



**'Absolutely stunning.  
Thrilling and unique'  
Gillian Flynn**

# **the centre**

**Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi**

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## **The Centre**

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*To Ammi and Abbu, to whom I owe everything  
(and, let's be honest, to Billee too).*

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No one sleeps in this room without the dream of a common language.

– *Adrienne Rich*

Do we, after thousands of years, really wish for inclusion, on these terms, in a world planned by others?

– *Carla Lonzi*

– *(translated by Veronica Newman)*

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# Chapter One

It all began with Adam.

Doesn't it always?

We met at a literary translation studies conference at Senate House, and it was through him that I first learned of the Centre.

Or . . . no, wait. Actually, pause. Rewind.

I should probably start with why I was at the conference in the first place. You see, a kind of listlessness had been brewing in me for some time, the kind that threatened to tip over into despair, leaving me just sitting there, solitary and stuck, forever, in the middle of my living room. When my best friend, Naima, came over one afternoon, I told her of these feelings. In response, she laid out some tarot cards on my bedspread.

Now, I didn't really believe in this tarot stuff, but I did have faith in the intuition of my friend. Also, I reasoned, she must have some skill in that kind of thing if she'd managed to forge a whole profession around it. After we'd graduated, Naima had gone on to do a master's in psychology. Then, with her characteristic skill for keeping her finger firmly on the pulse of the times, she transitioned into a kind of modern-day witch, doing tarot readings, tantra, reiki, and holding monthly ayahuasca circles for women of colour from her living room.

Naima scrutinized the cards before proclaiming, 'You are searching for the reasons for your discontent outside yourself, when the discontent itself is the reason for the discontent.'

'Huh?'

She pointed to a card at the top of her spread, of a man holding his head in his hands, staring at a dry patch in an otherwise green field.

'You are terrorized by feelings of inadequacy, but this is nothing more than a psychological defect.'



‘Naima, you can’t tell your clients things like that – that they’re *psychologically defective*.’

She pulled out the small booklet that came with the cards from her little orange backpack and started to rifle through it. ‘I don’t say it like that to real clients. With you, I tell you things how they are, or at least exactly how the cards say.’

‘So is there redemption for me in this spread, or shall I just kill myself now?’

‘It’s all in your hands, babe. Our fate isn’t written in stone. You need to take it like a warning card.’

We were sitting on my bed, cradling plates of karela cashew stir-fry, a dish that sounded better than it tasted because I’d used pre-sliced frozen karela from Tesco. I took a bite while she examined the cards. I looked again at the image on the topmost card.

‘But it’s good, no? That he’s tending to his dry patch?’

She turned her scrutinizing gaze from the cards onto me. ‘He’s not tending to it though. He’s obsessing over it for no reason. If he turned around and looked at the fertile bit, it would expand. That would be the better strategy.’

‘Fine. Tell me then. What do the cards say I should do?’

Naima looked at the booklet again, ‘Hmm . . . let me see . . . do not cover up your discontent with a happy face. Clearly no fear of that happening.’

‘Very funny.’

‘Blah blah, irrational thoughts, things like that . . . you need to be more careful about the people you surround yourself with—’

‘Oh, don’t worry, that’s becoming increasingly clear as we speak.’

‘You’re not taking this seriously.’

‘I am. Go on. Save me from my fate. What if we just did . . . like this . . . ploop.’ I exchanged the topmost card for a more pleasant one of a woman bathing naked with cherubs in a stream.

‘You know that’s not how it works.’

Naima and I had met when we were eighteen, when I’d first moved to England for my degree. At the time, I was convinced that it was to places like England and America that people came to make their dreams come true. Now, nearly two decades on, my bubble had long since burst. And there I was, living by myself, making mediocre karela cashew stir-fry,

cranking the heating up to twenty-one and still freezing, and pretending to make a living by writing subtitles for Bollywood films. That job, I told Naima, seemed linked to my general discontent.

‘I don’t see why you’re not happy with what you do,’ she said. ‘I’d love to sit around watching films all day.’

‘I don’t really watch them like that though. It’s tedious. Pause play pause play.’

‘It could be worse,’ she said. ‘Imagine if you had to do subtitles for like, black-and-white Russian films. You’d probably go all depressed. Consider yourself lucky. We had a blast watching that *Shuddh Desi Wedding* or whatever, didn’t we?’

In a sense, Naima was right. The Bollywood of today was nothing like the Bollywood I’d grown up with, with Shahrukh Khan chasing Kajol around mustard fields, or Salman Khan being attacked by his love interest’s ‘protective’ brothers with baseball bats. In today’s Bollywood, women had desire, homosexuality wasn’t just a punchline, and children weren’t solely the property of their parents. Many of the tropes remained, of course, but there had been definite progress. And honestly, sometimes these films felt like a corrective to the ones I’d imbibed as a child. Maybe that’s why I held on to this thread so determinedly in the face of so many others breaking, to allow for continuity, to prevent my mind from becoming frozen in the memory of a certain time. It was the same with my Urdu. In spite of operating almost solely in English now, I’d resolutely held on to the language, sometimes doing translations just for fun and taking weekly classes, during which my teacher and I would read novels and poetry together.

‘Okay, yeah, it could be worse,’ I said. ‘But what I do, it’s not *real* translation, is it? Like anyone could do it—’

‘That’s definitely not true,’ Naima said. ‘But if it feels like it’s not *real* translation then do real translation. Do short stories? Books?’

I shook my head. ‘I mean, one of the problems is that nobody reads in Urdu any more.’

‘That can’t be true,’ she said. ‘You just need to plug into the scene. My uncle tells me Urdu poetry is huge in Pakistan.’

‘Maybe I’m not good enough.’

‘Please.’



‘No, I’m serious. Maybe I’m just too disconnected. Every day my Urdu gets worse. And now it’s all mixed up with the Hindi. The other day I said shanti instead of khamoshi.’

‘What about French then?’

‘I mean, my French is mediocre. Not like French-person French.’

‘Well, I think what the cards are trying to tell you is to be happy where you are, sweet child,’ Naima said, stroking my head in a mock-patronizing way.

‘You can’t just tell someone to “be happy”, Naima. That’s not how it works. Happiness isn’t something you choose. It just . . . happens. It’s a hap, meaning “chance”. That’s Sara Ahmed.’

‘Well, that’s the difference between us,’ she said. ‘For me, happiness doesn’t just *happen*. It’s already there, just . . .’ she made the motion of plucking a piece of fruit from the air, ‘reach out and take it, you know? But listen, I have to go. In the meantime, you need to work on this. Homework: gratitude journal.’

‘You know I’m not gonna do that shit. Listen, stay a while longer. Let’s make dessert.’

‘Wish I could,’ she said, gathering up her cards and tucking them away in a silken square of fabric. ‘But I have a client at five.’

‘Tarot?’

‘Tantra. He’s actually one of my faves. Thirty-one and never had an intimate relationship. Can you believe that? Really sweet guy. We’re moving slowly, carefully. It feels like I’m kind of putting him through an initiation.’ She laughed. ‘As if I’m his gateway girlfriend or something.’

‘What’s he like?’

‘He’s sweet. He brings me flowers sometimes, and I make a meal, and then we practise intimacy. Sometimes we watch Netflix and things after. He books four-hour sessions, imagine.’

‘That must be a lot of money he’s paying you.’

‘I don’t charge him that much. It’s actually a cosy way to spend the day. I look forward to our sessions every week.’

Naima slipped her arms into her oversized fluffy olive-green coat and slung her backpack on.

‘He’s lucky he has you to initiate him,’ I said.

‘Hope so. I have to be careful, though, that I’m his gateway girlfriend and not his replacement girlfriend, you know?’

‘How do you do that?’

‘I dunno. Just . . . intuition. Reading each moment and moving from there. Maybe, ultimately, I’ll have to stage a kind of break-up. We’ll see.’

Naima’s tantric work baffled me. In that realm, the sexual realm, where all borders and boundaries become blurred, I didn’t understand how she maintained integrity. She would say, though, that the blurred boundaries were precisely the point, that it’s exactly in that place of orgasmic bliss or, sometimes, sheer terror where the stuff we normally keep repressed floats to the surface, ripe for transformation.

‘You’d be surprised,’ she’d once said, ‘how often they cry. That’s the release they’re really craving.’

After Naima left, I sat down with my books and laptop to do some translations, just for me. I wouldn’t do anything with these texts I worked on; it was more of a meditative exercise, in the same way that some people like to do puzzles or crosswords. When I really got into a translation, I would become so absorbed that I’d forget myself. It felt a bit like . . . disappearing. And it would often take rumbles from my belly or pangs from my bladder to remind me to return to the world.

Sometimes, when I was translating a text, it felt like I was writing the novel itself. Like I was Nabokov. Like I wrote *Lolita*. Lo-lee-ta. The tongue takes the same trip down the top of the mouth whether you trip over the syllables in Urdu or English. In fact, the tongue does an even more precise dance with the soft *t* in Urdu. Lo-lee-ta.

That day, inspired by a piece in *The New Yorker*, I’d pulled out a copy of *L’Étranger* from my bookshelf, along with an English translation of the book. In the article, the writer – something Bloom – meticulously takes apart the very first line of the novel: ‘Aujourd’hui, maman est morte.’ My English edition translates this as ‘Maman died today’.

*Maman*. It’s a tough one, isn’t it? What is the emotional resonance of that word in its context, and what in English comes closest? Bloom concludes that ‘Mother died today’ is too clinical, too cold, and then ponders other options. Mother, my mother, Mom, even Mommy. Ultimately, he argues for retaining ‘Maman’, just as my edition does. Personally, I think I’d opt for ‘Mum died’. That feels like a more faithful rendition to me. But who

knows. It was Bloom who was, after all, the published professional, while I was just standing there, head in hands, staring at the dry patch.

Anyway, that's just the beginning. There's also, crucially, the placement of the 'aujourd'hui', 'today'. Most if not all translators put the 'today' at the end, but Bloom suggests, ingeniously, 'Today, Maman died'. It's subtle, but there is a difference between 'Maman died today' and 'Today, Maman died'. The latter offers a soft emphasis on the 'today' and, for Bloom, hints at the narrator's tendency to be in the moment. I think it also points to a certain missing-of-the-point on the narrator's part, an emotional distancing from the death of his mother. Also, crucially, the emphasis on the 'today' reinforces the absurdity of the second sentence: 'Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas' – 'Or maybe yesterday, I don't know' – thereby foregrounding the strangeness of the stranger and the strangeness of ourselves. The truth is, in this wholly unembellished text, each word hangs ferociously on to the previous. One mistranslation and the whole thing unravels, and in my copy, there were numerous mistranslations.

And what if I were translating this passage into Urdu? What would I do, for instance, with the 'died'? The literal equivalent of 'Maman died' in Urdu – 'Amami mar gayeen' – sounds super harsh. It *feels* a bit like 'Mama kicked the bucket'. And so, even though a certain hardness is required in that opening sentence, I'd probably opt for a translation closer to 'Mother passed away'. I felt a kind of buzz as I considered the possibilities. What a joy and a struggle it would be to translate this novel into Urdu. It would, I imagined, be quite the intimate experience.

It's not that translation is a subjective process, exactly. In fact, in a way, it's highly mathematical. It's about retaining the *feeling*, the thing underneath. It's as if you go underground, and there are all these shapes and colours, and there you see that, oh, 'died' in this language is closest in colour and shape, consistency and texture, to 'passed away' in this other language. And it feels like a personal accomplishment when you make the match and haul the pair back up to the surface. And somehow, I was able to make those matches. I could just *feel* them. But the problem was that this feeling didn't translate into any kind of significant action, and for reasons I couldn't grasp, I was unable to get to that place I longed to reach. Whatever that gap was between editor and writer, print-copier and painter, midwife and mother, well, I'd spent my whole life trying to leap over that gap and

had consistently fallen into the abyss. The truth is, whenever I saw a beautiful painting, or read a great novel, I felt joy, of course, but something in me would also seethe. Jealousy is an ugly thing. Even ambition, particularly in a woman, can be undesirable. But this other feeling – this feeling of a life not fully lived – that was worse, practically unbearable. I felt constantly thwarted, and I didn't even know by what.

Still, I was lucky that at least the leap was conceivable to me. If you could recognize it, I reasoned, if something in you vibrated in attunement to good work, then surely you also contained the capacity to create that kind of work. And on a good day, I even felt like I'd been working towards it, no matter how haphazardly – the leap over the abyss. I had *some* proximity, after all, to my desired career. I was tuned into my own curiosity and following it, more or less. And so, I reasoned, I needed to keep myself close to what moved me until something emerged. And to this day, despite the horror that was to come, I maintain the importance of following one's curiosity. One's desire. It is the only way.

And so it was via this somewhat stumbling tracking of my vague desires that I ended up, later that week, at the translation studies conference where I was to meet Adam. Senate House is one of those old, imposing buildings that I used to be so impressed by when I first came to this country. I still remember the white phallic columns that ushered me into the UCL main campus, where I'd done my degree. They stood there as if announcing, 'You are part of a great and noble history now'. I even remember the dean telling us with great solemnity during orientation how well we were setting ourselves up for success just by being there, welcoming us into a future so bright and white and very well-trodden. The glow of this prospect of anything-can-happen warmed me for a little bit in this freezing cold country, but not for very long.

Soon, I realized that the seemingly gracious welcomes weren't that different from, for instance, the warden in my halls of residence saying to me, 'I know people like you like to keep the windows shut, but leave it open sometimes because it can get mouldy.' 'People like you.' Did she really say that? And 'mouldy'? I'm pretty sure it was something like that . . . my point is, although they can seem so different – the gracious welcomes and the hostile otherings – the effect is the same when they land in the body. Both translate to the same thing. Both are saying, 'Don't forget

your place'. Both are saying, 'You are lucky to be here'. Still, I settled in and made good friends. It was at UCL that I met Naima, who was redoing her first year, having secretly transferred from medicine to English lit, a move her parents didn't find out about until graduation day.

And now, years later, there I was again. Just around the corner from UCL. Senate House, Seminar Room 402, on another cold January day. I walked into the warmth of the lecture hall, found a seat, and took off my coat, hat, and gloves. The panel was on translation versus adaptation, and a woman was speaking at the podium about performing Shakespeare in Portuguese.

I did not, at first, notice the white boy sitting in front of me, scribbling into his leather-bound notebook. It was only after the woman's talk, when he picked up his phone to make a call in what sounded like fluent Mandarin, that I glanced in his direction, trying to place him. The two Chinese students sitting in front of him also turned round to look as he spoke, and they exchanged appreciative nods with him. It's always been like that, I thought, so much gratitude and admiration when a white person speaks a non-white language and only contempt and indignation for non-white people who don't speak English. The double standards of language learning. Why, I wondered, didn't they talk about that on this panel? I couldn't deny, though, that I too was intrigued, especially when, a few moments after his first phone call, he made another, speaking this time in what appeared to be effortless Italian. I glanced at him again. Was his skin actually more bronze than ivory, his hair more brown than blond? He was Mediterranean, I decided. He'd probably been to one of those fancy international schools where they teach you lots of languages. I was in the middle of concocting his life story in this way when he made his next phone call in what sounded like Russian. When he finished, I couldn't hold myself back any longer. I tapped him on the shoulder.

'Excuse me. Hi. I'm sorry. Was that Russian you were speaking?'

'It was,' he replied in a British accent before continuing in Russian, asking me a question.

'Oh, I don't speak Russian. It's just . . . it sounds like you speak a lot of languages.'

He laughed. 'A few.'

‘I think I’ve heard about four already. And you sound kind of fluent in them all.’

‘I get by,’ he said.

‘How many can you speak?’

He shrugged. ‘I don’t really keep count. A few.’

I was suspicious.

‘Do you speak this language?’ I asked in French.

‘Who doesn’t?’ he replied in French but with a better accent.

I hesitated for a moment before switching to Urdu. ‘And this one?’

‘Hindi?’ he asked.

‘Urdu.’

‘No, not that one, but give me like, two weeks.’

‘Yeah right.’

‘Try me.’

‘Seriously, how many languages total?’

‘Ten or eleven maybe?’

‘Ten or eleven?!’

‘Fluently,’ he said.

‘No you don’t.’

He nodded. ‘Native-speaker fluently.’

A new speaker took the podium. A slide projected behind him titled something like, ‘Bridging Worlds: Interpreting the Customs of Latin America’.

‘But how?’ I asked, lowering my voice.

‘I mean . . . I could tell you, but I’d have to kill you,’ he whispered back.

‘Deal.’

‘I mean . . . I could kill you, but I’d have to take you out for dinner first.’

Adam was not actually as smooth as his opening line suggested. When I took him up on his offer, he became shy and flustered about where we should go.

‘You decide,’ he said. I suggested the South Bank.

‘Sounds great.’

A week later, we met near the Royal Festival Hall. Adam was wearing jeans and a nice black jumper under a brown woollen coat. We exchanged a confused greeting somewhere between a handshake and a hug. The man didn’t necessarily incite excitement in me but something more like

curiosity, along with a kind of comfort, his shyness putting me at ease. At first, he asked lots of questions and only half listened to my responses, as if thinking of the next thing to ask. I found this initial awkwardness endearing, and after a while, our conversation smoothened. I asked him again about the languages, and he said he'd learned them off Rosetta Stone. I assumed then that he was some sort of savant, remembering languages the way some people remember strings of numbers. We went to the BFI cafe for a drink and then walked along the river, chatting. Adam told me he'd grown up in East London, where he'd been raised by a single mum. He hadn't done very well at school or university, he said, but then, in his twenties, he'd discovered his way with languages, and ever since, it sounded like he'd been thriving. He worked freelance now, moving between gigs for a Japanese aeronautical engineering company, a Farsi news agency, and an Italian research institute. He had the luxury, he shared, of picking and choosing his jobs, travelling the world.

'It's been quite the journey,' he said.

'I can imagine.'

So, I had never dated an English guy before. The truth is, I found most to be cliquy and unrelatable. They seemed to lack a certain warmth, holding themselves at a distance, even from themselves. But maybe that's not quite right; maybe I hadn't experienced their warmth because English men are careful who they show hospitality to. I don't know, but either way, Adam seemed different. He was interested in other cultures, open-minded, and not excessively reliant on alcohol to let go of his reserve.

It wasn't, however, like being with a desi man. There were fewer things that were just tacitly understood between us, taken for granted. I could tell, for instance, despite his extreme attempts at diplomacy, that his imagination of where I came from was skewed. His reaction when I said I was from Pakistan spoke volumes – this vigorous 'I'm so totally cool with that' kind of nod. And then he asked me whether I'd ever been pressured to wear a headscarf. When I responded by calling his question bizarre, he turned red and sputtered endless apologies. I thought of asking him in return whether he'd ever been pressured to divide and conquer, then realized that might imply that I thought the hijab was negative, and I got so caught up in this response loop in my own head that I just let it go. In other circumstances, his question would have ended the date right there, but I liked Adam. He



was cute and earnest, grounded and sensible. And he was compassionate. Like, while we were sitting on a sofa in the BFI, just chatting about this and that, I mentioned, for some reason, my PhD. Long story short, I'd started a PhD in critical theory some years ago but left the programme within a year and a half. I brought up the whole thing as an aside, emphasizing how little it all meant with a roll of the eye and a flick of the wrist, but he stopped me there, as if sensing the gravity I'd tried to conceal with flippancy. He asked me more and more questions until I found myself telling him, tearfully, of a careless supervisor, my disappointment in myself and my frustration with academia in general. And he listened, like, really listened, with no judgement and total sympathy. He was immediately on my side in a way that I, more often than not, fail to be for my own self, and he drew out feelings from me that had lain untouched for years. I felt then like this man had the capacity to hold parts of me that I didn't like to hold myself, and to this day, I've not met anyone who's been able to hold me that way. He told me some months later that this capacity was one of the gifts that struggle can bring.

I asked Adam out on a second date. That was another thing I liked about him, his holding back, letting me make the first move. We watched a French film in the cinema and, as it played, we kissed. It was cute; the electricity leading up to it made me feel like a teenager. Afterwards, we went to a sourdough pizza place, and when he spoke Italian with the waiter, I felt a wave of attraction towards him. On our third date, he came to mine.

When Adam first walked into my flat, he said, 'Wow, you must be really good at your job.'

I let him believe that my life was self-funded, an illusion I knew would crack fairly quickly.

We had aloo baingan with shop-bought roti for dinner, and for dessert, we massacred a pineapple that had come with my Oddbox, hacking it into chunks before mixing in vanilla yoghurt and pomegranate seeds and sprinkling some mint leaves on top. After that, we kissed. And kissed again. I pulled him closer and reached for his belt buckle. He stopped me.

'I really like you,' he said, all smiles. I grinned and kissed him again, fiddling with the buckle. Very gently, he moved my hand away. 'I'm enjoying getting to know you.'

‘Oh.’ I looked at him with a question mark in my eyes. He kissed me again, then took both my hands in his.

‘We can take our time,’ he said. I didn’t understand, but it seemed like he preferred to just . . . not?

‘Yeah,’ I said uncertainly, my hands still in his. He pulled me closer in an embrace and then let me go, still smiling.

‘Is that okay?’

‘Of course.’ I nodded, returning his smile.

Our bodies hung awkwardly for some moments more, the question mark hovering between us. He suggested we watch something on Netflix, and so we did, and then we talked some more, and then he left.

I have to admit, I felt irritated and also vaguely insulted. I’d invited him to my home, done all my waxing-shaxing. We’d been passing along all the right signals. And now, here he was telling me to . . . slow down? I don’t know. Maybe my annoyance was unfair. Maybe the third date was too soon, and it would be even better with some build-up. Maybe the part of me that felt insulted at his not returning my advances with uncontrollable passion, well, maybe that was just my patriarchal conditioning.

‘Like, imagine if the genders were reversed,’ my American friend Anjali said when I told her what had happened. ‘Imagine him saying, “Dude, date three and she wouldn’t put out”.’

So I decided not to push the issue, to go at his pace. We went on another date, this time to the National Gallery, and then another, walking in the park. Then, a week or two later, we were back at my place. This time, not wanting to risk my hand being pushed away, I held back and tried to let things move organically. There was real electricity between us; his touch was warm and sensitive, his kisses lingering and sweet. But an hour passed, and it didn’t feel like he was going to go any further unless I did, so finally, I took my top off. He followed suit. Then, well, okay, the gist is we tried to have sex, but . . . it didn’t quite work. I’d never experienced this before, someone just . . . not getting hard. And I kind of panicked, and I think he became embarrassed. We muddled along anyway, and things were fine. We found other ways. But I was left confused. He apologized, which made us both cringe all the more, and I tried to be reassuring, but it sounded disingenuous and awkward.

When the same thing happened the second time we tried, I asked him, as gently as I could, whether anything was the matter. He explained that he needed patience, that it was always like this for him in the beginning, and it would get better. I don't know how common such things are, but it shook me a little bit. It made me worry, despite his reassurances to the contrary, that he didn't find me attractive. I mean, what else could it be, right? His body was speaking loud and clear. It felt, basically, like rejection. I spent a lot of time in those first few months down internet wormholes, trying to understand about performance anxiety, erectile dysfunction, things like that. I grew awkward in my own body, trying to please him but receiving strange, self-conscious responses back. Like I remember reaching for his penis once and watching him draw back in a kind of panic, asking, 'Are you sure you want to?'

'Do *you* want to?' I asked, stopping in my tracks.

'Only if you do.'

It felt like no matter what I did, it wasn't quite right. Most nights when we lay together, I'd be stewing in my own unfulfilled desire, and even if we did manage to have sex, it would be so quick and unsatisfactory that I'd be even more frustrated than if we hadn't tried at all, because now he'd stoked the fire. And so, I'd lie there, wondering if I could quietly masturbate while he slept.

I remember asking him once why he never reached for me with desire, and you know what he said? That he believed in 'radical consent'. He explained that this meant that he never wanted to encroach, even accidentally. At first, I told myself that this was sweet, that maybe Adam would help me rewrite some of the violations I had stumbled into in the past, that maybe he would help me heal from all the times that I had overridden my own discomfort to pander to the demands of another. But later, I started feeling like maybe he was just using some kind of woke-boy spiel as macho defensiveness.

But I stuck around. He told me he was an iceberg, you see, that would eventually melt. And the sex did get better. He was able, most times, to get and stay hard, at least for a short while, although he'd be exhausted afterwards and would perform this exhaustion in a way that felt somehow accusatory. Still, even if I found myself having to temper my libido, and he found himself feeling pressured to perform, we were able to have a

somewhat satisfactory sex life after a couple of months of trying. It wasn't ideal, but we made it work, more or less. And other than the sex thing, we got along well. We went to galleries and the cinema, cooked meals together. I met his colleagues from work. They were funny and nice, although in long doses they made my brain glaze over a bit. Adam was also close to a couple of friends from his childhood, but he hadn't introduced us.

'You wouldn't like them,' he said. 'Truth is, if you'd known me back then, you wouldn't have even spoken to me.'

He told me stories then of shoplifting and alcohol and cigarettes before he'd even reached double digits. And I thought of my own childhood, back in Karachi: my inhaler, my flat chest and braces, reading *Sweet Valley High* books in my bedroom and watching Urdu dramas with my grandmother in the evenings, living a life that Adam would have found painfully uncool.

'You're the one who wouldn't have spoken to me,' I said, and he shook his head in the way he did when he felt that there were things about him that I could never understand.

I also introduced Adam to my friends, who seemed generally approving. Naima, though, was sceptical.

'You don't seem that into him,' she said over the phone the day after I'd invited him to a friend's gathering.

She also said that the iceberg he claimed would melt never fully would. And although I could see what she meant, I figured that what she saw as a lack of passion could be a good thing. It felt nice to not be swept off my feet – to remain clear-headed and even-emotioned. I didn't mind that Adam and I had some distance between us, that we could have our separate lives but still also a space we shared. And so we settled into a kind of cosy coupledness, and within three months, Adam had moved into my flat. We took turns cooking for each other. He did most of the cleaning and house repair stuff, and I did admin, like bills and food shopping. In the evenings, we would often watch Netflix cuddled up on the sofa together. And during the day, I did my subtitles, working from home, while he did his work, usually from one of his offices. Adam really was fluent in several languages. He was low-key though: the Italian place he worked for didn't know he spoke Russian, and his colleagues at the Japanese aeronautical engineering place genuinely assumed Japanese was his second mother tongue. I valued his discretion, saw it not as secrecy but modesty. And

when I overheard him on his video calls speaking foreign tongues with absolute mastery, I couldn't help but look at him with admiration. The funny thing was, though, when I tried to teach him Urdu, nothing would stick.

'I don't get it,' I said. 'How is it possible that you know nearly a dozen languages fluently, but in Urdu you can't even remember 'My name is . . . ' or 'How are you?'

'I don't know, sweetheart,' he said. 'Maybe it's some kind of mental block. Anyway, I don't learn like that. I can only absorb through intense study.'

I reasoned that maybe learning these languages had taken Adam more work than I'd previously imagined. He was, I'd discovered, incredibly hard-working. And the truth is, Adam's success sometimes made me feel inadequate. I was embarrassed about my own job, which felt so sporadic and solitary, when I saw him working long hours and travelling and staying out late to have drinks with colleagues. I would feel like I had wasted all my opportunity and privilege, whereas Adam, who had come from quite difficult circumstances, had done so well in life. In fact, I would sometimes think that it was precisely those difficult circumstances that gave him the drive to come so far, and that maybe I had been too coddled. Then I would berate myself for indulging in this weird 'poor little rich girl' stuff. I pushed these toxic, spiralling thoughts to the side as much as I could.

'If it's important to you,' Adam said, 'I can learn Urdu. It's not a problem, you know.'

'No, it's fine,' I said. 'It just surprises me. Mera naam Adam hai. Easy.'

'Mera naam Adam hai,' he repeated resolvedly, but forgot again the next day.

\*

After a couple more months of living together, Adam and I welcomed a little kitten into our lives. We named him Billee. Uff, there are no words to describe Billee's kittenhood. Tail chasings and lap nestlings, teeny tiny paws and the sweetest pounces. Then, a shockingly fast transition into a calmer and more independent, much larger but equally cute, cathood. It was a step, a big step, for us to get Billee together. We settled into each other

more and started to speak of the future, of hopes and dreams that even involved children. And yet, it was all said in a somewhat abstract way. I went along with it, enjoying these discussions the way I would a daydream. Almost as if it were just another story I was translating. It was only when he seriously brought up marriage that I found myself stopping short, unable to give him a clear response. He mentioned it casually after breakfast one morning while putting the dishes away. He was telling me his best friend had just got engaged.

‘Do you think one day you and I should, you know?’

I just laughed awkwardly and saw his back tense in response. Then, after he left for work, I reactivated my long-dormant Tinder account.

‘Don’t you think that might be a bad sign?’ Naima asked sarcastically when I told her what I’d done.

‘Maybe I’m just one of those cold-feet types,’ I said.

‘I think your instinct’s telling you something.’

‘I should probably just say yes.’

There was no reason to say no. It was just my overthinking mind, I feared, that was, as usual, ruining everything. I had spent nearly a year in relative contentment with this man. Now, it was only a matter of taking the next step.

It was just that, sometimes, when I woke up in the middle of the night to go to the toilet and came back to see him huddled up on his side of the bed, my heart would sink a little.

And sometimes, it felt like I was smearing a thin layer of vanilla over my life to make it more palatable for him.

And he kept asking me, possessively and insecurely, whether I fancied my married friend Mazhar, despite my constant denials (I did, in fact, fancy Mazhar, but that’s neither here nor there).

And once when we were watching a Bollywood film, he’d called it ‘colourful’ and asked whether our wedding would be like that.

And, of course, the sex. I still dreamed of the fireworks that had never come. And I hope this isn’t a bad thing to say, but sometimes, it felt like a deliberate withholding. Like, how come when it came to running or biking, the man seemed to have endless energy, but when it came to fucking, he was so easily depleted? There was some emotional work, surely, that needed to be done there, but he just wasn’t interested in doing it. Instead, he

would deflect, or become defensive. Like when he teased me once about my always ‘being in the mood’. I swiped back saying that it was because I rarely got any, and the conversation descended into a heated argument that ended with him leaving the flat and not speaking to me for days.

And I didn’t like hiking, nor the countryside, nor football, nor the pub. And I’m sorry, but his family was cold and boring, and the first time I met them, they tried to serve me pork even though they knew I was Muslim. Adam insisted this was accidental, but seriously, come on. And then he brought up the fact that I drank alcohol but didn’t eat pork, implying hypocrisy in a way that felt all too familiar.

But still . . . still, still, Adam was good. Reliable. Dependable. Secure. I also felt fairly sure that if I didn’t marry Adam, I wouldn’t marry anyone at all. I’d had enough relationships to know that if another one didn’t work out, the problem very likely lay with me. So I couldn’t say yes, but I also couldn’t say no. I decided, maybe as an in-between step, or a consolation prize, or perhaps a test, to fly with Adam to Pakistan and introduce him to my parents.

I’d already told Amma and Abba about Adam, but I’d kept it casual, simply saying there was someone I was sort of seeing. Amma, excited, had asked for a photo, and I’d sent her a YouTube video of him speaking at an event for the Italian company he worked for. That got her stamp of approval straight away. Abba, a workaholic surgeon, was more circumspect; he had always felt that my sister and I should marry within our culture. And I could see why he said this. In many ways, I agreed. But as time went on, he had softened his stance. By the time I hit thirty, he said that okay, maybe a non-Muslim boy would be fine.

‘As long as he’s not Indian,’ he added, to my outrage.

Then, as thirty-five inched closer, I was starting to get these ‘accha bas, quickly now, anyone will do’ vibes off him, so I sensed some relief along with the expected wariness when I told him about Adam.

‘What do his parents do?’ he asked.

‘Abba, please.’

Adam, too, was nervous.

‘Are you sure you want me to meet them?’

‘Of course. I mean, you kind of have to, right? If we’re talking about marriage? Um, not that I’m saying—’



‘No, I know. But . . . what if they don’t like me?’

‘Of course they’ll like you. Why wouldn’t they?’

‘Maybe they’ll feel like you could do better.’

I had learned by then that Adam carried within himself a wholly unsubstantiated sense of inferiority that was often powerful and relentless. I don’t know where it came from – maybe from growing up without much money or being bullied at school (he said the two were related). Even though he’d jumped from one success to the next in his career, somewhere in his core he held on to the belief that he wasn’t enough.

‘It’s weird for me when you get like this,’ I said. ‘I just wish you could see how amazing you are.’

‘I just . . . I feel like they’ll see through me, that’s all.’

‘What do you mean? What’s to see through?’

‘I dunno, Anisa. They just . . . they won’t like me.’

By then, Adam had figured out some things about my background. I hadn’t gone into detail, but he’d learned that I had a wealthy and indulgent father and that I didn’t make much money at all. ‘Trustafarian’, he would sometimes call me, but only in private. In public, he didn’t acknowledge this large buffer of privilege that I rested upon. He understood my discretion, embarrassment even, and we diplomatically swept such things under the carpet.

‘They’ll love you,’ I said. ‘Just like I love you.’

I spoke these words with a stab of guilt, worrying that my own doubt and hesitancy were probably not helping with his sense of inadequacy, but also feeling resentful for having to play the role of soothing caretaker. Anyway, he agreed to meet them. He said that he had a conference in Berlin at the end of the month and would be gone for two weeks, but afterwards, we could go.

‘We could book flights for September,’ he suggested.

‘September’s perfect. Karachi weather’s great in September.’

I instantly went back to single mode when Adam left for his trip. I have to say, ten days of watching Bollywood films in my pyjamas with a cat snoozing by my side was heavenly bliss, especially since I knew this state wasn’t permanent. It made me wish I could spend my whole life being single while also knowing that the singlehood was temporary.

These Bollywood films though . . . they'd fucked with my head. I was translating a romance that week, which nearly all of them were. I'm convinced that it was those films, along with Disney, that had brainwashed me into thinking that love was some kind of being-swept-off-your-feet, long-dances-in-the-rain type thing. But love was not that. Love was what Adam and I had. Maybe one day, despite a lack of interest that bordered on dread, I'd even go camping with Adam. Yes, I decided while he was away. If my parents liked him, I would just marry him. Ticking clocks and all that.

I think Adam sensed that my parents' opinion held quite a lot of weight for me. On his return, he bought some fancy chocolate for them and an ill-fitting shalwar kameez for himself on Bethnal Green Road. I was touched by the effort.

Then, one crisp September morning, having left Billee with Naima, we made our way to the airport. A car from Emirates came to pick us up as my father, much to Adam's dismay, had insisted on booking business-class flights. At the airport, we sat in the lounge eating some tasty prawn biryani thing, and I started telling Adam of all the delicious food we would eat in Karachi: BBQ tonight and Chatkharay, yakhni pulao and Bihari kababs.

'Even the KFC in Karachi is next level,' I said. 'And the fruit! So much more flavour. Do you know custard apple?'

A kind of excitement started to bubble in me as I thought that maybe, after all these years, I was finally stitching together the two halves of my life. Of course, friends and family from Pakistan would come visit me all the time in London, but this, the other way round, had never happened. This was the first time I was bringing a part of my London life back home with me. I leaned across the table and squeezed Adam's hand.

'I love you,' he said.

'Me too.'

We boarded the plane and made ourselves comfortable in our seats. Then, as I started flicking through the film options on the screen in front of me, Adam turned to the flight attendant and asked for a coffee. In perfect Urdu. And I mean, perfect Urdu. Like, the kind of Urdu my grandmother speaks.

'What the fuck?'

'Surprise.'

'Adam—'

'I can speak Urdu now! I learned in Berlin.'

He asked me, in Urdu, whether I was impressed.

‘What is happening right now?’

‘I was nervous. About meeting your parents. So I learned.’

The auntie sitting across the aisle from us had said, ‘Hai, suno’ to her husband when Adam made his request for coffee. Now, ears pricked and beaming, she seemed on the verge of applauding my magnanimous boyfriend’s efforts while pinching her husband’s forearm in a gesture of reproach for his own inadequacy.

In a whispered hiss I said, ‘Fuck off, Adam, nobody can learn to speak like that in two weeks.’

‘I studied intensively. I told you that’s how I learn.’

‘You’ve always spoken it. You’ve been pretending this whole time.’

‘Why would I pretend?’

‘I don’t know. Because you’re . . . a serial killer?’

‘A serial killer?’

‘A stalker then. One second, is this really happening right now?’

‘I thought you’d be happy.’

‘It isn’t humanly possible that you learned that quickly. You couldn’t string two words together in the six months I’ve been trying to teach you, and now you speak better than I do?’

‘Look,’ he said. ‘Just forget it. I won’t speak it any more.’

‘How does that fix anything?’

‘Not so loud, Anisa.’

I’d given the auntie a look by then, and she had ostentatiously put her headset on, but I could see that it was unplugged. Others, too, had turned their heads, enjoying the spectacle.

‘You’re pulling some kind of fuckery here. It’s not funny.’

‘I’m not trying to be funny.’ Adam put his fingers to his temples. ‘Oh god, this is not the reaction I was expecting.’

‘This is shady as fuck.’

‘Why is it shady? I told you already, I have a unique way of learning.’

‘It’s so shady! You’ve always been shady. I’ve been telling myself that it’s just me, but no, something has always felt off.’

‘Okay, fine. I didn’t learn the whole language, okay? I only learned how to ask for coffee. That’s all.’

‘Oh my god. You’re lying again. The way you just spoke, it’s obvious you’re fluent, fluenter than me, also—’ my words were jumbling in my mouth.

‘Okay, okay. That time I was lying. But I wasn’t before. I really did learn in two weeks.’

‘But how? How is that possible? I grew up there, Adam. And ever since I left, I’ve made sure to read for at least an hour each week so I don’t lose my Urdu. That is a *lifetime* of effort. And you’re saying you learned overnight?’

‘It’s . . . it’s different. This is my profession. I have a special way in which I learn. I’m sorry. I can see that I’ve shocked you.’

‘You haven’t shocked me. You’ve unshocked me. You’ve just confirmed that there’s something you hide from me. And you know what? At this point, I don’t even want to know. I just want to be left alone.’

‘Listen, Anisa . . .’

‘I mean it, Adam. Don’t speak to me.’

We didn’t talk for the rest of the flight. Six and a half hours. Then, just as we were about to land, I said, ‘It might be better if we got you a hotel.’

He looked like he was going to cry. ‘If I tell you how I learned, will you forgive me for not telling you earlier?’

‘No, I won’t. But tell me anyway.’

## Chapter Two

Hamid, the driver, was waiting for us outside the airport. He beamed when he saw Adam. They wrestled over his suitcase for a bit, but in the end, Adam kept it, and Hamid rolled mine towards the car while we followed behind. As Hamid loaded the boot, Adam stopped and looked around, wide-eyed and sweaty. I saw him take it all in: the couples sitting outside McDonald's, the crows pecking on the fries thrown their way, the drivers and the guards and the travellers weaving between cars, hauling suitcases and cartons in and out. The porters and trolleys. The blue, blue sky and the air so warm and humid that even in September it felt a few degrees closer to water than the air we'd left behind. I tried to look through his eyes, to understand what he was seeing, and I found myself feeling a strange mixture of pride and embarrassment.

'Wow,' he said before climbing into the air-conditioned car.

'Just . . . wow.'

'Now?' I asked, the moment we got into the car, forcing him to tear his gaze from the window.

'What? No,' he said. 'I told you. I can only talk about this somewhere private.'

He gestured with his eyes towards Hamid.

'Huh? He doesn't understand.'

'Are you sure?'

Oh god, I thought. Where to start explaining my country to this man?

I just rolled my eyes and said, 'Yes. I'm sure.'

'Okay,' he said, lowering his voice. 'So, first of all, I'm not allowed to tell anyone – well, only one person – my whole life. That's the rule. So, if I tell you, it's a big deal. Do you understand?'

‘Do you work for the government, Adam? ’Cause if it’s something like that, I don’t know if I want to know—’

‘No, nothing like that. It’s just . . .’ he lowered his voice to a whisper now, ‘it’s a language school. A super elite, super secret language school. It’s called the Centre.’

‘Huh?’

‘Anisa,’ he said, ‘this is serious. There’s massive penalties if you tell. Like, millions of pounds. Do you understand?’

‘I won’t say anything. Just tell.’

‘Well, when I said I was in Berlin, I wasn’t. I was actually at the Centre. I went to learn Urdu. To, well, I guess to impress your parents.’

‘And this language school gives you what? An earpiece?’ I examined the sides of his head.

‘No, I can actually speak it. And understand it. I can’t explain how it works. It’s kind of like . . . you just sponge it in.’ He made a motion with his hands of squeezing sponges over his head while he sucked in air through his mouth. ‘Like that. There’s no other way to describe it.’

‘And at this school, you become completely fluent?’

‘Completely fluent. In ten days.’

‘And you can only tell one person?’

‘That’s right. You can recommend them. Just one your whole life. And once you choose someone to recommend, well, if they pass the Centre’s tests and things, they can go too, and learn as many languages as they can afford.’

‘How much is it?’ I asked.

‘Twenty.’

‘Twenty what?’

‘Thousand.’

‘Twenty grand? How do you even have twenty grand?’

I hadn’t meant this in a patronizing way, but he looked stung by the question.

‘I make back ten times that within a year. The returns are high when it’s your trade.’

‘That is . . . wow.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And why the secrecy?’

‘It’s probably an intellectual property thing. Also to maintain exclusivity, I imagine.’

‘What’s it like there?’

‘Honestly, kind of like a monastery. You wake up at five every morning, and you’re not allowed to talk to each other. Not even eye contact. And you have to give up your phone and everything. No contact with the outside world.’

‘But you texted me loads from Berlin.’

‘That was Brian.’

‘What?’

‘Brian’s the one who recommended me for the Centre. We take care of each other’s socials when either of us goes.’

Brian was Adam’s boss and mentor. He came from a similar class background to Adam and had essentially taken him under his wing when Adam joined his company as an intern after finishing uni. I’d met him once, at Adam’s birthday party in our flat. They’d spent much of the party in a corner together, just laughing and joking and sort of making fun of the whole affair. The fierce solidarity between them that night made me realize there were parts of Adam that were inaccessible to me, certain languages he spoke that I would never know.

‘*Brian* was the one texting me? Adam, that’s really weird.’

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘I sent boob pics, you know.’

He went quiet for a moment.

‘He didn’t say.’

We drove on, me trying to process the idea of this miraculous school, him looking out the window in fascination with the novelty of it all. And then I looked out the window too, and felt moved by a nostalgic haze. A part of me wanted to share, to point out Teen Talwar or the big qabristan I used to be afraid of, to say something as we passed by Bata or Ghani Sons, where we’d made our annual pilgrimage for school uniforms, or the hangouts in Zamzama I knew so well. But I didn’t say a word. I found that I didn’t want to give this man anything more of my beloved city when he’d taken something at its heart so secretively and easily.

‘Are you still angry?’ he asked.



‘No, not angry. I just, I can’t believe it.’ I pulled out my phone and googled *The Centre, language school*. Millions of random links for language schools came up. ‘Show me.’

‘I told you. It’s highly exclusive. They have no online presence whatsoever. Not even emails. They only communicate over the phone.’

‘I can’t believe you kept this from me.’

‘Please, Anisa, don’t let this spoil our trip.’

I agreed that this wasn’t the time, and we decided to hit pause on discussing the Centre further. But with the matter left lingering, the distance that I’d already felt between us grew starker. And I think my parents sensed the distance too. They greeted Adam with politeness but also scepticism, confirming, I think, his worst fears.

I noticed that in Adam’s presence, Abba held himself a bit taller, and his voice deepened just a hint.

‘So, Adam, what do your parents do?’ he asked as soon as he felt it appropriate, which wasn’t long after ‘Hi, hello, how was your flight?’

‘Umm, it’s just my mum. She works in catering.’

‘All right, very good,’ Abba said and patted him on the shoulder. ‘A self-made man.’

Adam smiled graciously in response and later told me that he thought my parents were very nice, but I could swear I saw his neck muscles tense when Abba said that.

