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We Are Also Home

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WE ARE ALSO HOME
MUSTAFA ABUBAKER
Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts in Professional Writing
in the Department of English
in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences
of Kennesaw State University
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Committee:

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Invisibility, Art, and Love:
The Nuances of Perception in
South Asian Women

Mustafa Abubaker

In the opening scenes of “We Are Also Home,” the novel’s symbolic character Farishtay Mahdi allows a man by the name of Syed Janmohamed into her house. He pays her for sex and counseling. She does not love him. Instead, she loves what he gives her. Syed is not only after Farishtay for sex. He is also driven mad by the commonality found in both Farishtay and his daughter: invisibility. He has heard of Farishtay’s hushed-up condition through the grapevine. His performance, initially informed by societal norms, is almost instantly seen for what it really is by Farishtay. Irony plays a large role in this story, and it is then that it first makes the reader aware of itself. For someone like Farishtay who suffers from invisibility she alone toggles on and off like a television channel she sees others very clearly. She is the only other individual known to Syed to harness invisibility as his daughter does, and he seeks answers from her. While Syed’s decision is logical, it is not the right one, and the reader should infer Syed would be better off looking elsewhere.

In the 2015 New York Times op-ed “The Invisible Asian,” the idea of invisibility is hinted at throughout when it comes to people of Asian heritage¹. The author contends that for every South Asian man infantilized by their mothers, a South Asian woman is rendered unseen by society at large. A large part of this is due to the harrowing, blanket concept of the model minority. It is a flattering perception, to be lauded by the masses all because an Indian child turned ESPN star walks away a Scripps spelling bee champion every summer and because an

¹ Yancy, George, and David Haekwon Kim. “The Invisible Asian.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 8 Oct. 2015, opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/10/08/the-invisible-asian/.

Indian adult in a physician's white coat is about as common as the cold. Yet, flattery cannot and should not be the incentive for South Asian Americans to excel within their livelihoods. Outside of the precocious, border-line vain spelling bee and the typical doctor-lawyer-engineer domains in which well-to-do South Asian Americans dwell is a South Asian America that is largely ignored.

Many South Asian American women have slipped through the fabrics of our societies. In America's quest to include them, it's shortened their names, dressed them up in their image, and generally treated them as they would dolls. Yet, their traditions have been snatched from them.

The novel tackles this social injustice head on by inducing not one, but two South Asian women with literal invisibility as a means to comment on the struggles many South Asian women encounter today.

In *We Are Also Home*, invisibility shows us that despite feeling unseen in society, South Asian women remain home to themselves. If South Asian women can't find a home in this world, they should be able to find that that homely feeling in their presence. Furthermore, they are also home – meaning they belong here, there, and everywhere just as much as women of any heritage.

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CHAPTER ONE

1998

It was the best of vibes and it was the worst of vibes. It was the age of information and it was the age of vanity. It was the epoch of dishonesty. It was the season of Light. It was the season of Darkness. It was the spring of sprawl and it was the winter of warmth. Farishtay Mahdi had everything before her but she had nothing after her. She was going to Heaven and she was going to Hell—in short, her life was so much like those lives lived by her mothers and grandmothers, that some of her matriarchy’s noisiest authorities insisted on being seen, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. People who lived the fullest lives knew how to let love in.

Farishtay stretched harder and longer than she’d ever stretched that fateful morning. A kemetica yoga enthusiast, she paired her practice with deep breathing. All 5’5” of her dark-brown skinned, curvy body could not have felt better to live in once she rested on her back, and swung her legs up into the air to clutch her ankles. Her long, black hair was tied up into a bun.

Farishtay’s son, Taimur, then just 5 years old, spotted his mother doing yoga from the hallway inside their modest home.

“Come here, Tai-mu,” she said.

He walked over, smiling. She took him in his arms, and cradled him, rocked him side to side as he stood, and she kneeled. They were alone as Farishtay’s husband and Taimur’s father Farid was working long day shifts at the nearby factory where he made steel.

“Syed *chacha* is coming over, ok?” she said.

Indeed, Dr. Syed Janmohamed was already shuffling nervously outside her front door. He had driven all the way from the city of Karachi to Steel Town, a ghetto some 30 miles away from the city. An onlooker would have been able to figure that the city dweller in question felt out of place there. He finally knocked on the door, knocking twice, and Farishtay opened the door with one hand as she carried Taimur with the other.

“Oy-hoy, doctor *sahib*. Your shirt looks expensive,” Farishtay said, winking.

“*As-salamu alaykum*,” Syed said, smiling.

“Hello, Taimur,” Syed said, smiling.

Taimur outstretched his pale, thin arms so that Syed could hoist him in the air and make him feel like he was Superman flying over the city as he always did. Taimur giggled. The three of them stood there in front of the door before walking to the living room where Syed and Taimur sat on the couch. Farishtay brought over a tray of food and juice.

“How are you, son?” Syed asked Taimur, suddenly intense.

“Good,” Taimur said.

“You’re really growing, little papa,” Syed said.

Farishtay laughed.

“Make him stop,” Farishtay said.

Syed turned to her and smiled a smile so white he could have been in a Crest commercial.

“He’ll grow big and tall and strong,” Syed said.

“*Inshallah*,” Farishtay said.

“*Inshallah*,” Syed muttered, now facing Taimur again.

Syed kissed Taimur on the forehead, gave his head a weak and playful push and walked down the hall to the bedroom.

Farishtay sat down next to her son.

“Eat your vegetables. Oh, and, Tai-mu – this is your home, ok?”

“I know, ma,” he said.

“Good. I have to go,” Farishtay said.

Farishtay followed Syed into the room where Syed sat on her bed, counting money. She closed the door behind him, but they could still hear the sound from the cartoons Taimur had started to watch on the television. She sat next to Syed and gave him a sweet, intimate hug from the side, wrapping both her arms around his torso as he continued counting.

“It’s all there,” Syed said.

“Good. So, tell me about your daughter,” Farishtay said.

“You never know who to trust these days. But, sure. My daughter Yara is Taimur’s age. I haven’t seen anything like this before. She simply ceases to appear in the blink of an eye. One second she’s there, the next she’s not,” Syed said.

“How long has this been going on?” Farishtay asked.

Syed laid down on his back on the bed, and Farishtay laid on top of him, rubbed his head.

“Since she was born. Since we brought her home from the fucking hospital,” Syed said.

“Doctors know?” Farishtay asked.

“They’ll think I’m losing my mind. I have a reputation, too. I’ll lose my medical license over this shit,” Syed said.

“Well, what’s more important to you, your reputation or your daughter?” Farishtay said.

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” Syed said.

“What?” Farishtay asked.

“I’m not choosing,” he said.

Farishtay stood then. The fan was always on in the room because it got so hot in the summers in Pakistan. The breeze from the fan gave her hair some lift.

“I’ll never forget the day you and I were walking around New York City, just having a nice stroll on a nice day,” Syed said.

“I love New York because no one bothers me there like they do in Karachi. I could put on my plain clothes and no one would notice me. I love that.”

“So, as we’re walking down Broadway, you turn to me and say, ‘do you want to see me—’” Syed said.

“—Become her,” Farishtay said.

“Yeah,” Syed said.

Farishtay laughed.

“I think that was the first time,” Syed said.

“Why then?” Syed asked, now interlocking her fingers with his.

“I figure you’d keep your composure in public. Had I shown you privately first, you would not have taken it as well,” Farishtay said.

“Well. I suppose. I just didn’t know what you meant but I just said ‘Yes’ – and then I saw it. I don’t know how to explain what you did because it was so subtle, but you turned something on within yourself that was almost like magic. And suddenly cars were slowing and people were turning their heads and stopping to stare,” Syed said.

“They recognized that I wasn’t there anymore,” Farishtay said.

“But, where do you go when you go?” Syed asked.

“I don’t *go* anywhere. I stay put. Feet planted. I can move around, but I hardly do. It’s more fun watching everyone react,” Farishtay said.

“It’s almost as if you pull off a mask or something,” Syed said.

“I want you to know I can’t help Yara,” Farishtay said.

They were both quiet. The cartoons were still making sounds in the background.

“You’ve got a good son in Taimur,” Syed said.

“Yes. Yes, I do,” Farishtay said.

“He doesn’t know?” Syed said.

“It’s for the best,” Farishtay said.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. How is Farid?” Syed asked.

“He is good. He’s working a lot,” Farishtay said.

They were quiet.

“Are you still working?” He asked her.

“Yes.”

“I have something for you. A bracelet.”

He pulled the gift out from a bag he had brought along with him.

“Here it is. Do you like it?” he said.

She took it. It was emerald.

“I love it,” she said.

Satisfied, Syed smiled.

“I must be on my way,” Syed said.

“Stay,” Farishtay said, tugged his arm, licked his earlobe.”

“Farishtay,” Syed said, “I must.”

She pouted.

“Fine.”

On his way out, Syed sat next to Taimur again.

“You’re a piece of my heart,” Syed said.

He stood and offered his goodbyes to Farishtay.

She watched as he sat in his black BMW and drove off.

She came back inside and Taimur was still watching cartoons

“Baba will be home soon,” she said.

Taimur smiled.



“What is this?” Farid said, later on when he came home, pointing to the bracelet on her wrist.

“Syed bought it for me,” Farishtay said.

“You know, when we got married, I didn’t realize you’d be such a slut,” Farid said.

“Fuck you,” she said.

“Ma?” Taimur stood in the doorway, frightened at the argument

Farishtay scooped Taimur up in her arms and held him close to her chest.

“Great, you scared the kid,” Yara said.

“Fuck off,” Farid said.

Farid stood in the doorway with all but one button on his collared work shirt un-done, the hairs on his chest curling into the ether like hooks, a dark bottle of warm beer dangling from his wrinkly right index and thumb. Taimur never saw his father cry. Yet, Taimur never forgot the sound of glass bottles smashing against the walls in their one-bedroom house that night.



Taimur Mahdi, now 19, taller, hairier, fitter, was relaxing at home. His mother Farishtay was in her bedroom on the phone, and his father was at work late. Taimur had called Syed earlier to visit, and Syed was on his way. To kill time, Taimur stepped outside to smoke cigarettes outside and wave at some of the boys he was friends with from the neighborhood.

When he arrived, Taimur waved at him, giving him a soft smile.

“My boy,” Syed said.

“How are you, *chacha*?”

“Fine. I was on my way as soon as you called me. Is everything ok?”

Taimur looked around nervously, eyeing the roads that Syed drove in on.

“Let’s go inside and talk in the house,” Taimur said

Taimur brought Syed some water as they both sat on the couch.

“How are you doing?” Syed said.

“I’m cool,” Taimur said.

“You want a real drink?” Syed said.

Taimur laughed, shook his head.

“Just checking. Why didn’t you show up for our meeting, Taimur? Set it up with me and the medical school. Why didn’t you show up? Don’t lie to me,” Syed said.

“I don’t want to be a doctor no more. I decided,” Taimur said.

“What are you talking about?” Syed said.

“That ain’t what I want anymore,” Taimur said.

“What do you want?” Syed said.

“I want what you *got*, *chacha*. I want to be you.”

Taimur leaned in close.

“I came up in the hood. This doctor shit ain’t for me. I need you to give me something I can start pushing tonight.”

“You done lost your damn mind,” Syed said, shifting in his seat, laughing.

“Drugs. I need the best drugs you can find in the city, I know you know where to find them,” Taimur said.

“You want to ravage your community,” Syed said.

“I wanna make money. I wanna work,” Taimur said.

“You want that fast money, is that it,” Syed said.

“I don’t want it. I need it. My mama needs it, my dad needs it,” Taimur said.

Syed sighed.

“You know I’ll do anything for you,” Syed said.

“Thank you, *chacha*,” Taimur said.



Taimur kept the drugs in his socks in the same way that someone might put leftover food in Tupperware. He was always barefoot back then. He didn't keep any regular customers. He mostly made street sales. He used motorcycles. Some guys who lived close owned one or two and let him hitch rides to the city. He was a hyper-vigilant kid and one who knew how to spot a user. Shifty eyes. Itch-scratching. Moppy haired men — all of them.

Some of them were bold enough to make their pining for getting high apparent in broad daylight. They winked at him as he strutted through bazaars and back alleys to pick up groceries or desserts his mother gave him cash to pay for and bring back home. Some of them would even whistle at him, and the ones with the biggest balls grabbed his waist with their muddy palms and pulled him so close that their rice-and-chicken breath made his glasses foggy.

"Get the fuck off me," he screamed, and they let go every single time and laughed. He sold them what they wanted, and he fucked off back to Steel Town, prayed the fat cops on the side of the road in tan uniforms wouldn't tail him or toss him in jail. They never did. He said a prayer every time he had gone far enough to lose sight of them in his rearview mirror. He was religious in his youth, partly because it was something to cling to and subconsciously a way to offset the sheer sin that swallowed his sleep and his stride every second of every hour.

But he made good money. He could buy things for the home. Farid almost didn't care anymore about Farishtay's prostitution. Taimur always suspected his father kept mistresses of his own but he was wrong. Although Farid was a generally shy, quiet man who resigned himself to such behavior perhaps upon realizing his own wife wasn't fit to cut his hair when it was long, Taimur never shook the feeling there was a side to his father that he never knew, a side that only his father and those who knew him better would take to their graves. He resented his father for being so guarded. He didn't realize this until he was older.

"Wake up," Taimur's father said one day. Taimur was still asleep. It was a Sunday, and he secretly wished to sleep in this day. In fact, he had looked forward to it that blisteringly hot entire week of July 11th. The sun had not risen yet either, and Taimur was somehow grateful the heat spared him its wrath when his father told him his mother was no more.

His mother was no more.

Taimur cried in his bed that day and didn't stop crying for some time. His father hugged him, and the two of them cried together in the house that would someday be nothing but dust and bulldozers.

“What happened?”

“*I—I don't know....*”

Taimur knew when he saw her lifeless corpse. He knew right away. He collapsed to his knees in front of her and made a prayer. He felt his father's gaze. He laid awake at night and count the number of flies and moths circling the lantern light in the room. His dreams then were vivid. He often wondered if life was just one long dream, and if it was, then when would he wake up? Has he been sleeping all this time?

Relentless rainfall soaked the Mahdi home brick by brick. The way it clashed against the windowpanes reminded Taimur of a lot of things, not all of which brought about happy memories. He always found it easier to sleep whenever it rained, however. He started to correlate his dreams with the weather and kept a logbook of how vivid or drab his dreams were. He found the waterier and damp the earth was, the livelier his dreams were on those nights. It was a correlation he left unexplored, partly because he was unafraid of what he would discover about himself, and what waited for him outdoors.

Arrangements were being made for her funeral just minutes after Taimur received the news from his father. He sulked about the house, stunned, in shock, as Farid manned up and made sure that his wife would receive the proper burial that she deserved.

First, they had to wash Farishtay's body.

In the room in which they washed the body, nobody spoke much. The representative from the local mosque assisted them and exited the room quietly as the process began. Taimur

scrubbed his mother's face clean with soap and water, and his father brushed her teeth with a special brush the Arabic tribes and the Prophet used back in the day. What was most important was that her body was as clean as possible before it was lowered six feet into the ground at the funeral which would take place just a few hours from now.

Yet, at the funeral, much of the crowd was silent and unassuming.

A Muslim woman's burial was to be operated with care and caution.

The only problem was Syed.



When Syed heard the news, he was at home with his daughter, Yara, in the garden. He was reading a book by lamplight, and she was doing her exercises on the green. Their vast bungalow was near impenetrable, and they were used to the peace and quiet that would otherwise confuse those who lived in noisy and loud homes.

A man rang the doorbell, and the lone servant in the house went to fetch the guest upon Syed's slow nod.

"Sir, Yamin is here," the servant said.

Yamin drove Syed on the occasion he did not wish to drive himself.

"Sir, may I speak with you privately?"

Syed, once again, nodded. Yara, a girl with good hearing who did not need to be told twice, silently left the garden, but positioned herself on the wall just around the corner so she could peer in. Partly because when Yamin entered the garden, he brought with him a cool rush of iced energy, a feeling of sub-zero dread.

“Sir,” Yamin said, lighting a cigarette. “There’s been a problem.”

“What?”

“The lady... the woman you’ve been seeing... the special woman... she passed away this morning.”

Syed’s expression didn’t change, but the metaphorical blue bird inside his caged heart fluttered about his bloodstreams in panicked, melancholic flight.

“What the fuck happened?”

“She overdosed, boss. Pills.”

“Son of a bitch... give me a cigarette... when is the funeral?”

