

Anita Rose

Karachi, April 2016

The moon hangs low in the night.

Anita Rose Joseph closes her eyes. She opens them.

The stars are drowned by Karachi's endless curls of dirt and smog, the glow of the terminal, and the floodlights mounted to blind the road leading towards Jinnah International Airport.

Anita Rose keeps her gaze down, away from the towering billboards advertising Gulf Airlines and skin-lightening creams. 'Max Fairness for Max Confidence,' a purple-and-black advertisement promises over the smiling face of a famously fair cricketer. She walks alongside the queued-up Pajeros and Toyotas, impatiently and pointlessly honking, climbing the long slope to the departure terminal.

Under the cover of darkness, before the floodlights bleed into dawn, a mynah bird, with its yellow bandit-beak and orange eyes cut through its coarse black plumage, sings.

Anita lifts her eyes for a moment, looking for the lonely bird. But in the early hours of the morning she can see nothing in the dark, empty sky, not even the dacoit dressed up as a mynah bird. The moon carries only the heaviness of the city, suspended in the charcoal sky.

Anita pulls her *dupatta* tighter around her face. She

closes her eyes, irritated by the blinding floodlights, and opens them, breathing slowly, reminding herself of what she must do.

She holds her passport and red notebook tight against her chest and exhales deeply. Aside from a small bag with a necessary change of clothing and some make-up, she has no other luggage.

Ahead, a Pajero inches forward; it brakes at the check-point manned by armed commandos. A Ranger with a submachine gun strapped to his chest walks towards the Pajero, but no one gets out of the car. The front window rolls down, letting out a blast of English pop music as a driver relays the name of a VIP. Anita moves slowly, not wanting to draw attention to herself. She stops just before she reaches the jeep and waits for it to pass.

Even with the loud music, the rumble of the running engine and the sound of the commandos circling the car, lifting the bonnet, opening the back, searching it for explosives, Anita Rose can still hear the mynah bird.

On Netty Jetty, overlooking the mangroves that crawl thin just before the Arabian Sea, kites swarm the sky like a thick cover of clouds, waiting for lovers to throw chunks of meat to them – or if the lovers cannot afford the bloody parcels sold on the bridge, then small doughy balls of bread. In the chaos of Karachi's congested traffic, surrounded by barefoot boys promising in their high-pitched voices that your dreams will come true if you feed the hungry, Anita always felt protected by the soar of kites. And though she is almost certain that the mynah she hears so late at night is all alone, she is also almost certain that it has come to walk her safely through the airport,

with its yellow feet and bandit-beak, and out of this city forever.

The Pajero's engine is still running and the fumes from its exhaust choke the air around Anita. Coughing into her palm, she doesn't hear the VIP's name, but she can see the silhouette of a young woman, voluminous hair held back by sunglasses, perched on the crown of her head. The VIP presses a button and her window begins to open. No one lowers the music; it plays at full volume, percussion and thumping bass. As the VIP moves, a piece of jewellery reflects everywhere, a thousand rays of iridescent light.

The Ranger with the Heckler & Koch cranes his neck to see through the narrow slit. *As salam alaikum*, he salutes the VIP briskly.

Anita looks behind her, there's no one there. No one has followed her here.

As the Pajero raises its windows, muffling the music, and begins its climb towards the terminal, and before airport security can see her, Anita traces the shadow of a cross along the hollow of her clavicle. No one has noticed she has gone. No one except the birds.

Anita Rose lifts the thumb that drew the sign of the holy cross to her lips and closes her eyes for a kiss.

This city will take your heart, Osama had told her. You don't know what Karachi does to people like us. Take your heart, do you hear?

Anita had not understood the rage in his voice then. She had not understood that he was angry for her, long before anyone had hurt her. Anita didn't like it when she didn't

understand Osama. No matter her age, those moments made her feel just as puny and small as she had been the first time she knocked on his gunmetal door, all those years ago.

It was late at night and Anita had snuck out of her mother's suffocating home to be with him, with Osama comrade *sahib*. Her only ally. Her one true friend. The evening was perfumed by *champa* flowers that bloomed amongst the garbage in Machar Colony and that summer, just before the monsoons, the scent of the white flowers was so strong Anita could no longer smell the sea.

'How do I protect myself?' she had asked him.

Osama ran his hand through his dishevelled silver hair. He lifted his spirit and drank the medicinal liquid slowly, before placing the glass smudged with his fingerprints on his knee and leaning forward, so close that Anita could count the fine grooves of his iris, the lines that cut and coloured the warm brown of his eyes.

'You take *their* heart,' he whispered, even though no one could hear them on the roof – not the trees that wilted in the summer heat, not the constellation of yellow-and-white flowers that bloomed in the rain. 'Anita Rose,' Osama caught himself on her name, 'promise me: you take theirs *first*.'

Anita blinks quickly as her sandals hit the asphalt this cool, starless Karachi night. Above her, over the floodlights, around the Rangers in their camouflage uniforms, past the armed man who holds his dry palm out for Anita's passport, overlooking Karachi – a city so tired it can be overpowered by the fragrance of monsoon flowers, a city so beautiful Anita cannot bear to look back at it, now

that she knows she is leaving – the moon hangs low in the sky.