Abba and I generally got along well, settling into a comfortable routine when together – going to the shops, joking around, watching films in the evenings. Mostly preoccupied with work, he would take on a kind of mollycoddling and humorous demeanour towards us, his two daughters, which we sometimes prickled against but mostly rested in contentedly. And Abba’s love language was definitely presents, and this, too, we did not protest. His ceaseless generosity had found a new outlet in recent years in my sister’s beautiful child, a four-year-old who lived in Dubai. The boy, Isa, seemed to share Abba’s lifelong passion for the cosmos. The stars and planets and galaxies, I mean. When we were younger, the three of us – Abba, my sister, and I – would go up to the roof and stare through a telescope at the night sky. Seeing stars through Karachi smog sounds unlikely, but that’s what we did. If I remember correctly, a star through a telescope’s lens looks like a little dot of light rapidly dancing round and

round a small circle of darkness. I imagined that Abba would soon be taking little Isa up there, little Isa who yells ‘Moon!’ and jumps up and down every time he sees that glowing orb in the Dubai night sky.

As for Amma, well, Amma and I had a more intense relationship. There was a solidarity between us, a sense of shared struggle that we didn’t necessarily articulate but that was evident in the protectiveness we felt towards each other. At the same time, there was a certain tension, a layer of frost. When I would come home for the holidays, this tension would normally take a couple of days to reveal itself. At first, I would be coasting on a bout of nostalgia upon my return, poring over old photo albums and books, marvelling at the luxurious spaciousness that only became apparent after spending so long in London’s cramped homes, and looking with awe at the furniture and paintings I’d grown up with, as if seeing them for the first time. I’m ashamed to say that many things that had previously gone unnoticed would take on a weird kind of ‘authenticity’ for me – embroidered fabrics and clay pots, chaat masala and falsay – the once mundane was now the beautifully exotic. A part of me would cringe at my own delight, at this conversion to a diasporic gaze, but at the same time, I’d pack my suitcase full of these things: fabrics and ornaments, spices and keepsakes, trying to bring as much of it back with me as I could.

And so, for my first few days back, I would be joyful, appreciative and attentive. And my mother, too, would extend herself towards me, showing me the coconut and moringa trees in the garden, the fabric on the recently upholstered sofas, a new amrood ki jelly that she discovered and so on, and I would delight in it all. In turn, I would share my London friendship and work dramas, and we would analyse them together. Then, some time would pass. Only a little. Two or three days. And we would be sitting, for instance, at the small kitchen table to have tea, floating on a hope that neither of us dared name, a hope that the frost between us had evaporated just as quietly and mysteriously as it had settled in. But as we relaxed past those initial moments of reunion, there would come a point where, as we sat there with our teacups and she skimmed the milky film off the surface of her chai with a small silver teaspoon, revealing the scalding liquid underneath, I would feel the echoes, maybe in the flick of her wrist or from a certain tone in her voice, of a remembered sharpness, and I would brace myself for a shower of critique that descended so quickly and confusingly that it would be hard

to know whether it was coming from her or from me. I suppose it was something we co-created, but somehow, by the time she would, say, rest the teaspoon back on the saucer, we both knew that the secret hope had been foolish. I mourned this deeply, and I think she did too. Which is why, every time, we resurrected the secret hope.

Sometimes, it felt like, at the core of it, I was still yearning for those ten blissful months when the two of us had shared a body, before I was shocked by the cold and the distance upon being yanked out of her. I chided myself for longing, even in my mid-thirties, for this imaginary, perhaps idealized, maternal love. But whatever. Broken heart emoji. Truth is, this wasn't always the case. Because when she was really with me, when we were both able to meet with open and happy hearts, Amma was extraordinary. And during that trip with Adam, we often met that way. Partly because Adam had neutralized our tension somewhat, as I knew he would – we were always nicer around guests, had fewer expectations of each other and somewhere else to focus our energy. Also, Amma was excited at the prospect of my finally bringing a man home. It was the first time I'd done so. Not because I was more in love with him than the others but because I thought it was about time that I broke with the old rules. When I was younger, I hadn't even been allowed to speak to boys, and the idea of sex before marriage had been absolutely taboo. I'd explained this to Adam once, telling him about how my nani had told me that an unrelated man and woman can't, like literally physically cannot, be in a room alone together because the moment they are, then pop! A third being appears. It is Shaitaan, coming to join them.

'She made me feel as if boys were only interested in one thing,' I'd confided in him.

'Imagine if she knew that, actually, you were the one only interested in that one thing,' he joked, which, admittedly, I found both highly funny and supremely tragic.

Anyway, my parents and I had been quietly walking towards a new kind of reality around the men-and-sex thing throughout my twenties and especially my thirties, and so, it felt only now appropriate to bring someone home. He still slept in a different room though. Obviously.

On our first night in Karachi, we were sitting around the dinner table when Adam came out with the Urdu. He started by simply saying shukriya when Amma passed him the roti. She beamed in response.

‘Iss ne thora buhut seekh bhi liya,’ she said to me.

‘Haan, thora buhut,’ he responded, and she turned to him in shock.

‘Arre wah!’ Abba exclaimed and clapped his hands together.

They then continued the conversation in Urdu, to my parents’ delight.

‘He speaks better than you, Anisa,’ Amma said.

‘Not really,’ I replied, and Adam, noting my annoyance, toned it down.

Every day after that, my parents showed off their daughter’s Urdu-speaking gora ‘friend’ to anyone who walked through the door. And it’s true, he did speak better than me, except that he would sometimes get his pronouns wrong, accidentally calling my parents’ friends tum instead of aap, as if he were older than them. But he would correct himself straight away, and they would gush. I don’t want to be a baby about it, but, honestly, it was too much gushing, and anyway, I was meant to be the clever one around the dinner table. Plus, he had cheated.

‘How did he learn?’ Abba asked me while Adam and Amma chatted away.

‘Oh, he’s a linguist by trade. It’s easy if it’s your profession. Just a trick, like learning maths.’

‘I don’t think it’s easy,’ Abba said. ‘He’s very intelligent. They’re generally sharper, you know. As a people.’

‘Oh my god, Abba.’

‘It’s true. Have you seen the Dyson hoovers? Only the goras could make something like that.’

‘Him and his Dyson,’ Amma said to Adam. ‘This man secretly wishes the queen of England was his nani amma.’

‘I don’t,’ Abba said. ‘But they’re so organized there, you can’t deny it. For everything, they queue. Even at the bus stop, they queue. Queuing bodies make queuing minds.’

‘Haan, bilkul. Queuing to bomb us,’ Amma said, and, turning to Adam, she continued. ‘You know he started drinking Fiji water after finding out that’s what your Queen Elizabeth drank?’

‘How do you think she lived so long?’ Abba said, giving me a conspiratorial look. ‘That water must be the best if she drank it.’

‘I don’t think the Dyson guys are that ethical,’ Adam said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

‘Accha?’ Abba said.

‘Yeah, I heard they’re being investigated for dodgy labour practices,’ he replied.

‘Oh no, they’ve denied all that nonsense,’ Abba said, waving the matter away.

‘You learned Urdu for her?’ Amma said, changing the subject. I could tell she was taking his acquisition of Urdu as a personal compliment.

‘Kind of,’ Adam said shyly, and my parents both smiled quietly.

\*

Adam and I did all the usual touristy things while in Karachi: Mohatta Palace and French Beach, restaurants and cafes and dhabas. One day, we went to Zainab Market. Adam was mesmerized. In one shop, he picked up a beautiful antique copper paan daan. I explained to him what it was even though he was examining and handling it as if he were more familiar with it than I was. I turned to the shopkeeper to ask how much. The shopkeeper took one look at us and instantly quoted the foreigner rate. Adam replied to him, in Urdu, that he liked the paan daan very much and asked if he could have it for less. The shopkeeper looked at Adam quizzically.

‘Where is he from?’ he asked me, and once more, Adam replied in Urdu.

The shopkeeper shook his head and spoke at length about what an honour it was to have someone from the West learn our language. He insisted that Adam take the paan daan for free. Adam refused and started forcing a bunch of hundred-rupee notes the shopkeeper’s way, now initiating a kind of reverse bargaining, with the shopkeeper pushing the money back into Adam’s backpack and threatening to throw in a free pashmina for me if we didn’t accept his gift. Eventually, we accepted, and Adam left the shop misty-eyed, mumbling about the ‘incredible hospitality’ he had just witnessed. Finding himself the beneficiary of relentless kindness and warmth, and endless freebies, Adam used these words frequently during his trip, ‘incredible hospitality’.

Each time, it grated.

Did he not see, I wondered, that nobody else around him was being treated like a king? Did he not connect his whiteness to the special treatment he was receiving? He assumed, I suppose, that this country was just exceptionally kind to foreigners, to guests. I can tell you, though, that he would not have been treated that way if he were, say, Somali or Bangladeshi, Nepali or Sri Lankan. No. What Adam was witnessing were the remnants of a culture where once he was, *by law*, obeyed and pacified. That kind of ‘hospitality’ was in fact a legacy of his people’s wrongdoing. Or maybe it went further back still; maybe it was this ‘hospitality’ that gave colonizers the impression that they were welcome in the first place, to claim a land and people not their own. The truth is, even if Adam hadn’t spoken a word of Urdu, he could have had any door he wanted opened for him in Karachi. With red carpets laid out. And he seemed by this either moved to tears or completely oblivious. I didn’t want to be this way, but everything about Adam was starting to annoy me. Having to explain my city to a stranger, his delight at the differences, his patronizing horror at the poverty, his calling everything ‘magical’, and, oh god, his insistence – much to the annoyance of the cook and the embarrassment of my family – on taking his own plate to the sink. All of it was starting to get under my skin.

Then, one day, I received a gift from Amma. Despite her excitement for a potential union and desperation to see me settled down, Amma offered me a kind of authorization, an encouragement even, to follow the quiet beat of my own heart over the deafening din of that ticking clock. It happened while I was at the dining table doing my subtitles. Abba and Adam were watching cricket on the other side of the living room.

My translation project that week was not a pleasant one. It was a big-budget blockbuster set in medieval India, where for the bad guys, the filmmakers had drawn on every Islamophobic stereotype they could think of. I’d had to pause play pause play my way through the Muslim baddies, with their voracious and violent appetites for women, animals, power, blood, and money, saying the vilest, most heart-sinking things. Amma passed by just as the man on-screen was waving a bloodied sword in the air, putting on a bad Arab accent, and yelling ‘Allahu Akbar’.

‘What is this?’ she asked.

‘It makes my blood boil,’ I said.

I told her about the PAs who, after being given the job of creating ‘authentic’ graffiti for the sets of *Homeland*, spray-painted ‘This TV show is racist’ onto the walls. She laughed.

‘I want to do something like that,’ I said. ‘To write something like “this is historically inaccurate and highly toxic” in the subtitles of this rubbish. We should at least have the right to an afterword or something. It’s like they think I’m just a translating machine. And what am I promoting by doing this? I’m basically complicit now.’

‘You don’t have to do it,’ Amma said. ‘Just quit.’

‘Amma, I can’t keep quitting everything. I have to make something of my life.’

‘You don’t quit everything.’

‘I do. And you guys encourage it. How will I ever do anything that way?’

Amma was silent for a moment.

‘You are doing something,’ she said. ‘You can’t see it yet, but I can. It’s coming.’

I felt soothed by her words, a part of me still believing that my amma could tell the future. I found myself suddenly thinking of the Centre.

‘You really think I’ll make something good of my life?’ I asked.

‘Not think. I know. It’s like a puzzle. One day the pieces will just fit together,’ she said. Then, as if sensing danger, she added, ‘But don’t forget to recite Ayatul Kursi.’

‘I won’t.’

‘And . . .’ she hesitated for a moment before continuing, ‘that’s more important than all this.’

She gestured towards the other end of the room, where Adam and Abba were watching TV.

‘Chakka!’ Abba suddenly exclaimed, throwing his arms up in the air. Adam clapped belatedly in response.

‘Be settled in yourself first. And in your work. And with God,’ Amma said. ‘That way you’ll never feel desperate.’

When I was a child, Amma had struggled. She’d been a young woman with nerves stretched tight by a never-there husband, hostile in-laws, and an unsupportive mother. There was a time, she once told my sister and me, that those taut nerves had nearly strained to breaking point, but an absolute financial and social dependency had forced her to contain herself. She’d



raised us with the intention that we never find ourselves in a similar situation. On top of this, Amma sometimes described her pre-married life as a kind of idyllic paradise, with pets and time in nature, games and laughter, cousins and friends.

‘If I were a man,’ she’d once said, ‘if I had the kind of freedom and independence they do, I would never get married. I don’t know why they do it.’

Maybe things like that had planted a seed in me. I didn’t have the restrictions my mother had had. I could, in some ways, ‘live like a man’. And so, I wondered, did I need to take better advantage of the privilege of my freedom? Would marriage mean, for me too, the end of something?

In the comfort of the cocoon of my home, I began to wonder about the extent of the compromise I had made. No, I started to think. That fire I longed for. It existed. It must. Fine, maybe not dances in the rain and jumping into someone’s arms while they’re on a moving train, but the emotional equivalent of that stuff – love and respect and mutual admiration, and yes, heart flutters and bedroom sparks. Those are the relationships in which both partners grow. The truth is, even little Billee made my heart melt more than Adam did. I missed him terribly while in Karachi, even though Naima texted me photos of him daily, and I found myself thinking that maybe I’d picked the wrong flatmate to bring home with me. In this way, doubt accumulated on top of doubt, and it started to feel like I had brought this relationship home not for it to solidify, but dissolve.

The Centre, I thought. The Centre could be the stepping stone I needed. To reach the life I really wanted. To find a sense of fulfilment and meaning. To become a real translator.

But I forgot, of course, about the Ayatul Kursi.

On one of our last days in Karachi, while eating halwa puri for breakfast at Boat Basin, I told Adam I wanted to go to the Centre.

‘To learn German,’ I said. ‘Now that’s a *real* translator’s language. Can you imagine if I had access to German novels in the original?’

‘Are you sure?’ he asked.

‘A hundred per cent. It’s probably the biggest market outside of English. And anyway, it’s so complicated, that language. Learning it will probably make me smarter.’

‘It’s an intense experience, you know.’

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘If you could do it, I can do it.’

He hesitated for a second. ‘There’s something else.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Well, it sort of changes you, learning a language that fast.’

‘How?’

‘Maybe I’ve just done it too many times, but it’s like, sometimes, you forget who you even are.’

‘Forget how?’

‘It’s hard to say. Maybe that would have happened anyway. I’m in such a different place now from where I started. Career-wise. Financially. Even you. It feels to me, constantly, like I was never meant to be here.’

‘I think that’s an Adam thing, not a Centre thing.’

‘It’s both,’ he said.

‘I know what it feels like, by the way, to not feel like you belong.’

‘It’s not the same, Anisa. I’ve heard the way your parents talk to you. They’ve told you from the day you were born that you could be anyone you wanted. Me, every day I wonder. Sometimes I feel like I should keep a packed bag by the front door at all times, you know, in case I’m suddenly evicted from my life.’

He looked at me then, and I felt my heart soften. He touched the tip of his nose – our code for ‘I’m giving you a kiss right now’ while we were out in Karachi. Then, when we got home, while the household was taking its afternoon nap, we locked my bedroom door and made love in a way that felt tender and true, but also like a goodbye. And once we got back to London, I asked Adam if we could take a break.

He seemed upset but didn’t protest. This made things worse; he acted as if my rejection were a justification for his own self-loathing.

‘I understand,’ he said. ‘I can be a bit intense, I know.’

‘It’s not that. It’s just . . . I want to see where my head and heart really are. I don’t know, Adam. Maybe I’m just meant to be alone.’

‘You’re just trying to let me down gently.’

‘It’s really not that.’

And so, Adam moved back into his own flat. He told me he’d given the Centre my details and that they would be in touch if I passed their background check. Completely unaware of the true nature of what I’d signed up for, I waited impatiently for their call.

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## Chapter Three

After Adam left, I missed him badly and would ask him to come back from time to time, only to vacillate yet again. In the end, it was he who brought things to a close, saying that he'd had enough of this push and pull and that I should only get in touch with him if I really wanted to be together. But I was unable to give him the reassurance he needed. And anyway, I was mostly happy to nestle back into my solitude. Sometimes, though, my snug singledom would tip over into abject despair, and I'd feel entirely alone in the world and want nothing more than a warm body next to mine.

Sometimes, it felt like too much was being asked of me. Mine was the first generation in my family that was expected to find their own partner. My parents' marriage had been arranged, and their parents' before them. But now, here I was, being forced into a love marriage. Why did I have to be the one to pave a different path? It would be easier, I thought, if someone would just decide for me. I mean, take Billee. We found Billee at a shelter. We loved him at first sight and brought him home. And now he was this irreplaceable being. I had infused meaning into him because he was the one I'd come home with. It felt taken for granted that he was mine and I was his. The problem was, I thought as I swiped through Tinder, *too much* choice. I did not want to be accountable for a potentially bad decision. I did not want to be accountable, period. Luckily, about two weeks after my return from Karachi, I was distracted from my loneliness by the phone call that I'd been waiting for.

'Is this Anisa Ellahi? We believe you've been referred to us to study German.'

'Oh my god, is this the Centre?' I asked. 'I've been waiting for your call.'

‘Before we proceed,’ the voice cut me off. ‘I’m going to pass you on to our lawyers to make sure you understand the terms of our non-disclosure agreement. Are you happy with that?’

‘Of course,’ I replied and was transferred to a man who spoke to me at length in the most dry and legalistic language possible.

‘Yep, yep, I understand,’ I interjected periodically, pacing around my living room while prompting Billee to chase his little mouse thing. The gist of what the lawyer said was intellectual property blah-blah, privacy, secrecy, non-disclosure, the Centre not being held responsible, my own volition, strict agreement to their timetable, no phones, no communication with the outside world whatsoever and so on. ‘Yes. Great. Sounds good. Adam already filled me in.’

Eventually, after receiving my ‘verbal consent’, the lawyer transferred me back to the earlier voice, who asked whether I was free for an interview later that week.

Yes, I said. Yes I was.

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On the day of my interview, I stopped at Naima’s beforehand. Naima lived in a spacious two-bed in Peckham that she shared with her friend Salma, a movement therapist who did intuitive massage and ran 5Rhythms dance courses. Both women often worked out of their living room, which they’d set up as a kind of yoga/dance studio and ceremonial space. The morning I arrived, I found Naima in the kitchen, cutting up apples for a large pot of porridge bubbling on the stove. She was preparing it for the four women asleep in her living room after the ceremony they’d done the night before.

‘Can you believe it?’ I said. ‘If what Adam says is true, then in less than two weeks, I’ll be able to read, like Freud, in the original.’

‘Did Freud write in German?’ she asked.

‘I think so. But like, Goethe or whatever. Wouldn’t that be amazing?’

It’s not that I wasn’t conscious that both Adam and the lawyer had sworn me to secrecy, but Naima, well, telling Naima something was no different from telling it to myself in the bathroom mirror. Or telling Billee. To me, Naima was that ageless tree in the park into which you whispered your deepest secrets. And there was no safer space than her flat either. Partly

because the ayahuasca ceremonies she ran weren't, technically speaking, legal, and partly because she was Muslim, Naima was convinced that one way or the other, the government was listening in. She allowed no phones in her ceremonial spaces, only used Telegram and hung around on social media sites in what she called 'incognito mode'. And so, I spilled.

'They said we're not allowed any laptops or phones or anything, not even books,' I said. 'And we're not allowed to speak to the other Learners – *Learners*, that's what they call the students. Isn't that weird? And there's a strict diet. Meditation. 5.00 a.m. wake-ups—'

'Oh god, sounds intense. Are you sure Adam hasn't enlisted you into the army or something?'

'They said it's to create a distraction-free space so we can fully absorb the new language.'

'Well, might be good for you to be device-free for a while. I do that in my retreats too.'

'And it's fluency-guaranteed. And not just textbook fluency. Adam spoke better Urdu than me. Like the kind of Urdu our grandmothers speak.'

'It's like preservation when it's like that, right? Preservation of cultures.'

'Well, yeah, except it wasn't his culture,' I said.

'I just mean, with dying-out languages – it could be a way of preserving them. Pass the cinnamon.'

'Yeah, I guess,' I said, handing her the container. 'But imagine if I had that in German. It could be like a key to a whole new universe.'

'I mean, it's totally you, for sure,' she said. 'But I still don't get it. How does it work?'

'We'll find out, I guess.'

'How much does it cost?'

'Two thousand.'

'Oof. Pricey. But worth it, sounds like? If it works.'

The course was actually, of course, *twenty* thousand, not two, but I didn't know how to say this to Naima. I felt like the number would sound inconceivable to her, or that she'd look at me differently, somehow, if she knew. I'd like to think that my obfuscation was a gesture of empathy, but I don't know, maybe it was a dickhead move. Maybe, through these small erasures, which we tell ourselves are 'polite' or whatever, we're covering up a vast network of structural inequality. Who knows. It's just what came

to me in the moment, and I felt my cheeks redden even as I said it. Two thousand.

When we'd first met at uni, Naima had told all our friends that her parents were retired schoolteachers. Then one day, in our third year, while we were smoking a spliff in the park, she'd confessed to me that her father was in fact a taxi driver, her mother a seamstress. I was confused by the secrecy but, I suppose, in an entitled way. Having come from a place where there was virtually no class mobility, I'd operated in a tiny bubble and never properly considered the emotional nuances of what it might feel like to be in her shoes. And so Naima's shame came as a surprise. She'd been on her own journey with that since, though, and had become more open about her family background, although, I don't know, maybe this still changed depending on which circles she travelled through.

'Do you feel prepped for the interview then?' she asked, pouring the chopped apples into the porridge. 'What kind of things do you think they'll ask?'

I pulled out bowls and spoons, some honey, and a seed mix; we had done this breakfast prep before.

'No clue,' I said. 'But listen to this: it's not just an interview but also a medical check-up.'

'What?'

'Yeah.'

'What do they need a medical check-up for?'

'They said it was just blood pressure and things. Health and safety.'

'We don't even do check-ups for aya. Just a questionnaire.'

I shrugged. 'They said it's standard procedure.'

'Sounds bizarre.'

I carried on chopping fruit while Naima gently woke the four women in her living room. She went round the room tinkling a little bell, and they stirred in their sleeping bags, still processing, I imagine, the ceremony from the night before. Then, after toothbrushings and showers, they gathered again in the living room, nestling porridge in their laps, ready for the sharing circle. I popped my head in and said hello, and they greeted me with radiant smiles, with the tenderness that comes into the body after ceremony and stays, well, for at least a few days, until the severity of the city hardens it up again.

I went upstairs to wait in Naima's room while the women shared the details of their journeys. Sometimes sobs or laughter floated upwards as they went over their experiences. Big things could come up in these ceremonies: old traumas relived, new insights uncovered, lifelong confusions untangled, repressed griefs released. I'd sat in circle with Naima a few times, helping her empty buckets and prepare food in exchange for her medicine and space-holding, and I'd always come out revitalized. That woman truly knew how to hold space. And she was the only person we knew who ran these circles especially for women of colour. For the participants, this was a balm. Here, they could discuss ancestral trauma and cultural specificity without the kind of defensiveness or shame they'd be forced to adopt in whiter spaces. The truth is, when the aya strips you of all defences, even everyday comments like 'Where are you from?' or 'Your skin is so beautiful', things you may otherwise be inoculated against, can cause a kind of re-traumatization. Naima provided a refuge from such things and a place to heal from them. She had a steady stream of attendees and a growing waiting list, as she could only accommodate four women at a time in her living room and held these ceremonies just once a week. I'd noticed that running these groups had been healing for Naima herself; ever since she'd started, she held herself in a more substantial way, with a greater sense of purpose. Anyway, eventually, the four women left, and I helped Naima clean up. The conversation turned back to Adam.

'I guess it just felt like he was . . . enough, you know?' I said. 'Like, I don't even know what I'm holding out for any more.'

'Men are trash,' Naima said.

'Men *are* trash,' I agreed. 'But . . . what are we meant to do?'

'I don't know. Sometimes, I think maybe we need to accept the situation as it is, you know? Just settle into it. I may meet someone, or I may not. But I need to be happy either way.' She put her tea towel down, taking a seat at the table. I turned the kettle on and plucked two mugs off the drying rack. 'But other times I worry that total acceptance is a bit like giving up. I don't know. These days, I'm trying affirmations.'

'You just said men are trash. Isn't that the opposite of an affirmation?'

'Oh yeah, that just came out. No. No they're not. Men are lovely.'

'Hashtag not all men?'



‘LOL,’ she replied, ‘I guess. But really, what do I know? It worries me sometimes. So many people come to me with ‘twin flame’ shit – wanting to find ‘the one’, have babies, all of that. And the truth is, I want that too, and I don’t have it, and I don’t know why. How can I be counselling other people when I’m not even sorted out myself?’

‘You don’t need to have it all figured out to help people. You’re naturally intuitive—’

‘Psychic,’ she corrected.

‘Point is, you’re good at knowing this stuff.’

We were interrupted by the doorbell. Naima pressed the button on the intercom and said into the speaker. ‘Hi. Is that Simon? Come up.’

‘Simon your tantra client? I should go.’

‘No, no. It’s fine. Stay. Say hello at least.’

Simon was a shy-seeming, skinny guy in a worn Beatles T-shirt, jeans, and New Balance trainers. He had curly, unkempt hair, and he’d brought along a box of chocolates, which Naima accepted with delight. He wore a bracelet made of wooden beads around his wrist and carried a backpack. They gave each other a prolonged embrace before he even noticed me.

‘Oh, hi.’

‘Simon, this is Anisa, my best friend. Anisa, this is Simon.’

We shook hands.

‘Hi, Simon, I’ve heard about you.’

As soon as I said it, I wondered whether this was a betrayal of Naima’s doctor–patient confidentiality or whatever, but he seemed unfazed.

‘Nice to meet you, Anisa. I’ve never met any of Naima’s friends before.’

‘Anisa, you should stay for a bit. We were going to start with a manifestation session. What do you think, Simon, would you be cool with that? She’s powerful, this one. She’ll add to the potency of the spell.’

‘Yeah, sure, of course. That would be great.’

Simon looked at Naima with a kind of enraptured gaze that made me nervous for him. I wondered whether she should be allowing him to bring her chocolate and things.

‘What do you say? You want to do some manifesting?’ Naima asked me.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. ‘Manifesting? I don’t know.’

‘Come on, it’ll be fun. Anisa was just telling me, Simon, that she’s confused about her break-up, and she’s going on this language

course . . . um, I mean some kind of course thing . . . or, not a course, just a thing. Come, Anisa, it'll be good for you. You can really hone your intentions, you know?'

'I don't know if I believe in that kind of thing,' I said apologetically.

'Oh, don't worry about that bit,' Naima said. 'It works whether you believe it or not.'

And so I agreed to stay for their manifestation exercise. I wondered how it would have worked if I hadn't been there, whether they would have done it, I don't know, naked or something. Naima's whole tantra thing was kind of obscure to me, but I suspected my curiosity was a bit voyeuristic, so I didn't ask too many questions. Naima lit a candle, burned some sage, and retrieved three bowls. She filled one with water and plopped in a single pound coin. She explained that we would speak in turns of the life we wished for, while pouring the water and coin from one bowl into the other. She asked me to begin, handing me the full bowl.

'Okay . . . hmm . . . I want to become . . .'

'No, no, say it in the present tense.'

'The present tense?'

'Yeah, as if you already are.'

'Oh. Okay. I am a translator of great works of literature.'

I poured into Naima's bowl.

'You are a translator of great works of literature,' she repeated. 'And me, I have moved into a house with a garden, and I'm holding large retreats for women of colour there. Twenty at a time.'

'You'd be great at that,' Simon said. 'Okay, my turn? I . . . well . . . I just want to be open to the moment, I think.'

'Say it in the present.'

'I am open to the moment.' He sighed and seemed to relax. 'I am in the moment.'

I found my own breath deepening in response.

'Your turn,' he said to me.

'I have found a love, true and everlasting.'

'I have too,' Naima said next. 'And we make each other laugh.'

'Same,' Simon said, glancing at Naima. He poured the water into my bowl.

I closed my eyes and spoke again. 'I have a massive bathtub, one of those ones that stand in the middle of the bathroom.'

This made Naima laugh. 'I didn't know you wanted that.'

'Always have. And . . . a fireplace, and I take walks in the park every day,' I continued. 'Oh, and the park is right next door to my house.'

'Mmmm. That sounds cosy,' Naima said as I poured into her bowl. 'I'll come stay with you. Okay, me. I . . . oh, I start a podcast on tapping into body wisdom. That one's long overdue.'

Simon went next.

'I finish my master's, with a distinction.'

'You'll definitely get a distinction,' Naima said. 'Anisa, you go.'

'Okay. I . . .' I closed my eyes again. 'I have . . . a child. She's got sweet brown eyes and a tinkling laugh, and she's, hmm . . . she's holding my hand now. The whole of her tiny palm is wrapped around my finger as we walk through the park, the one near my house.'

I opened my eyes.

'Inshallah,' Naima said.

I didn't often express my wish for children any more, not as I had when I was in my twenties or even early thirties. It felt like an increasingly tenuous dream, and I think a part of me was afraid to even imagine it, like the pain of not having a child would be all the greater if I let my desire for one be known. But during our circle, I had the feeling that if I didn't even dare to see it, how would it ever have a chance of being? I was somewhat tearful as I imagined this tiny palm around my finger, and I saw that Naima looked emotional too.

'I just saw it, right now, in my head. So I said it.'

'That's how it works. You have to see it for it to be.'

I poured into Naima's bowl. She closed her eyes and took a long breath. Something in the air had gradually shifted during our session, and it felt like we were really dropping into our hearts' desires now instead of play-acting.

'I . . . I connect to my own legacy of communication with the unseen realms,' she said. 'Instead of taking from other people's cultures, I find the channel that my own people have used to commune with the divine.'

'I love that, Naima.'

'Our people had a way to connect. My manifestation is that I remember it.'

‘Ameen.’

‘Ameen.’

The manifestation session, I started to feel, wasn’t very different from prayer. And prayer, I think, can be a bit like translation. There’s a kind of cosmic geometry to it. It’s about getting the right words in the right order, and if those words are precise enough, they hit their equivalent in the other realm and the thing that is wished for comes into being. And like any art, prayer is a craft that needs polishing, understanding, practice and skill. I was frequently sceptical of Naima’s ways, but suddenly it felt right, sitting there and describing to ourselves and one another what it was that we wanted, painting our futures together, allowing for the limits of our imaginations to open, to envision possibilities that we had not previously considered.

We continued this way, drawing in deeper and deeper detail a picture of our lives, until, by the time we were done, it felt as if it were already so, and I walked out of Naima’s flat with the lightness of a hope already fulfilled. As I headed to the train station, I tried to hold the prayers I’d made close to my chest. I imagined them wrapped up delicately, in cotton wool, and I made an additional one then, as I descended the station stairs, that all Naima’s prayers be fulfilled, and that the healing she offered to others come back to her tenfold.

\*

The directions I’d been given to the Centre’s offices led me to a blue door, number 74, on a side street just off Tottenham Court Road. I rang the unmarked buzzer.

‘Yes?’

‘Hi. It’s Anisa Ellahi. I have a three o’clock?’

‘Come up please.’

Inside, I climbed a narrow, carpeted staircase to the first floor, where a slender woman with sleek black hair that curtained down the sides of her face sat behind a circular reception desk. Large pink geraniums bloomed in an ivory pot to her right.

‘Anisa?’ she confirmed and gestured for me to take a seat on one of the two leather armchairs around the coffee table in the corner. ‘I’ll let them

know you're here.'

I sat down and examined the space around me. It looked pristine, like something between a dentist's office and a spa. The receptionist had been knitting with bright turquoise wool when I'd walked in, and she put her needles down now to pick up the phone next to her and tell the person on the other end that I'd arrived.

'Won't be a minute,' she said, hanging up the phone and resuming her knitting.

I looked again at her desk, at the ivory pot beside her that held the geraniums. I realized it was in the shape of a human skull, with the flowers sprouting out of a hole at the top of its cranium. I found it strangely mesmerizing and examined it for several moments before clearing my throat and asking, 'Um . . . is that real?'

The receptionist looked up from her knitting and gazed at the skull as if seeing it for the first time.

'Oh,' she said abstractedly. She lifted her knitting needle and tapped the skull three times, just where its right temple lay, as if checking for authenticity. Tap, tap, tap. Then, she moved the needle upward, stroking a leaf that fanned out from the plant before resting its tip on one of the pink flowers. 'Of course they're real. They're in season.'

She went back to her knitting, and I wondered for a moment whether she'd deliberately misunderstood my question. As she adjusted the turquoise fabric, I saw that she was making a tiny little jumper.

'That's lovely,' I said, gesturing towards her handiwork. Her face blossomed into a smile.

'You think so?'

She put the needles down and held the jumper by the shoulders before spreading it across her belly and smoothing it down.

'Oh,' I said. 'Congratulations.'

'Thanks,' she replied. 'I like making mini ones to see what they'll look like before I do full-size.'

I heard the clicks of heels down the hallway, and then a man and woman, both dressed in white doctor's scrubs, walked in.

'Anisa?'

'That's me.'

The woman had curly hair and a bright demeanour, in contrast to the bespectacled, more serious-looking man who stood beside her, holding a clipboard.

‘Follow us,’ he said, and they led me down a small corridor, their polished black shoes sounding in near synchronization on the tiled floors.

‘I’m Susan, and this is Tim,’ the woman said, turning her head back to smile at me.

‘Hi. I’m Anisa,’ I replied, then worried that I’d introduced myself already and was smiling too widely. ‘Your offices are beautiful.’

It was a line I often used at interviews, and I think it worked; the woman thanked me and smiled.

The pair ushered me into a room that looked like a GP’s surgery. On one side, there was one of those high, collapsible, massage bed-type things, and on the other, a large desk with a flat-screen desktop and printer.

‘Take a seat,’ they instructed, not indicating where. I chose the chair next to the desk.

‘Adam has been with us for many years. We’re delighted he recommended you,’ Susan said.

‘We’d like you to fill this in before we get started,’ Tim added, handing me the clipboard. ‘We believe our lawyers have already talked you through it.’

The NDA was long, with tiny print and lots of jargon. The first point, covering what qualified as ‘confidential’, said that I had to keep literally everything to do with the Centre a secret. I worried that Tim, who seemed to be scrutinizing me as I read, would be able to discern from my face that I’d already told Naima. I tried to slow my breathing and look casual. By point eight or nine, which mentioned fines of up to one million pounds and even imprisonment, I started to wish I’d been more discreet and resolved not to breathe another word to anybody.

‘It sounds like you take this privacy thing pretty seriously, huh?’ I said with a laugh that came out like a cough.

‘Absolutely,’ Susan said. ‘It’s a finely tuned operation. They have to protect their vision.’

After I signed the NDA, they handed me a second form. The first page requested basic health information – things like underlying illnesses, allergies, mental health conditions, exercise habits, tobacco and alcohol

usage, and caffeine intake. The second page felt more like job interview stuff – what I felt were my biggest skills and weaknesses, whether I worked well in a team and was ‘used to solitude’.

‘Used to solitude?’ I asked.

‘Well, it’ll be ten days of, essentially, just you and the language,’ Tim responded.

‘And you’ll have only one person, your supervisor, with whom you can communicate while there,’ Susan added. ‘We need to make sure that’s something you can handle.’

‘Oh, yeah, of course. I’m an introvert by nature.’

‘Introverts tend to rely on various supplemental aids to provide distraction. The internet is a significant one. Do you have a meditation practice?’ Tim asked.

‘Umm . . . I guess so. Here and there. I use the Headspace app sometimes. Do you know that one?’

‘I am familiar, yes,’ he said, scribbling something onto his notepad.

I thought to myself that I should’ve said vipassana, the more heavy-duty meditation thing that Naima talked about.

‘Here you go,’ I said, handing him back the form.

‘We see you have applied to learn German,’ Susan said.

‘That’s right.’

‘A fine choice. Now, as part of the screening, we will conduct a brief medical check-up. Does that sound all right?’

‘Yes, they told me on the phone. I’m surprised, though, that you need one.’

‘It’s routine.’

‘Yes, it’s just, I’m trying to understand . . . a medical check-up for a language course?’

‘This is far more than a *language course*,’ Tim explained. ‘It is a holistic experience. What you get out of it is fluency in the language of your choice. What you put into it, however, is quite different.’

‘What do I put into it?’

‘Simply, presence. But we need to make sure you are fit and healthy, resilient enough to undergo the rigours of the process.’

‘Rigours?’

‘It is an intense absorption,’ he said.

‘That requires . . . physical endurance?’

‘Not physical endurance, exactly, but good health. Ten days of isolation from the outside world while deeply immersed in an unfamiliar tongue. That is a considerable venture.’

Conscious that this conversation could well be part of the interview, I said, ‘I’m fully prepared for all of that. I’m confident it won’t be a problem.’

‘Good. And you’re happy to proceed with the medical tests?’

‘Of course.’

They checked my blood pressure and pulse and asked me to spit into a small vial so they could test for allergies. I tried to draw them into conversation while we performed these tests.

‘So, have you been to the Centre yourselves?’

‘Oh yes, of course,’ Susan said. ‘We wouldn’t be here if we hadn’t. We found it very interesting.’

‘From a scientific perspective,’ Tim added.

‘How does it work exactly?’ I asked.

‘It’s very complex. We’re still trying to understand it ourselves,’ Susan said. ‘We’re going to write a paper about it one day.’

‘Sue,’ Tim warned.

‘What? I said one day.’

Tim sighed and went back to examining the screen. Susan rolled her eyes, and we exchanged smiles.

‘Management isn’t interested, you see, in anyone analysing their process yet,’ she explained. ‘But I think things are changing. A new woman’s been running the place, she’s been there three or four years now. I think she’ll let people in more.’

Tim, still looking at the screen, shook his head. It felt like this was a conversation they’d had before.

‘Did you two go there together?’ I asked.

‘No, separately. We hadn’t met then. But the woman who runs the place, she learned that we were both doctors, took a liking to us, and offered us this job.’

‘Extraordinary woman,’ Tim said.

‘It’s true,’ Susan echoed. She walked over to Tim and placed her palm on his lower back, looking over his shoulder as he checked the notes that the



printer was spitting out.

‘Are you two . . . together?’

‘We are, in fact,’ she confirmed and showed me the golden band on her finger. ‘The wedding’s in three months.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘I suppose it helped, didn’t it, that we’d both had . . . that experience? Sharing something like that can be bonding. You’ll see. It’s quite profound.’

‘I’m excited to experience it,’ I said.

‘At first, it can seem . . . different. And the body doesn’t always react well to difference, but eventually—’

‘Did you write down the temperature variance?’ Tim interrupted.

‘I did, yes,’ Susan confirmed, straightening herself back into a professional stance.

Tim uploaded my spit sample into some kind of device, and a stream of data appeared on the monitor.

‘Does everything look okay?’ I asked.

‘Looks good,’ he answered.

‘So, you know when they say fluency in ten days?’ I asked. ‘Is it like, fluent, fluent? Like, will I be able to read, I dunno, Freud and things?’

Tim turned from the screen towards me.

‘By the end of your ten days,’ he said, ‘you will be reading Freud and Hegel, Nietzsche and Marx, in the original with no problem. How much you absorb of these texts is, of course, a matter of intellect, but we generally find significant improvement in that department as well.’

The rest of the questions were so standard that I began to feel like the ‘interview’ was actually just an excuse for the medical check-up. When, near the end, they asked me if I had any questions of my own, I asked again what the process would be like so I could prepare beforehand.

‘You will find out about the specifics of the process once you get there. There’s not much required on your part but presence.’

‘Which can be the most challenging thing, mind you,’ Susan added.

‘Do you think,’ Tim probed, ‘that you can endure that kind of immersion into self?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I think I can manage that.’

‘Okay. Well,’ Susan said, clapping her hands together after receiving a nod of confirmation from Tim, ‘I think we can wrap up then. Thank you.’

Do make sure to get your affairs in order beforehand.'

'You should, of course, inform people you'll be away but without giving them any clues as to where you will be.'

'Where should I tell them I'm going?'

'That is up to you. Something befitting your career, I would suggest.'

'A language course is pretty befitting to my career.'

'Best if you say something else. We value discretion above all.'

'And it really works? Like every single time?'

'If you follow the instructions, then yes, success guaranteed.'

As I was getting off the bed and putting on my coat, the two of them conferred to the side for a moment. Then Susan reapproached me. 'I have one last question. But feel free to decline. This is outside the scope of the official interview.'

'What is it?'

'Do you mind if we measure your skull?'

'Funny.' I laughed. She looked at me blankly. '*Heart of Darkness*, right?'

They both blinked quizzically at me.

'Oh, I thought maybe you were quoting from the book? Like, testing me or something?' I explained.

'It's absolutely optional,' Susan said. 'Our own curiosity. The Centre doesn't care about things like this. But we're very interested, personally. In *how* it occurs.'

'Scientifically,' Tim added.

'Um, okay. If you like.'

Tim pulled out a pair of large metal callipers. He held the instrument above my head, and I heard it click open as he placed one cold jaw between my eyebrows, the other at the back of my skull. He called out a figure that Susan wrote down on her clipboard. Next, the prongs went on either temple, and finally, he placed one under my chin and its opposite on my crown. He moved quickly, and I closed my eyes, imagining an enormous, inquisitive spider crawling around my skull, trying to make sense of its surroundings.

'Conrad, you know, didn't speak any English until well into his twenties,' Tim shared as he worked. I tried to look up at him, but the instrument's grip held me firmly in place. The prongs dug deeper into my scalp, and I heard the metallic scrape of notches clicking into a tighter setting.

'I didn't know that.'

‘Remarkable, isn’t it?’ he mused. ‘That level of absorption.’

He called out one final figure to Susan before releasing me from the contraption. Relieved, I got off the bed.

‘Are you going to measure it again afterwards?’ I asked.

‘Oh no. No need for that. The changes take place inside, you see.’

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## Chapter Four

Three weeks later, I was at Tunbridge Wells station with my suitcase. The Centre had given me the number plate number of the car that would be waiting for me there, and I found it straight away. I noticed that the driver had a tasbeeh around his rear-view mirror, so I wished him salaam as I scooted into my seat.

‘Walaikum salam,’ he said, and we got talking. It turned out he was from a small town near Pindi and had been in England for about twenty years.

‘Do you like it here?’ I asked.

He shrugged in the characteristic way people answer that question. ‘It’s work, mostly. You?’

I returned his shrug. ‘Yeah, it’s okay. Same.’

About fifteen minutes in, I asked him how far we were from the Centre.

‘Maybe half an hour more,’ he said.

‘It’s quite remote, huh?’

‘Middle of nowhere.’

‘It’s very pretty,’ I said, looking at the lush green on either side of us. ‘In London, there’s only traffic and smoke.’

‘Yes.’

‘So . . . you work for the Centre then?’

‘I run my own taxi service. I work for myself. But they hire me to do this. Pick up, drop off. What language are you learning?’

‘German.’

‘Okay, I see. Good luck.’

‘Thanks.’

‘How much does it cost, this course?’

‘Uh . . . I’m not sure,’ I lied. ‘My company’s paying.’

‘They all say that,’ he replied, his eyes narrowing on me through the rear-view mirror. ‘You know, when I first started working for them, the people I dropped off wouldn’t even tell me what they did there. Some said yoga, others said business management. I thought maybe it was an all-purpose school. But then one day, I was dropping off a man. Gora. And he started asking me about Hindi, just in a by-the-way style. This man, the only thing he knew how to say going in was kabhi khushi kabhi gham. Nothing else. Coming out, he understands everything. Really, everything.’

‘I’ve heard that happens.’

‘Maybe he was just a genius, I don’t know. I reminded him, “Hello, sir, when I dropped you off, you couldn’t say two words. How did this happen?” He started looking here and there and saying, “No, no, it was someone else you dropped off.” But trust me, sister, it was the same man. I remembered him well.’

‘Maybe he was a genius, like you said,’ I suggested, conscious of my vow of secrecy.

‘I don’t know, but after that I started asking everyone I dropped off, “What language are you learning?” That’s how I confirmed that they teach languages there. Then, one day I thought, why not ask them directly? I was thinking maybe my daughter could go. She refuses to speak one word of our language, that girl. Or maybe my wife, for her English. She complains sometimes about how they treat her. It could help. So I went to reception and I asked the woman at the desk, “What is this course? Can you tell me what you charge?” And you know what she said?’

‘What?’

‘She looked at me like this,’ he said, tilting his chin up in the air so that he was gazing down at me through the rear-view mirror. ‘Just like this. And she said, “Invite only”.’

‘Oh.’

‘Snob.’

‘Yeah. That’s not nice.’