“In just a few hours, sir. DHA View.”

“Start the car.”

Syed gestured for Yamin to leave his presence and was alone with his thoughts for just a few moments. Yara, too, had noticed how different Syed suddenly became. His sighs were exasperated, and his look was stern enough to ward off any other would-be bearers of bad news.

Yet, she’d long wondered why her father, a wealthy man, was gone for hours at odd times. She used to envy the fathers of friends who went to work in the morning, came back home in the evening and spent every last waking moment with their family. With her, her loneliness had always been abundant. She knew it from the time when she was a young girl that her mother started to rise the ranks of the workforce in architecture, take trips to London to work on projects with white people whose idea of a good time was building a tower tall enough to teach its tenants truths about territories. Alone for the majority of her childhood, her observation was that of a seasoned hawk’s. She always felt like she had a bird’s eye view of any situation that stood in her path, her journey of self-exploration, self-love, and self-discovery.

Yara was especially close to her father. A daddy's girl, she watched Syed blossom and grow into a man rarely questioned, a man whose word was often the final say in any matter he chose to partake in.

"Yara," Syed said.

Yara went to her father quietly, as she would her Lord at the end of her life. Typically bubbly, Yara toned it down as much as she could to pay respect to her father's mood.

"Yes, Baba?" she said.

"I have to go out," Syed said.

"We were supposed to watch our show," Yara said.

"I know. We'll watch when I come back."

Syed went to his room to shower and change. Yara watched him not so much walk into his room, but saunter inside. He seemed to be thinking intensely about anything except what was in front of him. She made note of how he shuffled his feet and slouched his shoulders as he cast one surveying glance in Yara's direction. She noticed the pain he held in his eyes was as deep as the lakes and the oceans that many boats and ships succumbed to over the years. Most notably, she noticed that he was tired, and he shouldn't be driving this late in the evening, a time slot he usually reserved for TV and cuddle time with his daughter.

But, alas.

She remained in the room as Syed showered. She heard the nozzle turn on, and the sound of the hot, high-pressure water pelt her father's scalp, shoulders, and perhaps even his soul as he sang to himself in the shower as he always did. He appeared to be taking a long enough shower for Yara to recollect the name of the graveyard from her skilled eavesdropping. DHA View was

Defence View Graveyard. Puzzled at her father's attempt in visiting a funeral, she herself went to her room.

Something inside Yara broke when she decided to follow her father without her knowing. She had never deliberately disobeyed her father in this way before, nor had she ever caught him in the act of anything heinous or deplorable. Yet, something always rubbed her the wrong way about his semi-nightly grand entrances, about his bloodshot eyes, about his weak smiles he offered her on his way into his room those nights, the tiny, faint stains of red wine she'd sometimes catch whenever he wore white.

After her shower, which was rather quick, she got dressed in view of her mirror. She realized that she was able to try on multiple outfits and not feel much. She settled on all black, and resigned herself to a somber state of mind and body as she exited her room, peering around the corner to find her father wearing all black as well.

"Bye, Yara," he said. "Stay home. I will be back soon."

"Bye, Baba," she said back, blinking back tears.

Funerals were always sad occasions for Yara. She would not grow to understand that they were part of life just like everything else until she was older and more aware.

She watched as her father's passenger car door was opened by Yamin, and as Yamin circled around the black car to get into the driver's seat. Yamin didn't quite notice her head poking out from the corner of the main foyer in the front of the house, so he carried on as usual with his own habits. Seatbelt first. She watched him reach over to pull her father's seatbelt over as well. She let out a small laugh to herself. When was a Janmohamed not pampered and primped? When he was dead?

She watched as the car drove off into the evening, and it was then that the car she had called drove up into the driveway. She was able to arrange a driver from the next street over, a driver who had used to drive for the Mahdis until Yamin rolled around, to tail her father's car to the graveyard without getting caught.

She exited the house and got into the backseat of the car, where the Bollywood songs that played conjured up memories of her childhood dancing around to songs similar to the ones that the driver had on in the car. Yet, she wasn't in the mood.

"Drive fast," she said. "Turn the radio off."

The driver silently obeyed.

On the way to the funeral, Yara's mind raced a million miles an hour as she stared out at the window as the sun set over the city. She wondered whose funeral it was, and how many would be there. In fact, she thought to herself, she had never been to a funeral.

Yet, the drive was not long at all. The driver had been on his cellphone the entire time, lost in his own world, speaking rather quickly with whoever was on the phone and cackling, sometimes roaring with laughter as if the person on the other line had just told the funniest joke ever. He made sure that the drive was smooth and comfortable. Sensible enough to park around the corner so as not to join the conglomerate of cars that signaled to Yara that they had successfully arrived at the right graveyard.

"Let me out here," Yara said, but even before she could finish her sentence, the driver had unlocked her backseat car door with the touch of a button. Guy was a professional.

Upon exiting the vehicle, it occurred to Yara that she retain and maintain her stealth and sneakiness here in the outdoors as night had fallen. She tip-toed towards the graveyard's towering gates, and traced her fingers along the black iron.

A crowd had gathered there, a crowd solely of men. She felt a tugging of her soul, something unseen, something intangible that yanked her like a thread of yarn off of a ball. Yet, she resisted as much as she could to be in the front of the crowd, and hang back. She noted that most of the men were older, and from a distance, she struggled to properly identify her dear father amongst the throng of mustached brown-skinned people.

But, there he was. Yara spotted him. He, too, seemingly, wished to remain not all too obvious. He stood in the third row of men, the second one from the left as not to be in the middle center, as well. Poker faced to the max, he closed his eyes during the prayer recital.

It was then that she spotted the only young man there, Taimur. He, of course, had spotted her too. He gave her a quick, quizzical stare with raised eyebrows and all and then diverted his attention back to his mother's funeral. He looked lean in the night, strong enough to lift her perhaps with just one arm. But he also looked tired, and she wondered silently how all men grow tired and bravely continue to march on.

She was, again, within earshot to listen in on Taimur's speech.

"My mother," Taimur said, "was a spiritual, knowledgeable, sensitive, beautiful, vain, intelligent, sociable woman."

"Your mother was a whore," someone in the crowd said.

Yara's heart sank.

"My mother," Taimur said, pretending as if he hadn't heard the man, "was Farishtay Mahdi. She was the freest woman — freest person — I've ever met in my life, and she inspired me every day with her talks to me. I remember how she used to sing me to sleep at night. Some night as my gaze is transfixed on our nightlight, I'm back in the 6th grade, my mother crooning old family lullabies to me and telling me that middle school won't be that bad, that when she was

in middle school she loved it, caressing my forehead with a gentle touch and kissing it afterwards, leaving a glass of warm milk by my side. Before she left my side, she would always say that it's okay to feel small sometimes, that it humbles you. I hesitate— my mother's face flashes in my mind—and I blow the candle out. I'm submerged in darkness, somewhat shocked by how therapeutic it feels and, oddly enough and with much resignation, I've never felt smaller.”

“Your mother... your mother was a whore!”

Several men restrained the man responsible for the rude blurt, proceeding to remove him from the funeral grounds.

“Get him. Get him the fuck out of here,” Taimur said.

“My mother will know peace now. She was a troubled woman with a busy mind. May she be accepted into Heaven,” Taimur said.

All of the men said amen, including Yara's father Syed.

With that, the crowd broke congregation and huddled up with one another in groups of three or four or less to discuss anything else, something that would distract them from their pending mortality.

Yara watched her father speak intently with another man, lowering his head, leaning in forward to catch every last drop the conversation had to squeeze out. It was because of her fixation on her father that Yara was shocked and startled when Taimur tapped her on the shoulder.

Up close, Taimur looked scary. His beard was long, thick, and uncombed. There was a strain his eyes that no longer made him seem or appear to be tired but instead alive, something

that signaled to her that the fire inside his belly was absolutely raging with flames tall enough to tickle and ignite the words he spoke.

“Who are you?”

“I—I’m nobody,” Yara said, suddenly awash with shame. She was usually the one in control of the situation, but with that, she started to run but heard Taimur yell after her.

“Run! Run, that’s right! Run, pretty girl! I better not see you again! Whoever the fuck are you! Get the fuck out of here! Run!”

CHAPTER TWO

One day, Taimur was frying samosas for a slightly oily lunch when there was a knock at his door. He wiped his hands on his mother's tattered apron, took it off, and checked the door with it tossed over his forearm.

It was Syed.

"What the fuck do you want?" Taimur said.

Syed licked his teeth.

"Is that any way to speak to your elder?"

"Fuck you, man."

"Are you going to let me inside?"

He stood there in Taimur's doorway. Things were cooler in December in Steel Town, and he noticed Syed looked a little cold. Taimur relished the sight.

"No. We can talk right here."

Taimur stepped outside, made to close the door by cracking it ever so slightly. By the time he was face to face with Syed, he had realized Syed was taller.

"I am very sorry about your dear mum," Syed said.

"Why do you care? She was a..." Taimur said.

"She was a what?" Syed said.

Taimur didn't say anything. Syed lit a cigarette and offered one to Taimur. He took it. They each took puffs of their cigarettes twice before moving the conversation forward.

"Can I see her?" Syed said.

"Of course not. She's been buried," Taimur said.

"No, you don't get me. I mean... I *can* see her... Some days, I feel as if the answer's yes... I can see her in the skies, or in my dreams, or in bodies of water, or in you. But, then again, I can't *see* her. I can't see her body unless you had buried me alive next to her lifeless, earthly vessel," Syed said.

"Why would I do that? I don't want you anywhere near her. Let her rest in peace. For Pete's sake, the woman's still warm in her grave," Taimur said.

"But, then again... I can see her. My eyes, which I'll donate after death, allow me to see her. That's enough for me. Seeing her," Syed said.

In the background, just behind him, kid bicyclists giggled. Stray dogs barked.

"You've seen enough," Taimur said.

"On the contrary, I have barely seen her. She was... she was a good woman. I would like to see her now," Syed said.

"She's gone! You... you blathering, bloody fool..." Taimur said.

Syed peeled back his jacket. There was a gun there.

"I would like to see her now," he said again.

He stared into Taimur's eyes. Their cigarettes had been smoked to the filters. They were the man's last two.

"You want to make me a *murderer*..." Taimur said, incredulous, aghast.

"I don't care who kills me. I loved her," Syed said.

Taimur spat in the man's face.

"Do it yourself."

Taimur's spit trickled down Syed's face, but the man didn't flinch. Taimur averted his eyes from Syed's then, pretended not to notice the bonafide pain there.

"I won't do it. But if you come back tonight, one of my boys will do you. He'll do you real good, you son of a bitch," Taimur said and closed the door.

In those days, Taimur had a lot of unseemly friends. Friends who would do dirty things. Friends you couldn't trust around your money, drugs, girls, whatever. These guys had little to nothing to lose. Their eyes told the whole story of living and dying in Steel Town.



When Taimur went outside to find Syed once the evening had fallen, he found Syed asleep in his car. He decided then and there he would take Syed's car too and drive it to Karachi. This was retribution in its sweetest glory. He imagined how happy his father would be.

That night, Taimur tapped on the window. Taimur's friend, Samir, was with him.

Suddenly, all crusty-eyed and liquor-tongued, Syed woke up.

"Are you ready?" Taimur said.

Syed unlocked his car doors, and Taimur and Samir shook their heads. Samir cocked the gun and aimed it at the man's head.

"Get your fucking hands up. Step out of the vehicle slowly," Samir said.

Syed did so.

"Walk, bitch," Samir said, and Syed walked.

The three of them walked to a forested area just behind the residences. A curious, gorgeous fawn skipped across the greenery, stopped to eye them, and continued its trot into the blacker night.

“Kneel, you bastard,” Samir said.

Syed knelt. He had grown old. Taimur would later realize the man died with arthritis in his knee. He started to pray in Arabic, and Taimur's friend cocked the pistol once more. Crickets chirped in the silence. A light rain began to fall. The air was crisp. The grass was dewy.

The man finished praying and looked up at the two youngsters.

“I'm getting hungry. Do it,” Syed said.

Taimur's friend turned to him.

“I can't do it, Tai,” Samir said, shaking.

“What do you mean? Do it,” Taimur said.

Taimur's friend put the gun on the ground. He had sweated through his shirt, and he stuttered when he spoke.

“I—I—I've seen this g—guy b—b—b—before. I know him,” his friend said.

The way Taimur laughed, it made Samir laugh too.

“You don't know shit. He's just a nobody. He's just a random man seeking punishment for what he did. An agonized man who wouldn't dare look my father in the eyes,” Taimur said.

“Who are you, old man? I mean, really,” Taimur said. He knelt by the man and slapped him on the left cheek with the inside of his left hand.

“That's right. You're Dr. Janmohamed! You're Yara's dad,” Samir said.

The man moaned.

“How do you know my daughter?” Syed said.

"She grew up with my cousin. You used to come to pick her up when I would be at their house," Taimur's friend said.

"Give me the gun, Samir," Taimur said.

Samir handed Taimur the pistol, and Taimur pointed it at the doctor.

"Do it," Syed said.

Taimur almost did. He could have shot the man then and there, and nobody would ever know. He could have paraded through life an anonymous killer, having avenged his mother's death.

Yet, like Samir, he didn't, either.

"I'll kill you, but first, I want to meet your daughter," Taimur said.

"Again?"

"She was at the fucking funeral. I *saw* her. She saw me."

"She can't know," Syed said.

"They'll never find your body," Samir said.

Taimur turned around, flung the gun into the lake as hard as he could, watched it splash into the water, making so many enough ripples that he lost count.

CHAPTER THREE

Taimur opened his door to Samir and Syed. The three men walked into Taimur's father's home, where Taimur's father stood tall and lanky dressed in white. Taimur's father turned around and smiled.

"Hello, Samir. Tai, who's your friend?" Taimur's father asked his son, gesturing towards Syed.

"He's my *chacha*, my uncle from India," Samir blurted out.

Shame almost robbed Taimur of his appetite. But he sat Syed at the dinner table and joined his father in the kitchen to prepare for dinner. Taimur's father had brought home goat biryani from the local shop on his way home from work. There was enough to feed all of them and more.

The men ate dinner silently.

Taimur kissed his father on the cheek before leaving the house with Samir and Syed. It was close to midnight, but Karachi's a city that never sleeps. Steel Town is a good 30 miles out of the town. It was a good thing that one of the few things Taimur learned from his father was how to drive a manual car. Nearly every vehicle in Pakistan was a stick shift, except for the rich who imported their vehicles with automatic options.

He was speeding down the road. Samir had cracked his window to smoke a cigarette. Syed smoked a cigarette as well.

"Did your mum ever say anything about me?" Syed said.

"No," Taimur said, focused on driving.

"She missed me," Syed said, seemingly more to himself than anything.

"Your mother was not what or who you think she was," Syed said.

"Shut the fuck up," Taimur said.

"Sometimes, I couldn't see her... she would simply just... vanish..." Syed said.

"Samir, how far are we," Taimur said, ignoring the man.

"She was... invisible..." Syed said.

When they arrived in Defense, an upscale Karachi borough, the lights were still on. Two security guards stood to attention as they did not recognize the driver of their boss's car.

"It's okay," the guard said, then waved them off.

They opened the gate to the garage. Taimur drove it in and parked. Leaving the car, he helped the man out and took Samir aside for a moment.

"He and I are going to go inside," Taimur said.

"Sure," Samir said.

Samir stood with the guards, and Taimur followed Syed into his house.

Syed folded his hands before his back and paced the room in a tiny circle before speaking.

"Drink?"

"No fucking thanks," Taimur said.

Syed made himself a neat and offered Taimur a chair next, having seated himself on a long, green sofa that looked comfortable as a cloud.

"Yara, my daughter... she... she is nothing like your mum. Yara is a runner, and, as fate ordains it, you are her chaser. She is petite. She speaks Urdu. Her skin is colored like the star-flushed Sahara. She is my wife Wafima's only child. Wafima is an architect and a professor of

architecture at Zaha Hadid Architects in London. A very ambitious woman who wasn't home much. Yara often went with her to London for work trips, and I would be alone. That was when I made my trips to Steel Town to visit your mum.”

“Yara carries my large eyes under her long eyelashes. Many nights I brought her along when I tended to my garden and my flowers. She dressed liberally, thought liberally, intelligently, had the time of her life at home in the care of her doctor father. On the weekends, my green thumb kept me busy. I woke at 10 am or so to drink black coffee and walked to the backyard where I planted and watered apricots and blueberries. It isn't a clean city — the pollution's rampant, and there are hardly any trees to begin with. Yara would go to the garden, sit on a plastic chair, taste minty lemonades, and share crunchy ice-cream cones with me.”