Anita places her bag gently on the ground, freeing a hand to pull the fabric of her polyester *dupatta* tighter around her face, so the commando cannot see her properly.

The Ranger lifts his eyes from Anita's passport, its faint green pages crisp and relatively unstamped, and looks at the girl in the yellow *shalwar kameez* standing before him. He runs his finger along the photo, scratching the laminated page with his nail.

Anita watches the young Ranger. The hair on his face is light brown, though his stubble is flecked with white on his chin and near his sideburns. Without the worry lines pinching the space between his eyebrows and the frown deepening along his forehead, he would be handsome.

His walkie-talkie cackles with static and Anita drops her gaze to the scuffed black of the commando's boots. She holds her breath and waits for him to recognize her.

Does he?

Anita looks behind her once more. No one. No one has thought to check the airport. No one has noticed she's gone.

The commando reads the name in Anita's passport, almost to himself, and flips through the pages once more, in case he missed something, turning it round in his hands before handing it back to her.

'Are you travelling alone?' the Ranger asks Anita softly, stepping closer to her, a note of concern in his voice. 'It's not safe here,' he gestures at the empty, floodlit tarmac before them. The air smells of cigarette smoke and sleep, heavy and sweet. 'Not for a young girl.'

Anita instinctively takes a step backwards and wipes the corner of her eye with a finger, using her notebook for cover. In ten minutes she will clear this checkpoint, collect her boarding pass, float through security and be gone. Forever.

She thought once more of comrade *sabib*'s words; she never lost anything he taught her. Every line, every word, every poem is in that notebook of hers. If you let it, this city will shatter you. It will take your heart like a trophy, like Salome receiving the Baptist's head. But Anita Rose, tall and slender in *champa* yellow, standing alone before Jinnah International at four in the morning, was not like everyone.

One day, the city would burn and someone would ask her: Karachi? Wasn't that your home? And she would shake her head slowly, *no*. Even smiling, *not at all*.

'Beta?'

Anita Rose lifts her eyes and looks at the young com-mando, not old enough to call her *beta*. Maybe the rough stubble on his chin wasn't white; maybe it had only been lightened by the harsh glare of Karachi's sun.

'Thank you, Uncle,' she picks up her bag. 'I'll be safe soon.'

PART ONE

They Call Me the Lion

2014-16

Anita Rose

Karachi, 2014

In the small, grey cement room lit by a solitary naked bulb, Zenobia dragged her hands, glistening with silvery coconut oil, through her daughter's long hair. Anita Rose closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself as one of the women she had seen in the dramas on TV who sat in pink chairs and had their beautiful light-brown hair washed and dried in salons.

‘Anita . . .’ Zenobia shook a slim glass bottle of *sarson ke tayl*, splashing her palm with the bitter-smelling liquid. She rubbed her hands together, warming the oil before continuing. ‘We don’t have any gas left, nothing to cook with.’

Her mother yanked her fingers through the tangles in Anita’s hair, jerking her head backwards and her mind away from her floating dreams. Anita squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated harder, resisting the damp cold in their bare room. She pictured her mother’s sad voice getting lost in the knots of her hair.

‘Baby?’

Zenobia’s brown oval face had rounded out over the past few years. The small pouches under her eyes seemed heavier and her already-swollen lips bulged slightly, the way a face looks when it cries and cries and cries.

‘We need some gas to cook with.’

Anita shook her head. Her hair smelled sweet and bitter like the coconut and mustard oils.

‘Anita.’ Her mother’s voice was tighter, angrier.

Anita Rose closed her eyes again and imagined herself wearing a plush pink towel, sitting in one of those pink chairs, being perfumed and pampered and offered tea thick with milk, and sugar that came in little cubes. The kind you picked up with a silver tong. She had seen it on one of the shows, long ago. A man used it to pick up ice from a metal bucket.

‘I don’t want to,’ Anita said the words softly so her mother would not shout at her for being *batameez*. She said it softly because she wanted her mama to know that it made her stomach hurt to go there and ask.

The first time she went to Osama Shah’s flat as a young girl, Anita tiptoed up the stairs to the old man’s house shyly, trying to make as little noise as possible. She passed a boy in the stairwell playing football against the wall, all by himself. He was a few years older than she was then and, with his dark eyes furrowed and his face frowning, kicking the ball angrily and then stopping it with his chest, he didn’t even notice Anita climbing past him. ‘Hello, my dear,’ their neighbour, Osama, opened his gunmetal door, looking down sweetly at Anita, who had come to ask for rice. No one had ever called her ‘dear’ before.

Since then, Zenobia had treated the old Marxist across the *gully* as her own supply shop. She knew Osama lived alone. She knew the man had no family and a robust pension from his days with Pakistan Railways. She knew also that he was fond of her daughter, though Anita seemed

almost desperate to avoid asking for things, from anyone. She didn't like asking for water, no matter how dry her throat; she didn't want to beg the use of his cooker or ask to borrow oil or sugar – she especially hated asking for that.