‘This is what they do. They keep you down in this country any way they can. ‘Invite only,’ he repeated. ‘What does that mean? I felt so ashamed when she said it. She does the wrong thing, and I’m the one who feels ashamed. When I came home, I was totally quiet. My wife noticed and started pestering me, “What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” So I told her. You

know what she did? She started laughing! “Nakcharhi!” she said. “Snob.” Then we both laughed together, and I didn’t feel ashamed any more.’

‘I’m sorry that happened to you. That’s really . . . not nice.’ I said, squirming in my seat as if I were the one who had done this to him, as if I were the one who had raised my chin and said, ‘Invite only’.

‘It’s always like that,’ he continued. ‘But never mind. Maybe one day my son will go there. He’s top of his class already. Only fourteen. He’ll easily get into the top university. Oxford Shoxford. And the way he talks, he sounds like one of them. To him, nobody will dare to say, “Invite only”.’

‘Inshallah.’

‘Inshallah.’

We drove on, the area around us becoming more and more remote until we were surrounded by nothing but rolling fields and a couple of grazing horses. We turned into a long, narrow lane that led to a metal gate, which we were buzzed through. Then we went down a winding driveway, which ended in front of a gleaming building of glass and steel, slate and wood, curved at the edges and two or three storeys high.

‘Best of luck,’ the driver said, and drove away.

I approached the large reflective door, which mirrored back to me a softened version of myself. I leaned in closer, fixed my hair and wiped away my smudged eyeliner before searching for a buzzer. I found none, but moments later, the door slid silently open of its own accord, revealing a room, pine-floored and sleekly furnished, just as minimalist and modern as the outside. In front of me, a man stood behind a gleaming ivory desk. A large window occupied almost the whole wall behind him, and through it I saw a luscious garden, layer upon layer of different shades of green. I turned around and saw that the mirrored door I had just walked through was in fact one-way, now offering a clear view of the driveway. I felt mildly embarrassed that this man had seen me fix my hair and make-up. I approached him and introduced myself. He greeted me politely and asked how my journey had been.

‘Great, thank you,’ I said and gestured towards the garden behind him. ‘This is just . . . wow.’

He smiled and turned around to look, ‘Magnifique, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now,’ he said. ‘You’ll have to leave all prohibited items here before we move forward. Would you mind opening your bags?’

I unzipped my suitcase, and he confiscated my laptop, a bar of dark chocolate, and my Eimear McBride novel. From my backpack, he took my phone, a small spiral-bound notebook and pen, and a single clementine.

‘Sorry,’ he said, holding the clementine. ‘We ask all Learners to stick to the prescribed diet. You can eat it now, if you want.’

‘I’m okay,’ I said.

He placed it, along with the rest of my things, in a shallow plastic box and ushered me through the sliding door behind him. It opened onto the green courtyard I’d seen through the glass.

As soon as I stepped through the door, it was as if I’d walked into a whole other ecosystem. The air smelled musky and damp, and a light mist hovered around us, making it seem like every tree was connected to every blade of grass through a fine watery web. All kinds of foliage twisted throughout the garden, with vibrant flowers adorning the landscape in variegated patterns. Many of the trees held fruit: pears and apples, mulberries and peaches, and I noticed, in disbelief, roses and orchids sitting softly together in beds of moss. Just beside them were specimens that looked positively monstrous: sharp and jagged spokes of rusty purple and tangled webs of swampy green. These were bounded by chicken wire, with warning notices declaring them poisonous.

The man had lowered his voice to a whisper after we’d stepped through the door. He told me that my supervisor would meet me here to give me a tour and that she would be the only person I’d communicate with during the rest of my stay. Then he made a little zipping motion over his lips, gave me a theatrical bow, and turned back to the front of the building, the door sliding closed behind him.

I looked around, inspecting my surroundings further while I waited for my supervisor to arrive. The building bordered the courtyard in a kind of elongated diamond shape. Four enormous weeping willow trees, encased in shrubbery, stood at its corners. In front of me, a swallow swooped down and perched on the wire cage enveloping the jagged purple plant’s nodules. It held a wriggling beetle in its beak and tilted its quizzical head at me. I worried fleetingly for its safety, eyeing the spike glistening with an almost iridescent ooze just centimetres from its breastbone, but it seemed

unconcerned. I walked on and reached for a dark pink rose nestled among white orbs of delicate dandelion seed heads, but my arm scraped painfully against an invisible thorn. I quickly pulled it back, and the dandelion seeds, disturbed, blew into the wind, causing a commotion that made me sneeze. I backed away and turned my attention back to the building itself.

The structure was highly incongruous. Although the front of the edifice had seemed ridiculously modern, the part I faced now looked practically Victorian, all stone and brick and trailing ivy. I noted four entrances into the complex – the one I'd just walked through, two painted wooden doors on either side of me, and a final one at the far end, an imposing grey. Some of the rooms had large glass windows, like the one at reception, that faced into the courtyard. I peered into one and saw a series of square cushions arranged symmetrically on the wooden floor, clearly the meditation space Adam had told me about. Next to it, I saw what looked like a formal dining area, high ceilinged with heavy wooden tables and chairs stained in dark finishes. I couldn't make out anything else from where I stood, and except for the chirping swallows, it was very quiet.

I was beginning to wonder where everyone was when a woman finally emerged from the large grey door and walked toward me. She was dressed in a pair of trendy suede dungarees over a long-sleeved black speckled top. She wore white trainers, and her hair was draped in a long braid over one shoulder. The intimidation that her beauty aroused in me was somewhat mitigated by the warmth she exuded with her bright smile and somehow modest gait. Even before she'd said a word, I felt a strange familiarity.

'Hi,' she said, and shook my hand. She spoke with an Indian accent. 'Anisa, right? I'm Shiba. Welcome.'

She gestured for me to follow her and led us towards one of the weeping willows. We sat together on a bench beneath the tree, completely enclosed by the tall, manicured bushes of rosemary and lavender and other things I didn't know the names of. I felt an uncanny sensation as I entered the space, akin to wearing noise-cancelling headphones, and realized as I looked around that embedded within the hedges were tiny sound machines, buzzing together in a steady, filtering hum.

'We keep designated speaking areas on the grounds so as not to disturb the other Learners,' Shiba explained and pointed to the other shrouded corners of the courtyard. 'If we want to speak, we'll meet like this.'



‘Oh, okay, cool. Got it,’ I responded and gave her a ridiculous thumbs up.

‘Tell me, how are you feeling?’

‘Oh, fine. I’m . . . well, I’m kind of nervous to be here,’ I admitted. ‘It’s all been so mysterious. They say fluency in ten days. That sounds . . . intense. I just hope I’m able to do it right.’

I was blabbering, flustered by this woman’s quiet magnetism. I felt weirdly conscious of how close together we were sitting and slightly awkward in my body.

‘Don’t worry. You’ve done the hard part already. Now it’s just a matter of staying.’ She smiled and pointed to a timetable hanging on the wall across from us. There were several of these, I would later find, dotted around the complex. ‘As you can see, your days here are carefully planned. It may seem complicated at first, but you’ll quickly get used to it.’

I scanned the schedule briefly. Five in the morning to six o’clock: meditation. Six o’clock to seven o’clock: breakfast. Other activities followed: breaks, meals, more meditation, but about 80 per cent of the timetable was reserved for something called ‘language booth’.

‘Language booth?’

‘Yes. In fact, that’s where the other Learners are at the moment, in their respective language booths. This means we can speak freely for now. Come, I’ll show you how it all works. We’ll start with the Process Centre.’

She led me to her right, and we stopped in front of the red wooden door.

‘This building is amazing,’ I said.

‘Isn’t it? This part, you see, is a reclaimed mansion from the nineteenth century,’ she said and stroked the stone wall to the left of the red door. ‘And this,’ she continued, now touching the smooth plaster to its right, ‘was recently constructed.’

I looked more carefully at the structure surrounding us and saw that, just as she’d said, it was actually comprised of two conjoined U-shaped buildings, one aged and the other newborn. The connection was so seamless that you could hardly tell at first, but I saw now that the plaster slowly transitioned from smooth to textured so that by the time it merged with the stone, the transition felt continuous. The seam was still there, though, if you looked closely enough. A thin indent running from top to bottom, just next to the door. I touched it, the seam.

‘It’s beautifully done,’ I said.

‘I’m supervising the renovation myself,’ she said. ‘Eventually, the entire thing will look like the modern half.’

‘That sounds like a big job,’ I said, and tried not to look at her with too much curiosity. I’m not sure I’d ever internalized before that women who looked like us could oversee such important projects.

‘Yes.’ She nodded. ‘This will all be very different one day.’

I was struck by her words and found myself wishing I could speak with the same kind of gravitas and self-assuredness. That I could, in fact, say of my own life with such confidence, ‘This will all be very different one day’.

‘Now this wing, as I said, is the Process Centre. You’ll be spending the vast majority of your time in here.’

‘Sounds good.’

‘You see this?’ she asked and pointed to a small screen just by the door. ‘Here, swipe through.’

I touched the screen and a little bar appeared at the bottom. I swiped upwards, and then a dot traced the path of a little circle before the name *Ayesha* appeared at the top of the screen.

‘It’s facial recognition,’ Shiba said. ‘Whenever you need to talk to me, all you have to do is swipe here, and then your name will be added to the screen. I’ll be pinged and come find you. Then, once we’ve met . . .’ She swiped through the name with her finger. It disappeared. ‘Voilà.’

‘But . . . my name isn’t Ayesha.’

‘It’s your grandmother’s name.’

‘How did you know that?’

‘You told us,’ she replied, and I remembered that I had indeed included it on one of the forms I’d filled in. ‘We prefer to use pseudonyms for our Learners, to protect their anonymity.’

‘It’s funny. If you’d asked me to pick a pseudonym, I think that’s the one I would have chosen myself.’

She winked at me. ‘Read your mind, I guess.’

‘And the facial recognition? How did it—’

‘Oh, admin takes care of that.’ She waved the question away. ‘I imagine they set it up using your photograph.’

Maybe I felt a vague chill then, but I doubt it. Practically all of my devices used the face ID thing anyway. And so, mostly, I was just impressed by the efficiency. I followed Shiba into the dining area I’d seen earlier

through the window. The room was spacious, housing five circular tables, four chairs around each one. We sat down at one that had tea and samosas laid out.

‘Here, put this on,’ she said, handing me a wristband.

It was navy blue and had the name PETER inscribed on it. I noticed that Shiba too was wearing a wristband, plain green, alongside a slim golden bracelet.

‘Peter is your Storyteller. You’ll be spending most of your days upstairs in your language booth, listening to a tape that he’s pre-recorded for you.’

‘And what’s a language booth again?’

‘It’s basically a cubicle. I’ll show you after. You’ll sit there, put on some headphones, and listen to Peter speaking for several hours a day, in German. Easy.’

‘How will I understand what he’s saying?’

‘No need to think about it too much,’ she said, pouring my tea. ‘If you follow the protocol, the German will seep in. Just trust.’

She gave me a meaningful smile, the kind more suggestive of long-forged intimacy than brand-new acquaintanceship.

‘Here, try these,’ she said, gesturing towards the plate.

I picked up a samosa and took a bite. It was to die for. Crispy and warm, with succulent qeema and just the right amount of matar and aloo. Perfection.

‘Oh my god,’ I said, and Shiba smiled.

‘I’ll pass your compliments on to the chef.’

‘So, you’re saying I just sit there and listen to this Peter guy? No translation exercises or lessons or anything?’

‘That’s right.’

‘And . . . I do this every day?’

‘All day every day. We have an hour of meditation in the morning, another after lunch, and a final one in the evening, to ensure that the psyche has time to digest. And you’ll get short breaks during the day, of course, for your own leisure and mealtimes. But other than that, you’ll be in your booth upstairs.’

‘And the Learners are in their booths now?’

‘Not any more. Did you hear that gong a few minutes back? That was the signal for their next break.’ She pointed to the glass panel behind me, and through it I could see people making their way towards the wing facing us.

‘That’s the Learners’ area,’ she said. ‘I’ll show you after. Let’s go upstairs for now.’

We climbed a concrete spiral staircase that led to a wide hallway lined with a series of identical doors.

‘We host twenty Learners at a time here,’ Shiba said.

‘And each Learner has a supervisor?’

‘We’re a small team. Just ten people. So, each supervisor – there are four of us – oversees five Learners.’

‘I see.’

We walked further down the hallway before she stopped. ‘This language booth, number seven, is yours.’

She opened the door to a small windowless room that contained an office chair and a desk that held a large pair of wireless headphones. I was to spend several hours a day in that room. At least, I reasoned, the chair looked comfortable and the room was warm.

‘Here,’ she said and handed me the headphones. I took a seat and put them on. I heard a click, and then a voice: a man, speaking in German.

‘Is the sound clear? And the volume okay?’

I lifted the headphones off my ears. The sound clicked to a stop as soon as I made the motion.

‘I think so?’ I replied. ‘I don’t know what he’s saying.’

‘No.’ She laughed. ‘That’s why you’re here. Come, I’ll show you where you’ll be sleeping.’

We went downstairs and walked back through the courtyard to the Learners’ area. A Learner was leaving the building just as we were entering. She was very tall and wore her hair in a tidy bun. Even though she was dressed simply, in jeans and a white collared shirt, each garment was so finely tailored and immaculately constructed that she looked as if she were attending a conference at the UN. I raised my hand to gesture hello, but Shiba stopped me abruptly.

‘Remember,’ she whispered in my ear. ‘No contact.’

The woman passed us by without a glance. We walked through the blue wooden door, and Shiba led me to my room.

‘What would you say your average . . . clientele is like?’ I asked, pulling at the sleeves of my jumper self-consciously. ‘Like, what do they do?’

‘Mostly, elite diplomats. Foreign service, things like that. You also get industrialists, oligarchs, all kinds. Royalty, sometimes. Also, academics, linguists, even actors. Adam’s a bit of an anomaly, but that happens too from time to time, people being recommended by mentors or employers.’

My suitcase was already in my room when we walked in. It was a comfortable, if unassuming, space, outfitted with a double bed, some simple furniture, a full-length mirror, and a window overlooking the surrounding fields. The ensuite bathroom, though, was next level. I’d spend a scrumptious twenty minutes every day beneath its rainfall shower and never tired of the large porcelain sink into which water streamed in absolute silence from a sleek rectangular outlet or the commodious toilet with its silent flush that felt, somehow, like a hug.

When we returned outside, some of the Learners, now on break, were strolling around the courtyard. I considered them more closely. A bald man with a silver beard and a black coat was walking briskly while apparently deep in thought, and a woman with her hair tied in a ponytail and clad in lululemon gear was doing stretches in the middle of the garden. Another man in a tweed jacket was sitting on a bench and gazing placidly at the roses. There were also a couple of staff members cutting across the courtyard. Like Shiba, they had on green wristbands and white trainers. One carried a basket of toiletries into the Learners’ area, another rolled a large trolley into the Process Centre. The staff members had serious expressions on their faces as they went briskly about their tasks, darting glances from time to time at the Learners as if to make sure everything was in order.

‘So what’s the purpose of the wristbands again?’ I asked once we were properly sheltered under the weeping willow again.

‘They’re used for identification purposes – everything is individually tailored here, you see. So blue,’ she explained, placing a finger on my wristband, ‘means German.’

She pointed through the hedges at the man in tweed, whose red wristband poked out from his sleeve, ‘French,’ and then at the orange band around the slim wrist of the stretching woman, ‘Japanese.’

I gestured towards the heavy-looking grey door she’d first come out from.

‘And what’s over there?’

‘Staff quarters. Off limits, of course.’

‘Is that where the real magic happens?’

‘It’s where we sleep, if that counts,’ she said. ‘And the kitchens are in there, the laundry rooms. Your possessions that were taken at reception too.’

‘It seems kind of extreme, doesn’t it? To confiscate phones and laptops for ten whole days.’

‘It’s the only way. You need complete concentration for this level of absorption. Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it.’

‘I hope so.’

I had dinner that evening with the other Learners. It was strange at first to sit around a table with three or four other people and not even make eye contact. Once or twice, I couldn’t resist a glance, a smile, a nod of acknowledgement. But then I would quickly look away. We had paid a lot of money for this, after all, and taken time off. It wouldn’t work, they’d told us, if we didn’t follow the rules.

A staff member brought a serving tray to the table, double-checked my wristband, and placed a meal in front of me, all without looking me in the eye.

‘Thank you,’ I said, reflexively, in return receiving a curt shake of the head. ‘Oops, sorry!’ I whispered and felt another silent reprimand. I spoke no more.

The starter was a slice of roasted aubergine topped with mince and feta cream. It tasted phenomenal. I struggled not to share my pleasure with my dining mates and saw that they, too, were smiling. There were some contented nods to selves, and I heard an ‘mmm’ or two. In this way, the appreciation was shared around the table, even if not explicitly articulated. The main course followed, an equally delicious spaghetti bolognese, the pasta perfectly cooked and the meat drenched in a thick tomato sauce that melted in my mouth. Then, for dessert, a bittersweet pear and chocolate cake, served warm and with a single scoop of vanilla bean ice cream.

‘Are all the meals going to be like that?’ I asked Shiba afterwards.

‘We definitely don’t hold back when it comes to food prep.’

Oh, one more thing. I’m not sure if this is even worth mentioning – I’m not one to indulge in gossip, after all, nor hero worship. But I saw someone

famous there. I won't say who, obviously. Maybe I'll just give her a code name. Let's call her, I don't know, Darzi Tez. You know, I've always thought that celebrity confers a kind of aura on people, making them seem larger than life, but maybe it's the other way round. Maybe larger-than-life people claim celebrity. Or, who knows, maybe it's just the elite lifestyle. Hollywood trainers and nutritionists and all that. But Darzi, it was as if she was lit from within. Blonde and petite and practically levitating, this woman, who I'm pretty sure claims to be vegan, was sitting cross-legged on her chair at the table in front of me, voraciously eating her bolognese.

'Is that . . .?' I asked Shiba afterwards, pointing to her in the courtyard as we stood beneath the willow tree.

Shiba smiled in response. 'We protect our Learners' privacy here.'

'She's learning German too,' I said, gesturing towards her blue wristband. 'Is it her first time here?'

Shiba just shook her head discreetly. 'Not telling.'

'I wonder why she's here—'

'She comes, I think, because the experience adds layers to her work. Many come here, not precisely for the language, but for all that the language brings.'

'I mean, I don't know her music well, but I didn't sense that many layers.'

'She's on a slow simmer, that one,' Shiba said. 'She's careful to pace her unfurling. The smart ones know to protect themselves.'

\*

My days at the Centre were just as Shiba had outlined. Every morning, I woke up just before 5.00 a.m. and headed to the meditation room, where I sat cross-legged on a cushion while a soothing voice rose from the walls, reminding us to bring our attention back to our breath. Then breakfast, consistently delicious: turkey sausages and hash browns, poached eggs and sliced, cured meats, vibrant fruit salads and buttery pastries. After that, a short walk in the garden before settling into the language booth.

At first, my courtyard strolls were tentative. Being such a city girl all my life, I'd never had much of a relationship with the outdoors, and the garden seemed to share my apprehension. Like Billee on his first day in my flat, it

felt like the garden was crouched away defensively, staring at me warily from a distance, refusing to engage until I'd won its confidence. During my first few days there, I left our encounters with scratches from the rose bushes, a rash from some stinging nettles and insect bites around my ankles.

And the language booth, which had sounded easy, turned out to be exhausting. The German man, Peter, spoke in an endless monotone, just hour upon hour of what sounded like gibberish. I tried to concentrate, to decipher what he was saying, but to no avail. Often, I would drift into daydreams while his voice streamed into my ears. And sometimes, I would fall asleep altogether while he spoke, then abruptly wake up, disoriented and annoyed with myself for doing it wrong.

Struggling with the boredom and lack of social contact, I cheekily entered my name onto the screen basically every day so that Shiba and I could talk. She didn't seem to mind. She'd usher me into one of the speaking areas, and we'd spend the entire break period chatting about random things. I learned that Shiba, like me, had moved to the UK at the age of eighteen for uni. She'd studied engineering at Kent.

'My grandfather was an engineer,' she shared. 'And my father felt like I shared his talent. Probably because I was good at maths. But yeah, you never know where life will take you.'

I learned that Shiba was actually the Centre's manager. I found it fascinating that she, at her age, was basically at the helm of the whole institution. When other staff members approached her for direction, I noticed that she held her power with real comfort, with a kind of gentle but firm assertion that made an impression on me.

As the days passed, the courtyard gradually let its guard down. The jasmine-like perfume of the white wisteria revealed itself to me, and the enormous tree by the entrance to the Learners' area, whose trunk branched out a few feet above its ivy-enwrapped base, offered itself like a cupped palm for me to rest in. Now, it seemed, I was permitted admission, but nothing more, at least not yet.

'What's up with those ones?' I asked Shiba once, pointing at the spiky plants enclosed in wire. 'Wouldn't it be easier to just pull them out instead of fencing them in?'

'We find that the nourishing ones don't grow as well if we get rid of the poisonous ones,' she said. 'And besides, I think they add a nice kind of



contrast. Don't you?'

Sometimes when Shiba spoke, it sounded like she was saying something beneath her actual words, something that was imperative for me to understand but that lay just beyond my reach. But maybe it was just her large eyes and the way her lips skewed slightly to the right that gave her this mysterious air. I think her tone of voice also added to the enigmatic effect: it was incredibly soft, almost musical, while also emitting a thick resonance of vibration, as if emerging from deep within her gut. I wanted, almost instantly, to be close to her.

During one of our chats, I mentioned how I'd noticed that the people associated with the Centre – the couple that had interviewed me, the receptionist and, in fact, even Adam – had these sort of 'neutral' accents, the kinds of unplaceable dialects you sometimes find in third-culture kids or global cosmopolitan elites raised in the international schools and gated compounds of Oman or Turkey or Singapore. My observation made her laugh.

'I never thought of it like that,' she remarked. 'It's true, everyone here does speak similarly, don't they? Maybe it's the nature of the clientele. It would make sense that international diplomats or elite linguists would strive for that, what did you call it? Unplaceability. Or, I don't know, maybe it just happens when you're exposed to many different tongues.'

'How about you, then? Why hasn't it happened to you?'

'I think I consciously resist it. It's a way of holding on to myself.'

I understood completely, and she could see that I did. There was something between Shiba and me that just resonated at the same frequency. No translation required. Or at least, very little. I found myself thinking of her often, trying to piece together the story of her life from the fragments she offered beneath the willow tree.

One day, we began to reminisce about the food back home, and I told her of my grandmother's shahi tukray. I was surprised to hear that she'd never tried the dish and described to her the smell of the milk and khoya warming on the stove with the ghee and illaichi, sugar and saffron. There was a strange intensity to that moment, like the very tree that curtained us was listening in, our words floating up into its canopy and back down its branches before being absorbed by its roots. Then, the next evening, after dinner of karahi gosht and naan, we were served shahi tukray for dessert.

My heart expanded with gratitude towards Shiba when the dish was placed in front of me. It was the first time I'd had shahi tukray in England, and it was just as rich and milky and fragrant as my nani's had been.

But, other than my time with Shiba, my experience at the Centre was tedious. Peter droned on and on, and boredom descended on me like a fog. Sometimes, as he spoke, images would form in my head: a young boy squirming at a school desk, a family sitting quietly around a dinner table, a man driving down an endless highway. By day four or five, it started feeling like his voice was following me everywhere I went. While I ate or showered, meditated or dressed, his monologue continued. Then, I noticed that my dreams were becoming increasingly disturbing.

I dreamed, for instance, of a couple – my parents? – fighting by the kitchen sink. A blue-and-white porcelain teacup falls to the floor and shatters. My mother picks up a shard. She presses it into the skin of her nearly translucent forearm and draws a drop of blood. My teeth clamp together, and my forehead tightens as I watch helplessly from the dining table. The blood emerges like a bubble, then turns into a tear, dripping down her forearm. It lands in the kitchen sink. Everything is washed away, as if it never happened. Father walks away.

My sense upon waking was that this scene was an unearthed memory, repressed until then. But I couldn't be sure. The two people in the dream, they didn't look like my parents, but somehow *felt* like them. I told Shiba about the nightmares.

'How bad are they?' she asked.

'They wake me up in the middle of the night sometimes . . . and I hear him all the time. Peter. He's always in my head.'

'Well, that's kind of the point. By restricting your input to just his voice, he remains in your psyche.'

'And the nightmares?'

'Well, maybe that's just things emerging that haven't had the space and silence to come up before. Does that make sense?'

'Maybe.'

'Just keep working. And trust.'

The only person other than Shiba who I had contact with while at the Centre was the cleaner, who would come into my room every morning to Hoover and again in the evening to empty the bins. She was an elderly

woman, easily in her seventies, and looked Eastern European, with wispy grey hair that she tied back in a bun. She usually dressed in many layers of heavy skirts and tops, and tiny gold hoops hung from her earlobes. ‘Hello,’ I would say to her when she came in, but she would just nod at the ground, reinforcing the no-contact rule. Then, after she’d finished, I’d say ‘Thank you’, and again without looking at me, she’d murmur something like ‘Pojalusta’. Three or four days in, bored out of my mind, I started to say pojalusta to her instead of hello and thank you, and she’d laugh softly to herself. I felt like we had a bit of a connection, this sweet grandma and I, although, under those conditions, I suppose such things are easy to invent.

Over the coming days, my dreams worsened, each one more anxiety-inducing and frightening than the last. I dreamed of buildings collapsing on top of me, of car crashes and snowstorms. And even in my waking life, I carried these images close. Drinking tea one afternoon, I remembered, viscerally, the shattered porcelain teacup, the shard slicing skin, the teardrop of blood circling the plughole. My forehead tightened, and my jaw clenched as if I were reliving the moment.

What had once been boredom began to transform into a kind of desperation, and by day six or so, I was determined to leave. The strength of my feelings took me by surprise. After all, my situation wasn’t dire. We had nice rooms and great food, and were required to do nothing more than sit in our booths, meditate, and chill. Such a situation, I thought, should have felt like a luxury retreat. But I longed for news from the outside world. I imagined my work piling up and my friends trying to get in touch. I’d posted on Twitter that I’d be away and set up an automatic email response, told close friends and family I was attending a conference in a remote location with no phone signal. But still, what if there was an emergency? I couldn’t remember a single time in my adult life when I’d gone two days, let alone six, without checking my email. Another four sounded unbearable. Also, the truth is, life without distractions felt terrifying, as if the silence might give way to something beneath, as if there was this big secret pulsating below the earth, above the sky, within the trees, and if we went too quiet, we would hear it, and things would never be the same. I decided to speak to Shiba.

I found her outside the Process Centre, whispering to a staff member who was balancing a stack of green towels in his arms. I registered my name on

the screen and stood next to it until I caught her eye. She nodded at me, and we made our way to the nearest speaking area. I found myself welling up.

‘I’ve had enough,’ I said. ‘You said when I arrived that we could leave at any time. Well, I want to go.’

‘But Anisa, that would be such a waste. You know there’s no refund, right?’

‘I don’t care. I want to go,’ I said. Tears began to fall from my face onto the exposed root by my feet, where they were instantly absorbed. ‘It’s unbearable here. I don’t understand one word that man is saying. I’m having nightmares all the time. And I want to check my email.’

‘Listen,’ she said. ‘It’s perfectly normal to feel this way, especially around the halfway mark. It happens to most Learners. But I promise you, it will get better. Look, if you still feel the same way in a day or two, come find me. But you’ll see. It’ll all be worth it. When it finally happens, you won’t believe it.’

And then, Shiba gave me a hug. The physical contact melted my resolve but not my underlying angst and so, marginally convinced, I sniffingly went back to my room and curled up on the bed, covering myself with the duvet. Soon, I heard the gong ring, instructing us to return to our language booths, but I couldn’t do it. Instead, I just lay there, beneath the duvet, crying. I felt silly for reacting this way, but I missed home so much. I missed my own bed. I missed my books. I missed my kitchen. I missed the stove on which I cooked the recipes my Choti Khala WhatsApped me. I missed the Tesco and the Boots and the Holland & Barrett, the fruit and veg wala by the station who sold guava and mango in the summertime, squash and turnips in the winter. I missed my phone. I missed little Billee and my friends and my laptop and Pret and even the tube and the smog and chaos of the city. I missed Adam’s cuddles. And the cuddles of the man before him. And I missed the home I’d had before I moved to England – my parents and my sister and the sunshine. I missed my childhood, when I was still at school and didn’t have to decide anything for myself.

I missed my nani. She was so silly and conspiratorial. Whenever we did anything naughty, she’d exclaim ‘Astaghfirullah’ and try to contain her giggles. Then she left us when I wasn’t even in the country. On my last visit, I had said goodbye, see you later, and then she was dead. Same with my nana abba, who also passed away between my visits home. Nana

Abba's migration story, by the way, made mine look like a walk in the park. When he was a young man, a border had materialized beneath his feet, one so narrow that he could stand with a leg on either side. Fairly nonchalantly, he'd decided to hop over to the side across from that on which his parents and siblings stood, and he had said to them, with full conviction, 'I'll see you very soon'. How was he to know that that faint line would solidify into a steel wall, that they'd never let him return, even for a short visit? My nani went back once, though. She told me that although thirty years had passed, the children now grown men and women, she'd still recognized every single person.

'Not by their faces,' she'd said, 'but by their voices.'

I was lying under the covers this way, thinking of my departed grandparents and feeling utterly alone, when I heard a knock and then the door opening. I peeked out of my duvet cave. It was the cleaner lady.

'Pavlova,' I sniffled, forgetting the word we used for hello.

'Come. Time to learn.'

'No thank you,' I said, offering her a pitiful smile.

When she saw my face, she let out a sweet little 'oh' of concern that made me start outright sobbing.

'I want to check my email,' I wailed.

This made her chuckle gently. She sat beside me on the bed and gingerly put her hand against my cheek – her skin was like crêpe paper, wrinkled and nearly transparent. Her touch made me cry all the harder.

'I miss my cat,' I said.

'Where is she now?'

'He. He's with my friend . . . well, my ex-boyfriend, Adam.'

'It's okay,' she said and stroked my hair.

'I'm fine,' I said, an instinctive response to what I interpreted as pity, but she kept on stroking.

'It's okay,' she said again, and I looked into her eyes. In them, I saw not pity, but understanding. I saw empathy. I surrendered, burying my head in her lap. She kept stroking my hair, saying 'It's okay; it's okay', until slowly, I felt calmer. I lifted my head and looked up at her.

'Sorry. I've been having bad dreams, you see. That's why I feel a little . . . fragile.'

Her eyes widened. 'Bad dreams?'

‘Yes. And I keep hearing his voice. My Storyteller’s. I don’t like his voice.’

She was quiet for a moment.

‘What’s his name?’

‘Peter.’

‘Oh . . . Peter.’

I looked up at her. ‘Yeah.’

‘Peter is a little . . .’ She paused and scrunched up her face as if eating something sour. ‘Be careful, dear.’

‘Careful?’

‘Don’t take his pain,’ she said.

‘Whose pain? Peter’s? Do you know him?’

‘Just blow it out.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Like this,’ she said and breathed in deeply, breathing out with a sigh.

She moved her hands slowly up and down in time with her breath and gestured for me to breathe along with her. So I did. I breathed in and then out with a sigh. She encouraged me to loosen my body, to shake my arms and shoulders, to physically let go of this Storyteller’s baggage. I wanted to tell her that I didn’t actually understand anything Peter said and that the issue was probably homesickness, isolation and impatience, but our communication was limited, and the breathing exercises were actually making me feel better.

‘Do you know Peter?’ I asked again.

‘Don’t worry, dear.’ She placed her hand on my cheek again. ‘It’s okay. You’re a big girl now.’

‘Okay.’ I laughed.

I wiped away my tears and sat up. She put her arms around me, and I leaned into her. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d received an embrace like that, cocooned in another person, without feeling the need to make the gesture reciprocal. Then she waited until I slowly got up and washed my face, and we walked together to the Process Centre, where I returned to my booth.

By the next morning, the old lady had returned to her ritual of not making eye contact, but nonetheless, we would both smile warmly at the floor when she came in.

The infusion of love she had given me that night made the rest of my stay more bearable. Every time I got bored or fed up, I would sit for a few moments and take some deep breaths, and I would say to myself, 'You're a big girl now', and I would feel better.

\*

On day seven, my period started. I approached Shiba.

'Hallo.'

'Hi, Anisa.'

'I started my period, and I don't have any supplies.'

'Hmm. Ask me in German.'

'I still can't speak it. You know that.'

'Just . . . make it up.'

'Okay. Uh, ich habe meine tage, hast du eine binde für mich?'

'Yup, we do. I'll get you a pack now. You need to be in your booth in five minutes, by the way.'

'Was that right?'

She responded with her characteristic glint and walked off. I returned to my booth and put the headphones on. As Peter's words streamed into my ears, I realized I could understand everything he said. He was talking, basically, about himself, going over every day of his life in minute detail. Every day that he remembered, that is. He had reached his thirties by the time I understood that I was understanding.

'So where was I?' Peter said. 'Oh yes, springtime. March. I was still working in the architecture firm then. Nothing significant happened that month, not that I can remember. Oh, on the sixteenth, it was my brother Leon's birthday. If I was thirty, he must have just turned . . . let's see . . . twenty-eight. Leon always wanted to be an engineer. When we were children, we constructed buildings from toy blocks. I was more interested in the design side and he . . .'

He continued in this way, and by the end of his story I knew all about his brother Leon. Then, nearly an hour later, he tried to recover the thread of his narrative, 'Oh, where was I? Yes, March, oh, Easter of course. That Easter, we probably celebrated with my aunt . . .'

In the break, I rushed to find Shiba. It was pouring outside so we spoke in my room. A relentless rain slapped against the sides of the building as I told her what had happened.

‘I can understand!’

‘I know. Congratulations.’

‘Like, literally every word.’

‘It’s amazing, isn’t it?’

‘How?’

Shiba’s eyes shone. ‘Almost like osmosis. Almost like a miracle. It just . . . works.’

‘My god. This is just unbelievable. Shiba, you should be shouting about this from the rooftops.’

‘One day, we will,’ Shiba said. ‘But right now, it doesn’t feel like the world is ready. But seriously, Anisa. What we’re doing here, it’s revolutionary.’

‘It’s truly unbelievable.’

She beamed at me, glad, I think, that I’d seen and valued her work.

‘Tell me more,’ I said. ‘How does it work?’

‘Oh, we find it’s best that the Learners not concern themselves with the specifics of the procedure. But it feels good, doesn’t it?’

‘It’s like a switch flipping, like a little Google Translate in my head. I mean, I don’t think I even need to continue. I feel completely fluent already.’

‘You do need to finish, so that the change is fully integrated. Otherwise, the language could seep out again.’

And so I went back to the language booth and continued listening to Peter’s monologue. To be honest, it wasn’t that much less boring now than before I could understand. Peter went on and on about the banal details of his life, and once I got over the initial excitement, I mostly absorbed his words in a semi-daydream, usually only half listening to him while planning what I would do with my newfound skill.

Then I heard something that jolted me back to his story. He was recounting a visit from his father sometime in April.

‘While we were drinking coffee, I realized Papa’s eyes were watery, and he was not speaking much. I remembered then that it was Mama’s death anniversary. As he sipped from his cup, I realized it was part of a set he had



bought her from Amsterdam, with tiny windmills painted on it. It must have reminded him of her. I could see that he missed her, and I wished that she were there to see how much he had loved her. They hadn't always had the best relationship. He had been unfaithful to her when I was little. I don't remember much about this time except that they fought a lot. And Mama would throw things. Plates and saucers and perfume bottles. I remember once, while they were arguing, a teacup from that same set fell to the ground and broke. Mama picked up a piece of that cup and dug it into her skin – so hard that she drew blood. It was a very scary moment for me.'

I felt a sinking dread. I had seen this teacup in my dreams. Blue porcelain poking into white skin and drawing red blood. How had this man just recounted back to me one of my own dreams? Was he reading my mind or was I reading his? Or, my god, I thought, what if I wasn't actually understanding anything he said and was instead inventing these stories myself? In a panic, I found Shiba and told her what had happened. She laughed.

'Come on, Anisa. I can think of a million explanations for that off the top of my head.'

'Like what?'

'Well, maybe you're misremembering the dream. Or here's a likely one: he's probably told that story before. Or maybe, well, I don't know, sometimes we can be telepathic like that in our dream lives.'

'It feels like he's inside my head.'

'Yes. That's the whole point.'

'No. You don't understand. My dreams have become so *weird*, Shiba. And that dream I had, it was one of his memories. I'm sure of it. In fact, now that I think about it, a lot of the dreams I've been having lately could be his.'

'I don't understand. How is any of this strange? I dream of the films I watch or the books I read all the time. What else would you expect, listening to his life story all day long, with such little external stimulation? Of course you'll dream of him.'

'Before I could even understand him?'

'You could understand him before you knew you could understand him. Honestly, I'm surprised you're so upset. If you do have access to his

memories in your dreams, doesn't that make the process all the more amazing?'

'I don't know. It's not just that. I feel different too. In my body. I don't know how to explain it. I feel . . . I don't know, fitter, but also, heavier? I assumed it was just the diet, you know? The lifestyle change or whatever. But it's just so strange.'

'It can feel like that in the beginning. It's all perfectly normal. Just be easy on yourself. You'll see. It's all a part of the process.'

'It's just so weird. I feel like, hmm, you know what might be part of the problem? Just discovering that something like this exists. I mean, learning a language is *supposed* to be hard, right? It doesn't seem right that this can happen so easily.'

'We get used to expecting good things to happen only after pain. It doesn't have to be that way.'

'No. I guess not.'

'Sometimes the body struggles to accept a gift. It becomes so used to the striving that it doesn't know what to do when the wish is fulfilled.'

'I still can't believe it. Just like that, click, overnight.'

She smiled. 'Believe it.'

I went back to my booth, and over the next few days, I tried listening to Peter's words with greater serenity. And gradually, my concerns dissipated, replaced by a growing wonder and gratitude for the transformation.

On my last morning at the Centre, I was sitting in my usual spot for meditation, on a cushion near the front of the room, facing an old oak tree in the courtyard. Shiba would often lean against that oak tree and read while the Learners were occupied. Anyway, there I was, being mindful of my breath, gazing at the oak, when I found myself vividly imagining climbing up its trunk and swinging from its branches. It was strange because, growing up in Karachi, I'd never climbed a tree, never even felt, as far as I could remember, a desire to. But the sensation felt firmly situated in personal experience, in the memory of rough bark against my palms, the contracting of my muscles and the flexing of my toes around a sturdy foothold. I found myself wondering, that person who was imagining swinging from the tree, was that me, or was it Peter? After the session ended, I went over to the oak and ran my hand across its bark, feeling a familiarity that was both mine and Peter's and maybe . . . the tree's? I don't

know. It was disquieting, but also exciting, to be relating to things in a new way.

Later that day, Shiba and I decided to spend our last break together. She brought a flask of tea and a picnic blanket, which we stretched out below the willow. There was a harsh chill in the air, but the sun was out and its light brought out the curve of Shiba's cheekbones as she poured. I glanced away. Shiba's was the kind of beauty that made me understand why men carried photos of their sweethearts to war, the kind that I felt could ease even the idea of sacrificing one's own life. I suspected she incited this kind of devotion in many and that it had probably been both a source of power and pain for her. I felt irritated with myself when I looked at her this way or thought such things; it felt like a kind of masculine gaze, one that sought to possess. Maybe the best thing to do when you encounter that kind of beauty is not to bring it to the beautiful thing itself, a move that can be invasive, acquisitive and confusing, but instead to turn it upwards and simply praise God.

'Tell me, then,' she asked while I offered up my silent praise. 'Why were you so keen to learn German?'

'Well, firstly, curiosity. Adam's story just sounded so bizarre. But also, Shiba, I want to be a *real* translator,' I said. 'You know, like, a great one.'

'What's the sign of a great translator?'

'Someone who translates great works of literature.'

'It's funny. When you talk about your subtitling work, your whole being lightens, but just now, when you mentioned 'great literature', your expression went all stern.'

'Stern can be good, right? It's important to demand more of yourself.'

'I don't know about that.'

'I mean, like, it's good to have dreams.'

'Maybe. As long as you also know that you're perfect as you are.'

'Yeah, yeah, I know. Everyone is perfect as they are. But they could also be more perfect, you know?'

Shiba laughed. Then she reached her hand towards me and tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

You know when you sometimes read about people swooning in old Victorian novels? Well, the idea always baffled me. But truly, in that moment, I felt like I understood. Not that I swooned exactly, at least, not

physically. I kept my eyes firmly placed on a small daisy in front of me, overriding my pupils' impulse to turn upwards as I fielded a rush of light-headedness. When I finally glanced over at Shiba, she, too, was looking at the ground and had turned a bit red. Neither of us said anything for what felt like twenty years. Then she spoke.

'It's been nice to have you here. It's rare that I meet people I feel close to.'

'Same here,' I said, relieved to hear an echo of my own feelings.

'It's difficult, you know. Being "the boss". People treat you differently. The staff, I mean. And as for the Learners, well, most of them treat me as if I'm purely functional. Barely human. You forget sometimes that deep connection is even possible.'

'It can be like that outside too,' I said. The Centre had, by then, become a strange, self-contained entity to me, and I'd divided the world into 'inside' and 'outside'. 'Meaningful connection is hard wherever you are. I hope we keep in touch. We should definitely keep in touch.'

'Yes,' she said, with a hesitation that gave my heart a pang. 'We can do that.'

I wanted to probe further. Had Shiba always felt this sense of deep connection being impossible? Was there anyone she was close to? And what was it that had brought her here, to the Centre, in the first place? But my questions felt potentially invasive, and I could tell that there was something incredibly delicate about Shiba, that she might flit away at any hint of presumption, so I didn't ask.

Shiba sighed. 'Shall I tell you a quote I like? "To love without wanting to devour must surely be anorexic".'

'Ah,' I said, attempting a thoughtful nod. Then, after a pause, I asked, 'What does it mean though?'

She shrugged. 'I'm not sure, but it kind of scares me, that quote. But I also like it. It moves me somehow . . .' I nodded again. She smiled. 'I'll miss you, Anisa.'

I wanted to reply, 'I can just stay if you want.' But this ridiculous impulse was probably just a reaction to my perceiving a kind of finality in her farewell. So I just responded that I would miss her too, and we packed up our picnic and hugged goodbye.

To love without wanting to devour must surely be anorexic.

What *did* it mean? Maybe it was a message to back off. I hoped not. It was hard to tell where I stood with Shiba. We'd exchanged numbers, but only because I had asked. And although she'd said that lovely thing about feeling close to me, she had also insisted on keeping her distance. And so, while I was hopeful that we would get to know each other better, I didn't push it.

The last thing I would want to do, after all, was devour her.

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## Chapter Five

It was a relief to be back in my cosy flat after my time at the Centre, especially since the weather turned frosty soon after my return. I decided to hibernate for a while before putting my new-found language skills to use, fishing out my fleece-lined tops and leggings from the wardrobe and filling up my hot water bottle most evenings. During the day, I made soups and daal and did my subtitling work, which had accumulated in my absence, and in the evenings, I nestled hot chocolates and teas while reading Ocean Vuong one week, Virginia Woolf the next. I ordered Ocado and streamed TV shows in bed, wore thick woollen socks and went out infrequently. I don't think I'll ever get used to the weather in this country, will ever understand how people, with staunch determination, put on their coats and scarves and boots to go for long walks on frigid winter evenings, with no destination in mind.

Adam had been taking care of Billee while I was away, and he came over the weekend of my return to drop him off. I had told him that we would share the cat, six months each, but I'd asked to go first, resting on the gamble that he'd just let me keep him at the end of that time.

When I first opened the door to Adam, we reached in for a hug and our bodies, used to touching in a certain way, drew in close the way lovers do, stomach to stomach. Then we pulled away, holding ourselves back. There was some initial awkwardness like that – inconsistent eye contact and self-conscious fumbling over the kettle, but we soon regained our composure and spoke as friends would. I'd made us a potato salad, adding, via a burst of inspiration, mustard, vinegar and bone broth. It turned out great. Adam spooned some into bowls for us and told me it was probably for the best that Billee was with me as he had a trip to Japan planned. This made me inwardly rejoice, as I took it as a sign that he'd be too busy to keep Billee

after all. We took our salads and coffees over to the sofa, and I told him about my miraculous absorption at the Centre.

‘Isn’t it the weirdest thing?’ he said. ‘Especially that moment when it first clicks into place.’