“I not only took her there. I took her all over the world in her youth. I always say Yara grew up in the world, and nowhere less. Yet, each of our trips ended the same: a proud return to Pakistan, a plopping of palms by sides, and a resignationf to live in the Asian sub-continent.”

“And the weed. The weed I knew I retrieved it from your mum's older brother, Pawel.”

Everybody knew where the Janmohameds lived. Every other affluent Pakistani had rubbed shoulders with one of the members of the family at some point, ever since the family settled into the posh DHA district. One of Yara's uncles — by cultural practice, not blood — loved to make the joke he could land in Karachi, ask whoever was driving to take him to the Janmohamed house, and that was that. He claimed he didn't know the address and would put his hands over his ears like a schoolboy if someone tried to tell him.

For a doctor, Syed was a simple man. He was even religious. He prayed five times a day and figured that the best way to atone for his wealth was to follow God into the light blindly. It was better than the dark that money can sometimes feel like or represent.

Yara didn't work. She only studied, but she wasn't an airhead. She was a voracious reader. She was into the theater, and the stage, and the screen. She used to write her own little plays in college when she should've been studying. Still, she didn't show them to anyone for years and years. It took moving to the house in question for the writings to emerge from brown boxes meant for moving materials from the old cobweb attic.

The truth was that Yara knew nothing of struggle. She experienced a level of comfort and privilege that many would never understand. She became aware of this very early on. Guilt consumed her when she wasn't with her class fellows who came from equally wealthy families. When she was with them, shame filled her insides and threatened to eat her whole from the inside out. It was a flesh-eating shame. Briefly, she turned to art, like every other trust fund kid out there with unequivocal freedom. She tried her hand at acting. She lacked stage presence. She wrote a couple of stories. They lacked voice.

But when she sang, she sang to kill. She was no longer there. She was in the air, and in the air, she could be whoever she wanted to be. Up late at night under lamplight when she should be asleep, yawning in class, sleeping in class, it was all good, because nobody dared fail the lone heir to the Janmohamed legacy that made the neighborhood swell up with pride. She was paraded through this life like a trophy child: coddled and excused.

"You shall sleep on the cot tonight," Syed said.

"And Samir?" Taimur said.

"Send him home," Syed said.

"Where is she?" Taimur said.

"She has gone for a run," Syed said.

"At this hour," Taimur said.

"I send the guards with her," Syed said.

Taimur excused himself to step outside to talk to Samir. It was now one a.m., and he was tired. He caught Samir joking with the guards. They appeared to have been drinking. They realized that most of their efforts would grow to be futile, and had resigned themselves to light-hearted banter and shit-talking.

"Go home, bro. I got this," Taimur said.

"You sure? I'll kill that son of a bitch," Samir said.

"You should have done it back at the house if you were going to do it. It's too late now."

As Taimur hugged Samir goodnight, Taimur's eyes locked with Yara's for the first time. She didn't miss a beat as she jogged past the both of them into her house, where the sound of Syed's happiness registered clear as the day that followed.

"What is he doing here?" Yara said to her father, who himself was in and out of sleep.

"I am taking care of him. He is a friend's son."

"A friend's son. Which friend, Baba?"

"*Meri jaan*. My dear. Don't worry. He's a nice boy."

"You won't tell me whose friend of yours has gifted you their adult son?"

"Yara, darling, try to understand. I am doing him a credit. He wishes to attend medical school here, and he has just lost his mother."

"What about his own father?"

"His father is not of much help. Uneducated, steel mill worker."

"So? Let his son work in the Steel Mill today. I'm confused, Baba. You are acting erratically these days."

Syed stood now and attempted to make his point clearer.

“You will understand what I am telling you. You are thinking of the boldest things to say to me right now and I understand that. I understand you are upset. But you have to come to terms with the reality of the situation here, and why I am doing what I am doing. I have done things in my past that I am not proud of, Yara.”

“We all have,” Yara said.

“That boy in there... that boy in there is a sharp kid. That boy in there is giving me a shot at feeling better about myself.”

“You can’t just play with people’s lives.”

“I’m not – I’m not playing with his life. I’m working with his life. I’m working on his life. I’m doing everything I can in my power to improve his life, to show him that there’s a better way than whichever wayward path he’s chosen to embark on! He feels like he doesn’t want to embrace his destiny! That child wants to get by!”

“Who are you, Baba, to control his destiny? Are you a genie he rubbed out of a lamp?”

“Yara, please—”

Yara stood up, and watched her father continue, hapless, unable to voice any further thought concerning the topic.

“You think you can help this kid out but you can’t. You just can’t. You think you are able to figure out what it is he’s going through but you just can’t. He’s not educated. He looks odd. I don’t want to know him, I don’t want to know about his mother, nor about his father. I want him out, and I want him out now!”

Syed watched as Yara stormed off as the heat of the moment became all too hot for her to handle.

CHAPTER FOUR

Taimur noted how haphazardly perched the sun appeared to be the next day. It was if as God blindly flung it into the sky with a slingshot. He sweated in the sun after going for a run himself, inspired by the runs Yara would take. He took up the running route partly because he wondered whatever it was that Yara ran by that gave her such pause and inspiration to fire off her smart-alec remarks. It would not render him any sharper or wiser. He ran in Steel Town, but those were dirt roads. The roads here in Defence were not roads at all. They were city streets.

He came back to the Janmohamed home early that morning. He could almost guarantee that Syed was still asleep.

“Boss still asleep?” he asked one of the security guards outside.

“Yes, but boss should be up soon,” one of them said, checking his watch.

Taimur had always been an early riser. Sleeping in somebody else's home made him all the more aware of his tendency. He started to do push-ups in the garage as daylight seeped in through the black, locked gate.

“Twenty-eight ... twenty-nine...” Taimur said.

“Thirty,” Yara said.

Taimur fell. She surprised him.

“Thirty,” Taimur said.

"I've seen you. You were at my mother's funeral."

"Yeah. You're the ghetto kid from Steel Town," Yara said.

"I have a name," Taimur said.

"You also have a minute to tell me what you're still doing here," Yara said.

Taimur chuckled. He started doing push-ups again.

"I'm a guest of your father's," he said, in between reps.

"Aren't you afraid you've overstayed?" Yara said.

"No. I mean... no. In fact, I wanted to meet you," Taimur said.

"Why would I want to meet you?" Yara said.

Taimur stood this time. The sound of young children playing cricket in the street outside the Janmohamed home rang in his ears.

"We have a mutual friend. Name's Samir Merchant. Ring a bell?" Taimur said.

"What, he sends you here to ask me for my hand or something?" Yara said.

"No, no. Nothing like that," Taimur said.

"I know his cousin, Farida. Nice girl. We don't talk anymore. How is she?" Yara said.

"Wouldn't know. I never met her. Samir's my neighbor," Taimur said.

"That's nice. Just a couple of ghetto kids from Steel Town gossiping like girls about, well, girls," Yara said.

"What's your deal?"

“Buddy,” she said, “I don't have one. I'll make you a deal. Come to the garden where my father's waiting for us or see your way out. Ok, pumpkin?” Yara said.

“Where I'm from, they only call you pumpkin if they think you're a cutie,” Taimur said.

She was almost inside. In fact, she had already turned around and headed back inside. Her back was to him, so he couldn't see how her red her cheeks had flushed or how wide she grinned. She did her best to make her dialogue sound like she wasn't smiling.

“You're not a bad sport,” Yara said, and she was gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

There in the garden, Taimur watched Yara played badminton with her father. Yara's mother Wafima was in London on business. Yara had to sit this trip out because she was organizing a marathon for charity with her father. Had Wafima been in the city, Yara reminded both Taimur and Syed she would've begged her to watch. Her shirt exposed the slightest crescent moon-shaped glimpse of skin under her toned and sculpted abdomen when she served. Taimur pretended not to notice. When it came to making people feel included on lazy Sundays in high Pakistani society, homely sport and recreation always seemed to do the trick. Apart from the badminton, Taimur spotted a Sport Design classic volleyball by the lawn adjacent to the garden.

Within the game, Syed looked entirely convincing. He didn't resemble a man who had wanted to die just the night before. His line calls were melodic, his encouragement of Yara was gracious. None of it hinted at the turmoil of his night, primarily spent in a vulnerable, arresting state of body and mind.

"The kid sucks," she said.

"Be nice to him," Syed said.

"Why? He's a loser," she said.

"You know I can hear you, right?"

“Pal. You’re in my home. I can talk about anything I want and do anything I want. Walk your little broke baby nuts around the block before you come back and talk to me that way,”

Yara said.

“This one’s got an attitude,” Taimur said out loud.

The game was over. The two sat on either side of Taimur, who hadn't showered that morning, still feeling the impact of his morning push-ups. Syed's breathing was heavy, and Yara's controlled, rhythmic.

"What's your name?" she said, suddenly sober and not self-absorbed.

"Taimur," Taimur said.

“Steel Town Taimur,” Yara said.

“Karachi Yara,” Taimur said.

Syed whistled a song Taimur recognized from a Bollywood movie his mother used to watch.

"Yara, may we have a minute?" Syed said.

Yara nodded. She stood and walked inside. Taimur and Syed sat there in the lawn, still, and let some silence fill the air before either of them spoke.

"Badminton," Syed said.

"I'm not much of a player," Taimur said.

"You've seen my daughter. I want to see her again now," Syed said.

"You're a dead man walking," Taimur said.

"Is that right? Do dead men walking see dead women? Because I see your mother now. She's walking towards me. Her ghost's roaming the city" Syed said.

"You're a sick fuck," Taimur said.

"Oy hoy. Once again, with the foul mouth. You ought to learn some manners," Syed said.

"Manners. I ought to learn some manners. Do you hear yourself when you talk?" Taimur said.

"Not well. I have a hearing problem... so I have to speak up," Syed said.

"Why don't you just kill yourself?" Taimur said.

"You're the hoodlum. The 'ghetto kid from Steel Town.' My daughter thinks I've brought you here in the act of charity, out of the kindness of my own beating heart... You think I should just throw that away? No, no, no. It makes sense for you to be the one. You... you the uneducated, uncivilized, wretched —" Syed said.

"That's enough," Taimur said.

He stood up. He was angry. Yara was blending smoothies and dancing to pop music in the kitchen.

"You set me up. You knew I was going to bring Samir over last night. You know where I live. You knew who was a criminal and who wasn't. You knew who Samir was before he even recognized you," Taimur said.

Syed was quiet. An ice cream truck drove through the neighborhood. Kids chased it.

"And now, you've brought me here. You've chased Samir away. You've introduced me to your daughter. Something's not adding up. It makes me think you're going to do me like you did my mom," Taimur said.

Syed stood and blocked out the sun. He towered over Taimur in that lawn.

"I didn't do a damn thing to your mum. It was your father who was never there for her. Why don't you ask him what happened?" Syed said.

"I know what happened, you fool. She overdosed on drugs you were doing with her. You left her there to die. Fuck you," Taimur said.

"Don't you sell the same drugs?" Syed said.

"Fuck you, man," Taimur said.

"If you don't kill me tonight, I will do it myself and frame you. But if you do it and make it look like an accident, you're Scott free. I get to see your mum again, and Yara will be yours," Syed said.

At that moment, Yara emerged onto the lawn. Taimur turned to look at her.

"Yara, why don't you take this young man to the cinema and catch a movie? I have some planting to do," Syed said.

CHAPTER SIX

Taimur and Yara walked to the cinema not far from her father's house. Things happened fast between them. Yara would not tell him for months, but her heart beat faster whenever he was around. In her presence, his own heart ran laps. Their differences attempted to stifle a resistant, reluctant love.

"It was my birthday a few weeks ago, and I was already drunk, regaling my guests with stories about my earliest memories of birthdays," Yara said on the way to the theater. "I would sit on Baba's lap, and we would hold the knife steady and cut a chocolate cake that had so much icing on it my grandmother would shake her head. She never ate the cream on her cake. I probably wasn't old enough at 1 year old to remember when I was born, but my mom told me I was excited, nevertheless. My mom drove Baba's old truck home from the store with balloons hanging on each door handle under both rear windows. It was a pretty picture. I'll show you. It was just the three of us. Baba had been waiting for this day since I came home from the hospital. Baba's a doctor, and he — us — we had a lot of friends. Our social circle was filled to the brim with doctors, lawyers, businessmen, architects, authors, scientists, landlords, oil magnates," Yara said.

Yara loved to talk, and boy, could she do it well. He wondered if he would be happy with privilege, or if he would go chasing after trouble. He asked if he would be content with being safe and sheltered from the world, or if that innate human need to suffer would wrangle him too,

Yara didn't love Taimur just yet. She still had a ways to fall. She still had to love the way he would pick up the phone to call her to have a very focused conversation adorned with a pointedly purposeful message, and how she would pick up the phone for him to tell her how lovely her voice sounded, and to fill him in like the blueberry inside of a pie about her own day, all the ups and downs. She knew deep down that the zest in her heart could not be and would not and should not be quelled by Taimur, a man who was dark, broody, and damaged by life. He had been tossed around like landfill for most of his life, and his home was somewhere Yara wouldn't travel to without pepper spray and perhaps a pocketknife.

When Taimur and Yara arrived at the Janmohamed home that evening, Shehroz was perched against Syed's black BMW.

He spit on the ground.

"Where were you?" he said.

"Cafe Comma," Yara said.

"We had a dinner reservation. Who's the kid?"

Yara looked at Taimur, who looked as beautiful as she could have hoped a boy to be, and back to Shehroz who looked as angry as she could have thought a man to be.

"He's... he's my cousin. My cousin from Islamabad. Here on vacation."

Shehroz looked Taimur up and down with an expression that was less than impressed.

"Your father cooked for me," Shehroz said, moving on. "There's beef burgers in the fridge."

Yara took this as a sign to cease the conversation and walk through the doors into her home. She did so without looking back at Taimur, and perhaps she'd imagine he'd follow right

along, and he did and would have enjoyed a burger next to her had Shehroz not palmed his chest and blocked his entrance.

“What do you do in Islamabad, buddy?” Shehroz said, peering into Taimur’s eyes. Shehroz was a close talker. Taimur could have counted the number of veins in both of his eyes had he held the gaze a moment longer.

Taimur was a vetted liar. You could ask anybody in Steel Town. He could have charged the locals for the alibis he generated out of air thin as graphene.

“Fuck around, mostly,” Taimur said. “Just work and go home.”

“You married?” Shehroz asked.

“I’m gay. If I get married, it’ll be to a beautiful man, and it won’t be in this godforsaken country,” Taimur said and walked inside.

Syed was indeed in the kitchen, making chai now. The good doctor tipped his head to Taimur.

“Your father’s on the phone,” he said.

Syed handed the phone by its cord to Taimur, and Taimur answered it, anxious.

“Baba?” Taimur muttered at a low enough volume to dissatisfy any eavesdropping.

“Son,” Taimur’s father said. “I am home, where are you?”

“I’ve had some work. I’m in the city getting trained,” Taimur said, abruptly emotional.

“Okay, good. I am home, just bored. Come home soon. I am going to sleep,” Taimur’s father said.

“Of course, Baba,” Taimur said, and hung up the phone.

Now alone in the kitchen, he glanced to the garden where Yara, Shehroz and Syed were gathered, sipping chai. Yara smoked a cigarette. She looked tired in the light that illuminated the otherwise dark garden.

From where Taimur stood, he made the rest of her features out like he could make his way home in the dark. Yara was brown. Her skin was colored as if somebody had kissed it with honey applied to their lips. Her eyes were highlighted with dark eye shadow. Her hair was long and blonde. She wore a nose ring. She held some kind of radiating, knowing look in her iris that went perfectly with her ruby lipstick. What stood out most was the light-ray that rested on the right side of her face like some kind of transparent tape, illuminating a line of eyebrow, eye, skin, and teeth. She was the most beautiful thing Taimur had ever seen and yet he couldn't summon the courage to join her in the garden. It seemed as if all their fire from the flame from the theater and the cafe had been hosed down by Shehroz. Shehroz wore expensive clothes, had an innocence about him, and appeared to be a good man. Taimur felt shame for lying. Before Taimur could lift a toe, Yara had entered the home from the other entrance and went straight to her bedroom, yelling out goodnight to anyone within earshot. Taimur was left with his imagination. He watched as Syed and Shehroz exited the garden into the living room which was in even plainer view.

“So, how do you know Yara?” Taimur said.

“She is a really, really good friend,” Shehroz said.

