelfth of October 1992, and people still make a huge fuss

about it. If I had that telescope I would have discovered a new comet by now, and NASA would be honoured to name it Comet Nadim Haidar. The telescope would have aided my investigations right now.

Abrar is bad to the bone. Until around two years ago, he was a smug, snobbish kid with a particular fondness for proving you wrong and challenging innocent bystanders to play *Gladiator*, a game that finished only when someone got hurt. Now he's having a religious phase! Fasting, reading Quran, hanging out at the mosque all day. Good riddance. True, some of his innate criminality has been curbed. But his niceness to people is alarming. He lies in ambush and you just don't know whom he will be nice to next. I had voiced my concerns about Abrar's multiple personality disorder to his mother, but she just smiled and said, 'he has grown up.' The other day he invited a man on whose head I had dropped a water balloon into the house to dry up. Let's just say... that man had no sense of humor.

Abrar has yet to redeem himself for his crimes against me. He broke my Lego helicopter, and set my pet turtle free. He dangled me by my ankles when I wouldn't tell him where I hid his photographic film. He shouldn't have been taking pictures of me being chased by a hen in the first place. He proved that my model of an encapsulated futuristic city was unsustainable in front of an admiring crowd at our school science fair.

As if that wasn't enough, he got me suspended from school five months ago, over the phosphorus thingy. According to my teacher, phosphorus catches fire when you expose it to air and has to be stored under water. As I already told you, grownups lie. Out of a scientific curiosity, I stole a jar of phosphorus from the school's chemistry lab. But I had to wait till after school to ensure that there were no teachers lurking about. Abrar and

I shared the ride home. Abrar came looking for me, because he was desperate to go home and stick his nose inside a textbook. Unfortunately, he had spotted me as I was stuffing the jar inside my school bag. Extremely politely, I told the meddlesome moron to mind his own business. Before you know it, he had raised a ruckus, attracting the attention of a teacher who was in charge of after school detentions. I had been holding the jar high above my head, and the teacher misunderstood my intention. All I wanted was to see some spontaneous combustion.

My ears ached from hearing grownups say I deserved my three day suspension. My father promised me a good beating.

Still there is no sign of Shakil. Suddenly, the flashlight blazes. Shakil emerges from the tree line. He is walking straighter now. He doesn't have the sack anymore. Near the garden, there is a tube well. Shakil squats beneath it, and pumps the spindly handle, drenching himself. With his clothes dripping, Shakil walks rapidly towards the servant's quarters in the eastern side. Now he is just a few feet away from the house and he is scanning the perimeter. Suddenly, he looks directly at me. I try not to move. He switches off his flashlight, but I can feel him standing there, peering very hard. Pins and needles are tingling crazily in my legs. Why doesn't he just point the flashlight at me?

Someone is knocking on my door. I jump. Shakil is gone.

I see Abrar's loafy feet.

Abrar knocks again. Groggily, Ridwan sits up on his bed. Ridwan is fat and the bed wobbles. Abrar is here to wake us up for Fajr. This habit is a special feature of Abrar 2.0, and it comes with the benefit that he doesn't just barge in. But Ridwan usually wakes up and invites him in, and Abrar tries to wake me up. In vain, I had put trays of water

near the door but Abrar always walks around them. I had aimed punches at his nose while pretending to yawn and stretch sleepily, but Abrar was fast. Abrar's nose is straight as a ruler's edge, and many kids had attempted to break its symmetry. They say 'failure is the key to success', so I had upgraded my strategy. I left the door ajar and placed a packet full of hog plum seeds over it. I had to pick through garbage to get the seeds. The seeds are spiky as mace. Of course I would have preferred actual mace. But as they say, it's the thought that counts.

"Come in," says Ridwan. It's show time.

The door opens. Hog plum seeds plummet on Abrar's head.

"Yesssss," I shriek. Abrar hobbles back. One seed falls in his eye socket. Did I forget to mention I spat on the seeds?

"Amateur," says Abrar, throwing a seed that stuck on his head as though it is going to sprout. I strike a Ninja pose on the windowsill. The bed creaks, and releases a musty smell as Ridwan clambers out and stands between us. It's unnecessary. Abrar 2.0 is slow to pick fights.

"Sor, sorry, sorry, I didn't," Ridwan starts apologizing. He is a delusional peacemaker, who is always trying to resolve conflicts through talk. We tried it once. Abrar had better insults, not because he is smarter than me, but he is older, and he plagiarised insults that guttersnipes threw at him. Abrar stands upright with a bored expression. Faker.

"It will be Fajr soon. The earlier you pray, the more *ajr* you get. It's best if you pray at the mosque with me," says Abrar. *Ajr* means good points, and he is trying to collect as much *ajr* as he can. He has plenty to be guilty about. My pet turtle Blinky!

“Oh Nadim, you better return the laxative tea. Dadu made it especially,” said Abrar. How does know about that? I was going to give him a double dose. Abrar leaves, extinguishing the lantern in the corridor. Setting a bad example for his younger cousins, he doesn’t clean the mess on the floor. Ridwan turns his football face at me.

“Guess what I saw,” I say.

“Can it wait? I want to sleep,” he says. It can, but I tell him about Shakil and everything anyways.

“It’s summer, maybe he was showering because of the heat,” says Ridwan. It hadn’t occurred to me.

“What’s he up to?” I say. Ridwan frowns, climbs back into his bed, and tucks his head under the blanket. Avoiding all suspicious matters and situations is Ridwan’s default life strategy. He is asleep in two seconds. I look outside again. There’s nothing unusual. Ridwan snores, and he is louder than the Fajr *adhan*, the call for prayers, echoing outside.

Sunlight streaks the sky like pink lemonade. I am thirsty. I have hidden bottles of Coke and Sprite under the bed. My grandmother, Dadu, has an agenda against junk food. She is very strict. I have to steal the yummy stuff they serve to guests. If my mom was around she would give me a tin of Quality Street chocolates at the end of each month for good behaviour, even though Dadu keeps telling her she is spoiling me. I finished all of last month’s chocolates. I open a bottle of Coke. Ah, I like that fizzy sound. This is going to be an awesome summer. My mom isn’t here.

My mom is sailing to Singapore with my dad. My dad is a marine engineer. On the last voyage, I saw whales near the Cape of Good Hope. One of them came very close

to our ship. I threw things at it, out of a scientific curiosity, to see what would happen if I blocked its blowhole. After numerous attempts, I managed to throw an orange in the blowhole. Not that I generally miss my target, but the ship was rocking hard. The orange shot up thirty feet when the whale exhaled. I looked for something bigger. I found a hair dryer in the nearest open cabin. In my rush, I had mistaken a lady in her flowery dress as the bedspread. She chased me and screamed as I threw the hair dryer at the whale, messing up my aim. She was hopping mad and complained to my parents. For the rest of the journey, the lady's hair looked frizzy as a witch's. My parents didn't take me this time.

I gulp down the rest of the sugary drink. I will find out what Shakil is up to.

Adjacent to the staircase was a courtyard. The rice sheds, helper's quarters and the kitchen were across the courtyard. It would be faster to get out of the perimetres of the house from the gate in the far west, but there were over twenty helpers and their families who lived in the Haidar house, and Abrar didn't want to start small talks with the helpers who were waking up. He was still annoyed about Nadim's hog plum seeds falling on his head. Nadim had taken up pestering. Abrar turned left, into the house. His extended family would be asleep. As a summer tradition his relatives, including his third cousins, had gathered in the house. On Friday there would be a feast to celebrate the first year anniversary of Father's clinic. Most of the townspeople were invited, but the townspeople visited the Haidar house frequently anyway. When Abrar's great grandfather had been alive he made a policy that every kith and kin, neighbour and

wayfarer would always be welcome. Along with inheriting the property, the Haidar's had inherited a staunch belief in the law of generosity: whatever you give, Allah will return manifold.

Abrar sped up as a child wailed from the depths of the house. The rooms were massive, with interconnecting doors and walls that didn't always reach the high ceiling. Even though he was in the central corridor Abrar felt a draft. As the Haidar clan grew, the house had been renovated and expanded to accommodate them. Much of the third floor and east wing were only two decades old, and crowded with old furniture that was valuable because of the quality of its wood. The main entrance room remained sparse. Feeble lantern light illuminated the two cabinets and a seldom-used wicker chair. On rainy days people spread out their wet umbrellas on the floor. Facing the main door was an ornate mirror, hanging over sword ferns in a brass pot. The wall was faded where there had been a painting, now stolen. Abrar lifted the bar that bolted the main door. Next to the door there was a grapefruit tree. Its bitter smell invigorated him. Papaya trees lined the edges of the inner courtyard, hiding the heavily curtained windows of the house. Abrar walked to the gate, which was wide enough to let a rickshaw pass.

Gardens flourished all around the yard, only a strip in the middle was left barren. Old trees that Abrar's grandfather had planted lined the edges of the property. Ash gourd vines grew parallel to the eastern boundary wall, and eventually trickled into the forest. In the sparse light of dawn, the forest seemed uninviting. The river murmured, restless. Abrar sighed. A white van was parked in the main yard; its bumper had knocked over forlorn cricket-stumps. The bails were missing. It hadn't rained in three days and Abrar was hoping the grounds would be dry enough to play cricket. But the tires had skidded in

the central strip and it would be difficult to ball and run in that mud. Playing on the roof of the house was strictly forbidden, because the roof didn't have railings all around it.

The van was Roshni fupi's, Father's eldest sister, who must have arrived late last night. Abrar missed Roshni fupi's son, Shaiyyan, who was just a few years older than him. But Shaiyyan was doing a summer semester at university. It would have been nice to have a friendly person around, given anti-Abrar sentiments were high amongst his first cousins. They blamed Abrar for getting Nadim suspended. Some of the elders, including distant relatives who had no know idea what had happened, were infected by the attitude. The unfairness rankled Abrar.

A few days before Nadim had stolen phosphorus from the school lab Abrar had walked in on Nadim watching a documentary on America's use of white phosphorus in the Vietnam War. Abrar had been surprised – Nadim generally watched cartoons and shows with irritatingly catchy tunes. Nadim had been staring at the screen, so entranced that he didn't even notice a bee with its stinger out. As Abrar swatted at the bee, Nadim smiled dreamily. When Nadim stole the jar Abrar had tried reasoning with the pest. If they took it inside the car there was a possibility the jar would break as the car sped over potholes, and the school bag would catch on fire. It wasn't Abrar's fault the teacher heard Nadim's torrent of insults.

Warda, Ridwan's sister, was especially furious at him for ruining the Pan Art Competition at school. Abrar smirked. Ruining the Pan Art Competition was a team effort, the by-product of bad blood between Abrar and Tushar. Immediately, he wished he hadn't remembered Tushar. A raven flew in the dark sky. The blackness of its wing reminded Abrar of the mean glint in Tushar's eyes just before Tushar's fists had smashed

into a mirror. As Abrar walked around the van, thorns of the rosebush scratched his arms. The silhouette of roses and cockscombs dominated his field of vision. Annoyance shot through him. The roses were hybrid; they flowered all year long but they were odourless. The cockscombs had an aggressive growth pattern, and they needed to be weeded out. In daytime, those vivid red flowers obscured the delicate ixora. Ixora were *her* favourite flowers, and she had no idea that he had planted them for her.

Huh kid, the things you do for her, he thought. Three years ago, when he had diagnosed himself and concluded that he was in love, he had decided on doing small, subtle things to get her, Sadaf's, attention. Other guys gave girls bouquets of flowers. Abrar had thought growing her favourite plant could only be better than whatever average guys did. But when he tried to get a hold of an ixora plant that would start flowering soon, he ran into unpredictable problems. In the town ixora were ornamental, and not as abundant as bougainvillea. He had found a few growing at the side of a road, and unearthed them. A man chewing sugarcane had watched Abrar work. After Abrar had loosened the tender roots the man came up to him. With strawy sugarcane fibers sticking out of his mouth, the man had informed Abrar that that particular ixora plant belonged to a nursery, which was a few blocks away. Abrar hadn't believed the man; the man seemed like he spent half his day in the cinema hall watching melodramatic movies, and the other half conning people. At least that was the impression he made on Abrar. As Abrar had started walking away with the plant, one of the nursery workers ran up to him. "What do think you're doing?" the nursery worker had demanded, and an argument ensued. "If you intend to sell the plant, don't grow it on public property", Abrar had said. "Doesn't mean people can unscrew streetlamps to light up their toilets," the nursery

worker had replied. When the sugarcane chewing man had taken a particularly loud crunch, Abrar realized that spectators had gathered. Abruptly, he had walked away.

Eventually, he had sought Forkan's help. Forkan was a bookstore owner and an enthusiastic gardener. He had gotten the plants for Abrar, without asking any awkward questions. Sadaf's house was the nearest neighbour of the Haidar house, so Abrar had cleared a prominent place in the garden and planted them where she could see them every day, and hopefully develop a soft corner for Abrar. However, everyone in the Haidar house had been curious about Abrar's sudden interest in botany. Abrar had told them, "I just like the flower," a statement that satisfied nobody's curiosity. During that time he had even invented a formula for predicting people's behaviour: their curiosity was directly proportional to his evasiveness. So he had told them he was "concerned for the bee population." There was a dying beehive in the forest and he wanted the bees to "thrive on ixora nectar." It baffled most people. Some laughed at him, and others hung their heads and walked away, embarrassed for him. Sadaf didn't know. *She will know it and like it*, of that he was sure.

Ixora, he thought. It intrigued him, but then anything related to Sadaf intrigued him. When they were younger, and he enjoyed the luxury of being her friend, he used to watch her drawing out the nectar of ixora, and spraying the florets around her feet. Most girls he knew said roses were their favourite flowers. But Abrar didn't think any observant woman would love roses; the idea seemed culturally informed and reinforced through Hallmark cards. He wondered why she preferred the cluster of florets over other tropical glories. Perhaps the red veins reminded her of the strength in numbers. *Wrong kid*, he thought. If he thought hard enough it reminded him of solidarity within a blood

soaked army, and he guessed that wouldn't click for a girl. Pulling the keys of the iron gates out of his pocket, he thought, *in essence, it feels as though each floret is caught up inside itself*. Smiling to himself he glanced at her house, which was the nearest neighbour of the Haidar house. Coconut trees blocked his view, so Abrar walked back, sliding over soft ground. He steadied himself. Although power was back, as evident from the sodium streetlights, there were no lights on at her house. Even the bare bulb on her front porch, which normally blazed all night, wasn't on. On lucky dawns he would catch a glimpse of her opening the door of her veranda. Today, he left the house earlier than usual. The outlines of the house stood sharp and unforgiving against the night sky.

Later on in the day she would visit the Haidar house. Sadaf and Warda were childhood friends, which he considered a double-edged sword. Warda disliked him for a web of unfair reasons. Warda had sharp features, a sharp mind, a sharp tongue, and she had probably figured out he had a crush on Sadaf by now. *Idiot*, he thought. The distance back to the iron gates felt longer than before.

Back in Dhaka, Sadaf lived with her older brother and his family, and she studied at one of the best girl's schools. The only time he got to see her was from invitations to Warda's house. At those gatherings girls and boys hung out in different rooms. Abrar would insist on refilling the plates of the guests for a chance of coming across Sadaf at the dining hall. Much to his annoyance, he had discovered girls went to get second helpings of food in groups. Warda noted that he was present at those invitations even if he had exams coming up. She enjoyed criticizing his lack of finesse in slicing desserts, while steering clear of the kids who had specific requirements about whether they wanted the cherry, cream rose, or batman's mask on their piece of cake. The observations were

typical of Warda's mean spirited way, so Abrar hadn't worried about it. Then desperation had hit him. He would leave Bangladesh for his undergrad, and it was urgent to find out if he had a rival. Sadaf had a serious nature, and she might have already made up her mind on whom she wanted to marry. So, whenever he was in a gathering with his aunts, he tried to get them talking about Sadaf. When Warda had walked in on one of those sessions he knew he wasn't as subtle as he imagined himself to be. An aunt had directly asked, "Is there any news of Sadaf's engagement?" He had stood extraordinarily still, but the aunt gave him away by glancing at him. Warda had looked back and forth between him and the aunt. She had narrowed her heavy-lidded eyes, and a half smile played on her thin lips. It was the expression she wore when she aced exams. "No idea," Warda had said, her voice sounding like a waterfall, at the brink of laughter. Abrar was sure she had a perfectly good idea. He refused to apologize to Warda for the Pan Art Competition; it simply wasn't his fault. But she didn't see it that way. For the sake of vengeance Warda could ruin his chances with Sadaf.

Abrar unlocked the main gates. Other than a stray dog curled under the Royal Poinciana tree, the street was deserted. *What does she think of me*, he wondered for the millionth time that summer. *Does she think of me at all?* Abrar rubbed his birthmark. A breeze blew an empty packet of Potato Crackers around his feet. He remembered as a child Sadaf opened those glossy green packets, wrinkled her nose at the spicy smell, and passed it around. After every kid had taken their share, Sadaf would eat the spiciest chips. Then he remembered him and Sadaf going from house to house, raising money for picnics. They used to be great friends. But as Abrar grew older he had picked one fight too many to be considered a responsible, caring man, the type Sadaf preferred. Sure he

had a mean streak, but he was a fair guy. It was his understanding of justice that was skewed. If someone messed with him, he would pay them back both for messing with him and for the indignation he felt every time he remembered their wrongdoing. It took him a while to understand his attitude was excessive. Justice was an eye for an eye, and not an eye and a tooth for an eye. When he had realized it he went on the fast track to mend his ways. *I am a new man*, he wanted scream at the air. *She doesn't care*, said the mocking voice in his head. Suddenly he stopped walking and glared at the sodium lights.

A clinking noise made him turn around. There was nothing but the trees and walls lining the street. An old election poster was pasted on the entrance of an alleyway. In places where it had ripped, the vestiges of another poster peeked through.

Probably just a cat, he thought, and resumed walking.

She heard about Tushar, he thought. The whole town had heard about Tushar. Abrar's stomach knotted. Sadaf and Tushar were related, and Tushar's father hailed from Ujjalpur. The townspeople, who saw Abrar as the troubled son of the wealthy, benevolent patriarch, were quick to put the entire blame on him. All Sadaf would know was that Abrar had started the fight. Warda downplayed Tushar's role in her version of the Pan Art Competition. *Sadaf certainly wants nothing to do with me*, he thought. Panic attacked him. Abrar strode; whenever he walked rapidly thoughts couldn't crowd his mind. There was still twenty-five minutes before they would start praying at the mosque, and the mosque was a ten minute walk away. He decided to take the longer route. All he had to do was keep walking – if he slowed down the nightmarish emptiness of a future without Sadaf would grip him.

The Haidar house was at the edge of the town. Abrar walked on the route which ran by the river, which nobody used anymore. In places the path was overtaken by Kans grass that was nearly three feet tall, obstructing the view of the town beyond. Abrar sped through the path. He was cold, colder than his surroundings. The river roared in his ears. Its gray waters rose high.

Initially, settlers had favoured the river basin. The land was plain and fertile on the west. The forest provided firewood, grazing grounds, and food for foragers. But the river was aggressive. The river eroded their farms, beckoned their children to follow its budding waves, and visited their homes during floods. The settlers abandoned the area, some reclaiming land on the opposite bank, and some setting up a shantytown near the train tracks. The Haidar house was half mile away from its banks, and the distance was steadily decreasing. Roots of the trees Abrar's great grandfather had planted kept the soil intact. The dirt road was getting narrower. At a point the path ceased to be, and Abrar stepped through the harsh long leaves that had taken over. The path cleared again.

Quarter of a mile further the path would bend and reconnect with the roads of the town. A croak made him jump out of skin – he had stepped on a frog's leg. He was lucky that he turned around to see whether the frog was too injured to keep moving, otherwise he wouldn't have noticed the silhouette of the stocky man.

The man disappeared in the tall Kans grass. *Strange*, thought Abrar. There was something familiar about the dark figure. *Perhaps he is cutting grass for cattle*, Abrar thought. But Abrar hadn't seen a scythe, nor did he think Kans grass was cattle feed. Had he imagined the glint of metal?

Abrar kept walking.

He couldn't hear any footsteps.

The grass scraped Abrar's arms. *The shoulders*, Abrar remembered. A week ago, it had rained as though the skies held oceans above them. Abrar had sought shelter inside a shoe shop. A woman with two kids had been amongst the stranded people. Abrar had been looking for a rickshaw for her, but few rickshaw pullers braved the storm. Her son had worn his new sneakers that flashed with red light as he walked in circles around the store. Suddenly, the kid had tugged at Abrar's shirt and whispered, "That man is watching you." The kid had been smart enough not to point. A man with hunched shoulders had been standing near a rack of ceramic rabbits, staring intently at Abrar. The man's eyes were wide set and he had around three days' growth of stubble, otherwise he was completely unremarkable. *A farmer*, Abrar guessed. Seven minutes later when two girls had started arguing about whether a ceramic bunny on a unicycle or a bunny reading a book was cuter, Abrar glanced at the store again. Oblivious to the commotion, the man was staring at Abrar still. The man wagged his head as though waking from a trance and dissolved into the crowd. Abrar didn't make much of the incident. Where else? The answer was tantalizingly close. *Whoa*, thought Abrar. He realized he had caught a glimpse of the man three days ago, near the main gates of the Haidar house. Abrar fought the impulse to turn around and take a good look. Abrar thought he knew what the man wanted.

Get out of here, get out now, screamed the voice in Abrar's head. His limbs felt loose, falling from his body. Blades of Kans grass stretched before him. *That grass can hide much*, he thought. The impulse to start running was strong, but he didn't want to alert the stalker. Everyone expected the son of Zohair Haidar to be loaded. Abrar only

had spare coins for beggars. Incidents of muggers who stabbed their victims because the victims had nothing flooded Abrar's mind. Except Abrar guessed the man wasn't an ordinary mugger. *What, what*, he thought; he was forgetting something crucial, a well-known technique. Abrar turned his head as much as he dared. There was nothing around that could be wielded as a weapon. Not a stone. Not even a weathered pebble. Only chunks of earth waiting to cave into the river.

Chloroform, chloroform, Abrar remembered. His hands had started shivering without his noticing it. Kidnappers held a handkerchief doused in chloroform over their victim's face to make them lose consciousness. Abrar believed kidnapping and being held for ransom only happened to the children of wealthy people or political activists. Now, in the silence of dawn, he saw he fit the profile of a kidnapping target perfectly. Abrar threw piercing looks from the corner of his eyes. There was nothing but sandpappy grass that swallowed all shadows. When he reached a bend in the river Abrar chanced a full glance behind him. The man was around twenty feet behind, too close. Abrar walked a little faster. *The river*, he thought, without making sense of it. Then it hit him, he had to jump into the river if the man caught up with him. *Yes*, he thought, that might counter the effects of chloroform. There were just a hundred metres until he hit the town roads. Abrar yanked hairs of grass as his feet slid over clay. *Cool it kid*. He had bitten his tongue to stop yelping.

The man was gaining on him. He could feel the air condensing.

Move.

Abrar's knee buckled. It was probably best not to run. A field labourer would have no trouble catching up with him no matter how fast he ran. Abrar didn't want a

confrontation with an armed man in this lonely stretch of land. He walked as fast as he could without breaking into a sprint. The grass was thinning out. Chipped tarmac marked the beginning of a paved road, and Abrar could hear steady footsteps.

He could make out rows of houses now, and a narrow lane threaded between them. A man was squatting on a stone that bridged over a drain. Relieved, Abrar walked into the lane. At the far end there was the mass of a slumbering ox, then the main street. As Abrar passed him the man gurgled and released the water from his mouth with full force into the drain. From the corner of his eyes Abrar could still see the stout man. A *swish* made Abrar's heart jump to his throat. It seemed to come from his left. A woman threw him a weary look as she drew back curtains to allow in the private light of dawn. The green doors of the terraced houses and the warmth of flour and fire wafting made him claustrophobic. He walked faster, past a house that might belong to a cobbler, kicking broken awls, pliers and an ink pot out of the way. Abrar heard the man who gurgled call a salutation to the man who was following him.

There was no response.

Swathes of black hide rippled at the end of the lane. *Jump*, he thought too late. The ox started standing up. At the base of his neck, in the hollow place beneath his larynx, Abrar felt the horns of the sleepy creature as it steadied itself. He pushed his back against the wall of a house, trying to shrink his body so it would fit the tiniest space in the universe. The ox churned its mouth. Its rancid breath enveloped Abrar, dense as fog. Bovine eyes, glossy as a rock in a river, stared at him. A guttural sound escaped the ox, as its nostrils inched close to Abrar. He ducked down, swayed sideways, and spilled into the street.

A congregation of rickshaws lined the street. A couple of rickshaw pullers were inflating their tires. Pedestrians with faces covered against the morning chill were strolling towards the centre of the town. Abrar sighed with relief. Although the town wore silence like a skin Abrar guessed the stalker wouldn't make a wrong move here. The mosque was far behind. Abrar crossed the street and strode alongside the pedestrians. Soon, they entered a street full of closed shops, the shutters blazing like molten sheets under the red sunlight. The skeleton of a building under construction stamped the skyline. Abrar walked around a mountain of sand. Flaking against a cement-coated column was a pile of rods. Broken bricks like beads of blood pooled at his feet. At the place where the path forked the pedestrians scattered. As he turned left, he looked back. *Incredible*, he thought. Thirty feet away the man was still following him, his hands behind his back.

Abrar stopped walking. His hands gave an involuntary twitch. Surely as a suture on a wound, heat returned to him. *Ridiculous*, he thought as he remembered being held captive by the ox. The ghost of his fear disappeared down the inky road. These days nothing was going his way. *He must have a knife*, Abrar heard himself think over the blood pounding in his ears. *Hutt-hutt*, he chased the thought away. He needed a stick, or a bat – even a sturdy tree branch would do. *Huh*, he thought, picking up a rod. His fingers perfectly fit its serrations. Without warning, Abrar turned around and started walking towards the man. Momentarily the hunched shoulders thrust forwards as the man came to an abrupt halt. His look retained that intensity Abrar had seen at the shop. Abrar continued walking towards the man.

On the other side of the road, the man retraced his steps. Abrar followed. *What now*, thought Abrar. The man walked in a semicircle until he was at the forked road. He

walked into the other road. On closer inspection, the man wasn't carrying anything at all, except he could easily hide small things in the folds of his *Lungi*. He maintained a steady gait, and didn't look back. The man's nonchalance felt insulting to Abrar. He walked faster, unconsciously twirling the rod in his hand. The man's elbow jutted back and he held it in that position, stopping the natural pendulum movement of his arm. Just as Abrar was going to tap on the man's shoulder and ask him what he wanted, the man broke into a run. The man shoved a pedestrian. It was a hard shove, the kind that could lead to an altercation had it been later on in the day.

Abrar's feet thrummed on the road as he pursued the man towards the heart of the town. Ancient trees that were bent and rustling colonized the sides of the street, and boundary walls were broken to let their branches through. Several high rise buildings shot up like black boxes above the trees. In the entrance of a house there was a vehicle which resembled a bamboo ladder set horizontally on a pair of wheels. The man gripped the end of the bamboo contraption and swivelled it in Abrar's direction. For a moment it seemed as though Abrar's feet would get caught in the rungs, but he jumped over it successfully. But the iron rod weaved through two of the rungs. When Abrar glanced up, after pulling the iron rod free, the man was gone. Furious, he put the bamboo contraption back in its place. He strode forwards before the security guard of the house, the *darwan*, came to check out the commotion. *Fantastic*, thought Abrar, peering at the road. The municipality decided that that dimly lit hour was a fine time to turn off the streetlights. It was a long road, and there was a cosmos of hiding places. He turned around. He had forgotten he had set out to go to the mosque in the first place. *Bah! Now stalker knows you're onto him*, he thought. He felt as though insects were crawling down his spine.

A whistle filled the air. Surprised at its loudness, Abrar turned around. The stalker was standing further down the road, moving his arms in a peculiar way. Although he kept his mouth shut, Abrar's jaw dropped. *Bhangra, why?* thought Abrar. The man seemed to be doing something akin to *Bhangra*, the Punjabi dance. But the man wasn't doing it right; he was only using one arm and thrusting his head to his right. There was urgency in the movements. Abrar clenched his jaws. Even in the dimness Abrar could see the white of the man's teeth as he grinned. *Forget it kid*, he thought. If he started chasing the man again he would miss his prayers. Besides, he had a gut feeling he would see that man again, and the next time the man might bring an accomplice. But Abrar would be prepared. He walked away.

Despite himself Abrar turned around seconds later. The man was still head-banging at the building. Then the man stopped and pointed a stocky arm at the building on his right. It was a two storey building. It had a semi-circular room on the top floor, which had once been a balcony. Geometric patterns had been cut out of the wall that enclosed the staircase of the building, illuminated by a lamp. Momentarily, Abrar was reminded of a time gone by, and the distant Alhambra palace of Andalusia. Then he glanced at the signboard that hung on the entrance. It read 'Ujjalpur Investment Company'. *What*, thought Abrar. *Is it some half-baked ploy to get me investing in this company?* Abrar wondered. He had only heard of that company in passing. Perhaps one of Father's friends were using their service. Abrar strode back the way he came. The strangeness of the incident shook him like vibrations in glass. Two construction workers watched Abrar place the iron rod back in its place. One of them lifted the spade in his

hand and opened his mouth as though he had something to say. But Abrar's skin stretched like lightning under his raven black beard, and the man thought better of it.

Further ahead a stream of people were heading towards the mosque. Abrar walked faster, frequently glancing at the *jaali*, which was beneath the green gold tiles of the roof that sprouted into a minaret. The *jaali* was a tessellation of octagons perforated into the wall, and it served as ventilation. He remembered how detailed the pattern of the Ujjalpur Investment Company building was. *But that building was well designed anyway*, he thought. A related fact scuttled like an upturned insect in his mind. *Oh*, he thought, slowing down his pace as he suddenly remembered there was a scandal surrounding that building. Once it had been Qazi's house. Qazi *Rajakar*, or Qazi the war criminal, to be precise. During the 1971 Liberation War, Qazi had lead Pakistani troops into a neighbouring village, Khonighaat, which caused the massacre of four hundred people in three days. Father, with the help of *Mukti* soldiers, had attempted to capture Qazi after the war, but Qazi fled to London.

Abrar recalled the story about the Qazi house.

The Qazi House

Before the war, the centre of Ujjalpur was crowned by the Qazi house. Its gardens were abundant with limes, dahlias, mangoes, marigolds, jasmine and pomegranates. Its open balconies emitted fragrance and its latticed wall sent delightful shadows to passers-by. When visitors came to Ujjalpur, the townspeople would say, "look how Bulbuls and butterflies flutter around that house." Fabrics light as air and soft as summer skies

entered its ornate doors, as the townswomen watched and sighed. Qazi had owned a sari shop.

At the end of the war Qazi lost his sari shop and the trust of the townspeople. He left the house in charge of a nephew who used to run the sari shop with Qazi. The nephew wasn't keen on living in Ujjalpur in the post-war climate, and without the profits that came from the sari trade. Soon the nephew followed suit and left for London. The house was left to the care of an old cousin three times removed. The cousin was an honest man of little worldly ambitions. Despite the mattresses made of the fluffiest cotton in the Qazi house, the caretaker-cousin slept on the hard floor as he had done all his life. Frequently his gaze fell on the velvety dahlias that sprung from the fertile soil, until one day he found himself weeding out the flowering shrubs and planting seeds he considered practical – namely pumpkins, eggplants and okras. Qazi's nephew became a British citizen and he passed the ownership of the house to the caretaker-cousin for tax reasons. The cousin had full power of attorney. Soon the cousin became too rheumy eyed and stiff jointed to perform his chores, so his sons and daughters came from the village to take over the responsibilities. The caretaker-family saw no reason to be intimidated by the grandeur of house. Ignoring their father's reprimand, they each dwelled in rooms bigger than their entire house in the village.

Much to the satisfaction of the townspeople it was rumored that Qazi couldn't find any woman willing to marry him. Unlike his uncle, Qazi's nephew had a family of two children and was tolerated in Ujjalpur. Once every two years Qazi's nephew brought his family for a visit during winter. Before their arrival the caretaker-cousin's sons and daughters had to vacate the rooms. The caretakers had to air the mattresses, wash the

linen, polish the furniture, and remove fresh ash from the hookah. Mostly, they resented removing all traces of their existence from the rooms and moving into small quarters reserved for servants and other people of humble origins.

The caretakers nicknamed the children of Qazi's nephew '*bideshi bachcha*', meaning foreign children. During the first few visits, the *bideshi bachcha* observed everything wide eyed, and remained quiet when the caretakers tried engaging them in conversations. They wore slippers with stuffed bunnies on them, and sat cross-legged in front of elders. Mosquito bites shone bright red on their skin and they glared at the caretakers as though they were breeding mosquitoes for entertainment.

When the *bideshi bachcha* reached adolescence, they breezed through the house as though it were a hotel. They demanded 'authentic Bengali food' be cooked at each meal, and then exaggerated their discomfort at the sharpness of the spices. They grimaced at the *filim* posters the caretakers hung up, and laughed at the quaint shops that advertised quality yogurt. They didn't appreciate the art of making betel leaf wedges, and they blew bubble gum all day. They spoke in rapid English, which the caretakers only understood when they concentrated very hard. After all, the caretakers had gone to school, although only the eldest sister had passed the college exams. But the *bideshi bachcha* also spoke in French and Spanish, which was unheard of. Only the old cousin with an old school sense of honour accepted all their attitudes.

At the death of the cousin, the absence of the Qazi's nephew at the funeral was sourly noted. Even worse, Qazi's nephew called to give his condolences, and the phone line went bad and disconnected in the middle of the call. The money Qazi's nephew sent to cover funeral expenses was paltry. The caretakers were five brothers and three sisters:

one was a baker who got fired from his job on account of his bad temper, another a teacher who had been replaced by someone who was actually qualified, another was fired from a store for stealing small portions of shampoo and diluting the bottles with water (he thought he had the right, given that he had great hair), and another was a nurse fired for faking prescriptions. Things were hard. Insects digested the vegetables on their farm, and the cow dropped dead from the grief of losing its master. Staying in Ujjalpur seemed like a dead end. So they sat at a round table and counselled. They ruled out migrating to Chittagong and Sylhet, and they were lukewarm about Dhaka. A local famer had ended up as a bus conductor in Dhaka, far from the millionaire he had hoped to be.

Then the brother who had been a baker said, '*Amayrica*'. Excitement tangible as lava flowed through the siblings. They had heard the land of *Amayrica*, stretched like chewing gum beneath snow. There was so much land that each house had its own park, which the owners treated with wanton disregard. The siblings shook their head as they recalled that the owners dug out the land to make pools for their children, a pool without fish. Even the government doled out land. "Oh, if that land was given to wise, industrious people like us," said a brother, stroking an imaginary stalk of rice. "Need a single drop of blood be spilled over acquiring that land? Not a drop. "If a man wants land, all he has to do is fight bears, not even Royal Bengal tigers," said the perpetually unemployed brother. They all glanced at the teddy bear one of the *bideshi bachcha* had left behind and laughed uproariously.

Money, as always, posed itself as a problem. They literally had nothing of value. The small farm they cultivated sold for little as the land invariably went under water during rainy season. It would barely cover the cost of two plane tickets. The idea of

selling the house struck the brother with great hair, and buzzed around his head like a bee in a bonnet. He told no one at first but the vibes of keeping a dangerous proposal in his head emanated out of him like telepathy. Soon a brother who recognized the look of greed probed him. Thus, shamefully but excitedly, the brother with great hair revealed his thoughts. The siblings and their spouses rejoiced at the easy source of money. After all, the ownership of the house had been in their deceased father's name.

They found a buyer almost immediately. But the buyer didn't want to reveal himself and sent a lawyer as a representative. The brother with great hair was selected to oversee the paperwork. The caretakers borrowed a gray suit from a well-off neighbour to dress him in. They also bought a silk tie, the shopkeeper loosely tying the knot so that it could be worn and taken off with ease. As requested, the lawyer paid them in cash, in three installments.

The locals wondered many things: Why was Qazi's nephew selling the house to the first interested buyer, and not seeking out a better deal? Why did Qazi's nephew authorize the caretakers to sell the house instead of coming himself? And why was Qazi's nephew selling the house in the first place? When asked, the siblings claimed these instructions came directly from London. A suspicious neighbour, who never trusted the caretakers after an incident of ten missing chickens, wanted to call up the nephew. But the neighbour didn't have Qazi's nephew's phone number and he didn't know that had he Googled Aburraouf Qazi he would be led to the website of a pharmaceutical company that not only gave Qazi's nephew's email address but a direct phone number as well. Thus, by the time Qazi's nephew got a whiff of the exploits from an unlikely source and contacted the lawyer hoping to buy back the house, it was too late. Rumor has it Qazi's

nephew hit his own head for three days after learning the identity of the buyer. When he finally flew back to Ujjalpur, the caretakers had already harassed airhostesses over the Atlantic.

Chapter 2

Abrar reached the arched entrance of the mosque, out of breath. His face was flushed and he couldn't seem to unclench his jaws. It was too late for him to pray the recommended prayer that is prayed individually, before the obligatory Fajr prayer that is prayed in unison. He always prided himself on his punctuality. Moreover, it is disliked for worshippers to run to prayers. People were advised enter the mosque in a calm, dignified manner. Abrar didn't enjoy moving whilst he was praying to allow latecomers to join his row. Usually Abrar made it early enough to join the first row, as praying in the first row had the most rewards. Judging by the number of shoes in the pigeonhole shoe rack, he was sure he wouldn't make it to the first row. He yanked off his left sandal.

Makes no sense, he thought. He glared at a pigeonhole; someone had scratched the polish of its edges. The stalker had no logical reason to point at the Qazi house. He felt a fresh bout of annoyance as he remembered the stalker's gleaming teeth when the man had grinned at him. He was thoroughly regretting letting the stalker go. He had been so close. If only he had jumped over the bamboo contraption, he could have caught that son of a gun. It must have been amusing for the stalker to watch Abrar fleeing like a coward, only to be stopped by an ox. *An ox, a foul-breathed ox*, thought Abrar, blood rushing to his head. He pulled at his right sandal. Abrar figured the Bhangra was a victory dance. *That kind of disrespect can't be tolerated*, he thought, fuming. *Now what?* The sandal wouldn't come off. He got down on his knees and fumbled with the metal clasp; it jabbed his thumb. Adjacent to the shoe rack room was an area with a series of low lying taps, where people made ablutions. Water trailed around Abrar and he noticed his sandals had muddied the floor. In fact, the pattern in the mud resembled the stalker's face. Abrar

wanted to jam his fist on that face. Finally, his sandal came off and he shoved it into one of the boxes, only to see it rebound and fall down. He tried stuffing the sandals in again, gently this time because a couple of men had just walked in. One of the men tapped his shoulder.

“There is already a shoe inside there, and that’s why your shoe is not fitting inside, understand?” said the man, slowly, and his eyes were nearly shooting out of their sockets. Abrar had a feeling the man would have kept staring at him, but the Imam (the man who lead the prayer) started the praying right then. Abrar moved, and from his new angle he could see the offending shoe clear as daylight. Leaving the sandals where they fell, he walked into the mosque. Braids of the bamboo mat pressed against his heels as Abrar stepped into the last row, shoulder to shoulder with the man who had just enlightened him.

As the Imam recited the first chapter of the Quran, the stalker’s grin kept flashing before Abrar’s eyes, especially the way the stalker had been head banging to a silent tune. *More like a chicken that needs its head wrung off*, he thought. Abrar pushed back the thought of the stalker doing Bhangra. Immediately, fresh memories of the things that had gone wrong since that morning rushed to his mind, as though it was a playground for all aggravating memories. He glared at the bamboo mat; it was painted frog skin green. *Concentrate*, he told himself. Concentrating was usually easy for Abrar; he often found distractions less of a mind game than ideas he chose to focus on. *Samawati wal ard is heavens and the earth*, he thought, as he caught the Imam reciting it in the midst of Arabic verses he didn’t understand. As most kids, Abrar had only learned to recite the

Quran with its proper pronunciations. He had never gotten around to experiencing the meaning of the Quran.

“Allahu akbar,” said the Imam and the congregation bowed down, placing their hands on their knees. *Whoa*, Abrar nearly gagged. A latecomer stood beside Abrar and the man seemed to have doused himself in cologne. Abrar imagined tossing the man in a sea of turpentine. He imagined the cologne factory exploding and spitting out great balls of fire that burned the Qazi house to the ground. The mocking voice in his head was chatty again: *breaking news, Abrar is standing before the Lord of the universe, indulging in evil thoughts*. He was being watched. Abashed, Abrar bowed his head lower and quietly, praised Allah. In the second part of the prayer the Imam recited a popular chapter of the Quran.

“Wal Asr

Inna al-insana lafee khusr

*Illa allatheena amanoo waAAamiloo assalihati watawasaw bilhaqqi watawasaw
bissabar”*

“By time

Surely, man is in loss

Except those who believe and do righteous deeds, and join together in the mutual teachings of truth, and of patience and constancy.”

Abrar forced himself to remember everything he could about the verses. Literally, *Asr* means afternoon, the last part of the day, and it also means time that is running out. *You better talk to Father today, kid*, he thought. *Shut up*, he told himself. He recalled the

next verse meant that every single individual is surrounded by loss. Except loss is a mild term. In Arabic the word *khusr* means sheer loss, bankruptcy. There is a hint of deception in it. He remembered someone telling him, “The reward for chasing the world instead of working towards pleasing Allah is loss upon loss.” He remembered, *the only one way to win this rat race of a life, a life brimming with opportunity costs, is to be enslaved to nothing save the Lord*. The exceptions are Muslims who are immersed in doing good, inviting people to think about the man’s final destiny, and encouraging each other to persevere against all odds. *So*, he thought. His grandmother, Dadu, was looking for Doob grass and Arjuna bark, and if Abrar found them for her, intending to please Allah, he would get a mighty reward from Allah. This cheered him up.

The prayer ended but everyone was silent as the latecomers finished praying. It was a textured silence. Abrar could feel people structuring the day ahead. He closed his eyes and supplicated for *nerves of steel, and all the good things in life*. The cologne catastrophe of a man lightly tapped Abrar’s shoulder. Abrar pretended not to notice.

“Are you sleeping? He is calling you,” said the man he had met at the shoe rack, nudging Abrar.

Abrar digested a dose of annoyance. He nodded at the shoe rack man. Slowly, he turned his head, acclimatizing his senses to the sweet, medicinal smell. A man, endowed with the droopy Haidar eyes, was beaming at Abrar. It was Moin, Roshni fupi’s eldest son, and the only other family member who prayed in mosques five times a day.

“Assalamu alaikum, when did you get here?” asked Abrar, pleased to see him. Moin was in his early thirties, but the thought lines on his forehead and sprinkle of gray hair above his ears made him appear middle aged.

“Walaikum, well past midnight. We set out from Dhaka quite late. I got out of the office late as I am heading a new project. As you know I recently got a promotion,” Moin said in a carrying whisper. An elderly man who had been reciting the Quran shot Moin a disapproving look, possibly for discussing worldly matters inside the mosque. Moin was a civil engineer, and everyone in the Haidar family knew he was doing well for himself.

“So, how are you? Heard that you—” Moin said. In mid sentence Moin turned around, beamed at a man with a high forehead. The man’s sunken cheeks lent his jaws a protruding look. He stood straight, and even as he shook Moin’s hand, he looked at the congregation like an army general inspecting subordinates. Although Abrar spoke with the man frequently, Abrar’s stomach plummeted. It was Hasan uncle, Sadaf’s father. Whenever Abrar met Hasan uncle, Abrar would greet him, but Abrar would speak only if he was spoken to. Abrar knew Hasan uncle thoroughly disliked him, especially due to Abrar’s now forsaken hobby of fighting local kids. Since Tushar’s expulsion from school, Abrar had noticed Hasan uncle glancing at him as though he was a malignant tumour. Abrar knew he thought he was the bad influence that led Tushar astray. If Hasan uncle knew Sadaf was an important part of Abrar’s future plans, Hasan uncle would be alarmed. *Understatement, kid, Abrar thought. He’d punish you for daring to dream about her.*

Given time, ever fleeing time, Hasan uncle might come around to accepting Abrar as a son-in-law. Or so Abrar hoped. People started leaving, and Moin and Hasan uncle followed suit. Hasan uncle was a retired civil engineer, and Moin looked up to him as a mentor. When he realized Abrar was lingering behind, Moin waved at him. Unlike his younger brother Shayyan, Moin didn’t keep up with the life and times of Abrar Haidar,

so small talk between Hasan uncle and Abrar might have seemed like a good idea to him. Taking as much time as he could, Abrar walked out. They were in the room with the shoe rack. It was rather spacious – during Ramadan people broke their fasts here. Hearing the trickle of water from the ablution room reminded him that all the running around had made him very thirsty.

“Uncle, assalamu alaikum, uncle. How are you, uncle?” asked Abrar. Hasan uncle’s stiff neck barely permitted him to turn his head towards Abrar.

“Walaikum, good. How are you?” Hasan uncle replied, but he turned to Moin without waiting for an answer. Abrar swallowed back his reply, his mouth moving awkwardly.

“Moin, how long will you be staying?” Hasan uncle asked.

“Uncle, I just got the week off. Our firm is building a helipad for a private hospital in Banani,” said Moin. His chest puffed up.

“Alhamdulillah, so that’s it,” said Abrar.

“What?” asked Moin.

“Oh, Shayyan mentioned you landed a sweet deal, you beat–” Abrar whispered ‘beat’, hoping no one heard him. He was about to say, “you beat your bosses to it”, but that might have sounded disrespectful to Hasan uncle. Abrar noticed how Hasan uncle had no eyebrows and his eyelids rolled above his eyelashes. He was glad Sadaf resembled her mother. Moin chuckled.

“Yes, yes it was very competitive,” said Moin.

“You enjoy competition, Abrar?” asked Hasan uncle.

“Hmm,” Abrar wasn’t sure how to respond. Sure he enjoyed it, like everybody else did. Healthy competition takes a man a long way, as Father always said.

“Alhamdulillah, I am so grateful and happy I was picked. I would like to thank all of you, especially Hasan uncle...” said Moin. Abrar had a feeling Moin had prepared a speech.

“Aha, beta, live and prosper,” said Hasan uncle. Jealousy snaked through Abrar. He couldn’t foresee Hasan uncle calling him beta anytime soon.

“Oh, uncle, you do so much for me,” said Moin. *Yeah, smarm up to Hasan uncle,* thought Abrar.

“So, what is the project like?” asked Abrar.

“Exciting, extremely exciting. The helipad is on the rooftop, a panoramic view. I would never believe Dhaka is so beautiful if I hadn’t seen it from up there. Know what the best part is?” asked Moin, slapping Abrar’s arm. A waft of the cologne hit Abrar’s nose, and he tilted his head back. Several people were listening in on the conversation. One man was trying to put his left sandal on his right foot.

“What?” Abrar asked.

“Helicopters. I’ve ridden on helicopters twelve times so far. Not strictly protocol,” said Moin, beaming.

“Whoa,” gasped Abrar, impressed.

“Abrar, you should go into civil engineering, fantastic things in store. Right uncle?” said Moin. Hasan uncle was looking at Abrar from the corner of his eyes, but his feet pointed at Abrar, a gesture that was a truer indication of a person’s interest.

“You’ll study business?” Had it not been in contrast to Moin’s cheerful tone, Abrar wouldn’t have noticed the hostility in uncle’s voice.

“Engineering,” replied Abrar.

“Textile engineering?” asked Hasan uncle. Moin raised his eyebrows.

“Ah, yes. You’ll be joining the industry, of course,” Moin said waving his hand.

“Well—” said Abrar.

“Yes, textile engineering is perfect for you. Sure, it teaches you production optimization. That software, ah, what do you call it, ah, yes, CAD. Did you start learning it? No, I will teach you, it’s interesting. Better get a head start before class,” gushed Moin.

“So, you believe it is best for you to run your father’s factories?” Hasan uncle asked, letting out a burst of air as he pronounced the last *s*.

Abrar had forgotten that Hasan uncle held Father in contempt. Abrar felt heat rush up his ears. Hasan uncle preached that garment factory owners exploited cheap labour, and paid the labourers just enough to keep them alive, so that they could work like beasts of burden the next day. To Hasan uncle the whole industry was a slave trade, where labourers were locked inside factories to work in unsafe conditions. His vision of a beautiful Bangladesh didn’t include women who were forever pricking their fingers in factory needles. Abrar partly agreed, but those opinions were also generalizations. Several factories, including all of the factories located in the industrial zone where Father’s factories were located, were spacious, well lit and well equipped. Father was well respected for his fairness, and for giving full bonuses to productive labours. Besides, if it weren’t for the garments industry, Bangladesh’s economy would crumble like worm-eaten wood. *That’s a fact*, thought Abrar. People like Father kept the economy running

for the rest of them, making the best of a bad situation. Yes, the wages were paltry, but the market determined it. The government allowed it. *So uncle, got a burning fury against injustice, do something*, thought Abrar. *But that's not what's boiling your blood, is it kid*, said the mocking voice in his head. *Shut up*, he thought. He could feel his jaws tighten, and Hasan uncle's eyes narrowed. Luckily, Forkan, the bookstore owner and gardener, turned up at that moment.

“Assalamu alaikum,” Forkan said to Hasan uncle.

Both Moin and Hasan uncle turned around to greet Forkan, giving Abrar their backs. He knew Hasan uncle was thinking of that loser Ripon. Hasan uncle probably thought Abrar would end up like Ripon. In three seconds Abrar was at the ablutions area. Sweet water filled his mouth, and he let his taste buds luxuriate in the sensation before swallowing it down. He soaked his feet, remembering that nerve endings clustered there. Ripon was Abrar's brother-in-law, who also owned garments factories. There had been a labour strike in Ripon's factory, because Ripon withheld wages. It had happened three years ago, but in Abrar's memory it was fresh as the first drops of blood a gazelle shed by a hunter's arrow. All of it combined left Abrar with that tainted sensation of visiting a tannery, where he stank even though he hadn't touched a hide. He banished the thought from his head.

A wry smile twisted Abrar's mouth. Tushar's father was related to Hasan uncle, and by profession he was a RMG manufacturer. *Double standards*, thought Abrar. Tushar's father was exempted from the contempt Hasan uncle reserved for RMG manufacturers. Much of Abrar's recent troubles stemmed from the fact that Tushar's father and Father were ex business partners. They had also been long-time friends. Abrar

could recall endless picnics where Tushar's family were invited. In the same spirit, Tushar was enrolled in the same school as the Haidar children. Over a year ago, Father had dissolved the partnership due to disagreements over important investments. Afterwards, Tushar's father had invested in projects Father considered risky. It repaid poorly. Financial mess had clouded Tushar's father since. The townspeople agreed Father could have tried harder to knock some sense into his friend. Abrar turned off the tap and went to retrieve his sandals. It appeared that his left sandal was missing. People must have shuffled it aside as they walked out. Groups of uncles were standing together and chatting. Abrar scanned the spaces enclosed by their feet as unobtrusively as he could. Then he spotted it, upturned and darkened by Forkan's shadow. Hasan uncle and Forkan were nodding at Moin, who was talking and making great arches in the air. The temptation of heading back in the mosque to avoid Hasan uncle was strong.

When Abrar re-joined the group, Moin's monotone about suspension bridges didn't change in pitch or amplification. Hasan uncle was standing so upright that his shoulder blades thrust out. Abrar rubbed his birthmark, and wondered how Hasan uncle would react if he knew Tushar's opinion on the RMG sector. *What was that Tushar had said*, he thought.

It was sometime before Father had dissolved the partnership. Back when Tushar wasn't a sullen, vindictive soul. In the lounge reserved for senior students, Tushar had slapped the Queen of Spades on the table. His opponent had screamed so sharply that Abrar intuitively understood how the universe would end with the blowing of a trumpet. The table had been split clean in two. Tushar was a body builder, who ate seven raw eggs

every morning. After the accident Tushar was barred from playing cards or any other games in the student lounge. During the free periods Tushar took to throwing pencils at students who were doing their homework. It hadn't bothered Abrar because he was never targeted. But the other students who were constantly distracted from completing their trigonometry assignments threw Abrar resentful looks, as though having a powerfully built body came with responsibilities. He had ignored them for as long as he could, but when a pencil had flown past someone's glasses, narrowly missing their eyes, Abrar found himself talking to Tushar.

"Come on, man," Abrar said, thumping Tushar's back.

"Why you no play, huh?" Tushar asked, pouting, which made his jug-shaped face even more prominent than usual. He handed Abrar a stick of graphite that had a tail of chewed wood.

"The chipmunk's forehead," Tushar had thrown a pencil at their classmate Beetu a second before Abrar tried to deflect it.

"Bull's-eye," Tushar laughed, triumphant.