Anita felt uneasy disturbing their old neighbour, who was always – no matter what time she knocked on the gunmetal door – alone. She could smell the emptiness of his life, the dust of books, strewn all over his simple home and gathered on yellowing pages and cracked spines, the smell of food spoiling in plastic bags and ageing in containers and, worst of all, the odour of his *sharab*, a clear liquid he poured into a tall glass, cradling it in his palm as though hiding it from her, which lingered in the air like sweat and paint, curdled together.

After Osama Shah opened the door, Anita lowered her eyes, so he would not see the indignity of her return, back to ask for more. She would relay her mother's request and Osama would say nothing, shuffling towards the kitchen shelves to retrieve what she had asked for.

Anita was grateful for that kindness, she was grateful that he never looked surprised or annoyed at her presence. He never pretended an interest in her circumstance, never burdened her with small talk or meaningless chit-chat about her studies or the weather.

But still, she wrapped her thin arms around her stomach. She didn't want to go there. Anita never knew what to say to the old man, not even now that she was older, almost sixteen.

'The man likes you. You have to go.'

*

When they were children, Ezra had told Anita that the man in the drama with the silver tongue was drinking wine with his ice from the metal bucket. Why do people drink wine? Anita had asked her brother. She had never seen any before. Was it sweet?

Because, Ezra answered, smirking, people drink *sharab* because it tastes of heaven. Even though he was only a measly six years older than his sister, he lorded his age and infinite experience over her. Because it makes you forget all your sorrows.

He told her the man next door, their neighbour, he drank wine every day. Even though he was poor.

At that time, when she was in class four, Anita had her own troubles. She didn't have time to worry about being poor. At school, the girls sharing her bench would kick at her heels. Anita learned to cross her legs, wrapping one over the other, protecting the narrow tendons of her ankles with her chunky black school shoes. But the girls found other, less ambiguous ways of letting Anita Rose know how they felt about her. 'Go home,' Mira would hiss as she knocked Anita's copybook off the desk.

At the front of the Lady Girls' English Medium College, Prep to Matric classroom, a teacher with a slight stoop and long, unvarnished nails recited sums out loud: *two twos are four, three threes are nine, four fours are sixteen, five fives are twenty-five*. With every set, the teacher slapped a ruler against her palm. *Six sixes are thirty-six, seven sevens are forty-nine*.

The girls on the bench would crowd together, squeezing Anita between them. Anita used to try to defend her space, pushing them back with her elbows, but when they

kept pressing against her, she invariably moved forward, sitting with her bottom on the edge of the hard wooden seat. In new, improvised moves, someone would flick a nail against her neck or spit down her shirt collar. But usually Mira pulled her hair. Without turning round, Anita would collect the hair she had tied in a ponytail that morning and wind it into a snail's shell at the top of her head, adjusting a taut rubber band around the bun.

'*Kutee ke bachi*,' Mira would whisper, her voice buried under the drone of the teacher's sums. Her breath always smelled like onions and *achar* early in the morning. 'No one wants you here.'

On cue, one of the other girls sitting on the bench would lift her knee straight up to her chest and bring it hard against Anita's back, pushing her to the ground. And Anita would slip easily off her seat, knocking her cheek against the desk on her way down.

'Anita!' Zenobia slapped her greasy hand on the thin cotton of her thighs. Her *kameez* was a delicate green like the stalks of mustard flowers. Anita stood to her feet and swept her eyes around the room. In the corner were the three *ral-lies* they rolled out every night to sleep on, her mother's worn plastic bag of oils, their small cooker, a stack of plates that her mother wrapped in a torn *dupatta*. On the wall, on top of a small cupboard where they kept their clothes and school books, was a piece of glossy paper the size of a damaged, wrinkled photograph. In the middle of his blue robes, Jesus's heart burned. With one hand he pointed to the flames, with the other he sheltered it from the world.

Sunny

Portsmouth, 2015

Cricket had been the early love of Sunny's life. It was a gentleman's game, a slow, elegant sport that cultivated not only stamina in a player, but also subtle perception. But when his modest athletic scholarship to the University of Portsmouth came in, it was on the strength of his boxing, not his fast bowling, that Sunny had been selected.

Whatever his own personal failures, Sulaiman Jamil had always cheered his son's successes. Sunny's victories couldn't come fast enough. First, a Bachelor's degree from a marvellous university, next a beautiful job in a booming industry, then an office in the city, a Jaguar, a warm and loving wife, some children. Mixed-race, Hindu, Muslim, Sulaiman Jamil didn't mind.

That was all Sunny ever heard at home.

Be someone else. Do something else. Be better. Fit in more, try more, work hard. Don't get stuck in a dead-end job, don't marry the first lady who comes your way, don't be a slave all your life. Pa repeated his mantras, smoothing down his soft brown hair, its colour fading with age, absenting himself from his life's own failures, transmuting his personal traumas into general advice.

I only want you to be happy, he told his son repeatedly. What father can rest until he sees his boy settled?

It made Sunny laugh, coming home from running in the park to see his pa sitting at the kitchen table, the acceptance letter with the second-class stamp propped up before him. The first time that he'd done right by him, it felt like. He would major in business studies for Pa too; he would have preferred Islamic history or even sports therapy, but there was no money in that, no future, Pa said. And a future was all a man really ever had.