He smiled, and Syed put his hand on Shehroz's shoulder, but did not make eyes with Taimur.

“Shall we get some sleep?” Syed said.

Taimur looked around the lavish living room. There was even more artwork than there was in his bedroom, and he loved staring at the art, stood in front of the portraits in his room the night before for at least an hour, lost himself in the paint.

“Yes. I’m beat,” Shehroz said, “but I think I’ll go back home. It was good to see you,” he said to Syed.

He turned to Taimur.

“Enjoy your stay in Karachi, cousin,” he said.

“It was nice to meet you,” Taimur offered.

With that, Shehroz departed.

It wasn’t until Taimur was settled in the guest bedroom upstairs for the second straight night that the sound of the engine revving up alerted him to the view from his window where Shehroz drove Syed’s black BMW into the then wee hours of the morning.

Taimur dreamt of Yara that night. This time she spoke, and they were some ways away from Karachi. They were in America, they were older, and they were near the water.

“Where are you going?” Yara asked him.

Suddenly unable to speak, Taimur could only open his mouth to form the shapes that accompany speech. So much of this man’s life had been strife with a staggered, zig-zagged mapping. His life so far had been in servitude to others’ whims and desires of others for so long. As much as Taimur pined for control, so much of his early poverty-stricken life and his later wealth-weathered life was merely carried out like an order of operations or a puzzle that just happened to fit together. He was “a man to whom things just happened to, with no agency of his own,” to borrow the excellent line from *True Detective*. If Taimur told Yara where he was going within that dream of his, he would have not talked for days, and he would have had filled Yara’s

days and nights with epithets, paragraphs, soliloquies. There was a yellow and grey gravel before them that veered off into the never-ending, and that was where Taimur thought it was obvious he was going. It only occurred to Taimur that Yara shunned the obvious all her life once he woke up in her father's bungalow.

Mornings in Karachi used to leave Taimur like a little kid, awe-struck by sun-rise, mesmerized by the winds. Today he didn't find seventy and sunny beautiful. He brushed, showered, dressed, poured steaming hot coffee from the pot into a mug, sipped it in between hits of a hash joint he kept on his person for emergencies.

Yara joined him in the kitchen.

"You're no cousin of mine," she said.

"No?"

"A cousin of mine wouldn't dare drink his coffee black," Yara said.

"I don't love Shehroz. He thinks I love him. He thinks I'll bloody marry him," she said more incredulously than perhaps she would have liked.

"I've just learned to love myself enough not to throw myself at the first man who shows me any sign of affection and care. He should also have a future. You're interested in pursuing medicine like Baba," Yara said.

"Yes," Taimur said, not believing his own words.

"Let's go to the pool," she said.

She took enough steps into the pool to where only her neck and head were above water and looked back at Taimur who stood there with a drink in one hand, wearing Syed's half-buttoned button up on to match swimming trunks and sandals.

When Taimur got in the water, she felt his presence more than she heard the pool ripple or the chlorine stir. She reminded herself of her own presence as she turned to face him, laid her eyes upon the type of brown boy who'd always escaped her fantasies. The more she looked, the more she imagined sleeping in somewhere and all those shared whispered bitter nothings because time slipped between them like sand.

“I don't like to talk when there's nothing else to say,” she said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

On a rainy night with Yara in rare tow, Taimur descended upon his former stomping grounds of Steel Town. Yara played foreign fetishist and tourist to a tee. He encouraged her to dress down as he would be introducing her to his lonely father and didn't want to rile the lonely old man up too much just yet. In the time since, Yara had dyed her hair a voluminous black. Her hair color drew her eyes out, and she was dressed in all black athleisure.

As Taimur parked the BMW — yes, Shehroz had only borrowed it for the night — in front of his house, Yara gawked at its deplorable state.

“Your father needs to come live with us,” she said.

“Yara. Your heart is too pure for this world. He lives here because here is closest to his job. The government paid for the house, and they charge him very low rent,” Taimur explained.

Perhaps having heard the sound of the BMW's engine clicks and thumps as the metal expands, Taimur's father stepped outside to wave to his son and the beautiful young girl he was with. He spoke Urdu, beckoned for them to come inside.

Taimur and Yara waved back. Taimur hugged his father, touched the back of his neck with his index.

Together, the three of them walked inside where cricket was on TV.

“Baba,” Taimur said, “This is Yara. I've been working for her father, Yara, at his house. Thanks to her father, Syed Janmohamed, I've been accepted into medical school in the city.”

Taimur's father looked at them with a wide smile. He was a classic and responsible type of man that they just don't make anymore. He hardly ever complained, and he was good to have

around the house if anything ever broke or needed maintenance. Having heard this news, Taimur's father set his cup of chai down and walked to his bedroom to retrieve something. Just a moment later, he emerged with two wet eyes and one runny nose. He was holding a tissue.

"I will move into Syed's home on a permanent basis and live with Syed and Yara. I will study," Taimur said.

"Uncle," Yara said, "come with us."

Taimur's father looked at Yara and smiled his gentle smile.

It was not lost on Taimur that his living with Syed and his daughter was something that Syed as retribution. Syed felt he owed Taimur's mother a debt. Yara saw it as love. Taimur saw it as freedom, liberty, and opportunity.

"I have also come to tell you that we plan to marry each other, and our engagement is finalized," Taimur said.

Taimur's father started to pack his things. "I quit," he said. "Rich girl, rich family, rich *father*. My son, the doctor!"

"Baba, are you sure you want to do this?" Taimur said, quietly, as not to be heard by Yara who waited patiently in the living room as he followed his father into the bedroom.

Taimur's father had grown older in the time passed, but he was still confident and strong.

"Yes, I'm sure. Why not?"

"This is our house. We should keep the house."

"We should keep the house... only if I continue to work at Steel Mills. I'm not working at Steel Mills anymore."

"You're not working at Steel Mills anymore..."

"It's time for me to retire. Besides, I want to be with you," Farid said.

“So we just scrub Steel Town clean of our ever being here?”

“Fuck Steel Town,” Farid said.

“Fuck Steel Town? This place gave us grit. It gave us determination.”

“So, you get to leave, and I don’t? Is that it?”

There was a heavy silence in the air.

Taimur threw his hands up, as if in surrender.

“Baba. You do whatever you want,” Taimur said.

“You’re goddamn right I do whatever I want,” he said.

Taimur came back outside.

“I’m done with him,” Taimur said.

“How can you say that?”

“He’s not your father. He’s not some educated, rich man. He doesn’t think things through. He works with his fucking hands and he works with math and is paid shit for it.”

“He’s here all by himself, and you want that for him. You want him to live alone and be sad,” Yara said.

Taimur stopped to look at Yara, really look at her. Her gaze reinforced much of the compassion and care she was verbally expressing. Her eyes were already big, but this time they were welled up with tears thick enough to fill a tiny pail.

“It’s not like you can convince them otherwise,” Yara said, thinly. “I hear him in there packing his things. We have enough room. And he’ll get along with my father.”

“He—he won’t. He can’t.”

“Why is that?”

Taimur ignored her question.

“Why is that?”

“I have to tell you something. Your father was seeing my mother, Farishtay Mahdi. Your father was seeing her because he’s a horny bastard who paid my mother for sex. He was here all the fucking time, I know him, I know his fucking face, I know when he left. He came here all the time.”

Yara was silent.

“How dare you?” she finally said.

“How dare I?” Taimur said.

“Yeah, Taimur. How fucking dare you? Who the fuck do you think you are? I—I’m going home. You and your father are welcome, but don’t you fucking talk to me. I don’t want to fucking talk to you. I—I’m going to talk to my father, and I’m going to get to the bottom of your bullshit. He’s my father. He’s a civilian. It’s not right involving her. If you’re lying to me, I’m going to blow your fucking balls off.”

Yara dialed her father.

Syed answered the phone from his home.

“Hello, Yara,” Syed said.

“What’s up, Baba? What are you doing?”

“Just gardening, Yara.”

“You ever come to Taimur’s house in Steel Town, Baba?”

“No... no...”

“I heard different. Baba, tell me what happened. Don’t bullshit me.”

Syed was quiet on the other end of the phone.

Taimur watched as Yara held the phone to her ear and nodded, pacing the room.

She hung up the phone eventually and sat on the sofa.

“Taimur’s mother – Farishtay – was the love of my life,” Syed said over the phone. The words split Yara’s world into halves, cracked her globe like an egg.

“But she was also much more than that. She carried with her the same condition you have, my love. She carried with her the invisibility. She could toggle it on and off at will, like a light switch. My visits to her were more like consultations, were more like reasons to spend time with her so I could figure out why you are this way and what I can do to help you to be seen.”

Yara listened intently now, and nodded thoughtfully.

“I only wanted the best for you. I thought she had the answers,” he said.

Taimur did not have the heart to press farther on the topic, but he could touch her then, as she caressed his shoulders with her tender touch, dressed in a satin shirt and pants fit for hot summer sleep.

“Do you ... do you ever feel like your parents aren’t who they would want you to think they are?” Taimur said.

Yara was quiet.

“My father is a vain, complicated man, Taimur,” she said, slowly. “Trapped inside a loveless, sexless marriage without any reminders of how he married my mother in the first place. I’m sorry about your mother, truly. I really am.”

“But there’s something I have to tell you, too,” she said.

“I’m a freak, Taimur,” Yara said.

“I don’t belong in society. I belong in some kind of circus, some kind of forbidden display show where every move I make is fit for public entertainment.”

“What are you talking about?”

Without speaking, Yara took Taimur's hand. Her hand was very soft.

"Uncle," she cried out, "we'll be right back."

The two of them, joined hand in hand, moved to the room over where a mirror lay. Yara and Taimur stood in front of the mirror, watched each other move.

"You have to promise you won't scream," Yara said.

"I promise I won't scream," Taimur said.

"You have to promise... you have to swear on your mother's grave you won't leave me," Yara said.

"I promise. I swear. Baby, what is it?"

Yara sighed a deep sigh and exhaled.

Slowly, she closed her eyes and began to hum loudly. Taimur watched as parts of her body slowly blended into the background of the room. First went her torso, and all he saw was her visible arms, legs, head, hair, feet. Taimur immediately started praying, chanting.

"You're a fucking... You're a fucking ghost," Taimur said.

"Shhhhh. Keep your voice down. This is me. This is who I am. I'm... invisible," Yara said.

"Invisible?"

"Your mother. Your mother was also invisible."

Taimur started to cry then and tilted his head back towards the ceiling. His eyes narrowed.

Yara's body had materialized back into full form.

"I'm going to fucking kill him," Taimur said.

"You're going to kill him. He wants to die," Yara said.

Taimur's father walked into the room.

"It will take the government no time at all to buy the house back," he said. "In the meanwhile, can we imagine that there is some kind of retribution in store for the old man here? I mean, good golly. I'm a jolly old fellow," he said.

He looked at the forlorn expressions plastered onto the youngsters' faces.

"Geez, you guys ok?"

"Farid uncle," she said, "could you give us a moment alone please."

When Farid obliged and retreated in haste to the front porch, it was only when Yara heard the rickety door shut that she summoned some courage to look Taimur in the eyes.

"You don't know... do you have the slightest idea... the slightest idea of what it is to be me?"

"Are you mad?" Taimur said.

"It's with me everywhere I go," he said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The government bought back the house a month or so later, and Farid arrived in a cab in front of the Janmohamed house. He didn't have many worldly possessions nor any worldliness to begin with. His pronunciation was uncertain and confusing. There were words he had never uttered, words he had never stopped to say out loud, words he had never dreamed of.

It was only when Taimur's father shook Syed's hand vigorously and smiled in his face with the faith that accompanies religious men that the pang of secondhand shame revolted and repulsed Taimur enough to the point of nausea.

"As-salamu alaykum," Taimur's father said to Syed, who offered a gracious big smile.

Syed repeated the religious salutation, and hugged the man, gestured for him to enter the home first.

Taimur's father quickly acclimated to the prestige that awaited him in Defence. He lived in one of the guest bedrooms in the bungalow's second floor, and by nightfall, he was wearing his usual tight white t shirt and pants. He was useful around the house too, always fixing things, dismantling certain objects to put them back together properly, without even so much as voicing his remarks.

But Taimur noticed that as he and his father were finally reunited under one roof, his father's health faltered. Perhaps it was the move. His dad was well up in age enough so that even the slightest amount of motion could knock the wind out of his sails, so he imagined a move from the slummy townhome to the Pakistani equivalent of a Connecticut stately manor really took him for the ride of his life. There were things his father had never seen before like China

finer than most things he was used to dining on, and materials so unbeknownst to him that he had to ask how to pronounce the word for them so as not to come off anymore uneducated than he already did or was.

Taimur, on the other hand, sat through the first dinner with nausea in his stomach.

“So, Farid *bhai*,” Syed said.

“Syed *bhai*,” Farid Mahdi said.

“Mahdi. What a name,” Syed said in between bites of steak.

“Yes. Well, in popular Muslim belief, Mahdi is a spiritual and temporal leader who will rule before the end of the world and restore religion and justice. In Shia belief, Mahdi is the twelfth imam, who is expected to return and triumph over injustice,” Taimur’s father said.

“So interesting, Farid *bhai*.”

“May I be excused?” Taimur said, throwing his napkin over his plate and standing up, not even bothering to wait for an answer.

“Tai—”

He was gone.

He was in the bathroom throwing up when Yara entered the room from her room next door. She, too, was just now grappling with and coming to terms with the true reason for Syed and Taimur’s bond, why they took so much of a liking to each other, why there was so much vetted interest and connective tissue. If she only knew. Taimur barely knew anything about her mother. The more he thought about his own mother, the more he regretted ever opening the door for Syed in the first place. He began to have dark thoughts. His mind wandered towards a place of death and destruction.

“I-I want him dead,” Taimur said.

“You want him dead,” Yara said.

“He wanted me to kill him, long ago,” Taimur said.

“It seems like we’ve given him reason to keep living,” Yara said.

“That’s just the thing. Syed will never see it coming,” Taimur said.

“Oh. Oh, he’ll see it coming. He’s not dumb. He remembers things,” Yara said.

“Did you see the way he condescends my father?” Taimur said.

“This house... this house is your father’s. Your father has a right to live in this house.”

Taimur hugged Yara.

“We’re going to figure out what he knows first,” Taimur said.

CHAPTER NINE

Syed woke up in the country the next morning, groggy, just waking up. He'd been drugged in his sleep by one of Taimur's boys from the hood, a person who need not be named. The guy had taken a small amount of money and snuck into the house in the wee hours of the morning posing as a handyman and injected the man with an agent to make him temporarily lose consciousness.

"Just tickling his dick," Taimur's boy described it as. Whatever.

The sun was high in the sky day, perched atop a cloud all sturdy and secure. It wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. It beamed down on the men as they orbited Syed, each taking turns slapping him in the face.

"Are you with the fucking CIA?"

"What the fuck do you know about invisibility?"

"Did you make her invisible?"

"Was Taimur's mother ever exposed to radiation?"

"When was the first time you saw Taimur's mother disappear?"

"When did you first fuck Taimur's mother?"

"How sick of a fuck are you?"

Taimur watched as the Steel Town goons roughed Syed up.

"Yara was like that when she was born. My daughter was born this way. Please. You have to understand that I don't and didn't mean any harm to Farishtay. I had no idea she was a working woman."

“You lie to us!” one of the men said and unleashed a slap across Syed’s face.

“She was supposed to give me the truth... she was supposed to meet Yara and show her that she wasn’t the only one... please, you have to believe me...”

“What took you so long?”

“She needed money! She was a wretched... a discredit to society. She needed money. She offered me sex and I took it,” Syed said.

Taimur then took the lead with the gun of his own and enough superhuman strength to knock Syed’s head off right then and there.

“Do you want to die here in the middle of nowhere?” Taimur said.

“Kill me. I told you already – months ago – to kill me,” Syed said.

“Give me a name,” someone said.

“What?” Syed said.

“Give me a fucking name,” another guy said.

“There is no name. There is only spirit,” Syed said.

Taimur gestured for the gun, and someone put it in his hand.

“I loved you. Loved. Yet, here you go, boss,” Taimur said.

Taimur looked into Syed’s eyes.

“I’ll see Farishtay again. We’ll visit you, son. We’ll come see you. We’ll tell you everything. Just send me to her. Tell Yara I love her,” Syed said.

Taimur shot the gun, and Syed’s life leaked out of his body into the ether that best described the boundless black that stood before them.

The men around Taimur cheered. One grabbed his shoulders and rubbed them for good measure, massaging them.