"Let them study," Abrar said, more forcefully than he had intended.

"You're studying too much these days," Tushar said, dancing one eyebrow up.

"Must cram. First exams in three weeks," Abrar said. They were doing the AS level board examinations, a fact Tushar seemed completely oblivious to. Yet Tushar was a good student before he started losing interest in studies.

"What's the point?"

"You just have to do it," Abrar said.

"Dude, you know where you'll end up."

“I might do something else, you know, something meaningful,” Abrar said before he could stop himself. Tushar burst out laughing.

“Don’t tell me they brainwashed you. Grand plan, big vision, what else?” Tushar had bubbles of spit foaming at the corners of his mouth.

“Leave the kids be, okay. Exams are their gladiator’s arena,” Abrar said.

“Thinking outside the box, purpose of life. Know what I think?” Tushar hooted.

“What?” Abrar asked, although he had to get back to work, and he knew Tushar was going to spew nonsense.

“Garments business is as meaningful as it gets,” Tushar said, drawing in a deep breath of air.

“Hmm,” Abrar said, noncommittally. Tushar cleared his throat, stood on a chair and spoke in a ringing tone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let me lay it down for you. It’s simple. Humans are beasts. It all comes down to their basic needs. They only need – *need* – food, water and something more durable than leaves to cover their carcass. Yet they can’t wait to shed their identity. What hypocrisy. The beasts can’t wait to arrange finery all around themselves to appear civilized. They will eat farm fattened, hormone hell holes of chicken and meat, because jumping from tree to tree and hunting wholesome game reminds them that they are basically beasts.

“So, they call themselves intellectual beings. Devise all sorts of laws, institutions, political systems that will give them temporary amnesia, make them forget those are all elaborate systems based on the rule of the jungle. Thinking they achieved greatness, they will sit on top of a skyscraper, as far from mud as possible.

“The beasts will tell you scientific discoveries and technological advances are mankind’s greatest achievements. They will celebrate their ability to travel faster, communicate faster, work faster. Faster, faster. They will tell you speed improves your quality of life. But they will not readily admit that speed leaves them the leisure time to fill their appetites.

“To escape their condition of being beasts, the beasts will create art. They will create gourmet dishes so small and expensive you’ll digest before you taste. They will wear fine clothes, they will follow fashion. They will decorate their dens so craftily, other beasts will not recognize the optical illusions. They will make music so upbeat, that motor neurons of other beasts will be activated, followed by dancing feet. They will compose music so tender, other beasts will feel a numbing of all conscious thoughts. They will appreciate high culture. They will revel in frivolity. The beasts can fuse advances of technology with art as much their cunning lets them. But why? Drum rolls: the beasts desire to impress their mates. The beasts desire to impress their rivals. The beasts desire to show that they are at the top of the food chain.

“So, what is the shortest, smartest way to success? Forget highflying ambitions. Everything will fail. Communism, fascism, nationalism, and democracy will fail, and any other route to power will fail. Real power lies in biology. Trust the needs of the beast – its desires are tricky. The beast will always need clothes. For cold climes the beast will always need knitwear. Needful things our factories provide. Salute the needs of the beast rather than looking down upon its baseness and you will profit. That is meaningful.

“Everybody, on the count of three, raise your hands and chant, ‘The beast, the beast, the beast,’” Tushar had said. And Abrar had laughed, never suspecting Tushar wasn’t entirely joking.

“...Yes, uncle, yes, better tensile strength,” Moin was saying. Abrar came out of his reverie. *Vain thoughts*, as his grandmother, Dadu, would put it.

“Shall we get going?” said Hasan uncle. *Fantastic*, Abrar thought. He didn’t want to walk home with Hasan uncle any day of the week. Moreover if Moin got a whiff of the stalker he would tell Father or worse, Roshni fupi, and then the entire Haidar family would fuss over Abrar’s safety. There could be only one possible outcome: Abrar wouldn’t be allowed to venture out of the house without a bodyguard, and he could certainly do without that. He shot Forkan a beseeching look.

Forkan would know about Tushar. Forkan’s bookstore was a popular hangout for local kids, because it always had the latest comic books, paperbacks, board games, essential sports supplies, and chilled juice boxes for hot summer days. Next to the bookstore was a fuchka stall, which sold fuchka with the perfect blend of sweetened tamarind and spice. Forkan had set up beach umbrellas in the tiny space in front of his shop, where customers enjoyed fuchka and juice, while gossiping as though no one was listening. For his part, Forkan was a tight-lipped man. He had once fired one of his employees for telling a lady that her neighbour said she fought with her mother-in-law all day, and fought in their dreams at night. Abrar liked Forkan. He knew Forkan came from a humble background – he had learned trading from working in Qazi Rajakar’s shop. Twenty years ago, he had opened the bookstore because he believed “education gave

impoverished people a fighting chance.” He sold pencils and notebooks at a discount rate to kids who went to the government school and Roshni fupi’s NGO run school.

“Assalamu alaikum, Abrar bhaiyya, how are you today?” Forkan crooned. His deep henna-dyed hair unfurled as if it were carrot garnishes from beneath a mirrored toupee.

“Walaikum Assalam, Alhamdulillah. How are you? I wanted to ask you, err...” said Abrar. He couldn’t think of anything. Hasan uncle glanced at his wristwatch.

“Oh, did I tell you about the chili plants that got insects?” Forkan said, catching on quickly. Hasan uncle made an indiscriminate sound in his throat. He was looking at Abrar, the expression on his face inscrutable.

“Yes, our Abrar is good with plants. Takes after his grandmother,” said Forkan. Moin narrowed his eyes. Saying Abrar was good was a far stretch of the truth. Hasan uncle nodded, then he and Moin went to the pigeonhole shoe rack.

“Normally I plant marigolds around infested plants. Insects can’t stand the smell. This chili plant is potted, so there is no space. Can you guess what I did?” asked Forkan. Abrar stopped himself from replying “pesticides”, which would certainly be the wrong answer. He had the oddest feeling that Hasan uncle was listening to him, although he couldn’t think of a reason why. *Can’t be anything good, kid*, he thought.

“No. What did you do?” asked Abrar.

“Buried pods of garlic around it, and the insects did a Houdini,” Forkan said, delighted. The mirrors of his toupee sent speckles of light all around the place as he started talking about cutting the vines of tomato plants to ensure the plant had more energy to grow fruits. Abrar nodded dutifully. In this tropical climate tomatoes were a

winter fruit, but it appeared that Forkan had been successful in growing them under plastic sheets in the shade. Abrar's grandmother, Dadu, often used the rarer herbs from Forkan's garden to concoct her medicines. Generally, she sent Abrar to get them; and there Abrar would be subjected to detailed reports on Forkan's plants. Abrar caught a glimpse of Hasan uncle. Even in the morning light uncle's face appeared sculpted and ashen. As people streamed out, Abrar lost the sight of him.

"Oh," said Forkan, "I will be going to Dhaka in four days, Inshallah. I will send some radishes to your house, my garden is overrun with them. My missus made this new compost, terrific, hmm, worked too well." Forkan's arms were crossed languidly, but his eyebrows were knit in concentration. *Move it kid, he'll start yakking about rotting peels and dung*, Abrar thought.

"Radishes are, err, nutritious. Oh! Do you know where I can find Doob grass, and Arjuna bark?" asked Abrar, thoroughly relieved that he had a good excuse to change the topic.

"Hmm, Doob grass... Try that lake, you know the one, near the train tracks. Or, hmm, there will definitely be some in the field near the market... Arjuna, haven't seen any, but I know there was a grove, can't remember where," said Forkan. He pulled out an umbrella that was tucked behind the shoe rack.

"Jazak Allahu khair," said Abrar. *May Allah reward you well*. They walked out. A rickshaw came swooping at them. Forkan climbed on the rickshaw, but the puller peddled away even before Forkan gave him an address. Abrar snorted as the umbrella mushroomed up when the rickshaw took a sharp turn. He knew a shortcut to the lake, which ran through a timber forest. It took him a moment to realize the idea of taking the

shortcut unnerved him. Instantly, he spun on the spot, scanning for any signs of the stalker. Nothing. Trees obscured the horizon.

A pigeon was sipping water from a puddle under the arched entrance of the mosque. Abrar watched the velvet of its gray-green neck swinging with the precision of clockwork. Someone bumped into him. Full of adrenaline, he whipped around. A scrawny man raised his hands as though Abrar was going to arrest him. A moment passed then Abrar waved his hand in dismissal. The man's stick legs carried him away. The pigeon was gone, and Abrar wondered if it was thirsty still. He looked up at the blood skies; a flock of birds were flying in a V shape.

Abrar strolled by the lake. The municipality had installed flowerbeds all around the bank, and painted tree barks red and white. Abrar half smiled. He could almost hear Warda's reaction, *trees were doing fine without that ugly paint*. Only a wooden box, standing on four poles near the bridge, was spared the paint treatment. The joggers, mostly city dwellers, were taking advantage of the clean town air. On the opposite bank a square-faced man was sipping coconut water through a straw. It took Abrar a moment to recognize the man – the coconut was larger than the man's face – and without the usual trail of lackeys the man looked diminished. As always, he wore a massive garnet ring on his finger. Abrar flinched. It disturbed him when people wore gemstones for luck. Abrar was thoroughly weary of superstitions, and weary of anything people associated with power except for Allah alone.

The man was Father's friend and a local politician, Tapan Kabir. *Uninteresting person on the whole*, thought Abrar, except he was a co-founder of the clinic Father was

funding, and he was also on Hasan uncle's black book. Abrar quickly glanced away before Tapan Kabir could catch his eye. Abrar's gaze fell and lingered on the inscription on the recently constructed bridge. It read, "This Bridge is Generously Donated by Zohair Haidar." Inscriptions of this kind appeared frequently across town, mostly against tube wells. It didn't rub him the right way. He wouldn't have publicized his name. *Father craves the admiration of the townspeople.* He pushed the uncharitable thought away. Father had done a lot for this town, more than politicians in any case. *To be fair, Tapan Kabir has delivered three of his nine election promises,* thought Abrar. A few years ago, Tapan Kabir's party had taken the initiative to build a flood shelter. It was an ambitious project. The shelter was large and built to accommodate livestock as well as people. Each year, too many people drowned in their huts while trying to protect their livestock. New materials were imported to make the shelter withstand earthquakes as well. Hasan uncle was invited to participate in the project, but it was rumoured Hasan uncle had said he would "never take a penny from Tapan Kabir, don't think he can bribe me with a project." When Abrar had asked Father about it, Father had shrugged and said, "It will be complicated to make such a large structure earthquake resistant. Your Hasan uncle isn't familiar with the technicalities. I heard they will be consulting a team of experts from Japan." Then there were some who claimed Hasan uncle greatly desired to see Tapan Kabir in jail. Abrar didn't particularly care, but if Hasan uncle was going to be his future father-in-law, he wanted to know what had elicited such strong opposition. Tapan Kabir seemed to be engrossed in watching something. Abrar followed his gaze. A man was frog leaping down a coconut tree. He remembered Dadu was looking for someone to chop

down ripe clusters of coconuts in the tree in the Haidar hous, otherwise the newer ones didn't grow well. When the man came down an older man called him.

“Come, have a bun,” said the older man who was standing next to the wooden box. *Strange*, thought Abrar, the man was empty handed. As the boy sprang towards the wooden box, the man opened it and pulled out a bench from its crammed interior. Cans of carnation, jars of biscuits and packets of cigarettes were stacked neatly inside, and bananas and packets of chips hung from pegs. Rings of metal gleamed and Abrar realized it was a gas cooker. *Subhanallah!* A tea stall can be folded up into a box. Abrar burst out laughing

Joggers were settling on the bench, waiting their turn to regain lost calories by drinking saturated sweet, hot tea. The man was surveying the coconut trees while chomping on a bun. Abrar walked to the tea stall, where a fire was now up and roaring. The tea stall owner was rinsing thick glasses with a greenish tint.

“Bhaiyya, I have work for you,” said Abrar.

“Yeah? What kind of work?” the man threw him a suspicious look.

“Chopping coconuts. We have at least twenty trees,” said Abrar.

“How much will you pay?”

“A fair amount,” said Abrar.

“Salaam Abrar bhaiyya, please sit, how are you?” said the tea stall owner, pouring water into a tall, blackened teapot. Abrar smiled and the man passed him a plate of biscuits. *Fantastic*, thought Abrar. Not only did he not recognize the man, he didn't have money for snacks. Fortunately, the tea stall owner spoke to the man.

“Listen son, it’s your lucky day. Haidar sahib will pay you more than fair,” then he turned to Abrar, “Bhaiyya, it’s because of your father’s generosity I have this stall. Good man, your father, never turns away a struggling soul. Please, eat whatever you like. Some tea?”

“Thank you, no tea.” Abrar’s stress from the morning evaporated like the steam coming off the kettle. Pride surged through him. Father helped transform people’s lives. Gingerly, he helped himself to a biscuit and he was surprised when its fat didn’t stick to the roof of his mouth. It was buttery and sprinkled with cumin.

“I will come this afternoon,” said the man, solemnly.

“No son, you better go now. It will be raining heavily by afternoon,” said the tea stall owner. For a long moment the man observed the skies, and rubbed his finger as though the texture of air was as tangible as fabrics. The man nodded. *Whoa*, thought Abrar. He was always impressed by people who could accurately predict the weather. They had a primeval connection with nature which industrialization, urbanization or any other form of habitat destruction hadn’t been able to erase or weaken. When he was younger he would ask them how they knew, but they would only tell him they could feel it coming.

The man was taking small sips of tea from a chipped mug. Abrar felt a twinge of impatience. He had to be on the rooftop of the Haidar house by seven sharp. *Great morning ritual*, said the mocking voice in his head, but Abrar ignored it. He ought to get up now; it would take twenty minutes to get home by rickshaw. Besides, one of the joggers was chatting about Bangladesh’s chances in the Cricket World Cup, and looking at Abrar to weigh in his opinion. Abrar couldn’t afford to get caught in that discussion. If

he did he would miss out on the entire purpose of spending his summer in Ujjalpur. The instant the man drained his mug Abrar jumped up and hailed a rickshaw. The tea stall owner gave the kid a pack of peanuts.

“Allahafez, thanks for the biscuits,” said Abrar.

“Allahafez, Abrar bhaiyya, give my salaams to your family,” said the tea stall owner, wiping a tiny white cup with roses painted on it. Abrar grimaced at the teacup as he got on the rickshaw. The man sat above the backrest of the settee. Other than tapping a beat on the hood of the rickshaw the man was quiet. The rickshaw puller interpreted the beat as a demand to speed up. The last time Abrar had seen a teacup with roses was a month before the Pan Art Competition. In school his art teacher, Miss Asha, had wanted everyone to paint porcelain. His friend Beetu had left a teacup on Abrar’s desk and went to clean brushes. Abrar had been busy tracing the designs of a Chinese vase when Tushar had crept up on him. With a flick of his thumb, Tushar had sent the teacup flying. Abrar had barely swerved to avoid broken glass piercing his forearm. Tushar hadn’t tried saying it was an accident because Miss Asha had seen him. Attempting at a charming smile on his jug face, Tushar had said, “I am trying something new, err, painting the shatter pattern. I told Abrar to move, the dude’s deaf.” It turned out the teacup had been Miss Asha’s favourite, and it had featured in several of her acrylics. Miss Asha had given Tushar three after school detentions. *Of course Hasan uncle or Sadaf wouldn’t ever hear of it*, thought Abrar, as the rickshaw sent pebbles scurrying along the road. But remembering Beetu made Abrar smirk.

The man opened his pack of peanuts and held it under Abrar’s nose. The warm smell of roasted nuts reminded Abrar of the *jhalhuri* seller back in school, who made a

mix of spicy puffed rice. Gratefully, Abrar took a few. As the rickshaw took a road surrounded by monotonous greenery, the man munched, and Abrar's mind drifted. Soon his facial muscles lost their laxity. Back in school both Tushar and Abrar had been unpopular with their strict principal. Since Tushar had started considering Abrar his arch nemesis, Tushar kept trying to get Abrar expelled. Since Abrar had been too cautious to start a fight with Tushar in the presence of teachers, Tushar changed his strategy. In hopes of drawing Abrar into a fight Tushar had started bullying Beetu. *One more*, thought Abrar bitterly. That would be one more of Tushar's wrongdoings that Hasan uncle would never hear about.

Puffy cheeked, puffy eyed, bulgy around the tummy, and sporting glasses with thick black frames, Beetu greatly resembled a giant Roly-Poly. Beetu had joined Abrar's school in eighth grade, back when Abrar and Tushar were still friends. The first thing everyone had noticed was that Beetu took art as seriously as maths and sciences. That unusual perspective might have been impressive if Beetu could eat his lunch without letting ketchup and mayo dribble down his shirt. Soon Abrar had noticed Beetu's ID card. More specifically, how it was invariably clipped around Beetu's midriff, and also fastened to a long silver chain that Beetu hid beneath his shirt. Both Tushar and Abrar had suspected Beetu didn't wear it as an accessory. Zeeshan, one of the most popular kids in school, had been successful in teasing out the reason behind Beetu's devotion to his ID card. Beetu feared he might tumble down the stairs, or hit his head on debris during an earthquake or flood, and lose his memory. The only way the rescue party would be able to identify Beetu was through his ID card. Abrar thought Zeeshan was pulling his leg.

But a quick interview confirmed that Beetu earnestly believed amnesia was a real and persistent threat. “How many people with amnesia have you met?” Tushar and Abrar would ask him at least three times a day. Beetu reasoned there wouldn’t be so many movies featuring amnesia if it wasn’t a formidable problem, and he got articles from journals Abrar had never heard of that explained amnesia in great detail. Abrar and Tushar had formed a new habit of cracking amnesia jokes. Beetu would shake his head, saddened by their insensitivity towards amnesiacs.

One day, five minutes after the bell had rung signalling the end of their geography class, Beetu had asked Abrar to return the accounting notebook he had lent him. They had an accounting test the following week. Naturally, Abrar had started feigning memory loss, egged on by his peers and rewarded by the look of hopelessness on Beetu’s face. When senior students had started filtering into the class, a girl had pulled Abrar aside. With her hands on her hips she had called Abrar “an incredibly big jerk.” Abrar had nodded amiably, and thanked her for the compliment. She had curled her lips in disgust at Abrar. She told Abrar that one of Beetu’s uncles had had a motorcycle accident and injured his head, when the uncle was just twenty-three. Ever since then Beetu’s uncle suffered anterograde and retrograde amnesia. He couldn’t recall past events, nor remember what had happened thirty seconds ago. Beetu’s uncle was confined at home, under constant watch, because if he walked out and got lost, he wouldn’t be able to return home. Annoyed by the look of profound disappointment on the girl’s face, Abrar had found himself telling her stuff he would never have imagined himself saying. He had said, “Our goodnatured teasing will cure him of his stupid phobia. Heard how shrinks put crazies in a room full of spiders, so that they don’t flip out when they see one in real life?”

Similar idea here, can't give him a dose of amnesia but we can ridicule it. Cruel to be kind." Abrar had said the last sentence with heat, and nearly convinced himself that was indeed his intention. The senior girl's face had been inscrutable as she told Abrar he better go to his next class or he would be late.

By the time they had started their O-Levels Beetu was included in Abrar's gang. Beetu began to grow on them. Abrar felt protective towards the kid. Soon they discovered Beetu could be relied upon to fix technical difficulties. During school events Tushar was in charge of the lighting and sound equipment. On the eve of a rock concert Tushar and Zeeshan had been trying in vain to fix the screechy sound system. Zeeshan, an aspiring guitarist, was scheduled to perform that evening. Beetu had offered to help. Zeeshan had shrugged and went to call for back up. It had taken Abrar incredible willpower not to burst out laughing when Beetu mumbled soothingly to the microphones and amplifiers as he rewired them. Only Tushar couldn't resist snatching Beetu's ID card and putting it inside the air vents. After class Beetu would be at a loss to explain to teachers what he was doing stacking up chairs and clawing inside the vents. Moreover, Abrar's football team was a player short and Beetu became their defender, a post they always designated for fat kids.

Girls ignored Beetu. They didn't bother lowering their voices when he was around. They told him the seven dreaded words: *you are like a brother to me*. Zeeshan was the first to reap the benefits of the situation. Frequently, he sent Beetu on missions to gather crucial information from the girl world. Zeeshan had warm eyes, wing tipped eyebrows, and an easy manner. He was considered a 'dreamboat', as he liked to remind

everyone. The girl Zeeshan had a crush on wanted a crystal butterfly, so Zeeshan got it for her on her birthday.

Abrar wasn't an eager analyst of Beetu's information, because Abrar was a popular topic of conversation. According to the girls Abrar was at the same time, "down to earth and full of himself", "extremely boring and gutsy", and "nice and mean." His habit of keeping his opinions to himself was interpreted as sign of maturity, but they asked themselves, "what's he going to do with all that maturity anyways?" They thought Abrar "might be good looking, but it's hard to say. All of his looks are buried under that hideous beard." Warda's friends had nicknamed Abrar 'Goatman'. *Goatman*, Abrar had thought furiously, but he consoled himself that as long as Sadaf didn't find him repulsive it didn't really matter. He wondered why they kept looking at him if they didn't like what they saw. But he had trimmed the split ends of his beard. Besides, he had started thinking of the day he would stand before Allah, which had a way of diminishing the intensity of his desires. All the girls he had impressed wouldn't be able intercede for him on the Day of Judgement, wouldn't be able to pull him out of hellfire. Abrar endured all the teasing that came with Beetu's reports; he was capable of laughing at himself. Perhaps Abrar's reactions gave Beetu a false impression about how other kids reacted to ego deflating news, because one fine noon Beetu told the gang the girls said, "Tushar is obnoxious, his jokes aren't even funny, just crude. He's so gross, the other day he belched at this kid he was picking on. We nearly fainted, all that garlic and urgh, rotting meat or something." Nobody had laughed. Nobody made fun of Tushar. Confusion had registered on Beetu's plump face as Tushar lifted him off the ground and asked, "What did you say?" Beetu had mumbled, "Nothing." But Tushar couldn't let it go.

Six months later, there had been a graduation ceremony for the seniors. The school had ordered four high quality projectors for the event, and the projectors were set strategically across the hall. Tushar had taken up all the space in the tiny control room as he did the lighting sequence. The principal had been giving a speech on the history of the school when suddenly disco lights flitted over the audience. In his haste to control the damage Tushar had turned a spotlight on the principal's throat. A throbbing red bulge appeared across all four projectors. In an authoritative tone someone whispered aloud, "The principal is suffering from gout." The principal wasn't amused when laughter broke out, and he suspected Tushar of playing a prank. Beetu had run up to the control room, and told Tushar, "Please, I want to see the switchboard, please, err, step out, there's no space." Beetu telling him what to do had taken Tushar by surprise. As Tushar had whipped around he elbowed the switch for the strobe lights. In all earnestness Beetu had squeaked, "No that's the wrong button." Unaware that all eyes were on the control room, Tushar had grabbed Beetu's shoulder and shaken him. Lights flashed on Beetu's head, which was lolling as though it was freed from his spine. After that Tushar's responsibilities as light keeper were transferred to Beetu. Although Tushar hadn't appreciated the duty in the first place, losing his position to Beetu, whom he considered a 'goofy, insignificant Roly-Poly', rubbed him the wrong way.

The aroma of deep fried *puris* and *bhaji* conquered the air. Oil leaped up as fresh dough was poured in the woks. Day labourers crowded the roadside restaurants for breakfast. A newspaper hawker ran after a car, to get his change from the passenger. The man grabbed Abrar's shoulder when the rickshaw flew past an open manhole. Abrar

motioned for him to sit on the settee, but he smiled and shook his head. The rickshaw puller groaned and slowed down when a truck entered the narrow road. Two men sat on top of the truck's cargo. The cargo, wrapped in jute and plastic sheets, bulged out and teetered on the sides of the truck. Abrar held his breath as the exhaust pipe burped out acrid black fumes. Abrar looked up. There was a grid of black wires woven from pylon to pylon. Ravens roosted on them, nearly blocking out the morning sky. *Fantastic*, thought Abrar. The imprisoning blackness above was the perfect catalyst to make Abrar recall his first real fight with Tushar, and Warda's reactions to it.

During break time, when their shadows were directly beneath their feet, Abrar had been playing football against Tushar's team. It was two months after Father had dissolved the partnership with Tushar's father. Worse, recently Tushar's father had mismanaged a merger and lost professional credibility. Following his father's failures, Tushar's nasty temper had seemed to grow more solid, based somewhat on his familial frustrations. So, Abrar had been expecting a confrontation, but that didn't make it any less unpleasant. Tushar's midfielder, a brutish boy who was thoroughly disliked by most of their classmates, had kicked the knee of Abrar's striker instead of the football. Groaning in pain the striker had fallen down, but the midfielder kept kicking the striker's guts.

"Foul!" Abrar had shouted.

"Uh, I thought he fell on the football, uh, I was just kicking the football," the midfielder had said, shrugging his shoulders, despite eye witness accounts of other players who had seen the midfielder watch the football bounce away.

“Penalty,” Abrar had called out, helping the striker on his feet. Tushar had shaken his jug face, and sneered.

“No penalty. You heard the dude,” Tushar had said. Abrar had noticed the rigidity of Tushar’s muscles, and the way his fists curled up. Abrar had been enjoying the match too much. His team had been losing by one goal, and all he wanted was to score the winning goal. Abrar hated cheating, and he hated it in every shape and form. It didn’t matter whether it was friend cheating in a game of chess or if it was a peanut seller, giving him ten grams less.

“Play fair. Penalty or we call it a draw,” Abrar had repeated. A mean glint came across Tushar’s eyes. Abrar knew that look. Abrar had been prepared to walk away. But the day was hot. Besides the whimpers of the striker, the other players had quietened down. *Idiot*, Abrar had thought; he hadn’t attributed any evil intentions whenever Tushar had thrown the football particularly hard at his face.

“*Bah*, the son of a stinking thief talks of fairness,” Tushar had said.

“What?” Abrar had said.

“Oh, I thought you knew. Your father is a cheat and a thief.” Tushar’s insults had been mundane except he had cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed them. Fury had bulletted up Abrar as Tushar strolled in half circles and continued cussing. Tushar had mentioned Ripon, Abrar’s brother-in-law. Even when Tushar’s insults had reached the natural fist in the face point, Abrar hadn’t wanted to throw the first punch, hadn’t wanted Tushar telling the principle, “he started it.” Then Abrar had made the slightest move indicating his desire to desert the fight. Tushar had snatched Beetu’s glasses. As Beetu reached for them, Tushar shoved him aside and started stomping on the

glasses. A crowd had formed a ring around them, and Abrar thought he wouldn't be able to get out even if he wanted to.

Lightning fast Abrar's fist had found Tushar's guts. In a blur, Abrar had seen Tushar's knuckles protruding as he aimed for Abrar's nose. Thanking his footballer's reflexes, Abrar had caught Tushar's hand in time and twisted it. Tushar's close set features had crumpled on each other. Next moment Tushar had kicked Abrar so hard Tushar's shoe fell off, and a loose nail inside it drove into Abrar's shin. Even as pain and fury had shot up him, Abrar wondered what kind of a person wears a shoe that would continuously prick them. Then someone had stuck out their foot, tripping Tushar. In an unforeseen turn of events, Tushar's midfielder got hold of a chair and hit Abrar's goalkeeper with it. The goalkeeper had roared in pain, and that had brought teachers out from the cool, shady places where they ate lunch.

Distracted, Abrar had tried pulling the chair away from the midfielder's hand. In that moment of weakness, Tushar had sucker punched him. Abrar had fallen face first on the tarmac grounds. The unpolished shoes of the crowd had been inches away from his face. His jaws had hurt and he couldn't hear anything. In the cracks of Beetu's glasses Abrar had seen Tushar's knuckles. He had rolled over and Tushar's fist crashed where Abrar's shoulder had been. As a teacher had hauled up Abrar, Tushar hopped on the spot. Abrar had felt light headed when he saw that Tushar's knuckles were sticking out at odd angles.

All footballers except Tushar had been hauled into the school reception, where they waited their turn to meet the principal. The footballers had been ordered to stand far apart and avoid eye contact. Beetu had whimpered as the principal's office door flew

open. The midfielder had been the first to go in. Abrar had had a feeling that the principal would call him last, to keep him guessing his punishment. When his fury had subsided Abrar had counted and recounted the brown and beige floor tiles. The only other safe place to look had been the receptionist's desk, and there had been ten stacks of unstapled biology notes piled on it. Abrar had remembered the photocopier machine in the teacher's lounge was broken and everyone was using the one in the reception. When the reception door had opened and a girl with a sharp face and striking eyes entered Abrar nearly jumped out of his skin. It had dawned on him that this fight would be the family gossip for weeks to come. Warda was engrossed in conversation with someone at the other side of the door.

“Oh, both of your grandfather's were district judges? My grandfather was in the ministry, but he died early or he would have been a full secretary. In our family there are four additional secretaries and two district judges. But you know, my family goes way back...” Warda had said. She had a stapler in her hand. Much to his annoyance the footballers had stood up straighter, or tied their shoelaces, or hand brushed their hair. Most people considered Warda beautiful. Abrar thought they were a misguided lot. In school Warda was a year below Abrar, but her sphere of influence extended to students in his grade, because they did the same extracurricular activities. A tall, slender girl with a high ponytail had glided in, and she wore dangling earrings which were banned in school. She was the new girl in Warda's class and she threatened Warda's status as Queen Bee. Abrar had been rooting for the new girl, simply because he believed every tyrant ought to experience a power overthrow.

“Really? Mine too. You must have heard of Nawab Ismail Kamal, there are streets named after him; he was my great grandfather’s father. At one point we owned like half of Bengal,” the new girl had said. While Warda was putting in new staples, the new girl glanced at the miscreants. Desperately, Abrar had tried hiding Tushar’s shoe marks, but they stood mockingly bold against the deep brown of his uniform. Nonetheless, the new girl had glanced at Abrar a second too long. He had guessed he was an impressive sight, and his jaw pain gave him a brooding look. Then Warda spoke.

“I have Mughal ancestry. We are direct descendants. You know the really famous Mughal necklace, the Stones of Dawn? It caused quite a scandal when Elliot Atwater, a British naval commander, tried stealing it from my ancestor,” Warda had said. New-girl had drawn in a sharp breath. Abrar had guessed she wouldn’t be able to top that one. But Warda hadn’t been entirely truthful. The ancestor in question wasn’t a blood relative. Abrar’s grandfather’s first wife had an ancestor who was a vizier at the court of Shah Akbar. Both Abrar and Warda were descendants of grandfather’s second wife. The Mughal necklace, which had several aliases such as the Evanescent Stones, the Conqueror’s Glory, and the Stones of Destiny, had belonged to Father’s half-brother. During the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, a group of Dacoits had robbed the Haidar house, taking the necklace with them. With a half smile Warda had started stapling the biology notes. When her gaze fell on Abrar shock and horror had flitted across her face. But instantly, she had cleared her face of all expressions. New-girl swept her hand at the footballers.

“Uff, this school is so commercial, they take in anybody and everybody,” New-girl had said. Other than her nose flaring, there had been no sign that Warda cared for New-girl’s opinions.

“In my old school, they interviewed parents before they accepted students. This kind of fiasco would never happen. Isn’t he...?” New-girl had said, pointing at Abrar. He had felt heat rise up to the tips of his ears.

“I don’t know him,” Warda had said without flinching, and the striker snorted. But just then, the principal’s office door had opened, and a grim faced teacher spoke.

“Abrar Haidar, you’re next.” New-girl had rounded on Warda.

“He is your cousin, your first cousin. Don’t worry Warda, if I had family like him, I would lie about it too,” New-girl had said and the split ends of her hair quivered.

Warda’s face was beet red. Furious, Abrar had stopped rooting for New-girl. He stode to the principal’s office to find out he had to do a month of after school detentions. But there hadn’t been enough teachers available to host them, so they had to cut a third of the detention. The real annoyance had been in explaining to people why he couldn’t do extracurriculars, or play a round of games after school. At every family gathering Warda had made it a point to tell anyone who cared that Abrar was an embarrassment to the family.

“Wait here, I have to get your fare,” Abrar told the rickshaw puller when they reached the main gates of the Haidar house. The man jumped off the rickshaw and surveyed the yard. Vegetation flouted its fecundity all around. It was quarter to seven

already. *Move it, move it*, Abrar told himself, walking rapidly to the West gates. The man was still far behind him, so Abrar waited under a mango tree.

Its warm aroma reminded him of a summer day long, long, ago. He had been flying his Malaysian dragon kite, which was red with an indigo tail. The kite was magnificent. He had been to Malaysia with his sisters. On a hot day, they had walked down a lane where everyone was eating fruits out of cups. Illusory shapes of paper and silk had caught Abrar's eyes. In a trance he had walked over to the kite store and stared at paper monsters bigger than himself. The kite seller, who only spoke Chinese and Malay, had shown Abrar the flat dragon with red wings. When his frantic sisters had found him he had been hugging it and they paid twice the price. Abrar had had no intentions of keeping it locked up as a souvenir, as his sisters told him to do. That summer he had been eager to return to Ujjalpur, where he could fly it in winds unfettered by high-rise buildings. The neighbour's had gathered when Abrar spread its wings, which were larger than an ostrich's. He let everyone fly it, until the kite had gotten tangled in the highest branch of the mango tree. After futile attempts to extricate it, and wistful gazes, the elders had trickled away. Abrar was sitting in a forest clearing where he knew none of the elders would come to look, when she had suddenly appeared. Sadaf, who was slight of build and unafraid of heights, was holding his kite. He remembered jumping.

Furtively, Abrar glanced at her house; its edges were soft in the morning light. There was no sign of her, but that won't be so for long. *Come on, come on*, thought Abrar as the man caught up to him. But the man's eyes were fixed on the mangoes dangling behind Abrar's ear.

“Let’s go,” said Abrar. Dadu would be kitchen. The entrance near the servants’ quarter was made from two tall, metal sheets. Before Abrar could reach the handles it swung open and Shakil, one of Father’s employees, pointed his beaky nose at Abrar. Shakil’s intense gray eyes bore into Abrar, as though he was trying to detect some wrongdoing. *What now?* Annoyance shuddered through Abrar. Abruptly, Shakil stepped out of the way and pulled out a dirty hanky that was tucked in his vest. With deliberation Shakil shook a can that Abrar hadn’t noticed, and poured liberal amounts of grease on the hanky. Then he started greasing the metal hinges of the entrance, which hadn’t squeaked once in the last few weeks. As Abrar and the man crossed the entrance, Abrar had a feeling that Shakil was staring at the mud on Abrar’s sandals and trousers. Roosters scattered away as Abrar strode to the kitchen. *Only a few minutes till seven*, he thought as he read the wall clock above the stoves. The kitchen was crowded. A woman, who wore a spiky gold nose ring between her nostrils, slapped dough on a rolling pin. Abrar dusted flour off his shirt. The man sneezed, and the woman stared at him.

“What’s your name? How did you meet Abrar bhaiyya?” the woman asked in one breath. She had worked in the Haidar house a long time, and she believed knowing everything was her birthright. Abrar navigated through a sea of chopped vegetables. Dadu was pasting ginger on a stone slab. She turned around and showed no surprise in seeing him. Dadu had an uncanny ability to tell which one of her twenty-three grandkids it was by their footsteps. Abrar had inherited her deep-set eyes and aquiline nose. Dadu wore a cream sari with a thick gold and maroon border. Her face was free of wrinkles, which she attributed to her lifelong habit of eating sour and bitter fruits.

“Assalamu alaikum. I found a coconut chopper,” said Abrar.

“Walaikum assalam. Really. Alhamdulillah. Do you want a paratha?” Dadu asked. She smiled, softening her otherwise severe expression.

“No thanks. Rickshaw puller’s waiting,” Abrar said.

The smell of frothy pumpkins permeated the air as a maid lifted the lid off a pot. Abrar walked out, bounded up the stairs, and got some notes from his room. He paid the rickshaw puller. Walking back to the house he forced himself to slow down, and pretend that his intentions hadn’t already crystallized. The stairs were like the keyboard of a harmonium: as his feet landed on each stair, Abrar played a joyous tune in his head. In the silence between the notes he could hear the rapidity of his heartbeat. His feet performed a well-practiced dance over the metal pipes that crisscrossed over the roof. Clotheslines colonized the eastern section. Tubs full of lemon, henna and guava trees were spread against the edge of the roof. Water tanks, cemented to the roof’s floor, stood at the western end. Abrar peered. *No*. He slouched against the cool metal of a tank, glad it was heavy enough to support his disappointment.

Then the flash of a silver pitcher on the balcony of his neighbour’s house caught his eyes. He got up and stood near the edge of the roof, between tubs of guava trees. Around forty feet away, there were lush pewter, red, and purple leaves of Rex Begonias and Stained Glass Begonias, and Silver Queens surrounded those leaves in an oblong shape. The plants rustled in the breeze, and it reminded Abrar of the beating heart of slaughtered cattle. Whorls of cascading fuchsia, ruby, yellow, and white flowers hung above the wrought iron railing. The flowers were iridescent. He stared at it until his eyes hurt. Then he looked at the girl with sandalwood skin. *Sadaf*. Involuntarily, he took a step forward. His toes curled over the roof’s edge. With her loose, mint green kameez and

floral scarf she blended in. She watered the plants, which thrived in her care. He watched her prune a rotten leaf.

A Bulbul trilled in the distance. Sadaf looked for the bird and found it's beating black wings. *Come on, kid*, Abrar's inner voice was struggling to tell him something.

The Bulbul landed on the guava tree, above his shoulder. There wasn't enough time for him to hide behind the tree. Sadaf glanced at him.

At that moment, he could anatomize every sight, sound, smell and sensation to the quark, and name all minor arteries of his body simultaneously.

An acute awareness of the blackness of the universe beyond the exosphere engulfed him.

Even though he hadn't diagnosed himself with acrophobia he thought might fall in the swaying yard below. He would fall on his knees.

He bore his feet into the cement to keep himself rooted on the roof.

Watch it kid, his inner voice warned. *You wretched kid, get rid of that glint in your eyes; she'll think you are a grade-A creep*. His survival instinct kicked in. He lowered his gaze, and that simple action felt as purposeful as a pendulum's swing. *Ya Allah*, he pleaded. Fighting to remain calm, he looked up and noticed the man he had brought in was chopping coconuts from a tree near the main gates. Abrar looked back and forth between a pile of coconuts and the man on the tree. Abrar wondered whether Sadaf bought his act, whether she thought he was there to watch the last moments the coconuts had on their trees.

A tremor of hope shook though him. He knew she cherished small things, and now, the flight of the bulbul would be associated with him. His hope was quick to

subside. *She knows*, he thought and his shoulders drooped. Sadaf was observant, he remembered how she was always the first one to spot a birds' nest in the nook of a gnarled tree. She must have spotted him over the last few weeks. After all, her balcony faced the roof and the roof was a natural place for her to glance at. Now that he thought about it, it seemed like she had been avoiding glancing in this direction. Three days after the day he realized she always watered her plants in the morning, he had had the feeling she saw him. *Of course she saw you, you're a big guy. You take up a lot of space*, said the mocking voice in his head.

His brain felt too fried to process the implications of this discovery. *Can't stalk her again, kid*, said the mocking voice in his head. *I am not stalking*, he thought, but he couldn't find a better way of describing his actions and it bugged him. It bugged him more that he had no way of knowing how Sadaf felt. It also bugged him that he knew staring at her was sinful. A verse of Quran regarding chastity floated to his consciousness: "Tell the believing men to lower their gaze, and guard their modesty. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is all aware of what they do". It also bugged him that he knew having an intention to marry her sometime in the distant future didn't give him a free pass to stare at her in the present. In fact, when he had first expressed an interest in Islam it was one of the first lessons the imam had drilled in his head. *Why*, annoyance shot through him. *No*, he decided he couldn't risk her thinking he was a common Casanova. Besides, Abrar remembered the reward for guarding his eyesight from all things impermissible is seeing the face of Allah in paradise. Allah's face is so beautiful it beautifies the privileged gazer. Rubbing his birthmark, Abrar walked as far away from

her balcony as possible. *What if she doesn't like me*, the thought flitted across his mind. He sat down, hugging his knees with his arms. The river was gray-green.

Boats laden with jute and jackfruits sailed over the water, which was temporarily calm. Jute fields graced areas north of Ujjalpur. Jute mills had been the main source of economic activity in this area before the 1970s. As more durable materials were being invented, the demand for jute decreased in the global market, and the mills shut down. Abrar remembered that was how the town got its name – in Bengali *Ujjal* meant bright. From a bird's view the town was green and gold.

Abrar threw a rueful glance at his sleeves; white was her favourite colour. Ridiculous as it was, he had gotten the idea of wearing white from Beetu. According to Beetu the best ways for a man to get noticed by the distress-inflicting damsel was to wear her favourite colour, frequent her favourite place, be seen with her favourite books, and befriend her favourite people until he became her favourite man. *Advice from Beetu*, Abrar smirked. He remembered Zeeshan had placed a hand on Beetu's shoulder, shaken his head theatrically, and said, "The best way to preserve knowledge is by writing it down. Don't you agree, Beetu? You have got valuable insight, very valuable indeed. Firsthand knowledge. Write an essay, I beseech you, enlighten us on the sufferings and delights of unrequited love." A week later, when all the seniors were at the student lounge, Beetu had handed Zeeshan an envelope. Puzzled, Zeeshan had pulled out a piece of canvas paper, with a few paragraphs inked on it. *Indigo ink, fountain pen ink*, Abrar had noticed. Beetu had folded his hands and looked at the floor. It had seemed like Beetu was waiting for feedback. Zeeshan had been struggling to keep a straight face. Although Abrar prided himself on his lack of curiosity in other people's business, he had been

intrigued. But he hadn't had to wait for too long. Out of nowhere, Tushar had sprung up and snatched the canvas paper from Zeeshan's hand. Tushar had read it out in a booming voice.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give you ‘Mediations on unrequited love’, by our own expert Beetu. The scholar says: ‘It is like a dream where you are falling. You know the most tender and the most life threatening experiences you imagine will never happen. As the beloved remains elusive, unresponsive, the desire to fall is irresistible. You want to maximize that exquisite bereavement that comes from love withheld. So the mind competes with itself to fabricate memories so complex and detailed that you may even base your future actions on those fabrications...Unrequited love is self-love, because you fall in love with yourself as you plan all the gallant, altruistic things you would do for her, if only you were given the chance. Perhaps you really would. You think of your innate heroism and you start believing the old truth *your thoughts become your actions*. It's character building stuff.

Your love is only as strong as your imagination...”

That's as far as Tushar got, before he had howled with laughter. To Abrar it had sounded like such bull that he had laughed until his stomach hurt. But that had been a time when Abrar thought the possibility of being rejected was as far-flung as snow falling in Dhaka. Now, he wished Sadaf would see him as water beneath frozen lakes. He couldn't think of a better plan than waiting to see how Sadaf would react, if she would react at all after seeing him this morning. Crows screeched over his head. A boat with a solitary boatman disappeared around the bend. He had been wrong the first time; only the water around the opposite shore was gray-green. That's where underwater vegetation was

allowed to flourish, and that's where the river deposited what it eroded from this side of the shore. On the shore crows were congregating. After a while he got up, thinking of nothing.

PAN ART COMPETITION

7 Months Ago

Abrar and Zeeshan sat at the back. They pulled out their calculus notebooks. The white page felt luxurious to Abrar. He was in the art classroom. Every available inch of the classroom sported papier-mâché trees, flowers and animals. Abrar felt dull-witted just remembering how he had glued one paper on the other over the last few weeks. He had outright refused to glitter paper flowers; he thought that kind of task was only worthy of kindergarten girls. However, the art instructor was strict and nagged more than their mothers. So in the end she had had her papier-mâché forest.

Abrar so badly wanted to bulldoze the whole place.

All the senior students were forced to take art, music, sports or drama classes at least three periods a week. This was unpopular among the students, who would rather use that time to finish their homework or prepare for the looming A-Levels. But the principal believed developing artistic skills gave student a better chance when they applied to universities. Most of the seniors were unable to take sports as it clashed with chemistry lessons. So Abrar selected art. Their last art instructor was enthusiastic about architectural drawings. They had gone on class trips to the Mughal fort Lalbag, and the castle Ahsan Manzil. They had also gone to Jatiyo Shongshod Bhaban (the National Parliament House), which was a spectacular architectural feat, spacious and unique in its interplay of light and space. Abrar had sat in a stairway, next to an immense circular window that overlooked the lake surrounding the parliament, and he had felt afloat as he drew the complex interior. Abrar had enjoyed it, because the techniques he used were a few

degrees more complex than geometry. He had hoped for similar things this time, but they had a new instructor, Miss Asha.

Abrar could only see Miss Asha's head, full of charcoal fuzz hair. She was busy washing brushes, and her back was turned. Abrar pulled out his calculator and started his homework. Much to the student's dismay, there were only musically untalented boys in the class. The few girls who had taken the class dropped out when they realized Miss Asha genuinely expected them to spend two hours on each composition. The remaining students had predicted Miss Asha would let go of her unrealistic expectations once she realized none of them were interested in being the next Monet. There was an unspoken agreement amongst the boys that they would all goof around in art class after a hard day of A-Level science and commerce classes. No such luck. She didn't consider cartoons as proper art, and that demoralized the students even further. Zeeshan nudged Abrar. Hastily, Abrar covered his notebook with crimson sugar papers. Miss Asha glared at him but Abrar kept his face devoid of any expression. Zeeshan had wanted to take music classes but Abrar didn't want to take music and he persuaded Zeeshan against it.

Beetu was applying a thick layer of oil paint on canvas using a butter knife, and Miss Asha was looking at it lovingly. He had a sinking feeling Miss Asha would make them do impressionistic paintings. *No, Allah, please, no*, Abrar pleaded. They had done a few. Miss Asha was extremely annoyed at Abrar and Zeeshan because they produced substandard work, and waited for the paintings to dry so that they could chip away the lumps of colours. To Abrar impressionistic paintings seemed as though the canvas was suffering from an aggressive bout of acne. Miss Asha stood on a stool and started writing

a list on the blackboard. When she finally finished, Abrar read the list: wax paper or sugar paper, acrylic paint, chalk pastels, glitter, charcoal, ribbons, and laces.

“What fresh horror?” Zeeshan asked. Miss Asha faced the class. She was heavyset and middle aged. She wore a mauve sari and jade earrings the size of chicken’s eggs.

“Everyone, we are going to do something new today. But first, look at the board. You will do a mixed media composition, using all of the media on the list,” said Miss Asha.

“New?” asked Zeeshan, widening his eyes. Abrar kept a straight face. He thought he knew everything he needed to know about the themes and styles of art that Miss Asha preferred.

“The idea is representation through association. With the media create something inspired by this quote by Claude Monet: ‘I am following Nature without being able to grasp her, I perhaps owe having become a painter to flowers.’ Find a link,” said Miss Asha.

“Flowers, nothing old in that,” said Zeeshan, shaking his head. Abrar went to the supply closet and grabbed whatever was close at hand. Zeeshan started painting a bloody axe; it was his favourite image. This time there were unidentifiable flowers tied with ribbons, on the handle of the axe. Abrar decided against telling him that Miss Asha would tell him to re-do the assignment. Abrar took black sugar paper and coloured it blue-gray with chalk pastels, using the sides of the pastels. He curled and shred the ribbons and stuck them like a floral arrangement on the sugar paper. Abrar was dexterous and it took him around seven minutes to finish the piece. Sighing with relief, he went back to doing his calculus homework. Miss Asha discouraged them from drawing abstract paintings,

Abrar's favourite kind. His concentration faltered when Miss Asha shrieked. It appeared that one of his classmates was cutting paper without a cutting board and he had managed to chip off the surface of the wooden table. Annoyed, Abrar stared at the long, long, partial differentiation equation. He had been so close to solving it.

"Hey, you got the answer to this?" Abrar asked Zeeshan.

"Yup," Zeeshan threw his notebook at Abrar.

"Come on man, how did you manage to get a whole number, a *primary* number as the final answer?" asked Abrar.

"No idea," said Zeeshan, shrugging. His wing tipped eyebrows seemed like they would fly off his face. Abrar stuffed his notebook in his bag, and a moment later Miss Asha's shadow darkened their table. She shook her head at Abrar's piece. Anything basic or simple greatly affronted her. She wanted a cluttered canvas, full of details. *I like it simple*, thought Abrar. As much he appreciated complex crafts, there was better use of his time.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Err, ah, flowers at night," said Abrar.

"You did hear me when I told you to use all the mediums, correct? I don't see any paint, lace, or *glitter*," she said. Abrar felt a twinge of annoyance. Miss Asha was referring to his refusal at sculpting and glittering papier-mâché butterflies. He had told her that it was against his faith to draw or sculpt animate beings. He told her the image-makers and sculptors would be asked to breathe soul into whatever they had created, and would be severely punished on the Day of Judgement. It had greatly affronted her, as she was of the same faith. Moreover, Tushar had had the presence of mind to tell her, "Miss,

he is always drawing frogs, and human, err, organs in bio class.” Her face had turned the colour of dried plums when Abrar told her, “But that’s necessary, I have to learn it.” She took it personally. Zeeshan snickered. Miss Asha glared at him.

“I will not accept any paintings of any weapon. Not today, or any day, understand?”

“But Miss, I need inspiration, true inspiration. Let me fly outside like a bird, and I will draw inspiration from the breathing trees and sky,” said Zeeshan with his disarming smile. Some of her annoyance melted; at least Zeeshan had put some effort in his piece. Promptly, she got a thick book, walked to the windowsill and got a Bonsai tree that had been sitting there. Unceremoniously, she dumped the lot it on their table. Abrar felt a twinge of sympathy for the tree’s stunted development. Abrar thought he saw her blush as she pulled out a dried hibiscus from the book. She placed the flower on a dry palette. Abrar thought the flower would crumble if he looked at it, let alone come near enough to paint it.

“This should give you some ideas. Don’t just stand there, start working. Oh, Zeeshan, if you draw anything unimaginative, such as a still life, although your drawing needs great improvements, you will be in detention for the rest of the school year,” she said, and strode away.

“Hah, told you she was one of those chicks who dry flowers,” he said. Zeeshan narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. It was his I-am-genius look.

“Over think much,” said Abrar. He had no idea what Zeeshan was talking about. Zeeshan had over fifty theories about the types of women, and Abrar had stopped keeping track. He went to the supply closets again. The gray glitter was all right, but the

lace was so pink and frilly it felt emasculating just to touch it, and he didn't want to live in a world where men would have to fight for male rights. When he came back to the table Zeeshan still had an empty canvas.

"I am going to see what I can filch from those paintings," Zeeshan said and went to have a closer look at the works displayed all over the classroom. *Good idea*, Abrar thought, and he made a beeline towards Beetu. Miss Asha usually approved of whatever Beetu's work was. Beetu was in his own zone, oblivious to the fact that Abrar was looking over his shoulder. He had drawn a surreal garden floating on clouds, but red and earthy hues dominated the canvas. He had used salt and glitter on the clouds. The lace had been cut into thin strips and painted green to represent plant stems. Abrar snorted as he spotted a card, a nine of spades, posing as a leaf in Beetu's work. Beetu jumped up. Abrar leapt sideways to avoid the chalk pastel in Beetu's hand.

"Sorry, sorry. Didn't see you, or hear you," said Beetu, his eyes nearly popping out of his skull. Unconsciously, Beetu pulled out an ear bud from his pocket. Across from Beetu's table, Tushar and his sidekicks were watching them. Abrar snatched the ear bud from Beetu's hand before he did something embarrassing. Instinctively, Beetu looked across the table. The burly boy who played on Tushar's football team was shredding wax paper. The other boy, who was wiry and had a hooked nose, wasn't doing anything.

"I am out of ideas," Abrar said.

"Oh, okay. See there? I might have something," said Beetu, pointing to the wall opposite to the windows, where the best paintings were displayed. Abrar ducked en route. Hanging from the ceiling were large masks of fishes, peacocks, parrots, crocodiles, owls and tigers, painted in fluorescent colours, each mask divided into several sections painted

in different patterns. The masks were inspired by the floats that students of Dhaka's Charukola Institute of Art made for the Bengali New Year's parade. His ear scratched against the talons of an owl Warda's group had created, as Miss Asha had informed the class. Abrar's favourite mask was the tiger with a green polka dot face, purple and red mane, and a royal blue and white patterned forehead. Beetu had made it.

At the display wall Beetu pointed to a tiny flower at the corner of a large canvas. On closer inspection Abrar saw the flower was in fact the globe, and the oceans were drying petals. Abrar thumped him on the back as a token of appreciation. He decided to replicate the image, expect he would replace the globe with a book and the petal with the book's cover. Most of Beetu's works were surreal, featuring impossible staircases, impossible cityscapes, and ballerinas and dervishes whirling on stormy seascapes. Despite her assertion that she thought still life was 'unimaginative', Miss Asha had put up paintings of clocks and flowers.