‘Just like, overnight,’ I said. ‘How the fuck?’

He raised his hands in bafflement.

‘I know! Since when, by the way,’ he continued, pointing to my mug, ‘do you drink your coffee black?’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ I shrugged. ‘Just prefer it that way now. By the way, did you find that your dreams were different when you got back?’

I was still having dreams that felt like they belonged to Peter.

‘Oh yeah, that happens,’ he said. ‘Honestly, you notice those kinds of things more at the beginning. After going a couple of times, you don’t even remember whose story is whose any more.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. Although sometimes – oh, this can be a mindfuck – sometimes, it’s like, two of them mix in your head, and it’s as if you’re holding a party in your brain for people who’ve never met in real life *and* who’ve never met you either.’

‘Shit.’

‘The whole process is crazy if you think about it—’

‘You shouldn’t say that.’

‘Huh?’

‘That word.’

‘What word?’

‘Crazy. Say, like, “absurd” or “terrific” or something. “Crazy” is offensive to those with mental health—’

‘Anisa.’

‘What?’

His look became steely.

‘The things you’re preoccupied with. You think they’re deep, but it’s really the opposite. You make people your enemy for no reason.’

He got up off the sofa and flicked at the ivy trailing down my bookshelf. I knew he was thinking about the qualms I’d sometimes raised regarding his masculinity or whiteness. It felt like Adam had forged a case against me in our time apart.

‘Sorry,’ I said.

‘No . . . no. You know what, you’re right. Forget it. I was trying to say that it’s . . . very cool, isn’t it? What do you think you’ll do now? With the language, I mean.’

‘Well, so far, I’ve just been chilling. I don’t think it’s sunk in yet. But I guess I’ll start reading some German novels, watching films? And then, scope out translation opportunities.’

‘I’m sure you’ll be great,’ he said. ‘You’ll be very . . . strategic.’

I felt like he’d said the word with some bitterness – ‘strategic’ – and I wondered if he thought I’d been strategic in dating and then disposing of him when it suited me. It wasn’t true, of course. If I were strategic in the least, my life certainly wouldn’t look the way it did. In fact, if anything, Adam had been the strategic one. His last girlfriend had been a Brazilian lawyer and, before that, he’d been going out with a Sri Lankan academic. The man clearly had a type. But whatever. I let it go.

‘So, when you were at the Centre, did you come across someone called Shiba?’ I asked.

Billee meowed an order for petting, so I shifted from the sofa to the floor to oblige.

‘Oh yeah, I remember her vaguely. She’s one of the managers, right?’

‘Yeah. She was my supervisor.’

‘She’s fit.’

I laughed, ‘Yeah.’

‘Did you two become friends?’

‘I think so.’

Billee, who’d been blissfully purring while I rubbed his belly, shifted without warning into a murderous lunge for my hand.

‘He’s excited to see you,’ Adam said.

‘I’m glad. I was worried he’d forget me.’

Adam scooted off the sofa and sat next to me on the floor, cross-legged. He rolled a little ball around. Billee leaped enthusiastically.

‘He’d never forget you.’

I felt an urge then to lean into Adam, to have him hold me like he used to. I sensed the urge float its way over to him, felt him catch it midair the way only he could, but we refrained. There was no point, he’d said to me again and again, if I wasn’t going to commit. I thought this was, I don’t



know, somewhat cowardly, that we needed to let our feelings emerge naturally and follow them, do their bidding, not the other way round. Ultimatums . . . well, ultimatums are an insult to the heart. In Adam's mind, intimacy could only come from deep commitment, but in mine, it was the other way round. Commitment could only come from deep intimacy. Maybe this was the fundamental problem between us. But I don't know. Maybe I would have felt the same in his shoes. And so, we allowed the urge to pass, and it did, but not before leaving a certain softness between us in its wake.

'Seriously, Adam. Thank you so much for telling me about that place.'

'It's a big deal, you know, that I used up my referral on you.'

'I will be forever grateful.'

'Save yours for someone special, okay?'

'I will.'

He said this in a sweet way, not implying that he had wasted his referral on me but that he had indeed used it rightly. That familiar earnestness touched me. When we first broke up, I would long for Adam incessantly. Well, incessantly until he arrived. Then, more recently, things had flipped, and I would cringe when I thought of him, wondering why we'd ever dated in the first place. But in that moment, I could see both: why I had dated him *and* why we broke up. A necessary step, I thought, towards real closure.

Then Adam left, and Billee made himself at home straight away. I put the hot water bottle away, and he snuggled next to me while I pored over *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. A million times better in the original German.

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Over the next few weeks, my amazement at my miraculously acquired fluency settled into acceptance, and I decided it was time to put my skills to use. I was already connected to a bunch of linguists through mailing lists, social media, work and conferences, so it wasn't difficult to plug into the German translating scene. I dug deep into the online literary forums and looked up obscure German novels at the Goethe-Institut and British Library. I followed specialists in the field on Twitter. I emailed writers and joined reading groups. At all times, I kept my antennae up. Then I found it. A slim

volume, 150 pages, written by a forty-five-year-old poet based in Berlin. It was called *The Quiet of the Songbird*.

In the novel, the protagonist, shortly after being rejected by his lover, retreats into the forest and turns into a bird. Here, the other birds teach him their language. Bird language was a complex dialect, meticulously worked over by the writer. It was a tongue both make-believe and completely decipherable (to the German speaker), incredibly vast in scope, with words for sounds and objects, colours and entities so subtle that we humans hadn't bothered to put names to them. Also, the language used only the present tense, but in a way that enhanced rather than diminished communication. The man, by living among the birds and learning their language, discovers an entirely new way of being. Eventually, when he's returned to his human form, he finds that his personality has completely changed. The new language has rendered him more fully in the moment yet with an instinctive drive on how best to meet his primary needs. His ex-lover sees the change and begs for him back, but the man has had a burst of clarity about the previously skewed nature of his desire for her and walks away.

The novel hadn't made a massive splash in Germany, but those who liked it loved it, and when I read it, I knew two things straight away: that it would, in fact, resonate deeply with English readers and that I was the perfect person to translate it. The strangeness of the novel and the wildness of its premise excited me, and the invented bird language was so expansive that it allowed for a flexibility in translation in which, while staying loyal to the text, I could nonetheless bring out what I felt were the language's strengths through subtle emphases and rearrangements. I couldn't wait to get started, and for the next several months was deeply immersed in the world of this novel. I began when the first daffodils of spring were starting to raise their yellow ears and by the time the leaves on the tree outside my window turned auburn, I was ready to send it out to agents. Immediately, there was interest, and then, after a much longer process than I'd imagined, the book was signed up by a prestigious publishing house. Then, after several back-and-forths of editing and proofing, *Songbird* was finally published. It was met with rave reviews.

Now, not many people pay attention to the translator's name on a book's cover, even when it does well. Almost all the reviews and opinion pieces featured only the writer and publisher. But nonetheless, once the book was

out there, a steady stream of emails started trickling into my inbox. Publishers wrote to ask whether I had any other translations, and writers and fellow translators inquired about my interest in collaboration. I shared some of my Urdu short story translations with the publishers then – most of which had been hiding in my drawer unseen or else been instantly rejected. But now these projects, too, were swiftly accepted, published and celebrated. More and more, people started paying attention to me, wanting to chat, inviting me to events and discussions. I found myself on the other side of the same kinds of panels that I used to attend so assiduously in the past, speaking about obscure, complex shit like the intricacies of translating bird language or the imperialist undertones behind the industry's disregard for Urdu literature. And they listened, when I spoke, with wide eyes and sympathetic nods. My thoughts were suddenly 'compelling' and 'urgent', and afterwards, people would come up to me and give me compliments and ask me questions and sometimes even have me sign books.

There were times when I enjoyed this. I'd see someone look at me with admiration and I would be seduced by this gaze and by the object of it, which was me but also not me. Plus, my parents were proud, giving copies of *Songbird* to all their friends. And doors opened more easily for job stuff. Also, frankly, it felt nice to have people being so nice to me. Being respected felt nice. Being taken seriously felt nice. I felt that people were listening to me the way they listened to men, carefully, attentively, as if something of great value might drop out of my mouth at any moment.

Other times, however, this attention made me feel like the world was a shallow, fickle place, without depth or substance, hollow, vacuous, matlabi and cruel. It was as if, overnight, my words mattered, even when they were, frankly, somewhat mundane or being uttered by a million others who were patronized or outright ignored. The same people who I'd previously been invisible to were now looking at me with something like awe. And not just awe, not always awe. I sometimes detected a kind of presumed beneficence in their gaze that reminded me of photographs of white missionaries in India. So proud were they of having a brown woman on their stage, of humbling themselves by taking her seriously. And other times, I saw a variation of that beneficence, something more like penitence, like they wanted me to tell them what was wrong with them. As if, by having me up there, they were somehow atoning for their sins.

‘Classic BDSM,’ Naima said when I shared these thoughts with her. ‘They want you to tell them what bad boys they’ve been.’

‘Naima.’

‘I’m serious. Did you see their faces when you said that thing about translation as colonialism? They were practically salivating. You’re basically a dominatrix now.’

She was kidding, of course. It wasn’t really like that but still, sometimes, when I was on those panels, it felt like there was this kind of shimmering mesh between the audience and me that was obscuring their vision, rendering me one thing to one person and another to the next. And I would watch my fellow panellists, so smug and self-serving in their leather chairs, so convinced of their superiority, so confident in opinions that were often devoid of any real insight and depth, and so devoted to being, essentially, PR machines for themselves. Then I started to notice the number of books and TV shows that centred the media industry – propaganda, I decided. Since they controlled the stories we consumed, they chose to focus on glamorizing their own industry, these so-called ‘tastemakers’. I became highly sceptical about it all. But, at the same time, convinced of the superiority of this opinion that I held.

From time to time, I would think to myself, Peter would have liked this. I felt him there with me sometimes, when I was on my way to a meeting or onstage. I would remember his difficult schooldays, his fraught relationship with his dad, and my chest would swell with a kind of redemption on his behalf. I’d even sometimes feel him when I was by myself, cooking or reading a book. And when the book was in German, I often found that I read in his voice. You know how they say every significant relationship leaves a mark on you? Well, I was surprised to find that even this relationship, with someone I hadn’t technically met, had radically influenced me. Even behaviourally. Random things like becoming more punctual, better at asking for what I wanted and expecting that those demands be met. I would only speak for a fee. I would ask for transport and accommodation to be paid. I would negotiate my salary. I mean, who knows, maybe this new behaviour was actually a reflection of a rise in self-esteem due to *Songbird*’s success. It’s hard to tell. But basically, I was of two minds, both pleased with my new-found success and utterly disillusioned. And the unbridled joy I imagined feeling at becoming a Great

Translator, well, that never really came. It made me wonder whether I was simply an insatiable pit, never to be satisfied.

Naima, though, was by my side throughout. She came to all my events, applauded the loudest and often took me out to celebrate afterwards. And I was proud of her too. Her work was going well. She'd started holding larger retreats in a yoga studio in Bristol once a month and had a proper staff now – an assistant who did the admin and a musician/shaman woman who helped her hold space. I still attended her ceremonies occasionally and would always emerge feeling closer to myself, at least for a bit.

Then she met someone. Azeem.

They'd got talking in the comments section on Facebook for an event about psychedelics and racism.

'Anisa, I can't believe someone like him actually exists. Good-looking, tall, Muslim, woke, like truly woke, you know? It's as if I manifested him.'

I mean, I had to admit he sounded great. And I wanted to reflect back to her the love and support that she had shown me. And on the surface, I did. But as Naima retreated into coupledness, I felt her moving away from me. We no longer spoke on the phone every day nor met as frequently. Then, within a few months, she started talking about moving away from London.

'You know it's always been a dream of mine. A cottage with a garden, somewhere less city-ish.'

'Isn't everywhere outside of London racist?'

'Not everywhere. Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'll have Azeem.'

I know that it may sound narcissistic to make my best friend's new relationship about me, but it was only when I heard that Naima was thinking of moving that I realized I'd had a companion all this while in what I'd seen as my well of loneliness. And now she was distracted by this man she claimed to have manifested. And I was like, what about me? Why didn't you feel like you'd manifested me when we met? We form these elaborate fantasies of romantic partnerships, Romeos and Majnus who we'll spend our days and nights with in a passion of rose petals and fireworks, while discounting our non-romantic relationships (if such distinctions can even be made), often more enduring and authentic. We discard them as soon as some man comes along, flashing his teeth and brandishing his penis. But it's always the friends in the end, isn't it, who remain to pick up the pieces when the men have gone, leaving destruction in their wake? Still, only the

romantic partner is taken seriously. Friends and family will not gather, ever, to celebrate my partnership with Naima – there will be no anniversaries or acknowledgements, no congratulatory cards, no celebratory ceremonies. And yet, it is this slow-burning love of female friendship that actually keeps the world turning. Truth is, I felt pushed out by this ‘Azeem’ guy, who, to be honest, didn’t even seem that amazing once I’d met him. I mean, at least not compared to my phenomenal friend. He was good-looking, it’s true. Six foot two, with a nice beard. And he wore trendy trainers with exactly the right cut of jeans, cool T-shirts and well-fitting jumpers. And according to Naima, he was house-trained, meaning he could cook and clean and was generally considerate. But all these traits – style, hygiene, the ability to care for oneself and one’s home – are, in a man, considered exceptional, almost miraculous, whereas in women, they are the bare minimum. I wasn’t impressed.

Azeem worked for a start-up and was five years younger than Naima.

‘The younger generation,’ she said. ‘They’re so much better than men our age.’

‘I don’t think five years counts as another generation.’

‘Well, it should. Younger men, Anisa, they’re so much better. I’m tired of these mama’s boys who can’t even fry an egg. Azeem is different. He even knows how to make that chocolate cake with the melty thing in the middle.’

So yeah, he seemed nice enough. But he wasn’t very smart, I have to say. His contributions to our conversations never really went beyond the banal. Azeem didn’t think about life the way Naima and I did, not about the *underside* of life. He only talked about food and cars and trendy new bars. He was into techy things like drones and fancy gadgets and was teaching himself how to make cocktails with dubious-sounding names. But Naima didn’t seem to mind the lack of depth.

‘Intellectuals,’ she would say, ‘are all head, no heart. And they’re so competitive. And they’re mansplainers. I like it better with Azeem. We both contribute different things to the relationship. And whatever, I have my friends for intellectual conversation.’

When Naima spoke of something she was passionate about, a film they’d just seen, for instance, and Azeem contributed something inane or problematic, something she would have cringed at had it come from someone else, I watched her ignore, indulge and overlook his stupidity. And

when he proved himself not to be the ‘conscious man’ she’d described, making a joke about women belonging in the kitchen or saying, in all seriousness, phrases like ‘civilized nations versus third-world countries’, she would, it’s true, occasionally challenge him, but nine times out of ten she’d just make excuses.

‘It’s because of our privilege that we’re clued in, Anisa. It’s learned behaviour. To be judgemental about such things in others . . . well, I think that can be classist.’

Sometimes I felt like Naima would just make up theories to support her vision of Azeem as perfect. If he wasn’t intelligent, it meant he was unpretentious and down to earth; if he didn’t make money, it signified that he wasn’t a slave to capitalism; if he was younger, he was of a more enlightened age. Naima hadn’t ‘manifested’ Azeem, she’d manufactured him. She’d created an image in her head and found someone to project it on, someone who, a bit of a blank, a bit of a people-pleaser, happily accommodated her fantasies. It was annoying, and it made me worry about all that he could get away with. I don’t mean anything really bad, just a general letting down, a taking up of space that a more worthy partner could fill. I don’t know. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was just jealous. Or sad about losing my friend. Or maybe this was just what relationships looked like and I was alone because I didn’t know how to compromise. I would never find love.

I tried to contain myself, out of fear that this was my anti-maleness or my self-sabotaging thinking taking over. But although I can’t be sure where my feelings were coming from, there is one thing I’m certain of: there was a roaring fire in Naima that slowly started to peter out once she got together with Azeem. She started caring less about her work. She talked mostly about him and his interests and spent much of her time trying to support him, help him with his interpersonal dramas and push forward his fledgling career. He became the focus of her life in such an alarming way that it made me wonder whether it pointed to some insecurities within her. I don’t know. It could be that any brilliant woman who settles down with a less brilliant man dulls herself to compensate and console. Maybe my friend, so kind and thoughtful, was putting out her fire so her man would not feel inadequate. Or it could be that so much of her emotional labour was being diverted in his direction that there was just less left for herself.

A part of me feels bad even saying these things. I worry whether, in doing so, I'm falling into the trap of blaming women for their own oppression. But it's just, I felt like I saw complicity, like I saw wilful blindness. And I felt, if I'm honest, like Naima was compromising her feminist ideals by being with this guy, and it was making me lose respect for her. It was painful and confusing, especially in the wake of discovering that my Great Translator dream hadn't come with the fulfilment and contentment that I'd imagined. But I felt all the more grateful, given these circumstances, that Shiba was still in my life.

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I had texted Shiba shortly after my return from the Centre. First, I'd waited three days, playing it cool, and then, on the day Adam dropped Billee off, I'd sent a message.

I know I was dying to get back home by the end, but I have to say, all I can think about right now are those yummy samosas. How've you been?

To my relief, she responded straight away, with a gif of a dancing samosa.

Not the same without you, but all well. Samosas juicy as ever. What you up to?

We continued texting this way, back and forth. At first, I'd labour over my responses, trying to make them sound witty and charming, but we soon settled into a more casual, free-flowing rhythm, exchanging messages sporadically at the beginning, then several times a day. I screenshotted her a passage from *To the Lighthouse* that I thought she'd like, and she recommended an obscure and wonderful podcast about the psyche of an octopus. Then we both started watching the same series on Netflix, deconstructing every episode together. Soon, we were exchanging voice notes as well, long rambles about this and that, just riffing off each other, going deeper and deeper into random tangents. Sometimes we'd trade voice notes so frequently that it felt like we'd been chatting all day long. It was the kind of nourishing and collaborative discourse that opens up new ways of seeing, and I felt lucky to have her in my life.



A few months later, around the time I started working on *Songbird*, we arranged a Skype call and ended up speaking for nearly three hours. I introduced her to Billee and made a sandwich while we spoke, while she sipped from a mug of coffee and told me about the new cohort of Learners she was hosting. After that, we spoke on the phone nearly every night, and Shiba finally started sharing details about her personal life. I learned that she lived at the Centre full-time, in a studio flat in the staff quarters.

‘Did I mention my dad owns the place?’

‘I don’t think so,’ I replied casually. She totally knew she hadn’t mentioned this before, but the tentativeness with which she shared made me feel that if I showed any excitement at being initiated into this new level of confidence, she might flee.

‘He’s one of the founders.’

‘Oh, so that’s how you got the gig,’ I teased. ‘That makes me feel better about myself. Less inadequate.’

‘You feel inadequate?’

‘Of course! Here I am, working out of my living room, and you’re single-handedly running a whole five-star, secret service, *Men in Black* operation out of a mansion in Sussex.’

She laughed. ‘You should never feel inadequate. I told you, remember? Perfect as you are.’

‘Like I said, more perfection’s never a bad thing.’

Shiba shared that her father, who was based in Delhi, had founded the company many years ago with three friends from university. Her emotional investment in the Centre made more sense to me after learning about this personal connection. I was hungry for more details but knew that she’d share at her own pace. And I didn’t really mind Shiba’s reservedness. I saw it as part of her deep sensitivity, which I was captivated by. Shiba had a gentle, profound way of moving in the world, and through her gaze, everything became a kind of metaphor. For instance, once, while we were Skyping, I admired the thriving plants behind her, and she told me that every month, she’d pour her menstrual cups into a jug of water, and then at the end of the week, she would water her plants with that mixture.

‘It’s the stem cells. That’s why these babies are so lush, you see. In fact,’ she continued, ‘they say if you feed your stem cells to the fruit and veg

you're growing, the food will actually change composition, tailoring its nutrients especially for you. Isn't that amazing?'

I didn't know if this was true. I didn't look into it. And, honestly, even if it were real, there probably wouldn't have been many studies – such matters were not important, after all, in the masculine world of science. I do know, however, that menstrual blood is an important material in stem cell research. But the point is, everything Shiba said to me was true in some sense beyond numbers and charts and the seen universe. Shiba felt to me like a channeller of truth. And I'm not just saying this because I was a little besotted. No, it's the other way round. I was besotted because I saw the truth channelling. Shiba, you see, was a poem.

Oh my god. She was a poem? As soon as I say the words, I want to take them back. I sound like the sleazy male poets who compare their beloveds to the stars, the moon, the flame, the rosebud – men who place their women on such lofty and sacred pedestals that even normal bodily functions become an embarrassment, who, without ever asking, place beneath their women's feet whole blankets into which they've woven their fragile and all-important dreams, forcing them to forever walk on eggshells. No, I'm not this way. I'm not interested in turning people into deities, fixing them into positions from which they're unable to stray. I'm a woman myself. I'd had it all done to me. And so I hope my feelings for Shiba, even though they contained a kind of adoration, did not resemble the love with which men smother and contain women, pinning them down like butterflies on a board, with their names underneath in elegant calligraphy. We had one of those in our home in Karachi. Beautiful butterflies in a frame, wings spread, their man-made names etched underneath. I think I felt concern for those butterflies when I was younger, even though I knew they were essentially – gone. And yet, the shimmering blue of their wings is still so vivid in my mind that I can't help but acknowledge the power of that beauty preserved.

It is hard to know how to love someone well.

I told Shiba that I too would try pouring my menstrual blood into the plants on my balcony.

'You know what they say?' she said. 'They say that if all the women started giving their blood back to the land, there would be no more need for war.'

The months passed, and our relationship deepened. We even started exchanging gifts. On her birthday, I sent Shiba a truck art-inspired bag that I'd bought in Karachi. On mine, she sent me a book of essays by Audre Lorde. I loved it and told her afterwards that I'd annotated it heavily, writing my comments in the margins.

'Send it back to me,' she said. 'And then I'll reread it and write in my comments and post it to you.'

And so I did, and we found ourselves conversing within the pages of the book. It was a beautiful experience. And I think there was something about this exchange that moved our relationship from the virtual back to the physical and finally led to our deciding to meet in person. It had been over two years since my time at the Centre. But finally, about six months after *Songbird* came out and a handful since Naima and Azeem got together, we decided it was time. Brighton, we thought, would be a good spot. Two weeks later, we met there, just by the station.

I wore my favourite turquoise tank top with fitted stripey trousers, and Shiba had on a moss-green velvet dress, her hair in a fishtail braid. Just below her collarbones, hanging from a silver chain around her neck, was a single peacock feather.

'That's beautiful,' I commented after we hugged hello.

'Thank you. I found it in a park near my house in Delhi last summer.'

'The necklace?'

'The feather.'

It turned out Shiba had made the necklace herself.

'It's just some beadwork at the top and metal wire. I'll make you one sometime.'

When Shiba and I had last been together, it had been as supervisor and Learner, but that dynamic had dissolved over the course of our texts and phone calls so that by the time we saw each other at the station, it felt like we were old friends. I suppose, in actual fact, we still knew little of each other. It sometimes felt, though, at least to me, as if *everything* was known between us, and always had been.

We had a coffee near the station before heading off to explore, walking along the cobbled streets of the city centre, dipping in and out of vintage shops along the way. From one, I bought a mushroom-shaped candle, and she purchased a ring with a tiny silver turtle on it. We strolled and browsed

and talked, and Shiba told me more about how the Centre had come into being.

She told me her father had met the other founders while he was studying at Oxford – David, a historian from Israel, George, an English biochemist, and Eric, an anthropologist from the States. They'd met at the university chess club. Each of them, she said, was exceptionally clever and hugely ambitious, and it didn't take long for them to become close. It was the anthropologist, apparently, who first uncovered the heart of the process, and they all developed the idea together from there. Soon after graduation, they set up a small institution, at first teaching only Hindi.

'Why Hindi?' I asked.

'They wanted to start with one language, to see if it worked. I guess Hindi was the most convenient at the time. Anyway, it was a very controlled experiment, just a handful of people. Then, slowly, they started expanding into other languages and eventually built the place I manage now.'

The founders had since moved back to their respective home cities. They continued receiving income from the Centre but were, apparently, mostly researching other areas for expansion while leaving the day-to-day operations in Shiba's hands.

'It can't be easy doing it on your own,' I said.

'I enjoy it,' she said. 'And the truth is, I feel like this is only the beginning. There's so much more we can do with this knowledge.'

'Yeah?'

'It gives me a profound sense of purpose, this work. What I'm moving towards feels . . . collective, you know? And crucial.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'I think that's what I'm searching for too. Purpose. That's why I went there in the first place.'

'You think that's why you were there,' she said. 'But you don't know for sure. Sometimes, our true purpose only becomes apparent later.'

'That's true,' I replied. 'But seriously, it's impressive that your dad gave you that much responsibility.'

She shook her head.

'He didn't give me the responsibility. I took it. They would work in total secrecy, those four. Didn't want the families involved at all. It was always him and the three uncles switching off laptops and lowering their voices

when my mum or I entered the room. Honestly, at some point I wondered if they were CIA.'

'Maybe they were.'

'Nah, but it pissed me off, these men in their man cave, working on this super-secret thing. So I started snooping. I put the pieces together that way. Figured it all out.'

'Figured what out?'

'The language school. How they were doing it. Where and when. Then I told my dad that I knew. And, well, I think he was just so impressed that he decided to let me in. And anyway, they wanted to move on with their research, so they needed someone they trusted to take over. Trust is key at the Centre, you see. That's why we employ so few staff members. They've all been there for ever. Like a family.'

'And you enjoy living there? The Centre must be your whole life, in a way.'

'It's not always easy, I can tell you that. Especially at first. At first, oof, I went through a bit of a process, trust me. But then I started feeling like I was part of something bigger, like we could really . . . change things one day. You'll see.'

We stopped to eat at an organic vegetarian restaurant called Friendly Bites. There, over chickpea and spinach stew, mushroom lasagne and bullet coffees, we continued talking about our families and our careers until the sun started to set.

'It's been strange for me,' I said. 'This success. Becoming a "real" translator practically overnight.'

'I felt so proud of you when I read *Songbird*.'

'Thanks, but . . . it's different to what I expected.'

'What did you expect?'

'I don't know. Maybe a greater sense of fulfilment? I felt it when I first realized I could speak German. And when I was doing the actual work of the translation too. But everything since has been, I don't know, deflating.'

'Maybe it's the process you enjoy. The goalpost is just an illusion, you know. Just stay in the process.'

'Like, do another translation?'

'Yeah, maybe. Or . . . learn another language?'

‘I do think about that sometimes, you know. I miss it. The Centre. I’d like to experience it again.’

‘What language would you want to learn?’

‘I’ve always wanted to be able to read Russian.’

‘Russian would be great. Oh, you know what? I have the perfect lady for you as well. You’ll love her.’

‘As supervisor?’

‘No, silly. I’ll be your supervisor.’

‘Oh, good.’

‘I meant as your Storyteller. The voice in the headphones.’

‘Oh, right. Okay, that’s great. I have to say, that German man was a bore.’

‘Sorry about that.’

‘I still have dreams that feel like his, you know. They make me anxious.’

‘Don’t worry, this time will be different. You’ll love this lady. Actually, she was working at the Centre when you last visited. Anna. You remember her? She probably cleaned your room.’

‘The old lady?’

‘Yes, that’s her. She’s wonderful.’

‘Oh, how nice. She was very loving to me once, in a moment of distress.’

‘You spoke to her?’

I thought I saw Shiba’s mouth twitch and panicked briefly that she’d be upset at me for breaking the no-contact rule.

‘Kind of,’ I said. ‘I was crying in my room, and she comforted me. It was a very brief interaction.’

‘Oh no. You were crying in your room?’

‘It’s fine. Just internet withdrawal. So, her name’s Anna? Wow. That’ll be great, to hear about her life. Do they all talk about their lives?’

‘They do.’

‘And then after, I’ll finally be able to have a conversation with her in her native tongue.’

‘Actually, she won’t be there. Anna’s ill at the moment, unfortunately.’

‘Oh no, what’s wrong?’

‘A heart thing, apparently. She’s in hospital.’

Shiba seemed upset about Anna’s illness, looking down into her coffee as she spoke.

‘Is it serious?’

‘It may be. But we’re taking good care of her. She’s very special to us. She’s been with us for ever, like I said.’

‘I hope she feels better soon,’ I said.

‘Yes.’

‘So,’ I asked, ‘are all the Storytellers staff members then?’

‘Not necessarily. They come from all over the place. But they’re all trusted people who know what we’re about. That selection process is just as exclusive as the one for Learners. We’re very cautious at both ends.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘You can tell how deeply it’s all planned out.’

‘Who knows, maybe one day we can welcome you into the fold,’ Shiba said.

‘I’d love that.’

So there I was, a few weeks later, back at the Centre, ready to acquire the Russian tongue.

## Chapter Six

When I speak in Urdu, I change. I'm not sure how exactly. Sometimes, it feels like I become more honest. More real. Other times, I wonder if I become more childlike. This may be due to the limitations of my vocabulary. Since I speak Urdu mainly-slash-only to my elders, and the Urdu novels and films that I consume tend to be very PG, maybe my Urdu has never properly . . . adulted. Like once, sitting with Naima in a cafe, I was trying to tell her about the sex stuff with Adam in Urdu so that the white people next to us wouldn't overhear. And I realized I didn't have the words. I ended up saying things like 'aana' for 'come' and, by the end, resorting to pantomime. The white people next to us, who probably wouldn't have noticed otherwise, totally figured out what we were talking about.

As for French, well, I learned French as an adult while teaching English in Paris after my master's. Something about that time, and also the way that you have to change the shape of your mouth while speaking, and maybe also the stereotypes about the language, makes me feel *more* adult when I speak it. And also, sorry, but maybe more sophisticated. Sexier? I know. I kind of hate myself too. Even my desires, I think, shift according to the tongue I adopt. Like, at a restaurant, I'd probably choose a different item depending on which language I place the order in.

English, for me, sadly, is the default. The neutral. It's the language that I generally operate in, the one I dream and think in, and the one I feel most comfortable expressing myself in. You know, I'd always assumed my mother tongue was Urdu, but maybe it is in fact English. It's a problem, to struggle with something as simple as identifying your own mother tongue.

And the German? Well. The German came so quickly and with such immediate fluency that it operated in a bubble, not really interacting or



assimilating with the other languages but instead creating its own compartment. It didn't necessarily feel like a part of me but more like a companion, standing at a distance, ready to be called upon when needed.

And so I wondered what it would be like with the Russian. Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, Gogol and Chekhov. The ones they call 'the Greats'. My god. What was it that made them so great? Could it be something in the language itself? The idea filled me with a kind of hunger as I prepared to make my second trip to the Centre.

Just like the last time, I told my contacts I would be away, dropped Billee off (at Naima's this time), and packed my bags. Then, like before, I was picked up from Tunbridge Wells and dropped off at the Centre's gleaming entrance. I left my devices at the desk and met Shiba, once again, on the other side. While the other Learners were in their language booths, we sat together in the dining room and, over tea and samosas, she handed me a wristband, this time purple, with the name ANNA embossed on it.

'How do you feel?' she asked.

'Ready,' I replied.

\*

That evening, I was back in the dining room for dinner, sitting silently at a table with three other Learners. I was to settle in for now and start my programme early the next morning.

The crowd was similar to the last time. Most were glowing and immaculately dressed, others looked like eccentric professors with their spectacles and tweed. Even the ones who stood out – a skinny white man, for instance, with hot pink streaks in his hair, ear studs, tattoos, distressed jeans and a black hoodie that had 'anarchist' spray-painted on the back – looked so pristine that it was obvious their nonconformity had been meticulously curated. Two or three faces, including the 'anarchist's', seemed familiar, maybe from TV. One man, grey-haired and chisel-jawed and in impossibly good shape, looked, I thought, like the host of a popular cooking show about travelling the world and introducing viewers to exotic cuisines. But I couldn't be sure; maybe he just had a TV-friendly face and I'd invented the rest. Another, a woman made up mainly of limbs – who, just with her aura, made me feel as if she were conferring a favour simply

by allowing me to exist within the same space – looked like someone I’d seen on a yacht in a *Daily Mail* article, beneath a headline about cellulite or ‘perfect beach body’ or something like that. I enjoyed watching my fellow Learners in this way, formulating stories about them in my head that I hoped would keep boredom at bay this time round. But I would never know if my stories were accurate; we all came and left separately and, obviously, never spoke while there. We’d even had it written into our NDAs that if we were to bump into one another outside the Centre, we were to maintain the same vow of silence. I didn’t mind though. It meant I could be as outlandish as I wanted with the stories I concocted for them.

The next day, after breakfast and meditation, I was back in my language booth. I found that my experience with Anna was completely different from the one I’d had with Peter. Even before I could understand her, I’d listen with a smile on my face, lulled by the depth of her tone, by her easy pauses and sweet chuckles. When I listened to Peter, I often found myself clenching my jaw, and the images that came to mind as he spoke were jagged and spiky, metallic and sharp. Anna, in contrast, was all softness and flow. The sound of her voice made my forehead loosen and expand, my breath deepen and my body relax. My dreams were also very different from the last time. After a day spent with Anna, I dreamed of warm buttered bread, of the seaside and of a young child, softly nestling against my breast.

It also helped that I knew what to expect now, that I wasn’t worried about ‘doing it right’. I was able to passively absorb Anna’s words, sometimes making up stories for what she was saying, sometimes thinking of other things altogether, and often in a kind of meditative state between sleep and wakefulness, without any concrete thoughts passing through my head. I think this was what the couple who’d interviewed me had meant by ‘presence’. And now that it came more easily to me, the process worked faster. By day four, the switch had flipped. I was able to understand Anna completely.

Anna spoke, through the headphones, of her childhood in Kazan. She had started working, in her late teens, for a dress shop where she would embroider intricate flowers onto clothes, hats and handbags. Her mother had been in the same trade. Anna described sitting in her mother’s lap, at the age of nine or ten, in front of the fireplace, guiding a delicate needle in and out of a soft piece of fabric held in place by a wooden hoop while her

mother, who I imagined shared her soft chuckle, told her how wonderfully she was doing. Later, Anna would teach her own daughters how to embroider, her daughters who, she said with pride, had each excelled in their lives more than she could have imagined.

At first, it sounded like Anna had half a dozen daughters, so varied were the names she used for them. Like Natalya was also frequently Natasha, as well as Natashinka when she was being praised and Natashka when criticized. Eventually, I figured out that Anna had three daughters. One had three children of her own and Anna was saving money to help her move to England. Another was a shop owner in St Petersburg and the third, a nurse, had moved to the States.

Anna's stories filled me with a warmth that I carried with me even outside the language booth. It seemed to come from my belly, and, if I breathed in long and slow, would permeate my whole being. It kindled a hazy memory that I couldn't quite trace, and I started to feel like it was a warmth I had last experienced when I had been inside the womb.

There can be something quite devastating in feeling a comfort that you can barely remember. It can make you grieve, if I'm honest, for something that you'd always felt a vague sense of loss over but never known for certain you were missing. At the same time, there is a sense of relief at having finally found it, the warmth.

I tried to explain the feeling to Shiba. She was glad to hear that I was imbibing the language more easily than the last time and especially delighted about the feelings that Anna had evoked.

'I told you she'd be good for you,' she said.

'It's bizarre. I don't have the words for it. I just feel . . . held.'

'She always had a maternal spirit, didn't she?'

'She really does,' I said. I ran my fingers across Anna's name, embossed into the purple band around my wrist, and remembered my head on her lap as I sobbed with homesickness.

'You know you've had it within you all along, don't you? This warmth that you're feeling. Anna's just helping bring it out.'

'Do you think it'll stay?' I asked. 'Even when I leave? How can I make sure I keep it?'

'It's something you'll need to feed and nourish, but there's no reason it shouldn't stay.' She paused for a moment before continuing. 'You know,

sometimes, I think that this is the real reason we're here, for these other gifts that we receive in the process. You start to find the language learning becomes almost incidental.'

\*

Things passed like this, easily and gently, for my first few days at the Centre. But then, despite the pleasure of spending time with Shiba and my gratitude for all that Anna was giving me, I felt the stirrings of a familiar cabin fever. I missed my home: my kitchen, my bed, my cat, my friends and yes, my phone. Maybe *most of all* my phone. I thought it would be easier this time round, having done it already and realized that I wouldn't die without social media for ten days, but the truth is, once again, I was itching to check my WhatsApp and read my emails.

I felt that the garden, too, had turned against me, the wind blowing me in the direction of the exit when I walked by, the bark of the trees scraping against my skin when I leaned against them, the spiky leaves extending to poke me as I passed, even a chirping swallow pooping on my elbow once as I waited for Shiba beneath the willow tree. It felt like time to go home. I was perfectly fluent now, after all, and eager to return to the world and find my next book to translate. And the new sense of groundedness that Anna provided only reaffirmed my desire to heed my gut instincts. So, on day six, I decided to ask Shiba whether I could leave early.

Lunch at the Centre took place at one o'clock every day in the dining hall, where we were served delicious and perfectly balanced three-course meals, each one individually tailored. I can't remember what they served that day; it may have been a Sri Lankan curry, with tender morsels of meat, along with red chillies, baby corn and mushrooms in a coconutty shorba. Probably with jasmine rice on the side. And cardamom chocolate mousse for dessert. Yes, I think that was it. Every meal there was like a song, each part perfectly in tune with the others. As always, we sat in silence as we ate. I had started to appreciate, by then, being able to savour my food without having to make small talk with strangers. Afterwards, Shiba, having seen that I'd logged my nani's name onto the screen, was waiting for me outside. We made our way to the speaking area, and I got straight to the point.

‘Listen, I was thinking, since I’m completely fluent now, do you think I need to stay the whole ten days?’

‘Of course you do. That’s the only way it really sinks in.’

‘I hear you, but I feel like it’s sunk in already. I’d like to go, if I can.’

‘Why, what’s wrong? Are you not happy here?’

Shiba had told me how much she’d loved having me there again, and I didn’t want her to think I didn’t feel the same.

‘No, of course not. I’m enjoying myself, especially since we’re getting to spend so much time together. But it’s challenging sometimes, you know? The rules around no phones, no laptops. I feel so . . . cut off.’

‘I understand, but it can’t be any other way. The process only works if you’re fully absorbed, and anyway, we have to be very careful, for privacy reasons. People could trace emails or access phone cameras. We just can’t take the risk.’

There it was again. Privacy, privacy, privacy. But it was only now, provoked by my irritation, my desire to go home and, potentially, some kind of push from Anna, that I found myself thinking that this insistence the Centre placed on secrecy was actually pretty extreme. Maybe it sounds odd that I wasn’t suspicious earlier, with Adam’s talk of NDAs and those doctors who spoke in riddles, but I think I’d sort of just floated along with the mystery and enchantment of it all. Perhaps my pride at being granted access into this mega-exclusive club had blurred everything else. And anyway, I’d figured exclusivity and secrecy went hand in hand. The inner mechanics, I’d imagined, were probably too sophisticated for me to understand. But it was at this point that a real curiosity crept in, and was soon to overtake me.

‘What does it matter if people take photos?’ I asked.

‘The world just isn’t ready,’ she said, adding after a pause, ‘I thought you understood.’

And with that, I became anxious that Shiba might flee at any hint of intrusion, so I didn’t probe further. Also, I think I sensed that my curiosity, which had only just begun to stir, needed to be guarded lest it be prematurely squished.

‘I get it,’ I said. ‘It’s just claustrophobic sometimes, being by yourself for so many days.’

‘I really do understand,’ she said.

‘It’s enough to drive you mad, this no-distractions thing.’

‘Listen. I have an idea. Why don’t you come to mine tonight? I can’t let you do emails or anything, but we could watch something together on my laptop. What do you think?’

‘Is that allowed?’

‘Not really, but I could sneak you in. We could watch a series on Netflix.’

‘You won’t get into trouble?’

‘We’ll be careful.’

‘Oh god. That would be amazing. Are you sure?’

‘Honestly, I’d love the company. It gets boring for me too, on my own. Let’s meet after dinner.’

Dinner that evening was, as always, mouth-wateringly good – the starter was, I think, crispy rolls filled with mince and potatoes, served with mint chutney. Then, a Moroccan-style tagine made with olives and apricots and served with couscous, followed by baklava for dessert. I ate hurriedly, excited to finally take a break from a schedule that was starting to grate badly. Afterwards, I made my way to my room and waited.

My room was in a different part of the Learners’ area this time round, smack in between the two halves of the building. The transition from old to new was more obvious on the inside, and as I lay on the bed, I gazed at the conflict between the two halves of the ceiling above me, wooden beams colliding abruptly with steel and plaster. It was quite beautiful, in a sense, but at night, the ceiling would creak and groan in a way that felt increasingly like a warning.

Finally, Shiba knocked on the door.

‘You ready?’ she asked with a cheeky smile, as if we were planning an escape from a prison cell.

‘Let’s do it.’

The courtyard was still and silent as we carefully let ourselves out of the Learners’ area and crept along the sides of the building towards the staff quarters. Shiba pulled out a large key ring from her pocket and unlocked the heavy grey door. It opened into an entryway, where an imposing mahogany staircase with ornate banisters led upstairs. To our right was another door, stainless steel, protected by a keypad.

Shiba gestured for me to follow her up the stairs, but just as we were about to ascend, she stopped and turned around.

‘Actually, I have an idea,’ she said. ‘Wait here.’

She turned towards the stainless steel door and punched in a code to open it: 9989.

I know I said that thing about my curiosity being stoked, but I truly hadn’t peered over her shoulder with any agenda in mind. It was more like a habit from childhood or maybe a personality trait. When I was young, my mother would often catch me rummaging through her make-up drawer or my father’s desk. And if she was on the phone, I always wanted to know who she was speaking to.

‘Curious cat,’ she would say, ruffling my hair, and I wore the title with pride.

My father was similarly amused and used to tell me I would make a top-notch spy. Once – I must have been about ten at the time – he came home from a trip abroad with a present for me: a spy kit. On the front of the box, there was a picture of a man in a long beige trench coat, with one enlarged eye peering out through a magnifying glass. And inside the box, I found a magnifying glass just like the one in the picture, along with a notebook and a pen filled with invisible ink that would only reveal itself if you held the page up to a flame. There was also a badge, a silver star that read ‘FBI’.

‘I think that means “for big investigators”,’ I said to Abba, and he nodded.

‘Sounds correct, Beti.’

I was obsessed with this spy kit. I started hiding behind sofas, writing down people’s conversations and secretly following the servants. I remember during one of these expeditions, I spied Muneer, our cook, digging into a jar of Nutella with a spoon. Nutella, in those days in Karachi, had to be purchased from Agha’s, the fancy shop that stocked imported goods, and it was expensive – five or six hundred rupees, a lot at the time. It was therefore out of bounds for household staff. But there he was, I saw through the crack beneath the kitchen cabinet, eating our Nutella. I told my parents, and when he was away for the day, they went into his room. I followed behind them. There, we found various items that he had stolen, including perfume bottles and Barbie dolls and, bizarrely, several pairs of my mother’s high-heeled shoes, lined up against the wall just beneath his bed. I remember thinking afterwards, maybe I’ll understand this better when I’m older. Anyway, he was fired. Now, I look back on this incident with some shame and confusion, but somehow, it is the one that pops into

my head when I remember sneakily watching Shiba punch in the code. Maybe because I felt a similar kind of self-reproach afterwards, wondering if it had been any of my business in the first place. At the time, though, I felt the euphoria of a mischievous child, proud of her excellent spying skills.

9989. I made the added James Bond gesture of a sharp swivel of the head just as Shiba turned to see if I had seen. So smart, I thought to myself then. A top-notch spy. Only to realize, not much later, how very much this wasn't a game at all.

Once, when my mother used that familiar phrase for me, I asked her, 'Are cats really curious?'

'They are,' she said. 'That's why they need nine lives, hena? Always getting into places they shouldn't.'

Shiba emerged from the padlocked door a few minutes later, grinning and holding a bottle of wine.

'Might as well, na?' she said, and I grinned back.

'Might as well.'