That night, Taimur arrived back at the Janmohamed house. Yara stood outside.

“Did you do it?” she said.

“Yes. I did it. He said he loves you,” Taimur said, and fell into her arms.

“He loves me... he was a good man. But what he did was wrong.”

“He figures out that he was a good man all along when he gets to Heaven or Hell, so be it, but at least he paid for his sins and discovered that whatever was waiting for him in the hereafter, he deserved it.”

“Do you think he’s reunited with my mom?”

Yara pressed her forehead against Taimur’s forehead.

“My love. Don’t think of such things. For all we know, he’s still on his way... hurtling through time and space towards the next dimension.”

“He said he’s coming back,” Taimur said, close enough to speak directly into Yara’s mouth.

“He said he’s coming back and he’s going to tell me things, show me things,” Taimur said.

“It’s all about what you want him to do. It’s all about what you want to think about, what you want to invite into your world. Your thoughts become things.”

Taimur pulled Yara closer and grinned. He wanted to believe that she was right.

“I was never going to be a doctor,” Taimur said.

“You sure?”

He laughed.

“Look at that. I made him laugh.”

“Yes, you made me laugh... you’re good at that.”

“I love you, Taimur. I love you for being so brave. I love you for being you.”

“I love you too, Yara.”

Together, they walked inside and counted the number of steps it took to get from the road to the bedroom. Once they counted, they were able to sleep without any dreams.

CHAPTER TEN

People talked in Defence. They all talked. They all wondered just where the good doctor had gone. The whereabouts of Dr. Syed Janmohamed made the news. The days that followed that fateful sun-scorched gunshot found Taimur pacing back and forth in the doctor's garden only to fall into Yara's arms, have her stroke his head.

On the very next day, Taimur woke from a nightmare in which Dr. Syed Janmohamed had visited – just as he had promised. He was not wearing a t-shirt, but he was wearing pants and sandals. He strutted on sand towards Taimur, pulling a delicately porcelain white horse along. The horse's trot matched the doctor's strut, and before Taimur could spot a cactus somewhere in the desert, the doctor was close enough so that Taimur could not mistake him for another man. It was him, alright.

“Taimur! Taimur! Taimur!”

“No!”

Taimur woke up in the middle of the night, lurched out of bed. He touched his sheets to find only moisture. Yara was now holding ice up to his forehead. She looked like a dream there. Still tall, still slender, still strong. He looked into her deep, green eyes that resembled lily pads. If he were a frog, he thought, he'd simply go from lily pad to lily pad, leap from one to the other. He imagined that if the two of them were to ever move to the rainforest, they would find a way to survive. But it was only his mind that was elsewhere. Yara had half the mind to tuck Taimur back into the bed.

“It's just a dream,” Yara said.

“Your consolation —”

“Shhhh. It’s not even consolation. It’s just... Listen. You’ve sweated through the sheets, and your shirt. Please take a cold shower. Listen, people are on their way to the house. I need you to stay in here and don’t make a sound. Take your cold shower, drink this water, and hide out in here until I come get you, OK?”

Taimur nodded. She handed him newspapers with which he wiped some of the sweat away, and one of which he ripped the crossword out from. Having pulled his shirt off, now naked save for his underwear, he climbed out of bed and into the guest bathroom, shivering.

He took a look at himself in the mirror. He had gotten much darker in the summer. He put the newspapers down on the floor and placed his feet atop them as he took another step towards the stall.

Yara peeled herself away from the frozen statue he’d temporarily made her to run downstairs and prepare things. This was her house now, but there were still men coming to the house who were friends of her father. Some men genuinely wished Syed well and wanted to pay respects. Others had business dealings with the doctor that were now as open-ended as a poor man’s riddle. The rest simply wanted to feel good about groveling at the feet of a dead doctor’s daughter for penance and mercy from the highest. Nearly all of it felt as cheap and manufactured to Yara as 30-plus-year-old car parts. Nevertheless, she spruced herself up in her room as she heard the sound of the shower click on, listened for the moment the cold, blue water would pummel Taimur’s moist, brown skin. As soon as she heard the water slowly creak and then burst into a thick gush, she started to sing out loud to herself, songs that she recalled from her childhood, songs that she knew from growing up in a house where music was always a constant.

The first person to arrive was Wafima Mahdi. Dressed in an off-white skirt, blouse, and jacket with black heels, adorned with a matching top hat and red, rosy lips, Wafima looked the spitting image of a *lady*, a lady who deserved to be with a gentleman. Her sunglasses were large enough that they hid most of her head, but Yara could still feel a tiny pang of unsuspected jealousy when she took a mental note of just how sharp her mother's jawline was, even after all these years.

"Mom, I—"

Wafima exited the car she had arrived in. Yara had jogged outside to greet her, all dressed up herself in a dark blue hue Eastern cultural wear wrapped in a pashmina shawl.

"You'd do that?" Wafima said.

"Do what?" Yara said.

"You'd do something to your father?" Wafima said.

"Of course not," Yara said.

"Where is he?" Wafima said.

"I don't know," Yara said.

Wafima reached for her daughter's hand. Once Yara gave it to her, Wafima clutched it as tight as a grandmother would a young boy's in order to safely cross the road. Together, the two of them walked silently into the house.

Once they were in the house, Wafima let go of Yara's hand and started to pace the room. She still had not removed her top.

"This isn't like him," Wafima said. He'd leave a note... or he'd phone us from wherever he had to go. What's it all mean? Is there something you want to tell me? Tell me your side."

"My side.... Everybody knows my side," Yara said.

“Back on the night of the incident... a couple of the neighbors saw you working out in the garage in the early evening. I don't think anybody saw you after 6:30.”

“No. No. I had a cigarette, and I went back inside and listened to the radio like I told you.”

“Well,” Wafima said, “you were the last one to see him.”

“He was gone when I woke up,” Yara said.

Wafima stopped pacing.

“Is that right? When did you wake up?”

“I woke up late in the afternoon. He was gone when I woke up,” I said.

“Well, it's just not like him to vanish like this,” Wafima said.

Yara looked past her mother to the green and ripe backyard, where Syed's cherry trees and lavender plants had grown. She saw ladybugs crawl up and down the green root and branches of the tree. Their red and black dots suddenly stood out in the daylight.

She didn't notice a small crowd of four or five had formed outside her house until Wafima gestured to the front door with her index finger.

Men, all of them, were her father's colleagues. She recognized one of them, Pawel Pasha, her father's lawyer, among them. He caught her eye too and made his way towards the door once she invited him in with her eyes.

“Stay back,” Pawel said, as he held the three men back. They grabbed his shoulders and arms to somehow latch themselves onto him so that they too would be able to come inside and speak with Yara and Wafima but that could not be the case.

Yara opened the door just enough for Pawel, tall, thin, mustached, hairy, to diagonally slide in. He breathed heavy and closed the door behind him and locked it.

“*As-salamu alaykum*, Wafima,” he said, ignoring Yara.

Wafima, brooding, returned the salutation. She was posted up against the couch and the wall and had crossed her arms. Her eyebrows were low, and her spirits were even lower. She was so close to losing all hope she would ever see Syed again that the thought of leaving the country briefly floated throughout her mind. But she would never tell Yara this.

“Have you heard from him?” Wafima said, now twiddling her thumbs, bending and leaning forward over the couch.

“I’m afraid nobody has,” Pawel said, and put his brown briefcase down on the couch. “In the event he doesn’t come back, it’s important we go over the will he filed with me just a few months ago.”

“Doesn’t come back?” Wafima said.

“We have to consider the possibility,” Pawel said.

Wafima finally cried, and when she did, Yara envisioned a waterfall. Yara went around to rub Wafima’s shoulders.

Pawel retrieved a stapled packet of paper from his briefcase Yara understood to be her father’s will and placed it on the glass table between them. Yara heard police sirens ring off in the distance.

“I wish to respect your privacy during this time. Please give me a call when you are ready to discuss,” he said.

With that, Pawel turned and let himself out.

Wafima lifted the will from the glass table. She walked slower than than she usually ever did, but she made it to her bedroom without saying a word to Yara, slammed the door shut behind her so loud that the sound startled Yara, who jumped just ever so high into the air.

Yara inhaled a long stream of oxygen, and walked up the stairs to Taimur, exhaled on the way.

He was sitting on the bed with his legs dangling over the edge. His eyes were clear, and he was putting on his best, strongest smile for Yara. He knew that deep down he was the one who had to be strong for her.

“Who all’s here?”

“My mum. Her, and—”

“Oh, God.”

He stood up from the bed, clutched his stomach, appeared visibly nauseous. She fetched a pail from the bathroom for him and he emptied whatever contents upset his stomach enough to force their way out from it.

Wiping his lips and mouth with a lapis napkin she offered him, he sighed.

“You know we can’t stay here. My father’s still in the basement.”

“Where can we go?” Yara said, and sat down, pulled Taimur back to the bed.

He rested his forehead on her shoulder, and she massaged the back of his curved, hairy neck. He was warm.

“America,” he said. “We can go to America.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After what was hardly a good night's rest, Yara rose with enough time and positive intent to silently do her morning stretches, retrieve chai from the stall just around the corner from the house, and shower for longer than she usually did. Steam almost immediately filled the bathroom, and her light-skinned torso and arms felt nourished and happy lathered under all of the hand-made soap she preferred over the gunk that came out of plastic bottles. She had a small, circular mirror in her shower that she wiped over and over to see herself.

Once she emerged from the shower, she found Taimur to be gone. She heard the garage door open and figured he must be down there with his father either working out or simply getting some fresh air in the morning. Suddenly, she thought of her mother, and rushed downstairs in hopes that the three hadn't met.

And yet, life can be much crueler than fiction.

If it were up to Yara, her mother would never have come to terms with her husband's killer. Yet, there they were, and Farid was there too.

The three of them were in the garage. Taimur was doing his usual pushups. Farid was reading the newspaper. Wafima was clutching the will, and another piece of paper.

They all stopped what they were doing to say hello to Yara as she walked in.

Wafima passed Yara the other piece of paper.

"T—They found this letter. It matches his DNA."

Yara gulped, and unraveled the letter as it had been read and re-read by Wafima over her coffee hours earlier, and as recently as five or so minutes before she joined the three in the garage.

Dear Wafima,

If you are reading this, I must confess something to you with all of my heart and soul.

I have a lover. Her name is Farishtay Mahdi. She is the mother of Taimur Mahdi, and the wife of Farid Mahdi.

We met long ago. In fact, I have known Farishtay for longer than we have known each other. We have been seeing each other for 27 years. Before that, we were together for 5 years. That makes 32. Almost 60% of my life has been spent with this woman.

These are the facts, the realities of the situation.

You may have noticed that since the news broke of Farishtay's passing, I haven't been the same. Haven't ate. Haven't slept. Haven't been able to work how I usually do.

While I write this... my eyes are fiery. I cry tears to my diary.

Sometimes a Xanax can't help me fight back the anxiety.

So, Wafima... so, I went to my Lord quietly.

There are teardrops on both of our faces.

It's like the teardrops become waterfalls by the time they reach my laces. My eyelids are like levees but my tear ducts are like glaciers.

As I contemplate creation, the salt that heals my wounds pour out of my eyes just like libations. I can't stop my mind from racing. I have numbers on my phone. Pictures on my phone. The day Farishtay died, I scrolled her texts all day long. The physical returns but the connection still stay strong.

Now I understand why you used to cry sometimes we ride down Sunset.

You just missed your—now I just miss my Farishtay.

The clothes we wear to bed at night to sleep are just pajamas. The flesh we roam this earth in is a blessing, not a promise.

I bow with those who bow to the creator and pay homage.

Sleep well.

Lately I haven't been sleeping well.

I think I'll hit heaven's beach to soak my feet and skip some seashells.

Sleep well.

The lump inside my throat sometimes just towers like the Eiffel.

Sometimes I wonder do the trees get sad when they see leaves fall.

The last time that I kissed her, she felt cold, but she looked peaceful.

I read her messages when I get low and need a refill.

Sleep well.

I'm sleeping well.

I have left to go see her.

The boy in the house is her son, and the man in the house is her husband. I have left them both some money.

Tell Yara I love her.

Dr. Syed Janmohamed

When Yara looked up and went to return the letter to Wafima, she heard a jingling of keys. She turned around and saw Wafima in a blue coat, hair tied up in a tight bun, downing a cup of freshly brewed coffee. Wafima had that fierce determination on her face, sleeves rolled

up, make-up removed. Yara was trying to stop a bull in a chase. She went ahead and decided it best to stand in the line of fire sometimes, especially since she loved the bull.

Yara offered up a nervous laugh, tried to offset the tension, walked towards her, tried to console her, but Wafima put her her arms in front of her, pushed her thin palms against Yara's chest and thwarted her daughter's protective nature. She started to hit Yara's chest now, pounded on it. Yara was nothing more than a punching bag, then.

"Let it out," Yara said.

"I'm going to Pawel's," she said. "I'm getting to the bottom of this."

"You are, aren't you?" Taimur said.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Wafima said to him.

"I mean, your fucking husband was fucking my mum, so you're *definitely* getting to the bottom of this."

"Listen to me," Wafima said, "you little shit. I am going to my lawyer's. When I come back, I want you and your father out of my house."

Farid was silent, but Taimur ceased his exercise and stood, pointed his finger in Wafima's face.

"The predatory fuck killed himself. He said so himself. You live with that now."

"Well?" Wafima said, now eying Yara. "You're just going to let this hoodlum speak to your mother like that?"

"Apologize, Taimur," Yara said.

"What did you say? I can't hear you," Taimur said.

"I said... I said, apologize—" Yara said.

"Apologize," Taimur said. "Who apologized to me?"

“You’re an angry young man who’ll die a quiet, meaningless death. Birds will shit on your grave. You’re not getting any of this money,” Wafima said.

With that, Wafima finished her coffee and clanked her mug down on the blueish granite counter. She took Yara’s hand and off they went to the car to drive to Pawel’s office.

“Hello, Pawel, yes,” Wafima said, driving and steering the car as Pawel answered the phone on the first ring, “we’re ready to discuss.”

But what did it mean anymore, Yara thought, to travel and take to the wild? They might as well have taken the last train home, a dark, dimly lit black bullet to unravel and take to the wild. They took the universe there to Pawel’s office, having drowned in space and time. They really took themselves to the wild on that fateful car ride for the sake of Yara’s inner child.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Pawel's office was in a fancy high-rise. His office was located in the lobby, tucked into a wing of the open floor plan that did not quite demand your attention once you walked in. One would have instead paid attention to the fountain first. The building was built in 1995, but Pawel had renovated it just a few years ago. He kept many plants in his office, and the view from his office was Karachi's stunning picturesque skyline.

Wafima and Yara buzzed the intercom to speak to the concierge but were simply let in by a portly doorman.

They made a beeline to the office where they found Pawel standing outside the double doors, wearing a thin smile.

"Janmohameds," he said, "welcome."

He opened both doors for them while facing them as his hands were behind his back, and they proceeded to walk past each side of him. Once they were safely inside the office, he took three paces backwards and turned around to walk briskly into the office.

"Hey, hey," he said, cheerful, "look who's here!"

"Hello, Pawel," Wafima said.

"How are you feeling, Wafima?"

"I'm feeling okay. So, Pawel, I was talking to Taimur and he tells me that what is written in this will is true."

"Yes, it is true. Dr. J drafted this will with me just last month."

"Exactly how much money did he leave Taimur and his fat father?"

“He left Taimur and his father \$1,000,000.”

“And I?”

“He left you the house. And \$3,000,000.”

Wafima adjusted her posture.

“I have your money here,” Pawel said, “as well as Taimur’s.”

“I will collect it from you upon a later date as will Taimur,” Wafima said.

“So, that’s it,” Yara said.

“Your father loved both of you very much,” Pawel said.

Wafima and Yara stood to leave and began to walk out of the room. As they departed, Pawel called out to them.

“Give my best to Taimur and Farid!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Taimur was gone by the time Wafima and Yara had arrived back home, as was Farid.

“At least they listen,” Wafima said.

“I’m going to sell the house,” Wafima said, “and move to London. You seem to have made your choice as well.”

“I’m leaving with Taimur, wherever he goes.”

“I expected more from you, Yara. I really did.”

Yara, powerless, could only watch as her mother, a woman she would never compare to, walked away for the last time. She dialed Taimur on his phone once.

“Hello, my love,” he said.

“Taimur, pick me up. I’m ready to leave and never come back?”

“Where we are going?”