"Hey man," said Zeeshan. He was lingering at the display wall.

"Found anything?" asked Abrar. Zeeshan shrugged, and continued gazing at the paintings. Miss Asha was busy thinning paints and priming a canvas. *She'll be busy*, thought Abrar. The best paintings were done by a handful of students: Beetu, Warda, Taher, and two kids Abrar didn't know. Taher was in Warda's year, although he was in advanced maths with Abrar. Taher had created folksy compositions, with bright colours and simple motifs such as lotus flowers, horses, fishes, and fairground wheels. Abrar liked those; the paintings had a rustic charm, and the style had suddenly become fashionable. Abrar scrutinized the paintings before him. He had no idea how useful it would be in the events to come.

Warda's paintings hung in the center. Miss Asha was a fan, because Warda did several impressionist paintings of fruits and flowers. In all fairness Warda was talented and she was versatile in her use of media and techniques. Miss Asha often showed her work as examples. Fortunately, they weren't doing any portraits this term. Abrar had a nasty feeling Warda's self portraits would have taken up the rest of the display wall if they were, and narcissism would have flourished in otherwise modest kids. Warda's work was also influenced by cubism, and the canvases were full of bold complementary colours like blue, orange, yellow and purple. The paintings were pleasant in their own right but Abrar started getting a headache from looking at them.

Abrar looked at Warda's darker compositions. She had worked with charcoal and 4B pencils, and those compositions had a claustrophobic feel to them, emphasized by the birdcages she had drawn. Her paintings of rural Bangladesh were far better, and now in this cluttered classroom the paintings made him nostalgic. Next to those there were the watercolours of glass vases. Although he would never admit it, because Warda's ego was dangerously inflated as it was, Abrar loved those. Soft and hallucinatory, the paintings gave him the feeling of infinite space.

Imitations of Mughal miniatures dominated the top left corner of the display wall. Miss Asha was extremely fond of kings, queens and royalty in general. Abrar was glad she didn't make them paint scenes from fairy tales. In most of those paintings the patterns on the garments of the kings and courtiers were ruined by hasty brushstrokes or colours running over each other. Taher had painted hunting scenes. Kings sat on elephants and shot arrows at spotted deer that were forever caught in flight. Hunters tackled speared lions that were roaring at the skies. In battle scenes heads still in turbans lay beneath

hooves. Abrar scrutinized Beetu's court scene. Abrar smirked. Beetu had taken great care in painting intricate details in the king's garments and jewellery, and the king's face was devoid of any expression. In the foreground two goats fought. The king was looking at the sky, where there was a television instead of the moon. On the screen of the television, the word 'ummad', meaning mad, was written in Bengali.

Why are those up there, Abrar thought as he looked at Warda's renditions of court scenes. Annoyance shot up Abrar. He remembered painting a castle and its shadow, and Miss Asha had shaken her head and told him, "Learn to look Abrar, look. Do you see any shadows anywhere? No. In Mughal miniatures you are allowed to use different shades of colour, but not shadows, never shadows. As I explained five minutes ago, if you were listening. It's not a 3-D effect. The subjects are above each other." Warda had made the mistake of giving her subjects shadows. *Come on kid, Warda's above such petty restrictions*, thought Abrar. He glanced at Miss Asha; unfortunately she looked up just then. Abrar looked away, and stared at Warda's painting of a queen overlooking a garden. Abrar gasped before he could help himself. *No way*, he thought. Then he heard the clacking of rapid footsteps.

"What's up, man?" asked Zeeshan. Abrar pointed at Miss Asha but it was too late, Zeeshan had followed Abrar's gaze. He was squinting at Warda's painting.

"Why aren't you at your tables?" Miss Asha snapped, swinging a brush at them. From the corner of his eyes Abrar could see that Tushar and his sidekicks had gathered near the display wall, looking for a chance to cause trouble.

"Miss, miss, I have a great idea," gushed Zeeshan, clapping his hand. Zeeshan was good-looking, cheerful, and people generally listened to whatever he had to say.

“What?” Miss Asha asked.

“Mandala, Miss. You know miss, the Tibetan monks make massive Mandala’s out of coloured sand. They spend hours and hours perfecting them,” said Zeeshan. Miss Asha blinked a few times, contemplating sand art. Zeeshan gushed again.

“I *admire* them so much, Miss. After all that work, they destroy the Mandala to understand the transitory nature of the material world. Inspiring. Miss, if I destroy art I will be a better man,” said Zeeshan. Tushar’s sidekicks guffawed. Miss Asha suppressed a smile. But Tushar had been listening intently. His closed set features seemed to be squashed in concentration.

“Get back to work,” Miss Asha said.

“Oh Miss, your brush,” said Zeeshan as he picked up the brush she had dropped. But as he got up, he shook with laughter. Abrar hissed at him to be quiet. But Zeeshan slumped on the floor. Baffled, Miss Asha and most of the student gathered around him. Zeeshan pointed at Warda’s painting. At first glance it was the painting of a queen sitting in a garden tent, with the sun behind her head. On closer inspection the queen had Warda’s face and it was shades lighter than everyone else’s. Several girls were standing around her throne, fanning her. Abrar’s heart had skipped a beat when he recognized Sadaf as one of the girls with a fan. At Warda’s feet, there was Warda’s rival, New-girl, holding a goblet; and it was unclear whether she was serving sherbet, or washing Warda’s feet. In the garden musicians with Nadim’s and Ridwan’s round faces seemed to be hitting each other with flutes. Abrar was amongst the dancers. There was a goat behind him, just about to jab him with its horn; and Abrar was just about to fall, face first, on a pile of dung.

“Oh, wow, I never noticed. She has got talent,” said Miss Asha, breathless with laughter. Abrar felt heat rise up to the tips of his ears.

It was only after everyone’s laughter died down that Abrar wondered what was missing. *Huh, incredible*, he thought. There had been no nasty comments from Tushar. A fortnight ago, a business teacher had come to the senior student lounge and asked Abrar if his class could visit one of the Haidar garment factories. Before the teacher could finish proposing a date the loud sound of book hitting the floor had distracted Abrar. As Tushar had picked up his fallen book, he had shot Abrar a look. *Alive*, Abrar had thought without understanding why that word leapt to his mind. Then he had recognized Tushar’s look as a look of unveiled envy, envy in its rawest, purest form. Ever since, Tushar had mocked and insulted Abrar, without being able to provoke him into a full-blown fight. Now, Abrar glanced at Tushar’s table. The burly boy who played in Tushar’s team was pointing at paintings in the display wall. Tushar’s other sidekick was fervently nodding his head, and Tushar seemed to be giving them instructions. Abrar had a bad feeling about it. He nearly told Zeeshan to check it out, but he was still annoyed at him. Besides, Abrar knew Zeeshan would say, “Since when do you have any good feelings when it comes to Tushar?” Ignoring Zeeshan’s snickering (with the occasional ‘*maa- maa*’), Abrar finished his painting. No sooner had Abrar restarted his calculus homework, than the bell rang. It was third period. Students dropped their half-washed palettes and rushed to the door.

“Listen everyone. If you are participating in the Pan Art Competition leave your portfolios on my desk. Remember tomorrow is the last day to submit your work,” said Miss Asha, her jade earrings swinging wildly. The Pan Art Competition was a prestigious

inter-school competition between several schools in Dhaka. Each school was allowed to send five participants. The winner was given Tk. 20,000 as first prize. More importantly, the five best artists and the art instructor from the winner's school were sent to Darjeeling to attend classes on how to paint the Himalayas. All expenses were paid by the Pan Art committee. A stuffed art folder was already on the desk, with the label *Warda Haidar*. Miss Asha was desperately hoping to go to Darjeeling.

A chair creaked; Beetu was standing on it and unpinning his works from the display wall. Abrar smirked. Both Warda and Taher thought they'd win the competition. Beetu was probably the only one who wanted to win for no reason other than having a chance to learn new techniques in landscape painting. *Kid really cares about art*, thought Abrar, a little baffled. Abrar went to the sink to clean his brushes. Zeeshan followed suit, bleating like a goat.

"We will clean up, leave it to us, Miss," said Tushar. *What*, thought Abrar. He spun around, knocking over the flower vase Miss Asha kept next to the soap dish. But Miss Asha didn't find anything suspicious in Tushar's offer.

"Okay, I want everything to be absolutely neat and clean," said Miss Asha, throwing scrap paper in the recycling bin. Tushar leered.

"They're up to something," said Abrar.

"Over think much, Goatman?" said Zeeshan, imitating Warda. But even Zeeshan couldn't ignore the way the hook nosed boy and the burly boy were deep in conspiracy.

The reading room was one of the few places in the entire school where a senior student could hope for quiet time. So when Zeeshan burst into the room with Ridwan in

tow, Abrar looked up irritably. A pen scratch went across the logarithmic equation Abrar was attempting to solve. Both of them were red in the face, and they seemed alert.

Zeeshan banged on the desk and rolled his hands at Ridwan, gesturing him to hurry up.

Abrar shut his calculus notebook with the deliberate movements of a man resigned to fate. Zeeshan mouthed the word ‘*trouble*.’

“You know that guy who hangs out with Tushar? Umm, hook-nosed? He was following me today, from third period. Umm, he tried to trip me over, twice. Umm...I don’t know. Just now, I was going to the washroom. Umm, they were in the washroom, umm...I don’t know, they told me to scamper. There was a lot of noise. They were doing something I am sure of it,” said Ridwan, shuffling his feet. Abrar and Zeeshan exchanged a look. They knew Ridwan hated trouble and not following rules. The fact that he had come to Abrar instead of a teacher must have caused Ridwan tremendous mental anguish.

“Umm, I, I tried to have a look but that guy pushed me. I heard someone else say, ‘you sure Abrar will take the bait?’ umm and Tushar say ‘Abrar can’t back down now,’” said Ridwan in a small voice. *Fantastic*, thought Abrar. He knew he should have kept an eye on them.

“Tushar says stuff like that all the time. Go back to your class,” said Abrar, with exaggerated calmness to counter Ridwan’s nervousness. Ridwan didn’t budge. Abrar knew he was thinking it would be lousy to abandon a cousin in a fight. Abrar looked at Zeeshan, who showed no inclination to dissuade Ridwan.

“Listen man, that guy is hoping I take the bait. So trouble starts *if* I take the bait, okay? Chill,” said Abrar. He opened his notebook and pretended to finish the equation.

They waited three full minutes after Ridwan left, and then headed to the washroom Ridwan had mentioned. It was in the corridor near the geography classes. From the end of the corridor Abrar could hear Tushar's laughter; it sounded like a car backfiring. A geography teacher poked his head out of his classroom and placed his finger on his mouth indicating that Abrar and Zeeshan ought to keep quiet. Then he slammed the door. Zeeshan raised his fist at the classroom. Abrar tiptoed and stood at a forty-five degree angle to the washroom's entrance, and looked at the long mirror above the sinks. The hook-nosed boy was drenching what looked like a plastic bag in a sink. He could only see the back of Tushar's shirt sticking out of a washroom stall. Abrar leaned in to have a better look. On the floor, there was the lid of a toilet cistern. *Why*, thought Abrar. He pointed at it, and Zeeshan craned his neck in further. Hurriedly, he swung his head out. But the hook-nosed boy caught Zeeshan's reflection in the mirror.

"He's here," said the hook-nosed boy. Before Abrar could grab it, the hook-nosed boy tossed the bag to Tushar's stall.

"What the..." said Abrar, slipping on the blue tiles. He hadn't noticed that the floor was overflowing. Abrar grabbed the nearest sink; his finger made an imprint in the green paint that was dripping down the sink.

"That's just puke. I had spinach for breakfast," said the hook-nosed guy. He was strumming the air out of excitement.

"Yuck," said Zeeshan. But even as he expressed his disgust the paint broke down in blue and yellow pigments. Abrar looked down; multicoloured paint was swirling on the floor. His eyes traveled to the source of the paint.

“Hey!” Abrar bellowed. Fury boiled through him. Tushar opened the stall door. Tushar’s buffed up shoulders seemed even more gigantic in the narrow washroom. A wicked smile played across his jug face.

“Zee-shan, the man of the moment,” said Tushar, doing a courtesy bow. The stiff ends of his gelled hair pointed at them. Zeeshan’s eyes widened, and an indiscriminate sound came out with a roll of air.

“Oh, you gave me the idea. Tibetan monks and their ...mankalala,” said Tushar, waving his hand at the painting on the floor. The faint traces of a Mughal emperor watching television still remained on the washed out canvas. Abrar couldn’t tell for sure – he was seeing red before his eyes. A suspicion made him run to the stall Tushar had walked out from. In the cistern the remains of Beetu’s tiger mask, and several other works were floating. The hook-nosed boy guffawed.

“Oh the oils were a bit difficult to dissolve, we had to rip them, didn’t we?” said Tushar sounding like a sports commentator. When Zeeshan spoke, his voice seemed to come from a far off place.

“Why did you do that? Poor Beetu...This isn’t cool, not cool,” said Zeeshan. A sudden noise made Abrar spin around. The burly boy was at the door of the washroom, holding more of Beetu’s work in his hand. Before Abrar could move a muscle, Tushar snatched them out of the burly boy’s hand.

“Give it to me,” ordered Abrar. Tushar fanned himself with the paintings. He took a deep breath; Abrar could feel one of Tushar’s premeditated speeches coming. His eyes were full of animal cunning.

“Abrar, Goatman, I change my mind. I don’t want to brawl. I am surrounded by idiots. I miss you, my diaper-day friend...you, open the Coke can I got for lunch,” said Tushar. The burly boy had let out a guttural sound when Tushar mentioned ‘*idiots*’. The hook-nosed boy’s mouth hung open. Tushar snapped his fingers, and tucked Beetu’s paintings under his arms. *What’s he up to*, thought Abrar, looking at Zeeshan for a clue. Zeeshan shrugged. The hook-nosed boy fished out a Coke can from Tushar’s schoolbag. Tushar took a sip and offered it to Abrar. *Disgusting*, thought Abrar. He never ate or drank anything in a washroom. Zeeshan accepted the can but held it like a javelin that he would fling any second.

“We haven’t spoken in a long time, my friend... I am curious, I heard about that man with a loan in Ujjalpur,” said Tushar. Abrar didn’t answer. His shoes were starting to get soaked. In Ujjalpur there had been a man who couldn’t pay back his loan. When the man had gone to his lender the lender demanded an exorbitant interest rate. The borrower had to agree. When Abrar had heard about it he went to the lender and offered to pay back the loan. But the lender had refused to accept Abrar’s money, because he would earn more from the interest. Quickly, the argument had turned into a fistfight.”

Abrar squinted. He couldn’t figure out a reason why Tushar would mention the incident.

“I have been thinking about it. Aren’t you sick of fighting all the time? Fighting for losers and ingrates...That man with a loan complained about you for months. I swear. You see the lender refused anymore business with him after your interventions,” said Tushar. *Liar*, thought Abrar. He pushed away the uneasy feeling that his valiant effort

could have produced such unwanted results. The sound of metal hitting ceramic distracted Abrar. The hook-nosed boy had detached a loose faucet. Tushar spoke louder.

“...Remember I borrowed that what’s-his-name’s motorcycle and I wasn’t in the mood to return it? You had to drag your beard all the way to my place and rescue his possession from my grip, remember that? What good did it do? I tossed you straight in that mosquito ridden pond,” said Tushar, and his sidekicks laughed. Shame flushed Abrar’s face. He could almost taste the stagnant water of that pond. Tushar had caught him by the scruff of his collars and thrown him in the pond easily. *Too easily*, he thought. Fear quickened Abrar’s pulse. Tushar seemed to have grown bigger since that day last summer. *Cool it kid*, Abrar thought, trying to fight down the rising adrenaline.

“Yeah? I still got the bike back,” said Abrar. *No, shut up. Save the paintings first*, warned his inner voice. Tushar held up a hand to silence his sidekicks.

“Tushar. *Dost*. Give me the rest of Beetu’s paintings. You got nothing against that kid...come on, we’ll forget about these,” said Zeeshan. But Tushar spoke to Abrar.

“That dude threw away that piece of junk motorcycle three days later. The neighbours heard you started a fight, again. You know everyone in Ujjalpur talk’s trash about you. Say you are the biggest ignoramus in town. They complain to your mother and grandmother. For what? Why stick your nose in other people’s business? Even I don’t rush to fight those bigger... *better*,” said Tushar, with a look of bewilderment on his jug face. *Better, you think you’re better than me*, thought Abrar.

“You’re eloquent today,” said Abrar. Tushar continued as though there had been no interruptions.

“I know, I know...Some misguided notion about right and wrong. My friend, I forecast prison in your future. Say, will the principal care if you got in a fight for the right reasons? No. He’ll care that you are ruining the school’s image, setting a bad example to younger students, and other things principals care about. Given your track record, the principal will suspend you. Or more likely, he’ll expel you. Yes, Abrar, he’ll expel you, to make an example...you care about studies, university. All of that poof,” said Tushar, snapping his fingers. Zeeshan leaned forwards as the paintings nearly slid out of Tushar’s hands. Then Tushar’s thumb pressed on the globe-flower Abrar had imitated earlier.

“Your future gone. Your highflying ambitions aborted. A disgrace to your family. Your mother will cry. But, Goatman, no one will be surprised. A predictable end for a hot headed ignoramus,” said Tushar. Zeeshan restrained Abrar from taking a step forward. *Expulsion, expulsion*, warned the voice in Abrar’s head. Heat was coursing through him and he was almost surprised water wasn’t evaporating beneath his feet. When Tushar spoke again his voice was calm as the blue sky.

“So, you have to learn to put yourself first. You have to let losers fight their own battles. My friend, in the animal kingdom there is a natural order. Whoever you fight for will outshine you...and they might remember you, or not, as a guy full of potentials but who just couldn’t keep his head. My friend, you have so much to lose, so much. The rule of the jungle is: eat or be eaten,” said Tushar. Abrar grit his teeth to prevent himself from retaliating. Zeeshan reached out a hand, but Tushar dangled the paintings out of his reach. A maniacal smile spread over Tushar’s face.

“Abrar. Abb-rrarr, learn to tuck your tail between your legs and go to authority. Call a teacher, call a cop,” said Tushar. Even as Abrar lurched forwards Tushar ripped the paintings. Tushar’s sidekicks hooted with laughter.

“No!” Abrar and Zeeshan shouted. Before he knew it Abrar was throwing punches at Tushar’s guts. All traces of joviality left his face. He kicked Abrar’s shin sending him stumbling back. The burly boy pushed Abrar and he collided into Tushar, who squeezed Abrar’s left shoulder like a bolt tightener. Yelling, Abrar whirled around, trying to throw Tushar off. But Tushar slammed Abrar into the door of a cubicle. There was a stinging pain over his eyes. Water splashed and he heard a thud. Abrar felt himself get yanked backwards but before Tushar could slam him into the door again Zeeshan struck blows at Tushar’s brick-like arms. He heard Zeeshan slam against the ceramic sink.

Blood from the cut tricked down Abrar’s deep-set eyes. Furious, he wished the cut would dry quickly. The hook-nosed boy was trapped in a corner; and he was darting looks at the washroom’s entrance, which was blocked by the burly boy. Tushar’s arms slashed the air and Abrar blocked the attack by making an X with his arms. Abrar growled. Using all his strength he held Tushar at bay. Suddenly, Tushar released all the pressure from his arms. Abrar swayed. *Momentum*, thought Abrar as Tushar kicked his knee. He took a few steps back and launched at Tushar. A sharp pain engulfed him as Tushar’s fist caught him in the chest. Momentarily Abrar was out of breath. Zeeshan screamed and Abrar moved just in time. Tushar’s fist crashed into the mirror above the sinks. Light scattered as shards of glass flew everywhere.

“You idiot,” yelled Zeeshan. Sweat broke out over Tushar’s jug face, but he ignored the broken glass. Abrar suspected Tushar was used to breaking things. Tushar was about to throw punches again, but both Abrar and Zeeshan pushed him. The burly boy punched Zeeshan in the back. As Tushar bounced back he shoved Abrar and knocked him to the floor. Tushar snapped his finger at the hook-nosed boy, who looked petrified. *Get out, forget it, get out*, warned Abrar’s inner voice, as he felt a shard of glass grind into the skin just beneath his knee. Abrar yelped.

“Here...” Tushar yelled, and his cusses boomed in the small washroom. Faintly, Abrar could hear feet pounding down the corridor. He looked up, and the glass cut in deeper. The hook-nosed boy’s hand trembled as though he had Parkinson’s disease. He gave Tushar the broken faucet, then he tried running out of the washroom but he was too late.

“Stop,” yelled the geography teacher. Zeeshan and the burly boy stopped immediately, but Tushar hit Abrar’s back with the faucet. Grabbing an ink smeared sink Abrar tried getting up, but Tushar’s blow came harder. Furious, Abrar picked a shard, but he didn’t have the satisfaction of using it. The geography teacher tried extricating the faucet from Tushar hand. *Thud*. Everyone stopped, shocked. Tushar, the body builder, had shoved the teacher and he was now splayed on wet floor. High-pitched voices rang all around; the geography class had followed their teacher.

The school nurse had to take out ground glass from his knee with tweezers. As she tightened the Band-Aid over his knee Abrar suppressed a groan. Impatience throbbed through him, in sync with the pain in his chest. Any movement made him aware of the

different places where it hurt. The places where the faucet had hit him felt soggy, and his vest stuck to the skin on his back. He tugged at his shirt. If the nurse saw any trace of blood she would keep him in for another fifteen minutes. He refused the painkillers. He just wanted to go to the principal's office, and face whatever was in store. When the nurse finally released him, after placing a Band-Aid over his eyebrow, he made his way to the school reception.

He was surprised to see both Ridwan and Nadim there. Ridwan was looking at the floor. Abrar felt a twinge of guilt, although he hadn't technically lied to Ridwan. A half eaten bar of chocolate stuck out of Nadim's pocket. *Pest*, thought Abrar. Nadim lived in Abrar's house, and over the past few days Nadim had constantly whined about running out of his stock of chocolates. Zeeshan was edging closer to the principal's office, listening hard. His thought lines were becoming more pronounced by the second, and he shot nasty looks at the hook-nosed boy, who was standing forsaken in a corner. Miss Asha was sitting on a couch and talking to Beetu. His eyes were ever red and puffy from crying. Luckily, Tushar was inside the principal's room. Moments later Warda walked in, accompanied by a teacher who took Warda's schoolbag to the principal's office. *Rose madder*, Abrar thought, as he identified the colour that was darkening Warda's pale face.

"What's going on?" Warda demanded.

"Don't know. I was doing a class test when they called me. Don't think copper is an alkali metal," said Nadim. Her long eyelashes intensified the accusatory look she threw at Abrar. *She could glare at that kid*, thought Abrar, even as the hook-nosed boy squashed himself against the wall. In a hushed voice Zeeshan told her about the fight.

"...But, now Tushar is claiming—" said Zeeshan

“All of Beetu’s paintings? What about the ones he submitted to Pan Art Competition?” asked Warda, and every sibilant sounded sharp.

“Yeah, Tushar ruined those. I can’t believe it,” said Zeeshan, shaking his head. Abrar could forgive her for all the meanness she had bestowed upon him ever since childhood, but he couldn’t forgive Warda for the gloating smile that crossed her face right then.

Beetu sobbed as the principal’s door opened and Tushar, and the burly boy walked out with an army of teachers. There were members of the education board present, making the room stuffy. Inexplicably, the teachers were carrying four school bags, including Abrar’s. The principal wore immaculate gray trousers and a chequered shirt. Abrar looked down as the principal’s dull black eyes surveyed the students.

“Abrar, Tushar is claiming that you stole the paintings, and hid them in your cousin’s bags. Did you?” the principal asked.

“No, sir,” said Abrar.

“All of you open your bags, we will see,” said the principal. *Should have hit him harder*, thought Abrar, as he unzipped his bag. It felt as though all the air was sucked out of the room as everyone took a sharp breath. Nadim pulled out the painting of whirling ballerina from his bag. Nadim’s round face remained impish, as the teacher’s exchanged looks.

“I saw her put a painting in both side pockets,” burst out the burly boy, referring to Warda. Her nose flared as she opened the right pockets, but it was empty. Then she pulled out a folded paper from the left pocket.

“This is not the sort of behaviour we expect from a class captain,” said a teacher. Warda rapidly unfolded the paper. For a few moments she stood still and seemed to draw strength from the air itself. She held out the painting of a Mughal hunting scene. It was Taher’s.

“Did you take any of mine? The truth,” her voice was low and forceful.

“No, no, I swe– I swear,” stammered the burly boy.

“Describe the ones you took,” commanded Warda, completely ignoring the teachers.

“The, the tiger ma-mask, the ship...aahh,” the burly boy realised his mistake too late.

“Inside, now,” said the principal, cutting short the bubble of talk that was going to rise any second. The principal’s office was a familiar sight, with books, medals and exam scripts at the principal’s back. Abrar stood near the window, but the cool breeze made him feel feverish. Interrogations revealed the burly boy and hook-nosed boy had planted the paintings in the Haidar kids’ bags. But when they recounted the fight in the washroom, Tushar’s team made it sound as though Abrar had turned into a maniacal punching machine while the three of them stood by idly. Next, it was Zeeshan’s turn to talk. Abrar wasn’t elated when Zeeshan managed to convince the principal that Tushar had broken the mirror. Tushar’s thick lips moved in an attempt to deny allegations, but he was subdued quickly. Abrar rubbed his birthmark. A dense silence descended in the room. The principal stared at his bony, interlaced fingers.

“Abrar, you will be suspended for three days,” said the principal. The pain in Abrar’s chest and knee became sharper. Ridwan let out a choked sound.

“Tushar, you are expelled. You will pay for damages to the school property,” said the principal.

“But, sir, please, please. I’ve to go to university...” Tushar kept pleading. *It sunk in*, thought Abrar. The panic in Tushar’s voice was beautiful. Abrar wanted to stomp his feet and cheer. Irrespective of how little Tushar claimed to care for school, he didn’t want to get expelled. None of the teachers were sympathetic, because Tushar had a long history of inappropriate behaviour. Tushar’s brick like arms lay limp at his sides. *So close, a moment later that would have been you*, said Abrar’s inner voice, marring his relish. *Admit it kid*, said his inner voice. Abrar’s muscles spasmed. Guiltily, he looked around to see if anyone had noticed, but everyone was watching Tushar and the principle. Abrar knew if the geography teacher hadn’t intervened, he would have sliced Tushar. Suddenly, he couldn’t look at anyone. He wished he had taken the painkillers. He finally looked up when the principal slapped the desk.

“Quiet. Tushar, you should think before you act. We will be calling your guardians to come collect you,” said the principal. Abrar felt like he had been sucker punched. The memory of him, Tushar and Tushar’s father on a fishing trip leaped to his mind. He remembered gutting fish with the man. He couldn’t face Tushar’s father.

“Our school will not be participating in the Pan Art Competition this year. That is all. Abrar, a moment,” said the principal. Abrar was too anxious to notice who whacked him with their schoolbag as everyone left the office. The principal’s dull black eyes observed him.

“I want you to listen to a story,” said the principal. *What now*, thought Abrar.

“In a battle, Ali, the prophet’s companion, had his sword drawn over an enemy. The desperate man spat in his face, but instead of killing the man Ali walked away. Shocked, the man asked his why Ali let him go. Ali replied he would have killed the man out of anger, not for the sake of Allah. The man was so surprised that he converted to Islam. I understand you value the integrity and strength of character of the companions of the prophet, hmm. Tell me, how was Ali so clearheaded in the heat of battle? Hmm. That degree of restraint is not possible for people who give in to their worse instinct and their egos on regular days.” The principal gave him a long look. Abrar looked at his shoes. He had polished them that morning, it seemed like that was a century ago. The principal knew Abrar could go far in a fit of rage. *Come on kid*, he told himself, forcing himself to remember the numerous times he had ignored Tushar’s insults. But guilt over Tushar’s expulsion started settling on him.

“You have many years ahead of you. Your temper will be tested. Remember the teaching of the prophet, peace be upon him...the wrestler is not the strong man; the strong man is one who controls their anger. Think about it. You may leave,” said the principal. Abrar left.

His schoolbag lay half opened in the middle of the reception. Trying to ignore all the eyes that were on him, Abrar picked it up. He needed to be far away, and fast. *Coward*, said the mocking voice in his head, but he ignored it. There was someone behind him.

“If you went to a teacher as Tushar suggested, none of this would have happened.” A sharp twinge of annoyance shot up Abrar. He turned around slowly. Beads

of sweat were trailing down the side of Warda's face. She had her back towards the door, blocking his way out.

"Paintings, destroying Beetu's—"

"He destroyed them. You failed, failure," said Warda, without any trace of emotions in her voice. He realized he was in full view of the teachers while Warda's face was partly hidden by a long stemmed money plant hanging from the ceiling. She smiled a half smile.

"Huh, fighting on Beetu's behalf? Or art's? Don't kid yourself. Morons don't have the capacity for appreciating art. Don't for a second think you're some sort of hero. You wanted to have a go at Tushar, and you did," said Warda, narrowing her eyes. Abrar took a steadying breath.

"You wouldn't say that if those were your paintings," said Abrar. His pulse quickened when he saw a shadow behind the door. It was only a teacher, but he needed to get out of there before Tushar's father arrived. He took a step forwards but Warda didn't budge.

"But they are not mine. Thanks to you, my work isn't going to Pan Art," hissed Warda.

"There's next year," said Abrar, attempting at a consolatory tone. Instantly Warda's face turned crimson.

"You moron. You lose at everything, so next year won't mean anything to you. I want to go to Darjeeling now. I want my gold medal now. I want to win *now*. Next year I will win the *next* challenge. Why do you ruin everything?" Although she had started off calm, Warda began shrieking midway.

“It’s not like you would have won,” he replied, and he meant it. He genuinely thought Beetu was the better artist. There was a cacophony of teacher’s voices.

“How dare you,” shrieked Warda. Her hand reached towards her shoes. Indignation coursed through Abrar, and all the cuts in his body stung like salt was poured on them. But just when it appeared as though she would take off her shoe and hit him with it, Warda picked up a chewing gum wrapper off the floor. She put in her pocket with great care. By the time she stood up, she had regained her usual haughty composure. Footsteps thudded behind him.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, causing more trouble. Get out,” said Miss Asha, glaring at Abrar. Her jade earrings swung madly.

“Tell your sister I don’t need a winter coat,” said Warda. Miss Asha put an arm around her and led her away. *What coat*, thought Abrar, then he remembered. *Huh*. Warda believed she would win with full conviction. As he stepped in the school ground, his head cleared marginally. Warda had asked his sister, who lived in New York, to get her a winter coat. Warda had been planning to wear it the Himalayan clime. He felt an unexpected twinge of sympathy. *Must be tough living with an ego like hers*, he thought. He didn’t dwell on the feeling; he had to find the best way to explain the suspension. Father might understand. Mother was a gentle woman. Combat scenes on television, less violent than the he had participated in, upset Mother. He glanced at the skies. *Fantastic*, he thought, as he spotted Tushar’s father forty feet away. Avoiding eye contact Abrar went to the nurse’s room, which was closer than the stairs to the students lounge. He asked the nurse for a painkiller.

Chapter 3

Nadim

I don't have a habit of hanging out in small, dark places. But now I am in the space underneath the staircase. Dadu is nearby. I am not scared of grownups, but they have a way of decreasing what's called the 'quality of life'. I told you I run fast but I don't always hear Dadu creep up on me. She lectures me on stuff as if she will die after she is done. I see a bag of old clothes, and a pile of junk. I pick up an object that could be useful and put it in my pocket. Wow, there are the antlers of a deer, sharp enough to gore a man's gut. It's too dark to see the other trinkets. On the slanted ceiling there is a patch of darkness blacker than the surrounding. I tilt my head and of course I am right. It's a bat. A live, leathery bat. *Thump, thump*. Footsteps are coming nearer to my hiding place. Out of a scientific curiosity to see how bats behave in daylight I poke it with the antler. *Whoosh*. What a great sound. The bat is out.

"Aaahhhh," a couple of older cousins scream. They cross their hands over their heads and run. The bat flies over their head. It has a pointed face and possibly pointed teeth. But it doesn't seem interested in biting anyone. Grownups are attracted to the commotion. As an aunt runs towards the cousins, she accidentally hits the bat with her head and sends it flying off course. Uh-oh, I better get out of here. Instead of chasing the bat out, the grownups crouch and join in the shrieking. I jump out of my hiding space, but I have to flatten myself across the wall as Dadu walks in. Dadu ignores everyone, and opens the door to the kitchen's courtyard. She looks skyward as the bat flies out. Perfect. I run away while her back is still turned, but trust me Dadu has eyes in the back of her

head. I fly past depressing paintings of mustard fields, and thin people, and fruits, which always make me hungry.

The dining room is full of people. I am not asking for royal treatment here, but that pesky pinch-faced kid can get out of the spot I sit in. Roshni fupi, my father's eldest sister is here. Not drawing attention to myself in her presence is the best plan of action. Besides from Dadu, she has also been appointed in the Nadim monitoring program, and she tells my mother what I am up to. Zohair chacha is at the end of the table, talking to Ripon, the fat man. I heard Ripon used to be able to taste dishes from various cuisines and name every ingredient. People used to ask him to prove his talent. I guess as fat atoms increased in his body, the taste atoms decreased.

“Nadim, did you sleep well, beta?” asks Roshni fupi. She looks like my father, with the same droopy nose and deep-set eyes. I smile at her. Maybe I should have brushed my teeth, it has been three days. I hear fizzy drinks have acid, so I guess that dissolved the gunk on my teeth. People come in, fill their plates and eat in other rooms because there isn't enough space here to fit everyone. I sit next to Warda, which annoys me because when she gets bored she flicks my cheeks. The table is tumbling with rotis, parathas, scrambled eggs, okra bhaji, pumpkin bhaji, mixed vegetables, semolina pudding, fruits and laddoos. I love laddoos. I take helpings of pudding and eggs. I start picking out the potatoes from the mixed vegetables but Roshni fupi is looming over me. Then the inevitable happens: she puts papayas and beans on my plate.

“According to *Sunnah*, people should fill a third of their stomach with food, a third with fluids and leave a third empty,” says Warda, looking at my plate. I half raise an eyebrow before deciding to ignore her. I am surprised because religious sayings aren't

Warda's style. I like Warda. She hates Abrar, but her capriciousness had blighted my childhood. Anyways, my thyroid glands are energy efficient. All of this will be metabolized in an hour.

"Don't be mean," says Roshni fupi to Warda, before turning to me. "It is an authentic saying, worth trying, as I was just telling Warda. You feel energetic as a spinning carousel. Do you like the papaya? It's fresh from the garden."

"It's the best thing I have ever eaten," I reply. Warda sneers. She has a whole bowl full of amla, which is currently her favourite fruit. She starts yakking with Roshni fupi about healthy living. Apparently these tiny balls are full of vitamin C. Who knew? I pocket a few. They make good marbles, and they don't rot easily. Later I'll throw them in the river from the roof.

"Where is Ridwan? You making him get you something? A new hairspray?" I ask Warda. Why did I say that? I could have said '*is he getting you new shoes?*' Warda narrows her hairy eyes at me. The girl with two ponytails taps Warda's arms; she wants Warda to feed her breakfast. Thank God. Sometime ago, there was a dinner at Warda's house, and I saw a hairspray in her room. I heard that even though hairspray is a liquid it catches fire. Out of a scientific curiosity, I took the hairspray to her balcony. Warda's father smokes, so I had little trouble finding a lighter. I pressed the nozzle of the can and clicked the lighter. It was spectacular. You should have seen it. Then the flames caught on the clothes drying on the clothesline, which included a fuchsia sari Warda got from Calcutta. I ran out. The grownups put out the fire by throwing water on it; water which behaved as liquids should. My mother smacked me but everyone was happy I only scorched my hair and nothing else. Except Warda, it was one of her favourite saris. The

girl with two ponytails is eating a laddoo straight out of Warda's hand. Uh-oh, there is only one laddoo left. I grab it but the pinch-faced boy swoops in. Both of us have our hands on the last piece.

"It's mine," he says, baring his teeth. I don't like this kid. I would play rock-paper-scissors with anybody else but if I move my hand, he will take the laddoo. We could sit like this until the laddoo goes stale but soon the grownups interfere.

"Nadim, you can take my laddoo. Give that to him, he is younger than you," said Roshni fupi. I pretend not to hear her, although she is sitting opposite to me. As a rule older kids have to sacrifice food, toys and happiness for these good for nothing brats. Someone should change this rule. Both him, and the girl with two ponytails are six or seven years old. They should listen to me.

"Share it," says Zohair chacha. He is big on this sharing business. The laddoo breaks and I get the bigger piece. Zohair chacha talks about family values a lot. He is very interested in all of the kids in the family. In my earliest memory, I see myself being rocked on his knee. He was asking me to recite the multiplication table of seven. I was stuck at seven times eight, and I don't like being stuck. So, I was guessing the answer. Ridwan and Abrar were racing cars, until Warda flicked the cars off the track and pointed at me. The more they laughed and called me a '*brainless moron*', the more determined I got to guess the correct answer. Zohair chacha kept encouraging me to remember the process. Then Warda recited the whole table backwards. Later, they refused to play chess with me on the basis that, '*playing with dumber kids will worsen our skill.*' Often knights went missing from the chessboard, and accusations of cheating ensued.

As if he can read my mind, Zohair chacha asks, “Nadim, after the feast on Friday, I am going to find a science tutor for you and Ridwan.” There are laugh lines around his eyes.

“I don’t need a tutor,” I say.

“It will keep you busy...”

“I am busy. I will spaaa...” Oh Nadim, you’re smarter than this. I nearly told him I will spy on Shakil. Luckily, he thinks I am struggling to find a worthy cause to keep myself busy.

“Keep you busy with something useful. Abrar brought all of his books with him,” says Zohair chacha. What? Abrar would do something like that. He is as reliable as bad weather.

“Oh forget it, he is on vacation,” says Roshni fupi.

“Warda, my future cardiologist. How are you?” asks Zohair chacha.

“Cardylist? You’re going make cards? You recycled the birthday card I made for you,” I tell her. It was a year ago. I am still annoyed about it. Warda sneers.

“Cardiologist is a heart doctor. Next time don’t draw a monkey holding dynamite on a birthday card,” she tells me, and in a softer tone she talks to Zohair chacha.

“I am good. I will have to order half the people in this house to change their diets, of course,” says Warda, taking in a deep breath. She can’t wait to have a new reason to boss people around.

“Yes, you will have to. Far too much rich food. Talk to your apu, she will tell you how to get into the best medical college,” says Zohair chacha. One of Abrar’s sisters is a

doctor. Dang, I bit a chili. I hiss and Roshni fupi gives me a glass of water. Two-ponytailed girl giggles.

“Oh, chacha, I just noticed you’re wearing the special shirt. Heart healthy,” says Warda.

“Yes. I have had this shirt for over twenty years. When I started being successful, people were always inviting me. Rich food and sweets. I vowed to keep my ideal weight, keep myself healthy. Discipline will get you far in life. Where would I be if I didn’t have any discipline after your grandfather died? Discipline—” Zohair chacha mentions how this virtue changed his life. Interesting, he has been wearing that mouldy shirt for twenty years. Dadu tells me I should never wear my yellow t-shirt, and it is only a year old. I take a big bite of potatoes. Zohair chacha is still talking about the blessings of one predictable hour after another. Clearly, nothing exciting has ever happened to him. That reminds me, I went to check Shakil this morning. But he was sleeping on a stack of hay near the servants’ quarter. He is tired after a night of crime.

“Tell us a story,” says the girl with two ponytails.

“The robber story,” pipes in the pinch-faced boy. The girl with two ponytails nods. Zohair chacha had a half brother, Mesba, who owned a famous Mughal necklace. Robbers paid a visit to Zohair chacha and Mesba, and made away with the necklace. If I was born back then I could have caught those robbers blindfolded. Then the robbers would have to walk around town with their heads shaved and inked. No, I would have put the robbers inside a piñata. Since I am generous, I would have let the townspeople strike the piñata. *Thuck, thuck*, it would have sounded, and the robbers would have screamed, “be aware of Nadim Haidar.”

I put two pieces of mango in my mouth. So good.

“Well, you know we had jewellery that belonged to the Mughal emperor Akbar. There was a necklace made of...” starts Zohair chacha.

“No, get to the exciting part,” says the pinch-faced boy. Zohair chacha continues.

“*Accha beta*. Back then I shared a bedroom with your uncles – Warda’s father, Nadim’s father and of course Mesba. Ah, then, one night, a sound woke me up. It was a slight sound. I thought it was a mouse. I went back to sleep, hoping the mice wouldn’t nibble the sacks of newly husked rice we were temporarily storing in the living room. I could not have slept for more than a few minutes when I heard a louder sound. There was a definite twang of metal in it. I thought it was cat. I hoped the cat would stop the mice from getting near the rice. But then the door opened,” says Zohair chacha. The girl with two ponytails gasps and sits on Warda’s lap. There is an uneaten laddoo on Warda’s plate. It is orange and bits of almond are sticking out of it. Let’s see, slowly and subtly I will walk my fingers to the plate and grab the laddoo. She won’t even notice.

“Oooh, tell us the part where the robbers–,” interrupts the pinch-faced boy. Perfect.

“Why don’t you tell the story?” I ask. The pinch-faced boy scowls. I keep my eyes trained on him. From the corner of my eye I see the laddoo is just a few centimeters away. Zohair chacha continues.

“Yes. There were curtains in the doorway of our room. We never shut the door when we slept, the room would become hot if we did. A short man carrying a dimly lit hurricane lantern came inside. I couldn’t see his face. Umm, I could feel the presence of more people behind the curtain...Ah, I wondered why people were walking around the

house so late at night. Well, sometimes, in the middle of warm summer nights, we would sleep in cooler parts of the house. We didn't have fans, you see. Once it was so hot that Warda's father went to the roof and fell asleep there. Ah, children, don't get any ideas. You will fall off the roof," says Zohair chacha. The pinch-faced boy has a dreamy look on his face.

"Cockroaches, mice and lizards will nibble at you if you sleep on the roof. You'll get malaria," Roshni fupi tells the pinch-faced boy, and he scowls. Interesting, I should have reached Warda's plate by now.

"But it was cool that night. For a few seconds the lantern glowed steadily. There were urgent whispers behind the curtain. 'Something is wrong' I thought... Suddenly, the curtain was thrown back forcefully. A thin man stood there. He had handkerchiefs tied on his nose, mouth and forehead. Only the burning black of his eyes showed. He came in and another man followed...umm all of their faces were covered. Mesba's bed was the closest to the door," says Zohair chacha. I throw a sideways glance at Warda's plate. Huh! She is pushing the plate further away from my hand. Don't look, Nadim. But I glare at her. There is a smug look on her pointy face. I let my hand stay there, as though I never planned to get that laddoo.

"The large man put a hand over Mesba's mouth, and shook him awake. In a harsh voice the man said 'Don't scream. Hush...Now, tell me where you keep the gold.' I drew in a sharp breath. Immediately, the third man, who had bushy eyebrows, pressed his hands against my mouth. I tried not to make any sound, umm, both Nadim and Warda's fathers were very young. I didn't want them to wake up and get scared. 'Give us the gold and nothing happens to you,' said a grave voice. The man who held down Mesba said

‘give us the gold or the kids suffer.’ They repeated their terrible command...Mesba was gasping. The small man had a sack in his hand. Firelight reflected off a metal. I squeaked as I realized the thin man was holding a knife. Then everything went quiet as Warda’s father stirred. I heard Mesba murmuring assent. We kept the gold in a steel almirah in my Ma... Nadim’s grandmother’s room,” says Zohair chacha. The pinch-faced boy is listening with rapt attention. I’ve heard it before. I am waiting for my favourite part.

“They had rope. The large man was going to tie Warda and Nadim’s fathers. I looked at the robber at my head. Sensing that I wanted to talk, he moved his hand from my mouth. ‘Please, please, don’t hurt them. We will give you everything,’ I pleaded. The moment I got up my captor pulled out a knife from his pocket...oh, I still remember the coolness of the blade against my windpipe,” says Zohair chacha. Roshni fupi clears her throat and gives Zohair chacha a pointed look. Why? He looks at the girl with two ponytails. Oh, I get it; he has to censor the part where he nearly slipped and the knife came very, very close to his throat. When I was their age I didn’t need any such censorship. I was quite grown up, even then.

“On our way to Ma’s room we crossed the room where Roshni and the girls slept. ‘Not a single sound’, the thin man said. It was dark...so, dark. Mesba accidentally kicked a chair. When it crashed the sound traveled the whole house. Sarwat woke up, and she came running out. Nobody moved. As fast as they could, the robbers turned off the lamp. ‘Who’s there?’ she asked, umm, I didn’t trust myself to speak. Mesba said, ‘It’s just me. Go back to sleep.’ She asked, ‘Why did you turn off the light? Who’s there?’ I think she heard rustles...umm, when I spoke my voice sounded strange, I said, ‘It’s me, Zohair bhaiyya...there, ah, there is no more kerosene for the lamp.’ Sarwat went inside and we

heard her awaken Roshni. Then Roshni came out with a lamp. She went back inside moments later. Well, Roshni?” says Zohair chacha.

“Mesba was shaking his head at me, frantically. Then I saw the masked men. I remember everything so clearly. There was something I still can’t put my finger on... Yes, so I went back and made sure Sarwat didn’t cross paths with the robbers again,” says Roshni fupi.

“The robber told Mesba to wake up Ma, and persuade her to be cooperative. ‘Don’t try anything, or he’ll pay,’ the thin man said harshly, gripping my arm. But when Ma woke up, she was startled, umm, before Mesba could block me from view, Ma saw me and screamed. ‘Hussshhh’, whispered the thin man. Mesba spoke to Ma, and she calmed down. Ma always trusted Mesba... Anyway, the bunch of keys to the almirah was under Ma’s mattress. Mesba took the keys and opened the almirah... umm, he took out gold and silver bangles. Mesba was sweating so much, my poor brother... oh, I wished I could reassure him... Then the thin robber hissed, ‘I know there is more.’ One by one, Mesba took out Ma’s wedding jewellery... ah, also the jewellery we made for Roshni’s wedding. The thin robber gripped my arm and dragged me to Ma, and he said, ‘Whatever else you are hiding. Bring it out, or he suffers.’ Ma said, ‘There is nothing more.’ The robber twisted my arm. ‘Do you think we are fools? Or we don’t know what you have? Bring out Mesba’s mother’s jewellery.’... Oh, umm, I was dreading this. Mesba’s mother had possessed a large collection of jewellery. If Mesba opened that treasure trove, we would become paupers. Umm, there was trouble with the titles and deeds to our lands, and we needed money for settling legal matters. We had decided to sell jewellery if we ran out of money, and those were the last of it. Besides, it was Mesba’s inheritance. The

robber with the bushy eyebrow threatened Mesba, and immediately, Mesba began pulling out his mother's ornaments from a secret compartment at the back of the almirah. 'The Mughal necklace' said the robber."

"Where was it?" asks the pinch-faced boy.

"In a trunk underneath the bed. The thin robber rasped, 'Do you think we are we are fools? Don't you who we are? We are the Vultures. Even backwards people like you must have heard of us.' Ma clapped a hand over her mouth. Mesba was shuddering..."

"They told you who they are?" asks the girl with two ponytails, surprised.

"Yes, they were legendary, dangerous dacoits. They still inspire fear in the hearts of people from our generation. They had nothing to lose by revealing their trade name. We still don't know its members. Just hearing the name made me recoil. I wanted to warn Mesba, because Mesba had stopped shaking. He was looking the robber in the eye..."

says Zohair chacha.

"Really?" asked the pinch-faced boy.

"Yes. It was his mother's favourite possession, and a family heirloom. 'Where is the fabled Mughal necklace?' the harsh voiced, thin robber asked...and he pulled out a pistol. I screamed. It was terrifying. Back in those days no one had pistols. It was the first one I had ever seen. Immediately Mesba pulled it out of the trunk. The Mughal necklace was incomparable...There were tiny suns inside the rubies, and the emerald brought to mind the summer lakes of another world, another time...Oh, I tell you, anybody who saw it was fascinated by it. You want to possess it," says Zohair chacha. There is a faraway look in his eyes. Every time he talks about the necklace he bores everyone with its description.

“I wish I could see it,” says Warda.

“Yes, you will understand,” says Zohair chacha.

“Why was everyone so scared of these dacoits?” asks the girl with two ponytails.

“Oh, the Vultures? They were lethal, they had no trouble using weapons...umm, once they murdered seven people in cold blood,” says Zohair chacha. He may be a hotshot industrialist, but he doesn’t understand simple things.

How will a little girl appreciate murder and mayhem?

“Did you hear about the cannibals in Papua New Guinea?” I ask her. The girl with two ponytails nods.

“The dacoits are cannibals too. They eat little kids,” I say quietly, because Zohair chacha is telling us how the dacoits escaped through the forest. She knits her eyebrows.

“You’re as big as a roasted goat they serve in weddings...kids your size will make a good meal,” I say.

“No, you’re making it up,” she says. Warda is looking at me.

“No, I am not. Everyone knows his. Zohair chacha will tell you,” I say. She keeps looking at me disbelievingly. Think Nadim, think.

“But that’s not the scary part. They can disappear whenever they want. But, they don’t just vanish in thin air. They dissolve in the air, bit by bit. First their head goes, and you can see their brain, and then their tongue, until there is a headless body... Then, you see the blood and muscles in the inside their neck. No one’s ever seen them disappear completely, most die of fright,” I say. Her eyes widen and she starts chewing the end of her ponytail. For some reason Warda is kicking me under the table.

“If they decide to eat you, they suddenly materialize in front of you, and get you. You don’t know where or when. They can get you NOW!” I thump the table. The girl with two ponytails bursts out crying. That’s how it’s done.

Warda is nodding conspiratorially at me. That’s not a good sign.

“Ahhh,” I scream. Warda smacks my face, much harder than you do when you play pretend. She hugs the little girl and croons at her.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. There are no dacoits like that. Oh, Nadim is a dumb boy. He is a dumb-dumb,” says Warda. Roshni fupi tut-tuts.

“I am not dumb,” I say. But Warda takes her away, and when she returns a few minutes later, the girl with two ponytails isn’t with her. A kitchen maid comes after Warda, carrying many cups of tea. Warda winces at a dirty cup.

“Do you know you eat bugs in your sleep?” I ask her, but she ignores me.

“How many houses did the Vultures rob?” asks the pinch-faced boy.

“Hundreds and hundreds. The Vultures’ network ran all over Bangladesh and India,” says Zohair chacha. He moves the teacups across the table as though it were the vast territories ruled by dacoits.

“What about Ujjalpur?” asks the pinch-faced boy.

“They were very active before the Liberation War, even in Ujjalpur,” says Zohair chacha.

“Where did the Vultures keep their treasure?” I ask.

“Deep inside forests and secret hideouts where no one dared to tread,” says Zohair chacha. Interesting, they might have had a hideout in the forest surrounding us. That is a possible venue of investigation. I can see my picture in the front page of the newspaper,

above pictures of George H.W. Bush and Saddam Hussein. The headline will say '*Nadim Haidar, boy genius, discovers hidden treasure.*' The curtain moves and with it comes an unpleasant sight: Abrar. No one's noticed him yet. I take the opportunity to throw a chunk of papaya at him. It misses.

"You know Zohair, it still bothers me. There was something... I still feel as though I was very close to recognizing something, but I just missed it...hmm, I know the Vultures were extremely well organized, but I still can't quite believe they could just disappear without a trace. I believed the police, especially Tapan, had a real lead," says Roshni fupi, and lets out a sigh. Tapan Kabir is Zohair chacha's friend. Before Kabir became the chief of Ujjalpur, he was a cop. What was the lead?

Abrar

A haze of aroma embraced Abrar when he entered the dining room, but he had no appetite. Father's hands were folded in front of his face, the veins protruded like a mountain ridge, a testament of his years of hard work. Father had the droopy Haidar eyes; his broad face resembled Dadu's, except it was tanned and leathery. Abrar pulled up a chair, its back glistened with varnish and its top was oily with finger smudge. Father sat at the head of the oval table, separated from Abrar by three people. *What a fine specimen of people*, thought Abrar. There was his pinch-faced nephew, and Warda and Nadim, and he certainly couldn't have a heart-to-heart with father in front of them. But having a private moment in the Haidar house was hard to come by, especially in father's case. People flocked around father as they would around a king.