As we climbed the staircase, I examined the space around me, the florid carvings on the ceiling, the antique panels on the wall, the remnants of a stone fireplace. I didn't know much about English country homes – Shiba had told me this place once belonged to a duke – but I did know that there was something about this style of architecture, straight out of *Downton Abbey* or whatever, that made me feel instantly unwelcome. It surprised me how houses like this one inspired romance and aspiration for so many people. They only made me think of how, not very long ago, I would have been absolutely unwelcome in such a place. Well, unwelcome unless within a certain role. I could almost feel the ghost of the duke, questioning the intrusion. I shared this thought with Shiba, and she nodded vigorously.

'I know, right?' she whispered. 'But don't worry, it's slowly crumbling, and when it does, we're replacing it with the *new*. This will all be different one day.'

I wasn't sure, to be honest, what difference a renovation could make. The ghosts of the place would remain, surely, no matter what she did with the veneer.

'Where do you think the duke got the money to build all this?' I said.

She smirked and nodded. 'I know.'



We both saw it: the ivory and sugar, the linen and silk, the opium and rubies, the blood dripping down the walls. A chill went through me.

‘Come,’ Shiba said and led me around the corner to her studio flat.

The inside of Shiba’s home was a complete contrast to the outside. It was warm and bright, like an extension of her own self. She’d painted one wall orange and had a beautiful print of a waterfall on another, one by a famous Japanese artist. And she had plants everywhere, in hanging pots over the kitchen counter and bed, dotting tables, and weaving their way up her bookshelves. The space was very large for a studio, with enough room for her to create a nice open area between her bed and living room where she did her yoga and things – this was also where she’d Skype me from. She’d divided the space using one of those folding partition things. I could see that Shiba had really put thought into her space. She’d even painted some of the furniture herself: on her wooden wardrobe, she’d made a painting of two koi fish, revolving around each other like a yin and yang. It was amateurish, but this made it all the more beautiful.

‘This is lovely, Shiba.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, as she pulled out some wine glasses from her cabinet. ‘I try.’

After seeing her flat, I understood more clearly what Shiba had meant about redoing the duke’s property. It was so homey and warm that the possibility of reparation and recovery, of recycling and rehabilitation, became more apparent to me.

‘So, you want the whole building to look like this one day, huh?’

She smiled. ‘Not just look like. Feel like. Be like. There’s so much potential here, Anisa. Sometimes . . . I feel like we’re just not aware of our own power.’

‘I agree,’ I said.

She laughed then, a bit embarrassed, ‘I can’t wait to tell you more.’

‘I’m ready whenever you are,’ I said.

Shiba had a pot of pasta on the stove – tomato and tuna. She offered me some, but I was still full from dinner. I looked around. Her laptop lay on a table by her bed, and she had Netflix opened on the browser.

‘Have you seen *Undone*?’ she asked.

‘No, but I’ve been meaning to.’

‘Cool. Me too.’

I examined Shiba's bookshelf as she heated up some pasta for herself and poured us some wine. She had a large collection of books. Jacques Derrida and Rabindranath Tagore, Anaïs Nin and Hélène Cixous. Amrita Pritam and Novalis. I also spotted a copy of my *Songbird* translation.

'What a trip that novel was,' I remarked, running my finger along the book's spine.

'You did good,' she said, handing me my glass.

'Yeah, whatever,' I said. 'Peter did good.'

'Don't do that, Anisa,' she said. 'I have noticed this about you. You're very quick to take on blame, but the good stuff, you push away.'

'Do I?'

She pulled out *Songbird* from the shelf and showed me my name on the cover.

'You did good,' she said. Her words made me feel a bit shy. 'Accha bas, come, let's watch.'

We leaned our backs against the headboard while the laptop balanced on a stack of books in front of us. Shiba hit play. The show was trippy and darkly funny, and it sucked us in straight away. It was a relief to finally be able to put my feet up, and sitting there next to Shiba, I felt closer to her than ever. Emotionally, I mean. I tried not to be weird about the proximity of our physical bodies – refrained from commenting when I recognized the scent of her Lush leave-in hair conditioner or acting awkward when our arms touched as we refilled our glasses. After the first episode ended, we emptied what was left of the wine bottle and played the next. Then, near the end of the second episode, I noticed that Shiba had fallen asleep. My gaze moved over the curve of her lips, the incline of her nose, her thick eyebrows and long lashes, and most of all, the tranquil expression on her face, practically statuesque.

Shiba was not the first woman I had been drawn to. There had been others. In fact, when I was younger, about twelve or so, and everything was still fluid and unclear, this attraction had even turned physical with a friend or two. Some kisses and cuddles, tentative explorations. Later, I'd relegated these encounters to a kind of prepubescent experimentation, and when sparks arose subsequently with someone of my own gender, I'd enjoyed the feeling but never felt any strong urge to shift into the non-platonic. With Shiba, however, even though it scared me, the spark felt strong enough to

ignite the shift. But as I watched her now, sleeping softly, I also found myself thinking of the squishy slobbering mess my own face morphs into while I'm asleep and felt a twinge of resentment. This stab of insecurity made me wonder: Did I want to be *with* Shiba or to be *like* her? I looked away, turning my gaze back towards the screen, where the third episode had started playing.

Then, a thought popped into my head. What if I, very quickly, checked my email? Shiba would never have to know and, after all, what was the harm, really? What if something urgent had happened? Maybe I'd missed a deadline or had a job offer lingering in my inbox that would expire if I didn't accept immediately. Maybe my sister was pregnant again, or Naima had broken up with Azeem. Maybe somebody had died! Yes, the more I thought about it, the more absolutely imperative it became that I check my email. And for that matter, a quick scroll through my Twitter and Facebook and a little peek at my Insta wouldn't kill anyone either.

I minimized the Netflix window, revealing Shiba's open tabs at the top of the browser. She had several: a podcast, her own Twitter, a recipe website, random Wikipedia articles, and most importantly, her Gmail. Would the show automatically pause if I left the tab? I held my breath and clicked on the Gmail. Thankfully, the show's audio kept playing. Then I hovered over the sign-out button, but hesitated. Signing out, signing back in. Wouldn't the laptop keep evidence of that? I was sure it would, that my email address would pop up the next time she tried to log in. I imagined the look of betrayal on Shiba's face if she knew I'd done this. It was clear to me that for her to extend her trust was a rare occurrence. She'd probably withdraw her friendship entirely if she knew I'd overstepped.

While pondering the matter, my gaze wandered towards the screen – there was that curious cat again. Fairly near the top of Shiba's inbox, I spotted a name that I recognized, Natalya Volkova. That was Anna's daughter's name. The subject line read 'Mama's funeral'. I couldn't not click.

*Dear Shiba,*

*Thank you very much for taking care of the funeral arrangements in accordance with Mama's wishes. Here, we held a memorial for her*

*three days ago. It was a moving ceremony, with many stories and tears. We miss her.*

*Below, I attach a family photo that I would like you to place near Mama's remains. Also, a list of all residual costs.*

*Mama always spoke of you fondly.*

*Best wishes,*

*Natalya.*

The attached photo was of Anna and her three daughters when they were younger. Anna's hair was darker and her body slimmer, but she was unmistakably the same woman I had met, and embraced, the woman whose life I had been sharing for the past six days.

Shiba, who I'd previously considered incapable of lying, had lied to me. Or, well, lied via omission. What reason could she possibly have for hiding Anna's death?

I didn't sign Shiba out of her account, my earlier desire for emails and Insta suddenly extinguished. Instead, I switched back to the Netflix tab, clicked to make it full-screen, and hit pause. As softly as I could manage – I wasn't much of a drinker, so the wine had made me slightly clumsy – I got up from the bed, placed our glasses in the sink, and left the room. I descended the stairs and paused at the landing.

Everything felt very still. It was no longer just the ghostly duke haunting me from within the walls but Anna's ghost as well. Anna, who had been with me so intimately the last few days, was gone, and had been for god knows how long. I steadied myself, trying to let it all sink in. I looked at the locked steel door. 9989. The code for the keypad. I didn't know what I was looking for, only that there was something that I needed to know, and that you wouldn't bother with layers of locked doors unless you were hiding something. I keyed in the code, and the door beeped open.

I walked into a silent and dimly lit hallway with two doors on either side and one at the very end. I started with the door to my right, which opened into a little common room with square wooden tables, chairs and a tea area. It looked like a school staffroom. Certainly nothing worthy of a key-padded lock. The next room was a small library, filled with dry, old-looking volumes on physics, sociology, history and anthropology. They belonged, I imagined, to Shiba's father and the other founders. I pulled out one of the

books. Quantum mechanics. Tiny typeface and cool-looking diagrams, but it might as well have been written in ancient Greek for all that I understood it. I replaced it on the shelf and continued my investigation. The next door revealed a laundry room, and the one opposite it an equally boring linen cupboard. All that remained was the large pair of silver double doors at the end of the hallway.

I put my hand on the door and started to push, but something in me resisted. Suddenly, I wondered: did I even want to know? Maybe the wine was going to my head, but I thought I heard a noise, the sound of people approaching, maybe, of soft footsteps. A wave of dread passed through me. How had I found myself in this situation?

This is what happens, I thought, to curious cats.

When I was young, we once bought some newborn chicks off one of those street sellers who wind in and out between cars at traffic lights, rapping on windowpanes and showing customers their wares. This man carried a large cage filled with sweet baby chicks, their feathers dyed neon shades of purple, pink and green. The chicks were small enough to nestle perfectly in the palm of my nine-year-old hand, and he was selling them for a hundred rupees each. I picked two yellow ones. Maybe I thought, even as a child, that the non-dyed ones would be more likely to survive, although, looking back and remembering the fluorescence of their shade, I think they, too, had been artificially coloured.

Anyway, one of the chicks fell sick the first night he arrived. He cowered in the corner of his little shoebox and refused to eat. I remember nestling that delicate ball of fluff in my hands, determined to love the strength back into him. My sister said that this would make things worse, that I should leave him be. So I put him back in the box. At some point, finding the strength to move, he reached clumsily for his small water bowl and ended up tipping it over. He was drenched and started shivering uncontrollably. My mother tried to warm him with lightbulbs and hairdryers, until he was no longer wet but still shaking. At night, we covered the box with a piece of cloth and went to bed.

I remember waking up very early the next morning, possibly before dawn, to check on him. When I pulled the cover off the shoebox, I saw him, Jugnu – we had never named him officially, but his name was Jugnu – lying there, stiff and straight, his little legs stretched out like twigs. Even if

you've never seen a dead thing before, you know it when you see it. The heart recognizes it instantly, and stops.

What did I do then? I put the cover back on the box and went to sleep. Later that morning, the maid had taken care of it. She'd found the body, disposed of it, and told me the sad news. I reacted as if finding out for the first time.

\*

I awoke in my bed at the Centre the next morning with a headache, thinking of Jugnu the chick. My sleep that night had been deep but uncomfortable, the sheets drenched with perspiration. I groggily got up and made my way to the meditation room in a daze, trying to piece together the previous night. I vividly remembered reading Natalya's email but had no clear memories of making my way out of the staff quarters, through the courtyard and back into my room. I felt annoyed with myself for drinking that last glass of wine and disturbed by the haziness of my recollections.

When the gong rang to finish meditation, I opened my eyes to see Shiba through the window. She was standing by the oak tree, beckoning me to come and join her in the speaking area. I did.

'Anisa, I'm so sorry. I must have fallen asleep. You should've woken me.'

A chill wind whispered through the willow, and the sun shone bright and clear overhead. Everything is fine, I told myself.

'I found my way back easily,' I said.

'Oh . . . that's good. You okay?'

'Everything's fine. I think I'm late, though.'

'For breakfast? You've got time.'

'Oh, well. I should still go . . . let's catch up later.'

'Anisa.'

'What?'

'Are you annoyed about something?'

'No, why would I be? Look . . . I'm sorry. I'm just a bit out of it. Haven't had my coffee yet.'

'Oh, good. You just gave me this look . . .' She trailed off, confused but also relieved. 'I thought something was wrong.'

‘Nope. Everything’s fine.’

After breakfast, I went back to my booth and continued listening to Anna, but this time more attentively. I started wondering when she would get to her arrival in England, to her time at the Centre. Vague theories would form in my head and then evaporate. In the break, I sat in the palm-shaped hollow of the old tree in the courtyard, and it enveloped me protectively. From there, I surveyed the people around me. The staff members, I suddenly felt, were watching me from the corners of their eyes as they passed, flashing looks at one another afterwards. Did they know I’d been in the staff quarters the night before? That I’d read that email?

And then I let myself think the terrible thing: did they have something to do with Anna’s death? Maybe because she’d broken one of their precious rules, they’d had to get rid of her. After all, if the Centre had nothing to do with Anna’s death, why would Shiba lie about it or be paying for the funeral? The more I asked myself these questions, the more I felt the staff members’ gazes boring into me, until I worked myself into a panic, my heart beating hard and fast, the grip of the tree tightening around my body. I scrambled out and went back to my room, washed my face and tried to calm myself. When I came back out, I no longer felt quite as surveilled and thought maybe I’d just been receiving those strange glances because of my own panicked state. My head was a fog, and my disturbed sleep from the night before wasn’t helping. I went through the motions for the rest of the day while another part of me buzzed like static. And although I was able to keep the panic at bay, a nauseating question throbbed dully in the background: if they *were* somehow responsible for Anna’s death, would they kill me too, if they knew that I knew?

That night, I slept badly again. My dreams of the seaside and fresh bread continued but were interrupted and warped by other images. I dreamed of a helpless child crying out for me, but it was too dark to see who. I dreamed that Adam broke into Naima’s flat and kidnapped Billee. I dreamed that Shiba and I were running hand in hand through the Centre’s vast garden while being ferociously pursued by one of the venomous plants, which had escaped its chicken wire enclosure and grown large, drooling plant legs.

As a result of these disturbing dreams, I was in an even worse state the next day. At one point, red-eyed and blurry-headed, I was sitting on my cushion in the meditation room when I saw Shiba through the window that

faced me, leaning against the old oak tree. She was facing away from me and reading a book. I gazed abstractedly at the back of her head, trying to concentrate on my breath until, finally, my body softened. Then I blinked and suddenly saw a pair of eyes, staring at me from the back of Shiba's scalp. In the next instant, the entire back of Shiba's head had morphed into my own face. The shock almost made my heart stop, before I realized all that had happened was that the sun had gone down, turning the window into a mirror, and what I'd thought had been a blink had probably been a quick doze. The confusion of that innocuous moment made me question my state of mind. I wasn't sure what to believe any more and was grateful that the next day would be my last. At the Centre, I mean.

Before I left, Shiba and I sat down for a chat beneath one of the weeping willows. We made some small talk for a while before I said, very casually, 'I'm excited to see Anna again.'

She was silent.

I continued, 'It's been so good hearing about her life. And now, I'll be able to speak to her in her own mother tongue.'

Shiba responded after a pause, 'We don't allow interaction between Learners and Storytellers.'

'No? Why?'

She paused again before answering, 'It just . . . confuses things.'

'Well, I mean, she works here, right? So, I'll probably bump into her anyway the next time I'm here.'

'Anna doesn't work here any more, actually.'

'No?'

'Like I said in Brighton, she's been unwell. And she's quite old. She's decided to retire and . . . go back to Russia.'

This time, I was the one to pause. I paused for so long that I saw Shiba give me what I interpreted as a nervous glance.

'I hope she's happy there,' I said finally.

'Me too.'

We said our goodbyes soon after, and I was given back my phone and other belongings. A car was waiting outside to take me back to the station. As soon as I got in the vehicle, a great relief washed over me. Finally, I would be home. And I could speak Russian now. My disorienting last few days had not taken away from this gift, nor from the precious infusion of



warmth that Anna had given me. That was what really mattered. I would go home and continue with my life. Yes, I thought, as the unbearable tension in my body dissipated, the wisest thing to do would be to put the matter to bed. The email, I decided, was inconsequential. Shiba had told me in Brighton that Anna was in hospital. She had probably passed away then, and presumably Shiba had thought it too upsetting for me to know about this while listening to the tapes. That's the reason she hadn't said anything. This theory, I felt, was as good as any.

As for the part of me that insisted there was something more, well, I would let it continue its mulling. But I wasn't going to tell anybody what I saw, and I definitely wasn't going to do anything that could get Shiba into trouble. I would just put the cover back on the box, just as I had with Jugnu the chick. I would pretend I had never read that email that I could not understand, nor betrayed Shiba's trust by breaking into the locked door. And if there was a mess to be cleared up, well, someone more capable than I could do it.

And so I went home, reassured, ready to start thinking about what to translate next.

## Chapter Seven

I returned home to a barrage of emails: offers and requests, invitations and deadlines. It was the kind of inbox I'd once dreamed of having but now found cumbersome. I also sensed that this kind of work wouldn't cut it right now, that the only way to keep my curiosity at bay was to totally immerse myself in a new translation. And so I refused all invitations and told the subtitling company I was going to take a break from work. Then I asked the publisher I'd worked with on *Songbird* whether he'd be interested in a Russian translation. He responded the same day, saying that of course he would, that he didn't know I spoke Russian and what a *dark horse* I was turning out to be. I had to look up the phrase.

For someone so interested in language, I have these strange gaps in my vocabulary from, perhaps, not having grown up in England, or maybe wilful ignorance. Other British words that I don't understand: *palaver* (Is this like pulao? Like when people say, 'Stop making a khichri out of things?'), *public school* (which, I think, means private school but private school also means private school), *knobhead* (which I'd assumed came from the knob in doorknob, like the way we say *dhakkan* or *tubelight* in Pakistan, but Adam told me *knob* meant penis). Oh, also, *can't be arsed*, which I'd always heard as 'can't be asked', which makes more sense. I used it all the time until I realized it was actually arse, meaning ass, which I still don't understand and can't be asked to look up.

Anyway, there I was, diving into the Russian literary translation scene, which turned out to be easier to plug into than the German. The Russian speakers seemed kinder and more welcoming, to have more appreciation for others learning their language. Of course, doors also opened more easily because my status had risen from the work I'd done with *Songbird*. Within the month, I'd found my next book, *Work in Progress*.

*Work in Progress* is set in a future in which all books are digital, and writers are able to change their novels even after publication, in post-edits. The protagonist of the novel is a writer who can't stop tinkering with her book, even after it's published. Determined to make it the best novel ever written, she constantly amends characters, settings, time and plot lines. She becomes so obsessed with this tinkering that her readers find, even while they're in the middle of reading the book, words moving around in front of their very eyes. Soon, all this writer does is amend her novel, barely leaving her house. Sometimes she falls into despair, feeling like she's making it worse, and other times she's euphoric, convinced she's recreating Michelangelo's David. People become so fascinated with her obsessive editing that the text is turned into a museum exhibit, the pages projected onto the walls of a famous gallery, where visitors watch the words move around, day and night. Whole new characters enter the novel, change shape, then leave. Scenes in new countries are added; timelines shift; the protagonist's fate is dire one day, heroic the next. The work becomes a public spectacle. Then, one day, the people in the gallery notice that the words haven't moved for nearly a day. Someone is sent to check in on the writer, and she's found dead on her kitchen floor, clutching her writing device, a look of intense concentration on her face.

It was a strange story, both gruesome and funny, bleak and somehow hopeful. It also contained stories within stories, the writer's own novel and its shifting trajectories embedded into the larger work. It spoke to me deeply, and its complex structure seemed like it would be fun to translate. And so, for the next few months, I inhabited this book, marvelling at the skills I'd acquired and grateful to not have the time to think about anything else. And then, it was done. Like *Songbird*, it was well received, and like *Songbird*, this pleased me for a while but left me with a kind of emptiness afterwards.

Then, with nothing to distract me, my buried curiosity resurfaced. I hadn't spoken to Shiba since my return but found myself constantly thinking of her. Also, the stress was literally erupting across my body in the form of acne and rashes. And my dreams had turned ominous. I woke up terrified from one in which Billee's paws fell off when he tried jumping from the kitchen counter, and I couldn't reattach them. In another, I was back at the Centre in front of that keypad. I punched in the code: 9989.

Back in the hallway, dark and still. I entered the common room, the linen cupboard, and finally, pushed against the large pair of silver double doors. And then . . . nothing. I awoke, drenched in sweat.

I tried to ward off my anxiety by tapping into Anna's presence, which always left me feeling more secure and content. Anna allowed me to access a level of safety within which I could examine my life from a distance, and I found myself re-evaluating everything. Including my home. My flat, you see, was a cocoon, a nest. Rose-coloured linen bedsheets, a beautiful wooden desk. Salt lamps and hanging plants, ladder-style shelves crammed with beloved books. Islamic calligraphy and Aurat March posters on the walls, good food, clothes I liked wearing, candles and keepsakes. I had collected, over my life, artefacts of love and pleasure and made my home into a place where I could work peacefully and live with ease. However, after returning from the Centre, although I still valued this cocooning, I was also struck by its emptiness. Suddenly, this space, as lovely as it was, felt like a bubble, not really attached to anything, anyone, or anywhere. And I began to wonder, was this a haven or a hideaway?

'Maman est morte.' That was more or less how I started, right? The book by Camus? Well, maybe that sentence contained the kernel of the issue. Maybe it felt to me, on some level, like *my* maman was morte. Maybe that process by which the child assimilates the mother – using substitutes like thumb-sucking and stuffed-toy cuddling – well, maybe that hadn't fully happened for me. Maybe I'd never properly let go of the hem of my maman's kameez and run into the playground, the wind in my curls. No, I was always looking back, to see if she was watching, and collecting stories to tell her afterwards. My maman. Who always seemed to be looking the other way. I can't fully trace back a how or when to my incessant and unfulfilled longing for her, and may never be able to, but all I knew was that there had always been a part of me, deep in my belly, that felt frosty and vacant. But I'd not consciously processed it until Anna brought my attention back to my free-floating umbilical cord, severed too suddenly and in need of reattachment. Several processes, I felt, had been left incomplete. For instance, instead of emerging from the birth canal, I had been yanked out via C-section, into the shocking cold and light. Also, instead of experiencing a gradual transition into independence, something in me had

panicked, perhaps when my little sister was born, and my maman and I had unlinked hands too abruptly when she reached out to hold the new one.

And maybe I was meant to stay in Pakistan, not be transplanted into this harsh and windy place. We're meant to die where we are born, surely? When I first flew to England, my skin became scaly and dry, my tummy uncomfortable and my bladder confused. It took forever for my body to adjust. Someone told me then – I can't remember who, probably Naima – that although our bodies travel by plane, the soul still makes its way on foot.

'Your soul,' she said – I'd been in England for maybe six months at the time – 'your soul still has months, if not years, of travel ahead. It's probably only reached Afghanistan or Iran by now.'

I think I treated my move to England as an opportunity to leave everything behind, the gawky teenager I had been, the needy child, the grieving migrant. I packed it all into the empty suitcase I'd tucked away in the back of my cupboard till it grew dusty and forgotten. That person, who grew up in the chaos of Karachi, who had little knowledge of how to express unpleasant feelings, I'd been ashamed of her. Her innocence, her cluelessness, her vulnerability and fear. I'd wanted to start anew.

But it turned out I wasn't interested in settling into my new home either, if I'd ever even had the choice. After all, why would I want to make a home here, on this land in whose name the blood of my ancestors had been, and continues to be, shed? By then, I had spent at least as many years in England as I had in Pakistan, and there was a chance I would stay forever, that mine would be the first body in my lineage to be buried on this land. There would be nobody from my ancestry to receive me when I went underground. The thought turned me to ice. But repatriation, return, didn't feel like a possibility either. I wondered, after that much severing, these many processes left incomplete, was any stitching back together even possible? Ah, this is all banal immigrant cliché, isn't it? But the only way I saw past this was to wade through all of it, including the bits I would have previously dismissed as banal, as 'boring'. I was grateful, truly, that at least the questions were coming up, buoyed by Anna's support, even if I didn't have any answers.

But I couldn't believe she was dead. And I didn't know how to process the fact that we had become so close only *after* she had died. I was unable

to grieve for Anna in the way I would have had our relationship grown while she was still living. It sometimes felt like it was precisely the fact that she had crossed over that had made our connection so meaningful. The Anna that I'd forged this bond with was not of this earth, she had been eternal and still was, and always would be. I know that's what eternal means, but you know what I mean. The questions surrounding her death haunted me, and it was becoming increasingly apparent that I could no longer put off confronting what I had seen. And so, finally, I decided that the next time Naima and I made plans to meet, I would confide in her.

I hadn't seen Naima for a while. It's possible that this was because I had pushed her away pre-emptively, afraid of her doing the same to me because of Azeem. But we'd also not been meeting much because she often brought Azeem along, and I found hanging out with the both of them a little tedious. And so when I asked her to come over for dinner, I tried to hint that I wasn't interested in Azeem joining us. It had been so long, I told her, since we'd *properly* caught up. She understood.

'Finally,' Naima said when she came in. She embraced me, then took off her large parrot-blue headphones and hung them over the back of the kitchen chair. 'Where have you disappeared to?'

'Yeah . . . sorry. You know how it is.'

'Poor excuse,' Naima said and rolled her eyes. She took off her feathery maroon coat and draped it over the same chair, then offered her hand to Billee to sniff. 'Hi little meowster.'

'Chai?' I asked. I'd decided that this was an occasion for proper chai, so that we could sit *aram se*, for as long as it took, to deconstruct what had happened and figure out what it meant.

'Mm, yes please,' she said. I put the milk on the stove and grated in some ginger. Naima cleared the table, picking up a proof of *Work in Progress*. 'I still can't believe you speak Russian now.'

'It's strange, isn't it?' I replied.

'So strange! Maybe I should go. Do they teach Pahari there? Doubt it.'

'Yeah, probably not.'

'It's very unfair that you've sworn me to secrecy, by the way. This should be in the papers, you know.'

'That's just the way it is there,' I said. 'Secrecy above all.'

'That's some Illuminati-type shit,' she said.

‘You know, it kind of is.’

‘Except without the orgies. Or have you just not told me about that part?’ she teased, but my face turned troubled. ‘Anisa, what’s wrong?’

‘No, nothing. It’s just . . . the whole thing feels odd. I don’t think I’ll go back.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know. It feels exploitative, or something.’

‘I mean two grand is a lot for ten days, but for a whole new language—’

‘No, not exploitative of me. Just . . . exploitative.’

‘Of who, then? The workers?’

‘Just . . . as a system.’

I’d forgotten the tea, and it bubbled over. Naima jumped to the rescue and poured it out into two mugs.

‘It makes you wonder,’ I continued. ‘Like, is it even legit?’

‘Legit meaning . . .?’ she asked.

‘I dunno. Like, what really goes on there? Surely they owe it to us to explain.’

‘Oh, I know what this is. You’re self-sabotaging.’

‘No, it’s not that. I mean, okay, I’ve been meaning to tell you . . . I thought I’d wait till I got you alone. I’m not even sure what . . . and it sounds so . . . I don’t know. But—’

‘No, hun, seriously,’ Naima said, rifling through the bottom cabinet for biscuits. ‘You’re just looking for things to find wrong. Just accept the blessings. Actually, you know who I think should go there? Azeem.’

I felt a familiar seething. How quickly she’d turned the topic to Azeem. Even when he wasn’t around, she’d just been waiting for the opportunity to talk about him.

‘You haven’t told him, have you?’

‘Of course not. I’m not stupid. Anyway, you know what he’s like. He zones out the minute I start talking about my friends. But seriously, that place could really help him. I’ve been encouraging him to expand his work. That man has so much more potential than he realizes. I should show you these photos he took.’

She had found a pack of chocolate digestives by then and, holding one in her mouth, reached for her bag and pulled out her phone to show me Azeem’s photos. Now, I don’t know much about the field, but the shots

seemed entirely basic to me, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. It was clear that Naima was still, more and more, pouring her enthusiasm into Azeem's future instead of her own. Why had it been so easy for her to shift her focus onto him? What did that say about her as a person? Forget it, I thought. I wasn't going to tell Naima about the Centre. If she was going to put her new man ahead of me and, more importantly, ahead of herself, she didn't deserve to know what was going on.

'You guys should just tie the knot.'

I can't remember whether I'd said this to be sarcastic or to cover up my hostility by appearing excessively supportive. Either way, I wasn't expecting her response.

'As a matter of fact—'

'Shut up.'

'We're only talking about it.'

'About marriage?'

'Only talking.'

'Naima, please. You've only been together a couple of months.'

'I know, but when you know, you know, you know?'

She offered me a biscuit, which I ignored.

'This is what you want? Are you sure?'

'You can never be sure, can you? Sometimes you just have to *do* things and see what happens. You can't live for ever with an armour around you, right?'

I felt that Naima was making a jibe at my own life there, and it was unfair. Naima often made decisions this way, diving in head first, but she wasn't recognizing that her impulsiveness was a privilege. She was only able to live like this because she'd always had someone to catch her on the other side. She'd grown up with a loving mother and a doting older sister and, let's be frank, had been the honorary son of her family. Her family was always available and they thought she was the shit. It was this security that allowed her to do what she liked, but nonetheless, she assumed that more cautious people lacked some kind of innate courage.

'Some of us live with an armour around us for a reason, Naima.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just give it some time. Like, another year.'

'Why though? We're ready. We feel ready.'



‘Are you scared of giving it more time because you think it’ll fall apart if you wait?’

I saw a wave of irritation flash over her face.

‘No, but Anisa, there is something about that kind of commitment that makes things stronger.’ She spoke slowly, enunciating her words as if she were explaining this to a child. ‘When you take something seriously, that makes it more precious, more resilient. Anyway, you know I want to start a family.’

‘You’re rushing.’

‘Do you not like Azeem?’

‘What?’

‘I get that feeling sometimes.’

‘It’s not that I don’t like him, exactly. Although . . . yeah. Maybe. But it’s more that I don’t like who you’re becoming.’

‘Who am I becoming?’

‘It’s like everything you do revolves around him. You think more about his work than your own.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘It is, Naima. I’ve seen it. And you’re always praising him. He doesn’t do it back.’

‘Did it occur to you I praise him so much because I want you to like him?’

‘That’s even worse!’

‘How?’

‘I don’t know. It just is. It’s like, you’re trying to convince everyone of his greatness. Why? Who are you really trying to convince?’

‘I can’t believe you’re saying this.’

‘Look. Obviously, I’ll be supportive. I’ll be first in line, doing the dances at your shaadi, babysitting, whatever. I’m here. But you have to give me space to say what I need to say.’

‘Okay, fine. Say it.’

‘I just never thought you’d go for something so . . . conservative.’

‘How is it conservative?’

‘It just is. It *feels* conservative. I can feel you putting him first and he’s putting himself first too. It’s the same old story, and I just thought you of all people wouldn’t get trapped in it so easily. I feel like you’ve moved, what,

like ten inches from where our mothers were. Naima, we live in a different world now. We don't have to—'

'Enough,' she said.

'Fine.'

'Just because you don't have anyone—'

'Are you seriously going there?'

'... doesn't mean you have to ruin it for everyone else.'

'I didn't want to say anything in the first place.'

'Then you shouldn't have.'

'Fine. I'm sorry. I just ... I worry about you, okay? That's all. And I dunno. I see this shining star in you. You're a fucking meteor, Naima. There's no telling where you'll go. And now, instead of sharing your shine with the world, you're squandering it away.'

'Not if you're around to tell me not to, right?'

'But why should I have to sit here reminding you? That's not my job. And for what? To get shit from you about not liking him? And you know what? I don't think you're honest with him either.'

'Huh?'

'You don't tell him things. Like you haven't told him about your exes – what's that about?'

'I ... I just don't want to make him feel insecure.'

'Why should that make him insecure? Are you his property now?'

'I care about him, Anisa. It's normal to protect people's hearts when you care about them.'

'Does he know about the tantra?'

She didn't respond.

'He doesn't, does he? You're scared he'll think you're a prostitute.'

There are words you can say that can shatter a lifetime's worth of trust. I felt, instantly, a deep shame. Naima sat across from me, still saying nothing.

'I didn't mean that.'

'You think that word shames me?' she said and laughed, and there was an edge to her laugh that made me want to sink into myself. 'If you want to call me a prostitute, feel free, babe. If I don't call myself that, it's only because I think it would be disrespectful to sex workers. I don't want to appropriate their struggles. But I don't see myself as any better or worse or even different, necessarily. It's revealing to know how you see it, though.'

‘I didn’t mean anything bad by that, Naima—’

‘Enough, Anisa. Just stop. You need to free your mind from these chains of shame. I can practically see the rust congealing around you.’

She looked me straight in the eyes. It felt as if she were boring a hole into my forehead.

‘Promiscuity,’ she continued, ‘can be a kind of radical hospitality. That’s Garth Greenwell. You have no fucking clue what I do.’

‘Don’t be angry,’ I said.

She got up to leave.

‘Look,’ I said desperately. ‘It just scares me, that’s all. I guess I’ve always felt like *I* was your significant other.’

She looked at me suspiciously, as if assessing whether I was being sincere or just attempting emotional blackmail.

‘We can have more than one significant other,’ she said.

‘How? When you’re moving to Devon or wherever with this guy?’

She sighed. ‘Do you think I don’t feel scared as well? Of settling down with him. Of what that means? That . . . meteor thing.’ Naima’s voice broke a little as she spoke. ‘You think I’m not worried about that too? But you can’t feed my fear with your own.’

She had seen it too, I realized. The fading flame. It wasn’t just me. Both of us had been tracking the dimming with some concern. But the difference was that she was still hopeful of a redemptive love that I was thoroughly unconvinced by.

‘Maybe we should listen to that worry,’ I offered tentatively. The air had become tender. ‘Are you sure—’

‘I should go,’ she said. She picked up her backpack and left.

\*

The bond between Naima and me spanned nearly two decades and wasn’t one to be easily broken, but things chilled between us for some time after that night. We exchanged a few texts but not much more. I wished that things had gone differently, that we hadn’t taken that sharp detour and that I had told her about what I’d seen at the Centre. Now, it felt like I definitely couldn’t, but I also couldn’t do nothing. I decided that the next best thing would be to find out whether Adam knew anything. He had, after all, been

with the Centre for years. I sent him a text, asking if he wanted to meet. It had been over six months since we'd last spoken. My message stayed on read for a couple of hours before he replied.

Pretty busy these days but if you want to come over for tea, you're welcome.

So . . . I had never been to Adam's flat. I know that sounds shameful considering we were nearly engaged, but he lived in Seven Sisters, which was basically the other side of London. Like, an hour on the train. And he had a flatmate, Steven, whereas I lived alone. It had just seemed more convenient all round if he came to my place. And he'd seemed happy with the arrangement. But there he was, asking me to come all the way to his, not even to a cafe in between. It felt like a power move. Now that there was nothing at stake, he couldn't be bothered to put in the effort. So I went. I picked up a chocolate tart from Waitrose on the way.

Adam's flat was nicer than I'd expected. It was very clean. I suppose I should have guessed this from how much care he took in my home. It was also cosier than I'd pictured – comfortable sofas, nice bookshelves, posters of films on the wall: Hitchcock, Kubrick, things like that. The only resemblance it bore to the boys' pad I'd imagined was the small home gym he and Steven had set up in one corner, with weights, resistance bands and a bench thing.

'Your flat's really nice,' I said.

'Yeah,' he replied. There was a reprimand in his voice, and I felt ashamed that I'd never been before. 'You want some tea?'

'Sure.'

We sat in the kitchen, which was cold. Adam and I had very different ideas on when to turn the heating on. I wondered if that's why I'd never been to his house, because I'd intuited it would be cold.

'How have you been?' I asked, cradling my mug.

'Not bad,' he answered, and then, searching for something else to say, continued, 'I just got back from a work trip.'

'Cool! Where did you go?'

'Italy.'

'Oh, nice,' I responded. And then, after another awkward pause, I added, 'Did you . . . eat a lot of pasta?'

He smiled to himself. Nodded. There had once been a time when Adam and I were entirely unselfconscious around each other, a time when we had lain naked together. I wondered if he was thinking about this too.

‘So . . . how’s Billee?’

‘He’s good,’ I said and pulled up a recent photo on my phone of him crouching just above my head on the back of the sofa.

‘Wow,’ he said. ‘He looks like a leopard.’

‘Yeah.’ I laughed.

‘So what else is new with you? How’s the translation work?’ he asked.

‘Pretty good. I went to the Centre again.’

‘You did? What language?’

‘Russian.’

‘How was it?’

‘Not bad. Actually, Adam, that’s kind of why I’m here.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. I was wondering, do you know how it works?’

‘How what works?’

‘The Centre. How the language learning works.’

‘Well,’ he said. ‘I guess it’s the intense focus. The fact that you don’t talk to anyone, that you cut yourself off like that.’

‘I mean, if it were just that, it wouldn’t be so exclusive, would it? Anyone could do it. Theoretically, you could do the same thing in your own home. Just have Steven leave food outside your door and listen to recordings all day.’

‘Well, no, it’s more than that. It’s so strictly regimented. They’ve worked it all out. The meditation, the silence . . . it’s like – Brian and I have talked about this – we reckon there’s some kind of ancient practice they’re following, like a formula for doing things exactly a certain way in exactly a certain order. Have you ever seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark*?’

‘No, Adam. I haven’t. Ancient practice, like what kind of ancient practice?’

‘Like a secret code. Like you follow this exact regimen, including the wake-up time, the language booth, the diet. It’s a very precise formula. And it can’t be replicated.’

‘What part of it can’t be replicated?’

‘All of it. It’s old-school shit, Anisa. *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-type shit.’

‘You know, don’t you?’

‘Know what?’

‘You know what’s really going on. Listen, Adam, you don’t have to pretend. I know about the Storytellers too.’

I was bluffing, of course.

‘The Storytellers? What about them?’

His eyes were blank. He didn’t know anything. I backtracked.

‘Well, have you ever met any of them?’

‘In real life? Of course not. That’s not allowed. Wait, why? What do you think is going on?’

‘I, well, I’m not sure, actually. I just . . . I feel like there might be dodgy things happening there.’

‘Like what? Money laundering?’

‘Money laundering? No.’

Adam was so random sometimes.

‘What kind of dodgy things then?’

‘Okay, like, why are the staff quarters off limits?’

‘Oh, illegal workers?’

‘No.’

‘Drugs?’

‘Ugh, no! I mean, I don’t think so. I don’t know. Look, I’m just wondering how it’s humanly possible, what they’re doing.’

‘Oh yeah, I used to obsess about that too. Early on, I thought that maybe they injected some kind of chip in my brain while I was sleeping. But now, I think it’s just some secret ancient technique.’

‘Why aren’t you more curious about this?’

‘I don’t know. I mean how does *any* language learning happen? How does the brain allow us to make sounds and understand one another? Isn’t it all a big mystery anyway? But tell me, what do you think it is?’ he continued. ‘You said you know something. I’m definitely curious now.’

‘I was just bluffing . . . I thought maybe you knew something,’ I said hastily, slicing the tart I’d brought. ‘Here, try this. Dark chocolate.’

‘I don’t like chocolate.’

‘Of course you do. Come on, this one’s my favourite.’

‘I know it’s *your* favourite.’

I cut him a slice, picking two plates and forks off his dish rack.

‘Here—’

‘Do you know what *my* favourite is?’ he said.

‘You really don’t like chocolate?’

‘Nope. That’s a pretty basic thing to know about me, you would think.’

‘Adam, are you annoyed with me?’

‘Do you think it’s a problem that this is the first time you’re visiting my home?’

‘It is a bit weird, yeah. I thought that too.’

‘And you never would have while we were together. You would’ve just said, “Ah, it’s cold out, can we meet somewhere in between?” At the *most*, you would’ve said that. But more likely, you would’ve asked me to come to yours. And I’d have done it.’

‘You loved coming to mine,’ I said.

‘Did I? Did I love cycling all that way in the cold? Every single time?’

‘I mean, you have a flatmate—’

‘He doesn’t live in my room! And even now, you haven’t really come to see me, have you? You’ve come to ask about the Centre.’

‘No. I mean, yes but no. Adam, listen. I’m sorry I haven’t been here before. If you’d told me it was important to you—’

‘I started therapy, you know.’

‘You did? Adam, that’s great.’

‘One of the things that’s come up in our sessions is, well, how lowly I must have thought of myself to put up with you.’

‘Put up with me? Are you serious?’

‘You never cared about me. You never took any interest in my life. All you wanted was a little lapdog. You know, I don’t think it’s a coincidence you broke up with me not long after you got Billee.’

‘Are you serious? We got Billee together.’

‘Did we? You’ve never been able to see beyond your own nose, Anisa. And me, I was just so insecure. About who I am. Where I come from. I let myself be your lapdog.’

‘I loved you, Adam. You can’t . . . retrospectively turn things around like this.’

‘And you can’t win every argument by trying to analyse my behaviour. That’s your defence mechanism. You focus on my stuff to avoid your own.’

‘Isn’t that what you’re doing in this moment?’

‘You just did it again! I won’t fall for these traps any more.’

‘Listen, Adam, I’m sorry that we caused each other pain . . . but I did love you.’

‘If you loved me, you wouldn’t have treated me the way you did. Do you know how insecure you made me feel?’

‘I felt insecure too, Adam. The . . . intimacy stuff was hard for me. I felt like you withheld your affection—’

‘There you go again,’ he said. ‘Everything bad you did was because of some deficiency in me.’

‘Is this ’cause I didn’t want to go camping?’

Suddenly, Adam hurled his fork across the room as if it were this utensil that was responsible for all the problems between us. It smashed against the counter and clattered to the floor.

‘I never asked to go fucking camping.’

‘Adam!’

‘You treated me like shit. In Pakistan. Do you know how shitty I felt then? Do you think I couldn’t tell how your parents were looking down their noses at me?’

‘Don’t raise your voice at me.’

‘Don’t talk to me like a bloody schoolteacher.’

‘I’m not! What the fuck. What’s this really about?’

‘The day I brought up marriage, you downloaded Tinder!’

‘And I told you that I did, and I deleted it straight after. You said it was okay.’

‘You and your middle-class fuckery, Anisa. You’re passive-aggressive all the time. You’re hypercritical. You’re judgemental. Just ’cause you say it in this nice, polished, middle-class monotone, you think it’s all good. I just, I can’t believe I put up with all your shit.’

‘Where is this even coming from?’

‘Do you remember that time in Karachi when I took my own plate to the sink, and you stopped me and complained that I was being so white and judgemental, that I should let the cook do his job?’

‘Kareem was more offended than anyone when you did that, by the way. The kitchen’s his domain.’

‘Did you ever think that maybe I was thinking of my mum when I did that? Of her work in the service industry?’



‘But would you ever do that in a restaurant, Adam, insist on taking your own plate to the kitchen?’

‘It wasn’t a bloody restaurant, though, was it? It was your home. Surely we’re capable of feeding ourselves in our own homes?’

‘It’s the culture, Adam. It’s a legitimate job that Kareem has. Who are you to judge? It’s just the way things are there. Everyone has servants.’

‘Yeah? Everyone? Does Kareem have servants?’

‘Why are we even talking about this? I don’t understand.’

‘I’m just saying you’re so quick to tear other people apart, but when it comes to you, it’s like you think you have a fucking halo around your head. And I got convinced too. I got dazzled by the halo. But now I can see that it isn’t there, it never was, no—’

He stopped himself, but I knew he wanted to say more, to tell me that not only was there no halo but there were, in fact, devil horns. I could tell this by the way he was looking at the spot where my halo had been, and also because I knew him so well. I wanted to be like, ‘Who are you to judge me? You know nothing about me’, and, to be honest, I also kind of wanted to cry. But we just sat there in silence. Adam stared at his plate. He was sort of . . . pulsating, as if trying to control a tightly wound spring that lay coiled at his core. Then, he stood up. For a second, I thought he was going to throw the plate across the room too. But instead, he walked over to his room without a word, and I heard the lock click behind him. I let myself out and went back home.

Adam sent me a text a few days later saying that he was sorry things got heated and hoped we could still be friends. This softened my heart a bit. I also thought that maybe his outburst was a good thing – something emerging in Adam that was allowing him to stand up for himself, demand more. Truth was, I didn’t know if he was being bitter and demanding or just and legitimate. I wondered whether I should do something to show that I hadn’t disregarded him. I thought I could, I don’t know, go over to his flat again, make the kinds of efforts he’d accused me of not making in the past. I resolved to return the following week, just for tea and a chat. I’d bring carrot cake this time. I was pretty sure that was what he liked.

But somehow, when the following week rolled around, I felt less inclined. I told myself that maybe the distance would help with our closure and that turning up again at his place could send the wrong message.

Besides, the weather was so miserable that week. I'm aware that this may make me sound like a bitch, but try to understand, if I didn't feel compelled, I didn't feel compelled. I don't know. Point is, though, that Adam didn't know anything about the real goings-on at the Centre. My only remaining option was to confront Shiba directly.