“Lawyer’s office. You’re a millionaire.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Taimur, Yara, and Farid arrived at Pawel's office just before it was set to close. Farid had fallen asleep in the passenger seat on the way there, and Yara had sat in the back with most of her personal belongings next to her. Taimur drove deliberately. She loved how calm he was. Money didn't change Taimur, but it magnified him and brought out the best in him.

Taimur parked the car and went inside himself. Yara watched over Farid.

That time, Pawel was not standing outside, nor was there a doorman on duty. Taimur buzzed the intercom and exchanged pleasantries with a concierge before he was granted entry. He made the first right at the hallway's intersection and found the doors to Pawel's office.

He knocked, and Pawel's tall and thin frame strided over to get the door.

"Ah, Taimur," Pawel said.

"Hello," he said.

"Welcome. Come in. Can I get you anything? Cold beer? Soda?"

Taimur walked in. A cold beer sounded amazing.

"I'll have a beer," Taimur said.

Pawel gestured for Taimur to follow him to the desk and have a seat. Once Taimur made himself at home and distracted himself with the view from the window, Pawel took it upon himself to page an assistant.

"Two Murrees," Pawel said into the intercom. "Frozen mugs."

In just a minute, a young boy appeared with the order on a platter he hoisted to the right of his head with his right hand.

“Thank you,” Taimur said.

“Kid doesn’t speak English,” Pawel said, “just Urdu.”

Taimur didn’t say anything, took the first sip between the two men. He put the mug down and spoke.

“Yara tells me Dr. Janmohamed left some money for me in your possession,” he said, struggled to recognize the sound of his own voice or his own luck.

“That is true,” Pawel said, “I’m just going to need your signatures on a few things.”

Pawel opened the left drawer of his desk and retrieved a few typed documents with lines for signatures.

“I’ve never had to sign anything before,” Taimur said.

“Well... now you do,” Pawel said.

Without missing a beat, Pawel slid the documents across the desk. Taimur caught a glimpse of just how matted the hair on the back of his palm was, just how dry the skin on his fingers were.

Taimur signed the documents and smiled.

Pawel stood and unveiled a safe that was hidden in the wall. He spun the safe until it opened, rummaged through it for a moment before he brandished a black duffel bag. Taimur never forgot the sound the bag made when Pawel threw it onto the floor in front of Pawel’s feet.

“Is that any way to treat money?” Taimur said.

“It’s a way to treat money that isn’t mine,” Pawel said. “Off you go now, you lucky son of a bitch. Play the lottery today, while you’re at it.”

He’s not worth it, thought Taimur, and left Pawel in his office, who had since lit a cigarette and finished his beer while Taimur’s glass of beer remained virtually full.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Taimur, Yara, and Farid checked into the Pearl Continental Hotel, or as it was simply known, PC, on Club Road in Karachi.

Taimur walked into the hotel like he was ready to buy the whole fucking building, flailed his arms about, jeered at the guests. With the black duffel bag in his hands, the realization its contents could purchase his outfit a million times over made him laugh.

Yara had stayed at the hotel many times before and had even enjoyed many dinners on one of the higher floors where authentic sushi was served.

Farid simply had never seen such level of excess before.

“You already quit, but now you never really have to work again, Baba,” Taimur told Farid as Yara walked behind them.

Farid gave a hearty laugh.

Taimur approached the desk where a stern man awaited them.

“What’s up, bro? Give us a room.”

“Sir, which room would you like?”

“Give us a suite.”

“A suite. Fine, sir.”

He made several keystrokes on his computer without looking up once.

“How long will you be staying with us, sir?”

“Until further notice,” Taimur said.

“We’ll need a card on file.”

“Will cash do?” Farid said.

“Sure, sir.”

Taimur whistled and opened the black duffel bag to show the clerk.

The clerk nodded, gave a thumbs up, handed Taimur the hotel cards.

“In fact, I’m going to give you the penthouse. It is not listed, so we would appreciate your discretion,” the clerk said.

“No problem at all, chief,” Taimur said, taking the cards.

“Nice chime in back there, pop,” Taimur said on the way to the elevator

When Taimur, Farid, and Yara took the elevator up to the suite, they realized they had been spared no luxury from the living room filled with a grand piano, billiards, and rare book collection, to the bathroom that featured Hermès toiletries, and a Jacuzzi overlooking a mouth-watering painting of Lake Geneva. In true Pakistani fashion, the penthouse also boasted a state-of-the-art security system, with cameras, bulletproof windows, and a panic button. Complete with two king bedrooms, two queen bedrooms, and a full bedroom, the 4,788-square-foot penthouse was like its own mansion in the city. In the 5.5 bathrooms, they found black and white marble and toiletries made exclusively for the penthouse. The kitchen was custom-designed. There was plenty of outdoor space too. There was a skylighted pavilion and a 2,500-square-foot terrace that overlooked the city. Yara would not resist sunning on the suite's beautiful wood-paneled terrace. Every bedroom had its own balcony, and the floor-to-ceiling windows that surrounded the suite's two stories provided equally incredible ocean views. There was a home cinema, personal bar and gym, and a spa room. There was even a private wine cellar.

Once everyone settled into their rooms, Taimur called for a meeting only to find his father had fallen asleep with a smile on his face. He felt Yara's dainty fingers clutch his waist and he spun around in turn to hold hers with hands that were large enough to lift her with.

"I think I want to take singing seriously. It's the only thing I'm good at, and I think the whole invisibility thing is a major plus. I want to be a star," Yara said.

"Sing the Bob Dylan song again," Taimur said.

Yara stood.

And take me disappearing
through the smoke ring of my mind
Down the foggy ruins of time
far past the frozen leaves
the haunted frightened trees
out to the windy beach
far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow
Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky
with one hand waving free
silhouetted by the sea
circled by the circus
sands with all memory and fate
driven deep beneath the waves.
Let me forget about today until tomorrow.
Hey! Mr. Tambourine man play a song for me.
I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to.

Hey! Mr. Tambourine man play a song for me.

In the jingle jangle morning, I'll come following you

“Brilliant, as always,” Taimur said.

So, they committed to music. Most waking moments they lived through together were soundtracked by some kind of song or lyric Yara wrote. As time went on, Yara found new ways to feel like herself. Yara placed emphasis on different words, drew lines in sand where Taimur drew them in blood.

One night, Taimur went outside for fresh air when she asked for privacy. She clutched her yellow notepad to her chest, wouldn't let Taimur read what she had written. Step outside Taimur did, and just as the rain stopped, her vocals floated through the door, and he pressed my ear against it to catch a hint of anything she recorded. She wouldn't stop for any gathered regularity or some kind of twisted harmonic fate all tied up pretty and made to look nice with a bow. She not so much sang her words as she chanted them. It was then Taimur's trembling hands took to paper, penned black circles over lyrics he had written for her. It was time for her to tell her story, and she had to do it alone. As a writer, she allured with minimalist wordplay, which paired nicely with her sense of sight. That night she wrote many of her first songs.

It was 6:45 AM when they went to the rooftop and cheered to the amount of recording done tonight. Taimur wondered if he would always remember her like this. Not young, not happy, not even talented. But brazen, fearless. There he stood. She was stunning. He was just stunned. This was the same Yara that he fallen for. She never knew but Taimur counted the syllables in her name to help him sleep as night fell on the day he considers their first official meeting.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

2020

“Yara, look!”

She walked over.

Taimur’s mouse hovered over an e-mail.

Hey Taimur,

I checked out Yara’s music and the songs are fantastic and right down my street sonically. I really like what she is doing.

Why don’t the two of you come on down to Atlanta from Karachi next week for a meeting with the label to discuss signing a deal? Let me know your situation and I’ll have my team organize your flight and lodging.

Mustafa Ghanyani

Head of A&R

“Baba!” Taimur cried out. “We’re going to America!”

“Taimur,” Yara said. “I was going to tell you today. I’m pregnant!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The very first time Yara walked into the studio with Taimur, Farid, and Mustafa, there was little to no pressure.

“I just want to see what you can do,” Mustafa said.

There was a producer in the room by the name of ONIK.

Yara turned to him.

“What do you do?”

“Me? Well, I specialize in creating atmospheres. Some even say I’m an architect, you know? That location that artists want to be in, that space, that time, that feeling all needs to be created. I give your memories a home. I let them run free along a sin or cos graph where they can be themselves,” ONIK said.

Yara nodded thoughtfully.

There was a girl there with ONIK, a white girl with reddish brown hair and a nose ring. She sat quietly in the corner on her phone until Yara addressed her without even looking at her.

“Hi, girl,” Yara said.

“Hi,” she said.

“What’s your name, sweetie?” Yara said.

“Alaina,” she said.

“What’s your favorite song, Alaina?”

“My favorite song is Vivir Mi Vida,” Alaina said.

“Got any advice for me?” Yara said, plugging in her laptop.

“My advice for woman pursuing a career as a recording artist is to be yourself and don’t feel like you have to conform to societal standards. If you want to be racy then be racy, if you’re more conservative, then be conservative. Remember that you don’t have to be sexualized to be successful but if you want to wear that revealing outfit then do it and do it for you. Remember that you have a voice and a choice, don’t let others change who you are. I think that songs by women help to give women a voice and feel strength by allowing them to feel empathy with the artist,” Alaina said.

Yara smiled at her.

The songs that Yara wrote then brimmed with emotion, soul, and feeling. Her songwriting was sharper than the finest dagger. In the studio that day, she took only an hour to write and record the first song, a 45-second interlude to offset what shaped up to be a heavy-handed album. But she wanted more. She was hooked.

Yet again, it was another late, sleepless night in Atlanta. The studio was packed yet intimate all at the same time. Warm amber lights washed over exotic leather furniture, creating a dimly lit sonic oasis. A sweet aroma of weed smoke clouded the air, while vanilla scented candles were strategically placed around the room. The mood developed into a haze of relaxation. As engineers and producers methodically worked the mixing boards, Taimur and the rest of the label nodded along to a rough take of a Yara track that would later be called “Say Something.” Many individuals in the studio danced along while producers ran the track back, but there stood Yara in a dark corner, dissecting every piece of “Say Something” with surgical precision. The track stopped playing, and Yara stepped from the shadows. She didn’t speak much, but when he did, people listened.

“I’m going back in the booth, play that outro back.”

Puzzled, the engineer began playing the outro instrumental back, not questioning Yara's demands. The room fell quiet as people began to observe. As the outro began to play, Yara put on a pair of monitor headphones, rubbed her face, and closed her eyes. Yara started to let the ever-present stream of consciousness in her mind escape and help build the song out.

You doin' me dirty, you know.

How we let it get like this, I don't know....

But that girl can't save your soul, nah.

Producers and entourage members in the studio began to look around the room to see if others were witnessing what was happening. Yara continued crooning into the microphone, while the mood became even darker in the studio.

Doing me dirty

You doing me dirty

Haven't even heard from you.

How can you live with yourself?

Haven't even heard from you

How can you live with yourself?

Ungrateful

Ungrateful

The engineer – a young cat from Philadelphia named Prin\$e Alexander – looked over to Taimur with concern.

“Should we stop her?”

Taimur then put up one finger, as to silence the engineer while shaking his head, not taking his eyes off of Yara.

Yara crooned,

Your momma be ashamed of you

I haven't even heard from you

Not a single word from you

Ungrateful

I'm too good for you

Too good for you

You should go back to her

Perfect match for you

Unstable

Candles in the studio began to flicker and die out, one by one, as if a spirit swept throughout the room.

Doing me dirty

You're making me nervous

I haven't even heard from you

You look drained

You look exhausted

Boy

Them late nights ain't good for you

Really starting to show on you

Don't hit me up when it's good for you

Ungrateful

By now, everyone had stopped what they were doing. All attention was focused on Yara's darkened silhouette. Finishing up her final thoughts, Yara hung up the headphones and crept out of the recording booth.

As she came back into the studio, all eyes followed her every movement. Yara retreated back to her shadowed corner, where she leaned against the wall with her fingers interlocked and pressed against her lips, as if in deep thought. The silence of the room created an uneasy tension. The uneasiness built more and more, as studio members waited for her to speak. Finally, she broke the silence.

“Play it back.”

Mustafa signed Yara to a contract just a few hours later at 3 AM.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

In Mustafa's office in Atlanta the next day, Yara tried hard not to eye the plaques on the wall. Taimur tried too.

"Let's talk about Yara," he said to Taimur, as if the singer wasn't in the room, "she's from Karachi. She has this outrageous song called Pon de Replay. I was scared. That song is too big for her. I don't sign songs, though. I sign artists. Some people chase a hot song for a minute and then they sign an artist based on a song. I want to sign an artist based on the writing. And that girl can write. I was a little reluctant when I first heard the song. When she first walked in the office yesterday, it was just something about her. Then she performed the song. The way she moves, it isn't systematic. It's all natural. She talked about how she would stay in the studio for hours to get one little thing right. We signed her that night. We signed her last night at 3 AM. That's not often. To get lawyers to draft up contracts with 10 hours' notice. Yara appeals to everyone. She's not a dancehall artist. She's an R&B artist with an amazing voice. I didn't want to get caught up, but I didn't want to ignore her roots. Her roots come through and her culture comes through in the music."

"I was shaking, Mustafa. Before I met you, I was so nervous. But you guys made me feel comfortable and home. I'm here on a purpose to fulfill my dream. But you should know something about me," Yara said.

That was when Yara stood, closed her eyes, hummed, and vanished just as quickly as she reappeared.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The next day in Buckhead, Mustafa and Taimur had lunch at a restaurant while Yara knocked out another session in the studio just down the street. Farid had accompanied Yara to the studio.

“What I seen last night—What I fucking saw last night was some shit I cannot take with me to the grave,” Mustafa said. “I mean... it’s some supernatural shit. I have never fucking seen anything like that. There are a lot of doctors and scientists in my community and in my network. If I so much utter a word about what the fuck that was, they’ll have me in Peachford faster than a goddamn cheetah can gallop across grasslands.”

Taimur nodded.

“But, at the same time,” Mustafa said in between nervous laughter, “this’ll make her a global superstar. It’ll catapult her to a fame and wealth so embedded in history her kids’ kids’ kids’ kids’ kids won’t have to worry about money. Fuck it, Taimur. Let’s put her on a god damn world tour and have her do this shit on stage in front of millions. Every fucking show. It’ll be the talk of the town for years.”

After a bite of his smoked turkey sandwich, Taimur nodded.

“We want an advance. We want to sign another contract then. This time for \$10 million.”

Mustafa nodded.

“Our money’s her money,” he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Taimur and Yara woke up the next morning downright giddy. Yara, now the biggest popstar in the entire world, could hardly contain her excitement as she took to Twitter and Instagram to announce her elation at being on the road for that many months over the sweet summertime, her favorite season.

“Hello beautiful people, she typed onto her phone, I CANNOT WAIT TO SEE YOUR BEAUTIFUL FACES ALL SUMMER. Words can’t describe my love for you all and how much you all mean to this little brown girl.”

She hit send.

“Can you believe our luck?” she said.

Taimur shook his head.

“What did we do to get this lucky?”

“I’m not sure, but we’re here.”

Taimur looked across the horizon. Nowadays, he saw something special everywhere he looked that defied most of what he came to recognize and bask in as music. He saw his mother Farishtay looking down on him. He felt she was proud of him and he may have been right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The way the people chanted Yara's name gave her goosebumps she had never felt before. Dripping with sweat and wearing the prettiest, biggest smile she ever had in her life, she clutched the mic. She had just finished performing her smash single, "See Me," on stage on her last tour date of the fall. Her sequin outfit looked radiant in the jumbotron up above, and she had to hold back her tears.

It was then that everything changed for her.

Suddenly, all of her became invisible, and she delivered the final chorus of the night.

This is me, she thought, I am invisible.

Suddenly, she willed her body back into visibility.

"A lot of us feel invisible in this world. If you feel how I just felt, I love you and I'll always love you."

The crowd roared.

"I want to say to everybody on this tour. My band, my dancers, all my sound people, all the hard-working security people that work every night, the people inside the venues, I want to thank you for all your hard work. I appreciate it. I want to say to each and every fan in here... I want you to remember the night. I want you to remember the night because I'm not going to get the chance to get on stage and speak for a while. There's one thing I want you to remember. Despite that they try to tell us when we go on Instagram or when we turn on the news, about this country and how divided it is, I want you to look around tonight, look at the people next to you. We got 17,000 people from all races, all places, all religions. We having us a good

motherfucking time tonight. I'm proud of y'all. Look, Atlanta... I go by the name of Yara in case you didn't know what you were watching tonight. I want to thank all the artists who came out and performed tonight. Tour's over. But I promise you it's nights like this that make me love what I do. After this, I don't know how long it's going to take me, but I'm going to go work on the best album that you ever heard. I'm going to come right back to Atlanta. Shoutout my love of my life Taimur for holding me down on the whole tour. Ayo, Atlanta. We love y'all. I go by the name of Yara. I love y'all. Get home safe. Good night!"