Father was paying attention to his sister, Roshni fupi. Her cheeks were slightly red, complementing the misty maroon sari she wore. Abrar hoped her high blood pressure wasn't catching up with her. Warda poured her a glass of water, which she sipped distractedly. She had been saying that she always felt that she had missed something important during the robbery. *Strange an incident so ancient should bother her*, thought Abrar. Roshni fupi ran the SunLife NGO that worked on empowering rural women by providing them with capital to make embroidered cushions, mats, jute swings and other household items. Energetic and active, she rarely moped over her past misfortunes. Roshni fupi washed her hands, leaving the dirty water in the plate she had been eating in.

"Assalamu alaikum." Abrar greeted everyone. Father's smile was taut as a bowstring. Tottering at the edge of the table was a plate of tamarind chutney, Father's favourite. Abrar stilled it.

“Walaikum,” replied Roshni fupi, emptying a plate for him. Nadim was stroking his cheek and giving Warda a resentful look. The pinch-faced boy was catapulting a tamarind seed on a spoon. The seed hit its target, Nadim. Abrar snorted.

“I am not superstitious, but I see someone who is bad luck,” said Nadim, staring at Abrar. Warda laughed, and her wide eyes turned into slits. It wasn’t that funny, thought Abrar. His face was inscrutable, and he prided himself on his ability to see his cousins as mild annoyances. Warda went back to adding lemon juice to her tea, lightening its orange hue.

“Two cups of tea,” said Abrar to the helper who had just come in to take away dirty dishes. The helper raised two fingers and nodded.

“Bring me the black comb...Abrar, you didn’t sleep well?” asked Roshni fupi, her eyes drooped even more out of concern.

“Oh, how could he? Going to the mosque that early?” said Father, slightly shaking his head. Despite father’s apparent disapproval, Abrar knew father was secretly proud and thoroughly relieved that Abrar was religious. It kept him on his best behaviour far more effectively than any authority figure’s influence, even Father’s.

“He has this bad habit of waking me up...he has plenty of bad habits,” said Nadim.

“I wake him up for Fajr,” said Abrar, as Roshni fupi gave him a questioning look.

“Let the children sleep, Abrar,” said Father, as he took a dash of tamarind chutney.

“He’s over ten, someone should teach him,” said Abrar, careful to keep his tone mild and respectful. Although it’s obligatory for children to start praying at ten, Father

believed spirituality at a young age was distracting and confusing. Steam rose from Father's tea, and when he blew on it, it formed a mushroom shape. Through the haze, Abrar saw Father smile.

“Oh, did you hear the story about the thief who was about to steal from a rich man's house?” asked Father. It was one of his favourite stories and Abrar had heard it several times before.

“A thief was standing outside a rich man's house, waiting for the best opportunity to enter. He overheard the rich man saying he'd wed his daughter to a pious man. Marrying the daughter would give the thief better access to the man's wealth. So, the thief started going to the mosque everyday and the rich man noticed his devotion. Forty days later, the rich man sent a proposal to the thief. But by then the thief had had a change of heart, and he became a noble natured man,” said Father.

Warda chuckled. For a moment Abrar associated himself with the thief, and before he could banish that unreasonable thought, he glanced at Warda. Her head was slanted, sunlight dissected her eyes, and a smile played on her scissor lips. She was gripping the stem of a periwinkle. Abrar had a feeling that she thought he went to the mosque to get on Hasan uncle's good books. Abrar knew that Allah judged a person on their intentions, and he tried purifying his intentions as much as he was able. So technically, nobody's opinion should bug him – technically. He ought to eat something, having tea on an empty stomach would make him nauseous. He rolled an omelette inside a roti, and thought, *Bismillah, I worship You by nourishing the body You gave me*. He resisted the temptation of saying Bismillah out loud, as though he had to prove himself.

An uncle came in to refill his plate of breakfast. After he was done he struck up a conversation with Father and Roshni fupi.

“Question is, is the *goat*, I mean thief, worthy of the girl even after his transformation?” asked Warda, too quietly for the elders to hear. *Shoot*, thought Abrar. She was referring to his nickname, Goatman.

“No doubt, he was a better man,” said Abrar nonchalantly.

“Leopard doesn’t change its spots,” piped in Nadim, who was sitting next to her.

“Lucky he wasn’t a leopard,” said Abrar, stifling a pretended yawn.

“Who would have thought? Abrar, the defender of lowlives,” said Warda, with a smirk. Abrar ignored the bait. He had overheard Warda complain to one of her cronies that she found it harder to make Abrar’s life miserable these days. Naturally, it made him smug, until Warda had discovered Sadaf was his weak point.

The helper returned with the black comb and tea. Abrar took two cups.

“I mean, it begs the question. Do you have any personal reasons, Abrar?” asked Warda.

“Pass me the salt,” said Abrar in hopes of steering the conversation away from these dangerous waters. Salt flowed from the shaker. Someone, surely Nadim, had left the lid unscrewed.

“Abrar, don’t take so much raw salt. It becomes a bad habit before you realize it. That’s how I ended up with high blood pressure,” said Roshni fupi. Abrar hadn’t noticed that the uncle Roshni fupi was talking with had left.

“Told you he was full of bad habits,” said Nadim delightedly.

“Shut up,” said Abrar.

“Abrar, did your mother say when she will call next?” asked Roshni fupi as she combed the pinch-faced boy’s hair. The boy was her grandson, and his hair was resisting her efforts of flattening a cowlick. Now that Abrar noticed the cowlick, he wished she would just chop it off. Roshni fupi raised her eyebrows at Abrar.

“No,” Abrar replied. His mother and his eldest sister were still in Dubai, visiting his older sister, Shama, who had a baby. Shama was a doctor, and although she was fourteen years older than him, they were close. As a kid Abrar had often fetched frogs, dead mice and birds. She would dissect them and teach Abrar how an organism functioned. Abrar smiled. His eldest sister, however, couldn’t tolerate the sight of those animals. But her sense of repulsion didn’t extend towards deserving men. She was married to Ripon, whom Abrar considered a complete loser.

“I will call her in the evening,” Abrar told Roshni fupi. Her shoulders drooped, and she accidentally swooped the pallu of her sari over the pinch-faced boy. The boy leapt off the chair and ran away. He had drawn an airplane with the vegetables on his plate.

“Tch, I am taking an evening session...oh, oh, well, tell your mother to call Hasan uncle’s wife. She must. It will be very embarrassing if Hasan turns up at this feast,” she said.

“He’s invited. What’s his problem?” Abrar asked, startled.

“Ewww! Abrar, you’re spitting eggs!” shrieked Warda. Nadim laughed.

“What’s with Hasan uncle?” he asked, again. Theatrically, Warda started putting covers on all the food. Abrar stared at Father, who took thirteen seconds to reply.

“Envy. I am successful – he retired as an executive engineer,” said Father, pursing his lips in a resigned way. There are four ranks in engineering: Assistant is the lowest, then Executive, then Superintendent, and the highest rank is that of Chief Engineer.

“No, it’s Ka–” Roshni fupi couldn’t finish her sentence.

“They are here,” said a booming voice. It belonged to Ripon, Abrar’s brother-in-law. Ripon possessed the girth of a baby elephant, and he was wearing a t-shirt that had orange and blue horizontal stripes. Whiskers protruded from his face. ‘*They*’ referred to RMG manufacturers from Ujjalpur. Ripon beamed at father. Abrar stared at the table, hard. Nadim took the opportunity to throw an amla at Abrar, but it landed in the teacup and the tea scalded Abrar.

“Pathetic,” spat Abrar, standing up. The pest squawked.

“Abrar, his mother isn’t here,” said Roshni fupi, her hand outstretched to prevent Abrar from getting nearer to Nadim. Abrar clenched his teeth. Nadim’s mother got unduly upset if she heard the brat was mistreated during her absence. But Abrar wasn’t only irked at Nadim: it was the sight of his brother-in-law that really hit a nerve. Abrar sat down and sipped the other cup of tea.

“Ah, I will be there in a second,” Father replied, pouring himself a glass of wood apple juice. Father believed in a good breakfast: irrespective of who was waiting for him, he would at least finish his plate. Abrar noticed he was wearing his special shirt and felt a surge of pride. Father was the epitome of success.

Ripon picked a piece of sweet. *Smile*, Abrar forced himself to smile at Ripon. He remembered that according to the teachings of the Prophet (peace be upon him), a smile is the least form of charity. Suddenly, the curtains of the dining room flew as though they

were caught in high wind. The woman who wore a gold nose ring darted in and reported a crisis in the kitchen, with much flourishing of her hands. She was known for making mountains out of molehills. The woman bid Roshni fupi to resolve the situation immediately, and marched off. Roshni fupi followed her. Abrar sighed. He wanted Roshni fupi's insight on the animosity between Hasan uncle and Father.

“Oh, your *friend* called,” Warda told Abrar.

“Who, when?” asked Abrar. It was typical of Warda to leave out crucial information.

“That, what's his name, Beetu, yeah. A week ago,” said Warda. She picked up the spoon from the curry and banged it on the bowl. The gravy that was clinging to the spoon flew in all directions.

“What did he say?” asked Abrar.

“Do I look like I listen to what artist wannabes say?” said Warda, quietly so that Father couldn't hear her. Sneering, she dumped leftovers onto a plate.

“Right,” said Abrar, deciding to call Beetu in the evening, after he called his mother. Beetu, who could be a little paranoid, was most likely thinking that Abrar was avoiding him. Warda tilted her head.

“That loser is going to drag you down, trust me, and you are quite the train wreck as you are,” she said. Even though she spoke formally, he could detect the relish in her voice.

“If you say so,” said Abrar, fighting to keep a straight face. He secretly agreed with her assessment of Beetu. Beetu had been infatuated with one of Warda's friends, a girl who lived in Beetu's neighbourhood and had a reputation for upturning potted plants

of people she disliked. The girl made Beetu do her science project, a detailed model of a human heart, and stand in long lines to get her lunch from the school canteen, but made fun of him in front of their friends. Despite Abrar's warnings, Beetu believed it was true love. Around four months ago, the girl's cat had strayed into Beetu's garden. Promptly, Beetu had abducted the girl's cat, in order to train the cat to like him. Somehow, Beetu got the notion women like and trust men their cats approve of. During a dinner party at Beetu's house, the girl had heard the cat meowing from the storeroom where Beetu had locked it. She had rescued her cat, which nearly scratched Beetu's eyes out, and demanded an explanation. Although, Beetu had denied all knowledge of the cats' existence, his mother had come in at the wrong moment and asked the girl if she liked Beetu's new pet. In school, Beetu ended up as the laughingstock.

"Want to play Ludo?" Nadim asked Warda. Abrar noticed the pest had a rubber band with a pea aimed at him. Abrar moved, and the pea narrowly missed his ears.

"No." Warda replied. Her hands flashed as she piled up the remaining dirty dishes. She wore red nail polish and it seemed to him that she was drawing blood from air.

"It's not like you have something better to do," mumbled Nadim. That reminded Abrar how Nadim's mother had asked him to find a science tutor for Nadim. Abrar guessed she was hoping he would gallantly take up the offer, given that he had tutored kids over the past two summers. But Abrar wouldn't tutor that brat for the world. He decided he would ask one of his friends with the risk of ruining their friendship.

"What did you say?" asked Warda. The pest pretended to have a coughing fit. She snatched Nadim's glass and balanced it on the ceramics. She waited for father to finish

his breakfast and put his plate at the bottom of the tottering pile. She sped out of the room and Abrar waited for a crash that never came.

“Nadim, Abrar, come with me,” said Father. Annoyance shot through Abrar. Father had started taking Nadim along with them whenever he met other industrialists. This new trend began when Nadim started showing great enthusiasm in going to the garment factories with Abrar and Father. Abrar was sure Father planned to hand over the industries to Nadim in case Abrar failed. Initially, Father had planned to divide the responsibility between Abrar and Ripon. After all, Abrar was twenty years younger than his eldest sister who was married to Ripon, and Father had decided on an heir before Abrar was born. But ever since Ripon had dragged their family through mud, Father had focused his attention solely on Abrar. Although Abrar had never objected outright, he made excuses to avoid going to the factories. Father had attempted to revive Abrar’s interest in the business by calling him over to review the stock markets, an exercise that inevitably led to a chat about the factories.

Nadim was convenient. He lived under Father’s guardianship, and in their house. Nadim’s father was at sea more than three quarters of the year and he showed little interest in the pest’s future. Nadim’s mother’s greatest concern was with Nadim not getting expelled from school, given his love of mischief. Father thought he was indoctrinating Nadim into the family business by taking him to the factories. The pest had no interest in the factories. However, he toppled over freshly laundered clothes, unplugged irons, and tangled industrial strength strings. Mostly, he balled scrap fabrics and threw them at Abrar without the fear of retaliation, knowing that Abrar wouldn’t lose his cool in public.

They followed Father to the drawing room. It had a low roof, and the room was too small to contain Ripon's monologue. When Zohair Haidar stepped in, everyone quietened down. There were three men: one in a Hawaiian shirt, one with a unibrow, and one with curly hair. Abrar had seen them before: they owned garment factories all over the country, and they hailed from Ujjalpur. The man in the Hawaiian shirt stood up and others followed suit. Father gestured at them to sit down. Ripon took a double sitter, and the three men were sitting on the velvet sofas. Father sat on the sofa that had lion carvings on its legs, and Nadim sat on its arms. There were no more seats left. The man with a unibrow offered Abrar his seat, and Abrar declined. He looked around the room for a spare chair and found one near the window. A man was half hidden by the folds of the dense maroon curtains. It was Shakil.

He pointed his beaky nose at Abrar, his face propelled forward and he looked at Abrar as though he was trying to glean secret knowledge telepathically. Abrar ignored him. Shakil was mental, and he existed at the peripheries. But he was ever present at informal meetings Father had with his business associates. Abrar had to place his chair next to Ripon as it was the only space left in the circle. The man had doused himself with woody cologne that had a bitter undertone, but even that couldn't curb his halitosis. The halitosis was a symptom of his high diabetes that was often out of control. Whenever Abrar saw Ripon gorge on sweets Abrar would warn him, but the man felt insulted and he would call Abrar disrespectful. Abrar didn't bother telling him anymore; Ripon was in his forties. The men were talking about their children.

“...And I told her, ma, it's okay if you didn't win the high jump competition, you are the champion in singing, dancing, painting, and all the teachers agree you are the best

student in school. Poor girl, she was so upset,” said a curly-haired man. Father spoke before the man in the Hawaiian shirt, who looked as though he was going to dispute those claims.

“Yes, our children are quite the prodigies. Youngsters can surprise us with their foresight. Now how is business?” Father looked around.

“Heard about Mahin? He shut down,” the man in the Hawaiian shirt broke the uncomfortable silence. Abrar remembered Mahin had recently rented a floor for a factory in Chittagong. But he’d heard it somewhere else. There was a bad feeling attached to that name. The unbrowed man shook his head.

“Aha, he deserved it. Skittish man, you know,” said the curly-haired man. He glanced at Ripon, who was reputed to be hasty. Ripon kept trying to imitate Zohair Haidar’s ability to negotiate prices instantly. But he often ended up with bad bargains. The man in the Hawaiian shirt spoke.

“Tch, its bad luck. He, umm, made good money on the first four or five orders. In February he took an order of twenty thousand t-shirts, umm, and in March he took a huge order for jackets. I told him not to take the jackets, too many flaps,” he shook his head. Any extra detail in an outfit can slow down its production time.

“Short lead time, he gave it to this subcontractor, and they delayed delivery by two months. Buyer refused to take it. Huge loss. He ran on losses for some time, then shut down.”

“Oh, don’t mention those buyers! Their tariffs and their impulsiveness. Last summer we took an order for navy blue tops, and when we nearly finished production the buyer tried cancelling because navy was out of season,” said the unbrowed man. *Wow,*

thought Abrar, he could do without that kind of thing. Father too had faced that situation, when a buyer tried cancelling their order for a second batch of khaki pants because the first batch hadn't sold. But the buyers couldn't find any defect in the merchandise and ended up honouring their contract.

“Ingrates! If they made a baby's bib in their own countries, it would cost them two hundred dollars per piece,” said the man in the Hawaiian shirt.

“Yes, they take us for granted,” Ripon put in his two cents.

“Poor Mahin. These new subcontractors are unreliable,” said the unbrowed man, wagging his finger. Father refrained from outsourcing to subcontractors, not only because they could be illegal, but also because he wanted to control quality.

“Eh, poor nothing. He's a fool. He gave his workers full wages right before Eid, and Eid bonus, Eid bonus,” cut in the man with curly hair, “Aha, can you believe the stupidity? No one reported to work for over a week.”

“You have to give them wages,” said Abrar, louder than appropriate, but everyone burst out laughing. It took a moment for Abrar to realize they thought he was being sarcastic. Withholding wages was one way of ensuring workers return on time to meet the production deadline. From the corner of his eye, Abrar saw Nadim throwing a pen at him. Abrar caught the pen, nearly tipping over his chair. Mirthful laughter rang through the air.

Abrar glanced at the iron rods of the window, and the moss on it reminded him of bile. His own father overworked the workers, at rush times, well past the legal limits. Disappointment gripped Abrar; but it was a stale disappointment, flaking into nothingness even as it introduced itself. But then the images of women's swollen feet,

and red fingers raced through his mind. The last day he had visited the factories, a woman burning with fever had collapsed. Had Father not been there, the factory supervisor would have let her stay and finish the day's quota. Before his sister had gone to Dubai, she had treated several of them for herniated spinal discs. Those girls had not been from Father's factory, but they worked for these men in the drawing room, now bubbling away with laughter.

The workers put up with these conditions for the minimum wage they earned; the wage was enough to keep them alive. The current minimum wage was far beneath the wage that would be set under Islamic legislations. According to Islamic legislations, full time workers have to be paid enough to maintain themselves and their spouse, and the rent of their house, and the cost of commuting to the workplace. Abrar stifled a snort. If he privately raised the wage for his workers, then the cost of production would increase, and he would lose the competitive edge because buyers would flock to manufacturers who paid minimum wage and offered lower prices of production, and then Abrar would run into loss, and ultimately shut down. He had replayed the scenario a million times, without finding a solution. Unless of course the government raised the minimum wage, to which all factory operators would have to comply. But if it did, the wage would still have to be lower than the international average. Bangladesh had to keep its competitive edge. *Government, they should take care of it*, thought Abrar. His gaze fell on Father.

“Abrar has a point. I deliver my promises, the wages, bonus, and holidays,” said Father. His voice was devoid of humor, and the laughter stopped abruptly. Although Father overworked his employees, he always paid them their due. It was well known that Zohair Haidar spent on workplace safety, and paid medical fees for work related injuries,

and rewarded the most productive workers. The curly-haired man sucked in air, possibly because he viewed Father's attitude as extravagant: after all, workers were easily replaceable. *Metacarpals*, thought Abrar, as he identified the bones on his hand that ridged out. Taking a measured breath, he forced himself not to knit his eyebrows. Father spoke.

“Fail to see your worker as your son or daughter, and you will have a labour strike, as you deserve. We are their protectors – we are responsible for them. Some suck the life force out of the anaemic bodies of the workers, and then refuse them their due.” A flame appeared on Father's cheeks. There was no sound other than the whirring of the fan. No one looked at Father. Only Nadim, who was dangling his feet, was completely unaffected by the change of atmosphere in the room. The curly-haired man shot a glance at Ripon, who was fidgeting on the sofa. Abrar knew they delayed in paying wages.

Ripon owned three factories. Greed had blossomed in him. Whenever workers made marginal mistakes, Ripon would cut down their overtime wages. He took infeasible orders. He had rented a fourth factory without informing Father. However, Ripon hadn't been able to secure enough orders to keep the new factory running, and couldn't afford to pay wages for two months. When Father found out, he paid the wages, but not before the situation escalated to labour unrest. Ever since, Father monitored all deals that Ripon made, and even negotiated prices on his behalf. All that happened two years ago. Abrar pitied Ripon. Even if Ripon had learned his lesson, he couldn't man up and reclaim his business from Father. *Ah, you wretched man-child, can you man up?* Abrar sat up straight and chair squeaked.

“Right, Zohair *sahib*,” said the man in the Hawaiian shirt.

“The government has to raise the minimum wage,” said Abrar. The curly-haired man sucked in air, and the rest of them pretended not to hear.

“The accidents are so terrible,” said the unbrowed man. Abrar guessed he was talking about an electrical fire that broke out in a factory last month. The factory was a well-built one, in the same industrial zone as Father’s factories. Although there were several fire exits, many people were still injured as they stampeded out.

“Absolutely. One of my long-term buyers got queasy. Most factories are strong, safe. Aha, they can’t lump us in with those low standard factories, disgusting,” said the man in the Hawaiian shirt.

“It’s these newcomers. They start mushrooming factories all over, buildings designed to be shopping centers. They don’t understand long term investment...I sold two plots of land to buy a robust factory with proper wiring. Best investment I ever made,” said the unbrowed man.

“It’s expensive,” said the man in the Hawaiian shirt. “Besides, buyers should take responsibility too. Aha, if they want everyone to play by the rules, then they should raise the prices. It’s their duty. Give us higher prices, so we can build proper factories.” Father nodded. The mood in the room changed instantly, the curly-haired man bristled, much like the dry air. A murmur of ‘*hear, hear*’ echoed through the room. Abrar pressed his thumbs to his forehead. He was getting a headache.

“It’s ruining the image of the industry,” said Ripon.

“Image, huh?” spat out Abrar. “Buyers have responsibility, absolutely – but buyers don’t block fire exits or shove workers into cracked buildings.” *Fantastic*, Abrar

thought, he had just broken his promise of being polite to Ripon for the sake of Allah. Ripon snarled, and the unbrowed man started talking before things got unpleasant.

“The backlash falls on us. Aha, most of the factories are in acceptable shape. Listen, a couple of weeks ago, a reporter from some obscure magazine wanted to cover a story on my factory,” the unbrowed man shook his head, “I said okay; he came in five minutes after the phone call. He was standing outside the factory gates. He stepped in, and he saw how clean, airy and spacious the floors were, umm. He hounded the workers...but the workers are content...bhaiyya, you won’t believe, huh, he had the impunity to ask me if I had cleared off all illegal activities before his arrival,” Everyone in the room tittered.

“What illegal activities?” asked the unbrowed man, and his brows threatened to jump off his forehead. He took a deep breath and slapped his thigh, theatrically. Momentarily, Abrar let go of his annoyance.

“So I said, ‘Son, what do you mean? Did we siphon off all the heavy machinery? Did we spray the workers with happiness-inducing gas? Did we throw all flammable materials out the window? Oh, the clothes we are making are flammable. Did we build these ventilation shafts in five minutes? Aha, son, you are new at your job, but I have been at mine for twenty years, so think before you speak.’ And this journalist stomped out, black faced.” There was a howl of laughter, and Abrar joined in. He remembered once a reporter had called his family house in Dhaka, and asked him if Father was bribing politicians to let him buy public lands at throwaway prices. Abrar had told her: ‘Not my father. Me, I am going to seize your house, and all of your ancestors’ property,’ before he

hung up. He was fourteen at the time. Once everyone had stopped laughing, the curly-haired man spoke.

“Anyways, this Mahin...did he sell his stone washing machine?” His locks bounced. The man in the Hawaiian shirt nodded.

“I have a contact who is selling one,” said Father.

“Aha, Zohair bhaiyya, I came to the right place. You are so well connected. If anyone has a solution, it’s you.” Abrar watched the theatrical tilt of the curly-haired man’s chin. It got under Abrar’s skin, the way people flattered Father. But Father was looking at Nadim, who had a rubber band stretched to its breaking point in his hand.

“Does my smart nephew know what a stone washing machine is?” he asked.

“Ah, yes, umm...it is a machine full of stones. You put jeans in it, and the stones hit it and beat it, like this,” said Nadim as he jumped off the sofa and started flailing his hands and legs around. The man in the Hawaiian shirt’s jaw dropped and Ripon’s whiskers stood up straight as the pest refined his movements to what Abrar knew was his *Ooga Booga* dance. Nadim gave Abrar a sideways kick as he swayed like a pendulum. The curly-haired man looked as though he would start clapping.

“Nadim. Stop it,” Abrar said. The pest inched closer to Abrar, revolved on the spot with his arms spread out, so that they hit Abrar’s chest. Abrar stood up and the pest ran to Father, tipsy on his feet.

“Aha, so playful,” said Father with an indulgent smile. Father squashed himself on the sofa, took Nadim in the crux of his arms, and sat the pest down next to him. Abrar glanced at the floor to neutralize his annoyed expression. That brat needed discipline.

“Get my phone book. Blue covered, it’s on the T.V stand of my room,” Father ordered Ripon. Abrar felt a twinge of sympathy for the man; Father kept bossing him around since the factory mismanagement.

“I’ll get it,” said Abrar.

“I’ll help him,” said Nadim jumping off the sofa. As Abrar walked across the room, Shakil rotated a hundred and eighty degrees on the spot, to keep Abrar in his view. *Huh, what’s with him*, thought Abrar. He had completely forgotten Shakil was in the room. Nadim followed Abrar to the long corridor. A narrow shaft of sunlight was coming through the window at the end of the corridor. A seascape painting and brass vases decorated the other end. The pest tagged him and ran. Abrar hadn’t devised a strategy to prevent the pest from tagging him and running. One satisfactory drabbing would break his bones, but that would upset a lot of people. He concentrated on the pest’s crow’s nest of a head as it sped towards him. He caught the tip of Nadim’s hand before it poked him. The pest’s sandals squeaked as he tried to free his hand. He pulled harder, trying to trip Abrar. Balancing on the balls of his feet Abrar bent the pest’s little finger, slightly. A scuffling sound announced the presence of someone in the vicinity.

“Help, he’s murdering me,” screamed the pest. His rescuer failed to appear. Instead, a rooster poked its head through the bars of the window, its comb stiff and its eyes trained on Abrar. It crowed. Distracted, Abrar released Nadim’s hand and the pest ran to the end of corridor. The rooster pecked a worm off the windowsill.

“Got a surprise for you, and you won’t like it,” said the pest, the white of his teeth gleaming. He toppled a brass vase, and the clang echoed. A chorus of voices asked “what was that?” Keeping his eyes on Abrar, the pest tiptoed away. At best Abrar could hope to

be free of Nadim for half an hour. Abrar righted the vase and gazed at its unpolished metal surface, as he remembered that day two years ago.

He had been with Beetu on Beetu's front porch, waiting for Father's car to pick him up. The front door had creaked open and Beetu's aunt had beckoned him with her hand. Her face was turned away, only a tendril of hair escaped her bun. He had stood for a few seconds gazing at the back of her palm, which seemed to be made of alabaster. When Beetu had walked back into the house, it dawned on Abrar to do the same.

Before he crossed the threshold, he'd heard Ripon's name mentioned by a reporter relaying breaking news on TV. On screen, a car had been blazing, the fire's glow flickering on the face of a woman as her parched lips shouted about wages withheld for three months, shouted about the overtime wages cancelled as a fine for small mistakes. A wave of workers who were unable to pay rent, reduced to saving the last penny, and they were asking the nation why they were being punished for making an honest living. It was the first day of the labour strike.

A volley of hot shame hit Abrar's nerve endings. Father had warned Ripon not to start the fourth factory. Father had warned him against taking two unfeasible orders. Ripon, who was a misfit in their family, had tarnished their impeccable reputation. Abrar had felt Beetu's aunt's eyes on him. He was wearing his ice mask: it required a flat mouth without discernible tension, and eyes that seemed washed by the horizon. Beetu's mother had come to tell him the car was here. She was transfixed by the news, and she had placed her hand, soft as dough, on his shoulder. She must have felt him flinch. He had mumbled his goodbyes, relieved he wouldn't have to answer the questions fluttering on their tongues.

The strike became the talk of the town, and Abrar's sister had come to live with them. All sorts of people, including his peers, swarmed like locusts and kept asking Abrar how his *brother-in-law*, Ripon, had ended up in this mess, and why a man as experienced as Father had been unable to prevent it. They had wanted him to tell them Father's position, only to rip all arguments to pieces. Abrar didn't tell them he had been busy studying for his O-Level exams, and he didn't tell them that Ripon was in his forties and ought to be his own man. No one had wanted to believe that Ripon had gone behind Father's back, not at first. They had wanted answers from him. It was Abrar's gravelly voice, musculature covered by rioting body hair, and his beard that gave people the impression that he was much older than fifteen. Eventually, he had learned how to evade them, and their self-righteous condemnation would leave him cold.

The disaster hadn't cut under Abrar's skin until a week later. He had been walking around an urban slum. Quails, sparrows and cuckoos flew between drumstick trees, and birdsong had drowned the ugliness of the past few days. At the most tranquil moment, a flying rock had hit his gut. The child who'd thrown the rock was of the same hue as the soil his blistered feet had stood on. His ribs had been embossed like the imprints of fossils on ancient unyielding rock. '*Thief*', the child had mouthed. As the child ran away, the seam of his shorts caught on the jagged edge of a rickshaws' wheel cover, and ripped. As a target of such hate, Abrar had finally accepted the fact that people identified him with Ripon.

Bells were clanging and that shook Abrar out of his reverie. With a last glance at the brass vase, Abrar left the corridor. The inner courtyard was packed with Abrar's distant relatives. There were two rickshaws loaded with suitcases. Since Abrar's

grandfather had died, his grandmother's brother had lived in this house, and taken care of the family. At gatherings, grandmother's extended family visited them. They were a large clan, with several people who looked very similar, and Abrar couldn't keep track of everyone. Underneath the grapefruit tree, knots of children were squabbling over a Game Boy, and Nadim was trying to snatch a Walkman out of another kid's hand.

"Abrar, good to see you," said an uncle who was unloading a suitcase. Abrar greeted him. The uncle started talking about the train trip from Dhaka, but Abrar only half caught the words. Any moment now, the uncle would fulfill his familial obligation by asking Abrar about his future plans.

"Let me, I am going upstairs," said Abrar, taking the suitcase from him.

"No, no, one of the servants will do it," protested the uncle. Abrar pretended not to hear him; he wasn't a fan of delegating every task to helpers. He dragged the suitcase up to the second floor and an aunt gestured at him to leave it in the corridor. There seemed to be a confusion over which room had been designated to whom. Although Abrar's room was tiny, he was glad he wasn't sharing it with anyone. In order to get to Father's room, he had to walk past the living room. The living room didn't have a door, and it was full of kids. For reasons unfathomable to him, the kids were very fond of Abrar. Fortunately, they were all under the tunnels they made from sofa cushions, and Abrar passed undetected.

Father's room was decorated the same way as his room in their house in Dhaka. A chest of drawers, a settee and a bed were the only furniture. This room was ornamented with a wooded helicopter. Its snout was whittled too sharp and its blades were uneven, as though they had to be shortened to make the structure balance. The phonebook was

nowhere in sight. Abrar opened the left drawer, and a smell of mint and moss escaped its entombment. An Old Spice shaving kit and a rusted tin box were the only objects inside it. The phone book was in the right drawer.

Abrar plunged his hand in the drawer, which was cluttered with receipts, pens and paper clips. He winced as he pricked his thumb on the needle of a compass that stuck out of its geometry case. It'd only take minute to sort out the mess. He flattened the crinkled receipts and stacked them on the notebook, and he slid his hand to pick up the flotsam and jetsam. There was something beneath the oilcloth lining the drawer. Dumping everything unceremoniously into a penholder, he lifted the oilcloth and pulled out a white leaf photo album. There was a black and white photograph pasted in its center. With a jolt in the stomach he recognized himself.

But it wasn't him. The man in the picture had an angular face and a narrower forehead. It was uncle Mesba, Father's half brother who'd died in the Liberation War in 1971. His aquiline nose and deep-set eyes were strikingly similar to Abrar's, except in real life Mesba's eyes had been an electrifying green. Next to Mesba was a youthful Father, and others he didn't recognize. Abrar snorted. There was a man whose upper ear was large and rounded, but the lobes reminded Abrar of an octopus. He placed the photograph on the receipts thinking it'd ended up under the oilcloth accidentally. He glanced at the helicopter; it had been one of Mesba first creations. Father never spoke of Mesba, except when he told the story of the robbery. Roshni fupi would reminisce about him sometimes. Abrar snatched the phone book, leaving behind half-formed thoughts about Mesba.

A little girl was pouring talcum powder all over the living room pretending it was snow. The tunnels made of sofa cushions had collapsed and the kids were jumping around in plain view. He thought he'd better seek shelter behind the bookshelf, as he'd spotted a little boy who would invariably babble about *Tom and Jerry*. Then, he decided that a full-grown man shouldn't have to hide from kids, and he paid for this lack of caution a moment later when a girl with two ponytails pointed at him and shrieked. Five kids raced each other to reach Abrar. The first boy slid over the powder and narrowly missed colliding into Abrar. The girl with two ponytails started jumping around him, with a bunch of sugary candy in her hand.

"...Come, come to the castle," said the ponytailed girl pulling his hand.

"I have to go to my father, I'll come later," said Abrar redundantly.

"Be an elephant!"

"Lift me up onto the bookshelf," said a boy with missing teeth. A cacophony of chirrupy voices whirled about him. A squabble broke out over which game they wanted to play. It was only when the toddler attempted to climb up Abrar's legs did he find an excuse to extricate himself.

"I have to return him to his mom," said Abrar picking up the toddler. After bargaining with the kids some more, he was finally free. The toddler squirmed and when Abrar settled him comfortably, he rewarded Abrar by soaking his shirt with drool. Then he promptly fell asleep. In the myriad of relatives it took Abrar six minutes to find the toddler's mother, standing on a wicker chair, pulling out extra pillows and bedspreads from atop a wardrobe. Abrar cleared his throat.

She was holding a pillow and startled, she dropped it on Abrar's head. Abrar covered the toddler's head with his hand. Apparently, one side of the pillow was not stitched. Musty, hard cotton and cottonseed bathed Abrar. She mumbled an apology. Abrar brushed off a piece big as a mouse on his way out. Back in the corridor, Abrar saw tuberoses and hibiscus on a braided head, Warda's head. She was surrounded by her clique. All of them were wearing pastel colours today. Warda often colour co-ordinated her friend's outfits. He had noticed Sadaf didn't always follow suit. *Sadaf*, he saw her, wearing an olive scarf. She turned around suddenly, but her eyes were narrow, her nose hook-shaped. It was too late, the girl who wasn't Sadaf elbowed Warda. All of them turned around, and by their derisive laughter he figured he'd better consult the mirror before returning to Father and the guests. He rushed to the washroom at the corner of Nadim and Ridwan's room.

Cotton flakes were stuck on his hair and beard. His beard had taken a hard hit. It was lopsided, a scruffy hedge pointing to the left. The fine flakes were as stubborn as dandruff and they refused to come off. Resigned, Abrar washed his head and beard. His hair had the look of a drowned person's, so more water couldn't hurt. The phonebook slipped out of his pocket. He snatched it before the water spray from the faucet hit it, thanking Allah for his fast reaction time. With a jolt in the stomach he saw Tushar's father's phone number on the page it had opened on. Abrar turned off the faucet. *Get a grip kid*, he told himself as he realized it was a different number. The last he had heard, Tushar had been rejected by the army and navy. Universities had also closed their doors on him due to his expulsion from school. Tushar's father wasn't keen to let Tushar run

the factories, even when Tushar came of age. Tushar's family wanted to send him abroad – out of sight, out of mind.

The basin was cracked and gray. Soap suds solidified to stone were stuck on it. Abrar glanced at his eyebrow, at the ghost of a scar. *So pathetic*, thought Abrar. As much as he hated the guy, he hadn't wanted it to end this way. Abrar stared at the floor.

From the drain hole a leech crawled out. It was fleshy, glistening black. Abrar scanned the washroom. Bottles of imported herbal shampoo and body wash were placed neatly on a rack. On the topmost rack, there was a bottle of vinegar, quarter full. It was Warda's. He had heard his sister telling her that a vinegar wash would make her hair shiny. Abrar poured out the vinegar and rinsed the bottle. After filling it with water, he poked at the leech with the cap. The leech seemed to enter the bottle with the slowness of a glacier melt. Abrar capped the bottle. He was going to return the little guy to the river. He rolled down his right sleeve and put the bottle under it. The discovery of the leech would cause unnecessary drama. When he got to the corridor, he hid the bottle in the brass pot Nadim had overturned earlier.

“What took you so long?” asked Ripon when Abrar entered the drawing room. Abrar ignored him. The guests were helping themselves to the samosas, kebabs, noodles, carrot halva, and syrupy *gulab jamuns* that were laden on the centre table. An earthen pot of fresh yogurt lay in its box, from a shop named Ujjalmisti. The curly-haired man took a scoop; the yogurt was pink, made from much boiled milk. The man slurped and smacked his lips, and danced his eyebrows at Abrar, indicating he ought to try it. He was clownish and Abrar laughed. That seemed to annoy Ripon.

“You know everyone might have left, you should have hurried up,” snapped Ripon. Abrar doubted they would leave before noon. Father had plans after lunch, which meant Abrar had precious little time to have a decent conversation. Abrar knew Ripon thought Abrar wasn’t replying to him out of insolence. He didn’t really care, but now the man in the Hawaiian shirt was staring at Abrar’s still wet beard.

“Kids,” explained Abrar. Ripon could make what he wanted out of that response. Ripon’s whiskers quivered, he was going to speak again. Abrar looked at Ripon’s plate, which was stuffed with sweets. Still staring at the plate, Abrar placed the phonebook on the armrest of Father’s chair.

“Did you take insulin today?” Father asked Ripon. Abrar’s sister generally nagged at Ripon to take his medicine. Reluctantly, Father had to shoulder this responsibility in her absence.

“I will,” Ripon mumbled, his face reddening. He put the plate on the table and folded his arms as though he had nothing to do with it. Abrar smirked. Conversations resumed. The blame game of ‘foreign buyers should pay fairer prices’ resumed. In the midst of it someone mentioned local politics and Abrar zoned out.

This time two days ago, Abrar had been gainfully employed. The pair of siblings he tutored were on vacation. Abrar had been halfway down the lane from the siblings’ house, after a difficult day of teaching the younger brother decimal places, when the kid screamed about his vacation plans from the balcony. Before Abrar could ask him when they would be back, the kid had run back inside. Today’s lesson plan had included radioactivity, for the older brother. He would have touched upon the half lives of radioactive isotopes. Abrar found it an easy topic to teach. *Given the decay constant of*

Lithium 8 is 0.825/ sec, calculate its half- life. There are 18.93 grams of this isotope, how much of the isotope will remain after 3 years? Abrar imagined himself saying. It enthralled him to know that decay in and of itself was a clue towards the original state of things. Carbon dating meant ancient objects could be traced back to their own era of creation. *The truth over ambiguities*, thought Abrar. It seemed poetic to him.

“I will be off, Zohair bhai,” said the unbrowed man.

“How come? Have lunch,” said Father.

“Not today, bhai, have errands,” the man replied. “Besides, we are stuffed already.” He took his leave and the rest of the guests followed suit. Abrar couldn’t believe his luck; it was only 11:23 a.m. Ripon walked them to the main gate. Father pulled back the curtains to let in maximum light, and settled himself on the sofa with a newspaper. Abrar sat opposite Father; the sofa was still warm from the person who had last sat on it. Abrar knew precisely what to say, but the words weren’t forming. He rubbed his birthmark. He splayed his feet apart and dug his sandals into the floor so hard that some of the rubber sole wore off.

“Abbu,” said Abrar. He called Father Abbu. Father made an indiscriminate sound in his throat.

“I applied for an electrical engineering major, and a business minor,” said Abrar.

“All right.”

“All right?”

“Yes,” said Father, not looking up from the newspaper.

“Abbu, electrical engineering,” said Abrar. Father lowered the newspaper. The lines on his face looked smooth, and a small smile seemed about to emerge at his mouth.

“Good. You have a brilliant mind, engineering will keep it sharp. Better decision making in business,” said Father. *Whoa kid, did he just give you the green light*, thought Abrar, and he breathed out louder than was dignified. He scanned the snacks on the table for a celebratory sweet. He wanted a syrupy, purple gulab jamun. Of course, solving tough engineering problems would keep him a fast thinker. *Wait, wait*, said his inner voice. It dawned on him that Father still expected him to run the business after he finished his engineering degree.

“Abbu, I can’t take over,” said Abrar.

“In time you will conquer all self doubts,” said Father.

“It’s not the doubt,” said Abrar. He didn’t want to elaborate.

“No?” Father slapped the newspaper on the table, and suddenly laughed so hard his shoulders shook.

“Look at this. The nerve,” Father said, waving his hand over the newspaper. Perplexed, Abrar picked it up. There was an advertisement for the Ujjalmisti sweet shop.

Across the bottom of the page, written in red ink and a cheerful font, ran a quotation:

“Ujjalmisti has the best sweets in all of Bangladesh. Absolutely fantastic. It is the duty of every Ujjalpur resident to love Ujjalmisti, ’ opined our beloved Zohair Haidar.” In any

other time Abrar would have found the fabrication funny. He felt dismissed, and once Father stopped laughing Abrar pursued the topic.

“Abbu, I don’t want to run the factories.”

“You have four years to decide that. What’s the rush?” asked Father. His eyes were tinged gray, and they drooped more than they had during the time the guests had been around.

“I decided already,” said Abrar, louder than necessary.

“You would rather someone as incompetent as Ripon ruin what I built in my entire lifetime, hmm?” asked Father. There was no trace of anger in his voice. With his arms resting on his belly, Father looked completely relaxed.

“No, but...” said Abrar. His head felt heavy and he couldn’t come up with anything else to say. Father put his hand on Abrar’s palm.

“Son, you say that now. Wait until you have the first taste of success. The moment you realize the decision you made was the correct one, the tensions you endured were worth it, the vision you had materialized itself with perfection,” said Father. *Not my vision*, thought Abrar. If Father felt Abrar flinch, he showed no sign of it.

“Son, think of the workers you are responsible for. You will crave success for the sake of those poor souls. You will endure much because you can save them from bone crushing poverty. I know I have done so, and you have a good heart. These poor women are depending on you. Son, you are at liberty to let me down, but you cannot let them down,” said Father. His hand felt heavier and heavier by the second. He spoke softly. But Father tilted his head the way he used to when he would explain an important concept during Abrar’s childhood. *Responsibility, responsibility*, thought Abrar. He was clueless as to how he would escape the responsibility.

“Open a school for the children of the empowered workers. Destroy the shackles of ignorance and illiteracy for the next generation. Transforming the lives of people around you is an incomparable experience, and I want you to have that experience,” said Father. Abrar reasoned that telling Father the whole business stank would be churlish.

Besides, he would have to repeat this conversation again in four years. Abruptly, Father got up and served Abrar a bowl of Ujjalmisti yogurt.

“Here, fulfill your duty,” Father said in a mock official tone.

“Right, Abbu,” said Abrar. The yogurt was sweet, dense and cool. Languidly, Father settled back onto the sofa with the newspaper. *Expiation for four years, kid*, said the voice in Abrar’s head. He ought to get Doob grass and Arjuna bark for Dadu.

Chapter 4

Nadim

The early risers have picked the front yard clean of all fallen mangoes. I am loafing outside, looking for Ridwan. He has gone out. This town is bliss for goat herders but the rest of us can turn into boredom philosophers. Don't think he's at the Arcades, the videogames there make Pong look exciting. I need to start exploring the forest. Obviously such a thing is forbidden by grownups, and if Ridwan tags along I can always blame him if I get caught. There are hairy-spiralled stems in the ash gourd vine. I pick a few. It would be fun to throw those at kids and pretend they are worms, or baby snakes.

The main gate opens and there are Ridwan, Abrar and that guy, Moin. Ridwan's holding a packet in his hand, but it doesn't look like it's anything deep-fried. I go to the other side of the yard by sprinting noiselessly and hiding behind hedges. I do this often, to train myself to be undetectable. I shake a guava tree. One guava falls. As I am about to bite it a fat worm squelches its way out. Worms have an interesting life, eating the home they live in. I fling the guava and it bounces off the shadow of Abrar's head. Nowadays he is trying to look what grownups call 'sophisticated', but just as goats should, Goatman is carrying long grass. Interesting, Moin is talking to Abrar, and I hear 'Tushar'.

"...Has dengue fever. He is very weak. I am going with your Hasan uncle this evening to the hospital. Tushar is in ward 39F. You should come," says Moin. I run at them. I don't know Moin very well but this chance is too good to miss.

"Don't you know? He is scared of Tushar, really scared. Tushar beat him up real good," I say. I smack the air as demonstration. Awesome, Abrar is knitting his eyebrows. Moin catches my hand, which was nearly going to hit Abrar.

“I heard you had a misunderstanding...Tushar is your oldest friend. Make an attempt, you won't regret being courteous. Later, when you start networking for your career, this kind of initiative will speak in your favour...I am not saying you should go today, but go before you leave. 39F,” says Moin. I want to go. In school, the juniors have different break times than the senior students, so I haven't had the opportunity to watch many Abrar-Tushar fights. Moin has a few gray hairs but little wisdom if he thinks they are all set for a happy reunion. Abrar shrugs. We walk slowly to the inner courtyard. I peek inside Ridwan's packet: there are tailored clothes for his mother, and medicine.

“You went out alone?” I ask. Moin taps my shoulder.

“No, I went with him. Children are not allowed to go out alone, understand,” says Moin. I nod in agreement. What's going on? Abrar is dashing towards the grapefruit tree, which is at war with the door. Its bunches punch at the bricks. Abrar crouches over a lizard. Its front paws are burrowing into the earth and the rest of its body is trapped beneath a rock. How did he notice it? The lizard's head is only shades lighter than the soil. It's one of the common yellow-bellied ones that inspire children to chop off its tail. Clearly his mania for setting small creatures free hasn't subsided.

“There,” he mumbles and the lizard scurries away. Abrar gets up. I stick out a foot but Abrar jumps over it. I was telling you about my pet turtle Blinky. It was a good pet. For some reason Abrar was a little mad at me. I was racing a remote control car around the house, when he threatened to set Blinky free. I wasn't worried at first because it would be low even for his standards, but Abrar is full of criminality. I ran to the aquarium, but it was empty. I searched everywhere until I found Abrar stooping next to the drains. He was watching Blinky walk towards the filthy drain water. I tiptoed, but

when I tried to push him in the drain, he spun around like he knew I was there. I managed to give him a black eye.

Abrar looks at me as if he can read my mind. “Are you still rankled about your turtle?” Abrar asks.

“No, no,” I say. Ridwan stands between Abrar and me.

“If you wanted to catch that turtle, you could have. It’s a turtle. It wasn’t walking fast,” says Abrar, His Smugness. Next time he will swim in the drain.

Moin goes off to join all the uncles, but Abrar tags along. Ridwan thinks his mother will be in the dormitory room. It is a high ceilinged room. It has six single beds, which makes it a good place to play Crocodile in the Water. You jump from one bed/island to the next without being caught by the person/crocodile that runs around the floor. Our distant relatives from the villages stay here when they have to go to school in Ujjalpur. All the battered desks and dusty books are lined up against the wall. Right now it is densely populated by my aunts and cousins. They are making *mua*, sweet balls of puffed rice. Ridwan’s mother is at the far end of the room, near Warda. Gold bangles jingle as I move through grownups. Too late, I see a thin, old lady and even the dust particles around her seem to defy Browning motion and move in straight lines. Dadu is sorting out the *mua* to be distributed amongst family and neighbours. Ants carry away chunks of rice with supreme disregard for Dadu’s allotment. I follow Ridwan, staying behind his wide back because Dadu is coming in our direction. There are eight people around me, which should be adequate cover in case of an emergency. Just as Dadu is about to spot a hole in my t-shirt Abrar steals the show.

“Assalamu alaikum, this is for you,” Abrar gives the grass to Dadu. The long grass is such an odd gift that people stare.

“Walaikum. Doob grass. Where did find it? I haven’t seen any hedges around here,” Dadu smiles, and her usually knotted eyebrows are smooth as seas in sailors’ dreams. Ridwan goes to his mother, leaving me in plain sight. On my left is the bed Warda sits on, and on my right a group of aunts sitting on the floor making mua. I squat behind the aunts.

“Near the rail tracks,” says Abrar. What was he doing there?

“I sent many people looking for this. May Allah prolong your life, Abrar,” Dadu says softly. People gasp. Getting a compliment from Dadu is as rare as a fly escaping from a butterwort.

“Oh, you are so responsible and caring,” coos Ridwan’s mother at Abrar. Although she looks like Warda she is a kind lady. Out of a scientific curiosity to see if objects of different weights really hit the ground at the same time, I had dropped Abrar’s dumbbell, his Lego helicopter, and the knights from the chess set out of the window. I must admit it was a bit of a failed experiment, because the knights were too small to keep an eye on, but the helicopter smashing was awesome. Ridwan’s mother had seen me but she kept it a secret when Abrar threw a tantrum.

“You’ve turned so handsome,” says another aunt, looking at Abrar. Several people murmur in agreement. Beautiful people are a visible minority in our family; maybe that’s why the women have such a fanciful opinion. Abrar nods, but nobody notices. I step on a metal lid, which makes a twang sound.

“Nadim, how are you? Oh, look at you. Did you grow three inches taller in three days? Here have some mua,” says Ridwan’s mother, pulling my cheeks and plastering them with congealed syrup. I grimace at her, and wait for Dadu to continue her unfinished lecture from the other day. Incredible, Dadu hasn’t started berating me yet. I turn and see that Dadu is looking at the girl with two ponytails, who is making a garland with red flowers. I stuff the rice balls in my mouth, warm and crunchy, just as I like them. She’s right. I have slanted eyes, spectacular winged eyebrows, and the tousled hair you see in shampoo ads. People are always saying I look cute in my own way.

“You want to play?” the girl with two ponytails asks Dadu.

“No, *jaan*, my time for playing is long past. I need the hibiscus,” Dadu says. I doubt she played much as a little girl either. She is an austere sort, and Ma attributes the trait to Dadu’s early widowhood. But I suspect Dadu was a kid who invented complicated rules for otherwise simple games.

“I am going make sleeping oil. I will boil the Doob grass and hibiscus in coconut oil. Massage it on your head before sleeping, and not even thunderstorms will wake you,” Dadu says. She strokes the grass and gathers the soil that clings to it. It’s time to get out of here. I tiptoe and tug Ridwan’s sleeve. Mistake. Dadu looks at me. I think the holes in my t-shirt keep me well ventilated.

“Nadim, how are you? Ah well...you will come to me in the evening, as I told you last evening; it’s time for a haircut,” says Dadu.

“I don’t need a haircut. Waste not, want not,” I say. Several aunts laugh. Dadu crosses her bony hands.

“This is a house not a jungle. Ah well, there are neem pellets drying on the roof. Get them,” orders Dadu. I take another bite of rice balls and go to see what Warda’s up to, or else Dadu will tell me to do something else.

Warda has oil pastels in disarray about her, and the colours have names like tongue twisters. She has sketched a large picture of a necklace from a black and white photograph, and she is colouring a large green teardrop. She is obsessed with details. Tiny red and blue flowers jump out of the page. The squiggly lines are actually gold petals.

“Dadu, which stone is the oval here?” asks Warda pointing to the painting. Dadu walks over for a closer look. Abrar follows her, probably to get more praises.

“What are you doing?” I ask Warda. She crinkles her eyebrows as if to say, ‘*what does it look like?*’ but she is generally nicer when Dadu is around.

“I am painting it. Dadu, I wish I could wear the Mughal necklace at my own wedding,” says Warda. Dadu lifts her chin and knots her eyebrows.

“Oh, that’s gorgeous,” says Abrar, looking at the painting. What? No, Abrar can’t start being nice to Warda. I need her on my side, for the things I am planning ahead. Actually, I don’t, if my plan goes according to plan. Dadu whips around at Abrar.

“Abrar, don’t tell me you are struck by the Mughal necklace mania. Huh, anyone fascinated by that necklace gets deceived. Warda, it’s a sapphire. That necklace is gone, and I am sure your mother has other jewellery made for your wedding,” says Dadu. Warda frowns. People go nuts about that necklace, for good reason; it caused bloodshed before the Vultures stole it from our family. Abrar has a sheepish grin.

“Hmm? Necklace mania? No, look at that beetle,” says Abrar. On the teardrop, there is a beetle with metallic green wings. Dadu smiles. The moment Dadu turns her back Warda flicks away the beetle. Abrar can’t catch the beetle in time, and it lands in a tub of syrup. He looks upset, which suits him well.

“You know what bugs me?” I say to Warda.

“No,” says Warda.

“These gems have such a bloody history. They shouldn’t be on a stupid necklace...they should be on bombers or jet fighters,” I say.

“How many ruby studded jet fighters have you seen?” Warda asks. She adds finishing touches to the sketch.

“You are missing the point,” I say. The stones have been around a long time.

As legend goes, a Persian king fell in love with a sycamore tree. Loving a tree was probably a compensation for the cruelty he inflicted on his conquered subjects. He adorned the tree with gold and precious jewellery, and appointed a guard to look after it. The king decided when he would meet his sun god, Ahura Mazda, he would appeal that he had loved the tree intensely, and purely. Since pure love was holy, the king hoped to enter paradise. The guard would sit under the tree’s shade and wonder whether it would be a capital crime to cut it down, present its log at the king’s court, where it could fuel the fire for cooking a meal for the king’s slaves.