'My boy,' his widowed pa, Sulaiman Jamil, sang softly when he held the thin acceptance letter in his hands. Sunny had left the envelope with the second-class stamp on the kitchen counter for his father to see. It was one of the few times he had sought his approval. 'What a thing you've done . . . what a marvellous thing you've done . . .'

As though Pa knew all about the place, as if he'd got in himself. He hadn't gone to university, only a polytechnic back in the old country, but his parents couldn't afford it and, after a year, Pa was forced to drop out. It was a story he told Sunny over and over, embellishing the drama of his life with extra details in every telling.

It had been the first of his life's tragedies.

Sulaiman Jamil had not studied and so was denied the life he deserved. As a young man, he had seen and re-seen all the great James Bond films of his time – *Moonraker*, *Live and Let Die*, *Octopussy* – in cinemas clouded with the honeyed smell of *beedi*, masala chai and potato samosas, and had devotedly checked out all the Ian Fleming books from the circulating library.

It was with Nur Muhammad, his long-lost best friend, that Sulaiman Jamil had seen his first James Bond. Folded into the torn leather cinema seats, together they watched

car chase after ski chase, instantly disrobing women, and saw 007 disobey one superior after another as he flirted with a revolving rota of secretaries, all the time taking careful note of the gleaming, elegant MI6 offices. As the dense *beedi* smoke rose up around them, obscuring the light of the projector, the two friends gripped the arms of their seats and didn't utter a word. Only after the film had ended to a rousing Shirley Bassey number and they lurched out through a dingy corridor into the cinema's courtyard, their eyes adjusting to the harsh afternoon sunlight, did Nur Muhammad break their awestruck silence.

'*Bhai*, those offices,' he blurted out. 'They were so neat and clean . . .'

After polytechnic in Lucknow, but before Portsmouth and the journey there by plane, before the travel agent at Janpath in Delhi who had cheated him, a suffocating Air India flight staffed by superior but inept sari-clad stewardesses, filled with the shrieks of bawling babies and the smell of the air sick-bags being used, and which Sulaiman Jamil could not imagine being strong enough to transport the burden of his expectations across the black waters of exile; before he packed away his life into a single brown cloth suitcase, Sulaiman Jamil had been struck by his life's second tragedy: marriage.

His second cousin, a thin crane of a girl – in her slippers, she stood a head taller than Sulaiman – had been un-marriageable. Safiya Begum was too dark-skinned, too severe, too aloof to have found a match among her peers. Her poor Muslim family had gifted her a name befitting a Mughal princess in the hope of brightening the

stars in her favour. But they needn't have bothered. A question of debt and settling an unpaid loan had been enough to change her fortune. You don't have to love her, Sulaiman Jamil's father told his son on his wedding night. It is not a promise expected of you, Jamil senior counselled his son.

But Sulaiman Jamil wanted to love his wife flamboyantly, with panache, the way he had seen James Bond court Miss Money Penny and all those lithe gymnasts and glamorous villains. He sat next to her on their bed, the first night they were husband and wife, and cleared his throat. Safiya Begum's hair was perfumed with sandalwood and her hands were stained orange with henna – a smell he instinctively recoiled from, but still he wanted to try. When Sulaiman Jamil reached for his bride's hand, she pulled it away.

Tragedy number two: he did not have to love the woman he married.

Tragedy number three: she did not have to love him, either.

Sulaiman Jamil had never been in the right place at the right time. That was the alchemy of life, he always believed – timing. But if only it had been that simple. After all, what sort of Indian believed in time?

Even this Indian, escaping the hour of his birth, his family home, his polytechnic college, flying off to England, even he didn't have the heart to fool himself entirely about the powers of time.

Nur Muhammad insisted his friend was making the wrong decision. 'Cent per cent, *bhai*, you are wrong,' he said, shaking his head as Sulaiman Jamil recounted his

plans to settle in England. ‘They don’t have anything to offer the world now,’ Nur Muhammad argued. ‘They don’t grow cotton, don’t plant tobacco, not even a stalk of basmati grows in that frigid English countryside.’

Nur Muhammad, like Sulaiman Jamil, didn’t know England. He didn’t know anything except the isolation of India. But Nur Muhammad was staying; he had made up his mind and would not be persuaded by Sulaiman Jamil. He saw the future as eastwards-facing. India, finally free, unshackled, had its arms open to the world.

‘But, Nur Muhammad,’ Sulaiman gently warned, the last time he tried to convince his dearest friend to accompany him, ‘if you don’t leave now, you might not have another chance.’

‘Why would I want to leave later?’ Nur Muhammad replied innocently. He was working on an idea, a top business plan. He had been speaking to elders who would loan him a lakh here, ten thousand there, and he was going to take their money and move to Varanasi, setting up a tour company catering exclusively to foreign travelers. No matter what Sulaiman Jamil told Nur Muhammad, he would not budge. It was a top business plan, Nur Muhammad promised. He would not leave.