She dropped the mic and walked off the stage in tears.

Taimur was the first to grab her, and he hugged her tight.

"You are the bravest," Taimur said, clutching her face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Alone in their Atlanta house, Taimur and Yara listened to the pitter-patter of the raindrops as they synchronized with one another to hydrate the city's trees.

Taimur put on one of his favorite records, some obscure blues medley from an era much before his time. The sonic warmth of the music filled the room with a mellow vibe. He stoked the fire, gently placing a log above the ashes, throwing a handful of thin starter sticks under the logs. He lit a stray piece of paper on fire and tossed it into the pit.

Yara's sprawled out on the couch, eyeglasses on, wearing blue denim overalls over a paint-splattered long-sleeve white tee. Every brushstroke of paint opens up the world of inspiration for her, allowed her to dream of new songs and lyrics with which to appease the fans who have grown rabid over her work.

There were days Taimur barely recognized her. He revered her gall for performing sold out shows every night for weeks and weeks.

Without looking at Taimur, she lifted her legs as she sensed his presence, lowered them onto his lap as if on cue without breaking eye contact with her drawings. Her glasses slid off her curved nose. Her glass of water dripped onto the white rug.

"His whole life, my dad wanted a son," Yara said. "That's all he wanted, all he cared about. First there was me, then there was you. I got born and all, and he loved me, but you, he *cared* for you, but he always wanted more. He was never satisfied with anything, or anyone," she said.

"He was an abuser... he was a..." Taimur said.

“What? He was a what?” Yara said.

“He wasn’t fit to be a father,” Taimur said.

“Yeah. Maybe he wasn’t,” Yara said.

“The stuff he did to you... I don’t want to think about it. I can’t think about it.”

“Then don’t. It’s bad enough that I have to,” Yara said.

“Do you miss Pakistan?” Taimur said.

“No.”

He reached for the bottle of scotch they kept couch-side and poured the both of them some drinks. They sat there and stared intently at the flames, sipped scotch.

“Kiss me,” Yara said.

Taimur did, and she kissed him back. He pulled her closer, closer so their bodies fit like puzzle pieces. The thunder and the lightning made their presence known. She pulled away from him, patted him on the chest, stood and walked her long legs to the bedroom down the hall.

He put the fire out, and then he followed her there, watched as she got ready for bed. She brushed her teeth, applied a facemask and curled up in bed with a book thanks to the lamp. Every other light in the room had been off for some time, but tonight was a different kind of darkness. Black used to be Taimur’s favorite color. But now, he didn’t get that same warm, snug feeling he got from it when he was younger. Now it was just cold, boundless black. Music played softly from the record player. Yara got that for Taimur when they moved into their new house.

He remembered the day well as it was one of the first gifts she ever bought him. The Amazon drone flew it in and delivered it to their doorstep. She was so genuinely happy for them then. He never thought being in love and being happy were possible, all at once. In a way, he

always prepared himself for catastrophe this way. Never too high, never too low. There was always a chance the world could burn before your very eyes.

Some time passed. Yara had put away the book.

“Hey,” Yara murmured.

“You awake?”

“Yeah.”

A pause, then a response.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“For what?”

“For acting the way I am.”

“How are you acting?”

“Tai,” she said.

She sighed into his chest.

“I fuck things up with you because I get nervous, and it’s easy. I think I feel guilty a lot. So what? You are nice to me. I get dissatisfied. Please help me escape this loop. I miss you. I have so much to tell you. But right now, I’m so mad at you. You are sometimes one big guilt trip, you know that? I still want it to work. Even if I can’t say I’m sorry yet. My smile is just around the corner. Right? It’s right there,” she said.

He didn’t say anything, just looked back at her, tucked her hair behind her ear.

“And now here it comes,” she continued, “thank you for letting me fuck everything up, for your patience and enthusiasm, for not screaming at me. I can watch you glow, even from here. I can’t wait to see who you will be, with or without me. Some things are just fragile, Taimur. I’ve got a reputation, you know. Always had it. Tough girl. And I feel tough, I guess. I

must be tough, right? To keep calling. To retune my body and heart like this all the time. To the specific wounds I inflict. Now I feel like being with someone who does that too. But what do I know? When I was younger, I thought way more about being broken than any young, happy girl should. Lately, I haven't been worrying about it. New things sprout up in the cracks and crevices. And anyway, I'm a fucking genius at loving."

They both cracked up immediately, filled the room with laughter and just held each other as they laughed. Later on, Yara would say they laughed so much to keep from crying.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

When she woke up, she barely acknowledged the night before. It was as if all their sweet nothings and heart-to-heart conversations from the night before were numbed and washed away.

Taimur dreamt of swimming with a white blue whale hundreds of leagues under the sea. The whale said hello to him in plain English. He asked her what she dreamed about. She used to rattle off a laundry-list of her passions, most servicing humanity. This morning, she looked him in his eyes and gave a tiny shrug. There was little to no emotion etched in her face. He could never read her anymore. She was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Yara was not thinking about Taimur for the first time in a long time. Her mind floated into charted brainscape... a lush, pink space where everything made her smile like the grade school girl she used to be. She had decided, just that morning, that enough was enough – and the willingness to shove things like Taimur’s hinting grin, strong calves, or long eyelashes was strong enough to intend to follow through with. In this thick of thought, she spent time thinking about the way her vocal rested atop her new unreleased song like a mountain’s peak.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The dust from the woodworking Farid liked to do settled into his open garage and activated Taimur's wheezing and coughing.

One glance Farid's way and Taimur knew his father had been sitting here all night and worked himself into the morning, which is when Farid rose to see what all the fuss about the woodworking was about. There was an old stereo playing classic blues in the corner, and the one window in the garage was open, where all kinds of birds occasionally fluttered in to for water and sunflower seeds.

Tucking his greying beard under his chin with his left hand as he ate potato salad, his eyes fell on Taimur's first, then the chess board that hadn't been touched in over two years. It, too, was coated in cobwebs, drenched in the sunlight that poured in through the glass of the window. The two of them would play chess often when Taimur were growing up, especially in the summertime when he was out of school. But now that Farid had retired since, and the youthful days of woodworking and playing chess come back to him in nostalgic waves. Taimur's watched him build tables, chairs, and benches and yet playing chess seemed to work the inner mechanisms of his mind the most.

"I was working security last night," Farid said.

Taimur didn't say anything. He took a seat, watched him count up wood, do math in his head.

“I was operating a bag check-point outside the stadium... you know... for people who bring large bags to arena concerts. I’m squinting, and I squint some more... and a young man approaches the table with a blue and black Nike backpack. He starts asking me questions. I tell him the same thing I tell everybody. Then he asks me if I can do it for three dollars.”

By now he’s collected the chess board, has assembled the moving pieces, pausing briefly here and there to blow the dust off.

“I already wanted to punch him in the nose then. But I hid my grimace and smiled at this young man — he was younger than you. I told him I needed five dollars from everybody.”

Farid made the first move, shifted the rook up two paces.

“So he asked me — is the bag going to be safe?”

He laughed. That laugh turned into more of a guffaw as the winds blew behind Taimur’s back and the leaves fell from branches to asphalt. The guffaw snowballed into a full-on uproarious hoot that Taimur didn’t doubt the neighbors became privy to.

“Your generation needs to learn how to connect and trust one another. Of course, the damn bag would have been safe, you know what I mean? We’re bonded and insured. We’re not standing out there in the cold protecting your bags because we’ll let somebody steal them. There were police officers surrounding the place.”

Taimur listened up until now, because that’s what he did best with his dad.

But then, then he had something to say.

“Things aren’t right with Yara, anymore,” Taimur said, nervously, avoiding eye contact.

“She is just... she is complicated.”

Farid looked at his son intently. He wished to dispel every notion his son had of love, what it could for him, if it could even save him or not.

“I have long seen shades of Farishtay in Yara,” Farid said.

“Well. Did you know? Did you know about ma’s invisibility?” Taimur said.

“Yes, yes of course, I knew.” Farid said.

“And you never told me? How many times was she around and I didn’t know?” Taimur said.

Farid grunted.

“I need you to go see a man. His name is Pawel,” Farid said.

“Who is Pawel?” Taimur said.

“He is your mom’s brother,” Farid said.

“Where is he?” Taimur asked.

“Karachi,” Farid said.

Taimur stood, almost toppling the chair over.

“Karachi,” he repeated, flatly, and began to walk away.

“Son,” Farid said.

Taimur stopped cold in his tracks and looked over his shoulder, his back already turned to his father.

“Ask Pawel about a cat,” Farid said.



Taimur walked to Mustafa’s loft from his father’s place. It had rained while he was in the garage with his father, and his shoes and jacket were now slick with water. Night had also fallen, but he knew his way well in the dark.

When he arrived, he found Mustafa stood outside tending to his caged pet rabbit in the garage. He was wearing a black t-shirt, black sweatpants, black sneakers. The gold chain around his neck caught the moon and glistened.

Mustafa not only remained Taimur’s only friend of Pakistani origin in the city but he was someone whom Taimur genuinely got along with. Mustafa understood Taimur in a way none of his male friends ever really did, and Taimur treated him like a brother for it.

Mustafa gave Taimur a hug and pulled a chair off a stack for him, placed it on the ground. The two of them sat in the garage and watched the heavy rainfall outside.

“I met a girl,” Mustafa said, lighting a cigarette, “just a couple months ago. My mom insisted I take her on a date. She was nice enough. You know what we did, we... we went to Chick-Fil-A for a breakfast. She took some pulp with her orange juice, and we talked for a while.

It didn't work out, but I remember her asking for pulp, and how she'd never drink orange juice without pulp. Like ever. This girl had it figured out. What is tiny to you and I can be gigantic to she and her, if you know what what I mean."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The storm the night Yara called Taimur to make amends just a few days later made Taimur's drive over to the diner she wanted to meet up with him at almost undoable. But she was her, and he was him, and there were never two kids crazier about each other.

Taimur arrived. He didn't know what time of the night it was. He parked his car with precision by the side of the building, exited slowly and made his way into the rustic, dated joint. Just like enunciating a single word reduces its meaning to existential mush, when you let the letters linger on your lips, his condition was akin to delirium. *Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—
raaaaaaaaaaaaaa.*

"Hey," Taimur said.

Yara looked up. She never told Taimur, but he had this knack for arriving as softly and quietly as her own heart's harmonies. He waved at an employee who came over, gave him a hug. That's the type of person he was.

Taimur took a seat. It's a diner, all right. Dingy lights, a jukebox in the corner. Smokers cut figures of social butterflies on sidewalks in the summer. His hands find hers on the table, but she didn't make eye contact just yet. She has to take an intense beauty in slowly. Taimur's perfected smile. His long eyelashes. Girls would kill her for them. She stared right above them, at the big forehead. The small space between his eyes. Taimur's hair's tied up in a lush, black bun.

“I’m going back to Karachi. I have to go alone,” Taimur said.

“You’re so smart. You can do anything you want. I don’t understand why you’re doing this,” she says it like she means it — eyes full, wrists dainty, bent slightly.

“It’s my home,” Taimur said.

“We are also home,” Yara said.

“You, me – each of us, individually, we’re our own home. Your body is your home. We, physically, here in Atlanta – we are also home here. This is our home too. That was your home but it’s not anymore,” Yara said.

Taimur didn’t seem to be listening.

She knew it was coming, all along. As much as she tried to ward Taimur off of Pakistan, she knew an unsuspecting man only traveled where there was dread. Was it true? Was the artist such an enigma he was born for blacker nature? Her patience grew thinner by raindrop. Soon, she abandoned her heart and strolled into the night, sought a calamitous passion. Love came and went in waves, anyway. She was aware of this, read Nayyirah Waheed. Yet, even her aged heart pined for drowned memories.

Her demure voice echoed in the diner. Taimur found solace in the fact that their communication has the power to transcend tongues. They sufficed non-verbal language enough for now.

“Give this to her,” Taimur said.

Yara shook her head. A single silent tear streamed down her cheek. She brought her palms to her thighs.

“I’m not touching that.”

“She’s my daughter. I can give her things too.”

“She’s doing fine. We’re doing fine.”

“Whadd’yall have?”

For a second, they forgot where they were. They turned to order a couple of beers. The scene unfolded in silence: sipping beer, stealing glances, playing on their phones, doodling on notebook paper.

It was only when the diner was set to close, and the ruckus and commotion from the chairs and tables awakened a kindred spirit within her, stirred her soul to spare the solace of the night.

“Remember the night before your twenty-seventh birthday?”

Yara looked up. Her black coffee was finished, and she shifted the cup towards the window before answering.

“We stayed up all night.”

“Like some teenagers.”

“It was cute. And impractical.”

“We kept saying bye, but nobody wanted to hang up. We wanted to see who would spot the Sun first.”

Yara was excited, now.

Her eyes were all moons — luminous, capturing from a long distance, and wholly alluring up close.

“You said it that night, for the first time.”

“I know.”

“You made me feel so safe.”

“I know.”

“I’ll take the bag.”

Taimur looked at her and this time, he was the one who was grateful. He was the one who knew a future with Yara wholly depended on his own behavior, a twisted existence bent on illegitimacy. Now, he knew he would do anything to keep that spark alive. Even if he forced her into his own darkness.

“I’m going outside,” Yara said.

She left the booth slowly, as if she had calculated her motions. Maybe she did. She let her energy direct her to the swinging diner bar, after all. Head on a swivel, heart on a swing, she knew the things she missed the most were those phone calls. Those days when meeting and missing someone like Taimur was all she thought about. *When would I meet my lover? When was too late too late?*

She lit a cigarette. She was grateful Taimur didn’t follow her to the sidewalk. Alone, she recounted a time she flew from Virginia after visiting her cousin for holidays. Taimur was on his way back from London. She had these vivid dreams of him — playing tourist, drinking with the locals, indulging in literary escapades in the sunlight. She FaceTimed him at odd

hours, sacrificing her own sleep. One night over FaceTime, Yara remembered speaking with all the tenderness found in nature and nurture.

“My father hit my mother. I saw it. I was helpless,” Taimur said.

She listened.

“I’ve never told anybody that before,” he said.

She believed him, trusted him with all her heart. She sensed and felt. Her tears stained her bedsheets, her tears ran down the back of her palm.

And then, in the airport, they reunited. They didn’t have much time. So, they sat.

Shared earphones. A right for Taimur and a left for Yara.

“I like your shirt,” Yara said.

They sat there and listened to a song, held hands.

But that was then. She came back inside the diner and now she nodded at him, gestured her head to the door, winking.

They both got into their cars. Yara followed Taimur home. Yara watched Taimur unlock the door to the house, and the first thing she did was sit at her desktop, bask in the bright glow of the Internet. She opened up Microsoft Word and typed. Taimur mixed drinks for them in the kitchen.

I write love letters to him, because, he is so lovely.

I put the words together carefully,

different — from the way I speak. He writes love letters to me,

and my heart gives out.

It's almost melancholy.

You sip, puff, puff, sip, sip, sip, puff, sip.

“I still sleep with a nightlight on,” she said.

Yara pointed to the lone source of illumination, resting peacefully in the corner of the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I, Taimur Mahdi, only have eyes for you. I want to be your husband, and I want to be your best friend. I want to show you I love you. I want to surprise you with the little things. I want to leave the frivolous topics behind and let you know how much I appreciate you. So I will leave tiny Hershey's kisses where you reach for the aux cord in the morning. So you can start your mornings with the two kisses. Your sister's boyfriend proposed to her on her birthday. What a selfish asshole. If it were up to me, I will propose to you on the most random day. So that you have another special day in the year. And I can continue to date you, my wife, my life partner, my bride.

I, Yara Mahdi, remember the day we met like it was a film. It all happened in slow motion. I promise to love you at your worst. I promise to be your muse, the light of your eyes, as long as I'm your rock. I want you to be my husband, be my life partner, be my man. I fell in love with your voice, so deep, and cozy. I want to exist there. I promise to write you love letters on your birthday. I want you to know my love for you is unlike anything else I have felt, or could ever feel, in this lifetime. It keeps me up at night and keeps me wishing for another tomorrow with you. I love you, Taimur.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Yara and Taimur used to pass time staring at the city's skyline from the park, ate when they felt hungry. Sometimes they went whole days without saying anything. They made funny faces at each other. They made ugly faces at each other. Talking about the past felt stupid. They had ruin on our hands.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The color of the tennis courts in Syed's old Karachi neighborhood matched the billowing trees, and the door had been left upon by whoever had been using the park before. It, too, was green and he walked through it to thwack the lime tennis balls against the maroon brick wall. Again and again. The song playing in his Air Pods sounds better here.