Meanwhile, there was thief who admired the way eagles swoop up their prey and fly away. He wished for wings. He had heard of a Greek fellow who flew with wax wings, and the wings melted away. The tragedy consoled the thief, because he thought

the Greek fellow shouldn't have gone so near Ahura Mazda. Arrogance in the face of gods was never a good idea. The thief believed the Greeks were a dim-witted lot. Before his time, the Greeks kept warring with Persia despite their humiliating defeat to King Darius. In complete humbleness, the thief prayed for success in his chosen profession. One night as he was stealing he dropped a gold coin, and the owner of the house woke up. The owner would have seen the thief crouching at a side, had it not been for a cat with gleaming green eyes. The cat meowed and the owner went back to sleep. The thief understood the cat was a divine gift. He took the cat and learned stealth from the creature. Rumours of the bejewelled tree circulated his village, and he went looking for it. When he found it, the guard was busy stewing in dark thoughts. The thief disrobed the branches of their jewellery and leapt away just like a cat. The guard was executed.

The thief sold the jewellery to a goldsmith in Persepolis. Among the jewels were a large ruby and green stones with the clarity of water. The stones were so beautiful that the goldsmith couldn't stop gazing at them, and he burned his own hands while melting down the jewellery. The stones were worked into an ostentatious goblet for a nobleman, who took it to his tomb. Over a century and a half later, a farmer churned the soils of his newly acquired land. He was going to spear manure. This activity was the highlight of his day; he took a handful and caressed the soil with dung when he felt an unyielding structure beneath his palm. He dug and discovered the tomb.

A dispute broke out over the rightful ownership of the treasures. The previous landowner claimed his forefather was the one buried in the tomb and he had forgotten the fact. No one believed this, because the previous landowner was tyrannical and he seized everything. However, the previous landowner was also fond of drinks, and one night he

had one too many and ended up blabbing that he buried the treasure underneath his bedroom. The same night he was murdered and the treasure went missing. Years later, the goblet was seized from a good friend of the murdered landowner by an invading Mongol army. Every village, town, or city the stones reached, bloodshed and warfare followed, until they ended up in the Mughal India. In the court of the emperor Aurungzeb Alamgir, the stones were fashioned into the necklace in the photograph.

Scholars, frauds, soothsayers, and sick people came to see the stones in crowds. The stigma attached to the stones as bearers of misfortune was never erased, and some people feared not showing their respects to the stones would incur their wrath. Soon, the aura around the stones changed. Tales of the stones healing property circulated in places the wind didn't reach. People wanted to touch the stones and be blessed by them, as they believed they could change their fortune. The medieval people named them the Stones of Destiny. They wanted to set up a shrine, and this was forbidden. The viziers reminded the people that the stones were merely a powerless creation of Allah, that there is no might or power besides Allah. Then one vizier proposed hiding the necklace from the public, as it was weakening the people's faith. The emperor gave it as a gift to the vizier. The vizier was an ancestor of Mesba Haidar. The necklace was handed down the generations, and Mesba Haidar had become an inheritor.

The hot syrup gives me an idea. I pick up a bowl of it. I throw it at Abrar, but he moves. Amber rains down on the floor. I pretend to fall.

“Aahh,” I scream. I fell too hard and now my temple is throbbing from the impact with wood. Aunts rush to help me, but steam from Dadu’s nostrils are the first thing I see when I look up.

“Why do you fail to act your age?” Dadu asks with her hands folded on her belly. Why is she failing to act her age? Shouldn’t she be getting me ice? Anyways, what’s it that grownups say? Yes, ‘*all is fair in love and war*’. I am sure in human history some old, wise, bearded guy thought hot syrup could be a useful weapon in certain situations. Wait a minute.

“Why doesn’t that evil goon? You didn’t yell at him for getting me suspended from school,” I say. I point at Warda.

“Or when he ruined the Pan Art Competition,” I say. Awesome, Warda stops colouring. She hunches up her shoulders, and narrows her eyes. She is planning something. Dadu snaps at me.

“If you can’t behave, you will be in lockdown. Now get my neem pellets,” says Dadu. She won’t. She always threatens to lock me up, but she knows I can escape prisons.

“Why doesn’t Abrar get it? He is working for the Nobel Prize for bootlicking,” I say. He is staring at me with a straight face.

“Unlike you, he does a lot for me. I made the neem pellets for you, as you refuse to take my *triphala*,” she says, and dismisses me with a wave of her hand.

“Yeah, it’s disgusting,” I say, quietly. I had once thrown up over my father’s original documents after I overdosed on that stuff. My father had been on a two-week vacation after four months at sea. He had ended up hunting down people who could help

him regain the documents, instead of going to the invitations that were thrown in his honour. Dadu takes deep breaths and her frown deepened. Oh no, she heard me. I can feel one of her lectures coming.

“I mean Ridwan needs it more,” I say. I wasn’t kidding when I told you Ridwan has a football face. In the fat round face there are patches of acne, shaped like the red patches in footballs. But Dadu huffs.

“I have dedicated my life to eradicating the diseases that plague you. I am gifted in understanding the value of the herbs Allah’s blessed us with, each a miracle, each a remedy... People from afar throng at my doorstep for a the merest bit of my concoctions. Strangers, unknown... But what thanks do I get from my family? You lot spurn my every effort, pour my priceless tonics down drains, run for allopathic medicine at a slight cough and let their side effects siege your bodies. Ingrates,” Dadu holds up a hand at Ridwan’s mother, who was going to intervene. Everyone stares as she addresses the room in general.

“My progeny mocks me. You lot – your generation, Nadim – laugh in the face of my healing art. Not only do you reject my herbs, you reject wholesome, home cooked food. You twist the very concept of food as nourishment... The things you eat from those outside restaurants! Fast food, huh, my skin crawls at the thought... Do you know how they are made? Do you ever read the newspaper? They fry things in motor oil to make them crispy. They cook rotten food I wouldn’t dare throw in a flowing river for fear of contaminating the water. They garnish infected chicken for you. You, you eat these with the callousness of a cow chewing its cud. You think you are entitled to damage your

immune system, your kidneys and liver,” Dadu says. What? Does she know about the snacks under my bed?

I inch closer to the door. So far away. At the rate of my progress, I will die of old age before I escape. I can’t just dash out, she will call me right back. Besides, everyone will be on my case, telling me how I nearly gave Dadu a stroke. Although, Dadu is still using her quiet voice she is getting redder. She is looking at me and I have a feeling in my intestines, kidneys, or wherever that things will get personal.

“I soldier on to preserve your liver, detoxify your blood. But you, Nadim, you do not accept my gift. You do not appreciate my sacrifice. You stand before me, my own grandson, as a testament of my failure... How do you think it looks when all these people flock around me for herbal remedy and then they see you? Snot down your nose, constipation or loose motion all year around...and those horrible boils full of pus all over your hands and feet,” she says.

“Aha, those are just summer boils. It is normal,” says Ridwan’s mother. I agreed with her completely. Dadu continues as though there had been no interruptions.

“Do they know you are disobedient? Do they know you do not take what will heal you? They do not. They believe I do nothing for, or worse, they believe my cures don’t work. They see you and they underestimate my abilities. Do you think that is fair on me, your loving grandmother? I, who nurtured you, guided your mother in raising you. Before you belittle my magnificent *triphala*, my neem pellets, tell me is it fair?” says Dadu.

“I am going. I am going,” I say. I run out of the room before she can rant some more. I reach the staircase sporting, and spring up the stairs fast enough to make cheetahs ashamed. A muscled man is coming down the stairs. He is wearing a *lungi* and a blue

fake Lacoste t-shirt. The alligator logo is nearly unstitched. I stop just before hitting the Alligator's pointed teeth. The man's eyes are far apart, and you could easily draw a third eye between them.

"Bhaiyya, where can I find Abrar bhaiyya?" the man asks. Interesting.

"Why?" I ask

"I just need to see him before the feast. It's important," says the man in the local dialect. He talks slow, like the words had to be persuaded to travel all the way up his oesophagus.

"What feast?" I ask. Who would invite Abrar?

"The grand feast," he said.

"What grand feast?" I blurt out. The man smirks.

"Are you saying you saying you don't know about the feast? The feast that will happen in this house? Everyone knows...Everyone in town is talking about it. Haw, you're joking...How can you not know? An *educated* person like yourself?" This sounds doubly annoying in his long-winded dialect.

"Oh, that," I say. He means the one in Zohair chacha's honour.

"What day is the feast?" he asks with a lopsided smile. Is he quizzing me?

"Saturday. What do you want with Abrar?" Dang. It is maybe on Friday, or Sunday.

"Oh, oh, mister. You should be in the headline. You don't even know it's on Friday," he said. Awesome, a transition from being called bhaiyya to mister means you will be the laughingstock.

"Do you have a message for Abrar bhaiyya," I ask, sounding as grownup as I can.

“I have talk to him, bhaiyya,” he says. He stops smiling.

“He’s in, err, you know the, err, at the Progress A-Level coaching center. It’s at the other end of town,” I say. The man nods, and points in the direction of the coaching center. That will give him some exercise. Nobody makes fun of Nadim Haidar. I pound up the stairs and check under the bed. The junk food is safe.

I go to the roof. It’s hot and so dry my skin is shrivelling as I crane my neck for a sight of the neem Pellets. I don’t trust this dryness. It reminds me of the way oceans retreat as though a giant plug opened up at their centre before a tsunami hits. Someone has just hung clothes to dry. A pail with water that was probably squeezed out of the clothes is standing abandoned. A breeze flutters the clothes and I see a sari spread out, through the gap that is momentarily created. I jumped in the narrow spaces between metal pipes to the edge of the roof.

I lift the sari. Some neem pellets spill out and roll, gathering dust. To think those little mites are going to flush out my system. The sky is a pristine blue, unblemished by clouds. I throw the damaged pellets at it. Wait a minute, don’t grownups always say staring at nature is sublime, or something. I look at the sky but no epiphany hit me. Dang. Pigeon poop hits my shoulder. I fling a rock at the offending bird. It misses. I growl. The sparrows fly away but a magpie caws right back.

“What was that?” says a maid, poking her head out the kitchen door. The gold nose ring in her nostril glints. She can’t identify the source of the sound. She suspiciously eyes a cat that’s prowling on the ledge of the lower roofs. I sit under the shade of the water tank. Dadu will get her neem pellets when she will get them. People quarrel in the kitchen. *Splash*. A boy jumps in the river from a tree. A bouquet of clear water rises up

and drenches two kids who are skipping on the shore. Yes. The boy bobs in the water and splashes water on a woman who is sitting on the shore. She raises her fist at him. I want to swim. The water must be ice cold. It will take me a minimum of eight minutes to make it to the river. I spring up, and splash the water in the pail over myself. The imbalance of sensations between wet and dry skin is unpleasant. Oh Nadim, you are smarter than this.

I grab the pail, and march back. I stand on the pail and wrench the heavy lid off the water tank. Brrr, the water is cold. A shaft of sunlight illuminates my arms. I duck my head in and out just to see my arms look disconnected through refraction. I hold my breath for three minutes underwater because I can. I get out and shake myself like a wolf. I want to howl but the kitchen maid might notice me this time. I sit in the sun to dry. The town is quiet now. It's lunchtime. A nap will be nice. I am feeling bad about throwing the rock at the pigeon. I remember this preacher who always pleads, *'protect the environment. Preserve its awesome beauty for the fishes, beasts, birds and bees. They have no afterlife like you and me. The world is their Garden of Eden.'* I feel sorry for the Siberian birds that are compelled to follow the magnet in their heads and fly and poop over foreign people. What if one winter, they want to stay home? My sympathy lies with the birds, not the Siberian population, and not the human population by extension.

A cat meows. I turn around. The cat is alarmed at the sight of the monkey-hawk gargoyle that is standing behind me. Wait a minute. Gargoyles aren't native to Bangladeshi architecture. Besides, why would anyone put a gargoyle on roof while my back was turned? I spring up and look again. But the gargoyle isn't there anymore. I look around but there are too many lemon trees. Then I see it. A shiny bald head is disappearing down a wall that overlooks the kitchen courtyard. Shakil. I run. Dang. He

soundlessly covered the distance from the tank to the edge of the roof in a few seconds. The friction of a body against the wind creates sound. Shakil is holding onto a water pipe that runs down the side of the walls, and his feet are on the ledge of a bedroom in the third floor. I call out to him. He doesn't reply. Surefooted, he jumps on an extended roof of the second floor. He gives me one fierce look and then he vanishes. Plenty of people are milling about the kitchen and tube well. A man holding a jerry can is pointing me out to his friend. I realize I look odd with my stomach flat on the roof and head beneath the ledge.

The rush of blood to my upside down head must have brought me back to my senses. Why is Shakil acting stranger than usual? He heard me call out, all right. Did he figure out I was spying on him? Does he think I was looking for clues? How long was he standing right behind me? I probably didn't hear him over the kitchen fights. These speculations are boring me. Maybe he likes a quiet life and just didn't want to talk to me. You know what, I don't think I have ever heard him speak, only grunt. Try as I might I can't take him seriously. But what was he doing last night?

I scan the area where I saw Shakil's flashlight disappear. There is absolutely nothing unusual there, just vegetation. The forest is a giant salad bowl. I peer at an oddly shaped thing far along the shore. It is a giant triangle, not an isosceles. Dang. How did I forget? It's the Burned house, the Unlucky house. It's all broken down and there are weeds all over the place, but underneath it, there are burn marks and ashes. I heard it burned for two days straight. I don't know how it caught fire. Out of a scientific curiosity I will check it out. I gather the neem pellets and go downstairs.

Abrar

Abrar was on a path that travelled away from town; coconut trees watched over it. On either side stalks of rice stood spearlike against the skies. The paddy fields were empty of labourers, and where the fields broke into rivers ducks swam. The air thickened with the promise of rain and a Sirkeer cuckoo flew above him. Children disappeared inside distant huts. The desire to keep walking to the wilderness was upon him. He had perfect solitude except the man walking behind him. The sun was swallowed by clouds that seemed to stoop with age. *Sadaf*, he thought. The vision of Sadaf amongst her begonias kept returning to him. As children he had always picked her to be on his team. It had felt natural to him that she would be on his team, a person he trusted completely in the way children were capable of trusting others. She was so close, and yet as elusive as the last drop of perfume.

Do I know her? She used to talk to him a lot. Everything was important to her. She used to ask Abrar questions with urgency. He remembered her asking, “look at the boat, there are so many bags of cement, why doesn’t it sink?” And, at a cat curled in the corner, “what do they think when they sleep?” But there was more – she would observe things and tell him as though the world would change if she hadn’t caught it in words. She used to point out ordinary things, and always with that tone of discovery, as though she was that first person to have smelled a Queen of the Night, seen a flower break from its bud, the way two sets of ripples cancelled each other out in a river after she threw two stones, the way tires left marks, the way worms hid in barks, the place where the river curved, the sound an empty tin made when she hit it, the multitude of stars, the blackness of tar, and Abrar’s birthmark. When other children moved onto boasting and telling tall

tales, Sadaf would still hold her breath momentarily and say, “look Abrar, look, that caterpillar is the colour of the leaf it’s eating.” Pretending to be bored he would say “it’s just a caterpillar”, or something such. She must have known he was just as fascinated as she was, because he looked, and he looked seconds longer than other children did.

She started growing quieter when they were around ten. It took him a while to notice that she had shed her reliance on words. When she gave him a pink cowry, or pointed out the pastel green of a Quail’s egg, or showed him an ant hill, or the Tom and Jerry sticker someone had stuck on sword ferns, she didn’t resort to describing the observations. Her silence was so pure that he could only reach her when he thought hard about the things she showed him.

When adolescence hit, they stopped hanging out together. Sadaf started being religious, and she spoke to guys only when it was necessary. Local Romeos thought twice before approaching her, deterred by her natural reserve. Initially, Abrar was thrilled. *No rivals*, he thought. Soon he discarded his optimistic view. He realized he didn’t have much of a chance either. The wind picked up speed. The landscape was slanted. He should be returning home, the elders would worry. Earlier he had spotted a bridge parallel to the route he was walking; he might find a rickshaw there. *Does she know the rumours the other girls spread*, he wondered. In the paddy fields next to him, a submerged boat emanated a white glow.

When Abrar started developing an interest in religion, everyone was shocked. In their assessment Abrar was an arrogant guy, without the capacity for showing gratitude, especially to Allah. Most people assumed it was a passing fancy. But others, much to Abrar’s irritation, kept asking him what near death experience had precipitated his

change of heart. Much to his mortification he realized the rumours about his spiritual inclination were as numerous as birds, but they could be classified into two broad categories: love and death. The advocates of near death experience were the most popular. Some said Abrar was traveling to the Chimbuk hill tracks, and the jeep had swerved and tethered on the edge of a ravine. Others said he'd fallen in quicksand in the treacherous beaches of Cox's Bazaar, and a man who'd lost the directions to his hotel had miraculously appeared on the lonely track, and pulled Abrar out.

Beetu had told him that everyone in the art club was convinced that a girl, who was beautiful in a Helen of Troy kind of way, had broken Abrar's heart. Abrar had turned to Allah for consolation. This particular rumour had captured the fevered imagination of schoolgirls and they broadened it to a sickly sentimental tale that overlapped with the plots of two popular Hindi movies, and a seriously annoyed Abrar had received anonymous phone calls offering him free counselling, and cards wishing him '*better luck next time.*' Abrar's shoulders drooped. *No, Sadaf won't believe it,* he thought, fighting down the fear that was threatening to emerge.

In reality, his curiosity about God stemmed at the physics lab. He had been doing a parallel circuit experiment and he kept getting results that had a hundred and fifty percent margin of error. In frustration he'd invoked Allah's help, and immediately noticed the resistor in the third wire of his circuit. Like an insult to his intelligence the resistor was painted red, and he'd missed it the three times he'd inspected the problem. His brief feeling of animosity had passed and the rest of the lesson had gone surprisingly well, given that they discussed thermodynamics and he usually found entropy confusing. He didn't always feel connected to Allah, but when he did all he wanted was to meet

Allah. At times he was breathless, knowing Allah had intense love for mankind. When he started learning the ninety-nine names of Allah, it finally dawned on him the nature of the one and only deity was absolutely unlike anything in creation. It took him a while to get around the fact that Allah was pleased when a person asked Him for favours. The more a worshipper asked, even if it was asking for a shoelace, the more Allah was pleased. At every moment, Allah was watchful and accessible. He was thrilled to learn there never need be any barriers, or *pirs* (saints) between him and the Lord. *Ever watchful*, thought Abrar.

As a pocket of air formed behind him Abrar felt warmer. *Why*, he thought. The man who had been walking behind him had come too close. *The stalker from the morning*, Abrar realized. This time Abrar had a pocketknife, but he was hoping he wouldn't have to use it. He glanced around without turning, but the fields were underwater and empty. There were raised mounds of earth that bordered individual paddy fields. There wasn't enough room to place both feet side by side. He took a step and soil slid away. Suddenly, there was a weight on his right shoulder. He spun around. Before the man could grab a hold of him, Abrar threw a punch. They fell in the patch of paddy. The new shoots of rice were painful against Abrar's back. A stalk of vivid green rice scraped his skin as he tried to get up. *The water's too deep*, he thought as he slithered back. The stalker was up on his feet. His face loomed over Abrar. Using the ground beneath him as support, Abrar gathered his strength and threw a punch. The stalker toppled over again. The man grunted. Abrar didn't see a knife on him. Abrar's heart beat less ferociously than it had a moment ago. He got up.

“Bhaiyya, I don’t want your money, I want you to know the truth,” the man rasped. It was so unexpected Abrar nearly fell in the drenched field again. He splayed his feet and although every muscle in his body wanted to leap and attack, he let the man stand up. They stood staring at each other for a while but the man’s expression remained inscrutable, neither hostile nor harmless. Abrar didn’t speak.

“I am just a messenger,” the man said.

“Really? What message do you have?”

“Oh, I don’t deliver it. I will take you to someone with answers.”

“Answers to what?” Abrar asked.

“Questions you’ve been asking.” The man smirked. A fresh bout of humiliation attacked Abrar as he remembered the ox’s breath and the stalker’s Bhangra. It was all Abrar could do to not punch him. The man inched closer and he stank of body odour. Abrar flinched. The man’s eyes were set wide apart, and his broad mouth was open. He looked into Abrar’s left eye then the right; which was mildly dizzying. *Get away from the crazy, kid*, said Abrar’s inner voice. Abrar’s muddied shirt clung to him. He glanced at the place where they had fallen. He hoped the rice shoots weren’t so damaged that it would deprive some poor farmer from their share of crop. Fury engulfed him. He double backed onto the main path. It didn’t give Abrar any relief that the man didn’t follow him.

“Your father has history with Qazi Rajakar,” the man shouted. *Qazi, the war criminal? What nonsense*, thought Abrar.

“History this town has suppressed. They just want you to know the *truth*. I will take you to man who knows what happened. Please bhaiyya, please.” The stalker caught Abrar’s attention at *truth*, but Abrar didn’t stop walking. Abrar recalled everything he

knew about Qazi, but Qazi Rajakar was old news and no one gossiped about him anymore. Qazi had been a clothes merchant, and Roshni fupi had bought her first sari from him. Qazi had brought new saris to their house as a special favour. *Why though*, Abrar wondered. As far as Abrar knew, back then merchants would only pay house visits to important clients. But Abrar's grandfather had died by then, and their family hadn't been affluent enough to entertain such luxury. Qazi probably thought the gesture would be good for business. *Ah*, he thought. The stalker was probably sent by one of Father's enemies. A malicious move, no one in their right minds would try to tie an Ujjalpur-loving, people-loving person like Father to a war criminal. Zohair Haidar was a patriot and he forbade anyone to mention Qazi's name in front of him. *Does he have a personal reason for hating the man*, Abrar thought, and pushed the thought away. Avoiding a puddle, Abrar kept walking.

"They are planning to expose your father's dirty secret this Friday, at the feast. The whole town will be there...bhaiyya you want to know the truth," the stalker shouted, and the wind gave a bending sound to his words. Abrar stopped in his tracks.

"What?" Abrar shouted at the top of his lungs, above the winds. The stalker started walking towards him. Abrar racked his brain for any more scraps of information on Qazi. Above him the clouds unfurled like waves. *No, no, no*, he thought, digging his feet deeper in the muddy track. A memory from the depths of his childhood surfaced. Father had been arguing with someone, a woman, and Abrar had never seen Father so red in the face. The woman had been shouting back. Abrar had stood transfixed with a toy truck in his hand as the woman had yelled '*...after what you did to Qazi...father...Qazi's life...comes back...why would...*' Then a pair of arms had scooped him up and walked

away. That was someone who had smelled of soap. Abrar couldn't identify the two women. He knew it was an authentic memory because of the fear that was still attached to it. The stalker reached him.

"Hear for yourself. You must. Come." Abrar didn't respond. The desire to unearth the truth was growing inside him. But the man could be taking him to a trap; he might end up being held hostage for ransom.

"Who sent you?" asked Abrar.

"They want you to understand... They won't send anyone after me...if you are really interested in the truth, this is your only chance," said the stalker, standing still, and holding out his arms, even as the wind beat against him. Abrar stared at the new shoots, a piercing green against the black of monsoon. He felt his heart trying to join the gloom above. *What truth, what suppressed history?* Father had enemies, and the stalker was probably going to give him a pack of lies. But what if he gained valuable information? The idea that someone had gone to great lengths to deliver the truth was too alluring. Why shouldn't he follow the man? *What if something really happens this Friday*, thought Abrar. In his excitement he had overlooked that someone out there knew he would find the idea of truth irresistible. Who?

It started raining, hard, without any preparatory drizzle.

They took a twisted route to the village. Abrar could no longer keep the town's tallest building in sight. Overflowing ditches and the rain in his eyes made him skid along the way. The stalker hadn't answered anymore of his questions. With every house they passed Abrar wondered if the stalker had lost his direction. Pain shot up Abrar's foot as he stepped over something. Abrar picked up the object to move it out of other people's

way. It was a broken pipe, jagged, clean, and the size of his palm. He pocketed it. The more protection the better, he might be walking into a trap. When they reached a river the man didn't enter the cluster of huts, instead he walked towards the water. Vexation started roping in Abrar's veins. It had been daft to follow the man. Someone was playing a prank. Abrar looked around, half expecting to see a camera crew pop out and scream *fooled you*. No one came. The doors and windows of the mud huts were shut. Only a cow was sheltered under a tree. Shivering, he watched the man. He didn't know the shortest route back to town.

The man beckoned. A boat was moored to a forlorn wood apple tree. The man tipped it over and drained the water that had collected inside. It was lightly built and round bilged. A paddle and a basket were fastened to it.

"Where are we going?" Abrar shouted over rain plummeting on the river.

"There," the man pointed to a tiny island a short distance away. In the dry season it would be accessible by foot.

"We'll wait till the rain stops," said Abrar, although it felt cowardly to wonder if it was safe to cross the river.

"I have rowed in storms before," the stalker said. *Whatever*, thought Abrar, taking a seat. Ignoring the way the boat rocked, Abrar peered at the island. Raindrops blurred his vision in a haze of gray. The stalker's face was apish in the effort it took him to keep the boat on course against the gusts. A grove of trees surrounded the bank, completely blocking the interior from view. The man remained mute as ever. The whooshing of the wind sounded like a siren to Abrar. He clutched the broken pipe. *You're being reckless kid*, said his inner voice. The island was secluded and if there were ten assailants in wait,

then he certainly wouldn't be able to outmanoeuvre them. Courage slid away from him like the water between his fingers. He praised Allah and sent blessings upon the prophet (peace be upon him). He invoked Allah's forgiveness and thanked Allah for the blessings. As the shady bank came closer Abrar invoked Allah by calling *Ya-Latif*, one of Allah's ninety-nine beautiful names. *Al-Latif*, the one who saves you when you didn't know you were in danger, and the one who understands the subtlest of mysteries. Then he called upon Allah by *Al-Wali*, the protecting friend. He pleaded, invoking the name, *Al-Aziz*, the victorious. He thought, *Lord of the seven heavens, I take this risk to set things right for my father. You are the only One who can separate the truth from falsehood and lies of my father's enemies. Grant me victory, you are the almighty.* When the boat moored he nearly jumped out of his skin. They reached the island. Abrar sent blessings on the prophet again and whispered *Amin*. The stalker jumped off and moored the boat beneath a broad-leafed tree.

Abrar's cheek scraped against the studded skin of a jackfruit as he moved branches out of the way. Weeds encroached on the courtyard of mud huts. Their thatched roofs were strangely still in the wind, a moment later Abrar realized the roofs were so rusted they looked feathery. A fishing net with weights tied at the bottom was spread out. There was a needle where the twine needed mending. A spinning top was next to an empty hencoop; Abrar was visited by the impulse to play with it. Fishing rods flanked the door of the smaller hut and light petered out from the space between the threshold and the door. The man opened the door, nearly knocking over a kerosene lantern.

"Hey old man. Zohair Haidar's son is here to see you. Hey, wake up." The man shook a blanketed bundle on the floor; a plate of rice and spinach lay next to it. The room

stank of breeding insects, with an undertone of ammonia. Junk was piled at one end of the room. *Strange*, thought Abrar. It was peculiar that there was a bone china set, and a crystal lamp on a mahogany table in midst of the destitution. *Come on kid, how do you think these got here*, said the mocking voice in his head. Abrar pushed aside the uncharitable thought.

The stalker pulled the blanket to reveal a face so withered it resembled an intestine. The old man looked at Abrar and let out an inhuman cry.

“You...no hu-rt, hurt me,” cried the old man. His voice had strange accents as though he rarely used it.

“Ssshhh, calm down, ssshhh...Zohair Haidar’s son. It’s not him, it’s not him,” the stalker said as he patted the old man’s shoulder.

“Wait, he will be normal in a second,” the stalker told Abrar. The old man shook worse than Abrar, who was chilled from the rain.

“It’s you, I can see...don’t hurt me, please...no peace,” the old man clasped the messenger’s hands, unable to take his eyes off Abrar. The messenger gestured at Abrar to stay put, sensing that Abrar wanted to leave the terrified man alone. The stalker crooned something Abrar couldn’t hear, and the old man relaxed.

“Black...yes...black...yes,” the old man rasped at the stalker. *What about my eyes*, thought Abrar. The stalker helped the old man to a sitting position.

“Who is he? Why does he think I am Mesba?” whispered Abrar. The stalker raised a palm and motioned at Abrar to wait. The old man slapped the floor in front of him, and Abrar sat there.

“He responds to being called the island-man. He had a stroke... Talks slow. Don’t rush him,” said the stalker. As Abrar opened his mouth to retort, the island-man gripped his hand. He slithered against the wall and Abrar helped him up. The stalker was slipping out of the room. Although Abrar didn’t like the idea of letting him out of sight, he didn’t have much choice because the island-man was opening and closing his mouth trying to summon words.

“Do you know anything about Qazi Rajakar?” Abrar asked

“Good...ah...man, go-od, fall, witssss, fall,” the old man said. He mimed something Abrar couldn’t decipher.

“Sha...Sha,” said the island-man. Was the he mimicking the sound of the wind because he was cold?

“*Shak*,” the island-man said. In Bengali *shak* means spinach. Abrar pushed the plate of food nearer to him. Abrar was hungry himself.

“Sha, no, no...Sha, Sha,” he said urgently. He stared at Abrar, trying to remember something. Then, without any warning, he crawled towards the pile of junk. Bedsores had eaten his back and the balls of his feet. He didn’t seem to have any more strength left. Fighting nausea at the green furred raw flesh, Abrar placed him back on the blankets. The old man gazed intently at a haversack. Worms greeted Abrar as he unzipped it. Moth eaten clothes and a notebook were inside it. The old man croaked at the notebook and Abrar gave it to him. He pulled a sheet laminated in plastic and brandished it at Abrar. It was a newspaper clipping about an arrest in Calcutta. Before Abrar could finish it the old man waved his hands.

“Aha, Aha, no peace...no, no...falls, falls,” said the island-man, his voice was like the wind.

“Why?” asked Abrar. But the exertion was too much for him. His eyes had a vacant look. Relief swept over Abrar. Although, he wanted to know what was bothering the old island-man, it had been difficult to digest the look of despair on his face.

“Baa, baa, boo,” babbled the old man. The door sprang open and a woman screamed.

“Who are you?” she asked. She was middle aged and cross-eyed. Water slopped out of a pail in her hand.

“Abrar,” he replied, bemused. Abrar explained how he came here with a man. The woman looked at her toes. Abrar had a feeling she was deciding something. She peered out of the hut.

“I don’t see anyone,” she said. Abrar ran out the hut. The rain had stopped. He walked around the island, peering into the dense grove. Under the dazzling sun there was no trace of the messenger or his boat. Fantastic, he thought, just fantastic. He went back in the hut. The woman was sponging the old man’s arms and chest. She had opened the windows, which mitigated the stench.

“How does he know my father? Zohair Haidar’s my father,” he said. She mashed the rice and put it in the island-man’s mouth.

“Come on, you ate on your own yesterday. I have other things to do,” she snapped. But even as she was feeding him the old man dozed off.

“He was trying to tell me something. How does he know my father?” said Abrar.

“Everyone knows your father. Don’t mind my father-in-law. He talks nonsense,” she said. She was being deliberately unhelpful. Abrar’s temper rose. When he spoke next his words sounded chewed.

“He knows something about Qazi Rajakar, and my father. Does he mention them in his nonsense? Do you know what he says? He kept saying Sha, do you know what he meant?” asked Abrar. She turned around. Abrar couldn’t tell if she was glaring at him or the window, until she strode over to the window.

“STOP. YOU STUPID CHILD. You’ll drown. How many times do I have to tell you not to go near the river? Good for nothing just like your father,” she screeched. A little boy froze in his tracks. Abrar guessed he was the possessor of the spinning top he had seen earlier. He felt a twinge of sympathy for the kid. But the cross-eyed woman was right, a kid that small might drown before he could call for help.

“Who is he? Build a fence around the bank,” said Abrar.

“Grandson... Fence, huh, I wanted to. But his father is a good for nothing gambler, isn’t he? His mother works in the town and keeps her money to herself, doesn’t she? I watch him every minute,” she said in a gentler voice. She seemed to regret this immediately. She whipped around at Abrar.

“I don’t want any trouble. We don’t have anything against your father. Why are you asking all these questions?” she looked mad with her crossed eyes. Exasperated, Abrar told her again about the man who brought him here.

“He started mentioning your father and Qazi Rajakar only a few months ago, around the time he caught pneumonia. He is not lucid and none of us, me and my sons, know what he is trying to say.”

“Have you seen anyone like the man who brought me here? Wide set eyes, and broad mouthed?” asked Abrar.

“Plenty.”

“How do I go back to town?” asked Abrar. For the first time during the strange encounter, the woman smiled. She was relieved.

“My son will be here for lunch. It’s far past lunch time, but no one in their right mind would have braved that storm,” she said. She waited for a reaction but Abrar said nothing.

“He will row you to mainland. Have some rice,” she said and left the room. Abrar tapped the old man’s shoulder. The old man opened his eyes and looked at Abrar without any recognition. He went back to dozing. Abrar wandered off and found the woman in a tin shed. The smell of stewed greens was emanating from a pot over an earthen stove. His stomach growled and the woman looked up, smiling. She indicated the cooking would be done soon. Now that she was assured Abrar was going to leave she became friendlier. She sat on a low wooden stool and grated coconuts. The pure white flesh piled up as the woman droned on about the ingratitude of her sons and their wives.

Leaning against metal, Abrar wondered whether a friend or foe had arranged this meeting. How many of his blood relatives were privy to the secret? He didn’t want to alarm any of them. He would wait, he was sure things would develop. Over the rising steam a blackbird was singing, but the music was lost on Abrar. It bothered him that he was quick to believe his father could have a sinister past. Even more, he knew he wouldn’t confront his father. What kind of a son, a man, was he? Unfounded suspicion makes a paranoid freak of a rational man. *Unfounded? You always thought your father*

was ruthless. A crow cried, and several crows responded. The cross-eyed woman had thrown fish bones and flecks of food near Abrar's feet. The sound of their flapping wings dispelled the disturbing thoughts from his head.

The cross-eyed woman mumbled about the resourceful nature of crows. She poured him a plate of steaming rice and stew. He accepted it gratefully. As he washed his hands, a creaking sound made him look up. The grandson was standing on the roof, staring at Abrar. He retraced his steps back to the mango tree he had climbed to get there, making more noise, and Abrar coughed to cover it up.

"You should take a shower the moment you reach your house, or you will get a fever. You city people aren't immune to the weather as we are," said the woman with relish. Abrar ate his lunch. The stew was full of flavours, and he felt restored.

"There you are," she said as her grandson tottered in. The little boy whispered in her ears.

"He is from town... no, he can't give you a piggyback ride...he doesn't know how to play it, stop pestering me and go to sleep," she snapped at the boy.

"I can give him a piggyback ride," said Abrar. The woman glared at him cross-eyed.

"If he doesn't sleep now, I can't sleep and I need my rest," she said. Abrar spluttered on his rice. He reached for a glass of water and took long breaths between sips. Laughter rung in the air, he looked up to see two men making their way to tin shed. The little boy ran to the man who was laughing. He greatly resembled the woman, but without the crossed eyes, and Abrar assumed he was her son.

“Who’s this?” the man asked, surveying Abrar, his eyes lingering on the watch. His companion ignored Abrar. The woman replied.

“Zohair Haidar sahib’s son, Abrar. Row him to mainland after your lunch.”

“Oh, haw, haw, say salaams to your father for me, Bablu, fisherman. Aha, if I knew you were going to visit us, I wouldn’t have rested until I caught the largest Hilsa. Haw, haw,” he said, beaming. Abrar made an indistinct noise in his throat.

“Caught one this big, wasn’t it Ma, or bigger, just yesterday. Oh, Ma, lunch,” he flourished his hand. He grabbed a plate and started eating where he stood. His silent companion settled himself far away from them.

“So what brings you here?” he asked, beaming.

“Do you know anything about Qazi Rajakar?” Abrar shot at him. The man’s smile faltered.

“Eh, ah, my grandfather mentioned him again? The old coot’s mind’s gone.” He said. The cross-eyed woman waved a jar of pickles at Bablu, and he rushed to the tin shed. Their whispers sounded like radio static to Abrar. The grandson was staring at Abrar.

“He says Qazi is a good man...umm, they did it because Qazi knew,” he piped up.

“Who? What did he do?” asked Abrar. The little boy shrugged. He showed Abrar a boat made from a banana leaf, before running away. Bablu the fisherman returned with his mother and the silent companion. Abrar thanked the woman for lunch and she seemed relieved to see the back of him. They went to a flat-bottomed boat that had an overpowering smell of fish about it. Baskets, rods, nets, umbrellas, and a push net bedded with prawns were strewn across his way. Abrar sat near the front, even as Bablu the

fisherman gave him expert advice on balancing the boat. He wished the man would just shut up.

White mesh tangled with the hook of Abrar's sandal. He recognized the net. It was locally known as a current net, and it was banned because its monofilament mesh was notoriously effective at catching premature fish off seasons. When they reached the mainland, Abrar pulled out his wallet. Bablu the fisherman leaned forwards trying to peer into Abrar's wallet. Abrar fought down his irritation as he remembered the cross-eyed woman's grandson. He had replenished his wallet, and accidentally tucked in more notes than he needed. *Come on kid*, said his inner voice. Abrar pulled out all he had, save the rickshaw fare. Bablu the fisherman's eyes were bulging out. His mouth gaped when Abrar handed him the money.

"Build a fence for your son," said Abrar.

"Haw, haw," said Bablu, doing all he could not to snatch the money away from Abrar's hand. The boat rocked.

"My father will be very upset if you blow the money I am giving you," said Abrar. Bablu the fisherman's face contorted. He shook his head.

"Your father? Please no. It was that boy, Tushar. But you weren't supposed to find the island," said Bablu the fisherman. The boat swayed as Abrar lost his footing. He gripped the hull, the eye of a hook cut his palm.

"Tushar."

"Look bhaiyya, I don't know what's going on. My grandfather is a man of many secrets. Someone knows something about him...that boy Tushar, he found out something

and threatened us...But I swear on my father's grave I don't know anything else," said Bablu.

"All right. Look after your son," said Abrar. He needed to gather information. The island-man's trauma was too genuine to be a mere prank. There was no telling what Tushar might do. *Yes, Tushar was well capable of exposing and humiliating Father, at a party thrown in Father's honour,* reasoned Abrar. It was left to him to protect Father.

The front yard was blocked by a red Toyota Corolla, aside from Roshni fupi's van. Its bumper was nastily close to the ixora flowers. Abrar glared at it, until he noticed the bumper sticker, 'Ujjalpur Investment Company.' It was the name of the company the Qazi house had been converted into. Abrar's arms scraped against the grainy bark of a jackfruit tree as he rushed inside the house to find who the car belonged to. He stopped short in the inner courtyard. Father broke off an unripe papaya, and white sap that Mother used as meat tenderizer beaded out of its stem.

"The season's finest," Father said, giving the papaya to Tapan Kabir.

"Assalamu alaikum," Abrar greeted them, hoping Tapan Kabir wouldn't mention nearly seeing him in the lake that morning.

"Walaikum," they said. Despite Tapan Kabir's weak chin, the man had a shrewd face.

"Abbu, I need to ask you something," said Abrar, trying his best to pull a sheepish expression, so that Tapan Kabir would leave thinking Abrar was going to mention some embarrassing incident.

“I will find the driver, Zohair. He has a tendency to take smoke breaks outside a two mile radius,” said Tapan Kabir, with a friendly smile.

“Abbu, do you have anything to do with Qazi Rajakar?” Abrar came straight to it. The papaya slid out of Father’s hand, but he grabbed the stem in time.

“No. Why do you ask?” said Father.

“Please. Can you remember anything at all that might be, err...” said Abrar, unable to find the right word. A red flame appeared on Father’s cheeks. Abrar followed him out. Tapan Kabir’s car was backing against the Gulmohar tree.

“No,” said Father, walking faster, so Abrar could only see his back.

“Abbu, did you know Qazi personally? You demanded his trial and punishment after the war—” said Abrar.

“Everyone did. Why are you asking these strange questions?” asked Father

“I heard this rumour,” said Abrar.

“Rumour? Don’t...” said Father. The Toyota’s engine jumped to life, drowning out the next few words.

“What?”

“Nothing,” said Father. The driver of Tapan Kabir’s car opened the door of the passenger side. *Come on kid, Friday isn’t far away.*

“Abbu, I need to—”

“Abrar, occupy yourself with something useful,” said Father, getting in the passenger’s seat and rolling down the windows. They were going on the tour of the charity clinic. Abrar glanced at Tapan Kabir, who motioned that Abrar was welcome to join them.

“No, no, Abrar, we will be picking up more people on the way. There won’t be enough space in the car,” said Father. Abrar swallowed. The lie had rolled off Father’s tongue too fast. As the car pulled away Father suddenly looked at him, and intense anger blurred Father’s features. Abrar flinched; it was disconcerting to see that fierce expression on Father’s gentle face. *What are you hiding Father*, thought Abrar, as a breeze blew a serrated leaf into Abrar’s eye. He snatched at it.

Across the street, a boy threw a stone at a blackbird’s nest. An egg fell and broke. A thousand children had cracked blood-clotted eggs and a thousand birds had never flown. Abrar strode into the house. If Father wouldn’t tell him anything, he would have to ask others.

Past the dining room there was a living room with a TV blinking red light. Abrar wanted to smash the thing. He swallowed, pushing down his tonsils. Victorian styled sofas were crowded around an antler table, and empty teacups stained its polished glass top. Mother wouldn’t allow cutlery on tables without cloths or mats. Mother, thought Abrar, should he ask her about Father’s past? *She wouldn’t know anything*, he reasoned immediately. She was one of the gentlest people Abrar knew. He had spent his childhood hiding his misdeeds from her, even pranks other mothers readily accepted. Abrar would ask his sisters what mother said in her voice soft as spring leaves, to spare her the effort of repeating herself. He couldn’t imagine Father revealing his past to her, and with a twinge of guilt he thought his mother would be unable to deal with it, especially as it involved a war criminal. He stared at an eagle balancing on its beak inside a walled bookcase stuffed with yellow, brittle magazines, medals and honorary cups. Red light

glinted on the eagle giving the illusion the bird would break its metallic equilibrium. Abrar unplugged the TV.

Illusions, the word imploded in his head. All neural pathways of his brain focused on an afternoon he'd walked in on his Father deep in discussion with a friend who was the manager of a bank. Before they'd noticed Abrar's presence Father had persuaded his friend to deny a client a bank loan. That was why the name Mahin sounded familiar – the client was Mahin. Even then Abrar had given Father the benefit of doubt; he thought Mahin must be a bad investment. *How many others did he cripple?* Abrar pushed this thought aside. He was overreacting, he assured himself. Yet this distasteful business demanded an investigation. He trickled water from a jug on the back of his neck. *Cool it kid*, he chided himself, and walked resolutely to Dadu's room. Lavender curtains were closed on the doorframe, and he asked for permission to enter.

Scents engulfed him. The pungent stench of asafoetida tincture to heal wounds was the strongest, and underneath that note was the sweetness of peppermint oil, the bridal aroma of lentils and sandalwood to lighten the skins of Haidar women, the tang of burnt star fruit juice to clear coughs, the sourness of neem and lime, the sublime scent of pure saffron in a tiny vial, and the smell of the grinding stone. Abrar was alert, ready to conquer, and melancholic all at once. He remembered crouching beneath a banyan tree, the only child still not found in a game of hide and seek. Sadaf's small smile suffused with withheld energy flashed across his mind. He remembered the triumphant smell of blood and earth after he'd tackled a playground bully. A sweater in summer was what he wore to hide his bandaged arm from mother. He remembered a sparrow on a book about the fall of Constantinople. The yearning to soar was nearly tangible.

Abrar breathed deeply to immunize himself against the scent that was so complex it couldn't be synthesized.

Dadu was scraping marigold paste off the grinding stone. Two women were stretching a stiffly starched sari. The three-fold mirror of the dressing table reflected them, giving the illusion of infinite women with infinite saris. Essences and oils were labeled and ordered in a display case. *Dadu was meticulous*, thought Abrar, as she looked up and smiled at him. She put the paste in a bowl and went over to the table underneath an open window. Sliced aloe vera was set on a tray, as Dadu moved it sunlight caught its sap and it glistened as the water light coming from the jug next to it. A platter of herbal curd took up the remaining space. When she looked at a palm fan on the four-poster bed Abrar rushed to get it, glancing up at the ceiling. Dadu spoke as though she'd read his mind.

"Your grandfather could not stand electric fans. Every draught of air whipped his bones. You see he was arthritic, despite all the milk he drank," she said, as she fanned the curd. The two women were straight backed now, their ears pointed at Dadu. It was rare for Dadu to speak of her long dead husband. But Abrar knew the two didn't discriminate what gossip they were listening to, he'd often seen them eavesdropping at doors.

"I gave him mustard oil, and black oil plant. It only soothed him a little. Hmm, we installed the fans much later but I still don't fancy it," Dadu said, and she looked at him questioningly.

"Ah, yes. I err wanted to ask you about err, the war," said Abrar, and the infinite women stopped stretching the sari. The woman with the gold nose ring stared at Abrar, wide eyed. Dadu waited for him to continue.

“Err, concerning err, the famous local people,” he said, he didn’t want to drop Qazi’s name in front of the two women, he’d a feeling they would get very interested.

“Really, they concern you?” The high pitch of mockery rang through the soft consonants. Dadu had three golden rules. One, Allah is forgiving, so no one has the right to despair of Allah’s mercy. Two, one ought to keep their mind free of vain thoughts, and not be interested in anything that doesn’t concern them. Three, herbs prevent diseases, and they are far safer than allopathic medicine and homeopathic medicine.

“War criminals,” replied Abrar. The woman with a crescent nose ring between her nostrils pursed her lips, in the presence of anyone less stern than Dadu, she’d probably start recounting anecdotes. Much to Abrar’s annoyance they were stretching another sari. He just noticed there was a pile of saris.

“War didn’t come to this town, Alhamdulillah. Pakistani soldiers were present in the next town. Ah, as you know they guarded the water towers, power stations and other strategically important sites,” said Dadu and glanced at out the window, which over looked a robust ash gourd vine and a wild mass of grapefruit trees.

“There was little activity around Ujjalpur, because it was surrounded by rivers and marshes. Many Bengalis from the next town were forced to guard rivers at night, against the *Mukti Bahini* smuggling arms. Often they passed intelligence to the guerrillas. Some, well, ah, I remember this man, he signed on to the Pakistani side to guard a bridge he built, but it was bombed. Hmm, nothing major,” said Dadu. She turned away from him, picking up a fragrant bark. He shot a wry look at the two women.

“What about Qazi?” he asked. The woman with the nose ring answered.

“Very evil person, hmm, extremely evil. If you hear the things he did you wouldn’t be able to eat anything for a year. Listen, one eye witness, eh, err, eh—” She faltered as Dadu gave her a look befitting the angel of death.

“Qazi left town in the middle of the war, his alleged crimes were committed somewhere people didn’t know him,” Dadu said. Abrar made an indiscriminate noise in his throat, and stood ever straight. Dadu’s gray eyes darkened. She walked to a meat safe on the opposite side of the room. With deliberation she arranged the star fruit juice, marigold and *triphal*a paste and an iodide tincture on a tray she’d pulled out. Abrar didn’t budge. She beckoned one of the women.

“Take this to Ridwan’s mother, then pick fresh henna leaves,” Dadu gave her the tray. There was an increase in the rustling as the woman with nose ring flattened the remaining saris.

“Clean the hencoop,” Dadu told her the woman with the gold nose ring.

“Only seven saris left, it will only take two minutes,” she replied. Her eyes were doing a ping-pong match between Dadu and Abrar.

“This time scrub every inch properly, with Dettol, before you spread the ash. If you run out of ash there’s more in the rice shed. Go now,” Dadu said as though there had been no interruption. Ash is a desiccant and they covered the hencoop with it to remove the smell. With a great show of folding the sari in her hand the woman left the room. Abrar started fanning the curd.

“So you heard the rumours,” Dadu whispered. Abrar looked up. “I assure you we were not war collaborators—”

“What?” Abrar asked, so surprised he nearly smacked the curd with the fan. The Haidar family were known to have harboured relatives, the relatives of the neighbours and refugees. Wounded freedom fighters were shelter in their house despite security threats.

“How can anybody even imply that?” his voice came out high-pitched. Dadu shushed him, a gesture fit for kindergarten kids, and Abrar felt a bout of indignation. Then Dadu dropped a metal spatula on the floor; it clanged and Abrar saw a shadow move away from the curtained door. Abrar smirked, but Dadu’s face remained gaunt.

“Qazi was a close family friend,” said Dadu.

“A what? What *friend*?” Abrar’s hand struck the table. He winced in pain.

“Careful now, don’t spill the curd,” said Dadu, Abrar moved his fist from the rim of the tray. Dadu transferred a clear liquid to a narrow tube through a pipette.

“Yes, your grandfather knew him, and your uncle Mesba was fond of him.” Dadu said. The temperature dropped. He didn’t know enough about Mesba to process this information. The tube was full to the brim. As Dadu pulled the drawers to get out a test tube holder, Abrar recalled her saying Mesba was an attentive person; he’d help her with her herbal concoctions. Roshni fupi had said he’d always ask them what they needed, whittle wood toys, and mend their torn slippers.

“Qazi was a merchant. He used to go to India to get saris, to visit extended family. When he went to Calcutta, or Lucknow, Mesba’s maternal uncles and grandmother would send us gifts through him...Plenty of gifts, for all of us, hmm, once a suitcase full. Ah, well, Mesba’s maternal side were wealthy,” said Dadu.

Mesba's mother was from an Indian family. She'd been Abrar's grandfather's first wife, but their marriage was short lived, as she'd died of health complications only a week after Mesba's birth. Grandfather had married Dadu soon after, and Father was born two years after Mesba. Grandfather had died in 1966, when Mesba was fifteen, leaving the family vulnerable, as the crops failed on the year of his death. Grandfather had been an E.P.C.S officer and a small landowner, and his pension didn't cover the family's growing costs. With a twinge of pride Abrar remembered how Father had pulled the family out of poverty, how he'd braved leaving the town and starting an importing business in Dhaka. After the war the country developed fast, and everything had to be imported, as Bangladesh mostly sported heavy metal industries, sugar industries and jute mills. There was a chink of glass and metal.

"Qazi used to drop the gifts at our house...it was festive when Qazi came, everyone knew there was something for them, sweets at least. Ah, well, Mesba grew close to Qazi."

"You let *him* influence Mes—" rasped Abrar. He had always considered Dadu as a good judge of character.

"Nobody knew he would do the things he did. He'd never indicated a heinous nature. Ah, he was respected as a fair tradesman. He only visited our house when I had male relatives living with us. It is inappropriate for a man to indiscriminately visit the house of a young widow. Ah, well, wars can bring out the unimaginable in people." With the end of her sari she wiped a drop of the liquid, glossy as a gem. She answered the question raging in Abrar's mind before he'd asked it.

“He would bring news of Mesba’s relatives. I couldn’t deprive Mesba of such an opportunity. When your grandfather was alive, we’d take Mesba to Lucknow and Calcutta. In the five years since your grandfather’s death my brother had managed to take him to Calcutta only three times. I couldn’t manage to send him there regularly...he was extremely helpful, and I needed him around. Alhamdulillah, Mesba got to see them one last time before...” Dadu sighed.

“Mesba couldn’t even talk to them on the phone freely. Ah, well, our telephone was a privilege of your grandfather’s job and the line was disconnected after his death. He had to go to Hasan’s house, Sadaf’s father, to call them, but he didn’t want to impose on them either,” said Dadu.

“Hasan uncle?” Abrar’s curiosity peaked by degrees.

“Mesba and Hasan were good friends...Ah well, Mesba would wait eagerly for Qazi’s updates on his relatives.” Abruptly, Dadu smoothed the front of her sari and pulled a round tray from the space between the wall and the back of the three-fold mirror. She dusted it. Abrar could imagine Father, represented by Nadim, tagging along with Mesba whenever Qazi came with gifts. Had the townspeople magnified and muddied these innocent encounters and portrayed Father as a war collaborator? Was it that simple?

“Why didn’t his relatives come here?” Abrar asked.

“They did, twice a year. His grandmother was too old and infirm to travel. Regardless, you should understand Mesba felt left out. This house was full of my relatives; my brothers came to help us out. My relatives from villages lodged here, to go to the local schools, hospitals...I was fond of Mesba, he was humble and bright and he understood herbs. But others reminded him he was living with a stepmother,” said Dadu.