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# Chapter Eight

Shiba and I had barely been in touch since I'd left the Centre nine months prior. I knew she wasn't fooled by my responses to her emails and texts – polite and terse – meant to gradually bring communication to an end while making it seem incidental. I felt guilty about soft ghosting her in this way but didn't know what else to do. There was no way I could have had a real conversation with her without bringing up what I'd seen, and I hadn't felt ready until after my talk with Adam. So finally, I texted her, getting straight to the point.

Hi Shiba, sorry I haven't been in touch.  
Was wondering if we could talk?

Where have you been?

I'm sorry. I've had a lot on my mind.  
There's actually something I'd like to  
share with you in person if that's okay?

Ok

OK cool. Brighton again?

If you like. Or come here if you want?

That's allowed?

Of course silly. It's my home. Come

On the one hand, it felt like a good thing that we were meeting at the Centre. We'd have more privacy to talk openly and Shiba would have fewer places to hide. I could even make her show me her laptop if she denied the email. In fact, maybe I could ask her to show me what, if anything, was behind those silver doors at the end of the hallway. At the same time, I

remembered how the staff members had watched me with the hint of a threat in their eyes during my last few days there. I worried that I was putting myself in danger by confronting Shiba there, that the Centre could somehow trap or silence me if they found out what I knew. The notion felt fairly ludicrous, but I didn't want to be naive. I considered arming myself with pepper spray and a penknife but only thought of this the day before leaving, and by then, even off Amazon Prime, they wouldn't arrive in time. So, the morning of my trip, in a gesture that felt more or less tokenistic, I went through my kitchen drawers in search of weapons and emerged with a small knife and a single corkscrew.

The corkscrew, a present from my friend Ramali, was in the shape of a cartoonish woman whose head you turned to operate the thing, arms rising up as the screw dug into the cork. 'I'll call her Ramali', I'd said when she presented it to me. Later that night, when we'd opened a bottle of wine, Ramali screamed and clutched her neck when I twisted the corkscrew over the bottle. 'What are you doing to Ramali?' The memory made me smile. I made Ramali do some jumping jacks and sent a photo to her namesake before stowing her in my bag. Then I made a mini sheath for the knife from the pages of a magazine so that it wouldn't pierce the fabric of my bag. Fully armed, I headed to the station.

Like the previous times, Shiba sent a car to pick me up from the station. I was happy to see the same driver who had dropped me off on my very first trip to the Centre.

'Oh, hi, slamalaikum. You remember me?' I asked.

'Walaikum salam, sister, of course I do. How are you? No bags?'

'No bags. Actually, I'm friends with one of the girls who work there. Just visiting,' I replied as I got in the car.

'Nice of you to come so far to meet your friend.'

'Haan, well, we have a lot to catch up on.'

'Tell me, what language was it the last time we met? Can you speak it now?'

'German. Yes. A little bit.'

'Alhamdulillah. That must be helpful in your work.'

'It is.'

'Did you find out how much it costs?' he asked.

'You know, between you and me, I don't think it's worth the price.'

‘Oh?’ he looked at me through the rear-view mirror. ‘Why not?’

‘Just . . . I wouldn’t recommend it.’

We drove on, and the driver spoke once again of the son he was proud of, and then of his daughter who seemed to be giving him a bit of trouble.

‘How do you raise children in this country?’ he said, shaking his head. ‘There is no way to protect them. The schools, they’re filled with drugs, bad language, relations between men and women.’

‘Things like that happen in Pakistani schools now too,’ I said. I wasn’t sure if this was true, but I was guessing so from desi Twitter. I myself had been raised in a universe apart from drugs and sex and bad language. But this led to its own set of issues, my naivety becoming an embarrassment to me in my twenties. ‘You can’t be sure they would have been better off there.’

‘No, but something inside,’ he said, gesturing towards his abdomen, ‘it stays together when you grow up in a place where you are not the minority. In this country, our children break.’

I tried to feel into my own abdomen, to see if something had stayed intact there as a result of growing up back home. I concluded that there may be truth to his words.

‘Sister,’ he continued, ‘the things that they teach them about our home culture, you won’t believe. One day my daughter comes home, waving some book around, telling my wife to remove her scarf.’

‘That’s awful.’

‘How do you keep them from hating you?’

‘God protect us,’ I said. What else could one say?

We kept driving, and eventually reached the familiar roads that wound through unpopulated green. I became aware of just how quiet and secluded the grounds surrounding the Centre were, for miles and miles in every direction. I pulled out my phone but had no signal.

‘Where exactly are we?’ I asked. ‘Can I see your GPS?’

‘It’s all up here,’ he said, pointing to his forehead.

I told myself that my rising fear was just paranoia, that I was simply meeting Shiba for a chat, and she would soon explain everything. I had nothing to worry about. Still, I felt glad that I’d told Naima where I was going beforehand, even if I hadn’t been able to give her an exact address.

We pulled up, as usual, in front of the building. Before leaving the car, I leaned forward in my seat and offered the driver a twenty-pound note.

‘For you.’

‘Oh, no thank you,’ he replied.

‘Don’t say that. Please take it.’

‘Please don’t offer so much,’ he said, making me blush.

‘No, please. I enjoyed our drive. It’s nothing,’ I said.

His eyes turned cold. I had insulted him with the gesture.

‘Sister,’ he said, ‘we both know I’m only here to get you from A to B. Nothing more. Don’t try to make it look any different.’

With that, he drove away.

The familiar receptionist greeted me at the desk, flashing a smile. ‘Hello. How was your journey?’

‘Yes, pretty good. I’m here to meet Shiba.’

‘Very good,’ he said and typed something into his desktop. ‘She’ll be here shortly.’

‘Thanks,’ I said and looked into the courtyard behind him, just as lush and abundant as I remembered.

‘Your garden always looks so beautiful,’ I said.

‘Thank you.’

‘What’s your secret?’ I asked, watching him carefully.

‘I don’t know.’ He shrugged. ‘Good fertilizer?’

The hairs on my arms stood up in response. I looked at the garden again, at the handful of Learners walking around and the staff members weaving between them. The man behind the desk, who’d so cheerfully greeted me a moment ago, was now frowning at his screen. I was overthinking, I told myself. Any man at any desk would look like that. But despite trying to curb my anxiety, I jumped when Shiba popped up at reception.

‘Fuck. You scared me.’

She laughed and gave me a warm hug, and I felt my heartbeat slow.

‘Finally,’ she said. ‘I missed you.’

‘It’s great to see you,’ I said. ‘I didn’t know you were allowed guests.’

‘Of course we are. It’s our home after all. We just use the back entrance. Come.’

She led me back out the gleaming front door and around the outside of the building until we came to the back, where a heavy grey door identical to

the one inside the courtyard stood. She removed her key ring from her pocket and unlocked the door, which opened into the same entryway I'd seen last time. I looked around. The place looked different in the daytime, the carpets more faded, the carved mahogany staircase worn and chipped. The keypad protecting the metal door, which had been glowing green the night I broke in, was now a muted grey. I felt a spike of anxiety, but there was no turning back now.

'All good?' Shiba said, catching me looking at the keypad.

'Yeah, of course.'

We made our way up the stairs and into Shiba's flat. It was as cosy and warm as I remembered, and I felt my body relax a bit upon entering. A Solange Knowles song was playing on Shiba's laptop, and I could smell recently lit rose incense. Half a joint lay in her ashtray.

'Day off,' she said when she saw me clock it.

Nothing's up, I thought to myself. She'd just not told me about Anna because she didn't want me to be sad.

'I missed your place,' I said.

'Where did you disappear to?'

'I just . . . you know how it is, just got busy.'

'Ah, okay.' I heard hurt in her voice. 'I read the *Work in Progress* book. So good.'

'Ah, great. Glad you liked it.'

'Tea?'

'Sure.'

When she opened the cabinet to pull out a teabag, I strained to look at what else was in there. Only mugs and other types of teas. No weapons or body parts or anything. I chided myself for being so silly.

'I was wondering one thing, though,' she continued, turning on the kettle, 'about that woman in the book, the writer lady. What if she had just left her first novel the way it was and then done the amendments separately? She could have actually published a whole second novel, and a third, instead of changing the first so drastically every time.'

'But that was the whole point, right? She wanted something perfect.'

'I guess. But she could have strived for that anyway and at least left some markers along the way.'

'I mean, that wouldn't have made for a very interesting story.'

‘It just felt illogical, that’s all. Like a hole in the plot.’

‘It annoys me when people try to find holes in plots,’ I said.

‘Too self-referential, that was the other problem with it.’

‘Well, maybe this kind of critique is what she was scared of and that’s why she kept amending. Did you think of that?’

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘I’m just saying, the meta stuff can get boring.’

‘Yeah. Sorry.’

‘Not your fault. Writer’s fault. There you go.’ She extended the cup to me. It was ginger and honey. ‘I have some leftovers as well, from lunch. Are you hungry?’

‘I’m good.’

We each cradled a mug and sat cross-legged, facing each other on two large circular cushions on the floor.

‘All right then,’ she said, ‘tell me: what did you want to share?’

I took a deep breath. I hadn’t rehearsed what I was going to say, thinking that it would just make me more nervous.

‘It’s about the last time I was here.’

‘Yeah?’

‘So, okay. Well, I know.’

‘You know?’

‘I know there’s something going on here.’

‘Huh?’

‘I know that Anna’s dead.’

For a millisecond, it felt like she was trying to decide which expression to arrange her face in. It was blank at first, then suddenly amused, almost mocking.

‘Why would you think that?’ she asked.

My heart sank. If the death had been innocent, she wouldn’t have jumped straight to denial.

‘I read the email. From Natalya. About the funeral.’

I was hyperalert, watching her closely, and thought I saw hints of panic beneath her mask of bemused confusion.

‘What?’

‘Yeah. Last time I was here.’

‘You read my emails?’



‘I hadn’t meant to. I just wanted to check mine, and then Natalya’s name popped up with that subject line—’

‘I invited you into my home, and you went snooping around my emails?’

‘Shiba, that’s not the point right now, is it?’

Shiba stood up and walked towards the kettle. She slowly opened a cabinet and took out some pistachio nuts, pouring them into a bowl.

She continued with her back to me, ‘I can’t believe you would do something like that,’ she said.

‘Just tell me what’s going on.’

She slowly turned her head to the side, and for one sickening moment, I thought it would go all the way round like Ramali the corkscrew’s. But she stopped and looked out of the window to her left.

‘You’re misunderstanding,’ she said and turned to look at me. Her eyes were wet. ‘I trusted you, Anisa.’

‘I trusted you too. Would I be here asking you directly if I didn’t?’

‘You haven’t told anyone? About what you read in the email?’ she asked.

And there it was. Confirmation that something sinister was at play.

‘I haven’t.’

She sighed and sat back down. I decided to just ask the question.

‘Did you guys have something to do with her death?’

‘It’s not what you think.’

‘Oh my god.’

‘Look, Anisa. The first thing you have to understand is I was intending to tell you all along.’

‘Just answer the question. Did you kill her, yes or no? Was it because she broke your weird no-contact rule?’

‘Anisa! Of course not. There is nothing like that happening here. Nothing . . . violent. I promise you. I can’t even imagine how you could think such a thing. The people you learned those languages from were like family to us.’

‘People?’ I repeated.

She pressed her lips together. An awful question materialized in my mind.

‘Shiba, where is Peter?’

She looked at me silently.

‘He’s dead too, isn’t he?’

More silence.

‘Tell me what happened to them.’

‘What we do here is not easy to explain. There is a process that needs to happen before you can even begin to understand. And my intention, I promise you, my intention since I first invited you up to my room that evening, was to share how things work here. It just has to be done slowly and with intention. Do you understand?’

‘I don’t believe you. You never intended to tell me anything. If you had, you would have already.’

‘But don’t you see? I have been. Anisa, we’ve been walking towards each other since we first met. You think that’s safe for someone like me? But I haven’t stopped for a reason. Even now, I’m walking towards you. Please, let me share this with you the way it’s meant to be shared.’

‘All right, so tell me then, in the way you’re supposed to.’

‘That’s what I’m trying to explain to you. It can’t just be told. First, you have to assimilate what’s happened to you. Peter. Anna. You have to really integrate them. And once you’ve done that, it’s almost like I won’t have to tell you at all. You’ll just know. But I will explain everything, I promise.’

‘What do you mean? How do I “integrate” them?’

‘There is a process. Everyone who we’ve shared this information with has undergone it.’

‘Who else have you shared it with?’

‘We let very few people in. The staff know. And my father and his associates too, obviously.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Walk me through it then. I’m ready.’

‘It’s not that easy,’ she said. ‘The best way to describe it is a kind of self-ingestion.’

‘Self-ingestion?’

‘Yes. It can feel a bit like digesting one’s own self, really *considering* the body, becoming truly aware of it, starting with your little toe and working your way up to your scalp. And then, understanding, within your being, what you have undergone. It already happens somewhat during the language course; that’s what the meditation sessions are about. But if you’re systematic and consistent with it, all kinds of other insights reveal themselves.’

She said that this would take time, and she could show me how to begin, but then I would need to continue by myself until, eventually, all would be clear. She said we could start right then, with the toes. And so I followed her instructions. I took off my socks and lay on my back and pulled my right foot towards me, knee bent, hands wrapped around my sole. Next, she guided my breathing until it lengthened and deepened. Then she directed me to consider my toes, to examine them, with curiosity and compassion.

‘This feels strange,’ I said, raising myself up on my elbows. ‘Why can’t you just tell me again?’

‘Please, Anisa. Trust me. This is necessary.’

So I lay back down and tried again. It took some time; at first, I was restless and fidgety, but slowly, patiently, she redirected my attention again and again, until finally, I surrendered to the process.

I’d always hated my toes: they were short and stubby, pink and round, with bits of hair sprouting near their middles. In fact, I hated my feet altogether, although when I really considered them, I realized this hadn’t always been the case. I noticed, during my examination, a prominent mole on the outer side of my right foot. I hadn’t looked directly at it in ages, had practically forgotten that it existed. But someone had told me, when I was a child, that this mole was a sign that I would travel, and I remember staring at it then, on a cuter, smaller foot, and feeling excited for this gift foretold by my body. I wondered when this appendage had started seeming so grotesque to me.

I sat like this for a while, holding my toe, slowly removing the layers of other people’s gazes that had settled upon it. I found myself thinking of the way I looked at Billee, at his sweet whiskers, and the little freckles from which they emerged, at his dab of a nose and the little M on his forehead that looked like someone had drawn a pair of ears there, and at his actual ears, soft and sharp and rotating independently from the rest of his face. When I looked at Billee, I saw perfection. His nose, to me, was a miracle. And now, I tried to bring that same gaze to my feet. Sometimes I was successful in this endeavour, and in those moments, I marvelled at the beauty and grace of this vehicle I had been given the privilege of inhabiting for my brief span of time on earth. And I thought of my father, and his obsession with the stars and planets, and how he would remind us

sometimes of the strangeness of our blue dot, and I felt filled with love and gratitude.

An hour passed this way. An hour of intimacy between my feet and me.

Shiba told me to continue this process over the coming days until I reached the top of my scalp and then beyond.

‘What we are doing here,’ she said to me, ‘I don’t think there is anything more important. You’ll see.’

I shared with her that during my process of self-ingestion, I had also felt, I thought, Peter’s feet, walking purposefully down a German pavement, and Anna’s, soft and achy, and, well, maybe even Anna’s daughters’ feet too, and beyond.

‘Yes,’ she said, her eyes shiny. ‘This is the magic of it. Their feet *are* your feet. This is what I was hoping you would see.’

‘I’m still having his nightmares, you know. Peter’s.’

‘It’s not just nightmares, though, is it? Also nicer dreams. This is what happens when you have an intimate relationship with *anyone*. You partake of their lives. They change you. Sometimes the experience is pleasant, sometimes not. But who knows, maybe you learn and grow more from the unpleasant bits.’

It isn’t always easy to distinguish between the rush of excitement and the chill of fear, and my adoration of Shiba was not so oblivious that I didn’t consider the possibility that she had, well, practically hypnotized me, calmed me to the point where I didn’t feel the need to demand answers straight away and had decided, instead, to go at her pace. But I allowed for that possibility and chose to walk towards her nonetheless. I had turned around enough times in my life, abandoning relationship after relationship at the first hurdle, to know that this time, I would find the strength to stay. And when I’d felt Peter’s and Anna’s toes within my own, well, I had sensed that they, too, wanted me to continue.

The next morning, back in my own flat, I lay on the living room carpet and devoured my ankles, spinning them around, flexing and stretching them. These ankles that had run across the sand of Defence Club playground, and that had twisted and swollen once when I’d tripped while walking down Willesden Green. These ankles that had been cradled in the hands of an old boyfriend on a sofa on a cold winter’s night. Every morning, in this way, I moved upwards through my body. Sometimes, tears

started to flow, and other times laughter would erupt. And occasionally, I drifted off, something in me resisting further exploration, but when that happened, I would call myself back. At times, I heard Anna's voice beckoning me to continue my investigations within.

Some parts of my body were particularly difficult to digest: the bum that had been caressed by an anonymous hand at Funland when I was eight years old, the waist that had been encircled by a presumptuous arm. Then there were the breasts: the nipples that had been teasingly pinched by a cousin in the swimming pool, the chest that had to be concealed and covered up from prying eyes, the breasts – which, I have to say, are not even particularly large or unique – that had been leeringly gazed at enough times and from a young enough age that I'd started carrying them around guiltily and apologetically. Then there were the ears that had heard things they wished they hadn't, a brain that made up stories that weren't true. Some of these revelations would come up in waves and leave me reeling, and I would understand why the mind chooses to cut itself off from the body. But so often, joy and beauty were stuck in the same places as grief and shame, and one could not be accessed without the other. All the memories, the feelings and sensations that I had walked away from over the course of my life, were still there, intertwined in my physical body, and now I was untangling them. Sometimes, it felt like I was cutting up my own tongue with a knife and fork before consuming it with that same tongue.

I stayed in touch with Shiba throughout this process, telling her about my journey. We contemplated together what it truly meant to be in touch with the body – with the flesh and blood and muscle and tendon and fascia of it all – and with that other, more ephemeral substance that flowed through all things. The body, I started to see, was a memory keeper. It knew *everything*. It made me sad that I had lived at such a remove from this fountain of knowledge, that this communication with my own self had been so badly severed.

And there was something else too, something I could only touch the edges of. When I felt my stomach, my womb, my breasts and sternum, I saw that they didn't just hold *my* memories, they held the rage and pain and isolation, the joy and passion and lust, of the women before me. My body remembered my mother's life experiences and my grandmother's and her mother's before her. I felt the violations and indiscretions, the reverence and

longings, from unfathomable years back. When I caught these glimpses, I was filled with awe. And it started to feel like there was a way to return to the very first woman in my lineage who had experienced a certain kind of shame, and to find comfort, strength and reparation for her from the woman who had come before. It's hard to explain, really, but when people say the body remembers, the breadth of this memory, I suspect, is almost inconceivable.

'I'm starting to understand,' I told Shiba, 'to see the infinite possibility that we hold.'

'I'm so glad.'

And in this way, a slow reconciliation took place between Shiba and me. We met again a few times, reaching a new depth in our relationship from the secrets slowly revealing themselves. Shiba had never let a friend into this part of her life before, and she wanted to show me more. Every year, she shared, her father and his partners would meet in person to further their research, and this time, the four of them were getting together at her house in Delhi.

'You should come with me,' she said. 'You'd get more insight into the process and its potential.'

'To Delhi?'

'Yeah. I'd love it if you came. I can show you my hometown, and you'll see first-hand where the Centre began, how it really works.'

I had never been to Delhi before and felt excited about the prospect of visiting Shiba's home, of meeting these men and understanding how they'd discovered this strange and wonderful process. I also felt, of course, that it was by going to Delhi that I could discover what had really happened to Anna and the other Storytellers, and by then, I trusted that Shiba wouldn't let any harm come to me. Also, frankly, I was fascinated by the idea of visiting India, a country for which Pakistan has both great loathing and immense longing. It was where the films I subtitled were made, and the place where so many of my closest friends came from too. It was also, in fact, the place that my own ancestors had inhabited pre-partition.

And so I told her that yes, of course, I would love to go.

## Chapter Nine

Shiba and I managed to get ourselves on the same flight and met at Heathrow airport. Rolling our suitcases behind us, we browsed through the airport bookshop, tried the perfume samples and bought some extra-large Toblerone bars before boarding the plane. On the flight, we picked the same film and hit pause and play on the little screens in front of us until they were perfectly synchronized. After that, we played Scrabble on a mini kit we'd bought from the bookshop, and then we fell asleep. Shiba was, I decided, my favourite person to fly with.

When we woke up for mealtime, Shiba turned to me and said, 'It's always strange when a friend meets a parent, no? Like, you're afraid they'll see you differently after.'

'Nah, don't worry. All parents are weird. I won't hold yours against you.'

'I've never introduced anyone to this part of my life before,' she said. 'It's only ever been me and the uncles.'

I felt like there was an unarticulated hope behind Shiba's words, that perhaps she wanted me to be more involved with the Centre at some point, maybe even help her run it. Or maybe that's just what I wanted. I imagined us living side by side, me doing my translations in a studio overlooking the beautiful garden, watching the strange processes taking place below, understanding them more deeply every day and thereby understanding myself more fully as well – and helping Shiba, playing co-host to aristocrats and diplomats, scholars and scientists who would come to this secret place that we ran together. Don't get me wrong, I was still a bit wary, not entirely taken in, but I can't deny that a part of me was captivated.

After our meal, I reached into my bag and pulled out a piece of folded cardboard that I'd used to carefully preserve a single feather. It was jet

black with a sharp stroke of white running through one side, as if someone had streaked a paintbrush over a crow's feather.

'For you,' I offered, inexplicably shy.

'Oh.' She untied the string that I'd wrapped around the card and lifted the feather by its stalk. 'Magpie!'

'It landed on my balcony the other day, as if asking to be passed on to you.'

'I love it,' she said and kissed me on the cheek. I felt an embarrassing quickening of the heart.

Some hours later, we disembarked at Delhi airport, which was not dissimilar to Karachi's. More white people and more women dressed in short skirts and sleeveless tops than you'd find in Pakistan, but the overall vibe was so familiar that I felt instantly at home. Same accents and style of conversation, same eagerness in the porters and rush of travellers, and a similar kind of controlled chaos holding it all together. We collected our luggage and made our way to the arrivals hall, where Shiba's father was waiting for us. Dressed in a navy blue shirt and beige trousers, he was tall and slim, with slicked-back hair and a manicured salt-and-pepper moustache and goatee. He beamed when he saw Shiba and wrapped her in a tight embrace. She folded into his arms like a little girl.

'Hello, sweetheart,' he said. I felt a pang of jealousy, having grown up in a family in which such terms of endearment didn't exist.

'Arjun,' he declared, holding out his hand to me as if I were a colleague and not a friend of his daughter's.

'Hi. Anisa,' I replied, irritated at my shyness as I shook it.

We piled into Arjun's gleaming car and drove down spacious roads interspersed with roundabouts. The two of them chatted in the front while I stared wide-eyed out the window. Delhi reminded me of Lahore, with its expansiveness, its parks and roundabouts and its surprising combination of the ancient and novel. Later, I would notice a similarity in the people of these two cities as well, in the way they tried to pin you down in the social hierarchy as soon as they said hello, their treatment of you changing drastically according to where they imagined you fell within that structure. Don't get me wrong, Karachi could be like that too; nothing surpassed Karachi in its particular brand of snobbery. But still, Karachi was more like I imagined Bombay to be. You could move with at least a bit of anonymity



there. Delhi, like Lahore, felt spatially more expansive but socially more claustrophobic. A few days into my trip, I felt – just as I did whenever I visited Lahore – scruffy and unkept, and had a sudden and urgent need to go shopping for something stylish to wear and to visit the beauty parlour for blow-dry-waxing-threading-mani-pedi-the works, which Shiba was more than happy to come along for.

Shiba's father, on the drive home from the airport, told us that his colleagues were at a fundraising gala but would meet us for dinner. He had stayed behind to pick us up.

'Couldn't miss out on receiving you,' he said, ruffling Shiba's hair. His accent had a British twang that was thicker than his daughter's, even though she'd spent a lot more time in England than he had.

'You'll enjoy meeting them,' he said to me of his colleagues. 'Wonderful chaps.'

We arrived at their house, the chowkidar opening the giraffe-height black metal gates for us and saluting as we drove past. Shiba's home was a beautiful and airy two-storey colonial-style build in the middle of the city, with marble floors, expansive verandas and ornate windows. Mughalesque furniture, patterned tiles and decorative carvings dotted the house, and floor-to-ceiling bookcases with glass doors lined the hallways. Cane chairs and tables occupied the living rooms, along with hand-loomed carpets, long linen curtains in muted colours and tall showcases. It was a carefully curated home that looked of another era, opulent in a very different way from my house in Karachi with its sliding doors, large flat-screen TVs and swimming pool. Shiba's home announced a kind of dynastic wealth that had, through the decades, absorbed into the very fabric of the sofas, a wealth embedded in the way her father spoke and evidenced by the cultural capital I saw all around me: the black-and-white photographs on the walls, the tabla set in the corner, the dusty bookshelves crammed with the so-called classics. *Their* flat-screen TVs, I would later find, were discreetly tucked away, covered demurely with old-looking Rajasthani prints (except for the massive flat screen in Shiba's TV room, which had been set up as a home cinema, with large leather recliners and a fancy surround sound system). I felt in my bones that this was the kind of family that would look down on mine. Probably not the type that would snigger overtly about 'new money' or anything like that – they'd consider that kind of behaviour crass

– but one that would find a way to say it nonetheless, through a kind of benevolent kindness or, even worse, total disregard.

I was surprised, actually, to see that this was where Shiba came from, to see, for instance, the retinue of servants at her disposal. It's not that our household in Karachi wasn't also run using the labour of servants, but in Shiba's home, it was like . . . I don't know . . . a whole protocol thing. Like, the chowkidar at the gate saluting us or the maid, Roshan, grabbing Shiba's suitcase as soon as we arrived. Even for a cup of tea or a glass of water, someone had to be summoned. In Sussex, Shiba lived a simple and independent life. She worked hard at her job and took good care of her home. She subsisted off khichri and pasta and aloo saag that she made herself with ease and skill. I had never seen entitlement or snobbery in her before and the truth is, I didn't see it now. But I didn't see embarrassment either – just a very natural easing into her setting, as if she were perfectly comfortable both ways. I tried to follow suit.

My room, the guest bed, was up a winding marble staircase and across the hall from Shiba's. It was decorated as tastefully as the rest of the house. There was a long-legged bed made of darkly stained wood that held a sturdy mattress and across from it, a beautiful hand-carved dressing table with a trio of narrow rectangular mirrors atop it – the type where you could adjust the side mirrors to see yourself from all angles. A matching cabinet and wardrobe rounded out the set, along with a single elegant bookshelf carrying novels by Hardy and Austen. A Madhubani painting of women tilling a field hung on the opposite wall, next to the long beige khadi curtains that rested on either side of the large windows. I put away my things and settled in before returning downstairs where Arjun was shuffling through papers in his study.

‘Hungry?’ he asked.

‘Starving,’ Shiba said.

‘Chalo then. Let's start. The others can join us when they're back.’

We went to the dining room, where the table had already been set. Kumar, the cook, welcomed Shiba warmly when we came in, scolding her for being away for so long. He told her that he'd made her favourite: fish fry and matar paneer, and while we ate, he went in and out of the dining room, refilling the roti box and our water glasses as needed.

‘Shiba’s been very excited to bring you here,’ her father said. ‘It’s the first time she’s sharing our world with a friend, you know.’

I blushed. ‘Yes, she mentioned that. Thank you. I’m excited to be here.’

‘We’re very careful, you understand, about who we let in. What we’re doing here is so groundbreaking, so revolutionary, that it’s important to guard it carefully.’

‘I understand completely,’ I said.

‘Shiba told me about your finding the email,’ he continued. ‘I hope it did not shock you, my dear.’

I felt a bit embarrassed. I didn’t want him to think that I was the kind of person who went snooping through other people’s emails.

‘I hadn’t meant to look. It just sort of—’

‘It’s all right. Truth is, Shiba came across the process in a similar way herself. She was only, what, twenty?’

‘Thirty,’ Shiba corrected.

‘And she just had to know what was happening. She somehow made it past my airtight system.’

‘Papa, the password was your birthday.’

‘Still. And, you know, Anisa, I wasn’t angry.’

‘You were,’ Shiba said.

‘Well. Maybe for a minute, sweetheart. But then I thought, such an enterprising young girl. She not only figured it out but also learned how, when, what, just from a collection of data. And then, once she knew, she didn’t hesitate. She immediately saw its potential. Fearless.’

Shiba beamed at this.

‘I see this in you too, Anisa. I can tell already what a bright young thing you are. Now, what do you think of how Shiba runs the place?’

‘It’s amazing, Uncle.’

‘Oh, we don’t do those old-fashioned things here. You can call me Arjun.’

I saw Shiba flinch when he said this, and I cringed a little too. I’d never called a desi friend’s dad by his first name before, but I complied.

‘Okay . . . Arjun. I was saying, she runs it like a fortress. Everything is so efficient, so carefully arranged.’

‘Not that carefully if she’s leaving emails open for Learners to read.’

‘Papa,’ Shiba interrupted. ‘I already told you. It wasn’t like that.’

‘Uncle, I mean, Arjun. Actually, that was my fault. I betrayed Shiba’s trust in that moment, and I’m sorry.’

‘She said she let you into the staff quarters?’

‘Yes.’

‘That was careless.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘No, it wasn’t. I crossed a line. It was right of her to trust me. You both can trust me.’

‘I was going to tell her anyway,’ Shiba said. ‘I mean, no offence, Papa, but she’s the first person I can properly talk to who isn’t an old man.’

‘Who are you calling an old man?’

‘I’m serious,’ she said. ‘It’s a load off my shoulders.’

‘You have the other staff members too,’ Arjun said.

‘It’s not the same. I’m their boss. I can’t speak to them the way I can with Anisa.’

‘I understand,’ he said and looked at me gravely. ‘But of course, there is a concern about privacy. You can imagine. It is a father’s job, after all, to worry about his daughter.’

‘Oh no, Unc—Arjun, you don’t need to worry about that at all.’

‘I’m happy to hear that. Because the truth is, it’s a comfort to me that she has you. Now, you must have already realized, from what you saw that . . .’ Arjun trailed off as his colleagues entered the dining room. ‘Oh, look who’s here!’

The men were all in their mid to late sixties. George, the English man, wore glasses and a light-green linen shirt. David was bald with a thick neck and biceps to match. He was dressed in a teal kurta from Fabindia. And Eric, the American, with his lean cheeks and straight, shiny teeth, was dressed in a polo shirt and chinos.

‘Ah yes, Anisa Ellahi,’ Eric said as we shook hands. ‘The new initiate. We’ve heard a lot about you. Welcome.’

‘How was the gala?’ Arjun asked them.

‘Well, this one here bid an extortionate amount for a pair of glasses,’ Eric said, gesturing towards George.

‘Not just any glasses,’ George said. He pulled a leather pouch out of his briefcase and from it, extracted a pair of delicate copper spectacles. ‘Now, believe it or not, these once belonged to the great Bahadur Shah Zafar himself.’

He ran a finger down the ornately carved copper frame of the spectacles and then held them up to the light, so we could see the gleam of the gorgeous green lenses, before informing us that the lenses were actual slices of genuine emerald.

‘Wow,’ I said, my eyes widening.

He put them on. They were so small that they made his head look comically enormous.

‘Do I dare ask how much?’ Arjun said.

George tutted and shook his head. ‘The money was for the children.’

‘For the museums,’ Eric corrected. ‘The gala was raising money for the museums, not the children.’

‘Oh yes. The museums then.’

I wanted to try on the glasses. To see what the world would look like through a pair of emeralds, but I was too shy to ask. George gingerly put them back in their pouch and turned to me.

‘Well, congratulations are in order, my dear,’ he said. ‘Few are let into the fold, you know.’

‘Thank you. I’m excited to learn more. Shiba told me the four of you came up with the idea for the Centre at university?’ I asked.

‘That’s exactly right.’

‘You must have been so young. Still in your twenties.’

‘In many ways, the mind is at its ripest then, don’t you find?’ David said.

‘Does that mean it’s all downhill for me?’ I joked.

‘Not at all, honey,’ Eric said. ‘I mean, you’re here, aren’t you? That could only mean you’re on your way up.’

‘We’ve heard you’ve already made great strides,’ Arjun said. ‘Shiba was telling us about your translations.’

‘Oh, yeah. Thank you. It’s not a big deal.’

‘We’re actually writing a book ourselves,’ David said. ‘That’s one of the things we’re working on this week. Collating our research and experiences to make a kind of testimony, or maybe a guide.’

‘I thought it was all meant to be secret.’

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘But it is important to think about what we leave behind.’

‘One must always consider legacy,’ Arjun added.

‘Absolutely,’ David said. ‘A comprehensive account, for posterity.’

‘To contextualize. Historicize,’ George added, and the other three nodded. They seemed to me a kind of four-limbed being occupying one central brain. How wonderful it must be, I thought. To have such a brilliant mind and then join forces with others on your level. It must make you feel fairly invincible.

‘It’s important,’ Arjun continued, ‘for people to know one day where it all began. For them to know what is possible if you dare to imagine it.’

‘And for the children,’ George said. ‘Let’s not forget the children. This will all be in your hands one day, won’t it, when we’re ashes and dust?’

‘Yep,’ Shiba said, taking a bite of her fish and smirking slightly. ‘That’s true.’

‘But like, how secret is it, exactly? Shiba mentioned that only the handful of employees at the Centre know,’ I probed. This idea, I have to admit, flattered me somewhat. ‘But your families must know what you do, right?’

‘George’s family knows,’ Eric said, winking at George and waving a fork in his direction.

‘My wife does, yes. She is . . . intimately familiar.’ George chuckled.

‘You see, George married one of the Storytellers,’ Eric said.

‘Jessica,’ George said. ‘That’s her English name.’

‘Oh . . . wow.’

‘It’s quite wonderful. It also means, you see, that we’ll be able to remain together, in a sense—’

‘George,’ Arjun interrupted. ‘We’re not quite there yet.’

‘Oh yes. I’m sorry.’

‘No,’ I said eagerly. ‘Please, continue. What were you going to say?’

‘I think they want to give you the grand tour first, isn’t that right?’ George said.

‘Yes,’ Arjun confirmed. ‘Anisa, how would you like to see where it all began?’

‘I’d love that.’

And so, after dessert of fruit and rasmalai over conversations about art and literature and the ‘state of India today’, Shiba, Arjun and I left the others chatting around the dinner table and walked past the kitchen – where Kumar was now bent over the countertop next to the stove, eating his own dinner – and through the creaking back door. There, between the main house and the servants’ quarters, we came to a cottage.

‘We had this built specially as our workspace,’ Arjun said, leading us in.

The cottage was made up of three or four rooms. The first was an office space, most of which was occupied by a large wooden table with two cane chairs on either side. The surface of the table was covered with files and folders, along with an archaic-looking desktop computer. Other smaller tables dotted the room. There were piles of papers on most of the surfaces, and filing cabinets covered two of the walls. The other two walls were lined with bookshelves that held row upon row of technical-looking volumes, similar to the ones I’d seen in the Centre’s library. I grazed my fingers over their spines. Some of their titles verged on the indecipherable: *Advanced Anatomical Gradations in Universe 25*, *The Pacification of the Gnostic Mind*, *A Practical Guide for the Worldly Quixotic*.

‘So this is where it began,’ I said.

‘That’s right. The four of us launched the project from this very room, before Shiba was even born,’ Arjun replied, pointing to a nearby picture frame. ‘That’s us at the time.’

The photo was of a very young and handsome-looking Arjun dressed in a blazer and flared jeans standing next to three equally young and dapper white men. The four of them, with their broad chests and languid demeanours, stood tall in front of a large green expanse and a medieval-looking building, as if they had the world at their feet.

‘That was our college,’ he said.

‘It’s beautiful,’ I replied.

We moved on to the second room, which was small and contained only a large, dark-green leather armchair, a desk, a microphone and a pair of headphones. A set of simple buttons was embedded into the table itself, the kind you would find on a music player: Rewind, Fast Forward, Stop, Play, Record. Except for the microphone, the space looked like an upscale version of the language booth at the Centre.

‘This is where we do our recordings,’ Shiba said.

‘We?’

‘Yeah, Papa and me. And the other three, when they’re here. George, Eric, David.’

‘You guys are Storytellers?’

‘Of course,’ Arjun said. ‘We wouldn’t put other people through a process we didn’t believe in ourselves, would we?’

‘What do you talk about in your recordings?’ I asked Shiba.

‘I tell my story,’ she replied. ‘Just like the others do. It’s basically just hours and hours of me recounting my day-to-day life.’

‘That sounds cool,’ I said, my fingers grazing over the buttons on the desk.

‘In fact, our very first Storytellers recorded from this room. Did Shiba mention that our first facility was right here in India?’

‘Yeah, I think she did. Teaching Hindi?’

‘That’s right,’ he said.

‘How did you find the Storytellers?’

‘Oh, it wasn’t difficult. We reached out to indentured labourers, people who didn’t want to pass on debt to their families. We took care of their debts and, in return, they came in every day to record their stories.

Sometime after that, we booked out a luxury spa hotel and marketed it – to Westerners, obviously – like a yogic, Ayurvedic, Hindi-learning retreat. We told them it was based on ancient Vedic philosophy. They love that kind of thing.’

‘I think the original advertising’s still somewhere around here,’ Shiba said. ‘You should see the illustration on the poster – a skinny man in a dhoti and turban with a snake made out of letters of the Hindi alphabet coming out of his basket. Papa, that was so cringe.’

‘It worked though, didn’t it? The Learners said we were magicians, even saints. I think they wanted to stay for ever, to become our “followers” or some such thing.’

‘Foreigners are always coming here desperate for men that they can turn into gurus,’ Shiba said, rolling her eyes.

‘But we had no interest in playing that kind of role,’ Arjun continued. ‘We just wanted to know whether the process worked. And once we knew it did, we opened up a Thai centre, here in Delhi, and when that, too, was successful, we thought we’d try multiple languages under the same roof. That became the place Shiba runs now. It had to be in England, you see, to attract the kind of clientele that wouldn’t have a problem with our rates.’

‘Makes sense.’ I nodded before asking, as soon as it felt appropriate, ‘So . . . how exactly does it work?’

Arjun flashed Shiba a look. ‘You have probably understood it somewhat by now, yes?’



I felt a little stupid.

‘Somewhat, yes,’ I said. ‘But how *exactly*?’

‘It is, essentially, an energetic exchange. The methodology is complex, meticulously developed. I think best to explain when you’ve caught up further on your own, don’t you?’

‘Sure,’ I stammered. ‘Whatever you think is best.’

We entered the third room of the cottage, a small kitchen with a two-burner gas stove and a small fridge.

‘We needed a place free from prying eyes, and often worked late into the night, so we set up our own little station here to make chai coffee and reheat food. In fact, Shiba, sweetheart, will you make us some tea now?’

‘Of course.’

While Shiba set the water to boil, Arjun and I made our way back to the office. I looked at the photo of him with his colleagues again. I could see where Shiba got her sharp eyebrows and prominent nose, her glinting eyes and thick hair. Arjun stood behind me and looked at the photo over my shoulder.

‘We met at the chess club, you see. Eric was a physicist and George there was studying biochemistry. David was studying anthropology, and I was reading PPE—’

‘PPE?’ I asked.

‘Oh,’ he said and let out a little chuckle, as if I was so very sweet and stupid for not knowing. ‘Politics, philosophy and economics, dear. But I also considered myself something of a linguist in those days. Like you, I hear.’

‘Kind of—’

‘Soon,’ he interrupted, ‘the four of us became bosom buddies. Then, one day, we were talking in one of our rooms. Well, don’t tell Shiba this part, but, in those days, you know, various substances were in vogue as well. I mean, mind-altering stuff. It was an experimental age. So yes, we had taken a little something.’

‘Ahh, okay.’

‘I’m not as fuddy-duddy as you thought, am I?’

‘No. I mean, I didn’t think you were . . . fuddy-duddy.’

‘Okay. Good. Well, as I was saying, the four of us were sitting there, sharing our research and ideas and experiences, and to this day, none of us

is sure where the idea came from. It just formed itself, right there. We were sitting in a kind of square, and there, in the middle, the idea arose, like vapour. And as we kept talking, it started to take shape. I remember George sharing about ancient wartime practices, and then David talked about some mind-hacking techniques he'd learned in the IDF. We kept sharing, adding, refining, until, to our own surprise, we had created a whole new thing. Oh, it feels like yesterday, when I think of it.'

'It sounds like . . . an exciting time.'

'There is nothing so stimulating as the creation of a new idea. In that moment, it feels like anything is possible. Like you've plucked a cloud out of the sky, and it's turned into a swan.'

'Or maybe like childbirth?' I offered.

He nodded to himself. 'Yes, more like the swan I would say.'

Shiba returned with a wooden tray that held three teacups, a small jug of milk and a matching sugar bowl. Her father reached for his cup without looking at her, as if the tray were levitating of its own accord. He poured himself some milk and a spoonful of sugar before lifting the cup up to his lips.

'It truly was a wonderful time,' he said, still caught up in his own nostalgia.

Watching them, I found myself wondering what role Shiba's mother had played in all this. Shiba told me that she'd been only twelve years old when her mother passed, and from then on, her father had taken on the role of both parents. She'd also had a loyal maid who'd raised her as if she were her own.

'Did Auntie . . . um, Shiba's mum . . . know about all this?'

'Oh no, of course not. The four of us agreed early on to maintain total secrecy. She left us to it.'

'I see.'

'You see this computer here?' he said, gesturing towards the bulky desktop. 'This is from the nineties, believe it or not. But even this we didn't have when we first started. To conceptualize something so novel with technology now considered so antiquated, well, I don't think you girls could even imagine the challenge of that.'

Arjun continued sharing story after story from those times while we sipped our tea around the large wooden table. He told us these tales as if

recounting great myths from the Mahabharat, resurrecting the ghosts of the young men who had conjured this magical thing. It felt as if he were taking the room itself back in time, and I was honoured to be in a space of such significance. The green leather armchair, the table full of dusty papers, everything around us took on an air of practically sacred importance. It almost made me want to bow in reverence, and everything that I didn't like about myself, all my inadequacies and insecurities, melted away at the thought that, surely, I must be quite special too, if I'd earned an invitation here.

Shiba also listened in starry-eyed rapture, glancing at me every now and then, happy to see me basking in the glow that she had enjoyed since she was a small child. Eventually, though, the two of us succumbed to our jet lag. We returned to the main house, where Shiba and I ascended the marble staircase to our rooms while Arjun poured himself a whisky in his study.

The next day, we met again at the breakfast table, where the men were already tucking into masala omelettes. They asked me slightly patronizing questions then about where I'd gone to uni and what my parents did. Sometimes, I enjoyed this treatment, like when Arjun had made the 'bright young thing' comment or when they said how pleased they were that Shiba had found a like-minded friend. But it also felt somewhat dismissive. After we finished eating and Kumar had cleared the plates, the men nodded at one another as if to say, 'Okay, time to get back to the *real* work now', and retreated into the study. Arjun told Kumar on his way out that they would be taking their lunch in there, working through the afternoon. Before he shut the study door firmly behind himself, he turned to us with a wink and said he would see us at dinner.

\*

The rest of our days in India followed in this vein, seeing the men at breakfast and not again until evening time. In between, we usually went sightseeing, which was an absolute blast. Shiba knew the city like the back of her hand. She took me to bookshops and outdoor cafes, dhabas and concert halls, hidden-away nihari joints and bustling marketplaces, mosques and mandirs, dargahs and gurdwaras, talks and plays. We travelled everywhere by auto (that's what they call rickshas there), and I met her

friends, who were super fun. We walked in Lodhi Gardens and ate shakarkandi ki chaat and gol guppay in the street. We went shopping in Delhi Haat and Sarojini Nagar. And you know . . . I kind of hate to say it, but I have to admit, I felt *safer* in Delhi than in Karachi. *Much* safer. Safer travelling by ricksha, safer browsing through markets, safer walking in parks. I know Delhi, too, is an unsafe place for women, but compared to Karachi, not as much.