His iPhone pinged with a WhatsApp message from Pawel with an address.

Eager to fill the void Yara had left in his life with information that would help him understand, he quickly packed up and walked to the garage where he kept a car parked as if any old yellow and grey gravel road out there wasn't prone to veer off into the never-ending. He put his things inside the trunk and grabbed the pack of smokes that lay to the left.

Lighting a cigarette as he walked down the street, inhaling tobacco and chemicals in the briskest weather Pakistan has seen in a while, his mind drifted towards the possibilities surrounding himself and this man. *What did he know? How does he know my dad? What does he know about my mom or about Yara? Did he know Syed?*

When he reached the destination, he found himself in front of the building where there were visitor parking spaces. Lacking the unit number, he fished his phone out of his pocket and let out an audible groan. His phone died, and he knew no one in this building. He just seemed to be in the right place at the wrong time.

He started to walk down the sidewalk, hoping to come across somebody. *400...* he thought... *400...* he walked into the parking garage running alongside the building the address had taken him to. Standing by the callbox, while residents filtered through their mail by unlocking and locking the keys, he was about to buzz in when someone buzzed the door and opened it, let him in after them.

Taimur took the elevator to the 4th floor. This was it. Emerald Apartments, #403. He was reminded of Emerald City Bagels, the warm, toasted breakfast foods he'd fuel up on every once in a while before he headed into work. He was also reminded of emeralds in themselves and close your eyes for a moment to indulge yourself in the glow that comes from emeralds.

Once the elevator came to a halt, the doors opened. Five strangers entered the elevator once Taimur exit. Not one of them looks at you. They looked young, excited, dressed colorfully. Taimur stood there for a moment and only began to move his side profile once the doors closed.

409... 408... 407... 406... 405... 404...ah, 403. The door itself was plain as it could be compared to the others down the hallway. Some people had already begun decorating for Christmas, while others had old cultural ornaments hanging from their doors and on the floor around their mats.

When Taimur knocked on the door, he was surprised how rough the woman answering it looked. She looked sleepy, brushed past you as a man followed.

He was dressed in a red flannel with the sleeves rolled up twice. It was tucked into his Levi jeans. His brown boots gave him an inch of height, but he was still shorter than Taimur. He

looked to be about 70. Between his stubby fingers on his left hand was a cigarette near its end. He let it ash while he looked at Taimur.

“Hello,” he said.

“Uh — hi.”

“Can I help you?”

“Well, actually, yes. You see, I’m looking for a cat.”

“You’re looking for a cat...” the man echoed, like he was trying to find a deeper meaning in why Taimur was knocking on his door at 10:45 PM. Taimur gave Pawel another glance-over. The lines in his face were so deep and wrinkled Taimur could place the lint that lived in his pockets in them. Taimur’s hands too were calloused, reddish — but Pawel’s eyes told a different story. Pawel gestured for Taimur to come in, so Taimur walked into the apartment, and Pawel closed and locked the door behind me.

“You’re not going to kill me, are you?” Taimur said.

“No, I’m not going to kill you. I know who you are,” Pawel said.

Taimur walked over to the living room that was cluttered beyond repair. CNN played dimly on the TV that was on the big wooden stand. There were multiple ashtrays on the table, as well as glasses filled with different beverages. There were paintings behind the couch, a stench of alcohol and nicotine that made it hard to get the scent of it out of Taimur’s hair the next day. Pawel sat down on the futon, handed Taimur a long cord to charge his phone with. Taimur stood for a second, observed this man who just let him into his home.

“I live alone,” Pawel said. “I pretty much live in this room, but I have a bedroom in

there.”

He pointed with his right index to a hallway Taimur would never walk through. It was obvious he had been drinking all night.

“Your cat’s not here... but you knocked on the right door. You and I — we were never *supposed* to cross paths.”

Taimur’s phone had powered on by now.

“Do you want a beer?”

What the hell, Taimur thought. He took one. He retrieved two cans of cold beer from the fridge and sat back down.

“A long time ago, I lived in a house with four roommates,” Pawel said.

“One of the roommates was smoking crack with a woman he brought home.”

He frowned.

“Suddenly, she turns to me, and she says ‘for \$50, we can go back in the back room right now’.”

He looked at Taimur and shook his head side to side.

“I was just so uncomfortable. All I recall is saying no over and over and retreating to my bed. Women are sirens.”

Taimur had a drink of the beer and placed it down.

“You’re my uncle,” he said, slowly.

“Yes, I’m your uncle.”

“You’ve seen me. You’re the lawyer. You came to Yara’s house.”

“Yes.”

“And you had me in your office and you didn’t say anything? You’re my mother’s *brother*, but you never showed me love. You were never around. Where were you?”

“Your mother – my sister – was a very interesting person.”

“She’s dead,” Taimur said.

There was a silence that hung in the room.

“I’m aware your father, Farid, may have sent you,” Pawel said.

“Yes, he sent me here to look for you. Why the cat?” Taimur said.

“Just a code word,” Pawel said.

“For?” Taimur said.

“Truth,” Taimur said.

“What’s the truth? Are you aware of any conditions my mother might have had?”

Pawel stood. He looked bluer in the light from the television.

“Yes, she had a major condition. She had always struggled with it. It broke my heart, but she made me swear not to tell anybody. There was just nothing that could be done. I remember when I couldn’t see her for the first time. We were just kids driving in the car with my father and mother to pick-up carry out food from a restaurant. Obviously, we were in the backseat. When

we arrived at our destination, father got out of the car to go inside and pay for the food and walk it back to the car. It was a process that only took about 5 minutes or so, maybe even less than that.

So, then, I was able to finally get some time with my mother to talk about things that were on my mind. I was always closer to her, meanwhile Farishtay was a big fan of our father. But, when he left, she stayed in the car, which I didn't mind at all. Why would I? It did however irk me that she never once made an effort to muscle her way into the fluid conversations my mother and I could have that flowed like water downstream.

She never truly made an effort. When I turned to see her, I noticed I couldn't see anything anymore, but the car door remained locked. It was one of those childhood memories that you see, and one that never leaves your memory, and you just get sort of shell shocked by it. To tell you the truth, it scared the living hell out of me. I was absolutely petrified. My mother never knew what happened that day, nor do I think she ever wanted to know. She would have stayed happier knowing what she knew, which was very little to begin with. As my father started to walk back to the car – I could hear his voice from other rooms, he was always very loud and confident – I noticed all I could feel was Farishtay's hand on my hand, and that's when I saw only her hand materialize before my very eyes. If I was old enough to faint or pass out from disbelief or shock, I would have at that point. I thank her for showing me these things early on and not waiting until we were older, as an older heart of mine might not have taken it as well.

When we arrived back home, it was as if nothing had ever happened. The four of us sat on the floor and ate the food with our hands, and Farishtay helped Mom clean while Dad and I prayed. We all listened to the radio, until Farishtay tugged on my arm, practically begged me to

come play with her since most of her friends were out visiting their families or friends in places like England or America.

She told me then that she was different. She told me that she could make herself vanish whenever she wanted to, and that she had been doing so ever since she could remember. She wasn't college educated, but she was smart, and she opened my mind up to possibilities I would have never once considered if it were not for her supernatural abilities. They forced me to question religion all along and study law. I tried to help her. It's why I became a fucking lawyer."

Pawel had spoken quite a bit. He took another sip of his beer. The news was telling the story of a flu-like virus spreading through the air, some kind of virus that emanated in China and was now spreading rapidly across the globe. He took another sip of his beer.

"I was researching her case, her diagnosis but if I were to ever voice my claim of her condition, I would have been made a fool out of. They would have mocked me endlessly and shown me no mercy. All my credibility as a scientist would go down the drain. So, I had to choose. I had to choose between my sister and my career. And the fucking pussy I am, I chose my career despite going into it for her in the very first place. I moved out of home and came to the city, thought I was a hot shot, and barely kept up with her. She was done after high school. She found work cleaning and then... you know..."

"Prostitution," Taimur said.

"Yes, well. That. She took it up. It paid well. She was good at it. It was a job, she reasoned, just like everything else," Pawel said.

"So you never saw her again once you left the house?" Taimur said.

“No. I did see her. Just after you were born. You probably don’t remember. Your father was a gracious host to me and my family at that time,” Pawel said.

“And what type of conversation did you have with my mom, then?” Taimur said.

“Well, a congratulatory one. I prayed all the best for you, and all the best for everyone involved in the house and the birth. She told me thank you, and she deeply appreciated me coming. She told me she had better control over her episodes, but that they empowered her, that they kept her safe, and how she wished everyone could experience what she gets to experience just once,” Pawel said.

“I’m married... I’m having a daughter... do you think she will have it too?”

“Farishtay was a very spiritual person. She told me that you would have a daughter, and that... um... yes.... She would have it too.”

Taimur nodded slowly, stunned.

Pawel finished his beer, Taimur finished his, and the two spent the evening watching TV.

The End

Biography

Born July 25, 1993 in Queens, New York, Mustafa Yaseen Ghanyani Uzair Abubaker is a Pakistani-American writer and editor from Atlanta, Georgia. Mustafa got his start in writing when he was ten years old. He was attending Berkeley Lake Elementary School and he was in Mrs. Latoya Brumfield's class. One sunny day, he was playing with friends during recess, and was called in to speak with Mrs. Brumfield. That morning, his class had a free-write about a current event. Mustafa's piece moved his teacher so much she called his parents at work to tell them about the story and referred Mustafa for admission in Mercer University's Young Authors summer camp. Mercer published an anthology of stories by children entering middle school, and that was the first time Mustafa was published.

Mustafa realized he had something special. The following year, he wrote an NBA season preview which spanned 60 or so pages and e-mailed it to the sports editor at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. His carefully worded rejection only inspired Mustafa to continue writing, and he continued to write. This is when Mustafa began to write fiction. He crafted a fantasy series revolved around hero Cloud Var and his quest to collect seven sacred books that were hidden on seven different planets in a universe dubbed as Nellion. When this fell to the wayside, Mustafa read *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, and also fell in love for the first time. This culminated in a deeply personal work *The Surrogate* which his parents self-published in September 2009. By this time, Mustafa was a freshman at Woodward Academy, taking newspaper class with Mrs. Sandra Slider and creative writing class with Mrs. Lorri Hewett. Both educators were blessings in his journey as a writer. Mrs. Slider allowed Mustafa to write for the school's newspaper *The Blade*, and Mustafa also began to submit to the school's literary magazine. Mrs. Hewett pushed Mustafa to write extensively and helped him understand writing workshops and fiction

techniques. Mrs. Jenny Green, Mrs. Carolyn Haldeman, and Mr. Mickey McNeill of the English department were equally instrumental in helping Mustafa realize the promise he held at such a young age.

Following Mustafa's first self-published novel, he proceeded to do all his own marketing and public relations to promote the book. He found himself interviewed on several platforms, most notably NPR, where he was interviewed by Mr. Stephen Goss. He remembers missing homeroom that morning because he was in the radio station talking about his novel. In his senior year of high school, Mustafa won the YoungArts Merit Award for Novel Writing, which placed him in the top 5 percent of over 4,000 of the USA's most talented 17 and 18-year-old people in all 9 disciplines offered. Around this time, Mustafa started his own blog "The Right Kind Of Brownies". This would not be possible without Sirish Kanukunta, Bilawal Babar, Yousef Khraibut, Lawrence Brown, Borna Amalfard, and Paley Martin. The blog went on to accumulate 30,000 views in just three months of inception and featured interviews with then-green figures or then-virtually unknowns such as Frank Ocean, Hasan Minhaj, and more. Mustafa was the boss of a music blog that gained a lot of attention. The blog was ultimately co-signed by Outkast's Big Boi. When Mustafa entered college, maintaining the blog became a lot of work. A writer he admires very much to this day, Andy Barnard, offered Mustafa a position to write for his then-blog "Most Blunted". At the time, the blog was in the golden days, and this was an opportunity Mustafa could not pass up. Mustafa started to extensively cover music.

Mustafa's breakthrough interview was with Gunplay, just following his appearance on Kendrick Lamar's "Cartoon and Cereal." From then on, Mustafa accepted offers to write for the acclaimed blog "Pigeons and Planes" which is part of Complex Networks. They republished

Mustafa's interview with Gunplay on www.complex.com and www.pigeonsandplanes.com on Mustafa's birthday on July 25th, 2012. Mustafa went on to conduct interviews with The Internet, Mr Hudson, Flying Lotus, Freddie Gibbs, Wiz Khalifa, Action Bronson(2x), Toro y Moi, Torres, Raury, ABHI//DIJON, and more over the course of the three years Mustafa wrote for "Pigeons And Planes." In October 2013, Mustafa placed his first article in the legendary publication *Rolling Stone*: an interview with songwriter, guitarist, and vocalist Bethany Cosentino of Best Coast, thus becoming a 19-year old contributor to *Rolling Stone*. This would not be possible without editor Simon-Vozick Levinson. Mustafa went on to write more pieces as assigned under editor Christopher Weingarten. These pieces include writing about Raury, 6lack, and Nav in three separate lists highlighting new artists, and two separate, exclusive interviews with 6lack and Nav. At this point, Mustafa received his next writing opportunities in the world of fiction. His short story "Heresy" made its way into literary magazine *The Liner*. This would not be possible without Gloria Kim for her fantastic editing and encouraging words. Shortly thereafter, he was offered a contract by Golf Media and Whalerock Industries to write short-shorts for its iOS app Golf Media. This would not be possible without Matthew Castellanos, Jonny Black, and JP Alanis. Mustafa called the sequential collection of shorts or short novel *Letting Everything Go*. Each chapter was a little over 1,000 words, and the ten chapters made the word count just over 13,000. It was a story about a couple who survives the nuclear apocalypse in Los Angeles.

It was during this time Mustafa's transition to majoring in English as a student at Kennesaw State University from majoring in Marketing smoothed out. In 2015 and 2016, Mustafa was able to place third in the university's annual undergraduate creative writing contest. Mustafa was also taking creative writing classes under the esteemed novelist Tony Grooms, the two-time winner of the Lillian Smith Prize for Fiction, who has become his mentor in the world

of writing novels. Mustafa produced much of his best fiction in those courses and is indebted to him and his wisdom. During this time, Mustafa also placed first in a joint fiction contest called *Katha*, sponsored by two Indian-American magazines *India Currents* and *Khabar*. At this point, Mustafa was eager to start his new novel and begin publishing in new magazines. He began to find placements in publications like *Khabar*, *Wine And Bowties*, and *Atlanta Magazine*. Parthiv Parekh has been a phenomenal editor helping Mustafa become a writer for *Khabar*, the most-read Indian-American periodical in the country. Mustafa has to thank Max Gibson and Will Bundy for their belief in his writing and giving him the opportunity to write for *Wine And Bowties*. Writing for *Atlanta Magazine*'s June 2018 cover story would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of Christine VanDusen and Myrydd Wells. In July 2018, Mustafa was invited to attend a creative writing workshop in Bryn Athyn, PA organized and hosted by the author of *Chosen* (HarperCollins, 2010), Chandra Hoffman. Throughout 2019, Mustafa wrote for *ELEVATOR*, a major music media outlet. In the time since, he has written for *Kickr Design*, *PadSplit*, *Spotify*, *Rolling Stone*, *LVRN*, *Golf Media*, *Bedouin*, *Energy Consulting Group*, *ELEVATOR*, *Daily Chiefters*, *Complex*, *The Wild Honey Pie*, *Creative Loafing*, *Pigeons And Planes*, *Mass Appeal*, *Wine And Bowties*, *Preme Magazine*, *Sniffers*, *The Nuance Magazine*, *Kajal Magazine*, *Khabar Magazine*, *Atlanta Magazine*, *Mosiki*, *Counterzine*, *Immersive Atlanta*, *ArtsATL*, *The Aerogram*, *Plasma Magazine*, and *The Mainline*. Mustafa has also edited for *Oxford University Press Pakistan*, *Even Financial*, and *DJBooth*.

Now 27 years old, Mustafa Abubaker enjoys running, cooking, coffee, swimming, saunas, food, hiking, and reading. He lives in Atlanta with his family.