Despite himself Abrar half-smiled; for Dadu being good with herbs was a character-defining quality.

“I believe it affected him. Before I worked at the Public Administrations office, I supplied sweets to the local market, to make ends meet. Mesba would insist on helping me, as though he needed to earn his right to remain in this house, or any of his birthrights for the matter...I received little help from your father; Zohair considered making sweets beneath him. Your father became practical and empathic afterwards, you know...Mesba’s death taught him things I never could.” There was an edge to her voice.

“Err, right,” said Abrar, he wanted her to get back to Qazi.

“Enough with fanning the curd,” said Dadu, pushing the test tube holder aside. She gave Abrar three vials.

“Put them here in three equal portions. People, huh, always asking me to give them oils and ointments... but they never return my *bottles* and jars, no matter how many times I tell them I will use it again,” said Dadu. Her annoyance was directed at him, and that pushed Qazi out of his mind. *What bottles*, thought Abrar. He didn’t ask her for any of her stuff.

“Uh-oh...the glass bottle you sent me sherbet in, I put it in the deep freezer to drink it ice cold the next day. When I took it out the room was hot. The bottle burst,” said Abrar, relieved he could remember. The failing evening light lent Dadu a soft expression.

“No matter. Ah, well, at first Mesba’s relatives wanted to take him away. They were an old, wealthy family. Mesba would be well cared for there. There were many who said I didn’t want Mesba to live in comfort. Hmm...But what would I tell Allah on the Day of Judgement? I threw the child out of his father’s house? I think not. Besides,

Mesba shouldered many responsibilities, and he certainly wasn't eager to leave." Dadu walked over to the bed, and lifted the bed sheet. Abrar made an indistinct noise in his throat. She pulled out a whole neem bough. Its branches, with a million serrated leaves, sprang apart, but didn't get restored to its original volume. Its bitterness, now distinguishable from the other scents in the room, reminded Abrar of the memory he'd tried to conjure earlier. The woman who'd taken him away from Father's argument had smelled of neem soap. Abrar's pulse quickened. He knew who she was.

"...Well then," Dadu was saying something. He gathered she wanted him to pick out the leaves. He couldn't remember the rest of the memory. Dadu was gazing at the feathery leaves with tenderness. Abrar guessed she was going to start telling him about the anti-bacterial, blood purifying and malaria fighting properties of neem. His impatience heightened as he crushed a leaf, releasing a sharper scent.

Besides, he'd had enough of neem to last him a lifetime. When he had chicken pox, Dadu boiled neem leaves and made him take showers in it. He hated it, and told his mother as much, but Dadu was too domineering for his soft-spoken mother.

"Qazi and Father," demanded Abrar. Dadu tilted her head to one side, and she didn't answer.

"Please tell me about them," he said, in an attempt to sound more polite.

"Zohair wanted to start his own business, something fancy, an electronics shop. He was only eighteen at that time. Electronics, cassette players, toasters, and televisions were considered status symbols...Zohair learned about the import-export business from Qazi. Why do you look so surprised?" asked Dadu.

“Did they make any deals?” asked Abrar. His gut contracted. Dadu tut-tutted at him.

“No, Zohair was eighteen. His ideas were impractical. He thought he could just move to Dhaka and open up a store in New Market, the most popular market of those times. Qazi gave him an estimate of the kind of capital that would need. Even for Qazi’s taste an electronics store was too ambitious, it would require importing from a region wider than South Asia.”

“Your father only became successful after the war. Initially, he sought Qazi’s expertise, since nobody in our family had ever been a merchant,” said Dadu. After the Liberation War, the country went through rapid development. As Bangladesh had sported few heavy industries, much had to be imported. That’s when Father made his first money, through the export-import business.”

Abrar kept his face neutral. Father always said his success came from trial and error, that nobody taught him a thing.

“Qazi must have blown him off,” stated Abrar. Dadu shot him an appraising look, and then went back to picking neem leaves. She was faster than him; she had picked one side of the bough clean.

“He certainly discouraged Zohair. But your father wouldn’t relent...he was eager to start a business in this town. A corner shop first, until he’d enough capital to open the electronics shop. Ah, well, Qazi was well connected. He knew most of the Pakistani officers, and he promised to help Zohair get started, get permits and such.

Alhamdullillah, such a thing didn’t occur,” said Dadu.

“Promised to help,” said Abrar. He felt solid as a rock, and it surprised him that his internal organs could move to produce sounds.

“...Your father...being poor, hated the hand-me-down clothes...meat thrice a month at best... excuses to your grandfather’s former friends for missing events...excited when Mesba’s relatives sent gifts—” Abrar zoned out. *Had Father made some kind of deal with that creature without anyone’s knowledge? What had the senile man wanted to convey?*

“You are ripping the leaves,” snapped Dadu. Abrar looked at the neem leaves in his hand; they were split in half.

“Pick them from the bottom of the stem, gently, understand, gently,” said Dadu.

“Sorry. Err...did he take any loans from Qazi?” asked Abrar.

“What did you hear?” asked Dadu, sharp as a scythe.

“Err, not worth repeating,” said Abrar, softly. Dadu looked down at the neem leaves, and Abrar thought he saw her lips pursed but her expression neutralized so fast he was left wondering if he’d imagined it.

“Not that I know of.” She looked at a jar of sweet broom weed; the label said it was effective for diabetes.

“Mesba was always present when Qazi came to the house and he didn’t mention any loans or any other transactions of the sort. Zohair’s eagerness embarrassed Mesba; Zohair trumpeted that his wish to be the wealthiest man in town...Ah, well, Allah has given him his heart’s desire – whether it has done any good for him or destroyed him is only known to Allah. You do know Abrar, that moneylending is forbidden in our religion, and your father has no remorse over violating this commandment of Allah. If

you take control of the business Abrar I expect you to keep your investments clean of usury.” Abrar hoped she wouldn’t start berating Father. He had heard her vent about Father before, and it always felt like being hammered.

“Mesba was going to study Physics in Dhaka University, and become a Professor of Physics, a prestigious position. We wished Zohair would also pursue physics or pharmacy, or any discipline where he could build a career with a steady income. It’s what your grandfather would have wanted. But Zohair remained adamant about starting his own business. No trivial salary would suffice for him. Besides you know your father, he still considers making money a noble ambition. He’d always thought keeping people in school, then universities for half their lives kept them away from any real responsibilities, kept them a child for too long.” *Fantastic*, thought Abrar, remembering his talk with Father at noon. If Father hadn’t changed his mind in three decades, he wasn’t going to do so in four years.

“He thought it was easy for Mesba to live off the meagre salary of professors as he had a large inheritance from his mother. Besides from his mother’s jewellery, Mesba had his portion of prime real estate in Dhaka. Of course, back then those areas of Dhaka were undeveloped. Now those lands will fetch an astronomical price...Ah, well, if he was alive now,” said Dadu. An ant fly wandered in the room, its body large and red, and its wings translucent as ice. He swatted it, but it hovered in the same spot, a metre away from his ear.

“Ah, anyway, Zohair wasn’t really serious about the corner shop, of course. I don’t think he could tolerate the idea of selling candles and cooking oil to your grandfather’s former friends, and of course to Bajwa, the jute mill owner. I assure you, I

have never met anyone more arrogant than Bajwa...” said Dadu, with a vehemence that shocked Abrar. Dadu rarely held grudges against anyone. She considered arrogant people a trial and tribulation sent by Allah. He couldn’t remember hearing much about Bajwa other than the usual anger people directed against exploitative industrialists and prewar West Pakistanis in general. The ant fly zoomed around Dadu. She gazed at it and recollected herself.

“Ah, well, your father would scan the market, looking for a niche. He went to Qazi’s shop sometimes, to learn the trade. But that was enough for some people to associate Zohair with Qazi. The absurd rumours about your father being a collaborator started over a decade after the war,” she said.

“Why?”

“Ah, well, to sabotage him. As you know, Zohair has a knack for the stock market...” she waited for him to continue. Abrar had a feeling she was trying to glean what he knew. *Just deflect the interest kid*, he thought.

“Yes, err, Father invested in exports, err, frozen fish, tea, pickles and jute bags,” he said. Dadu looked at him still. The tray was overflowing with neem leaves. Abrar got up to get a newspaper to hold the remaining leaves. He was glad Dadu couldn’t see doubt coiling up his face. He pressed his thumb on the paper and ink smeared across an old weather forecast. *neem leaves are acidic*, he remembered.

“Thank you. Ah, Aren’t neem leaves beautiful? Abrar, it’s so sad to see your generation doesn’t understand the value of herbs Allah has blessed us with. They’d gobble fifty pills if the doctor told them... but they fail to understand neem can prevent

boils, ulcers, eczema, infections, blood disorders, immune malfunction, and cure malaria. In the least it will liven unhealthy skin and hair,” said Dadu and Abrar nodded obligingly.

It didn't make sense. Qazi had fled from Ujjalpur in early 1972, so whatever *suppressed history* the guide had insinuated must have happened before the eighties. He broke a branch as he remembered the newspaper clipping. He glanced at Dadu; she was too busy with her herb talks.

“...That's why basil is sacred to Hindus, all bitter plants have the sugar lowering effect, and bitter gourd is another one, when they cook it properly, without a vat of oil and potatoes. Fenugreek seeds lower blood pressure and blood sugar... Chirata leaves are great for diabetes, soak them in water overnight and drink it the first thing in the morning. Ah, well, that reminds me, Abrar, the next time you go out look for Chirata leaves, I am out of stock,” said Dadu.

“Sure,” said Abrar. More bitterness was just what he needed.

“Arjuna bark too. Do you know how it looks?”

“Yes. Inshallah. Err, you were telling me about Father's investments,” said Abrar. Dadu sighed and took a moment to gather her thoughts.

“Ah, those were good investments...your father suddenly became even richer in the eighties when he opened his garments factories. It was near the time of the local elections. Naturally, the local politicians feared he'd try to usurp their positions. So someone harped that Zohair wasn't fit to be a leader as he had been a war collaborator,” said Dadu. Abrar nearly toppled over all of the leaves.

“Abrar, watch it,” said Dadu, without her usual sternness, and continued.

“Ah, well, they didn’t do much directly...just kept mentioning our family had links with Qazi. The rumours didn’t gain momentum. People remembered our generosity to refugees...they remembered Zohair was one of the first to denounce Qazi. He wished for Qazi’s capture and punishment. It makes me nervous still,” said Dadu. She stopped picking the leaves and was lost in her thoughts.

“Why does it make you nervous?” asked Abrar.

“Ah, well, your father was very shaken by Qazi’s betrayal. So was I. If you knew the man you’d never expect...besides, your father was grieving over Mesba’s death, ah, that added to his anger, well hatred really. It consumed Zohair. He memorized the reports of atrocity and spoke of them as though he’d suffered them himself. He couldn’t recover from Mesba’s death in a healthy way,” she said.

“Right,” he said, convinced she was exaggerating. Father would want the traitor to be brought to justice as much as any self-respecting citizen. Father was too purposeful, too focused to waste his energy hating an enemy. Abrar couldn’t imagine Father being one of those passionate fools. *Maybe he was different as a teenager*, said his inner voice, but he ignored it.

“Anyways, Zohair made it clear he wasn’t interested in a political career. However, he publically supported that man Tapan’s campaign, and donated to his party. Then the rumours stopped, or so I thought. Amongst the strangest and stupidest people to roam this earth are the gossipmongers. I cannot fathom what they gained from telling you an old lie. Don’t give them the satisfaction of knowing they have gotten to you.”

“Sure,” said Abrar, as he remembered the inscription on the bridge he’d seen that morning. Zohair Haidar wanted his name to be known. He wouldn’t want his achievements to be attributed to a political party.

“Who got him?” Nadim asked after he’d burst in through the curtains. Dadu sat up startled and the neem branch in her hand flew up Abrar’s nose. Despite himself, Abrar snorted.

“Ah, you, where are my neem pellets?” snapped Dadu.

“Who got him? Did they give him a good drubbing?” Nadim asked, with maniacal delight on his face. He obviously thought Dadu was talking about Abrar. Nadim had two packets in his hand. He gave one to Dadu.

“No one. Bring me that glass,” said Dadu, pointing to a glass of burnt star fruit juice.

“It’s for you,” Nadim gave Abrar the other packet. He hopped over to get the glass, keeping an eye on Abrar. Through a small crease Abrar could see inside the packet.

“Mousetrap,” said Abrar. Nadim shrugged as though he was sure one day Abrar would fall for the trick.

“Well, go on drink it,” said Dadu.

“If I drink it will you tell me what happened to that house in the forest? The one that burned to the ground? The fire was like whoosh, whoosh?” asked Nadim, flailing his arms to mimic flames. *That pest has an unhealthy interest in fires*, thought Abrar. Dadu threw a pointed look at the glass of juice. Nadim took a sip, and Abrar watched the pest splutter over the sour taste.

“Star fruit juice is full of vitamin C. It’s extremely good for cough and congestion. It works far, far more effectively than cough syrups. Listen, it separates the cough in your chest, and makes the cough come out effortlessly, in blobs. You don’t have to make embarrassing noises trying to clear your airway,” said Dadu. *Noted*, thought Abrar.

“I don’t have a cough,” protested the pest, his round face contorted with disgust.

“I know,” said Dadu. Abrar laughed.

“How did it catch fire? Did someone start it? It’s not a wooden house, so how did it burn and burn...I am asking you out of a scientific curiosity,” said Nadim, deterred by the stern look on Dadu’s face. Suddenly, Dadu’s face broke into a sweet smile.

“Abrar, I just remembered there is a grove of Arjuna trees near the Burned House...it’s evening now, but you can go there sometime tomorrow,” said Dadu.

“Sure,” said Abrar. He recalled the story of the Burned House, and that distracted him from further dark thoughts about Father and Qazi.

The Burned House

Over a century ago, a Hindu merchant family lived in the house by the river. The trader had been born in poverty but he changed his fortune. People said twenty-three was his lucky number because at that age the trader married a woman from a higher caste. He prospered enough to buy the house and two large boats for cargo and two smaller ones for his family. But the prosperity didn’t last long. His daughter, who was beautiful as a full moon, started telling tales of how her next life would be better than the one she was

living. It was a harmless fantasy of a vain young woman, that was what the trader thought. She had silk saris, gold necklaces and two young men at wars for her attention. However, her conviction of a better rebirth only strengthened in time. She prophesized she would be born a queen, and she told visions of the future. Names of courtiers and loyal knights rolled off the tip of her tongue.

Convinced the tales were influenced by the Islamic visions of paradise, the trader forbade her from seeing any of her Muslim friends. This changed nothing. One of their relatives, who had travelled to Rajasthan, came to visit. The relative was astonished at the accuracy of the girls' imagination. There was indeed a red, windy palace with a Moroccan style fountain being built. There was indeed an old woman selling handcrafted tapestries which were bought by the residing British and Portuguese merchants, to be shipped off to distant shores. The trader grew nervous. How did his daughter acquire such knowledge? They asked her.

“The old holy man from the forest told me,” she replied, her eyes sparkling like diamonds.

“What holy man?” her parents asked.

“Oh, he came to beg one day and said it was an auspicious day, so he would tell me the future. He comes often,” she said.

In secret, they sent a search party to find the holy man. They found no one. Besides, it seemed as though only the daughter could see the holy man, because no one else had seen him around. The exasperated parents concluded she learned these details from a friend and enjoyed the retelling and self-aggrandizing. They implored her to stop. She responded to their pleading by being quieter. Her eyes grew glassy.

One evening every member of the household went to a local wedding. The daughter wore a beautiful blue Banaras sari, plaited her oiled hair with ribbons, and put on gold bangles and large gold earrings. Everyone stopped what they were doing to look at her. They couldn't tell if she was a human or a fairy. As many people were going, both of the smaller boats were used. People on each boat assumed the daughter was on the other boat, and off they rowed to the mainland. At the wedding, the trader couldn't find her, so he sent his son to fetch her.

The night was too cold for a summer night. It was the boatman who complained of an evil aura. Each lapping of the oar dragged weeds to the surface, and the weeds looked like long fingers. The palpable black water rippled as if invisible feet were running on it. The son would have chided the boatman for his superstitions, but he could almost hear demonic laughter in the whip of the wind. The chicken he had eaten at the wedding felt alive and pecking the insides of his stomach. There was no lamp lit on the premises of the house. They tied the boat, cradled their lantern and went in the courtyard.

A soaring relief filled the son as he saw her in the courtyard, in faint firelight. She was sitting on the silver swing she was fond of. He called out for her to come quickly before the wedding was over. But she stayed in place. He called out impatiently once more, but he realized that her face was oddly skewed, and her doe eyes were not blinking. She wasn't swinging. As he moved closer, he saw her two dainty feet, milky in the moonlight dangling in mid air. She was dead without any trace of poison on her. No one could tell how the beautiful, healthy young lady had died. A week later, on the night of a full moon, the house caught fire. For two days they couldn't put the fire out. They were

unable to trace the source of the fire. The house was called the Burned House, the Unlucky House. To this day, the locals steered clear of the place.

Chapter 5

Moin broke off the stem of a white radish, releasing a vinegary scent that made Abrar want to sneeze. Forkan had brought radishes fresh from his garden. All of Forkan's desire to talk about the intricacies of radish growing had evaporated when Abrar asked him about Qazi Rajakar. Forkan was sitting near Hasan uncle and Abrar didn't dare mention the war criminal a second time. Abrar's face burned at the recent memory. After they had prayed the evening prayers at the mosque Moin had invited Hasan uncle over for a cup of tea. Hasan uncle had taken Moin aside, and talked in a voice too low for Abrar to hear. Moin wasn't as cautious and Abrar had heard him say, "I understand uncle, it's most disagreeable...he is at the clinic now, won't be back until much later." The 'he' could only refer to Father. Hasan uncle was talking with a distant uncle, and Abrar was wondering why he was putting so much effort into avoiding Father. *Boycotting the Haidar house was a new and extreme measure*, thought Abrar.

"Abrar, open the window," said Ripon, breaking him out of his contemplations.

"It will start raining again," said an uncle who was talking to Forkan. *Poor fat man*, thought Abrar. Ripon always felt stuffy, even on cold days.

"I best get going," said Forkan, looking for his umbrella; someone had moved it. Abrar spotted it behind the speckled leaves of a Tovara plant. Moving the umbrella he dislodged a snail's shell lying under the Tovara plant. The russet ridges of the deceased mollusk's home were so ordered that Abrar had a strange wish to reside inside it. He gave the umbrella to Forkan. Raindrops came down like first few drops from a tight sieve. In silence, they walked to the main gates.

“Do you know anything about my father and Qazi Rajakar?” asked Abrar. Forkan’s calloused hands rested on the iron latches as he considered something.

“He taught me how to read...Qazi Rajakar, in his spare time in the shop, he taught me the alphabet,” said Forkan, matter-of-factly. *So what?* Forkan was peering at the streets for an empty rickshaw.

“Something is happening this Friday. Tell me what you know, please,” said Abrar, in an attempt to sound politer. The bristles of Forkan’s eyebrows rustled together as he frowned. A long moment passed. The bells of a rickshaw jingled and the air shimmered with rain. The rickshaw puller wiped water from the settee that had flamingos painted on it.

“I am not in a position to discuss this...when I first learned to write I chronicled my years at Qazi sahib’s shop. I can share some excerpts,” said Forkan. *Why can’t you discuss it,* thought Abrar. The skies were luminous with lightning; perhaps it was a trick of the treacherous light, or was that real pain on Forkan’s face? Abrar watched the rickshaw go. He stared at the deserted road until thunder brought him back to the present. It was raining with full force now. Abrar picked his way through the muddy, grassy courtyard. As the power went out, his last sight was of a person in the entrance room.

The stringent scent of the grapefruit tree made Abrar alert. He stood behind the tree. When lightning flashed again, he couldn’t see her anymore. *You can go in now,* said his inner voice. Outside the shelter of the tree, rain as sharp as nails hit him. As he stepped on the threshold, someone lit a lantern. He froze. She wasn’t gone. Sadaf was next to the threshold, turning the cap of a kerosene can. Her back was turned; her shapely shoulders were relaxed. Over the obliterating musicality of the pouring rain she hadn’t

heard him come in. The elongated shadow of Sadaf's eyelashes fell on the wall. Abrar's silhouette fell on the mirror across the room. Suddenly, he felt so lonely that he wanted to scratch the silver off the mirror.

She won't blow me off, thought Abrar, trying to shake off the hollow feeling inside. She would remember her childhood friend. *Isn't there a law of reciprocity*, he thought. The law that claimed when people were assured of a person's fondness for them, they mirrored the sentiment. That law was true; it was tried and tested. The chill from the rain left him. *Speak*, he thought. *No, no need for words*, he reconsidered. She would just know, in that intuitive way she had known Abrar would appreciate anything she showed him. The fragility of the flowers painted on her lilac kameez reminded him of one charmed afternoon when she had shown him a perfectly spherical water drop, swirling inside a bowl. Only when he had breathed out had the surface tension broken and the water drop flattened.

All he would do was make eye contact. *That should suffice for now*, he thought. Warmth was spreading to extremities of his body. She wouldn't turn him down, yet his breath was caught in his throat. *Make a move*, said his inner voice. She picked up the lantern. Unmoving, he watched her polish its glass casing. Shadows, softening and darkening, danced across the walls. She moved the rag, and the glass of the lantern was clear as air. The fire inside was so pure. Abrar saw his birthmark hover over her shoulder blade. He saw the tip of his finger milliseconds away from her silk scarf. *Fire*, said the voice in his head. He didn't understand. But the voice was insistent. *Hellfire, isn't that precisely why you haven't made a move all this time? To avoid hellfire and worse, taking her with you*, said his inner voice. Reasoning returned to him. He snatched his hand back,

and ran outside. *Just eye contact, who are you kidding? Forgive me Allah, forgive me, forgive me*, he prayed.

“Who’s there?” Sadaf asked. Abrar stood still, not daring to make another sound. The wet clothes weighed him down and he wanted to sink into the ground. *Please Allah, don’t let her find me*. Soon a severe irritation replaced his mortification. *Whoa kid, sunk so below your own standard, might as well—shut up, shut up, shut up*, he thought. As the rain lashed at him he felt the last smidgen of pride leave him. He had always prided himself for being a man completely in control of himself. *What would she think*, he wondered. Would she think he was an impostor pretending to be a pious man? Or a creep taking advantage of the first chance he saw her alone? Bitterness engulfed his mouth as he remembered she had been avoiding eye contact every morning on the rooftop. Soft footsteps were nearing him. He would tell her he was just about to come inside. *Lame*. Then he heard a crash.

“Ouch err, salam, aunty, err, uh-oh I mean apu. It’s me,” said an oddly familiar male voice.

“Oh, are you okay?” asked Sadaf, treading away from Abrar. Cautiously, Abrar stuck his head in the room. Abrar had been too absorbed to see the broad-faced boy wearing glasses with a thick black frames in the far corner. An ID card hung down to his waist. He was clutching his toes. His spectacles fell off his nose. When he bent to pick them up, his elbows hit the wall. *Beetu*, thought Abrar.

“I am okay, thank you, apu. Thank you. Uh-oh, I saw the cabinet. I have fat feet – I mean flat feet. I mean both. All of my shoes are orthopaedic. But I left my shoe at the door. I didn’t know if I was permitted to wear shoes inside,” the boy blundered. Abrar

moved as fast as he could. Sadaf looked at the door to check the validity of the story. Sure enough, rain was sloshing inside a pair of puffy, ugly, black shoes.

“It’s getting wet,” said Sadaf, soothingly. Abrar wished she would speak like that to him.

“I will get, miss, I mean apu. Thank you,” said the boy. Heavy footsteps came towards him. Abrar crouched, hoping Beetu wouldn’t notice him. As he picked up his shoes, the boy gave Abrar thumbs up. Abrar heaved a sigh of relief, and rain found its way into his mouth.

“Oh no, they are making a puddle. Do you think Abrar’s Dadu will get mad? I heard she is very strict,” said Beetu in a worried tone. Sadaf must have shaken her head.

“Oh apu you asked who’s there. I said it’s me. I don’t mean to say me, of course, apu. I mean if everybody said *it’s me*, no one would know who was who,” Beetu said.

“It’s okay,” Abrar heard Sadaf say.

“I am Beetu. I am Abrar’s friend, I promise. You can ask Warda. Uh-oh, Abrar has cool friends, but I am also his friend. Uh-oh, apu, I have a request, don’t ask Warda. She doesn’t like me very much, a misunderstanding about her friend’s cat. But, she didn’t like me before that either. Ask Ridwan, he will tell you,” Beetu said. Abrar slapped his hand on his face, wishing he could un-hear Beetu’s revelations.

“Sadaf, where are you?” said a voice which sounded like cold butter being smeared on bread.

“They are in the drawing room. Just go down the corridor to—” Sadaf didn’t have to finish her sentence. With a pomegranate in hand, Warda entered the room. Beetu’s

puffy eyes widened and he ran in the opposite direction. A faint sneer appeared on Warda's lips.

"Was that Beetu? That dweeb is so annoying he should be quarantined," said Warda.

"Scared of you, what did you do?" asked Sadaf. Warda offered her the gem-like seeds. Abrar watched as Sadaf walked away with the lantern. His face wore the look of a man in a work camp, haunted and haunting. He went to the drawing room when he was sure the girls wouldn't hear him. It turned out that Beetu had called a week ago, and told Warda that his family would be visiting Ujjalpur and he would drop by.

"So she is the reason you don't like any girl in school?" Beetu asked. It was lucky that Ridwan was accusing Nadim of cheating in a chess game, so that no one heard Beetu's a-decibel-too-loud whisper.

"Never mention it, understand? Please," Abrar said. Beetu nodded his head enthusiastically; glad to have a chance to do something for Abrar. They joined Nadim and Ridwan, who had set up the magnetic chess set on a coffee table next to Hasan uncle. Nadim was slapping away the hand of the pinch-faced boy, who kept trying to make the rooks, which had the same poles, stick to each other. For the next half hour the four of them played chess. Consecutively, Abrar played Fool's mate, by choosing white both times, and moving his pawns to F3, and G4, which cleared the way for the black queen to checkmate the white king. Abrar was relieved that there was only one chess set and the rest of them were eager to play; it left him plenty of time to think of the events of the day.

"Nadim, will you call my daughter? That will be Sadaf. Tell her we are leaving," said Hasan uncle, when the rain quelled. He was sitting straight-backed. In the lantern

light his face was more gaunt and sour than usual. But that wasn't enough to deter Beetu. Toppling over a rook he turned to Hasan uncle.

“Hello, uncle, hello. Salam uncle. I am Beetu, Abrar's friend. I would just like to tell you what a good boy Abrar is. Oh, I forgot to ask, how are you uncle?” Beetu asked. *Fantastic*, thought Abrar, as he reset the chessboard and pretended to be immersed in the game.

“Good,” said Hasan uncle, curtly.

“Uncle, Abrar is not only generous and kind, he is as bravehearted as the warrior Rostam. One day, a vicious boy at school stole my paintings. If I may say so they were beautiful paintings. I am good at art, uncle. That boy ruined my paintings, drowned them in toilet cisterns...he is the most evil person you can imagine uncle, the kind you wish you never meet – an ugly soul called Tushar. Everyone, even his own family hates Tushar,” said Beetu. Hasan uncle took in a sharp breath. Moin was gesturing at Beetu to be quiet, in vain.

“Abrar tracked him down and beat him up, uncle. Tushar is big as the *Sabu*, you know uncle, the Jupiter giant in Chacha Chaudhary comics. But Abrar defeated him. Tushar was thrown out of school, ridding our school of a great evil. Yes uncle, Abrar is a good soul, a perfect match for Sa–,” said Beetu. *Whoa, the idiot*, thought Abrar.

“Enough,” barked Hasan uncle, “I know Abrar well enough. Sadaf lets go.” Abrar didn't dare look at her. He heard Hasan uncle march to the door. He might have heard the rustles of Sadaf's kameez if Hasan uncle's words weren't ringing in his ears. Moin told Beetu that Hasan uncle was Tushar's cousin, once removed. Beetu bumbled back to the chess table, red in the face.

“I know you were trying help,” snapped Abrar. Lights flickered to life, and Ridwan extinguished the lantern. Hasan uncle’s thin fingers were coiled on the door bolt. The ceiling fan twanged and he glanced at Sadaf. *Crash*. A scream thundered through the air. Everyone rushed to the corridor. Nadim was standing on the windowsill, possibly in an attempt to avoid the pool of blood, and glass at the centre.

“What happened?” Hasan uncle asked Nadim. It turned out that Ripon had toppled over the brass vase, where Abrar had put the vinegar bottle earlier that day. The bottle had survived the fall but when the power returned Ripon was horrified to find that he was holding a bottle with a live, swirling leech. Ripon was still holding the shard of glass he used to impale the leech. *Nothing’s going right*, thought Abrar, gazing at the glossy remnants of the life lost. Then someone said they should call a maid to clean the mess. Fury was threatening to overwhelm Abrar.

“You didn’t have to kill it,” said Abrar.

“It’s a blood sucker,” said Ripon, as though killing it was a foregone conclusion. Murmurs of ascent ran through the room.

“It was trapped in a bottle, why couldn’t you just let it be?” yelled Abrar, not caring what anyone thought. Ripon opened and closed his mouth, unable to find an appropriate response. An uneasy silence followed. He could feel Hasan uncle glaring at him. The maid with the gold nose ring appeared, and peered over Ripon’s shoulder.

“How did the leech get inside Warda apu’s vinegar bottle?” she asked. Suddenly, everyone started talking at once. Moin was laughing. Abrar returned to the drawing room. The rain irritated Abrar; it trickled on the windows like there was a leaky tap on the roof. He wanted the thunderstorm back. He stared out of a window, hoping to avoid everyone.

Even in the dim light the ash gourd vine seemed feverishly alive. Abrar rubbed his birthmark. He heard a car pull up and Father entered the room. In the harsh white tube light, Father's wrinkles seemed as permanent as the caverns of the moon. *Tick tock*, he thought, reaching Father before an uncle could walk over for a small talk.

“Abbu, I need you to tell me about Qazi,” whispered Abrar.

“Whom? Why the radishes?” said Father. Abrar didn't buy his distracted act.

Day 2: Wednesday

Ayah, Abrar's old nursemaid, lived on the other side of the shallow stream. A boy with a vegetable basket on his head glided over the single bamboo rod that served as a bridge. It always impressed him that a construction so simple was perfectly functional. He strode on the bridge. Vibrations threw him off. *Ya Allah*, thought Abrar. He caught the bamboo rod between his knees and waited for the earthquake to pass. Strangely, the water was still. Gripping the railing, which was nothing more than two rods set diagonally, he scrambled up. He realized it wasn't an earthquake – the bridge was shaking because he'd walked rapidly. *If only the football coach could see me now*, he thought, balanced like an imbecile. *Yes*, coach would lament about all of Abrar's training having gone down the drain. Stepping carefully as a tightrope artist, Abrar crossed the bridge.

Ayah's house was the only brick house in the neighbourhood. But its paint was sun bleached and someone's betel leaf laced vomit stained the wall. Stalks of Malabar spinach rested against a window with flaked wooden shutters. Abrar sighed. The house was a gift from Father to Ayah, for her long years of service for the Haidar family. Goats

chewed garbage. In the courtyard a girl was tossing hundreds of rice grains up in the air and catching them again in a bamboo tray. The process separated rocks from rice. On closer look, Abrar recognized her as Ayah's great-granddaughter. She was tiny, and the bamboo tray seemed disproportionately large.

"A lot of rice there," Abrar said in the dialect. She smiled.

"Yes. I am A-mi-na. Amina," she said. The proper enunciation reminded him that she should be in school. Abrar knew the girl's mother took monthly allowances from Roshni fupi in exchange for sending Amina to school. Roshni fupi's NGO-run school wasn't closed at this time of summer. Suppressing a jab of irritation he watched a goat with brilliant black hide walk to the girl. She stroked it. The goat bleated and she got up to fetch stalks of spinach. Glaring orange fabrics patched her violet frock.

"Do you want to feed it?" she asked, offering him a stalk.

"Thank you. Where is your ma?" he said. She shrugged. The goat refused their spinach and sniffed at the packet of fruits in Abrar's hand instead. He lifted it higher, only to attract a couple of houseflies. Amina laughed a joyous laugh. *Huh, that's what a real laugh sounds like*, he thought. It struck him that lately he'd been surrounded by relatives who laughed politely at lame jokes, or at the wrong times. Or Nadim and Warda, who laughed at him maliciously. The arrival of a tall and fair woman broke his reverie. Her hair was lanky and her cheekbones were too high to be pleasant. The cheerful printed sari she wore didn't suit her; a bitter aura hung about her, traceable as warm breath. He'd seen her before. She often visited Roshni fupi and his mother.

"Assalamu alaikum. Where's Amina's mother?" he asked.

“Working. Why? She is a full time maid at a house. No women from my family had to work outside their homes, you know. They tricked us. My father saw this brick house. He was so impressed. I didn’t know I was marrying into a family of beggars,” she said, jerking her head at the house. The courtyard felt too small to contain her contempt. Ayah’s family were hardworking, honest folks. He was sure no trickery had been involved. Besides, he was a stranger. He didn’t like people airing out their dirty laundry in public. Abrar swallowed his anger. It was a dent in her lip that lent her the look of permanent scorn.

“Why isn’t Amina in school?” he asked.

“Can she scrub pots with alphabets?” she sneered at Amina, who was leading the goat away.

“Roshni fupi can answer that,” said Abrar. She raised her eyebrows and frowned. Abrar had a hunch that *she* was enjoying Roshni fupi’s allowances, and not Amina’s mother.

“She will be there tomorrow,” the woman said, crossing her hands.

“I am here to see grandmother,” he said. The woman scanned the packet in his hand. Her eyes were still for a moment, and he guessed she was summing up its worth. She went inside and called him a moment later. Ayah was sitting on a cot next to a window without bars. Fuzzy shawls wrapped her. Her face resembled a crushed paper, but her gray eyes glinted. She caressed his cheeks. Abrar let her touch soak in, savouring the roughness and warmth imbued in her ancient skin. The neem smell of childhood was replaced by a medicinal smell.

“My *Abrarjaan*,” she said and patted on her cot for Abrar to sit down. Jute bags lined the walls, below a rack full of cups and worn out ceramics, patterned like melting chocolate. A trunk was on the bamboo scaffolding under the roof, next to two thin blankets. Abrar made a mental note to give her a thicker one. Winter of this tropical region could be punishing and fatal to the poor, especially during the Himalayan cold waves. She had no more possessions. It caught his breath. When she’d worked for their family she’d been more prosperous, but then her elder son had caught serious asthmatic bronchitis, and he couldn’t work the fields any longer. Poverty had trickled in. Abrar knew the rest of the helpers of the Haidar family had televisions in their houses.

“So big now. Has the time come for you to make your mark in this world?” she asked. Over the years Abrar had started getting used to Ayah’s way of speaking. As a child he had focused on her tone of voice, or on her willingness to pick him up and carry him around.

“Depends,” he said.

“The crown should fit the king,” she said. Abrar guessed she meant he ought to down size Father’s business if he fell short of being able to handle what it took Father four decades to build.

“If the king doesn’t want the crown?” he asked.

“Justice is closest to piety. Be just to yourself,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said. It was great to hear an affirmation – to feel, however momentarily, unselfish. They sat in comfortable silence for a while. Silence had been banished from the Haidar house. Even white noise was perforated by creaking furniture, squeaking sandals, spoons clanging in glass, laughter here, a shout there, and wailing

children. Yes, he thought. All he needed was silence to detoxify his brain of all vain, unknowable thoughts and longing. Then he'd be able to split the situation into neat categories of cause and effect. But now Abrar didn't want to listen to his thoughts.

When a bulbul landed on the window, Ayah tapped Abrar. Its crest was sharp as a compass needle on its fragile body. Ayah used to show him lizards and birds as she fed him. Later he'd learned it was a common ruse used by mother's to distract fussy children into eating meals. He remembered asking if the world's largest bird would let him roost in her nest. Ayah hadn't spoken in her riddles that day. Plainly, she'd said there were more important things than finding that nest, but that had only intensified his interest in birds. Without his parent's knowledge, Ayah used to take him to the wilder parts of the city where he spent evenings watching sparrows and chasing pigeons. Once in a while they'd be rewarded with the sight of an uncommon bird. He'd been five the first time he'd seen a kite. Its fierce orange wings were like fire in the sky, and he'd followed it on foot. After being lost for over two hours, Ayah had found him on the other side of a shallow swamp by railway tracks, still wet and not entirely disentangled from weeds. He'd been following at a slow moving cargo train, one foot in front of the other, wondering if the train would take him where the kite had gone. That had put an end to their trips. Abrar smiled at the memory. *Every long winded journey has an eventual return*, he thought.

“How have you been?” Abrar asked Ayah.

“I remember the destroyer of pleasures, often,” she said. She meant death. How much longer did she have? Fluffs of white hair tinged with blue escaped her head covering. Abrar sighed. The housefly that had followed the fragrance of fruits landed on

Ayah's palm. Its wings glimmered like a prism. She turned her palm with the slowness of a person underwater. He wished Ayah hadn't mentioned death. Anxiety gripped him with a vengeance for being neglected for too long. The housefly flew to the other side of the window. Despite the low resolution of its sight, its compound eyes allowed it to detect movements in slow motion, and with a greater range of vision. On Judgement Day he'd have the ability to see multiple sides too. The muscles of his shoulders tensed. On that Day of Account, as every soul will wait for judgement to begin, hell will call the accursed by their names. Abrar didn't want to hear its voice. While everyone would be able to see the fire, alive and hotter than the core of a white star, they would be able to smell paradise, five hundred years away. He remembered the bridge to paradise is sharper than a sword and thinner than a hair, and it spans over hell. All he wanted was to cross over to paradise at the speed of light. Abrar swallowed. The nearness of day terrified him. His musculature, which he'd carefully toned, felt like strings drenched in a solvent. *Ya Allah*, he kept repeating in his mind until the feeling was gone. Abrar remembered why he was there.

"Do you remember Qazi Rajakar?" he asked. She blinked but opened her eyes slowly, and he had a feeling she was veiling her expression. Abrar wondered if he'd been right to come here out of the blue. Perhaps she didn't want to remember Qazi. She nodded and tightened her shawls around herself.

"It's to do with my father," his voice came out choked. She gave him a searching look. "I remember my father arguing with a woman about Qazi. I can't recall who the woman was, but she'd accused Father of doing something to Qazi. It was a terrible argument. You picked me up and took me away," he said. She took a moment to answer.

“Wasn’t me, Abrarjaan,” she said.

“I had a toy truck in my hand,” he said, urgently. Ayah shook her head. Abrar stroked his birthmark, as disappointment enveloped him. He’d been certain the woman smelling of neem soap was Ayah. *Two unidentifiable women*, thought Abrar. Both were probably related to him. It raised the possibility that the women had concealed their knowledge for good reason. *I didn’t choose to dig the dirt on my own father*, he thought defensively. This was a precautionary measure.

“You’ve been a part of our family a long time. Did you notice anything unusual between Qazi and my father? Before, you know,” asked Abrar. Goats bleated. The smell of fried aubergine crept into their room and intensified with time. Ignoring his hunger pangs Abrar listened to Ayah. Much of her narration matched what Dadu told him earlier. Abrar found himself filling in gaps so she wouldn’t get too tired. Ayah’s gray eyes flickered. Static electricity sparked through the wool of her shawl. The subtlety of the movement made Abrar guess Ayah was hesitating to say more. *Being direct could be the ice breaker*, he thought.

“Did Father ever make a deal with Qazi?” he asked.

“Strange you should ask,” she said. Minutes flew like sawdust.

“Bring me the trunk,” Ayah said, pointing at the bamboo scaffolding. Puzzled, Abrar stood up and the smell of aubergines hit him. The metal trunk was light and it chilled his skin. *What’s inside*, he wondered. He put it in the warm place where he’d been sitting, and there was no more space on the cot. Abrar wondered if he was on the verge of a revelation. He sat on the floor; his knees felt too weak to support him. She opened the

trunk. There were only clothes there. Abrar let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Ayah pulled out a blue sari and spread it over the cot. *What now*, he wondered.

“Women complain of hand me down saris. Little choice, someone else's taste. Original owners imbue the sari with their memories. Faded colours from years of fading sun. But I keep those saris still, to lock events in their fabrics,” Ayah said. With a hint of annoyance Abrar remembered women often talked about clothes. His sisters spent endless hours gabbing about fashion, and he'd always done his best to forgo the privilege of listening to their conversation. Clearly Ayah didn't transcend this trait. Abrar's interest was restricted to checking out how revealing women's outfits were. Ayah was rubbing around a tear in the cloth.

“My sari caught on a thorn and tore, a week before Mesba died. Such beautiful eyes Mesba had, you know. They contained the promise and joy of plants as they shoot out of earth,” Ayah said. Abrar sat up, alert. She continued. “Your father didn't love for Mesba what he loved for himself. I thought Qazi sahib was just another person for them to fight over, until that day,” she said, her face crumbling. *Sadness suits her like a second skin*, thought Abrar. But he was disturbed by Ayah's choice of words. The prophet (peace be upon him) had warned that a person would not truly believe until he loved for his brother what he loved for himself. Abrar knew that the condition of not being envious and being unselfish isn't all that is required for a person to be a believer, and faith in Allah fluctuates in the heart of a believer. Technically, all she meant was that Father and Mesba simply didn't get along. But it reminded Abrar of the times Ayah told him Satan's envy and arrogance had brought about Satan's downfall. He was sick of the way both Ayah and Dadu were determined to vilify Father and immortalize Mesba with honour.

Sentimentality, thought Abrar. In an untimely death Mesba had appropriated the sympathy of all those who knew him. Abrar wouldn't be surprised if he learned Mesba had antagonized Father and belittled Father's ambitions of starting his own business. *Much like Father scoffs at your ambitions now*, said the mocking voice in his head. Abrar pushed the thought aside. Ayah was watching him.

"Something wrong, Abrarjaan?" she asked. He shook his head. It bugged him even more that she read the annoyance on his face. Although Abrar wouldn't readily admit it, he looked down upon expressive people. His admiration for stoicism was astronomical. Ayah folded her blue sari. Her eyes were misty. Abrar picked up the trunk. So light, he thought. He didn't know anyone else who had such few possessions. Pretending to have difficulty putting the trunk back on the rack, he braced himself to hear what Ayah had to say. A breeze moved cold sweat down his forehead.

"You were going to tell me about Qazi," said Abrar.

"Abrarjaan, I will tell you because you ask. My memory is weak, once a thought departs, its shadow seizes to exist," said Ayah. Abrar nodded, and sat down, with his chin on his knees and his arms around his shin.

"During the war your grandparents' house was full of relatives, rebels, and refugees. On a day late into the rainy season, and far later than that terrible Operation Searchlight, your aunt craved mint tea. She was so distraught over a now insignificant thing. All the mint was used up when we cooked lunch. So I went to the forest, seeking the herb to calm her nerves. I reached the tree whose trunk is twisted like a dancing man. There I heard a quarrel between your father and Mesba. Unsurprising, they fought much... Abrarjaan, the walls of your grandparent's house quivered under the weight of

people. Disputes flared between people like a scorching wind. Mesba was compassionate to all those people enmeshed in their nightmares – a soothing word here, a helping hand there. You would have liked Mesba, you remind me of him,” said Ayah. Abrar was taken aback, but some of the hostility he’d been feeling towards Mesba melted. In all fairness, he didn’t know the guy. Perhaps Mesba was deserved the praise he got. Ayah continued.

“By tacit understanding your father and Mesba maintained a truce in front of the guests. Their disputes occurred in the privacy of deserted corridors, barren rooftops, and shaded gardens. We, me and the other maids, who roamed away from the reports of disaster blaring from the radio and repeated by guests, we caught them often. Mesba was usually the one to end a fight. But that day near the dancing tree, Mesba’s voice alarmed me...Mesba asked Zohair, ‘Did you hide it here?’ There was low thunder in his voice. They were so deep into the forest and it was a serious fight. Again Mesba asked, ‘Did you?’ If transgressions had tongues, they would sound as Mesba did then. Zohair was silent. All wildlife held their breath. Swift as a blade Mesba waved his arm, to the river bend. Abrarjaan, I forget, the river was less eroded then,” Ayah said. *Thunder voice and transgression’s tongue*, he thought. Either Ayah didn’t know how good it felt blow off steam, or she’d just had unrealistic expectations of Mesba. He was doomed to listen to incidents that were blown out of proportion. *Focus*, he told himself. He realized he was missing the point. Mesba had accused Father of hiding stuff.

“I didn’t mean to pry, but as I turned to leave my sari caught on a thorn. I only had three saris. I tried to free my sari without a tear. But the thorns were dense, and more threads looped on them. Then I heard Zohair whisper aloud, ‘Qazi. That Qazi.’ On

Zohair's face was disbelief and shell shock, in Zohair's eyes fear was locked," said Ayah. *Hey kid, she mentioned Qazi.* He inched closer.

"Your father was the aggressive type, and I never had I seen him so terrified. I heard Zohair repeat again, 'That Qazi told you,' this time loud, without restraint," said Ayah, taking a deep breath. Excitement exploded in Abrar's guts. So Father really had had a beef with Qazi even before the war ended. Ayah's pause was too long for comfort and her eyes were glassy. Abrar burrowed the tips of his finger into his birthmark. *Come on, remember, come on,* he thought. He cleared his throat. Light penetrated Ayah's eyes, as she leaned closer to the window. She continued.

"Mesba spat so vigorously the blob landed far as three arm spans, the gesture of a cruder man. I gasped, and thought I would be spotted, but they were too engrossed. Then Mesba said, 'So what if Qazi uncle told me. I would say you're stupid, but you're worse, much worse,' and Mesba insulted him. If you knew Mesba, then you'd know how uncharacteristic insults were for him. Without looking Mesba in the eye, Zohair whined, 'Qazi did this, he did this me, to us. He'll pay.' Zohair kept repeating his oath with his eyes bulging out, until Mesba gave him a clout. Thundering Mesba said, 'You heard me,' and he mentioned Bajwa the jute mill owner, something about trust and...Ka, or Kabir," she said. *Bajwa, Tapan Kabir,* Abrar thought, confused, but he dismissed it. Ayah wasn't certain.

"My sari was untangled but I was curious by then. The brothers stood still, eyeing each other as the air condensed. In a carrying whisper Mesba said, 'I'll search the city, there better be.' Then Zohair screamed, 'The city, are you mad?' Mesba slammed Zohair against a tree, green leaves fell like confetti. With a roar Zohair was upon him. Limbs and

rage flared. Oh, the strangeness of it. The boys had shed their civil skin. So I ran as far and as fast I was able. I knew I wouldn't be forgiven if they knew I'd witnessed that scene. I couldn't make any sense of the encounter--"

"So, you don't know what they were fighting about?" blurted Abrar. She held up her hand, indicating that he shouldn't interrupt her. Impatience bubbled inside him. He was so certain he'd get an answer. Anything he learned only raised more questions. He relieved his feelings by rocking the cot. It squeaked like an orchestra of mice. He stopped.

"I may be mistaken, I hope I am. From what I heard I gathered your father took something from Mesba, valuable. Mesba died searching, understand," said Ayah. Abrar recalled that Mesba was hit by shrapnel, and he had lain in a ditch for two days, unmoving. A stranger had carried Mesba home, but the infection and blood loss had been too much for him. *Died searching? His death was an accident*, Abrar thought, defensively. She clasped her hands. Tears were glistening in Ayah's eyes. Abrar fidgeted. He didn't know what to do around crying women.

"Err, maybe he found it, umm, yeah," he said. Ayah buried her face in her hands. She started sobbing. *How was that the wrong thing to say?* Abrar took a cup from the rack and poured water. He offered it to Ayah. Finally, she sobbed. Abrar didn't know Mesba personally, and he couldn't share Ayah's grief; he felt only a mild sadness for a life that was cut too short. Ayah spoke.

"The days after the forest fight, the rain came down with might. Three days later the sun came out glowing and proper. It vanquished the gloomy atmosphere that had collected like smog in every corner of the house. So when Mesba left to tread the sun

kissed path, no one thought it unusual. Evening fell, people, birds and beasts returned. Be home by evening, on that rule your Dadu was stern. But Mesba was nowhere, we learned,” said Ayah.

“Your Dadu searched from the roof. The town was in a precautionary blackout, and moonlight was aloof. Soon we became detained by distress. Your Dadu put cardamom infused poultices to our heads. But the dread Mesba had been captured couldn’t be shed. ‘What if the enemies trace us here?’ we asked each other, we can’t disappear. Your Dadu shivered, cried, on the prayer mat. On the third day a man came, carrying Mesba on his shoulder. The man had found Mesba in a ditch, his leg nearly amputated, shrapnel sticking to it still. There had been a bomb dropped from an airplane near the city...The city, I was so frightened to hear it,” Ayah sobbed. Abrar rubbed his birthmark. Ayah regained her composure.

“Mesba had lain unconscious in that roadside ditch. When he woke up the place was deserted. He was surrounded by addresses that had no houses to anchor them. He drank water from a dead man’s bottle. It was so brackish he slurped the earth instead. His groans were heard by fleeing people. A soldier looked inside the ditch to find Mesba, his skin bloodless and his eyes traitorously green. They left him there, thinking he was a Pakistani soldier. The war was a reality that brought all realities to a halt, and the imaginations of conscientious men were distraught,” said Ayah. Abrar’s air pipe constricted as he remembered how closely he resembled Mesba.

“...When the disease, bloody stench, starvation and thirst had brought Mesba near the stupors of death, a man noticed the rise and fall of Mesba’s chest. Mesba had official papers with him, and the man returned him by seeking the Haidar house...But by that

time Mesba caught a cocktail of infections that all of your Dadu's herbs, and pharmacist's medicine couldn't cure. He died that night," said Ayah.

Later, Amina brought them cups of warm milk. Abrar was fasting. Clutching her steel cup, Ayah watched her granddaughter leave the room. Then Ayah told Abrar another memory, and a location.

Out on the street Abrar racked his brains trying to think of another trustworthy person who would know anything regarding Qazi. He truly trusted few. *Must be a deficiency of oxytocin*, he thought. One of Mother's friend's came to mind. *No, she'll be too curious about my curiosity*. The only person would be the local pharmacist, a reserved and reliable man. The rickshaw in front of him had a painting of Phoolan Devi, the bandit queen, holding an AK-47. Abrar hailed it, and went to the pharmacist's house. He was led to a small room at the end of the house. Abrar noticed liver spots on the pharmacist's hands, as the gentleman motioned him to sit across from him.

"I don't know much about Qazi Rajakar. I came to this town in eighty-three, over a decade later. I used to live in Dhaka, Farmgate. During the war I fled from place to place," said the pharmacist. He had a croaky voice. Cacti lined the windowsill. On the glasstop table rows of cards were arranged. He had been playing Patience. Abrar folded his arms, just to have something to do because the pharmacist was giving him an intense look. Abrar realized the gentleman's eyes were dry; he didn't blink as often as regular people.

"When I returned home, everything was gone. I checked the music room first, my father's room. Umm, I grew up with Hemanta Mukharjee songs, always spinning out of the old gramophone. Sad songs, pastoral. Umm, some days I heard cheerful notes and

they sounded alien, not musical at all,” he said. He bowed his head slightly in remembrance. Abrar had a feeling it was important to him.

“Gorgeous, like a flower, the brass horn of the gramophone. Painted maroon, or was it red? Umm, I found the horn on an oil drum; someone had used it as a funnel. Clumsy, that’s what I thought when I first saw it. Petals were wide. It sat badly on the drum. Umm the records were scattered and shattered. Not enough gramophones around to make the records worthy loot. I still have some of the needles.” He pointed to a silver box on the chest of drawers, but he didn’t get up to show Abrar.

“Umm, the harmonium was my father’s favourite thing. I used to pump the bellows, no music, it drove my father mad. He played it before he went to the office every day. The third knob, it was pulled. You know, to pitch the sound. The key you have to press for the *da* sound was pulled out. It was umm, only that space that was brown, umm, the rest of the keyboard was red from dried blood. The blood trail led away from the harmonium, disappeared under debris.” He placed the ace of diamonds on the table, ending the game. They sat in silence for a while and then Abrar left.

It was quiet. Abrar watched shadows fall on a pool of glittering water. *Tick tock, do what needs to be done*, said his inner voice. But he stood still, and watched a student with a school bag so stuffed with books he seemed like a beast of burden. His blood traveled through him like a spray of needles.