Sulaiman Jamil embraced his friend when they met for the last time, exiting a brightly lit cinema after having watched *Licence to Kill*, a startlingly dazzling Bond starring Timothy Dalton. Even though he understood that the grandeur of cinema existed in the lies, Sulaiman Jamil still imagined that the world that would meet him, post-exile, would bear some resemblance to the glamour and excitement of (preferably) Roger Moore’s movie life. He was

not naïve, but he had hoped that if roulette tables, tuxedos, Aston Martins and stylish gadgets were not nearby, they would be at least in the vicinity of his new neat and clean existence.

At the very least, Sulaiman Jamil would dress in tweed, smoke refined cigarettes out of an engraved silver case and live in a sleek house with all the latest mod cons. It was a shame Nur Muhammad did not feel he deserved the same things; even more shameful that he was not prepared to sacrifice for them.

'*Khuda hafiz,*' Sulaiman Jamil wished Nur Muhammad affectionately as they parted, holding his worries deep in his heart. Who would look after his friend, now that Sulaiman Jamil was gone? Who would pick him up and encourage him after his business collapsed?

Sulaiman Jamil pressed 5,000 rupees into Nur Muhammad's palm. It was nothing, all he could afford to give, taken out of the enveloped gifts given to him and Safiya Begum at their wedding. 'Something small,' he mumbled, embarrassed, patting his friend's hand, which he noted did not resist the donation. Nur Muhammad didn't do the polite thing and pretend to refuse the present. This surprised Sulaiman Jamil, but also made him sad. Even before he began to work on his 'top business' venture, Nur Muhammad seemed to acknowledge that it would be a failure. Sulaiman Jamil left Lucknow even more certain that a good life awaited only those who dared.

But from the moment he landed at Heathrow one autumn morning, immediately pierced by the chill in his gabardine suit tailored at K.P. Shahani & Sons, it was as though he had never left India. He heard the sweepers in

the airport loo speaking Punjabi, was rudely and roughly interrogated by a Hindu lady officer at immigration, who still seemed to blame the Partition of India on educated Muslims like himself, and suffered the long train ride south, missing his connections, which were delayed to the point of absurdity, forcing Sulaiman Jamil and his new bride (even less amused at this tragic series of *déjà vu*) to sleep in a cold train station, curled over their cloth suitcases like the nearby hobos, smelling of the musky, rotting-wood odour of unwashed hair, their arms lovingly embracing black bin-bags of belongings, shopping trolleys parked at their sides.

His brother-in-law had found him a job at Fratton Station, Sulaiman Jamil whispered to his wife as she pulled her lambswool cardigan tighter over her belly to protect herself from the falling night temperature. He would be an announcer, but he said the word with less pride than he would have done a day before. An Announcer. He had taken elocution lessons at the British Council in Lucknow. He would do it right, Sulaiman promised, shaking his head with determination – that he would, all right.

But all that met Sulaiman Jamil in Portsmouth were replicas of home: kitchens smelling of curry, the toxic scent of *methi* clinging to the walls, everyone – his sister, all his Lucknow expatriated friends and neighbours, but most of all him – keeping their heads down and holding their breath in the dreadful anticipation of something greater, that neat and clean life, that never seemed to come.

Tragedies four (or five, depending on his mood) through seven encompassed the humiliations of travel, migration, perfecting the new accents and intonations of a language

that, although familiar, seemed foreign in Portsmouth, and the continued alienation of his wife.

In order to make their new house a home, Sulaiman Jamil brought his wife flowers every Sunday morning. A few daisies picked from the park, nothing extravagant, but the gesture went by unnoticed all the same. He left *The News* open on the horoscope page so that she could read her sign, but aside from cutting out and collecting articles on Princess Di, Safiya Begum only used the paper to soak up the oil of freshly fried onions.

Sulaiman Jamil was encouraged by Safiya Begum's fascination with the glamorous English royal, relieved that she was finally taking an interest in her new country. He had hoped, deep down, that this would result in his wife loosening up, and imagined that she would begin to act a bit like the liberated women in his favourite films.

Sitting on the foot of the bed as she slept one morning, before they had figured out how the heating worked, Sulaiman Jamil took Safiya Begum's feet in his hands. Cupping his fingers around her heel, he pressed down and tried to warm and soothe his wife's skin with his own. For a few minutes, Safiya Begum didn't stir. She lay on the bed, her knees bent into her chest, and let her husband massage her feet. Do you see, Sulaiman said softly, how much we need each other here? It's only us, Safiya Begum. We have no one else.

He had never massaged anyone's legs before, only his mother's, and he pushed his thumb gently against Safiya Begum's ankle, just as he had done as a child. Sulaiman Jamil bent his body and brought his lips down to the finely criss-crossed skin above his wife's arches, but before

he could kiss her feet, Safiya Begum pulled her legs away. Don't be disgusting, she snapped with irritation, sitting up quickly and removing herself from the bed. She shoved her feet into her house slippers and pulled her robe tight against her body. I'm not Fergie, she shouted, slamming their bedroom door behind her.

England, she later complained to her husband, had made him a pervert.

Portsmouth was not grand; it was definitely not London. But it was still a step up from Varanasi.