‘The narcissism of small differences.’ That’s a phrase coined by Freud. ‘Der Narzissmus der kleinen Differenzen.’ It means, I think, that when two things are very similar, you end up inflating the small differences between them far more than you would the larger differences between two less similar things. I think this is the game that India and Pakistan play, and so I felt a strange conflict within when I would notice such things. But yeah, the truth is, I hate to say this, but Pakistan is not kind to women. And sometimes my secret, awful thought is that by moving to England, I *escaped*. Then I start to feel like this thought comes from the white supremacist in me. The traitor. But being in Delhi, which was so different and yet so the same, well, it made me sad to see all that *could be* in my own city.

But, yeah, let’s not overstate the matter. In many ways, Delhi was lethally unsafe, and I found myself occasionally circumventing a certain spewing of hatred by answering, when people asked where I called home, that I was from Bihar or Lucknow. (In those places, I figured the Hindi accent probably sounded the most like mine.) Not being visibly Muslim was also, I could tell, useful to me in India, and I felt for my sisters and brothers struggling with an everyday Islamophobia that was even more deeply rooted, pervasive and hostile than that in England, and also, even more state-sanctioned, positively encouraged. Again, not that Pakistan is kind to its minorities . . . but this comparison game leaves me talking in circles. All patriotism, in the end, is patriarchal and deadly.

Anyway, after our sightseeing, we’d come home and chill for a while. Then, every evening before dinner, Shiba would spend about an hour in the cottage, recording her story, while I read a book in the living room. Arjun would often, at this time, conveniently take a break from his work and saunter in from the study for a chat.

‘What are you reading?’ he asked one evening.

I'd selected a Henry James novel from one of the tall bookshelves lining the hallway.

'*The Turn of the Screw*,' I said, showing him the cover.

'Ah, I see. I've never been one for fiction myself.'

'It's pretty good, I think. A bit hard to understand.'

'For you? I doubt that very much,' he said.

'No, it is. It's dense. Confusing. I keep losing my concentration.'

'You youngsters, I tell you. All of this YouTube shoetube has shortened your attention spans.'

'I'm not that young.'

He looked at me then, with a raised eyebrow.

'No. No, I suppose you're not.'

I don't know if I'd meant to infuse my words with innuendo. Sometimes, it feels as if it's just hardwired into my system – a compulsion towards people-pleasing, maybe stemming from an early sexualization and an intuitive understanding of the power in pandering to sleazy uncles. That power, of course, is totally false, but maybe I reach for it anyway, unconsciously. The other possibility is that my words had been innocent, and Arjun was the one who infused them with another meaning with his raised eyebrow and conspiratorial tone of voice. Maybe he had started it even earlier, on that first night in the cottage when he'd told me that thing about the illicit substances. By asking me to keep a secret from his daughter, he had made me an ally. An accomplice. I noted it all, the raised eyebrow, the tone, the regular strollings in for chats while Shiba was away, but I responded as if I hadn't.

'He writes in a way that's deliberately obscure,' I pivoted back to the James novel. 'Unclear.'

'I know what obscure means.'

'Of course.'

'Tell me,' he asked. 'How did you get so smart?'

'I'm not that smart.'

'My daughter is very smart, and if she values you so highly, you must be too.'

'We're just . . . on the same wavelength, that's all.'

'Well. I'm glad she's made such a close friend. It's good to have you here. I hope you keep coming.' He smiled and raised his glass towards me.

‘Drink?’

‘I’m good, thanks.’

‘Okay, well. You know where to find me,’ he said and gave me a wink.

‘Back to work.’

He was cliché, Arjun Uncle. Of another era, with his moustache and his flattery, his sharing of confidences, and now his offer of a drink. But at the same time, he held the answers to the burning curiosities within me, not just regarding the Centre, and Anna and Peter, but something deeper. I felt that he held something mysterious, unnameable, precious and ephemeral, something that I would never have access to. At least not in this lifetime. But proximity, I thought, could help. And so his attention both flattered and repelled me, and I’d even started reconsidering my refusal of his offer for a drink when Shiba returned, yellow USB dangling from her wrist. Each of the foursome carried a similar USB on which they backed up their recordings, plugging them into whichever device they were using.

‘How was it?’ I asked.

‘It was fun. I actually find it very cathartic, ending every day like that.’

‘I can imagine,’ I said. ‘What did you talk about today?’

‘Oh god, so random. Literally whatever came into my head. I think at some point I was even talking about the renovations to the Centre. Hey, you feel like going out tonight?’

‘Sure.’

In the evenings, after dinner with the uncles, Shiba and I would often go out, either with her friends or by ourselves. My favourite place that we would go to was the top of the Park Palace hotel, where we reclined on lounge chairs that surrounded the rooftop pool – a glowing blue oasis. Here, we usually ordered a luscious chocolate fondue that came with pieces of brownie, strawberry, pineapple and banana. We would sit there for hours, pecking on the fondue, sometimes ordering a cocktail, soaking in the breeze and chatting. These nights out felt decadent and luxurious. I imagine, though, that it sounds like peak ignorance and privilege to be feasting poolside while children begged for money on the street just below, but sometimes it felt like it was this very thing – the chaos and noise, the poverty so close to our faces – that made our retreat into luxury all the more alluring. The rooftop was a haven from the blaring horns and the dying poor just steps away.

And it's the same in Karachi. A sense of futility seeps in when you're exposed, so closely, to the way the world is. In the West, they keep it all at a distance. The old, the poor, the dead – outsourced, deported and dismissed, hospitalized and imprisoned, or else bombed via remote control. But here, it's all mixed together in such a way that the rich, in panic, put on their blinkers. I don't know. Maybe I'm just trying to justify the decadence. It's messy and hard to explain, to reconcile in my own mind, but we all contain multitudes blah blah blah, point is that's what we would do sometimes: chill in fancy bars and eat chocolate fondue. And we would get dressed up for the occasion. It turned out Shiba had a separate 'Delhi wardrobe' in her possession, a collection of fancy tops and dresses, expensive bags, jewellery, and high-heeled shoes. She shared these with me generously.

'If we went out here like we do in England,' she said, handing me a pair of dangly pearly earrings, 'in jeans and trainers, they probably wouldn't let us in. Here, try these on.'

It was just another way, wasn't it, to solidify the markers around class, to make any permeability between them more difficult? I felt that discomfort even while I relished my borrowed sparkly handbags and tinkly earrings. Such a contrast to cold nights out in sticky-floored London restaurants, to being in my jumper *all the time*. Also, I felt, frankly, beautiful in the slinky tops and flattering trousers, the elegant earrings and nicely done hair.

The uncles had differing reactions when we wished them goodbye before our nights out. Eric, sweet and paternalistic, would look at us the way one would a baby or a blooming flower, with a kind of nostalgic marvel.

'Ah, to be young again,' he would say and then tell us to be careful and not stay out too late. The next morning, he would ask us what we'd gotten up to and remind us to drink more water and wear sensible shoes. 'The feet,' he would say. 'You realize later that the most important thing is to take care of the feet.'

As for David, I felt like he looked at us with something like admonition.

'You won't be cold?' he asked Shiba pointedly once, causing her to self-consciously tug at the hem of her dress.

'She's fine,' I said. 'It's warm outside.'

And Arjun and George, well, if I'm honest, I sensed a desire in their gaze. George responded to his by quickly turning away and busying himself

when we came downstairs. And Arjun. Well, Arjun and I would look each other straight in the eye.

‘You look nice,’ he would say.

‘Thanks,’ I’d reply.

And I would see, in his eyes, a hunger. It embarrassed me a little, but I considered it harmless. And maybe it also flattered me. I carried Arjun’s gaze with me to the bars and restaurants that we went to and would bask in this suddenly sexy body that I occupied. My limbs felt longer, my tummy flatter, my skin unblemished, my entire body supple and lithe, as if it were in communication with the attention it received and was altering itself accordingly.

\*

The days passed in a whirl of sightseeing, culinary feasts, and beautiful things. One evening, though, my wavering attention was finally brought back to the hovering ghosts and unanswered questions. Shiba and I were walking by the study, and the men met us with their usual smiles and questions like, ‘You girls having a good time?’ and ‘Have you been shopping?’. Shiba happily responded, in a tone of voice that shifted, ever so subtly, into a register closer to a child’s. I had been feeling a growing irritation at the men’s condescension and Shiba’s complicity, so I asked her about it.

‘How come you used to be so annoyed at being excluded that you went ahead and discovered the truth about the Centre yourself, but now you’re happy to let them get on with it while you run the bit they’ve left behind?’

‘It’s different now,’ she said. ‘I’ve realized that the best way forward isn’t trying to get them to change, Anisa. The way is to change things yourself.’

‘How?’

She shrugged. ‘Strength, patience . . . and most importantly, fearlessness.’

I felt like she said that last word, fearlessness, kind of pointedly, and that she was doing that thing again, of beckoning me somewhere deeper. I suddenly felt embarrassed at my own complaisance, at not having pushed harder to get the answers I’d been promised, and decided to finally address the matter that night over dinner.



Kumar had made a delicious-smelling chicken roast that evening, and Shiba and I waited at the table for the men to emerge from the study. By the time they did, chatting animatedly about the prospect of buying a farmhouse or something like that, the chicken was cold. They took their seats, continuing their chat. Then Arjun ruffled Shiba's hair.

'All well, sweetheart? Did you have a fun day?'

She beamed in response. 'Haan, Papa, all good.'

Arjun started to call for Kumar to cut the chicken, but I stopped him. I found myself saying that I'd like to do it.

'Be my guest,' he said.

I stood and picked up the large knife and two-pronged skewer that lay on either side of the bird and examined it, trying to figure out where to begin. I'm not an expert chicken carver or anything, but I had done it before, and I'd felt a strong urge to do it just then, as if carving up this bird for the hungry mouths that surrounded it, the way I'd sometimes cut up my nephew's food for him, would be an antidote to the infantilization I'd been subjected to earlier. I ran the tip of the knife gently over the chicken, trying to establish some kind of rapport. Then, I picked a leg. I stuck the prongs in and began to carve. The meat was tender, and it detached easily, the hip bone popping without protest. Next, I took the thigh apart from the leg with the cracking of a slender bone, and then I gently detached the wings. The sternum, though, was not so elegant; I messily hacked and sawed through ribs to remove the breasts. In the end, two succulent morsels remained on either side of the lower back. I removed them last and popped one into my own mouth. My final handiwork was not perfect, but it was fine.

David, however, ruined my reclamation of adulthood by saying, once I was done, 'Very good job, dear.'

I sat back down and helped myself to the juiciest-looking leg piece.

'We have still not addressed the matter of Anna.'

The table fell silent.

'I would like to know how, exactly, she died.'

There was some shuffling of chairs, some throat clearing.

'Obviously, she died of natural causes,' Arjun said coolly. 'Surely you are not imagining otherwise?'

'It's hard to know what to think since I haven't yet been told anything, really,' I said. 'I would like to know now, please. *Exactly* how this process

works.'

'Well,' Arjun said. 'You only had to ask, my dear. You see, we wanted to make sure you were ready. For all we knew, maybe you had decided that you didn't want to know after all.'

'Of course I want to know.'

'All right then, after dinner, we'll tell you everything.'

And so, after dinner, which was slightly rushed, Shiba, Arjun and I once more made our way to the cottage, where finally, the truth emerged.

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## Chapter Ten

We sat in the office, on the cane chairs around the large table. Arjun and Shiba were procrastinating, talking about the weather one minute, offering tea the next.

‘You were going to tell me about Anna?’ I interrupted.

‘Yes,’ Arjun said. ‘She was elderly, as you know. And she died of heart complications. It ran in her family, apparently.’

‘All right . . .’ I said.

‘As for Peter, he was diabetic. He had already been diagnosed when he signed up to be a Storyteller.’

I paused for some moments.

‘Are . . . all the Storytellers dead?’

‘The Storytellers whose stories you hear at the Centre, yes, they are.’

‘Is there a reason we’re playing twenty questions here? Are you trying to tell me that the Storytelling itself induces death, is that it?’

‘Of course not,’ Shiba said.

‘Now, the most important thing to know is that everything that happens here is consensual. Anna was fully aware of what she signed up for,’ Arjun said.

‘Which was?’

‘As I said, an energetic exchange. A transmission. From her, into you.’

I was quiet, looking at them. Shiba was fumbling with her hands. Arjun spoke again.

‘You must understand, to some degree, what is going on.’

Shiba got up and walked over to one of the bookshelves.

‘One way to understand,’ she said, reaching for a book, ‘could be this. She rifled through it and then began to read: “All union, all spiritual interactions, can be expressed by eating. In friendship, one truly partakes of

the friend, or feeds on him. To substitute the body for the spirit or indeed, the intellect, is a genuine trope. At a remembrance meal for a friend, we enjoy, with daring, sensual imagination, his flesh in every bite, his blood in every gulp.”

‘What?’

‘Just listen,’ she said. ‘I think this next part is beautiful: “This certainly seems barbaric to the soft and delicate preferences of our time, but who tells us to think precisely of the raw, decomposing flesh and blood? The physical assimilation is mysterious enough to be a beautiful metaphor of the spiritual meaning – and are blood and flesh really so repulsive?”’

Something was trickling in, a vague suspicion solidifying.

‘What happens to the Storytellers?’

Shiba sighed. ‘Anisa. You already know.’

‘How exactly do you transfer the energy?’ I asked again.

‘We incorporate the transformative elements into the Learners’ diets,’ Arjun said.

‘Meaning?’

‘Anisa, come on. You know what we’re saying, right?’ Shiba said.

‘You . . . ingested the Storytellers. Physically.’

I froze.

‘Peter, who makes cassoulets for his father, who liked playing with LEGO blocks as a kid . . . are you telling me I *ate* him?’

‘You assimilated him. Yes.’

I laughed. ‘Okay, stop. No, I didn’t.’

Shiba looked at me gravely.

‘This is not a new practice, dear,’ Arjun said. ‘It has been tried and tested throughout time.’

‘That is . . . oh god.’

‘Just listen—’

‘Oh my god.’ I groaned and clutched my stomach. It felt sore and distended.

‘You really had no idea?’ Arjun said.

Shiba started pacing, panicked. ‘This is why I wanted to tell her slowly, piece by piece.’

‘I’m going to be sick. I feel . . . poisoned. Oh god. I can feel them inside me.’

‘No, you can’t. You’ve long since digested them,’ Arjun said.

‘Please, Anisa, don’t react this way,’ Shiba pleaded.

‘How else would someone react? What about Anna? I loved Anna.’

‘Anna emptied your bin once.’

‘She was a human being.’

‘And what happened, tell me, after you assimilated her? She’s living on. Through you. *In* you. She was dead, Anisa. She passed away. The Storytellers, they *choose* to do this work. They sit down and record the stories of their lives, and they do it because they want to live on.’

‘They choose to do it?’

‘Of course! How else would we have access to their stories? Anisa, listen. You told me yourself about what Anna gave you. How life-changing it felt. You need to think of it like . . . organ donation.’

My heart was racing and my skin felt clammy.

‘She donated her body?’

‘Yes!’

‘Knowing she would be consumed?’

‘Yes. Of course. She worked there. She knew all about it,’ Arjun said.

‘To be clear,’ Shiba added, ‘not all Storytellers know exactly what we’re going to do with their bodies. I think some prefer not to. But they all consent to their bodies being used after their passing, in some way, for the process. Anna, though, had full knowledge. She cleaned the kitchen every day.’

At Shiba’s mention of the kitchen, I saw in my mind’s eye once again the silver double doors at the end of that dark hallway. That room, I suddenly and inexplicably knew, was a kitchen. I saw that Arjun was studying my reaction carefully.

‘There’s a long history behind this, Anisa. It’s something humans have always done. You know, people used to drink the blood of their enemies during wartime – they said it gave them the strength and knowledge to defeat them. That’s how nations were conquered, back in the day.’

‘I’m not interested in conquering nations.’

‘You’re clearly interested in some kind of conquest, though, right? Even if it’s just taking control over your own life. Society has turned these practices into awful, disgusting acts that need to be hidden away. But it doesn’t have to be that way.’

I turned my gaze to the ceiling to field wave upon wave of nausea.

‘We have tapped into something groundbreaking here. It’s clearly just outside the bounds of your imagination at the moment,’ Arjun said.

‘What about *my* consent, huh? What if I’d had a bad reaction and died?’

‘There is no danger of that, my dear,’ Arjun said. ‘We have the best scientists overseeing the process, neutralizing all potential toxicities. And we’re proactive. The specimen is treated for optimal ingestion even before the last heartbeat.’

‘Oh god,’ I said, bringing my hand to my mouth. My watering eyes darted towards the door.

‘Anisa, calm down,’ Shiba said, walking towards me and trying to place a placating hand on my arm. ‘You have to understand—’

‘Stop!’ I said, pulling away from her. ‘Why are you doing this to me?’

‘She wasn’t ready,’ Arjun said.

‘She is, Papa. It’s shocking news. Give her time,’ Shiba said.

‘You’re right to say she’s smart. Curious and open-minded. But she’s too frightened of crossing a line.’

‘I mean, no disrespect, but the line you’re talking about is pretty out there,’ I spat.

‘The truth is,’ he continued, ‘very few people can see beyond their prescribed little boxes of good and bad, wrong and right. To digest an idea yourself – an idea that hasn’t been predigested – very few can do that. Maybe that’s the reason you like to translate. You can transmit ideas, but you’re too scared to come up with your own. Ultimately, you’re afraid of your own insides. *That’s* why the concept disgusts you so much.’

I looked from Arjun to Shiba, Shiba to Arjun. Their words were making me dizzy.

‘You’re playing games with me.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Shiba said. It was unclear who she was addressing. ‘It’s a lot. Maybe we should have waited—’

‘I . . . it’s not that I can’t . . . digest new ideas,’ I sputtered and rubbed my chest, trying to keep the sickness down. ‘But let’s be clear. Cannibalism. That’s what you’re talking about. That’s what you do.’

‘Just listen to how you say it. *Cannibalism*. Tell me, what image pops into your head when you hear that word? Cannibal?’ Arjun asked.

I stumbled. ‘What . . . I don’t know—’

‘These are age-old rituals, Anisa. And they can be incredibly powerful. Absolutely transformative,’ Shiba added.

‘But it’s disgusting,’ I interrupted. ‘You can’t deny that it’s disgusting.’

‘But that’s what I’m trying to explain to you. It’s not inherently disgusting. Our bones and muscles, they carry unimaginable wisdom, immense capability. It’s for that very reason that these practices have been demonized, made to seem primitive, barbaric. But there is nothing inherently revolting about flesh and blood,’ Shiba said.

‘In the animal kingdom, this is a commonplace interaction,’ Arjun continued. ‘Underwater, in fact, over ninety per cent of organisms engage in the practice.’

‘What?’ I asked, feeling disoriented.

‘It’s a perfectly natural strategy employed often, across species. For nutrition. Or population control. And perhaps other reasons we’re not yet aware of. And then, of course, there is also sexual cannibalism – this is usually when the female consumes the male, either during or after copulation.’

Shiba smirked when Arjun said this, but quickly wiped the expression off her face. Her reaction amused me for a second before I remembered what we were talking about.

‘You said that you’re both Storytellers. So, you’re going to . . . do the same, then? You’re going to leave your bodies to the Centre?’

‘Yes,’ Shiba replied. ‘It’s better than being buried in the ground, isn’t it? What a waste that would be.’

‘The truth is,’ Arjun added, ‘we’ll end up in the ground eventually anyway. But this way, we’ll pass through another being on our way there. I think of it as doing one last round before the grand finale.’

‘A kind of prolonging,’ Shiba chimed in, ‘an extension.’

‘And you don’t feel weird about being, I don’t know, chopped up, cooked in a frying pan?’

‘No weirder than being burned to ashes in an even bigger oven at the morgue,’ Shiba retorted.

‘Or being wrapped up in fabric and left underground,’ Arjun added.

‘Also,’ Shiba explained, ‘it’s not like what you’re imagining. It’s done with more care than that—’

‘It’s true,’ Arjun interjected. ‘Each specimen, you see, can feed up to five Learners. We process and extract the raw materials carefully before adding them to other animal meats, a kind of melange, if you will. Of course, we do prepare some of the particularly palatable regions in the more *traditional* manner. After a certain age, the meat can become fairly tough, but’ – he put his hand on his lower back – ‘tenderloin in particular—’

‘I don’t need to know the specifics,’ I interrupted.

‘Of course. My apologies.’

For a while, nobody spoke. I could feel Arjun and Shiba looking at each other and at me expectantly.

‘And you said this began here? With indentured labourers?’

‘That’s right,’ Arjun said. ‘We tried to pick elderly ones, since we wanted to get the process moving quickly. You’d be surprised how difficult it is to find older labourers. Most of them die around sixty. That is, if they even know how old they are. Many don’t. We had to estimate. If their teeth had fallen out, that was usually a good sign.’

‘Sixty’s so young,’ Shiba said to her dad. ‘You’re sixty.’

‘Life expectancy for the poor,’ I said, ‘at least in Pakistan, is fifty-five, maybe sixty. But for the rich, it’s equivalent to Western lifespans, about twenty years longer. It must be the same here.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘My father,’ I said. ‘He’s a medical professional.’

‘Sounds about right,’ Arjun said. ‘They die obscenely young, poor chaps. And the debt these people accumulate is unbelievable.’

‘It’s passed on through generations, that’s why,’ Shiba said.

‘But then how consensual is it? If you’re using test subjects who have no other choice?’ I challenged.

‘My dear, it was *more* than consensual. They were desperate for us to take them, for our help. And it felt good, I must say, to give them that last bit of relief.’

‘I . . . I’m not sure I want to talk about this any more,’ I said.

Shiba and Arjun exchanged another apprehensive glance.

‘Of course,’ Shiba said. ‘Look, we don’t ever have to talk about this again if you don’t want to.’

‘No, I want to. Just, not tonight.’



We walked back to the main house, and I went straight to bed, lying there, wide-eyed, for what felt like hours. Suddenly, I was keenly aware of what a stranger I was to this city. How I had absolutely nowhere to go. How I knew literally nobody outside this household. I hadn't even bothered to learn street names. I imagined sneaking out into the darkness, past the servants and the chowkidar – where even was my suitcase? Roshan had tucked it away somewhere, and even if I did manage to leave the premises, then what? Getting an auto at midnight? Was that safe? And finding a guest house or hotel? Would it be best to make up a Hindu name? How had I let myself become so helpless, so absolutely dependent?

I suddenly, desperately, missed my dad. 'What's up?' I texted him, but it stayed unread. He was obviously asleep. I didn't want to worry him or anything, just to say hello and feel the comfort of our familiar routine. He'd respond, 'The sky. What's down?' and I'd message back 'The ground, what's sideways?' It's surprising, the things you crave in moments of distress. But no response. So I texted Naima.

Are you there?

She replied a few minutes later.

You're up late! Partying with Shiba?

I miss you

Same hun! Look at your little meowster

She sent a photo of Billee, curled up on her bed. I started to cry and didn't respond. Eventually, I suppose I fell asleep.

\*

The next morning at the breakfast table, the men greeted me with sympathetic looks. I couldn't eat a bite and told Kumar I wanted only chai. We sat quietly for some moments before David broke the silence, asking how I'd slept.

'I dreamed I was being eaten by earthworms,' I replied in a dry monotone.

"Those are pearls that were his eyes", George quoted.

‘Huh?’

‘Shakespeare,’ he explained. “‘Nothing of him that doth fade, but both suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange.’ The earthworms eat you, thereby you become the earthworm, and then you eat another.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I asked.

‘He means, my dear, that you are both the earthworm and she whom the earthworm consumes. It is beautiful, this cycle,’ Eric explained.

‘The dream wasn’t beautiful,’ I said. ‘It was scary.’

‘Fear is a blockage. A way to stop you from looking further,’ Arjun said.

I turned to George. ‘You said your wife is a Storyteller?’

‘Yes.’ He smiled. ‘The beauty of this process is that we can keep each other close even after we are gone. Now, how many other couples have that opportunity?’

‘You’ll . . . consume her, when she’s gone?’

‘If she goes first, then yes, that is the arrangement.’

‘And if you go first, she’ll consume you?’

‘I did offer, but the idea didn’t seem to interest her much.’

My head was fuzzy, and my throat felt like a bathtub plughole clogged with hair. But it helped to hear Shiba and the men speak with the same levity and wisdom as they had before; it made me feel like perhaps nothing had really changed, that I was only suffering from the shock of learning something that needed time to sink in. So I sat quietly as the conversation flowed around me.

David’s eldest, he shared, was starting university soon. He was frustrated that the boy still had no idea what he wanted to do, and Arjun was advising patience, saying that he would find his way. Shiba, who had been fairly quiet, also chimed in, sharing a story about her indecisive friend who had, almost magically, neatly braided together strands of a life that had once seemed totally tangled.

‘Let him do what he likes,’ she said. ‘Give up all control. Eventually, that’s what’ll happen anyway.’

‘But he doesn’t know what he likes,’ David said.

Slowly, I too was drawn into the conversation, and the table, warm and friendly, welcomed me in. Eventually, my tummy started to grumble.

‘Have one bite, na,’ Shiba said, offering me a nawala of omelette paratha.

I took it. It was tasty.

After breakfast, Shiba and I spent the whole day indoors. I felt like I had PMS or a bad hangover, my head throbbing and my body not wanting to move. Shiba, gentle and accommodating, played sweet Coke Studio tunes and brought me tea and snacks while we lounged in her room, not talking very much. Eventually, we transferred ourselves to the TV room, where we sank comfortably into the large leather recliners.

‘Veer-Zaara?’ Shiba suggested, clicking through the options on the screen.

‘Yeah, okay,’ I said.

Shiba clicked play. She called out to Roshan, who was dusting outside, and asked her to tell Kumar to send up some popcorn.

‘Kumar Bhai!’ Roshan hollered down the stairs. ‘Shiba Baji popcorn maang raheen hain.’

Kumar, from below, sent confirmation.

Shiba turned to me and said, ‘Wasn’t it funny when Papa said that thing about sexual cannibalism?’

I groaned.

‘Oh. Sorry. Too soon.’

‘No, no. It was kind of funny,’ I relented. And then, despite myself, I smiled. ‘The female consumes the male, either during or after *copulation*,’ I repeated, mimicking Arjun’s voice.

Shiba laughed. ‘I’ve looked it up. Apparently, sometimes male spiders make sure that their partners are full before they approach them for sex. To make sure they won’t get eaten afterwards.’

I laughed. ‘No they don’t.’

‘They do. I swear.’

‘Well, good strategy, I guess?’ After a pause, I asked, ‘Do Anna’s daughters know what happened to her?’

Shiba shook her head. ‘Storytellers aren’t allowed to say anything to their families. She just told them that she’d chosen to have us take care of everything in the event of her death. I think they found that strange, but they accepted it nonetheless.’

‘And you said not every Storyteller knows that they’ll be eaten?’

‘That’s right. But they all know that their bodies will be used in some capacity.’

‘Did Peter know?’

‘He didn’t know what would happen precisely, but he was excited to donate his body to the cause. He was fascinated by our work and had completed the course himself a couple of times.’

‘He never mentioned. How come none of them talk about the Centre on their recordings?’

‘Some of them do, but we delete the references for now.’

I asked Shiba whether she spoke openly about the Centre’s secrets when she recorded her own story.

‘Well, no, personally, I don’t. But for all I know, Papa and the others do. Maybe by the time they pass away, people will be more open-minded about the whole thing, and we’ll be able to leave those bits in.’

‘I think that would be nice. For people to know exactly what they’ve signed up for.’

‘You think people would still do it, if they knew?’

I thought about this for a moment before responding. ‘I think they would. You’d be making it clear to them that it was all consensual, right? Maybe the process would go even deeper if they knew.’

‘Yeah, maybe.’

I wondered then what my story would be like if I were to tell it. I hoped I wouldn’t be all bone and grit and chewy leather, but not too creamy or saccharine either. My story needed to simply be true, I decided. I’d speak with as much honesty and clarity as possible, and, surely, that would translate into something nourishing.

‘You know, I actually feel closer to Anna and Peter since I found out,’ I admitted.

‘Yeah?’

‘I think so.’

The opening credits of the film rolled on the screen in front of us.

‘Do you want something to drink?’ Shiba asked me once the popcorn arrived.

‘Pepsi?’ I suggested.

‘Roshan, Pepsi bhi!’ Shiba yelled.

‘Kumar Bhai! Pepsi bhi,’ Roshan passed along.

From that evening onward, when we sat around the dinner table, I felt included to a wholly different degree. The uncles began to share, with remarkable nonchalance, the intricacies of the Centre’s operations. They

spoke so lightheartedly of donations and transformations, of plans for expansion and the great potential of it all. And the truth is, there was something intoxicating about being in the midst of their conversation. It started to feel as if I'd entered the place where the *real* things happened, as if I had pushed through a tear in the fabric of the world and could now see the invisible mechanisms setting everything in motion. Well, okay, maybe not *everything*. But I saw that there were levels of control, layers of power, between man and God. These men had been on a different layer from me, but now I was up there too, and once you've been up there, the mechanisms would never be invisible again. It sometimes seemed monstrous up there and other times holy, but it didn't really matter which; the important thing was just being there. I tried to commit every moment to memory, every word, every sight. I wasn't sure why, but it felt imperative, somehow, to remember it all. And soon, I found that I'd stopped seeing anything wrong with the process at all. Somewhere along the way, I had decided that it was no greater a sin to ingest a human being than it was to ingest, say, a cow. Or, arguably, a melon, which is also a living thing. Who was it that decided my flesh was more sacred than, say, Billee's, or Billee's more sacred than a chicken's, or a chicken's more than a pea's? No, that was pure speciesism. It was us humans, as always, adamant on our own superiority.

And so I asked Shiba, a few days later, 'Do you think I could record my story too?'

She looked at me, surprised.

'Do you want to?'

'I do.'

# Chapter Eleven

At first, I didn't know where to begin.

'Just begin from the beginning,' Shiba said, handing me a yellow USB drive that she'd fished out of the filing cabinet in the cottage.

I tried following her directive, starting with howling Libran child pulled out via C-section at Al-Shifa Hospital, but the story came out all garbled, so I deleted it and began again. This time, I started not from the beginning but from the Centre. From when I first met Adam, more or less. And then I just spoke, for as long as I wanted and in whichever direction I pleased. I was aware that all the Centre bits might be deleted, but I didn't mind. I mean, I hoped they wouldn't be, but either way, that's just what wanted to come to me in the moment, so I let it. Every morning, I would enter the recording room, USB in hand, and confide and confess, narrating my days into the machine as if it were an exceptionally good listener of a friend.

Then, before we knew it, our time in India was drawing to a close. George, Eric and David left for their respective home countries two or three days before Shiba and I were set to return to the UK ourselves, leaving just three of us around the dinner table.

The night the men flew home, Shiba and I made plans to go to a bar in Hauz Khas with some of her friends. I put on a silk navy blue halter top of Shiba's, a pair of my own black skinny jeans and some dark plum-coloured lipstick. Once we were dressed, Shiba went to the cottage to do her recording, and I went downstairs to the living room. I opened my book and read distractedly until Arjun walked in, on cue, about five minutes later.

'You look nice.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'We're going out later. How are you? Missing your friends?'

'It's always hard when they leave. But we'll be back together soon.'

‘To summon up more swans from the centre of the holy square?’

‘Something like that.’

Arjun and I had developed a kind of playful teasing by then, a banter that flirted with the flirtatious. The conversation often seemed to revolve around his accomplishments, both with work and with women.

‘Uff, when I was your age,’ he would say, ‘I just assumed it would always be that way, women lining up around the corner. But how things change. Take advantage while you can, Anisa. I’m sure you have men lining up by the dozen, no?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘Well, in that case, the world must have really changed. Nobody does courtship any more, do they? We used to woo women back in the day. Really woo them. You know what I mean? Now, it’s all this Tinder-shinder. Swipe, bang, and then next please, hena?’

Our conversations would often veer, in this way, into the sexual.

‘I don’t know . . . I guess so.’

‘Are you still reading the same book?’ he asked, taking a sip of his drink. I was on the sofa, legs curled under me, the Henry James in my hands.

‘Yep.’

‘Enjoying it?’

‘Think so. It’s a bit weird.’

‘What’s it about?’

‘Among other things, there’s a hint of desire in it for someone of an inappropriate age.’

‘I see. You believe in all that, then? Rules for who you can and can’t desire?’

‘Depends,’ I said, feeling like I couldn’t be bothered to clarify that the desire I was detecting in the novel seemed to be for a small child. ‘Anyway, what are you up to? Still working away?’

‘As always,’ he replied. ‘You know, it still sometimes shocks me how groundbreaking this work is. Mark my words, Anisa. Game-changing.’

When he said this, I saw in my mind’s eye people a hundred years from now coming across a black-and-white photograph of Arjun in their history books (although, I suppose a hundred years from now it would probably be more like a hologram or something). Anyway, they’d see this photo, and they’d say, ‘That’s him. The Inventor.’ And, maybe, there in the

background would be . . . me! Just chatting with Shiba or, I don't know, doing my recordings or whatever. And there would be a footnote labelling who I was. I felt a sudden urge to take a selfie with Arjun, but restrained myself.

'I can translate your book for you, if you like,' I said. 'When the time comes?'

'We'll see,' he said. 'I do find myself thinking, though, that if we could discover this process merely by exercising our minds, well, just imagine the vast undiscovered that still remains. This is just the tip of the iceberg, you know. The very tip.'

'Tell me more,' I said, 'about this iceberg.'

'What we're doing, Anisa, for *humanity* . . . one day, you'll understand.'

'I don't want to understand *one day*. I want to understand now.'

'Such a curious cat,' he said and gave me a wink. The words sounded very different coming from his mouth than they had from my mother's. 'Come. Have a farewell drink with me.'

I agreed and followed him into the study where he reached into his cabinet and pulled out a squat crystal bottle.

'Neat?' he asked, and I said yes, even though I didn't know what that meant.

He handed me my drink, and I looked around the room as I took a sip, the liquid moving warmly down my throat. The large desk was covered in papers, and on the walls were photos – some old, faded auburn, others more recent.

'Tell me then,' I said. 'What got you interested in doing this kind of work in the first place?'

'You know, I think it was luck. Us four meeting; being so highly ambitious. It was simply right place, right time.'

'Yes, but I guess I'm asking, what was it that made you so highly ambitious in the first place?'

'Oh . . . well, I don't know. I just was. Always have been. My father' – he gestured with his glass towards a photo on the wall – 'he was a great man. One of the most successful industrialists in India. Shiba must have told you.'

'Actually, no.'



‘Well, he was really something. And I was his eldest son. It was important to him that I also succeed, that I innovate. He liked that word a lot. Innovate.’

I stood next to Arjun and examined the photo. It was a faded print of a man in a suit, standing in front of a Rolls-Royce, arms crossed, cigar in mouth. In the background, you could make out his house, another large colonial-style build. Three blurry women in saris were sitting on the white marble steps that led to the front door. Two of them carried babies in their laps.

‘Is one of those you?’ I asked, pointing to the babies.

‘Oh.’ He squinted at the photo. ‘It’s possible. I can’t tell.’

‘You think he would be proud of you now? Your dad?’

‘Oh yes, he most certainly would. In fact, if he had stuck around a little longer, maybe I could have kept him here.’

‘Kept him?’

‘Yes.’

‘You mean, you would have ingested him?’

‘No. I mean I would have kept him alive. Strong, healthy, trim. I would have wanted him to see where I am now, where I’m going.’

‘You can’t really *keep* anyone here, right? Not for ever.’

‘*Anything* is possible, my dear. If you can conceive of it, it’s possible. It’s those of us who can imagine beyond the boundaries who make things happen.’

I looked at him and felt a similar reverence as when he’d first given me that tour of the cottage, a kind of rise in my own stature at being granted access to his mind.

‘You know, now that I think about it, there was one other thing.’ He refilled our glasses. ‘It wasn’t just my father’s ambitions. I remember, it was also my being in England. Something changed in me while I was there. That was where I decided I would do something great with my life.’

‘Why England?’ I asked.

‘You see, here in Delhi, I was always treated like a prince. Then I went to England and, suddenly, I was a second-class citizen. Things were different then, you see, in the seventies.’

‘Things are still like that.’

‘No, no. They were truly terrible then. They would call you names.’

‘They still do that.’

‘Not like this. They treated you like you could never be one of them. And I just wanted to say to them, “Do you know who I am?”’

Involuntarily, I laughed.

He looked annoyed. ‘What?’

‘I’m sorry. It’s just, “Do you know who I am?” Doesn’t that make you no better than them?’

‘Not like that. What I’m saying is, if . . . if people treat you like you’re not worthy, you need to rise above them.’ He made a fist, bringing it down on the table for emphasis, as if crushing a tiny little man. ‘You need to show them who you are. It’s the only way.’

‘The only way?’

‘I was shocked by the bad treatment. Appalled.’ His accent turned more British as he spoke. ‘Really, how dare they? And some of these people were just off the streets, you know? Lower-class types.’

I winced, but said nothing.

‘Of course, those chaps at Oxford never treated me differently. They wouldn’t dream of it. But I hid from them the way I was treated elsewhere. Except, oh god, I remember once, when I was walking with Eric down the high street, someone was passing us. Ruffian type.’

‘Oh god, Arjun. Stop. What does that even mean?’

‘Oh, you have a problem with that word, do you? Listen to this. He spat on the ground in front of us and then he said “bloody p\*ki”, just like that, under his breath—’

‘The p-word.’

‘Huh?’

‘I would prefer it if you called it the p-word.’

‘*P-word*, don’t be ridiculous. *He* called me that. If it’s allowed from his mouth, we can certainly say it.’

‘Who’s “we”?’

‘Okay, regardless, he called me a p\*ki, and I wanted to say to him, you fucking imbecile, I’m not even Pakistani!’

‘That’s a fucked-up thing to say.’

‘I . . . oh . . . Anisa. You know I don’t see you that way.’

‘What way?’

‘Well, as a *Pakistani*, or anything like that.’

‘I am Pakistani.’

‘It’s all the same to me, darling. You’re one of us.’

Indians did this to me all the time, this weird colonial swallowing up, this ‘we’re all the same’, which inevitably became ‘partition should never have happened’, which then turned into a full-on mourning for their completely fictitious long-lost perfect India of yesterday. They saw Pakistan, the entire country, as some kind of travesty, a broken-off piece of themselves that had turned rotten and sour once severed from its root. It was fucking annoying, but whatever, I let it go.

‘Anyway, what happened then, after he said that?’

Arjun paused and took another sip. ‘Well, so Eric and I were walking, and the man said “*the p-word*”, and we both heard it . . . but we pretended we didn’t. I saw Eric’s ears turn red like a tomato, but we kept walking. The truth is, the fact that the man had said it was less humiliating than the fact that Eric had heard it. That man made Eric see me that way – see my colour.’

‘You think Eric didn’t already know you were brown?’

‘Not brown like that. You wouldn’t understand. Things are different now. But Eric’s behaviour changed for a while after that. He treated me differently. And I had to prove myself all over again.’

‘That must have been painful.’

‘It was what it was, but I wasn’t going to just surrender. I was my father’s son, after all. Ah, it’s been so long since I thought about all this.’ He exhaled deeply and continued. ‘But something else happened too. Something much worse. Not something I enjoy looking back on. There was this pub, you see, around the corner from where I lived. Gora pub. The King’s Head. And I would go there, by myself, every Thursday. Just sit there and have a pint. Sometimes I would buy everyone a round. I wanted to show them that we could all be friends, that we were not so different.’

‘Oh god, is this some kind of pro-assimilation story?’

‘Huh? No, just listen. So I went one Thursday, then the next, and then the next. People got friendly. It felt good. I felt like I was overcoming something. They even bought me a round sometimes.’

‘Uh-huh. And then?’

‘And then one day, there was a big cricket match on. India versus England.’

‘Oh no.’

‘Well, I told myself, that’s fine. You’ve got friends there now. And anyway, if they ask you who you support, just say England.’

‘That’s horrible that you’d have to say that.’

‘No, Anisa. That’s not horrible. What’s horrible is it didn’t work.’

‘What happened?’

‘I don’t want to get into it. I’ll just say, there was hospital involved.’

‘Oh god.’

‘That’s not even the worst part. What happened to me . . . it spilled out into the street. And afterwards, I was just lying there, bloody nose, like a bum on the pavement. And then someone came up to me. A man. He gave me some water. Lifted me up by the arms and said he would take me to hospital.’

‘Thank god.’

‘I remember his arms pulling me up. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you,’ I was saying. And then I opened my eyes and saw his face.’ Arjun paused. ‘It was the Bangladeshi man who ran the curry house across the street.’

‘And?’

‘Oh god. It was the most humiliating experience of my life. At the hospital, I told him, “Go away, go now, my friends are coming”.’

‘You told him “go away”?’

‘I didn’t want people to know.’

‘Know what?’

‘I didn’t want them to think that he and I were the same. I didn’t want *him* to think it.’

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing.

‘I decided, never again. Never again will I be humiliated this way. You know, I’ve never told anyone that story. Even when George and David and Eric arrived at the hospital, I made it sound like it was some drunken brawl. It meant so much to me that they didn’t see me *that* way. And, well, after that, I worked hard. So hard. And I made it. Look,’ he said, gesturing towards a photo of him with Bill Clinton. ‘Today, nobody will dare say anything to me.’

‘That man, though, who took you to hospital. Did you ever go back to find him?’

‘I just want to forget it happened. To focus on where I am now. My father would be proud.’ He caressed his glass, circling back now. ‘He was a great man.’

‘Yes, well,’ I replied, edging towards the door. ‘I should probably get going.’

‘We are moving mountains with the work we’re doing. Mark my words, it will be in the history books,’ he said.

‘You’ve done well,’ I said, my voice taking on the soothing intonation it sometimes shifted into when the feathers of a male ego were being ruffled in my vicinity. ‘Really good work.’

‘You think so?’

He looked at me with a kind of gratitude then, and for the first time, I felt like maybe I too had something to give this man, that our relationship wasn’t totally one-sided. He wanted, no, *needed* my comfort in that moment, and surely, I could provide it.

‘Of course,’ I continued softly. ‘If anyone ever saw you as less than, that’s on them, not you.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, and looked at me in a way that made me feel suddenly self-conscious.

‘Of course.’

He cleared his throat and turned away slightly. I wondered if he felt embarrassed about showing vulnerability in front of me and whether I should have been more delicate in reassuring him. Men often want to be comforted without feeling as if they’re being comforted. He opened his mouth as if to say something and then shook his head.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘Tell me if it’s not my place. But I don’t think I can let you leave without telling you at least once that I think you are gorgeous. Just beautiful. Is it okay to say that?’

I flushed. ‘No, it’s fine. Thank you.’

‘You never know, in these times, what is okay to say.’

‘It’s fine,’ I said again.

He came towards me then and reached for my face. Like a frightened bird, I flinched and then immediately laughed in mockery of my own reaction.

‘Sorry,’ I said, and he looked amused.

He reached again, this time towards my side, and moved the tips of his fingers down the length of my arm. I felt a tingle pass through me and didn't move a muscle, didn't even meet his gaze. Then he placed his palm behind my neck and turned my face towards his. He looked so soft. Soft in a way I had never seen him look before. George and Eric and David, even they, I was sure, had not seen this side of him. Nor Shiba. No, only I had access to this side. I looked into his eyes, trying to decipher what was being asked of me. Before I could come to a conclusion, he brought his face towards mine and kissed me on the side of my neck. A long, extended kiss. He caressed my back, my shoulders, my breasts, all the while kissing my neck. Then he kissed me on the lips, his hands on my butt and then between my legs. I let out a whisper of a moan. Then, softly, he put his right hand on the top of my head and gently pushed downwards.

That gesture. The hand on the head, the suggestion of a push. I'd felt it before. More times than I'd like to admit. How many times, over the generations, would you say that soft spot on the top of the scalp has been suggested downwards by an insistent hand? I think probably so many that our collective scalp has an indent there. So many times that now, when the hand nudges, the body bends, almost instinctively, to satisfy the urgent need. Maybe because we think that with that little steer, we're being given directions that lead, ultimately, to the heart. Or maybe it's because we know that behind that subtle palm lies an iron fist.