Leaves from another season that had lost their vibrancy blew at him. He walked at the side of the road, where the stones chipped away, a road where he had played cricket with Tushar. Perhaps the townspeople were right; perhaps Father should have fought harder for Tushar’s father, not allowed the decades old friendship to decay. *No*, he

thought. Guilt, compassion, or anger would only distract him. Sirens sliced the air as he neared the hospital. Avoiding eye contact with the receptionist Abrar bounded up to the stairs to the third floor. Nervousness was threatening to engulf him. *What does a man say to an ill nemesis*, he wondered. An old man in a wheelchair moved past a trolley of syringes. His face was crinkled with annoyance, and Abrar guessed it was because of the music that was blaring across the floor. *Idiot*, thought Abrar. Only Tushar would have the poor judgement to play loud music in a hospital. As he got closer to room 39F he could make out that the songs were from the Hindi movie *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*. Tushar was singing along, “*jara sa jhuum lu main, arey na re na re na re na*” (shall I sway/ dance a little bit? Oh no, no, no, no, no). He was repeating the line over and over again, out of tune. The familiar voice hammered Abrar’s head. He forced himself not to slow down when he finally reached Tushar’s room. The stench of disinfectants hit him. Fruits, biscuit wrappers and board game pieces were strewn all over the room. Only a sofa and chairs for visitors were clutter free. The cassette player was on a bedside table. Strapped with saline, Tushar was sitting on the single bed. In the warm light he looked yellow. Without warning Abrar yanked out the plug of the cassette player. He stood seven feet away from the bedside table. Momentarily, shock registered on Tushar’s jug face, but it was quickly replaced by a wicked smile.

“Goatman. Come to gloat? The King of the Jungle outdone by a mosquito?” said Tushar, spreading out his arms. Although his arms were still massive, loose skin hung from them. Abrar took a few steadying breaths. It was not the reaction he was expecting. Whatever Abrar had been planning to say, he was too tongue tied to say it now.

“No. How are you?” Abrar asked, rubbing his birthmark.

“How’s your back? You seem a little hunchbacked to me,” said Tushar. A ghost pain appeared in the places where Tushar had hit him with the faucet. Blood flushed up Abrar’s face. *Cool it kid*, warned his inner voice.

“What do you know about Qazi Rajakar?” asked Abrar. Tushar’s jaw dropped open, and spit bubbles were forming at his mouth. *Huh, bet you weren’t expecting that*, thought Abrar with satisfaction. The cross-eyed woman would neither have the means nor the motive to inform Tushar that Abrar knew he had sent the stalker after him. Tushar shuffled on the bed, releasing a pent up scent of disease. Tushar snapped his fingers, and pointed at a packet of crackers. Abrar grabbed it and tossed it on Tushar’s bed.

“Your mother taught you nothing. Put it on a plate.” said Tushar. Abrar emptied a plate that was full of jujube berry seeds. The garbage bin was overflowing. By the number of mango peels and sweet packets it seemed like Tushar had many visitors. Abrar spread out the crackers and balanced the plate on the cassette player. Tushar chewed on the crackers with exaggerated effort; much as toothless people chewed betel leafs.

“What do you know?” asked Abrar. The bed squeaked, as Tushar laughed and slapped the side rails. Soon he was coughing. Phlegm chugged up Tushar’s air pipes. He pointed at a bucket that had murky fluids swirling in it. Abrar had no intention of catching the diseases stewing in that bucket. He picked up a chair and used its leg to push the bucket closer to Tushar’s bed. The man in the wheelchair peeked in and threw the both of them a disapproving look. Loudly, Tushar cleared his throat.

“I heard my agent dragged your soaking beard all the way to the island,” Tushar’s laugh turned into a coughing fit.

“Congrats, it was a good prank,” Abrar couldn’t keep out the relief from his voice. *Whoa kid, he was just throwing an arrow in the dark. He didn’t know how deep it would hit*, thought Abrar. The tension left his shoulders and arms. A light scent of limes permeated the air as a cleaning trolley passed the room. Tushar stopped laughing.

“Prank? Nah,” said Tushar. Abrar swallowed in an attempt to delay responding.

“It was a good prank. You got me,” said Abrar, spreading his arms in the same theatrical way Tushar had earlier. He knew Tushar wouldn’t be able to resist taunting him, and revealing more information in the process. But the next thing Tushar said felt like a punch in the lungs.

“My father and Hasan uncle were talking about it confidentially. You see, Goatman, they were in the study room, behind locked doors. I had to squat outside the window, decapitating caterpillars. Well, the latter I did for fun,” said Tushar. *Hasan uncle, what*, thought Abrar, freezing on the spot.

“It tested my resolve. They had a discussion about the ways *it* is going to devastate the community. A moral dilemma so boring that I almost stopped listening. Goatman, when you light up dynamite, you should stay to watch it explode...worth it. The showdown this Friday will be big, Goatman...and bad, really, really bad...they found witnesses this time,” cackled Tushar.

“Witness to what?” Abrar prevented himself from yelling. Tushar laughed with such force that plate on the cassette player shook. Abrar suppressed an impulse to punch the jug face. Coughing and sending spittle all over the place, Tushar spoke again.

“When do people need witnesses? ...Crimes and weddings...Don’t start bleating in despair Goatman. I will send you a clue...yes, yes, that will kill two birds with one stone,” said Tushar, his eyes squeezing in calculation.

“Basically, you don’t know anything,” shouted Abrar. He heard the squeak of the wheelchair outside the room. Tushar gave a hacking laugh and stuffed crackers in his mouth. *Just get out*, warned Abrar’s inner voice. Tushar made a few irrelevant comments.

“Get better soon, Tushar. Mentally,” said Abrar. He bumped into the man in the wheelchair on the way out. His knees felt watery. His faith in Father was unsubstantial as foam.

He wasn’t sure how he reached the mosque. When Forkan gave him an envelope, Abrar couldn’t bring himself to thank him. The envelope was like live coals in his hands.

Chapter 6

The kids gasped at Shakil. *Fantastic*, thought Abrar. Shakil stood lopsided, carrying coils of rope that were as thick as a tire. When Abrar had returned home, the kids had formed a human chain around him and demanded he build a swing for them. It had been difficult to explain to them that he wasn't taught the art of swing and seesaw making in school. Nadim had goaded the kids before disappearing into the forest. In the end they settled on a lowbrow rope swing. Shakil brandished a receipt and a penny under Abrar's nose. Abrar had a feeling Shakil would start laughing if asked why he had wasted all the money Abrar had given him. The beaky nose remained pointed at Abrar's beard and it suddenly inhaled air. *Freak*, thought Abrar, although there was no change of expression on his face. Seemingly indifferent Shakil, threw the rope at Abrar's feet and sauntered off.

The boy with missing tooth presented him with steel scissors, industrial ones. Threads were dangling from them.

"Put them back where you found them, capishe?" Abrar told the boy. The kids gathered around Abrar and started clapping spontaneously. The snipping of the rope felt more ceremonious than a birthday party. Every kid gave Abrar their two cents on how to tie the rope to the tree. At moments like these Abrar missed his old self, that most kids ran away from when they saw him. They did a round of rock-paper-scissors over who should swing first. The ponytailed girl sat on the swing and stared at him.

"Swing yourself," Abrar said. This declaration was met with a wail. The rest of the kids remembered they were a single organism and all of them joined in. Resigned, he pushed the swing; he could be playing chess with Moin or practising football kicks or be

reading that book on quantum mechanics. *Or you could be finding out what happened with Qazi*, he thought. *No*, he thought. It was too soon to talk to Father again. He reasoned that if whoever had sent that scatterbrained stalker really cared for the truth they must have entertained the possibility that Father wouldn't open up easy.

"Higher," screamed the ponytailed girl. Abrar glanced at Sadaf's house. If she looked out the window now, would she think he was great with kids? *Huh, in your dreams*, said the mocking voice in his head. Sadaf probably had a list of guys she considered marriage material, and he wondered if he was even on that list. He pushed more vigorously. He was extremely annoyed when the swing flew out of its smooth pendulum motion. The pinch-faced boy tapped on his wristwatch.

"Five minutes more," shrieked the ponytailed girl. Potential protestors were distracted by the sound of heavy footsteps. Out of breath and sweating, Ridwan was making a beeline for Abrar.

"Help," rasped Ridwan. The kids stared at him curiously. The boy with missing teeth did a karate squat, ready to fend off imaginary ninjas. Without warning, Ridwan tugged Abrar's arm, unrolling his white sleeves. Abrar took a step forward.

"Nadim's stuck at the bottom of the well," Ridwan whispered. It took a moment for Abrar to process what he thought he heard. *What well, there are no wells around here*, he thought, and figured Ridwan could only be talking about the well in the forest. The well was supposed to be dried up, as the groundwater table shifted after an earthquake over a decade ago, but the heavy rainfall would have filled it. Panic kicked in. He wasn't sure if Nadim could swim. Anytime Nadim went to a swimming pool he would splash at spectators. Nadim had been banned from the last pool they went to

because he had deflated a pool float by stabbing it with a safety pin. *Cool it*, Abrar chided himself. Even in the well Nadim should be able to stay afloat.

“Ladder, we need a ladder,” Ridwan panted. The ponytailed girl pointed to a stepladder in the tin shed. Ridwan’s shoulders drooped and he shook his head, flabbergasted. But Abrar grabbed the rope coil and strode towards the forest. The boy with a pinched face followed them.

“No!” shouted Abrar, as the four kids started following him. Shock registered on their faces, they had never seen Abrar angry. The boy with the pinched face mumbled Abrar was cheating him off his swing time, and Abrar would probably climb up the ladder to watch some spectacular show. It was only when Ridwan mentioned hogwash about explosive diarrhoea that they looked mollified and raced back to the swing.

Abrar ran through the forest. The coil of rope grew heavier in his hand.

In the forest clearing, the well stood cold as a black hole. Coir rope, gone pulpy with rainwater, hung from the rope bailer, and it was ripped. Muddy patches surrounded the well. The bricks were weathered and slippery. Nadim was halfway down the well. He was eagle spread, and he had stretched his fingertips to reach the walls. His face was upturned and he was gasping for air. If the well’s lid had been over it, the air would be old, lacking oxygen. Above Nadim’s head there was a box with a blazing flashlight. It illuminated a cone of the wall. Nadim screeched and the sound echoed through the deep well.

“Hang in there,” Abrar shouted back. He tied the rope to the sturdiest tree that was twenty metres away, glad that Shakil’s petty attempt at inconveniencing him had backfired. Throwing the rope down would be too dangerous, Nadim might fail to catch it

and end up falling farther. The safest thing would be for Ridwan to climb down with the rope, and Abrar would haul them out. Ridwan had just reached the clearing. In a half-witted way Abrar thought Ridwan was a steaming teapot. His excessive huffing couldn't hide the look of delirious fear contorting his face. Abrar thought Ridwan would faint at the idea of going down the well, let alone actually doing so. Gritting his teeth, Abrar tied the rope around his waist. The well was a claustrophobic four feet wide. Abrar circled around it. If he allowed himself to think he was gathering the nerves to go in that grave-like hole, he might lose courage all together. Fifty feet deep, he estimated. He figured Ridwan wasn't strong enough to haul them out. That was a serious problem. Avoiding Ridwan's eyes, he stroked the internal walls, looking for stepping-stones. He found holes in between the brick instead, mossy, but he'd have to make do.

“Listen man, if we're too heavy, just call somebody,” said Abrar. It was embarrassing to look at Ridwan; he was fanning himself to diffuse the tension. Abrar thumped his back to make him focus. Picking up the slack rope and nodding vigorously, Ridwan watched Abrar step into the mouth of the well. The bricks were roughly hewn, loose bits crumbled at his touch. A few feet down he nearly puked. It smelled of rotting animals. He scaled up, gulped air and went in a dive. Finally, Nadim clambered onto Abrar's back. Ridwan tugged the rope, and with sheer momentum nearly toppled into the well himself.

“Careful,” Abrar shouted and nausea attacked him as he drank in the foul air. Eagle spread, his brain clouding with vapours, Abrar hung there, until Nadim shrieked in his ears.

“I’ll scale up, stand back,” shouted Abrar, hoping he didn’t sound garbled. Ridwan seemed to have gotten it though, because he stepped away. Now the sun was where Ridwan’s head had been. He manoeuvred himself to avoid its full glare. Nadim squawked. Something drilled into Abrar’s shoulder blade. Wincing, he shifted but whatever it was, it bored in harder.

Scaling up was more difficult, the tips of his fingers were rubbed raw, and Nadim showed no inclination to help. *Nearly there*, thought Abrar. A brick slid out and the ones above it creaked. Abrar tucked it in, and gripped a protruding brick. So soft, he thought, and slipped down half a meter. It had been a mushroom and had ripped in his hand. *Allah, help*, thought Abrar and braced himself with his knees. The rope tightened; Ridwan tugged and Abrar started scaling up again.

“Good job,” Abrar mumbled when they finally got out and had gorged on enough oxygen. Nadim slumped onto the ground, looking rather green.

“What was that?” Abrar asked, rubbing his shoulder blades.

“No idea,” Nadim gave himself away by glancing at his T-shirt pocket. A strangely shaped metal object was sticking out of the pocket. Before Nadim could cover up his mistake, Abrar sprang up and snatched it. Nadim cried out in indignation and Ridwan gasped. It was a key, made for a large padlock. It was oiled; it must have been used recently.

“Give it back, give it back, now,” Nadim screamed.

“It’s true. What’s he hiding?” Ridwan sounded genuinely surprised. *Hiding, who’s hiding*, thought Abrar. He guessed Nadim hadn’t fallen in just out of recklessness.

“Explain,” Abrar said. Nadim glared at him defiantly, his lips rolled back in his mouth. The pest could be stubborn so Abrar turned to Ridwan, who was standing with his arms crossed. He had regained his poise.

“Right. Want to explain to your mom, and Dadu, how you let him fall in the well?” he asked. Ridwan’s shoulders drooped. Nadim made indiscriminate sounds in his throat. Nobody was going anywhere until he got some answers.

“Da– Dadu? I, err, wanted to see inside, err, leaned in too close and toppled over,” Nadim said.

“Just like that?” asked Abrar.

“Just like that,” Nadim snapped his fingers.

“Go around with a flashlight in broad daylight do you?” Abrar asked him. Nadim shrugged.

“Shoot! We better get that out,” said Ridwan. The idea was so ludicrous Abrar stared at him. Ridwan was generally a sensible person, so Abrar decided it must be the adrenaline rush.

“Right, what’s with the key?” Abrar demanded.

“I am collecting keys, you know, other people collect stamps,” said Nadim with a smile he clearly thought was convincing.

“Ridwan,” said Abrar.

“None of your business,” shouted Nadim as he charged towards Abrar, but Abrar dodged Nadim’s kicks and tripped him. Ridwan stood between them, his hands out like a referee. Then, ignoring Nadim’s threats and curses he told Abrar how Nadim had spotted Shakil coming in this forest at night, and how Shakil’s flashlight had seemed to hang in

the air, and then disappear. Today they had come across the flashlight accidentally, and they figured Shakil had gone down the well. Despite Ridwan's warnings Nadim was determined to find out what Shakil hid. Since Nadim would go down anyways, he figured he'd better stick around in case anything went wrong. The rope from the bailer had snapped midway. Abrar stood still. The air temperature dropped. *Shakil*, thought Abrar, and got a bad vibe, but it was gone before he could analyse it further. Most people thought him harmless, and besides Father tolerated him. Shakil was only ever caught in petty wrongdoings, smuggling sugar and saris from over the border, and getting in fights with the supervisor of Father's garment factories. Then there was *that* case Abrar remembered. Once Shakil had been walking down a narrow lane, and a car had entered the lane. Shakil had moved away quickly and fallen into an open manhole. Instead of apologizing the man in the car had laughed at Shakil and driven away. Shakil had hounded down where the man lived, broken his car's windows and stuffed the car, especially the driver's seat, with cow entrails. Other embarrassing incidents had been hushed up where Shakil was concerned. Several people told father Shakil ought to be in an asylum. But people pitied him, as far as they knew Shakil had hit his head as a child and he was never the same again. Abrar guessed Shakil had stolen something valuable and hidden the keys of his treasure trove in the well. Given his eccentric nature, he might even have a perfectly innocent reason for hiding the key here. *Think*, tantalized the voice in his head. Abrar felt that he had missed something crucial, something unrelated to the situation at hand.

“What'd you reckon Shakil will do once he figures out we got his key?” asked Ridwan. The nervous way Ridwan said ‘Shakil’ caught Abrar's attention. *Huh*, thought

Abrar as it clicked. The old man on the island wasn't talking about wind or spinach; he'd been trying to say Shakil all along. Now that Abrar thought about it, he was sure the man had also said 'keel' at one point, but he had dismissed it as gibberish. What had Shakil done to that poor man to inspire such terror? Abrar looked at his feet; he didn't want Ridwan to see the expression on his face. But Ridwan had a point. Abrar was sure Shakil wouldn't suspect Nadim of being the key thief, but Shakil would plot revenge on whomever he did suspect. Abrar didn't fancy the idea of another stuffed car, even worse, the innocent victim demanding justice from Father on the day of the feast. *On Friday*, he thought as a tremor ran down his spine.

"I am putting it back," said Abrar.

"Eh, I wasn't thinking straight. Let's just leave the key where Shakil will find it, okay? Uh, let's get out of here," said Ridwan, sweeping his eyebrows off sweat. Momentarily, Abrar hesitated and Nadim snatched the key from his hand. Before the pest could run away, Ridwan grabbed his left shin, and then caught him in the midriff. But Ridwan released him instantly.

"Ugh, you stink," Ridwan said. Nadim's round face wore an uncharacteristic look of determination as he sprinted towards the forest. He didn't go far before Abrar caught up with him and threw him face down into the mud. The thud was a satisfying sound. Abrar's stress fizzed out of him like baking soda in vinegar. He remembered Nadim's kicks from the day before and rolled Nadim in the mud for good measure.

"That should take care of the smell," said Abrar. He grinned but wished he hadn't because Nadim splashed him. Spitting out mud and what seemed like shells, Abrar

extracted the key from the Nadim's hand. Abrar tied the rope around his waist once more. Ridwan gaped.

"I *will* get that key. I will climb down that well fifteen times if I have to."

"Don't be stupid, please. Err, what if we can't get you out the next time?" Ridwan pleaded. Abrar snorted, reckless behaviour was Nadim's speciality.

"Leave it alone," snapped Abrar.

"Don't tell me what to do," said Nadim.

"Trust me, Shakil's bad news," said Abrar. Clay slid off Nadim's forehead as he frowned.

"Really?" Nadim asked. Abrar figured he had just confirmed whatever crackpot notion Nadim had about Shakil.

"You're going to boarding school in India," said Abrar. That threat usually worked because his parents had seriously considered it. In Nadim's mind a boarding school was the equivalent of prison, without the chance of parole. Nadim was frightened of India; he couldn't speak Hindi, nor could he hop back home on pretended illnesses. Nadim shook his head.

"Yeah, after the phosphorus—"

"You should be whipped for that," said Nadim, throwing fresh mud. Abrar ducked in time, and Ridwan got splattered. Ridwan yelped, and stared horrified at the mud on his T-shirt. He was fond of cleanliness. He washed his clothes several times before he wore them and bleached his white clothes himself. Ridwan gestured at them to get going.

“You’re not going anywhere though. No universities accepted you,” Nadim sang, high pitched.

“Yes they– what do you mean?” asked Abrar, and a sharp suspicion hit him.

“Universities didn’t accept you, did they? No acceptance letters,” Nadim chanted. *So, that’s what happened*, thought Abrar. When his classmates started receiving acceptance or rejection letters from universities, Abrar didn’t receive any responses. He’d called up the admissions offices. But the receptionist informed him they had mailed their response and it should have arrived. He had checked with the local post office and the head postmaster assured him they had delivered foreign letters to his house. Luckily Abrar had confirmed with the Georgian university straight away.

“*You hid my acceptance letters?*” shouted Abrar. Furious, he had nearly missed his deadline. Every last one of Nadim’s white teeth showed as his grin widened on his mud-splattered face.

“Nadim! You hid his acceptance letters? Uh you–” Ridwan clutched his heart, he was incoherent. *Cool it*, Abrar told himself. *Alhamdulillah*. It took a moment for Abrar to calm down and thank Allah that he had been cautious and gotten all official letters since then. Nadim shrieked with glee and started his Ooga Booga dance. Abrar lunged at Nadim, who stuck out his tongue and sprinted away. Abrar wanted to chase him, because facing the fetid fumes was daunting. He strode back to the well. Despite himself, Abrar chuckled. It was ironic he was fulfilling a long forgotten desire of climbing down the well, and twice in the same day. Ridwan stared at him, the sun glistening on his tongue. Abrar was sure Ridwan wouldn’t appreciate the absurdity of the situation even if he understood it.

The well had fascinated Abrar as a child. He used to wonder if it was possible to dig to the other end of the earth, and he had been curious to know how far down the well went. Perhaps he had asked too many questions, because he had been strictly forbidden to go anywhere near the well, even in the company of adults. Later, when the labour strikes had hit Ripon's factories Abrar had sought the solitude of the well. He had believed life would make sense if he thought it through underground, in the cool embrace of water, earth and stone. But he didn't end up climbing down its darkness. When he learned an earthquake had stripped it of its function, his disappointment had been acute.

"Please, just leave the key here. Let's go," Ridwan's cheeks moved like bellows but he tightened the rope to the tree all the same. Abrar held his breath and stepped in, relieved to find his footing. He put the key in the box and lifted up the flashlight, tucking it around his waist. His lungs were already fighting for air. Stone dust rained, and creaks echoed menacingly as he clambered up. *Up*, he told himself, and placed his hand in a hole. It was ice cold, smooth as a nail, and soothing as balm to the cuts on his fingers. The pressure on his cuts shifted.

He tilted his hip, aiming the flashlight at the hole. There was a shiny black ball, and a small head retreated shyly into the center of the coil. So long as the light shone the snake might remain docile. He noticed the whitish bands on the snake. It wasn't one of the common vipers.

He pulled his hand out. But he shouldn't have done so fast. The coil slithered on his palm. Its hiss reverberated through his spine. *Don't let me die here, Ya Allah! Krait.* He recognized it as a krait. Ridwan tugged the rope, possibly misinterpreting Abrar's

stillness as a plea for help. Then Ridwan's scream hit Abrar like a gong in the confines of the well.

Its fangs were an inch away from his birthmark. Abrar thrashed his arms and pried his fingers apart. He gripped the base of the snake's head. It seemed to realize what he wanted to do because it squeezed his hand so hard Abrar thought he would go numb. He smashed its skull against the wall, and again. Its eyes bulged out. Blood gurgled out of its mouth, and splattered onto Abrar's shirt. The coil went limp around his hand. With a resounding splash it joined the other rotting carcasses at the bottom. Ignoring the bricks he displaced, he spurred up. As Ridwan pulled him out he heard the second splash. The box, with the key inside it, had fallen after being hit by a brick, and Abrar felt he had made the most irrelevant observation in the universe. Ridwan was shaking. Abrar thumped his back.

"Subhanallah. Thanks man. Chill, it's gone," Abrar said with a bravado he didn't feel. Kraits are a nocturnal snake, fond of hiding in human dwellings, and biting sleeping people without waking them up, because a krait's bite is rather painless. Their venom has a neurotoxin that paralyses a grown man in a couple of hours and kills him in a few more. *Thank you Lord*, Abrar couldn't stop mumbling. A shiver slithered through him as he thought the snake could have easily entered their house at night. He slumped against a jackfruit tree. After a while the sun seemed to be hot again. Ridwan was sitting upright, and it dawned on Abrar that he was waiting for instructions.

"Go home. I'll be there later," Abrar said. Ridwan nodded stiffly, as though making up for lost dignity. He had stuck through it even though he was scared out of his wits, mused Abrar, as he glimpsed Ridwan's back being swallowed by trees. Gratitude

surged through Abrar. He thought Ridwan was more courageous than anyone gave him credit for. Ridwan rarely got a chance to prove himself, given his habit of steering clear of trouble. Studies were his forte, but even in the academic arena his ambitions and achievements paled in comparison to Warda's. He burned midnight oil, struggling over concepts Warda and Abrar understood straight away. *Poor kid*, thought Abrar, he had grown fat from sitting at his desk for endless hours. He couldn't gain on Warda; she was a perfectionist even when it came to sharpening pencils. Once Abrar had caught her dusting the inside of a shoe she was going to throw away, and he still couldn't figure out the necessity of the gesture. *Must be tough being Warda's only sibling*, he thought.

In school people were often shocked to hear they were related. Warda was intelligent, beautiful, and talented, and much to the dismay of her minions her hubris still hadn't brought about her downfall. Ridwan received suggestions for improvement from teachers as much as Warda received admiration. Warda treated him with the kind of kindness people reserved for simpler life forms, or so it seemed to Abrar. She mentored him before exams and trumpeted that Ridwan was the most "hard working student in school" who "deserved better." Ridwan took it in stride. He didn't complain, but Ridwan didn't complain about anything anyway.

Warda knew she wasn't going to get an apology from him for the Pan Art Competition. Warda's tongue was heavy artillery, and he could only hope she wouldn't start talking about him with Sadaf. *Does she like somebody*, he thought nervously. Some of those calmer, reserved girls knew precisely what and whom they wanted. He shouldn't open that can of worms. His hands twitched to beat the pulp out of that faceless guy she *mistakenly* thought she loved. *Mine right*, he thought, glaring at the skies.

A raindrop hung on the tip of a jackfruit leaf right above him. There was a burning sensation when it fell in his eye. He squeezed his eyes, and the snake's fang was on him. Splinters from the tree's trunk needled into him as he recoiled. *No snake, it's gone*, he told himself. His fists burrowed into clay. The snake's venom glistened on its fang, and Abrar's breath felt wet. *It's gone, it's gone*, he chanted in his head. Spitting out the bile that had collected in his mouth, he looked at the well. It was nothing more than a stack of stones. When a red ant crawled over his feet, he forced himself to feel the tickle. The key was lost. *All for nothing*, he thought. He couldn't tell if he was laughing out of humour or relief. Two chirping sparrows flew above his head. The feather of their bellies seemed alive. It didn't matter if Sadaf was into some loser now. *Surely, she'll see I am the better man*. He followed the birds' flight, until they were tiny dots against the blue. It struck him that the earth's atmosphere had a specific density, consisting of particles that scattered blue light uniformly during the day. At sunset the sun would be further, and its light would travel further. Yet, unfailingly, he would see red, the colour that had the longest wavelength in the visible spectrum. There were things in life you fought for, and others that reached you when stood upright and still. *Can't be rash*, he thought. But waiting around for Sadaf was the most boring plan. *She isn't going out with anyone*. He got up, feeling cheered.

The forest was as calm and soothing as a lullaby. There was nothing to suggest it held the potential for near death experiences. When he reached the tree with a fantastically crooked arm he remembered Ayah. *Father and Mesba would have had argued here*, he thought. Without knowing why he was doing it, he stood where Mesba had stood. Mesba had asked if Father hid *it* here. The forest was full of nooks and

crannies. Besides, if Father had buried whatever *it* was, there was no way Abrar would be able to find it three decades later. An electric pulse charged through his stomach. He knew he was being irrational but he wanted to search the area. Father wasn't the burying type; it was too simple. Abrar guessed Father would have veiled whatever he had hidden, but he would have hidden it in plain sight, just to give Mesba an extra reason for aggravation.

He noticed a polythene bag stuffed in the hollow of a tree. It was torn to strips. The non-biodegradable bag had been there awhile. If whatever Father hid was still hidden in the forest, it might not be in its original form. But where was *it*? *Why don't you have a heart-to-heart with daddy dear*, asked the mocking voice in his head. To shut that voice up Abrar tried to recall a factual trivia. *Tunguska event*, he thought. In 1908 an asteroid flattened 2000 kilometers of a Siberian forest. Resolutely he walked to the edge of the forest. If only he could get more answers out of the stalker, or the island-man. The suspicion that Father was covering up something serious gripped him like a fish on a hook. He couldn't exorcise it. He couldn't convince himself it was a storm in a teacup. Dadu's recounting of Father's past left blanks as disorienting as discontinuity in space-time. *That's it*, he thought, all he needed to do was merge the younger version of Father with the familiar version. He thought he was free falling but he managed to catch himself in time. An earthworm, red and segmented, was beneath Abrar's face. Its antennae were feeling his beard. Repulsed, he hoisted himself up, and the cuts on his hand bled afresh. He'd tripped over a tree root. Wiggling his toes out, he noticed slime from the well had crusted over his feet. *Subhanallah*, he mumbled.

He was mud splattered, snake blood splattered and barefoot. Judging by the way mosquitoes were avoiding him he was sure he stank too. Like a child who puts his finger in a socket after being warned of electric shocks, Abrar sniffed himself. The nausea returned at the smell of death. For a few seconds he stood with his hands on his knees, acclimatizing himself to the stench once more. He needed to take a shower. How to get past a house full of people without raising awkward questions was the tricky part.

For what felt like half an hour Abrar crouched behind a bush, because an aunt was gazing out of a second floor window. Pollens took the liberty of sticking to his mucus, and his larynx ached as he forced himself not to start sneezing. When a dragonfly distracted the aunt, Abrar streaked across the backyard. He had to get to the stairway, which was inconveniently located in the right wing, near the kitchens. From fifty feet he could hear the kitchen area loud as a fish market. Ever since the Vultures robbery, most of the extra doors were heavily bolted, except the backdoor that opened to the scullery. *It doesn't befit the nobility of a man to enter the house like a thief*, he thought. *What nobility?* The mocking voice in his head was uproarious with laughter.

Crawling under windows, he reached the scullery. Abrar pushed the door lightly. A splash of water greeted him. He croaked. Someone was washing pots and pans there. He ran to a banana tree, and pulled feathery leaf over himself. *No, no*, he thought. One second more, and the leaf would have broken with a crunch. Flattening himself on the ground, he watched the maid with the gold nose ring who had been told to clean the hen coops yesterday come out holding a pot and a rolling pin. She looked around myopically in the opposite direction. When she couldn't find the intruder, she stomped back to the scullery. Abrar wasn't amused when she left the door wide open and washed the rest of

the pots facing the backyard. Remaining in the shadows, and feeling mutinous, he waited until she was done. Except her dish washing was a Sisyphean task. Stains and foam remained on washed pots, and gravy poured on them from dirty ones. She gossiped as she rewashed them. *Fantastic, first the aunt and now this*, thought Abrar. He stroked his birthmark. *If on average people lived till seventy, how could they afford to waste time so extravagantly*, he thought.

That's it, the Ottoman Turks had done it, he thought. He smacked the trunk of the grapefruit tree he was squatting under. Time was running out for Qazi, he had to be nearing eighty now. What if Tushar wasn't the only one who wanted him to find out about Qazi? After all, the stalker wasn't supposed to bring Abrar to the island. It was Qazi's last chance to avenge Zohair Haidar. A genocide architect would undoubtedly seek revenge on a mere teenager that had advocated for his exile. Abrar was the easiest target. The Ottoman Turks had trained the children of their enemies to be the Janissary Corps of Turkish forces. Pitting Abrar against Zohair Haidar would make it easy for Qazi to carry out his plan. Heat flowed out of Abrar's body as fast as lightning. How was that creature planning to harm Father?

The maid threw a sweeping glance in his direction. Abrar pressed his back against the tree trunk, uncomfortably aware of his spinal discs. *Is Qazi nearby?* The blood coursing through Abrar's arteries was suddenly loud. *Is Qazi scrutinizing the effects of his final spurt of venom?* Abrar nearly jumped out of his skin when a cicada chirped. *Steady now*, he told himself. Tushar promised another clue, and besides if the stalker was working for Qazi another conspirator would turn up soon. He was sure of it. He hadn't had the chance or courage to read Forkan's letter. He still had to check out the location

Ayah had mentioned during his morning visit. *Know thy enemy*; the proverb seemed to emanate new meanings like a halide lamp that could be seen from outer space.

The maid stepped out of the scullery to speak to someone. Knowing he only had seconds until she returned, Abrar ran for it. Water was cascading down the threshold. She had left the tap open. He turned it off. *Let her think it was the phantom of the Haidar house*. He raced up the stairs, grateful to find the corridor empty. His sanctuary was only fifty feet away. In the living room, a wind chime played without any breeze. He tiptoed past its open door. It was just Warda. He didn't need to answer to her.

"Eww, what's that smell?" asked Warda, her voice was more irritating than a mosquito's whine. He wondered who she was talking to, and tilted his head. Just behind Warda he could see a girl's sleeve. The sleeve was a beautiful lilac with lace, and he had seen it before. She had square nails, naturally pink. She wore a lapis lazuli ring on her forefinger. He remembered reading that the stone used to be mined from Afghanistan, and it had been the preoccupation of middle age alchemists who'd crush it to make the pigment of ultramarine blue. Nature is stingy to that shade of blue; it's even rare in wild flowers. He was seized by a desire to thank her for her generosity towards that colour of deep, deep oceans. He wanted to thank her for being alive. But the floor was unstable as the edge of a cliff. Half-wittedly, he wondered why that should be. Then his survival instinct kicked in. *Are you mad? Hide stinky, hide*, screamed his inner voice. Praying Warda wouldn't come to investigate he ran to the nearest room. But there was someone ironing linen sheets. He fought the urge to wrap himself in a sheet. Warda's footsteps were coming closer. Abrar looked around wildly. *There*. He ran to a storeroom like a nomad running to an oasis. The door wouldn't shut. To make space he moved a broken

cassette player, and it released a torrent of roaches when he balanced it on his leg. Yet the door remained ajar, and a yellow bellied lizard clung to the top.

“It’s coming from there,” Abrar heard Warda say over the thump of his heart. She strode to the closet, her aquiline nose scrunched in revulsion. Sadaf glided behind her, although, wisely according to Abrar, she showed no inclination to come closer to the offending stench. Warda winced at the sight of him. *At least she isn’t shrieking her infamous ‘eww’*, thought Abrar. Her eyes were feasting on the mud on his shirt. He knew she thought he had lost a fight.

“What is it?” asked Sadaf. Warda grinned, and it shocked Abrar that her harsh face could resemble Nadim’s. She yanked the door. Abrar pulled it back. *Please*, he mouthed, and self-loathing crushed him the next moment.

“It’s umm,” Warda said to Sadaf, without looking at her. Warda’s eyes were narrowed to slits. He couldn’t bring himself to plead again. He even half hoped she’d tell Sadaf, just to see the reaction. After a brief bout of silent laughter Warda spoke.

“Sewer rats, of all sorts of filthy things in this world,” spluttered Warda, turning away. Love, laughter and hope evaporated from him as she led Sadaf away from his view.

“Why are you laughing?” asked Sadaf.

“Saw something that doesn’t belong there. Tell you later,” Warda replied. Abrar’s heart leapt to his mouth. *What now?* Perhaps he should have apologized for Pan Art. The yellow-bellied lizard hadn’t moved, even though it must have been a seismic catastrophe for that little creature. Inspired by the lizard, Abrar regained his cool. Tremendous empathy possessed him; and he was the pain of every soul who was unlucky in love. His

mind soared over the memories where he had jeered at the kids who were spurned by their crushes. He embraced that younger and cruder version of himself as he embraced the losers. Hope anchored him. If Sadaf looked deep enough surely she could excavate feelings for him, curled and cozy as an ammonite fossil.

He dashed to his room, and pulled out the only shirt in the drawer. He stared. The shirt was pink with polka dots. He didn't own that monstrosity. All of his clothes were missing. *Someone's playing a prank*, he realized. Instantly all of his good will vanished. *Nadim*, he should have left that brat in the well. *Whoa kid*, he grabbed a thick book on the chest of drawers. Forkan's letters were safe. He threw the polka dot shirt on the floor and glared at the bedspread. He would have to borrow Moin's clothes and the bedspread would have to do for now. *Huh*, he thought. To please his mother he had packed a bag of emergency clothes. People who put excessive attention to disaster preparedness got on his nerves. They wouldn't have their aid kits at hand when an earthquake struck, and even worse they were going down a rocky road towards paranoid schizophrenia. Now the simple wisdom of packing extra clothes humbled him. Maybe some of the other things people did weren't entirely frivolous. He had stuffed the bag under the bed. A red ribbon was stuck in its zipper. He teased it open. If he'd opened it hastily, he would have ripped the paper inside. Taken aback, he stared at the paper. In bold red letters it said: Shah Pahlavi of Iran, Hakaluki Haor.

What? He wondered. There was a feather glued to the paper, and the ribbon was loosely tied to the bottom of the feather. He stared at the words until he felt dyslexic. It wasn't part of the prank. It didn't have a Nadimesque feel to it. The cuts on his fingers were stinging, so he put the feathered message back, scanning for anything else out of

place. Nothing but dirt and beads of spilled milk. Whoever was on floor mopping duty had conveniently forgotten his room. Whoever put that message in his bag had to know that he kept the bag under his bed. Even he had forgotten. Perhaps they had put it there earlier, thinking he would unpack the bag.

Hakaluki Haor was a marsh wetland, and it had nothing to do with the Shah of Iran. Half formed images and ideas whirled around his head and annoyance throbbed through his veins. *Stick to the facts*, he thought. *Come on kid, no point in sticking to the facts*, he thought. Tushar said he would send a clue but he didn't say it would make any sense. Abrar pulled out fresh clothes from the bag. A childish hope that he could figure it all out in the shower clung to him. But as he tucked the bag back in he stared at the floor like it was a riddle. Something odd was staring him in the eye. *Aha*. He didn't drink any milk at dawn. Abrar touched it, and it was still wet and it stuck to his fingertips. He pulled out the message again. The feather had been stuck with the same glue. *Whoa, fresh glue*, he thought. Whoever was working for Tushar had been here, recently. *They could still be in the house*, he thought with a shiver. Instinctively, he turned around. But the room and the corridor beyond were empty. It was an impromptu job, and whoever it was had probably glued the feather under the bed for privacy. It raised the possibility that they had come in after Nadim. *Fantastic*, he thought irritably. He ought to interrogate the brat.

He flipped the message over a few times. The paper itself was non-descript, but the bold red letters had a glaze to them. He recognized it as oil pastels. *Whoa*, there was a jolt at the pit of his stomach. Only one person in the house had oil pastels, *Warda*. Syringing out secrets from people was a skill she excelled at. He figured she didn't know everything. She wouldn't plot against Father, but she would aid Tushar if she thought he

was bringing Abrar down. *Probably tripping over self-importance*, thought Abrar. But he had to go for afternoon prayers, so the *fun* prospect of confronting her had to be postponed. After showering he headed down. He was too absorbed to notice the commotion in the entrance room.

“Generous of you,” said Moin, who was also on his way to the mosque. Abrar looked at him questioningly. Then he noticed all of his clothes, including branded tees, and the Panjabi set he had bought to wear for the feast, were heaped near the entrance door. Beggars were squabbling over the clothes, watched over by a cross Dadu. Calloused hands were testing the texture of his favourite Guayabera shirt. Abrar quelled his annoyance. It would be lousy to confiscate the clothes from the beggars, especially as they considered it charity. Besides, he reminded himself, it wasn’t as though he did a whole lot of good for humanity, so he shouldn’t sabotage this. He could buy something for the feast later.

“Abrar,” said Dadu, walking towards him. She wore a peach sari, and it highlighted the redness in her face. Sensing trouble, Moin cleared his throat and stepped back.

“I appreciate your charity. But inviting a random group of beggars into the house is not the way to go about it. You should have come to me. I have a list of priorities for the needy. Some of your shirts are in great condition. I would have sent them to our poor relatives,” Dadu enunciated each word clearly. Abrar raised his eyebrows, but Dadu wasn’t done.

“I thought you valued the *kurta* I stitched and embroidered for you. It took me two weeks. I’d hoped you would keep that at least,” Dadu glared at him. A man with a

toothless grin was wearing it. Abrar felt a twinge of guilt. He had never worn that *kurta*; the embroidery consisted of water lily leaves and he didn't know if that was just old fashioned or the kind of thing people never wore. But it was a special mark of her favouritism. Moin, who was looking slightly sour, had never received as much as a handmade handkerchief from her.

“Nadim,” Abrar said, louder than he had intended. “I didn't call all these people here to donate my stuff. Ask Nadim,” said Abrar. Moin burst out laughing.

“I see. You, get Nadim. What do you want to keep?” said Dadu, exasperated. One of his elder cousins went to get the pest.

“Nothing,” said Abrar, hoping she wouldn't pursue the subject. She smiled. Finding Nadim wasn't difficult, given that he was guffawing in the corridor. Ridwan came in tow, and gave Abrar an apologetic look. Dadu glared at Nadim.

“I don't know anything,” Nadim said. But he couldn't stop laughing. A pockmarked man exclaimed, and raised his hand at the pest. His fingers were sliced, Abrar noticed.

“Thank you, bhaiyya, I, I am so grateful,” the man continued thanking Nadim profusely. The rest of the group watched him. *Get out of here kid. They will follow the pockmarked man's lead*, Abrar thought. Their gratefulness shamed him. Their destitution might have been alleviated under responsible governance. *No*, the voice in his head corrected him. They reminded him that the workers in Father's garment factories were marginally better than them, just skirting penury. Abrar sighed.

“Enough,” Dadu told the pockmarked man. She turned to Nadim, “You're going to think about what you did until evening,”

“I thought about it already,” said Nadim. Dadu dragged the pest to the drawing room that had faux Victorian sofas. Nadim seemed to realize she intended to lock him up. He tried making a run for it, but Dadu’s fingers swooped down on his shoulders.

“He made me do it,” said Nadim, pointing at Ridwan.

“Until bedtime because you lied. Get your school bag Ridwan, you’re joining. You’ve been incompetent as an older brother,” said Dadu. With his head hung down, Ridwan went to do as he was told. She shoved Nadim inside the room, and she shut the door. Slightly cheered, Abrar walked to the main gate. Moin caught up with him, and started nattering about the kinds of challenges civil engineers would face developing a futuristic city. Abrar wished he’d shut up.

“Hey, heard of the Shah of Iran?” Abrar asked.

“...Of course, elevators using vacuum technology might be the answer. Hmm, the Shah, the overthrown monarch. Who hasn’t?” said Moin.

“Did he ever visit Bangladesh?” asked Abrar.

“Nope, fled to places West of Iran. Why?”

“No reason.” *Fled*, thought Abrar. The Shah was famous for being in exile.

Abrar streaked up the stairs. Everything was as he left it. He pulled out the message again. Carefully, he plucked the feather from the paper. He hadn’t paid attention to it before. It was black and rather long, but it wasn’t a raven’s feather as he had assumed. *Trust Warda to have exotic feathers*, he mused. In school, she had made a life sized metallic tree. She’d used sea glass, beads, and corals as the fruits. She had used feathers as leaves. But the parrot, kite, and peacock feathers were overshadowed by

feathers of darker hues. The magpie feathers had reminded Abrar of cemeteries. The coral fruits had seemed like shredded flesh caught in a headless birds' grip. Miss Asha had placed it near the school's reception. Abrar's classmates would quiet down when they walked past it. They couldn't objectively explain how beautiful materials combined together to produce such a nightmarish quality. It had been removed after a kindergarten kid threw a nervous fit.

The second floor and the third floor were deserted. As he passed the smaller drawing room, he heard Nadim demand to be let out. Abrar knocked on the door and pretended to open it. He could hear Nadim hopping on his feet. Abrar laughed and walked away. He had bigger fish to fry. Laughter was bubbling out of the drawing room. Half the family and guests were gathered there. Two of Roshni fupi's son-in-laws were singing Tagore songs, with lyrics of their own making. Warda wasn't with the elder cousins she usually hung out with. A kid playing charades was imitating a scuba dive. Then Abrar spotted her. Warda was making lemonade. Moin's elder sister, a short woman with a good-natured face, was working next to her. Abrar swallowed in nervousness, and Moin's sister mistook it for a sign of thirst.

"You didn't get any?" asked Moin's elder sister, handing him a glass.

"You'll need it," said Warda in an undertone. Her face broke into a lopsided smile.

"Thanks," he replied.

"What do you mean?" he asked Warda, prepared for her snarky comments.

"I spoke to Sadaf," she said, as she liberally added sugar to juice.

“What?” he snapped, caught off guard. She sliced a lemon and its juice made his eyes water. People threw him curious glances. Warda handed him a jug of lemonade. Her grin looked even more gleeful, magnified by the glass and transparent liquid.

“What did you tell her?” he asked, keeping a neutral expression. *Kid, you can’t afford to think about Sadaf right now*, he reminded himself.

“Bring a chalk. I’ll draw a map of Narnia, and then I’ll tell you. Make yourself useful. Thirsty people all around,” she said. Forcing himself to maintain a neutral look Abrar walked away with the jug, avoiding the arm of a kid who was pretending to be a lion. He started from the right, moving counterclockwise. Working methodically acted as an antidote to the stress that had piled up since yesterday, until he got to Ripon. Seeing Abrar, Ripon gulped down his full glass and lemonade dribbled down his double chin. He waved his glass under Abrar’s nose. Abrar poured him more lemonade, resisting the temptation to tell him to control his blood sugar level. Warda was watching. She’d be delighted to think Abrar was so miserable that he was reduced to snapping at innocent people. Besides, it would embarrass Ripon in front of the guests. Soon he ran out of lemonade.

“I hate to break it to you. I mean Sadaf—” said Warda, when he returned with the empty jug. She put her hands on her mouth and snickered. Her knot of friends was sitting close by, staring at him. Mentally Abrar counted sheep, but it didn’t help, so he slaughtered them instead. *Cool it*, he told himself.

“Sadaf’s just not into you,” said Warda, as formally as a news anchor.

“Okay,” he replied, surprised at how normal he sounded. No, he wasn’t prepared to hear it. Sadaf’s face flashed before his eyes, and then all her features marred and she

was faceless. Ice cubes melted in a jug. All of his extremities were numb. But all the other stresses grounded him; his decision to forsake the garment factories, the man on the island, Dadu and Ayah's revelations, Father's reluctance to talk about Qazi, and the snake in the well vied for his attention, taking turns to attack his tranquility. Warda was gripping her glass.

"She was like, 'sure he's a great guy, but I – don't start feeling relieved now, you're not *great* great. She was just being polite... Nobody in their right mind thinks you're great,'" said Warda. She was too electrified to keep her voice down. Warda's clique was zeroing in on his reactions. Giving them his back, Abrar pulled out the feather.

"Recognize this?" he brandished the feather.

"She didn't talk about you for more than thirty seconds. Not worth the time, know what I mean?" said Warda. *Smart of her*, he nearly said aloud. Sadaf would know better than to confide in Warda. *Sadaf knows, she knows, she knows*, thought Abrar. *Focus*, his inner voice shouted.

"Recognize this?" he asked again. Warda exchanged glances with a friend, and their grins widened. His face felt strained from the effort of keeping a blank expression.

"It's a feather, get over it. Did you digest what I said, or are you in denial?" she asked. This was met with a snort from her friend, a girl with sleepy eyes, but a jutting and pimpled chin. Moin's elder sister stood between them, under the pretence of making more lemonade.

"I know it's a feather," he said, as though he was thanking her for stating the obvious. Momentarily, her eyebrows knitted with annoyance. Abrar guessed she had hoped he'd make a fool of himself in public. She took the feather and scrutinized it,

perhaps surprised to find it was just a feather. *No*, his hope that she'd have some answers was so strong that he had denied the possibility that someone else planted the clue.

Warda's face brightened.

"I get it. People react to trauma in different ways. Normal people get numbed from shock. Ancient kings killed the bearer of bad news. You show people rubbish," she said, tossing the feather away. Outstretching his arm like a goalkeeper, he tried to catch the feather before it hit the ground, but it got trampled by the kids playing charade. Warda's clique choked with laughter. *Not you then*, Abrar thought. With a thrill he realized whoever Tushar or Qazi's agent was may be sitting in this sea of people, watching him. Pretending to pour himself more lemonade, he turned his face away from the crowd. Abrar swallowed an ice cube and the brain freeze distracted him from his grievances.

"Did anyone borrow your oil pastels today? Around the time Nad—" asked Abrar. He had a feeling her clique would fall of their seats if they heard him mention Nadim.

"My pastels? No," said Warda. Some of her mirth died down. Caring for her art supplies triumphed over her tendency to inflict misery. Moin's elder sister answered.

"Yes. This woman, she was fascinated by the pastels. I let her test it. Don't worry Warda. Your pastels are in their place," she said. Her voice had a hint of Dadu's sternness beneath its softness.

"Who?" Abrar asked, looking around. Everyone was absorbed, ordinary.

"Why?" asked Warda, honing in on his urgency. Abrar asked Moin's sister again. If she was surprised by the request she didn't show it. But Warda's eyes narrowed. Light reflecting off her toe ring caught Abrar's eyes. She was going to follow them.

“Hey, aunty wants more lemonade,” said Abrar, gesturing at a group of ladies in the far end of the room. Knowing Warda would serve the aunts to maintain her goody two shoes image, Abrar followed Moin’s sister. Adrenaline burst through his system. He was getting warmer.

“Don’t mind Warda,” said Moin’s sister, as they crossed the entrance room.

“Oh, she’s just immature,” Abrar said.

They went past the stairways, Abrar’s excitement increasing with each step. Save two slumbering people, the courtyard was deserted. There was a woman huddled in the porch of the kitchen, beneath a window. The aroma of kebabs hit him. He’d forgotten he was hungry. Moin’s sister whispered to the woman. Her face was still covered by the *pallu* of her sari, and Abrar wondered if he’d have to wait until she woke up. She stirred. All the colours around him felt surreal. Moin’s sister had to go, and Abrar nodded at her. The woman yawned and gave him a cross-eyed glare. Abrar greeted her.

“How’s your grandson?” he couldn’t stop beaming. He was right; she knew more than she had let on yesterday. She was here to help him. She had changed her mind. A face popped up at the window. “How do you know her grandson?” she asked, shaking her head, so her nose ring bounced. *Incredible, the woman has a gossip-sensing radar,* Abrar thought.

Hencoop lady’s face was alight with interest, and she stared at him, expecting a legitimate answer. The cross-eyed woman glared at her. Abruptly, the cross-eyed woman stalked off.

“Oh, wow. Who does she think she is?” the woman with the gold nose ring asked.

“Forget it,” he couldn’t help feeling sorry for her. Behind the bars her face was puffed with indignation. He went to the front yard. The cross-eyed woman was sitting hunched shouldered.

“I can’t make sense of the message,” he said. She sighed and looked up to survey the neighbourhood. Other than a man trying to fix the TV antennae and slapping his thigh on the veranda of a faraway house, there was nothing worth noticing. She kept walking, slowly. Abrar guessed she was having second thoughts. He leaned against the guava tree, just to let her feel that he wasn’t dogging her footsteps. After Abrar had guesstimated the weight of all the buildings in the area, in hopes of curbing his impatience, she returned.

“All migratory birds return home,” she said.

“So what?” he asked, hoping it didn’t mean what he thought it meant.

“Qazi sahib needs to come back here,” she said. The lines on her face were prominent.

“Why? To be hanged in a jail yard?”

“This is his birth place,” she said. Abrar was too stunned to speak. *What kind of a statement is that?* Sure, fugitives longed for their motherland. But no amount of emotional appeal would persuade him to even entertain the idea of allowing a *Rajakar* back in town. Qazi had to know that. *Why return*, thought Abrar. It had to be all the property and real estate he owned. Qazi would have to divide all his assets amongst his family. Qazi had three decades to authorize an heir. But Qazi’s physical presence might be required to fulfill legal requirements. Was it the house? Was anything worth facing prosecution? Even if court procedures took time, Qazi was guaranteed a mob beating. Besides, Abrar was sure Qazi could have given the power of attorney to a lawyer, and the

lawyer could have taken the legal documents to Qazi's den. If that failed, there were duplicitous ways, loopholes in the law, and local officers waiting for bribes. A man who had escaped justice for so long could think of something. *Why return*, thought Abrar. Yellow leaves and fungus infected leaves fell off the guava tree. A decayed leaf fell on the bridge of his nose, and Abrar flicked it aside. The woman watched the leaf fall. To block her face from his sight, Abrar tilted left and stared at a guava.

Whiffing the warm overripe odour he could tell it was nearing the time it would fall off the tree. The tree that bore it would disown it, sever it from its branches. *Huh*. Abrar got it, he got the intense desire a soul must feel to see the fruits of its labour. *Before death Qazi wanted to know what became of the village he had burned to cinders*, thought Abrar. Qazi would get a kick out of retracing his footsteps. With a cartographers' penchant for accuracy Qazi wanted to refresh his mental map of the terrain he had destroyed. Anger pulsed through Abrar. He walked away.

"He is innocent," the woman called out.

"So is Tikka Khan," said Abrar with unbridled fury.

"Listen, he is not whom everyone thinks he is. People confused Qazi sahib with Gazi the butcher. Gazi was the real *Rajakar*. Qazi sahib was framed," she said calmly.

"Convenient story," said Abrar.

"True story, ask your father," she said.