Sulaiman Jamil wrote to Nur Muhammad of the neat and clean life he was slowly but steadily building, folding a ten-pound note in a sheet of white paper so it wouldn't show through the gauzy blue airmail envelope. These were lies Nur Muhammad would never catch, because he could never have imagined how poor England was, often bewilderingly so. With its small houses, sunless harbour and streets coated with the yeasty smell of beer, even in the early morning, it failed to conjure up the new beginnings of life that Sulaiman Jamil had imagined.

Loneliness had a scent that Sulaiman Jamil came to associate with Portsmouth – it was the dour smell of the roads after a football match, of rain, of pensioners who stank of cat hair or the feline smell of urine, pungent and overpowering as you stood behind their mottled bodies, spotted with the blue-and-purple bruises of old age, at the supermarket or post office.

He loathed this poverty of England's, more so than India's – the poverty of takeaway boxes strewn on the roads, festering in unheated homes and the waiting rooms

of betting shops, jeans exposing pale buttock cleavage, women slack under clingfilm skies, foolishly burning their great advantages over the futilely toiling masses of the Subcontinent.

He hoped that one day his newborn son would avoid this dismal fate – the poverty of the educated and overfed, which was so much more fearful than the rag-and-bone destitution of India.

But Portsmouth was what Sulaiman Jamil could afford. It was where he knew people, others who had escaped Lucknow and had called him here, assuring him that he would all but be given the keys to a brave new life. But England was cold and grey and quiet – the worst was the quiet, both in his loveless house and in the streets where mothers shushed their children and men spoke loudly to each other, but never to a passing stranger.

There were no animals, no bullock carts, no dung fires with their smoky mesquite smell, no children screaming as they swam in the canals – nothing. A deathly silence welcomed every day, the long lonely hours between day and night broken only by dolorous church bells.

Emerging from those *beedi*-perfumed cinemas and James Bond films of long ago, Sulaiman Jamil had yearned for adventure and beauty, but instead he had found in England a cold power that destroyed all possibility of love and intimacy. It made him secretly long for, despite himself, the grit and the grime, the broken pavements and dusty roads that he had sought to escape, the squalor in which it was never possible, even for the powerful, to forget that one was human and frail.

It's not what I expected, Sulaiman Jamil confessed to

his wife, her back turned to him as she stood at the kitchen counter, stretching dough with her gaunt hands. The small curve of her shoulder moved sensuously as she pulled and massaged the *atta*, but Safiya Begum said nothing. She did not turn to comfort her husband, her only friend in this strange, foreign land. And you? Sulaiman Jamil had asked, longingly, seeking commiseration, friendship, even just a suggestion of casual solidarity.

Safiya Begum leaned her pelvis against the kitchen counter, rolling the dough as far as she could. I didn't expect anything, she finally replied, without turning round to face her husband, whose skin was pale and ashy in the English winter.

Sulaiman Jamil's loneliness was only removed by the grief that flooded his heart in a way he did not expect, when Safiya Begum died suddenly from a vicious and decisive strain of breast cancer, leaving him behind to care for a two-year-old child.

Even in sickness, even after the cancer spread and ate away her body, even then Safiya Begum hadn't turned to her husband and taken his hand. She said she was ashamed by the sight of her metastasized breasts, the smell of death that surrounded her, the soft tufts of hair that fell on her shoulders like dandruff, so she distanced herself even more. Finally, in death, she had managed to be free of her husband. Let me die in peace, Safiya Begum begged Sulaiman Jamil. For once, won't you just leave me be?

'Look at you now,' Sulaiman Jamil smiled at his young son. This was the moral of the story: Sulaiman Jamil had

fought the karma of his life to build something new, something better for his precious child, his only boy. ‘We did all right, didn’t we?’

Sunny nodded at his pa.

‘You and me, the two of us? We did good, didn’t we?’

Standing at the kitchen counter, Sunny watched his father’s eyes fill with tears. He bowed his head and nodded once more.

‘You have a home, you have a city, a country even – a place in the world.’ Sulaiman Jamil’s voice broke with emotion. ‘You have a father who loves you. What more could your poor papa have given you?’

Just a moment ago, holding his University of Portsmouth John Doe acceptance letter, they were happy. Sunny was happy. He felt it. But it was gone now. Happiness didn’t hold. Nothing lasted very long for Sunny Jamil.

‘Nothing,’ Sunny mumbled, reaching out his arm to squeeze his old pa’s shoulder, massaging him for a moment, before leaning forward to embrace him. His pa. His protector, his defender. ‘I’ve got everything I need.’

Monty

London, 2015

The English capital was cool in the evenings. With a fine mist of pollen in the air, July in London felt like Karachi in winter. They had dinner plans at Novikov, and Papa had called a taxi from his phone, insisting on using Addison Lee instead of Uber. Akbar Ahmed said he didn't come all the way here just to sit in a Prius, have his identity known to the driver – nearly always called Mohammad – and then have to endure long harangues about fasting in the summertime.

It was just the one time, Monty pointed out, but Papa was still annoyed. Two days ago, arriving via Emirates from Dubai, they had sat in the heavily perfumed car of a cockney-accented Uber driver with two gold teeth and a toothpick dangling from the corner of his lips, which he flicked around with his tongue; he was from, it turned out, Multan.