Except now, we know better. The women who encountered the pushy hand before have told us about it; they've gathered their testimonies, these women, and shown us red flag after red flag. Our sisters have spoken, past their shame and sorrow, past their rage and fear, so that we may recognize things like a subtle push, a stray set of words, for what they are. So that we may make out the gleam of the headlights while the train is still far away enough for us to jump off the tracks. And so, I did. I jumped. I resisted his push with a counter push, so that on the surface it appeared no pressure had been exerted at all.

And then I said, 'Listen, I should go. Shiba will be back any minute.'

'Oh. That's fine. I didn't do anything wrong, I hope?'

'No. Of course not. But I should go.'

Or . . .

What if I didn't do that? What if, instead, I felt the push and thought, nah, those aren't the bright lights of an oncoming train. That's simply the reflection of my own glow. And in that moment, all the times I'd been burned in the past, all the advice that my sisters had walked through fire to transmit to me, all the raised eyebrows of concern that I had myself issued to girlfriends, evaporated. And I responded to the push by looking up at his face, and he gave me a look that said 'please' in such a way that I felt a rush at having power over this man who had seemed all-powerful. Suddenly, it felt like he was at my mercy, and I wanted nothing more than to respond to his 'please' with an 'of course', so I knelt. I unzipped his trousers and guided his dick into my mouth, and he moaned, and I kept going. And then I felt another push. At the back of the head this time. An instruction to go deeper. And again, I complied. And after a while I darted my eyes around and saw that we were on a very expensive-looking Persian rug, and I didn't want to make a mess, so when the time came, I swallowed, and when he saw me swallow, he moaned again with what seemed like total admiration. And there I was, holding his spent penis, basking in his momentary gratitude. And then he lifted me up and kissed me on the lips and . . . that was it.

Moments later, a kind of embarrassment crept into the room. He started clearing his throat, and he walked towards his desk and rustled some papers around.

'Yes. Would you . . . have you had anything to eat, dear? You both should eat before you go out.'

He sounded apologetic, which made me, in turn, ashamed. I suddenly didn't know what to do with my arms. They felt long and gangly lying by my sides. I picked up my empty glass for no reason. A vague urge to destroy myself passed through me. But I swallowed that down too.

And that's when I said, 'Listen, I should go. Shiba will be back any minute.'

'Oh. That's fine. I didn't do anything wrong, I hope?'

'No. Of course not. But I should go.'

One of those two scenarios unfolded. Let's just say it was the former, that I didn't stupidly bend to his wishes. The second would be, after all, too degrading. Either way, he kissed me on the cheek to say goodbye, and that kiss felt like a kind of contract between us.

‘You won’t tell Shiba?’ his kiss asked.

‘It never happened,’ my cheek answered back.

As I was leaving, I turned to look at him. He had his back to the door and was facing the photograph of his father once more. He raised his glass to it.

‘Innovate,’ he said softly before taking a sip.

In a daze, I went upstairs to Shiba’s room to wait for her. My head felt foggy, and my thoughts jumbled, so I lay on her bed to rest for a moment. My body was like lead. I felt it grow heavier and heavier until it was as if it sank through the bed itself and into the ground. Then, having fallen beneath the surface, I was swimming in the depths. An enormous octopus approached me. It unfurled a sharp shard of steel from its tentacle into the palm of my hand and waited, as if offering that same tentacle for me to cut off. I hesitated, looking up to see how far beneath the surface I had sunk, and heard a voice. It was Shiba. Her voice guided me back to the surface.

‘Why didn’t you wake me?’ I asked groggily.

‘You were knocked out. That’s Kiran on the phone. I was telling her we’d be late.’

‘No, we won’t, I’m ready to go.’

‘I’ll call you back,’ she said and hung up. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Oh yeah, yeah,’ I said, sitting up. ‘I’m fine. Let’s go.’

‘You’re drunk.’

‘No I’m not.’

‘I can smell it. And you look terrible.’

‘I was just resting. I had like, a glass or two, that’s all,’ I replied and stumbled out of her bed. ‘I’m fine.’

‘You don’t look well. Have you been crying?’ she asked. I’m not sure if I had been before or not, but upon hearing those words, I burst into tears.

‘Anisa! What’s wrong?’

‘I just – I don’t know why I’m here. I don’t know if it’s right,’ I spluttered.

‘What? If what’s right?’ She sat next to me and wiped my tears. ‘What happened?’

‘It’s just, everything. This whole Centre business. Do you really know what it even is?’

‘Huh? I thought we’d been through this.’

‘Yes,’ I spluttered. ‘But where’s the line, Shiba? Where’s the line?’



She moved away from me.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Those four,’ I said. ‘Have you ever asked yourself *why* they’re doing this?’

‘Where were you just now?’ she asked.

‘It’s just about the stroking of their own . . . egos. That’s all,’ I blubbered.

‘Are you listening to me, Anisa? Where were you just now? Were you with my dad?’

‘Uh, yeah, we were just chatting, in his study.’

‘And drinking?’

‘He was just telling me some stories, about his father and—’

‘He loves to tell his stories.’

‘Yeah, I guess.’

‘Especially to the ones like you.’

‘Oh yeah? And what about the ones like *you*?’ I deflected. ‘Have you ever asked yourself why you’re working for them?’

‘You are so drunk.’

‘Tell me, how long are you going to play at being daddy’s little girl?’

‘Ha! Daddy’s little girl? Anisa, trust me, I’m walking into this situation with my eyes wide open. If you had just stayed with me a little bit longer, you would have seen. Instead, you shifted your attention to those guys the minute we got here.’

‘That’s not true,’ I said defensively.

‘No?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, trying to sound sober. ‘But I’m seeing things clearly now. And I’m asking you something serious. Are you sure this is what you want to do? Sometimes we inherit things we may not actually want.’

She laughed bitterly. ‘You don’t get to choose what you inherit. You think I haven’t thought about this? I have had years to consider. But thank you, really, for your input after a week of seeing what my life is like.’

‘You know you’re never actually going to be given a seat at their table, right? They’re just humouring you. And anyway, you shouldn’t even want it. It’s covered with blood, that seat.’

‘I thought you of all people would understand. Anisa, I have to own my life completely. If there’s any hope for transformation, that’s where it lies.’

Don't you get it? Even if the seat is covered with blood, if it's being left to me, I'll be able to . . . clean it,' she said. 'Only cowards run away.'

'No, Shiba. I don't think that's true. I think, sometimes, it's the cowards who *don't* run.'

'I don't want to be mean, Anisa, but none of this is actually your business.'

'Okay. Fine. I'm sorry.'

'Look, we're flying back in two days – I want to spend that time in peace. I don't want to hear any more about this. And I *really* don't want you hanging out with my *dad*, for god's sake. Frankly, it's a really weird way to treat someone who's showing you hospitality.'

'I wasn't . . . it wasn't like that. I just—'

'Can you go to your own room now? Why are you even in my bed?'

And so I stumbled across the hallway and into the guest room. I took a seat in front of the hand-carved dressing table and looked into the rectangular mirror. Kajal was running down my face. It had formed clumps in my inner eye and collected in the crevices beneath my lower lashes. One of my earrings had fallen off, and the halter top that I had been admiring myself in earlier was now sticky and uncomfortable. It looked too shiny against my skin, and the armpits were stained with sweat, the fabric crumpled. I squinted at my reflection. Through the glaze of tears and kajal, I could see my mother in there, looking back at me. Was she . . . ashamed? I couldn't quite tell. I looked harder and saw my grandmother there too, and her mother also. With the palm of my hand, I swiped across my eyes and forehead, spreading the kajal more. Then I swiped across my lips, smearing a lipstick-kajal combination around the bottom half of my face. I turned the two side mirrors inwards so I could see my head from all angles. My hair was messy, but it looked too prettily dishevelled, so I stuck a hand in and pulled out some tufts at random to create a more monstrous effect. Satisfied, I continued to examine my reflection.

One of my favourite writers is Adrienne Rich. Her writing is ferocious, like a blade cutting into your intestines. I once read in a tribute to Rich that another writer, Elizabeth Hardwick, had said of her, 'She deliberately made herself ugly and wrote those extreme and ridiculous poems.' Who would say such a thing, I had thought at the time, how very mean. But now, I thought of those words again.

‘She deliberately made herself ugly; she deliberately made herself ugly . . .’ I repeated the words over and over to myself while looking at my monstrous face, and I felt a snarl come to my lips. I leaned into it, baring my teeth and let out a hiss. I imagined Adrienne in the mirror, snarl-smiling back, telling me that actually, from a certain angle, Hardwick’s comment was a compliment, that to make yourself deliberately ugly in a world demanding beauty was a goddamn feat. Alongside her and me in the mirror, I then saw Seema, Nabila, Sara, Saba . . . Naima, Kavita, Khwaja, Arifa . . . Warner, Dickinson, Mingus, Ahmed . . . all the faces of those who had, throughout my life, been quietly beckoning me to the place where appearance was irrelevant, where, to see the truth of the thing, ugliness needed to be welcomed in unreservedly. I was being filled up with something in that moment and tears were streaming down my face to accommodate it. I stared and snarled like this for god knows how long before finally crawling into bed and falling asleep.

I woke up the next morning hungover and exhausted. Shiba wasn’t at the breakfast table, so I asked Kumar for some coffee and then knocked on her bedroom door. I found her in bed, watching Florence and the Machine music videos on her laptop.

‘Can I come in?’

‘Yeah, okay.’

‘Can you turn it down a bit?’ I asked as I sat beside her. Florence, on the screen in front of her, was levitating in a purple robe.

‘It’s fine, I can hear you.’

‘Listen, I’m sorry. I was being . . . overemotional last night.’

She looked at me carefully before replying. ‘I couldn’t stop thinking about what you said.’

‘It’s not my place. Like you said, I’m your guest. I overstepped.’

‘You need to understand. This is my family. I live with the repercussions of *everything* that happens under this roof, whether I like it or not. People can’t be coming in and tearing things apart.’

‘That’s not what I was trying to do. I’m sorry, Shiba. I think I just wanted to make sure . . . this work, is it really what you want?’

Tears gathered in the corners of Shiba’s eyes. ‘I thought you would have trusted me enough by now to understand that I know what I’m doing.’

‘Talk to me then. Tell me—’

She looked away. ‘Last night, I saw a side of you that I didn’t know existed.’

‘I wasn’t trying to hurt you,’ I said, and reached for her hand. She pulled it away.

‘Listen,’ she snapped, ‘let’s just forget this happened, okay? I don’t want it to spoil the rest of our trip.’

‘Shiba—’

‘I’ll get dressed and see you downstairs later, okay?’

‘Okay.’

\*

Although we’d made amends on the surface, Shiba was cold towards me from then on. She also postponed her flight back to England by a couple of days.

‘Nothing to do with you, obviously,’ she said, not looking me in the eye. ‘Just wanted to spend a little more time at home. You okay to fly out by yourself?’

‘Of course.’

I tried to appease Shiba in every way I could think of, to show her that I was still the same person she’d thought I was. But I think my efforts were so obvious that they came across as artificial. Things felt forced between us from then on, and I could feel in my bones that our friendship was over. As for Arjun, I was civil towards him but avoided him as much as I could. When Shiba did her recording that evening, I stayed in my room. The next morning, while I was heading out to the cottage to do mine, she stopped me.

‘You’re still doing that?’

‘Well, it’s my last day, I thought I might as well finish. It’s become kind of a ritual for me. Don’t worry, I’ll leave the USB here with you after. You can do with it what you like.’

She nodded, and I continued to the cottage. There, in the filing cabinet, I found another USB and copied all that I had recorded of my story onto it. On the original, I deleted everything after the point where I entered the Centre for the first time. On the second, I kept the recording, and continued further. Then, the morning of my flight, I gave the first USB to Shiba and tucked the second into my suitcase.

There was one last thing to do before I left Delhi. I went into Shiba's room while she was downstairs and opened her bedside drawers. Nothing. Then I checked her bookshelves. Nope. Then, her dressing table, and there it was. I carefully unfolded the cardboard and extracted the magpie's feather. I put it in my bag, encasing it in a slender box that had come with a necklace I'd bought from Sarojini Nagar. The feather, I realized, hadn't drifted onto my balcony for Shiba. I had been mistaken. It had come as a gift for me. I brought my luggage downstairs and hugged Shiba goodbye. We were both misty-eyed. Then I rolled my suitcase down the driveway and towards the large black gate, finding not my Uber, but Arjun, car keys in hand.

'I sent your taxi away. I thought I would drive you to the airport myself.'  
We drove in silence for a while before he finally spoke.

'I couldn't help but notice,' he said, 'that we have not spoken since that . . . interaction in my office. I had quite a bit to drink that night. I hope that I did not say or do anything that embarrassed you, my dear.'

'You didn't.'

We resumed our silence.

'I hope I did not cross a line.'

'Nope.'

'Good. Well, I'm happy that everything is fine. I would never want to get in the way of Shiba's friendships, you know, and I would never want anyone to get any silly ideas.'

'It's fine. The truth is, things like that can be quite revealing, don't you think?'

I saw his grip on the steering wheel tighten.

'Revealing in what way?'

'Oh, I don't know,' I said. 'Things like that make you see things differently. Reassess.'

'You sound angry,' he said, jaw clenched. I shrugged. 'I'm sure there's no reason to even ask, but we can be sure of your discretion regarding the work we do, yes?'

I said nothing.

'You must understand. This isn't a family to be trifled with.'

'Ha,' I snorted. 'Okay. Thanks.'

‘I hope you are aware of just how privileged you are, being granted access into this world. And think of how much further people can go when they recognize the value of what they are given. It would be childish, after all, to play with things you do not understand.’

‘I . . . I wasn’t actually planning on saying anything.’

‘Good,’ he said, and something ignited inside me.

‘But, yeah, if I wanted to, I could.’

He pulled the car over onto the side of the road.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Now. Tell me. Seriously. What would you like? All we are asking for is your discretion regarding our work. You are already obligated to this, as you’ve signed ironclad paperwork. But if there is anything we can do to sweeten the deal, name it.’

I smiled. ‘You’re desperate for my silence, aren’t you?’

‘You understand, of course, that it would not take much for us to find something to leverage against you, if needed. Everyone is so careless these days, with their iClouds shy-clouds.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I asked. ‘Do you have something on me?’

‘There is little that we do not have access to, my dear. Have you not realized that by now?’

I laughed. ‘You’re just trying to scare me because you’re scared.’

‘How do you think Shiba would feel if she found out about everything you’ve been up to?’

I snorted and rolled my eyes. ‘It would be much worse for you than for me if she found out about our so-called *interaction*.’

‘Not that,’ he snapped. ‘I meant your little break-in at the Centre. Taking advantage of her trust to steal the access code. Sneaking into the kitchen after she fell asleep—’

‘The kitchen?’ I asked, confused. A vague picture materialized in my head. A spacious, darkened room. An industrial-size fridge. A rectangular sink. I couldn’t be sure if this was a memory or just my brain conjuring images in response to his words. ‘Do you mean that room at the end of the hallway? How did you know I was there that night?’

‘Did you honestly think we wouldn’t have a system in place to contain security breaches?’

‘Contain?’

I felt deeply unsettled, but I wasn’t going to let him have the upper hand.

‘You think I fucking care? Tell her. And go through my iCloud too. Be my guest. Use every fucking tool in your ancient handbook, man. You’re only resorting to threats ’cause you know you can’t buy me off.’

‘Oh, don’t fool yourself, darling,’ he said. ‘Everyone has a price.’

‘Listen, Uncle-ji.’ I pointed to the time on the dashboard. ‘I don’t want to miss my flight, okay?’

He turned on the ignition and carried on driving towards the airport. We didn’t exchange another word.

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## Chapter Twelve

When I told Arjun that I wasn't scared of him, it was mostly bravado. The truth is, I knew that man could harm me in ways deep and long-lasting, whereas I could hardly ruffle a hair on his head. But there was one thing I could do. I could, finally, reach out to Naima. I texted her the day after my return.

I'm back. How's chotu Billee?

Oh yay. B's a fluffball as always.  
I'll drop him off tonight?

Yes please.

'You okay?' she asked when she saw me a few hours later.

She set Billee's carrier down and unlatched it. He emerged, sniffing cautiously before we commenced our rituals of reunion.

'Hai chotu Billee. Welcome home,' I cooed and petted him. He let out a little *meep* in return and instructed to touch noses.

'You look tired,' Naima said. 'Jet lag?'

'A little. What's this?' I asked, pointing to Billee's expanded tummy.

'You didn't play with him?'

'He doesn't like to play. Only wants twenty-four-seven belly rubs.'

'You have to make him. Look.'

I found a ribbon toy and waved it around in the air. Billee raised his head and looked at it with rounded pupils for a second before flopping over on his back.

'Told you. So, what did you get up to? Did you see Humayun's Tomb or whatever?'



‘I saw so many things, and I need to tell you about all of it, but first, oh my god, the invite. It’s beautiful.’

While I was away, Naima and Azeem had set a date. The wedding was in six months, and she’d sent me the invite that morning. I lingered on the topic because I wanted to make up for hurting Naima. Also, I didn’t want to jump straight into my news without properly honouring this development in her life first. Whether I approved or not, I’d decided, was irrelevant. In fact, I figured that if things did go badly (which they would), she’d be more likely to come to me afterwards if I supported her now.

‘I’m excited,’ I continued. ‘We should start dance practice soon, there’s barely any time.’

She scrutinized me. ‘Are you sure you’re happy about this?’

‘Naima’ – I embraced her. ‘So happy.’

She softened with relief. ‘Oh, thank god, ’cause you’re right. There’s so much to do. So much to fill you in on. I got worried, you know, while you were away, that I’d been replaced in the best-friend department. Tell me if I have, okay? I can take it.’

‘Well, firstly, never. But also, truth is, I’m not sure Shiba and I are friends any more.’

‘Oh no, why?’

‘It’s a long story. Actually, Naima, about that. There’s something I need to show you.’

I flipped open my laptop, plugged in the yellow USB, and showed her the audio file.

‘It’s pretty long. Like, several hours—’

‘Please don’t tell me you two recorded an album.’

I laughed. ‘No. Nothing like that. It’s just, I’ve been uncovering this whole . . . situation. It’s bizarre. Surreal. And I need your help. I wanted to tell you earlier, but I didn’t have the words.’

‘What is it?’

‘It’s all in here. The whole story, start to finish. Would you listen to it?’

‘All of it?’

‘Please.’

‘Can’t you just tell me?’

‘I wouldn’t know how. And some of it is just . . . it’s just not stuff I want to repeat. Just take it home with you. I’ll make you a copy.’

‘I want to listen to it now.’

‘Yeah?’

‘At least the beginning. Just make us some tea, and I’ll sit here and listen.’

And so, after swearing her to secrecy, I handed her my headphones.

‘Can I listen without?’

‘If you want to.’

‘I’d prefer it that way.’

I went to put the kettle on and Naima pressed play. When I returned with the mugs of tea, I heard myself repeating Naima’s own words.

*You are searching for the reasons for your discontent outside yourself, when the discontent itself is the reason for the discontent.*

Naima hit pause.

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘I mean, maybe not that *exactly*, but definitely something like that.’

‘It sounds like you’re taking the piss out of my livelihood! Why are you so cynical?’

‘I wasn’t taking the piss.’

‘Do you mention how I told you Mercury was in retrograde the day you met Adam?’

‘I don’t think so. I can put it in if you want.’

‘Obviously put it in.’

‘Okay, I will. I really wasn’t taking the piss, by the way.’

‘Well, even though you’re not portraying me in the best light, I’m still flattered you started with me.’

‘Who else would I start with?’

‘Correct answer. Now go and do some work or something, it’s weird to have you hovering over me while I listen.’

I went to my room, leaving the door ajar so I could listen to Naima listening to me. I heard myself recounting my relationship with Adam, our trip to Pakistan, his confession about the Centre, and then my visit to her flat before my interview. She hit pause again at this point and popped her head into my room.

‘Is that really what we asked for in our manifestations?’

‘I think so.’

‘Hmm, it’s good to remember. I should write them down, stick them up on my wall. Oh, but I have to make sure to amend them over time. It’s not good to have your manifestations set in stone—’

‘I don’t mean this in a bad way, Naima, but you seem to be the most interested in the bits involving you. Are you even listening to the rest?’

‘Of course I am. It’s about the Centre, isn’t it? I can tell.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Okay, so quiet then. But hey, listen, are you hungry? Shall I make us sandwiches?’

‘I can heat up some daal chawal?’ I offered. ‘Does that work?’

‘Perfect.’

‘Great.’

‘By the way,’ she added, ‘what’s up with that “I wish I’d had an arranged marriage” stuff? Do you really believe that?’

‘I dunno. Just popped into my head. You see my logic, though, right?’

‘Not at all. You know those matches were based on things like caste, class, skin colour, right? It’s all about keeping the money in the family. You can’t be romanticizing that shit—’

‘Naima, okay. Maybe. But it’s better than romanticizing the romance shit. That’s what you do.’

‘What does that even mean?’ She laughed and threw a cushion at me.

‘I don’t know. But this isn’t the time. Just . . . keep listening.’

And so she kept listening while I heated up our food. I handed her a bowlful and she responded with a thumbs up.

A little while later, she paused the recording again, and I heard her get up to use the toilet.

On her way back, she nudged open my door. ‘Hey.’

‘Hi.’

‘What’re you doing?’

‘Just reading. What do you think so far?’

‘The swoon.’

‘Oh god.’

‘We must address the swoon.’

‘Ahh . . .’

‘Do you fancy her?’

‘Naima.’

‘Tell me.’

‘I described what I felt the best I could.’

‘You fancy her.’

When I was recording the tape, I had this vague idea that it would be listened to, I don’t know, fifty or sixty years in the future, and by then, all illusions around gender and sexuality would have dissolved. And anyway, I wouldn’t be around any more to be questioned about it. But now, I found myself stumbling.

‘Yeah, I guess. Maybe.’

‘Did you want to kiss her?’

‘Oh my god, stop.’

‘Did you want to kiss her, yes or no?’

‘Maybe. I mean, if she’d wanted to . . . I don’t know, Naima.’ I paused. ‘Sometimes, it felt like we were both just waiting for the other to extend her hand.’

‘I feel like this is a side of yourself you should explore.’

‘Why, though? Like, why actively pursue it? Why endure the drama if you have a choice in the matter?’

‘It’s important,’ Naima said. ‘Otherwise, parts of you will forever remain unwatered.’

I thought of Azeem then and felt a stirring of resentment towards Naima. I felt like she’d never admit, even to herself, just how much her own choice of partner had to do with the comfort of heteronormative conventionality, of, basically, box-ticking. And yet here she was advising me to take risks? But I didn’t say anything, and thank god I didn’t, because soon after she went back into the living room and pressed play again, my scathing account of Azeem and Naima’s early relationship sounded loud and clear. I’d said that he was putting out her fire, that his wokeness was all for show and that he was shallow and unworthy. I’d even called Naima complicit in the whole thing. Billee and I sat on my bed, his ears pricked and mine burning, while that endless section played. We listened for the tiniest sound from Naima: a sigh, a laugh, a groan, a snuffle, but heard nothing except my own annoying voice. It was only after my discovery of the email about Anna’s death that she returned to my room.

‘Did they kill her?’

‘No.’

‘Oh, phew. What’s going on then?’

‘It’s complicated—’

‘How come you didn’t tell me about this before?’

‘I don’t know. I wasn’t sure what it meant. But keep listening. It gets worse.’

‘Oh my god, just tell me.’

‘No, you have to listen.’

‘Okay, fine.’

She turned to head back to the living room, but I stopped her. ‘Um, Naima? Those things I said about Azeem—’

‘Babe, please.’

‘I didn’t mean them.’

‘It’s all love, love,’ she said and brushed a strand of hair from my face.

‘Thank you.’

‘Is it making you swoon, when I do that?’

‘Shut up.’

‘You know, you make it sound like we talk about men a lot.’

‘Do I?’

‘Yeah, first Adam, then Azeem. It’s that stereotype, that women have nothing to talk about but men.’

‘I don’t think I make it sound like that.’

‘Well, I think it’s true. We’re always talking about them. They don’t do it, you know. When men get together, they don’t sit around trying to analyse the inner workings of our minds.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I just do. They talk about *man* stuff. About being *manly*, out there in the world, getting man things done. Men, you see, consider themselves independent beings, but we see ourselves only in relation to them.’

‘I mean, aren’t we kind of doing it again now, talking about men?’

‘Shit, yeah, I guess we are. But it’s fine. Right now, we’re trying to understand them so that we can defeat them,’ she declared, raising her fist in the air. ‘In fact, you know what? If you share this with anyone else, can you end it as if I broke up with Azeem? That’ll come across better. We’ll sound less man-obsessed.’

‘Are you breaking up with Azeem?’

‘Nah, still got that old ball and chain. Say I said that, okay? Ball and chain.’

‘Ball and chain. Noted.’

‘I’m gonna have to stay the night. You know that, don’t you? I need to finish the whole thing now.’

And so Naima stayed over, listening to the recording until the early hours of the morning. When I woke up, she was waiting for me at the kitchen table.

‘Okay, so first of all . . .’ she said, then paused.

‘Yes?’

‘I don’t really say fuck that much. Is that your way of trying to inject people with personality?’

‘You’re kidding, right? *That’s* what you have to say?’

‘Of course I’m kidding. Anisa. What the fuck? It’s obvious what we need to do.’

‘It is?’

‘We have to give this whole thing to the police like, basically, yesterday.’

‘That’s the last thing I’m going to do.’

‘Don’t worry, Anisa, you’re not an accomplice.’

‘Actually, I think I am. And anyway, I can’t do that to Shiba.’

‘Oh my god, get over your fucking swoon. The woman eats eyeballs for breakfast.’

‘It’s more complicated than that—’

My thoughts were interrupted as I turned to the kitchen counter and saw, next to the stove, my glass teapot standing on its pedestal over a tea light to keep it warm. I recognized the small plastic bag next to it as the special blend of tea leaves that Naima made for her clients, generally consisting of things like mugwort and rose, lavender and cinnamon and a generous sprinkling of fungi.

‘What’s this?’ I asked.

‘It’s to open the gap,’ Naima said.

‘The gap?’

‘The gap in your memories,’ she explained. ‘Did you not notice? That moment you sneak through the keypad door, and then, what? Suddenly you’re back in your room? And then Arjun pretty much telling you that something more happened then.’ I saw the flashes once more – a large

fridge, a rectangular sink, a looming shadow. She picked up the teapot and lifted the lid, letting me smell the sweet scent of its contents. 'There's something there, something you're not seeing. This could help you enter that gap.'

'Do you just carry this stuff around with you?' I said, shaking the small plastic bag.

'It's called synchronicity, darling. The medicine clearly wanted to find you this morning.' She poured each of us a cup. 'It's not very strong. It'll just relax you enough to return to that moment.'

We sat on the sofa and sipped. After a while, I closed my eyes and followed Naima's prompts to better visualize the scene slowly unfolding behind my eyelids.

I press the keys on the pad: 9989. I hear a sound, a little beep, as the door closes behind me. I enter a common room, a laundry room, a linen cupboard. Then, at the end of the corridor, I see a pair of large silver double doors. I push them open. I am in a kitchen. Here, I stop in my tracks. Because right in front of me, hanging from a meat hook by the industrial-size fridge, is the bottom portion of a human leg.

A calf, with the foot still attached. The top of it, skewered by the S-shaped hook, is red and muscly. The rest, pink and mottled. Red and blue veins bulge from its length, and the slender toes are tinged purple. The nails have turned a grey-blue, and one has been punched through with some sort of tag. 'It's not real,' I say aloud to myself, trying to calm my racing heart, but I can't take my eyes off it. Sometimes the body has a mind of its own, and my body knows. My skin turns cold and prickles all over with goosebumps. My stomach churns, and my throat fills with bile. I start to shake, and my eyes water as my gaze moves over the pale veiny skin, its marks and bruises, the tiny hairs covering it. Suddenly, I feel a sharp prick on my right shoulder. My knees go wobbly and my vision darkens, as the grotesque sight in front of me fades from view.

I narrated the whole incident to Naima as I relived it, and when I opened my eyes, I saw that her face had gone white. I stood, rushed to the toilet and threw up, heaving and retching painfully.

'Was that real?' I asked her afterwards as we lay on our backs on the living room floor. 'Did that actually happen?'

'Memory retrieval is a tricky thing,' she said. 'But it felt real to me.'

‘So they must have drugged me then, right? And taken me back to my room? That’s basically what Arjun was implying too.’

‘It sounds like it,’ she said. ‘And it’s important that you saw what you did, Anisa. This isn’t just some abstract thing. These are real people. Real bodies. We need to go to the police.’

Naima and I got into a long and heated discussion then. She shared my scepticism about the police and my negative views of the punitive justice system, and we both understood the dangers of playing God with someone else’s life. She still felt, though, that I had to share.

‘You can’t keep it inside. Trust me. I see this every day in my job. Things *fester* when they’re left inside. Secrets, Anisa, can ruin lives for generations. And they can cause real, actual illness. You have to find a way to speak out,’ she urged. I’d made her swear on the Quran that she wouldn’t tell anyone, and I reminded her of this now. ‘Of course I won’t. But *you* need to. I’m sure there’s a way to do it while keeping both you and Shiba safe.’

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know. But we’ll figure it out.’

A little while later, as Naima was putting on her coat to leave, she turned to me. ‘Um, there’s one more thing.’

‘Yeah?’

‘The . . . thing that happened in Arjun’s study.’

I offered an exaggerated shrug in response and said, ‘You know how it is.’

‘Yeah, actually. I do.’

She leaned in close and hugged me, and I felt the feathers of her ridiculous coat caress my cheek. We spoke then of soft and tender things, damaged and frightened things. I’ll keep our exchange between us, for now, as I continue to learn how to care for these very fragile things, and how to translate into words that which has not yet been spoken.

May God heal all that is wounded in us and restore all that appears lost. Ameen.



Naima and I spoke frequently about the Centre after she'd heard the tape, but decided to hold off on taking any action until a clear path emerged. Also, we were often distracted by wedding planning over the next few months. The joyful dance practices, the noisy dholkis that went on until the early hours of the morning, and the decision-making about food, decorations, music, and outfits couldn't not get me excited about the wedding, but my views on Azeem had, unfortunately, remained the same. If anything, I'd grown even more convinced of his inadequacy, and the scary thing was, I felt like Naima was seeing it too. I noticed her strained smiles and stilted laughter when the topic of their relationship came up and saw subtle shifts in their interactions that made it increasingly obvious she was making too large of an effort to sustain warmth and love between them. I felt that theirs was a story that she *needed* to be true, and now that events had been put into motion, she was allowing herself, basically, to be swept up in the ceremony of it all, by the excitement of her family and his. Before we knew it, her wedding day was around the corner. And there I was, fireworks in one hand and dustpan in the other, ready to deploy whichever the situation demanded.

Then, about a week before the wedding, Naima pulled me to the side during dance practice, her eyes shining with excitement.

'I know how we can share the story.'

True to her word, Naima had continued to think up ways in which I could unburden myself.

'Huh?'

'You see that girl?' she asked, pointing to her friend S, who was dancing clumsily on the other side of the room to "Aankh Marey". 'You remember her, right? From ceremony?'

'Yeah . . .?'

'Guess what her job is? She's an editor. At a publishing house.'

'Okay. So what?'

'So give her your story! Just transcribe the recording and change all the names and pretend it's fiction. You can even use a pseudonym.'

'What's the point of that?'

'The point is that you'll be releasing it from your energy field. You can finally let it go.'

I looked again at S the editor. She was both self-conscious in her movements and overly performative, as if she wanted both to be the centre of attention but also to disappear.

‘How do you know she’ll publish it?’

‘‘Cause I know her. She’ll like it. And anyway, it’ll make for a good read, I can tell. We should at least try, no?’

‘I don’t even know her.’

‘I don’t know what else to tell you, Anisa. If you want to hold on to this for the rest of your life, be my guest. I’m just saying here’s a chance to finally move on.’

‘Maybe if your friend publishes it, Shiba will read it, and then she’ll see herself. Like, *really* see herself.’

Naima gave me an annoyingly sympathetic look. ‘Yeah. Maybe. And maybe you’ll see yourself differently too.’

‘Adam might not like it—’

‘Okay, babe, enough of your agonizing. I’ve found us a way, and I’m not going to talk about it any more. I have a mehndi to plan.’ She walked away in a huff.

Maybe it would help, I thought. A confession. A final testimony. I went back to Naima. She was practising dance moves with her sister.

‘Listen—’

‘Anisa, look, it’s up to you. Take it or leave it. This is your story, after all.’

‘*Our* story,’ I corrected. She smiled. Already, I felt lighter.

‘You still need an ending,’ Naima said. ‘Don’t you think?’

I shrugged. ‘It ends when it ends, right?’

‘Well, definitely keep going in the meantime. As if you’re still recording for the Centre, you know? Oh my god, you know what? You should end with my wedding. They love that shit.’

‘I’m not ending with your wedding.’

‘I’m serious. You think they’ll listen to a whole story about us without at least one shaadi scene? Those guys live for our sequins and jalebis.’

‘It’s not for *those* guys.’

‘Still gotta get it past them, babe.’

If only to subvert Naima’s cynicism, I really didn’t want to end with a shaadi scene. But Shiba, as if in unconscious collusion, texted me just a few

days later, completely out of the blue, for the first time since we'd said goodbye in Delhi.

Hi, Anisa. I'm sorry for not getting in touch sooner. I can explain. I'm in London later this week. Please can we meet?

I had thought about texting Shiba a couple of times after my return to London but never went through with it. I realized, however, upon receiving her text, that even after all that had happened, I would have dropped everything to see her. But no, I stopped myself. This time, she needed to come to me.

Super busy with Naima's wedding. But  
you can swing by if you want?  
It's on Friday.

K. Text me the address.

\*

So, despite my feelings about Azeem, I have to admit Naima's wedding day was nothing but love. It was moving to see her friends and family gather, showering their hopes and blessings on the couple. And I could see how such events, with the mass of support and well wishes they bring, can help to solidify something as tenuous as the attempted union of two souls. Also, the food was delicious, the music was great and the dance floor was blazing for hours on end.

For most of the ceremony, Naima was sitting on the stage wearing an elaborate maroon lehnga that was so heavy it had taken the both of us to lift the box when it first arrived from the designer. She sat with Azeem beside her, who was dressed in a gold and white sherwani and bright-blue pagri. They both had smiles plastered on their faces while group after group came to pose with them for photographs. I stood by the stage waiting for an opportunity to say hello. Then, seizing a gap between guests, I went in.

'Naima!'

'Anisa, oh my god, this dupatta is killing me.'

'Oh, wait, I know,' I said, remembering my sister having the same issue at her own wedding. I stood behind her and lifted the fabric off her shoulders, holding the weight of it in my hands.

‘Ah, thank you. Just stay like that forever. So, is she here yet?’ Naima asked. I pretended not to know who she was talking about, but she just rolled her eyes. ‘You know who.’

‘Not yet,’ I said.

‘Okay, well, point her out when she arrives.’

‘Anisa!’ Naima’s mum called out from below, gesturing towards the photographer and instructing me to stop holding up Naima’s shoulders. I readjusted her dupatta and sat next to her instead. Azeem, on her other side, was accepting an envelope from Naima’s khala with a big grin on his face. The khala positioned herself between the couple and stuffed a laddoo into Azeem’s mouth despite his vehement protests. She aimed for Naima next but Naima pointed to the bowl of M&M’s in front of her that she was using as a laddoo substitute.

‘One of those instead, Khala.’

‘Silly girl,’ her khala said. ‘Skin and bones.’ But she assented, popping a single blue M&M into Naima’s mouth and kissing her on the forehead.

‘You look good, Azeem,’ I yelled so he’d hear me over the commotion.

I aimed an orange M&M his way, gesturing for him to catch it with his mouth. He obliged, and I missed. The dot landed on his sherwani. Straight away, he picked it up and popped it into his mouth, still grinning.

‘Thank you!’ he yelled and gave me a thumbs up. He looked so happy. My mother would have said, if she’d been there, that he looked like ‘the cat that got the cream’.

I made my way to the dance floor next, one eye still on the lookout for Shiba. Naima’s cousins were at its centre, dragging in uncles and aunties who would oblige them with short dances met with hooting and hollering. Other friends and family watched from the side, clapping along to the beat, and little children wove through the crowd, jumping around ecstatically. Some of Naima’s younger cousins were dancing in a tight circle in the corner, erupting in laughter now and then and not-so-surreptitiously passing around a hip flask. I joined a group of our friends from uni and allowed myself to be taken by the music. I hadn’t seen some of these people in years, and as we danced and danced, it was as if we were summoning back our eighteen-year-old selves. We emerged from the dance floor, faces glowing, just as the food was being served. And that’s when I saw her. Shiba. By the door, holding a Pepsi bottle. She was wearing a bright-pink

sari with a silver blouse, her braid draped over one shoulder. I walked over to her.

‘Hi,’ I said. ‘I wasn’t sure you were going to come.’

‘Sorry I’m so late.’

‘It’s okay. Nice to see you’re still alive.’

‘I’m really sorry I went so quiet, Anisa. I just didn’t know what to say.’

‘It’s fine. Me neither,’ I said. ‘Are you hungry?’

‘Always.’

We made our way to the buffet and then to the table where my friends from uni were sitting. I had become vegetarian by then, and so my plate was filled with daal, palak paneer, and choley, but Shiba’s karahi looked so good that I had to dip my sheermal in, just to try the shorba.

‘So, what brings you to London?’ I asked eventually.

‘To tell the truth, I came to attend a memorial service.’

‘Oh no. Who for?’

‘Well. That’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. David, Anisa. He passed away three days ago.’

‘Oh my god, *David* David? How?’

‘A jet ski accident, apparently. He had family in London, so they gathered here to pay their respects. Papa came too, and Eric and George.’

My stomach churned when I heard that Arjun was in London. I had compartmentalized my experience in such an extreme manner that I hadn’t considered him being able to leave Delhi. I imagined him bursting through the doors of the shaadi hall, furiously wagging incriminating photos and private messages extracted from my iCloud. The idea of sharing my story according to Naima’s plan suddenly felt fraught, more loaded with danger.

At the same time, David’s passing incited sympathy in me. David, with his shaved head and thick biceps, who held himself, always, very upright. David, who put tahini on everything and always skipped dessert, who roamed around Delhi wearing Fabindia kurtis and had named his son Ravi. David, who, like the rest of the foursome, spent a whole lot of time contemplating legacy.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ I said and recited the prayer in my head, Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un.

‘Me too,’ she said. ‘I . . . well, that’s kind of why I came to see you, actually. When you first came to India, I was so excited to let you in. And

then, everything just . . . listen, I'm sorry—'

'Seriously, it's fine,' I interrupted.

I was only just starting to extricate myself from this drama and wasn't going to be sucked back in. I tried to change the subject and lighten the mood, introducing Shiba to my uni friends, but she had an uncanny way of holding herself at a distance, as if she were in an ecosystem apart. In response, she received a kind of deference and even admiration, but also cut off the possibility of any real connection. Eventually, the party started winding down. The music was lowered and then switched off, and some of Naima's cousins began to clear up the hall, stacking chairs and collapsing tables, while the remaining guests slowly trickled out.

'Are you going home now?' Shiba asked.

'Well, actually, a few of us are going to Naima's parents' house. You're welcome to come.'

'I'm okay,' Shiba said. 'But before you go, can we talk privately?'

'Okay,' I said. 'Let's find somewhere quieter.'

We made our way to the garden at the back of the shaadi hall, where some of Naima's hippy friends had a fire going. People were gathered around it, laughing and chatting, many holding steaming cups of chai. One of Naima's cousins, waving around the now-empty hip flask, kept initiating games of antakshari, and though people would offer input from time to time, it was basically just him playing against himself. Then a boy started singing Leonard Cohen into the fire, as if serenading it. The young woman next to him adjusted her hair and discreetly moved closer. Shiba and I stood some feet away from the scene, taking it all in.

'So, you're still at the Centre, then?' I asked.

'I am.'

The flames crackled, releasing waves of black smoke into the air. My thoughts returned to David.

'It's so unpredictable, isn't it? How life can suddenly take you?' I reflected. 'He was still so young.'

'We're receiving him tomorrow,' Shiba said.

'Receiving?' I asked. She gave me a meaningful look. 'Oh.'

I remembered. Of course. He was a Storyteller. This had been the intention all along.

'I wanted to invite you to join us,' she said.

‘Join you?’

‘At the Centre. To receive him,’ she answered. The fire spat and fizzed. ‘That man contains a treasure trove.’

‘Yuck, Shiba. No.’

‘Just hear me out, Anisa.’

‘Honestly Shiba, I think I’ve heard enough on that subject.’

‘You haven’t though. You haven’t really, properly listened, not once.’

I looked at her. The ferociousness and depth, the fragility and courage, it was still all there, in her eyes. I had not imagined it.

‘Ok,’ I said, ‘I’m listening.’

‘The first step,’ she continued, ‘in changing anything is to truly understand it. We have to consume it if we want to transform it. This is what I’ve been trying to explain to you. It’s the only way to really take charge.’

I laughed sarcastically. ‘Take charge? You know it’s all an illusion, don’t you? They’ve got you thinking you’re running the place, but they’re pulling all the strings.’

‘It’s not like that.’

‘The day you invited me up to your flat, the night we watched *Undone* and I read that email on your laptop, I opened the locked door downstairs on my way out, the one with the keypad.’

‘What? How? You need a code.’

‘I’d seen you type it in earlier.’

‘Oh—’

‘I didn’t mean to, but when I saw the email, I had to know more.’

‘So . . . you knew all along?’

‘No, I didn’t, because they found me. The staff. And they drugged me or something and dragged me back to bed. They made me forget what I had seen, made me feel like I was basically losing my mind. Did you know that?’

‘What? Of course I didn’t!’

‘Well, your dad knew. He’s probably the one who made them do it. This is what I’m saying. You’re just their pawn, Shiba.’

‘Fuck. Anisa, I’m so sorry that happened. I promise you, I had no idea.’

‘It’s okay,’ I said, relieved that she’d played no part in it. ‘But you realize that you can’t just take over, right? That’s not how it works. It isn’t *yours*.’

And thank god it isn't. You can still walk away from this.'

'I know it isn't mine. But it will be. I'm going to consume them, Anisa. Do you understand? I want to consume them all and I want you, I *need* you, to do this with me. Then we can have access to whatever it was that allowed them to create what they did. But with that knowledge, we'll make our own thing! *Everything* can be transformed. It's on me, on us. There is no running away.'

'But what you're describing isn't transformation, it's . . . extension. You'll just end up reproducing whatever they came up with.'

'You know that's not how it works. There's choice involved. It would be like . . . like smuggling dynamite into the epicentre of power. We could remake the world in our own image,' she said. Her eyes lit up as she spoke.

'It's too much,' I said. 'To participate unknowingly was one thing, but to do it voluntarily? I'm not cut out for that.'

'But you're doing it anyway, Anisa. We all are. It's how the cycle of life works, right? This is just a way to opt in consciously. To have more control. Listen, life is short. We have, what, another . . . fifty, sixty years left? We need to stuff more into our little lives. I know you think so too.'

I wondered what a repurposing of things once thoughtlessly imbibed would look like, and something my mother used to say came to mind. Amma would say to me, when I was a young teenager, 'Don't do anything that you wouldn't feel comfortable being printed in the headlines of all the newspapers the next day.' At first, I had taken Amma's words as a warning. I thought she was telling me, 'keep it clean'. But later, I reconsidered her words, converting what I'd previously internalized as a call towards shame into an argument against it. Amma wasn't saying to keep it clean, I decided. She was saying, let the dirt be known. She knew, after all, that things could never stay clean. She had tasted the blood. She'd meant, I decided, that I should own my life. Claim it. Every last drop.

I thought of Naima then, and S, her publisher friend. Is that what ownership looked like? But the fire roared, drawing me back towards it. Towards the possibilities Shiba spoke of – absorption, transformation, change. To smuggle dynamite into the epicentre of power. To remake the world in our own image. I couldn't tell whether the picture Shiba painted was reality or fantasy. Was it pure narcissism to imagine we could consume the Centre itself? Would we end up being consumed by it instead?



It's hard to know what the answer is, dear Learner, but Shiba and I kept the conversation going deep into the night, and as the fire burned, we tried to make out the outlines of a future still smoky and vague, and nearly indecipherable.

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Finally, prayers for the greater work being done. May our compasses stay aligned. Gratitude for our collective journeys towards learning the real meaning of words like Justice, Forgiveness, Grace, Sacrifice, Community, Redemption, Transformation, Love.

With love,

Ayesha

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