"Why do you refer to my father," Abrar said. She fidgeted and pulled her sari closer around her. She opened and closed her mouth, and then her mouth went firm, and it wasn't more than a dark brown line in her brown face. She wasn't going to tell him,

Abrar figured. He hoped his relief didn't show on his face. He didn't want to hear it from this stranger.

“That's a special feather,” she pointed to the feather, which was sticking out of his pocket. Anguish crumpled her face. She put a hand on her forehead. There was turmeric powder lodged in a nail. She glanced around, shook her head, and rushed to the main gates. Abrar followed but she had already said too much.

Forkan's Tale

Kewrapur: the weaver's village, west of Ujjalpur. I was going to follow my father and grandfather's footsteps. We specialized in making *Jamdani* saris, designed with the patterns in my father's dream. Beautiful. Saris like hazy air. I set up the wrap. I was too young to be an apprentice. My father and my elder brother would weft perfectly symmetrical motifs over the clack of bamboo rods. We used the old pit looms, not the Jacquard looms they use to today. The pit loom doesn't have the perforated cards to aid in designing the sari, so our saris were entirely handcrafted. My uncle dyed the yarn. He was rarely dry, always dipping wet yarn in and out of boiling soap. We boiled the dye in river water. Back then the water was pure and sweet. People were always bathing in the dyeing room; it was so steamy that I thought my flesh would tenderize as I took out the threads to dry. Labour intensive work, all of it.

I am not just saying it because he was my father, but he was the best. Every Friday at dawn he would take my brother and me to sell the saris in the bazaar. My

brother had six toes, and the sixth one was elongated and skimmed the ground when he walked. I can't remember his face. Middlemen bought saris from us and sold them to wholesalers and retailers. The slightest weaving flaw made the price drop. But my father was solid. His reputation grew and a middleman from Qazi sahib's shop offered to buy all of our saris once a week at fixed rates, depending on the quality of the saris. Qazi sahib was legendary, dictating colours and designs before they were the trend. All the best saris went to his shop.

One day Qazi sahib visited our village during Ramadan, the busiest month. There was high demand for saris before Eid. He needed three Jamdani pieces, with delicate *zari*, gold threadwork. It was a special order from Bajwa the jute mill owner. My father was chosen for the job, but my father felt nervous when Qazi sahib showed him a sketch of the complex design. The exorbitant amount Qazi sahib was willing to pay unnerved him still more. Patterns so intricate couldn't be woven in three weeks. But my uncle wished to seize the opportunity, changing the course of my life.

On my seventh year I caught typhoid and grew so thin you couldn't tell me apart from a bed sheet. I never fully recovered; colds, nausea, headaches and diarrhoea were my constant companions. Country remedies failed. My father and uncle took me to the Ujjalpur hospital, a long ride on bull carts and a ferry. I was wrapped in towels, mufflers and quilts. It upset my uncle. He believed in being dressed smartly, so that the townspeople wouldn't look down on us as naive villagers. I was dazed by the number of buildings terraced together like the shell of a giant worm. Green glass glistened. The roar of the first motorcar nearly threw me out of the rickshaw. I understood how traffic lights worked after four signals.

In the hospital, we sat at the end of a corridor opposite to the ward. A nurse in a white uniform rolled a trolley up the corridor. The white was luminescent, naturally, or I felt so in my fevered state. I wanted to ask her what she washed her uniform with, so we could boil the raw threads with that soap. Up close I realized she was as old as my sister. There was a plastic sheet on the trolley. It had a gray and white image floating on it, not the way motifs float on fine muslin. Someone trapped a shadow on that sheet. My uncle asked her.

She explained it was an X-ray. Some invisible rays like radio waves can pass through the body and leave a trace of the places it couldn't pass. "Is that the truth?" my father challenged, eyes bulging. She smiled at the child's fractured arm. It was one of the most terrifying moments of my life. I was chilled with fever and this beautiful healer in glowing white robes told me that there was a machine that could see my insides. I didn't want such knowledge, knowing what *I am made of* laid bare. She had said, "X-rays pass through the body." What did that mean? I pinched and compressed the skin on my arms. There was space I hadn't noticed before. What path did these rays take? Could a powerful ray slice the flesh apart like coconut leaves? No, it wouldn't be as neat as that. I searched for her during the time bayonets sliced civilian bodies.

Antibiotics were prescribed. The doctor emphasised a healthy diet with proteins. My father's face darkened, yet he fed me half a chicken that day. Fish was cheaper than chicken. My mother made curries of small fish every day, mostly razor belly minnows, Gangetic leaffish, striped dwarf catfish and climbing perch. On Fridays we had hilsa, Catla, and bronze featherbacks. Once I regained strength, they went back to feeding me Malabar spinach, hyacinth beans and dasheen that grew all over our property. I drank

milk regularly. There were days I only ate salt and leftover rice. End of monsoons were the worst, a time when nothing is harvested. Our stocked up food and grain diminished fast. Monsoon waters retreated slowly; in places they remained in stagnant pools where diseases brewed. The rains flooded the pits of the loom. We were broke. With my frail health I couldn't be a weaver. The levers of the old pit loom had to be hand lifted. Muscle soreness and failing eyesight affected all weavers, locked in those cramped work areas. Cheap yarn was vanishing from the market. Even my uncle, the hard bargainer, who loved the craft, thought of starting another line of business.

The day Qazi sahib visited us I was wading in a shallow pool with my peers. We were catching stinging catfish with our bare hands. Catfish are slippery, without scales, and venomous. One jab could leave a grown man howling in pain. You have to grab the soft spot beneath its pectorals. My basket was not as full as my friend Bakul's, the boy who possessed a baritone voice.

Later when I first heard Kishore Kumar I almost believed Bakul had survived the war and adopted the stage name Kishore Kumar, their voices were so similar. Suddenly my uncle came, grabbed my shoulders and asked, "Do you want to go to the town, boy? See wonderful things and live in a big house?" I did. My uncle snatched my basket of catfish. My uncle had bargained with Qazi sahib, he would have to employ me at his sari shop. Qazi sahib had agreed. At the loom pit the song of bamboo rods was without harmony. My father skipped beats when he heard what my uncle had done. My father loved his freedom, and being a weaver he could work as he pleased. He didn't want me to work under a master. Catfish are strong creatures; they have too much life in them. I watched the fish leap in the basket for hours as my uncle persuaded my parents that I

would die of malnutrition if I stayed there. Qazi sahib would be responsible for my food, medicines, clothes, shelter, wages, and big bonuses.

Qazi sahib looked distinguished, unusual. He was heavy-jowled, his cheeks brick like. Beneath his bushy eyebrows his eyes protruded like peeled lychees. All of us were gaping at his ears. The ears were massive, and wriggly as cauliflowers, bordering deformity. He stood straight, appearing taller than he was. He always wore a white *Khadi* cotton kurta and salwar. Yet after the war there were garbled accounts of how he looked, and of course the things he did.

Two days later I left the village, this time travelling by boat. Himalayan silt and landfills have choked up this area like cholesterol in arteries. But in the late sixties waterways of all sizes graced this area. I remember the transitory feel of being between silver lakes and sky. Boats spread like water lilies at the shores. The fish whispered at the oars. Ujjalpur had fields and fields of *birui* rice; its fragrance was so earthy and sweet, I felt full just smelling it. Now days all they grow is irri rice.

I was disappointed that Qazi sahib's shop didn't have the rumoured chandelier shaped like the *huma* bird of Sufi poetry—the mythic bird that foretells kingship whenever its shadow touches a man's head. But it had a vaulted ceiling and mirrors. Saris of every texture and hue were fanned out from the ceiling. I had bathed, oiled myself, combed my hair flat and worn my best shirt, determined to look as smart as the townsfolk. There were five of us: Qazi sahib, nephew, Qazi sahib's two Bihari brothers and me. The first day I sold a sari for what I deemed a reasonable price, Qazi sahib's nephews face became dark as teak, "Who said you can sell?"

My father's saris were sold for thrice the price Qazi sahib paid us. There were *taats* from Tangail, *katans* from Karachi, and silks from Rajshahi, Assam, Orissa, Benares and Kanchipuram. Those were far off places, much further than Kewrapur and Ujjalpur. As a sari travels far from the place of its creation its price increases like the river flowing to the sea. In a city like Bombay or Rawalpindi my father's saris might have sold for five times as much.

Otherwise Qazi sahib was a fair man. In quieter times he and his nephew read the newspaper. People discussed politics incessantly. The people in the market felt cheated by our rulers in West Pakistan. Anger that East Pakistani resources were only being used for West Pakistan breathed amongst them. I saw myself as the son of a brilliant weaver from the village Kewrapur. I didn't believe my family's fate would change with a change of oppressors. When people shouted *sovereignty triumphs domination*, or, *unity triumphs secession* I wasn't too moved by their fervour. It made Qazi sahib despondent. The Bihari brothers were refugees from the Indo-Pak partition. People call him a war collaborator, but he was merely a man who didn't want to see another war, who wished to see the Muslims of the region stay united.

Bajwa, the jute mill owner from Lahore or Punjab, was powerful and disliked by the locals. Bajwa sahib frequented the shop, speaking with Qazi sahib in rapid Urdu, words flowing on each other. He always bought saris for his wife; more saris than there were the days in a year. The lady never visited the shop. It was rare for women to be in market places back then. The Bihari brothers were allowed the privilege of going to Bajwa sahib's mansion when we had a stock of new saris. They said gold and jewels adorned the furniture. I couldn't imagine a house more beautiful than the Qazi house.

I used to get snacks for the customers. One day Bajwa sahib wrote down the sweets he wanted from sweet shop. My sweat smudged the paper on the way. So I bought the sweets I knew to be Bajwa sahib's favourite. He said, "Why didn't you get what I wrote, you illiterate imbecile." I must have been very upset because from that day Qazi sahib taught me how to read Bengali, as he was convinced it would serve me better under the circumstances, in this place. I realized reality is far richer for the educated. Urdu was created by the Mughals; they borrowed words from Sindhi, Punjabi, Persian and others to create a language to command the Indo-Pak armies they had conquered. Faiz, Ghalib, and Iqbal suffused the language with poetry and melancholy.

Qazi sahib had another pupil, Zohair Haidar, who learned business strategies. Zohair would come to the store in quieter hours and ask questions that I had never thought of, even though I was working in the shop. Zohair would require a large start up capital and a network across the Indian subcontinent to run a shop like Qazi sahib's. Otherwise he could be content with the local goods, but there was a tendency in customers to value local goods as inferior. The Bihari brothers were contemptuous of him.

Zohair came from an old family that had become poor. Their awe of Zohair's ambitions was balanced by their belief that Zohair didn't have the necessary grit or the pragmatism to make things work. One day, I returned to the shop to find that Zohair had had an altercation with Bajwa sahib. It had to do with selling something owned by the Haidar family. Also, it had something to do with one of Zohair's uncles, a staunch supporter of secession. Bajwa sahib was livid that a *Bangali* spoke back to him. Since then Zohair avoided the shop, or perhaps Bajwa sahib.

Except that one day Zohair stormed into the shop, at closing time. Qazi sahib ordered me to leave, but I heard Zohair say, “You created this rift. I can’t justify it, but neither can you...the purity of intention.” I thought that was a strange thing to say. They argued in harsh but hushed voices. I heard Bajwa sahib’s name over and over. Since that day I noticed Qazi sahib was less courteous to window shoppers.

The war came. Kewrapur was a peaceful village, unfamiliar with violence. We didn’t have televisions and movies to corrupt our imaginations, so when I heard the radio broadcasts of the killings, I didn’t believe it. But Qazi sahib grew restless, and closed the shop. He told me he had promised my father that I would reside in Ujjalpur until the turmoil was over. War didn’t come to Ujjalpur; it was too surrounded by rivers, paddy fields, and marshes. Qazi sahib wanted to reunite the Bihari brothers with their family, and get them to safety. Qazi sahib left Ujjalpur, and he was gone for three months. His nephew couldn’t find any trace of him. The family of the Bihari brothers were rail station workers, and they had been massacred two days after Qazi sahib had gone.

My friend Mukul, who reminded me of Kishore Kumar, visited me. Our house in Kewrapur was near the road. My mother and sister had gone deep inside the village, where there were only narrow roads, impossible for two people to walk on. So the Pakistani army didn’t go there, but they found my father and uncle in our house. Mukul was blindfolded but he heard my shy father bargain with the soldiers, “Kill me, and spare my brother.” The soldier told them they had precisely fifty seconds to live, and then they fired point blank. The knowledge that my father and uncle’s murderers would not escape justice, regardless of what they believed, and the knowledge that I will meet the murders on the Day of Judgement helped me retain my sanity. Mukul had jumped into a river as

they were taking him to camp. Later he crawled out and slithered on the soil, his skin peeling off his body. I don't know what became of him.

We got news of the massacre of 300 Khonighaat villagers, linked to Gazi the butcher. Witnesses stepped forward, claiming Gazi was Qazi sahib's alias, a name to hide behind. That didn't sound like the man who taught us, who protected the Bihari brothers. Qazi sahib had returned to Ujjalpur, saying he had been detained in a Pakistani camp. One witness had been blindfolded and he couldn't tell if the accused man had enormous ears, and the others hadn't been allowed to look at Gazi the butcher. But the other witness was Mukta, a fisherman, of unreliable character, not a resident of Khonighaat. Mukta claimed that he had seen Qazi sahib leading the soldiers into the village. Swift justice to alleviate grief was what people demanded. I protested claiming my master was innocent. But his ties with the overthrown government had been too strong, and his three month disappearance was inexplicable. Few aided Qazi sahib. When Zohair joined the people demanding Qazi sahib's trial, which was not a trial but a death sentence, people trusted Zohair's judgement, even though he had just reached manhood. The zeal grew under Zohair's influence. It became too dangerous for Qazi sahib to remain in Ujjalpur.

Chapter 7

The third floor was deserted. Abrar paced back and forth, twisting a basil leaf. His scalp was hot and a headache was on its way. Hasan uncle's comments burned through his consciousness, now that he knew Sadaf had rejected him. A few minutes ago he had said the evening prayer at home. *Idiot Beetu*, thought Abrar. But the ill will disappeared instantly. Abrar was grateful that he finally knew Hasan uncle's stand on things. *No more agonizing over impossibilities, kid. No more wondering what Sadaf wrote on the misty window.* When he stepped on a squeaky frog toy, the sound hit him like hammer on the funny bone. *Come on kid, you know who the island-man is*, said the mocking voice in his head. *Shut up, shut up.* He was exhausted from the trip he made half an hour ago, but it was the kind of exhaustion that left him jittery. He didn't want to think anymore. *Coward*, said the inner voice. Abrar sped up, knocking a vase, which had a peacock painted on it, out of the way. *So many species of birds*, said the mocking voice in his head. *But how does Qazi fit in? Why did Father go after him?* Once again he looked at the newspaper clipping the island-man had given him. The Vultures had been caught in Calcutta in 1968, before the robbery in the Haidar house. The copycat robbers must have needed an insider from the Haidar house. Abrar decided that cooling his head was a priority. But when he reached the washroom and poured himself a mug of water, he thought his wet head would only worsen his headache. He got out and kept pacing. There were footsteps coming up the stairs. An impulse to hide enveloped him. But he stood frozen on the spot, expecting more bad news. Roshni fupi's face came into focus.

“Abrar. I hear you are responsible for Amina’s return to school,” she said. Her face was serene, devoid of the harsh lines that marked Father’s face. It took him a moment to realize an answer was expected of him. His words merged with each other.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Abrar, if it has anything to do with Sadaf, umm, I have lived long enough to know that feelings change. If you want to you can talk to me,” she said. The mortification of being asked to talk about his feelings jolted Abrar into action.

“No, no, Sadaf? No. I mean... Was there between our family and Bajwa the jute mill owner?” he asked wildly. Roshni fupi sighed.

“That was a long time ago... Yes. Bajwa was powerful. You know we were having a lot of problems with the ownership of our lands. He had offered to help, which we didn’t accept,” she said. Her sympathy felt dense and sticky as honey.

“How come?” asked Abrar.

“We couldn’t afford what he asked for in return. He wanted Mesba’s heirloom, the Mughal necklace,” said Roshni fupi. The world spun. And he pretended to stretch, just to balance himself. *Whoa kid*. Everything kept coming back to that necklace.

“Abrar, have some tea, go out for a walk. You will feel fresh,” said Roshni fupi. Mumbling a reply, he decided to do as she suggested. Getting far away from this house was a brilliant idea. After Roshni fupi left, he went down the stairs, desperately praying he wouldn’t come across anyone. Half way down he stumbled when he spotted a coil. Covering his birthmark he took long breaths. *The snake’s gone, it’s gone*, he thought, and picked up the coil, which was just the drawstring of a long lost petticoat. Light was

dying. He ran back up the stairs and found the emergency flashlight from the living room. Leftover snacks were scattered across the coffee table. Abrar grabbed his water and stuffed a few samosas, jujube berries and a banana in his pocket. He didn't have a clear idea where he was spending the night. As he passed the courtyard of the kitchen someone called his name, but he ignored it and sped up. According to the tradition of the prophet (peace be upon him), roaming about right after sunset is frowned upon.

His feet carried him to the forest. Mosquitoes bit him and thorns drew his blood. Behind him the Haidar house was embraced in the ruby red of the sun. *No*, he thought, *I can't stand the warmth everyone is enjoying back at that house*. Broad leaves drank the soupy sunlight. Speeding past the well he knew he was going to the Unlucky house, the Burned House. It was the perfect sanctuary: a house where its inhabitants have known some flavour of hell. That house had burned for two days despite being so close to a river. *So close to the answers kid*, he thought. He was impatient for the night. The river's cry pursued him as he walked past its bank. At a bend in the river, his eyes sought the charred remains of the courtyard. The burnt umbers of the rafter of an exterior room, possibly a stable, came into view. Weeds cloaked the frontal columns so completely that the branches seemed unnaturally straight.

The bones of the interior quarters remained. Grass fed on the cement. Serrations in the leaves glinted with starlight. But when the North Star hid behind a cloud, which seemed as though a giant claw had ripped through it, Abrar felt too exhausted to remain standing. The ground beneath his feet reminded him of the well. So he circled the house. In most places the roof had collapsed and cool river winds whirled inside, except in one room where the debris had blocked the window. *It'll do*, he thought. Bamboo planks

rotted across the room, but he didn't shun the smell of decay. Besides, fresh air entered through the gaping hole where a door had burned. There was a raised dais, which the last inhabitants would have used as a temple for performing *pooja*. Soft creepers and moss swathed the dais. Abrar turned off his flashlight and slumped down.

“Aaahh,” he groaned and leaped. His thigh had hit a hard rock lying beneath. *What now*, he thought, as he turned on his flashlight. The creepers weren't rooted on the dais, and they had fallen away revealing a bamboo mat. *Huh*, he thought. *Why is the mat so intact, untouched by the fire?* An owl hooted. Abrar yanked away the mat. He had heard of owners who would cement their trunks to prevent thieves from carrying them away. But he had never expected to see one, and yet there was a trunk in the cavity where the dais should have been. A large padlock shut its metal lids.

The padlock was shiny, as though it had been recently oiled. He scavenged until he found a boulder. Lifting his arms above his shoulders he slammed it against the padlock. As he kept pounding, his breath came out like furnace air. *This one's for Qazi*, he thought as he slammed the boulder ever more forcefully. The boulder cracked but the steel remained unyielding. *Squeak*, went the lock fastener. Abrar realized one good pull would detach it from the trunk. *Momentum*, he thought. If only he had rope he could tie it to the fastener and pull from a distance. He wasn't curious about what was hidden in the trunk but he needed to finish what he started. *Come on kid*, he thought. The windows would have rods, and they could be used to gain momentum. Nocturnal rodents scurried away as Abrar searched for a rod. When he found a usable one, he also spotted a ball of light deep in the forest. *Fantastic, someone's coming*, he thought. Rushing back to the room with the trunk, he inserted the rod into the slot where the fastener was coming

undone. Then Abrar yanked it open. He didn't pick up the object lying there. *Breathe*, he told himself. Intensely, he felt like a man who had walked into a cave expecting to see cave paintings of domesticated beasts, but instead found the scene of a massacre.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but all he could see was the object. Disparate images floated to his consciousness, but their meanings eluded him. He could see coal turning to diamonds; speeding train wheels cracking bamboo ladders; his geometry set measuring the solar system; a paper boat sailing over arteries; himself walking alone over a river of tree sap; electromagnets spinning and gearing balls levitating; begonias becoming glass flowers; symbols of exponential functions falling off graphs; a tungsten filament twisting around the bulb that sheltered it; twigs turning to syringes; sparrows feeding their young; fish feeding on lava; a pair of green suns evaporating the morning dew; mummies being embalmed in jade; spores withering in radiation; black petals beating like bat wings; wrenches flying over oceans; a fire extinguisher releasing clouds; storks spitting out pearls; and a snake finding its way by sensing the heat in his body. He opened eyes.

Abrar picked up the object and turned off his flashlight. He pulled out the jujube berries from his pocket and put them in the trunk. For a few seconds he waited, and then he saw a light across the inner courtyard. He couldn't see who was holding the flashlight, but judging by the width and breadth it seemed to be a man. *Hide*, screamed his inner voice. By the time the flashlight shone over the room, Abrar had just crouched behind the nearest bamboo plank. Rafters creaked and one fell on his back. Luckily, the man holding the flashlight gasped at the same time, and he didn't hear anything. Abrar crawled. There was a slat between the planks. The light was still shining over the trunk. He heard the man pick up the jujube berries. One by one the berries fell back in the trunk.

“Brother, my poor brother. What will I tell my brother?” said a voice so nasal it was almost inhuman.

Abrar felt the hair on his body rise. The man scanned the room with his flashlight, its beam an inch away from his head as Abrar flattened himself on the moist ground. *Who’s your brother*, thought Abrar, desperately hoping his suspicion wasn’t true. But the man didn’t expect the trunk opener to remain on the spot. He ran out and Abrar could hear him running around, searching. Then the footsteps ran towards the forest. Abrar got up. Abrar knew Shakil was heading towards the Haidar house. Abrar followed until Shakil started running in circles. Abrar tiptoed nearer, hiding behind the trunk of a jackfruit tree. Shakil threw up his spindly arm and hit his forehead. He was mumbling something Abrar couldn’t decipher. As suddenly as he had started, Shakil stopped running in circles and continued on his way. In his haste Shakil made so much noise that he was oblivious to Abrar’s presence. When they came near the backyard of the Haidar house, Shakil repeated his odd behaviour. Abrar resisted the temptation of getting closer to Shakil. Instead, he crouched beneath the ash gourd vine. He spat out the acrid saliva that had pooled in his mouth and whiffed the ash gourd’s light, buttery aroma. Shakil stuck his face outside the window of the drawing room. Frantically, Shakil waved his arms at someone inside the house. A familiar face appeared on the other side of the window, and watched Shakil silently mouth words. Then the familiar person was gone.

Nadim

Fourteen times. Fourteen times. Ridwan had whined about Abrar's acceptance letters fourteen times. That was before he went all preachy on me about the Shakil mystery. He'd huffed and puffed on the necessity of avoiding trouble, so much so you'd think he has a vendetta against daredevils. I told him about my future ambition of catching criminals. As entertaining as his overreaction was, I wish he would have just kept his mouth shut. In Ridwan's lowest moment he told me a lame story about Abrar killing a poisonous snake in the well. In the middle of it he scared himself and shut up. I was enjoying the peaceful silence but then he started yakking as if his life depended on it. Funnily enough he started believing the story as he told me. How stupid does he think I am? Even Red Riding Hood is a better cautionary tale. As if they can stop me. I'll get that key.

Finally I resorted to feigning an interest in algebra. Don't judge. Dadu imprisoned us in the drawing room, which looks like it belongs in a horror story. All we have is Ridwan's school bag. Ridwan droned on and on about quadratic equations as though he had the license to bore. I am accomplished in the art of deception but my face is hurting from wearing a look of respect that borders on reverence. I think the tree outside the window grew an inch just listening to him. Instead of solving the equations the way he taught me, I just drew graphs and read off the answers. I like having answers in front of my face, where I can see them.

"No, don't keep drawing graphs. These are really hard, solve them on paper," says Ridwan, shaking his head. His favourite ink pen is leaking on the antelope table.

“Easy enough,” I tell him as kindly as possible. Poor thing, he is older than me and he finds it harder. His face matches the shade of his purple shirt. My mother is fond of saying that the truth hurts. Ridwan slouches like a sea slug on a chair that looks like a vampire’s throne. I solve all the equations. Yes, Abrar pulled me out of the well.

However, I was doing fine on my own. From the bottom of the well I had already scaled midway up before he decided to play the hero. It is Ridwan’s fault of course. He lost his head and didn’t find my reassurances convincing. Even if I needed help, he could have found a less offensive person. Now Abrar knows about the key. I am not worried. Abrar doesn’t have enough brains to fill a teaspoon. Fat chance he’d have solving the mystery.

I accomplished a lot. I found the key. I let Abrar know that I made paper planes out of his acceptance letters. I’d have told him eventually, of course. It will be awesome to have Abrar going beyond the seven seas. A few hours ago I scored again. Thanks to my efforts, Abrar doesn’t have fancy clothes. I am sure he is fuming. He likes his clothes. I deserve a crown, applause in the least. What’s that sound? It’s coming from the outside. Ridwan is giving the window a bug-eyed look. I run to the window. I can’t believe it.

“Let me out, let me out now,” I scream, running back to the bolted door. I run back to the window. There, a few feet away, Shakil is running in circles and hitting his head. He knows the key is gone. I am sure. This is the moment I should be following him. Why am I in captivity? I run back and kick the door. Ridwan is being a dolt as usual. I slap his hand away.

“What is going on,” shouts Dadu, as the door flies open. I run back to the window. Ridwan is red in the face. Hopefully she will grill him. No, she is coming here. Shakil has come close to the window and I can hear chanting. What is it? Sounds like

'*Muuunguuu, muuuunguuu*'. What does that mean? Dadu is standing next to me, but surprisingly, she hasn't smacked me yet. Dadu is watching Shakil with rapt attention. Shakil is saying the same gibberish and running in circles. Wait, there is something new. He is saying, "neigh, neigh, where is it?" Where is what? The key or what the key hides? I step away from the window. If I make a run for it, a real good sprint, then I can go to the forest and follow him. My toe twitches. What? This is odd. I look at Ridwan but he is looking at Dadu, his mouth hanging open. Dadu is laughing. Laughing. She sounds like someone we never met. Yes, Shakil is acting funny, but Dadu never laughs.

Abrar

Instinctively, Abrar retraced his steps. Soon, his feet were mired in a mud, but he didn't dare turn on his flashlight until he was deeper in the forest. When he had made his way back to the Burned House, he spotted Shakil and Shakil's partner around fifty feet away.

Abrar loomed over the trunk, wishing he could be his own shadow. *Keep cool kid, you're here, you can still run but you won't*, said his inner voice. *Ya Allah*, he kept repeating in his head. If it hadn't been for Warda's painting he had seen the day before, Abrar would never have recognized it. He took one last look at the rubies and emeralds of the Mughal necklace, and extinguished the light. Although the necklace was nestled in his hand, somehow the idea of running his fingers over it was abhorrent. This time, Abrar wasn't in the dark for too long. Shakil's flashlight beamed.

“It’s a replica, exquisitely made. The gemstones are real, but it’s worthless,” said Shakil’s partner, a man Abrar had stopped trusting.

“Where is the original?” asked Abrar. It didn’t occur to him to greet Father by saying *Assalamu alaikum*, as he generally did.

“I don’t know,” said Father.

“Who made the replica?” asked Abrar.

“I wonder the same thing,” said Father. *Lies*, thought Abrar. Shakil’s flashlight put Abrar in the spotlight, and he wished it were turned on Father’s face instead. Voices in the dark didn’t reveal much.

“Surely you have a clue,” prompted Abrar.

“I cannot exactly point fingers at anyone,” said Father. *No, you can’t*, thought Abrar. Father wouldn’t be able to take a stolen necklace, never mind one stolen from his own family, to any jeweller and ask if the jeweller had been assigned to make the forgery. *How did you know it was a forgery, Father?* The question sat like a spring on his tongue. Taking a deep breath, he swallowed his query; it would be answered later.

“You must be wondering how it got here,” said Father, in an even tone. Abrar nodded. Shakil looked back and forth between Abrar and Father. Even in the dim light the tip of his beaky nose was shiny with perspiration. Abrar turned on his own flashlight. Father flinched as light swathed his face. *No*, Abrar thought. Keeping the beam directed at Father’s face was too hostile too soon. He needed answers, so Abrar put it on the floor. Shakil followed suit; he seemed to have just realized it wasn’t necessary for him to keep holding the flashlight.

“We found it after the robbers took it from us,” said Father. *Who are we*, thought Abrar. Shakil skulked away. *Fantastic*, thought Abrar. He was alone with Father, swirling in bamboo decay, in a collapsed house, with questions he didn’t want to face.

“The Vultures left it behind,” said Father, motioning at the trunk.

“Why?” asked Abrar. The muscles in his arms contracted.

“Hmm. I can only speculate Abrar. Perhaps the robbers had a falling out between themselves. It happens.” Father’s voice was deep and calm, and it made Abrar think of whalebones in sea beds. Then the feeling disappeared.

“Is it the only thing the robbers left behind?” Abrar asked.

“Yes. Again I speculate, but I believe they couldn’t share their spoils and one stole from the other,” said Father. The crow’s feet around his eyes deepened. *One stole from the other*, thought Abrar. He knew it was significant but he couldn’t tell why.

“Right. Why didn’t you bring it out when you found it?” asked Abrar, all of the consonants sounding clipped. Father sighed.

“Our family has suffered enough publicity since the labour strikes in Ripon’s factory. Hmm, the media will chew us apart if the investigations reopen,” said Father calmly.

“You found it...recently?” Anger soared up Abrar.

“Yes,” said Father. *Liar*, thought Abrar. He was sick of the lies. He wanted the leech he had saved and lost to draw out the truth from Father like poisoned blood.

“Can you tell me something?” asked Abrar. Father nodded. “Before Mesba died you fought with him. He accused you of hiding something in the forest. Did he mean the necklace?”

“How do you know about that?” Father’s voice was high pitched. *Yes*, thought Abrar, triumphantly. Father’s thought lines ridged out and his cheeks sunk back. Abrar didn’t reply. *He is your Father; show some respect or he won’t talk*, warned the voice in his head.

“Abbu, Baba, please tell me what really happened. They are planning something this Friday,” said Abrar, forcing himself to speak softly, and it had the effect of sublimating the hostility he was feeling. Father’s shoulders drooped and he rubbed his forehead as though he was applying VapoRub. A dense silence descended upon the room. Between them the trunk lay open like a black hole. As a child looking at his parent to get a candy, Abrar looked at Father. He was praying Father had a good reason to rob his own family.

“I already gave them my final answer. They aren’t supposed to involve you,” said Father.

“What answer?” asked Abrar, louder than he had intended.

“What did they tell you?” asked Father, adamant.

“Why did you rob Mesba’s stuff? How could you hire robbers? Let them hold your family at gunpoint? Huh?” Abrar burst out. When he felt a stone drop in his stomach, he realized what he had said. *No, no, no*, Abrar kept thinking. He was desperately hoping Father would deny the allegation.

“They told you that?” shouted Father.

“No. I had to do some digging,” Abrar shouted back. Father slapped his hand across his forehead, staring at the moss-covered ground. When Father spoke again, his voice was thinner, as though the wind had eroded away its upper register.

“It’s not what you think. It didn’t go the way I planned,” said Father. He sat down. When he spoke, Abrar didn’t interrupt.

“We were in a tight situation. The summer of 69, we lost our crop to floods. We got by. Then someone was interested in buying one of our lands. Well, back then land wasn’t as highly valued, but still. Our portion of the lands was jointly owned between relatives, and this was common. Land division was nothing near as critical as it is now. There were fewer people and they shared crops. We had known abundance, but the buyer insisted upon proper legal documentation, a foresight which still impresses me. The extended relatives weren’t eager to sell any portion of the land to an outsider, but we needed to get signatures of all the joint owners, including a great uncle who was posted in West Pakistan. Getting a hold of that great uncle was difficult. So our case lingered at the land registry office. We weren’t overly worried about it. Even if it didn’t sell, we were getting by, until Bajwa came to know of our situation,” said Father. Abrar drew in closer.

“The jute mill owner, Bajwa. He complicated matters. He was very influential. At first I was surprised when he showed an interest in our family. We didn’t have the social status to be included in his circle. Soon, he offered to help with the land registry. A word from Bajwa could resolve the issue of signatures. We were so relieved, we agreed. But he wanted the Mughal necklace as a service charge. Straight out, Mesba said he wouldn’t part with his mother’s heirloom. Besides, it was only a matter of time before our great uncle returned, and we would get all the signatures we needed,” said Father. *If they declined Bajwa’s help, what was the problem?* Abrar nearly asked, but he swallowed the question. He had a gut feeling Father would rethink his decision to tell him everything if he showed the slightest impatience.

“Bajwa tried persuading us to sell it. I used to go to Ujjalpur more often and Bajwa could access me easier. Every few days Bajwa offered to buy the necklace. He offered a good price. Every time, I had to tell him it wasn't for sale. It was bothersome but I wasn't truly afraid of Bajwa...until your grandfather's younger brother, Shams chacha, joined politics, rallying for an independent Bangladesh,” said Father.

Huh? thought Abrar. Shams had died of a cardiac arrest before Abrar was born, and Abrar had only heard of him in passing.

“Of course, he wanted private, West Pakistani-owned jute mills to become government property, its profits used to develop East Pakistan. As you know, the profits made from East Pakistan went to West Pakistan. Shams chacha was an agitator. He didn't live in Ujjalpur, but he was openly critical of Bajwa when he came here,” A small smile crossed Father's face, and he gazed at the bamboo planks.

“Abbu, what does it have to do with Qazi?” asked Abrar. Father sighed.

“Abrar, I will be honest. Qazi tried to intervene in our favour. Qazi *loved the necklace*. I believe Qazi was genuinely fond of Mesba. Bajwa was after the necklace like a dog with a bone. One day, I was in Qazi's shop when Bajwa came to buy saris for his wife. Shakil was with me. Again, Bajwa demanded we sell the necklace. I will not forget Bajwa's words. He said, “It doesn't suit filthy, Bengali beggars to touch a Mughal article, let alone thinking they own it”. Abrar: I was young, you will understand, I lost my temper. I dared talk back. I told Bajwa, “It suits you less. We will kick out leeches like you”. Despite himself, Abrar chuckled.

“You know, Bajwa actually raised his hand as though he would slap me. But then he whispered, “Been learning from that dog, Shams, have you? I will see to it he is

thrown in jail and tortured.” I believed him. He was extremely wealthy, well connected, and Shams was already on the blacklist. I don’t know if Qazi heard the threat, but if he did, it makes his actions inexcusable,” said Father, holding up a hand because Abrar was about to ask ‘*what actions*’.

“I left the shop soon afterwards. I was too angry to be around people. So, I went to the lake. Tapan Kabir was there. At that time Tapan was a police officer, and he always ran laps around the lake. He asked me what was wrong. It was a delicate decision. Tapan was ambitious, and a junior officer. I couldn’t tell how he would react. For all I knew Tapan could start looking for a way to deliver Shams chacha to Bajwa, trapped in the Ujjalpur jail. I trusted my gut and told him everything, and in the end it worked out in my favour,” said Father.

“How did it work in your favour?” asked Abrar, sitting down.

“Abrar, I am coming to that. Tapan was sympathetic. He warned me Bajwa was greedy, and ruthless...Accidents happened in the jute mill. After a worker injured his arm working on a run down machine, Bajwa laid him off with a paltry sum of money and refused to pay for the amputation of the worker’s arm. Bajwa failed to see his workers as humans. In his mind the workers were a different species. Anyways, Tapan implied that Bajwa would get the Mughal necklace no matter what, and that I ought to apologize and sell it to avoid humiliation.”

Huh, all that trouble for a few pieces of rock, thought Abrar. When he heard the next part his derision dissolved.

“I talked it over with Mesba,” Father continued. “Mesba was inclined to seeing the good in people. He was furious over the threat Bajwa made against Shams chacha,

but he assured me Bajwa had issued the threat in anger. After all, Shams chacha was outspoken against Bajwa...But I remembered Bajwa's raised hand. I couldn't contemplate apologizing. So I shouted, 'I wish that necklace would just vanish. I wish it would just vanish.' Shakil gave me the solution," said Father.

He stopped speaking and looked out at the forest. Abrar's pulse raced.

"Why did you trust Shakil?" Abrar asked. Momentarily, Father looked pained.

"One afternoon, when I was around thirteen, I was napping in the backyard. A thud woke me up. There was nobody there. It had grown chilly, so I decided to go inside the house, when the strangest sight caught my eye. In one of the windows of the dormitory room, a small brown foot was wiggling. I went to investigate, and found that our radio set, a betel nut cracker, and a silver key ring were piled outside the window. I burst out laughing, and the foot stopped moving...Inside the dormitory room, there was a well oiled, small statured boy. He was balanced like a monkey against a cage. Shakil was a kleptomaniac and he had been slipping in between the iron rods to steal things. Your Dadu came into the room to do something and he saw me trying to help pull Shakil's foot free. He had been caught and scolded many times by our neighbours, but everyone pitied him. He was an orphan, and not entirely all there...Your Dadu sent for Shakil's uncle, Mukta the fisherman, and offered to hire Shakil as a servant. Your Dadu was always kind to orphans. Mukta the fisherman was a thief by night and in charge of training Shakil. Although he didn't want to be deprived of Shakil's services, he accepted your Dadu's offer. Shakil didn't always have the presence of mind to be a good thief...I took good care of Shakil, and Shakil is loyal to me. You see...I felt as though I had a younger

sibling dedicated to me. Mesba was the popular one, all of your uncles and aunts looked up to him, always vying for his attention.”

Whoa, so island-man is Shakil's uncle. It's a small world, thought Abrar. He flinched as red ant's teeth punctured his skin. Father raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

“No, Abrar. You mustn't think I was so envious of Mesba that I would harm him. That's important. Both Qazi and Hasan were quick to jump to that conclusion,” said Father.

“Abbu, that thought never crossed my mind,” said Abrar. *Hasan uncle.* Abrar felt as though a centipede crawled up his spine.

“Shakil suggested we spread a rumour that the Mughal necklace had been stolen. But I knew that wouldn't fool Bajwa. Then Shakil said, ‘Brother, we can make it vanish.’ I was under too much pressure to think clearly. The temptation to do something, *anything*, to prevent Bajwa from enjoying his desire, was overwhelming...Abrar, I might have done things differently, but Bajwa's raised hand...Shakil and I started planning a staged theft. We sought Mukta the fisherman's help. Immediately, Mukta pointed out that a theft and the rumor of a theft are too similar. If the Mughal necklace was the only thing stolen, Bajwa would be suspicious. For it to be convincing, we needed to have witnesses, and real despair,” said Father. *Real despair*, thought Abrar, feeling revolted. *No, focus kid.*

“Of course I didn't want to put my family through such a trial, but...Our planning had to be fast. I didn't want myself or Mesba to confront Bajwa anytime soon. So things weren't entirely meticulous. I should have found a way to keep Nadim and Warda's

fathers out of the room... That I terribly regret. As it happened, Mukta brought in another thief to act as a robber. Mukta trusted him well enough. The third man, whom we only knew as Dabbu, asked for a small fee. I agreed. Besides, I could recover all expenses once I started my own business. But Dabbu came with a loaded pistol, which was never a part of the plan. They argued inside our house. Mukta had never been near a pistol and he couldn't tell where Dabbu had gotten one... Abrar, in any case, the robbery went successfully. As they escaped, they made sure they woke up enough servants in the house to be witnesses. Shakil pretended to be amongst the sleeping servants. The loot was divided between Dabbu and Mukta, in case they got caught. They were supposed to meet in this Burned House, where Mukta the fisherman had a boat ready... Dabbu never arrived, and Mukta realized that Dabbu had switched the sacks. So Mukta's sack, which had the Mughal necklace inside it, was gone, and he was carrying Dabbu's sack instead."

"You trusted the words of a thief?" asked Abrar.

"Even though Mukta was a thief, he had a kind disposition Abrar," Father answered. "He was doing it as a token of gratitude to us for taking in Shakil. Life could be cruel for a mentally deficient child."

"If you say so, Abbu. What about Bajwa?" asked Abrar, taking in a sharp breath.

"It worked. He stopped bothering us," said Father, interlacing his fingers.

"But?" asked Abrar.

"A week later, Tapan called for me... in private. He told me to meet him on a particular island. I was surprised at the request but I did as he asked... It was a far away, isolated island. When I got there, I realized it was Mukta's hideout. I was caught," said Father, frowning. All I thought was how will I face Mesba. You see, I had planned to

confess everything to Mesba the morning after the robbery, but Mesba kept saying, ‘I will break their legs. How dare they stick a knife at our throat? When we find them, we’ll make powder out of their bones.’ At other moments, he looked as though he had drowned, and he would say, ‘Why did this happen to us? What will we do now?’ Abrar, it became harder and harder for me to tell him what I had done.”

“But when I saw Tapan I was in for another surprise. He laughed when he saw me. It was a mirthful laugh, the kind that reminds you of catching grasshoppers in the sun. Then he told me he was planning to join politics. He said he wanted me as an ally, and to support him in his endeavours. I said, ‘Me? I am not sure I would be a useful ally to have.’ And that made Tapan laugh even harder, and he said, ‘A man who feigns a heist on his own family to thwart a formidable enemy is a useful ally to have’. Abrar frowned; he could detect traces of pride in Father’s voice.

“So trustworthy Mukta confessed,” Abrar said, smiling a hallow smile.

“Not at first, but then Tapan told him I had spoken to Tapan about my trouble with Bajwa. He needed persuasion...When the time came I introduced Tapan to Shams chacha and his circle, and that greatly helped Tapan’s political career.”

“Abbu, how was Qazi involved?” asked Abrar. The dampness of the room and the stickiness of the sap on his shirt was starting to get to him.

“Bajwa frequently asked about the investigation’s status. Tapan claimed there were only dead leads, which frustrated Bajwa...Soon Tapan officially dropped the investigation. Dabbu was still missing, and the Mughal necklace along with it. With Mukta’s help, Tapan searched Dabbu’s hideouts. Eventually, they found the rest of our jewellery buried in a graveyard,” said Father, heaving a sigh.

“What happened to Dabbu?” asked Abrar.

“Tapan’s team found his corpse, two nights after the robbery. The post-mortem revealed that he had died of a seafood allergy. I believe he ate freshwater fish all his life, and he didn’t know he would be allergic to anything borne of water,” said Father.

“Oh,” gasped Abrar.

“What I didn’t know was that Qazi was leading his own investigation. As a tradesman he had many connections at all levels... When he caught Mukta, he nearly beat Mukta to death. Just like Tapan, Qazi suspected an insider had to be involved, and he naturally suspected Shakil. When Qazi threatened to give Shakil the same treatment, Mukta spilled the beans,” said Father. *Poor island man*, thought Abrar.

Suddenly, Father got up and started pacing. His sandals made slurping sounds against the mud. Shadows deepened the lines in his face. When he spoke again his voice had borrowed the hardness of a soldier’s shield.

“You know Abrar, I begged him and begged him not to tell Mesba. I loved my brother, and I knew he would forgive me but he would never trust me again... Qazi accused me of robbing my own brother to get the capital to start my own business. Can you believe it? Such a disgusting accusation. Disgusting,” said Father. *Yes, I can believe it*, thought Abrar, and his pulse quickened.

“I told Qazi, other than some of the loot Dabbu stole, there were still some bracelets and the rest of it was intact. I never had any intention of selling any of it, only to protect it. He asked for proof,” said Father, and laughed without any mirth.

“A glass painting from Turkey and his precious Kashmiri vase were near his hands when I showed him the Mughal necklace, he broke the glass and the vase.

Instantly, he was demented with rage...he started screaming, 'It's a fake, it's a fake.' I picked up the necklace and saw it for what it really was. I had had my doubts of course. The gold shone like it was new. It didn't have that pinkish tint to it. The teardrop emerald had never known the algae of ancient seas, and it didn't have that tiny dent on the top, the dent you would know existed only if you ran your finger over the texture many times...But I couldn't bring myself to face the fact that the original, the powerful necklace, was lost through my intervention. I don't blame him for attacking Mukta again, for trying to find the immense loss," said Father, his voice coming out in a sob.

Attacking Mukta? Excessive.

"It's just a necklace. The forgery has the same stones," said Abrar with some heat.

Father waved his arms around, trying to find the right words.

"Do you know why the stones are named the Stones of Destiny?" asked Father.

"Abrar, you have never seen those stones, so you will not understand. Once those stones come in a man's life, they force him to make a decision that will change his fortune and future. You only have to recall how kings died over them and cities fell. When you hold them in your hand, you know you have to do whatever it takes to keep those stones, and you feel courageous. It is an inorganic courage, superhuman; your mind sheds all fears and distractions. Your body is alive with energy, and you foresee your destiny with the clarity of the stone."

"Enough," snapped Abrar, nauseated by the way Father was talking about the stones, stones that are nothing more than an alignment of atoms.

"No, you won't believe it until you see it. You would be captivated...It was so beautiful," said Father, squinting at him as if he was an unreasonable child.

“Not everyone is captivated by it...Abbu, what happened next?” asked Abrar.

“Qazi tried everything to get Mukta speaking. But Mukta claimed he had no idea about the forgery. When Qazi wanted to beat up Shakil as a way of getting Mukta to talk, I said I couldn't allow that. So Qazi told Mesba, in the middle of the war...Mesba, Mesba stopped speaking to me, except the day we fought in the forest. That day, he wanted to know where the rest of the jewellery was, the ones Dabbu stole...Qazi poisoned him, telling him I kept the rest of the jewellery to sell off and start my own business. I told you Mesba would have forgiven me, but Qazi wouldn't miss a chance to instigate my brother...Eventually Mesba said he had to check if I stole anything else from him. Mesba had a vault in a bank with a few gold bars he had inherited from his maternal grandfather. I didn't even know about the vault,” said Father.

“So that's where he went before he died?” asked Abrar.

“Yes. Qazi sent him to his death,” said Father with a tone of finality. Saliva and a hint of mango juice flowed in Abrar's mouth, as he drew back his tongue to stop himself from telling Father, *No, that was you.*

Get a grip kid, Mesba died of an accident, Abrar chided himself.

“When the war reached full heat, Bajwa shut down his mill and fled. I never heard of him again. Then Qazi left Ujjalpur for nearly two months. There were two Bihari brothers who worked in his shop. I heard he was trying to get them to safety, but long ago I learned to not trust what I hear...I wish he had never come back. Injudicious as it was, Qazi returned. There were people who accused him of being a war collaborator, a *rajakar*. Some said he was being mistaken for another man, a Kazi or Gazi the butcher. I neither believed nor disbelieved those rumours...but when they brought in the witnesses

who claimed to have seen Qazi strangle five people with his bare hands...I demanded justice,” said Father.

“So if there were witnesses, what’s the problem? Others must have wanted justice,” Abrar said.

“Mukta was one of the witnesses. Shakil knew the other two, and there is a possibility the witnesses were not in Khonighaat when the massacre happened,” said Father.

“Insufficient evidence to condemn a man,” said Abrar. Father shrugged.

“He condemned himself...There are some people in Ujjalpur who supported the Pakistani regime during the war. Post liberation, they asked for forgiveness and they received it. We were building a nation, not looking for an excuse to shoot our own brothers. If there really was a Gazi butcher, then there would have been people hunting him down. Besides Mukta, there were others willing to testify against Qazi. But Qazi chose to flee. Why would a man with a sparkling clean conscious flee?” said Father, exasperated.

“But he could have been innocent,” Abrar blurted.

“Innocent? He nearly killed Mukta, and my brother,” roared Father. A tense silence followed. The night deepened as though the darkness wanted to reside in their hearts. Abrar broke the silence.

“Abbu, what do they want now?” *Were you planning on persecuting him?* Abrar thought while asking the question.

“Immunity. Qazi wants to visit Ujjalpur without the fear of persecution,” said Father, as if reading Abrar’s mind.

“It’s not wise for Qazi to return. I will not demand justice a second time, but you must remember, there are many who were affected by the Khonighaat massacre. Qazi will be using a new identity. Qazi’s allies don’t understand, or don’t want to understand that people will recognize Qazi...Qazi had bulging eyes and terrible ears...They are wasting their time trying to coerce me into ensuring that I go along with the new identity deception,” said Father.

“How are they coercing you?” asked Abrar.

“Mukta had a stroke, and he started babbling. Your Hasan uncle got a whiff of it. Even when Mesba was alive, Hasan believed I was scheming to get Mesba’s money to start my business...When he heard Mukta, he pieced it all together and contacted Qazi...He says he can build a real case against me, with witnesses, if I stand in Qazi’s way...but they are wasting their time. If a mob were to gather, it won’t be on my hands,” said Father, irritably.

Abrar looked at the floor, unable to stop himself from wondering whether Father would organize a mob.

“Abbu, fix it,” said Abrar. Abrar waited for an answer. A beam of light cut across the room. Shakil was back to tell Father that people were expecting him.

“I guess you are really not interested in taking over the factories after me,” asked Father. Abrar shrugged. *So that’s all you care about*, he thought. He hadn’t been thinking of the factories at all. They left the Burned House, with Shakil leading the way. Abrar walked slowly, just to fall behind Father. Shakil jabbered, his nasal voice subdued in the dense air. When Abrar reached home, the sounds of talking relatives melted into the air. There was only one thing left he wanted to hear. The curtains on Dadu’s doorway were

parted. He drank in the fragrances of a Queen of the Night. Dadu was holding the orchid; she looked up and smiled.

“Dadu, I have been thinking about the robbery the past few days,” said Abrar.

“Ah well,” said Dadu. He detected a hint of mirth in her voice.

“Do you remember anything unusual from that night?” asked Abrar.

“Pass me the bowl Abrar. The Chirata leaves need to sit in water a little longer. You see the water isn’t saturated yet. There is a right time to brew the essence of Chirata, much like there is a right time for orchids to bloom,” said Dadu. Abrar passed her the bowl.

“Do you remember anything unusual about the Mughal necklace?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I am just curious...It was very famous. So I am naturally curious,” said Abrar.

“I don’t think so, but I can see why it would fascinate you,” she said, lightly. *Huh. Hey kid, she isn’t telling you to curb your curiosity,* Abrar thought.

“You may not remember this Abrar, but when you were a child you used to ask to hear the story of prophet Ibrahim over and over again. You would always look so astonished. Then one day, you ran up to me and said, ‘Dadu, Dadu, I know why they worshipped the idols they made with their own hands. They started believing their own stories.’ You aren’t curious about the necklace...I believe you found the replica,” said Dadu.

“What, how?”

“Ah well, you see Bajwa’s wife harassed me in small ways because we wouldn’t sell the necklace. She was given to indulgences, the lady. Once I told her orange peels are

a good facial cleanser, she imported oranges out of season. In her own way she let me know that she and her husband would get the necklace. Before Mesba went to meet his maternal uncle he took the necklace. I thought he would leave it in Lucknow, and we could tell Bajwa we didn't have it anymore. I was disappointed when Mesba returned with it, until I held the necklace. The texture of the gold was different. I didn't let Mesba know that I knew it was a fake. I don't think Bajwa would have recognized it as a fake. He was too greedy, too mired by everything the necklace represents to actually see the necklace for what it was. The original is where it belongs, with Mesba's family...I knew Bajwa could stoop low, but I wasn't expecting the robbery," she said. Abrar's heart leapt to his throat.

"Of course I didn't believe they were the Vultures, because they were trying too hard to mask the local accent. The pistol shocked me; common thieves didn't have access to firearms, and that pistol was military grade...I thought I recognized one of the robbers, but I couldn't be sure, until two days later when they found Dabbu's body, a thief who died from seafood allergy. Then I remembered where I had seen him. He used to be a stable boy at Bajwa's house."

"How do you know he was working for Bajwa, and not himself?"

"Ah well, after the robbery Bajwa's wife was quite bitter. She had actually held the necklace in her hand when she visited our house. She realized it was a fake, not easy for an arrogant woman to tolerate...One day she said something like she would throw away any ornament, no matter how expensive, if it was a duplicate of a piece she wanted. I pretended that I didn't understand what she was saying." Dadu laughed, and the bowl of Chirata leaves quivered. The fragrance of the orchid was making Abrar light headed.

There were tiny flecks of light on the river. Abrar gazed at the wave of concentric rings. He rolled an emerald in his palm, his thumbs stroking the dent at the top. He had retrieved the Mughal necklace from the place Mesba had buried it, and trusted Ayah with the location. *Duplicitous people deserve duplicates*, he thought. Then he threw the teardrop emerald into the river, to be carried to the sea, far from civilization. A drop of water, precious as gems, leapt up.

THE END