As salam alaikum, this Mohammad in ripped jeans and a Juve jersey said in a voice dripping with sanctimony as soon as they had shut the doors. *Salam*, Monty mumbled, while Mummy nodded and Papa rolled his eyes.

The driver watched the Ahmeds in the rear-view mirror, taking his eyes off the road to turn round and look at them as he pulled the car out of the Heathrow parking

lot. Khadija, their maid, sat in the front seat, Zahra's carry-on bag pressed against her knees, holding the family's four permissible duty-free bottles of Laphroaig in her lap. A plastic silver-painted الله اكبر hung from the mirror, twirling slowly, as they made their way onto the M4. *Bismillah*, Khadija whispered, reassured, pulling her hijab tighter around her face while trying to stop the bottles from clanking noisily against each other. Mohammad clocked the duty-free bags out of the corner of his eye and exhaled deeply. '*Astaghfirallah*,' he muttered, as though complaining about the traffic.

Monty had taken a sip of coffee, bought at Caffè Nero while Papa was changing money, and the driver, biting his tongue after hearing the clank-clank of the bottles in the front seat, lifted his toothpick from his lips and shook his head. 'Only the first week of *Ramzan*, mate, couldn't you wait till *iftar*?'

Monty laughed nervously. It was a long flight, he replied – you didn't have to fast while travelling, he thought, not that he kept any *rosas* anyway. Zahra, who was fasting, flight or not, patted her son's knee and looked out at the overcast skies, ignoring the young driver.

'It's not for everyone,' the Uber driver continued in his thick accent, glancing sideways at the maid and then back at the Ahmeds, before sliding the toothpick behind his ear. 'Needs real commitment, real understanding of the faith, you know?'

Monty was glad that Khadija couldn't speak English and would miss this dig at his impious family. Papa rolled down the window, muttering that his suit would smell like a rose-petal factory, but Mohammad carried on.

‘Took me mam for *Umrab* last year,’ he smiled in the rear-view mirror. ‘I work seven days a week, drive an Uber on me off-time. Can’t afford to travel for *vay-cay-shun*, just to faff around shopping and looking at sights, you know? Took me just five days off last summer and went with the family to Mecca Medina, *subhanallah*.’

He turned to Khadija, nodding his head, but she wouldn’t understand anything the driver said, especially not the Arabic words mispronounced in his cockney drawl.

‘Could you put the radio on?’ Papa snapped at the driver, but Mohammad shook his head. ‘Sorry, mate,’ he spoke coldly, ‘*haram* to listen to music during *Ramzan*.’ He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, reaching for his wet toothpick and returning it to his lips. ‘Thought, from your tags, you’d know better, coming from Pakistan and all.’

Akbar Ahmed thought of complaining to Uber and asking for his money back, but settled for a single-star review of the BBCD driver. British-Born Confused *Desi*, Papa typed simply, as the justification for his low rating. They may have been civilians here, but Akbar Ahmed’s position, his social standing, required a certain respect. He would not be spoken down to and lectured on religion by some second-generation immigrant from Multan. Not here, not in London.

Papa wanted to be chauffeured by white men, suited and booted, not in ripped jeans. Addison Lee was not ideal, frankly, they used Romanians almost exclusively, but they would do.

The family had been subjected to Papa’s sour lectures on Brexit and the failures of British transport since that first taxi ride – two days of complaints and unhelpful suggestions on

hospitality and urban planning. It wasn't so complicated, Papa said. He wanted to be called 'sir', respectfully be handed a selection of financial newspapers and have his door opened for him. Most of all, though, he wanted an executive car with a driver who would zip him through Knightsbridge and Park Lane without any *bak bak* on the way to dinner. 'How would you like us to go to The Connaught, Mr Ahmed, sir?' his favourite driver, Aleksander, once asked him. 'Silently,' Akbar Ahmed replied.

Back home in Pakistan, the Ahmeds never had to struggle for anything. Our people made this country, Akbar Ahmed had told Monty since he was a child. Our people embroidered the dream of Pakistan. We wove it out of the clouds, out of thin air. It was a sacrifice, the Ahmeds believed, that forever insured them against difficulty or hardship of any kind. We birthed a country – our very own – moving millions across this ancient soil, shifting land like mah-jong tiles across a board.

As the fires of Partition swept from *gully* to *gully* and neighbours plundered each other's homes, hacking women and children to death, Monty's grandfather walked off his Deccan army base with nothing in his pocket but his cigarettes and matches, his service pistol holstered to his hip. He walked across Hyderabad and, as the family legend had it, all the way to Bombay, where he boarded a steamer for Karachi.

We are *nawabs*, Akbar Ahmed often told his scion, his only son. In the draughty haveli that once was the Ahmed abode, thirteen gun salutes met the princes every dawn. In the morning, at a more civilized hour, soldiers and

boiled eggs, presented in ruby-encrusted cups, were served on the verandah. Armando, the family Borzoi, lay on the freshly cut grass and waited for breakfast to be over. The dog was nearly one and a half metres tall and wore a shaggy brindle coat. Every morning he sat patiently, resting his long, elegant snout on your grandfather's polished dress shoes. Every day Armando the Borzoi's wet shadow had to be wiped off the English leather by one of the Ahmed valets. Some days Nawab Ahmed didn't even bother, that's how close master and dog were.

But your grandfather, the romantic, gave up his monogrammed Rolls-Royce and bespoke Cartier leopards. He gave up the shoe-shiners, the egg-boilers, and even, sadly, Armando, who was too old to make the journey to a new country – all for the very idea of Pakistan. He re-joined the military in his new country and fought India. These were the foundation stones of Ahmed family lore.

Monty's father, Akbar, continued the Ahmed tradition: glorifying and protecting the dream of Pakistan. He did not enlist, but made his money divvying up parcels of the country's promised land. He had a fine eye for disaster capitalism and, post-Partition, he made a fortune convincing the citizens of the new country to give their land away for a song. *Bath Island? No, not a good investment. Place is too near the water. Plus, difficult being a Parsi, now that we're all Muslims, no?* In his Lawrencepur tailored suits and Gram-marian drawl, young Akbar Ahmed preyed on old ladies who set their hair in curlers and wore long, pleated skirts. *Looks patriotic, one has to admit, being Muslim. Never know when people will turn on you in your, uh, situation. Do you have a plan regarding your property, if you have to leave in a hurry?*

Once the Parsis had packed up and moved out of prime real estate, Akbar set to work fudging the papers of abandoned Hindu homes, one of which he settled his own family into. Next came the business of growing and expanding the Defence Housing Authority, a brainchild of his father's old chums, who pinched and pocketed land for the Armed Forces until they owned most, if not all, of Karachi's reclaimed land. Eventually Akbar Ahmed went into high-rise development, Dubai-style. Soon, the Ahmeds would own the sea.

In London they owned only one plot of land, but with its view of Harvey Nichols and its elegant courtyard sheltered from the tourists prowling Knightsbridge, one could argue it was the best possible address. Their neighbours were arms dealers and senators, Akbar Ahmed told everyone, and those were just the other Pakistanis.

Monty sat on the sofa in the living room of their Sloane Street apartment that evening while Papa held a phone in each hand, one on hold with Addison Lee and the other dialling Novikov, to add another four seats to their dinner reservation. Monty flipped channels on their Sky-satellite remote, jumping from one reality show of English teenagers binge-drinking in Spain to another reality show of chinless heirs drinking in Chelsea.

'Mummy,' he called out, not lifting his eyes from the screen as he heard the front door open – there had to be some actual TV somewhere – 'are you ready?'

'Madam abi tob tayar nahi hai,' Khadija slipped into the living room, her arms weighed down with Waitrose shopping bags and her *dupatta* hanging loosely from her shoulders.

Khadija's thick hair reached the back of her knees, and although she tucked it under a *dupatta*, you could still see the tail of a plait peeking out. Madam was in her room, still getting dressed, Khadija said, smiling nervously. She set the bags down in the kitchen and returned to lean against the doorframe, briskly rubbing her shoulders. She had never been so cold in her life; she even felt it in her teeth. Madam mustn't get a chill, Khadija bobbed her head with concern at the ominous British weather; she would tell Madam to wear a coat.

Teek hai, teek hai, Monty nodded glumly, trying to get rid of her.

His parents had insisted on bringing Khadija with them to clean the flat and look after the laundry and the housekeeping. Monty had tried to tell them that it was embarrassing, Khadija wasn't even eighteen, she looked like an indentured labourer. What if someone saw her trailing after them on Oxford Street and reported them to the authorities?

'Don't be ridiculous,' Papa had snapped, 'what makes you think Britishers care about indentured labour? Don't you know what they did to us for four hundred years?'

'She's not indentured,' Zahra Ahmed swatted her son on the shoulder. 'She's very happy to be here.'

Monty tried to argue with his parents that it just didn't look right, that it would seem weird, that Khadija would be uncomfortable; she looked unlike the rest of them, with her sun-blotched skin and elevated cheekbones, and more like a hostage, always seated at a separate table in restaurants. Why did she have to come? Couldn't they bring the new Filipina Mummy had just hired, who at

least spoke English and was Western, or whatever? London would be too big a shock for Khadija, she would stick out with her cheap slippers and ratty *shalwar kameez* and covered hair.

But unless Monty wanted to take the rubbish out himself every day, and cook omelettes with chillies and tomatoes every morning, the maid was coming, Papa said. The Filipina would run away, Papa explained; with her passport and her fluency in English, she would get it into her head that she could survive in London. Filis were bloody hard to find in Pakistan these days, why take the risk of losing her? And besides, Khadija wouldn't be so *chhalak* as to assume the same. 'Our people are much simpler,' Monty's mother agreed, 'more innocent.'

But still, Monty didn't like what bringing Khadija here, on a month-long summer holiday to London, said about the Ahmeds.

'Turns sixteen, thinks he knows everything,' Akbar Ahmed shook his head.

'I'm seventeen, Papa,' Monty reminded him. His birthday had only been the month before, in June. They cut a cake at Fujiyama, it wasn't that long ago.

'Sixteen, seventeen,' Akbar Ahmed draped a thin cashmere scarf over his neck to ward against the evening's summer breeze. 'What's the difference?'

Anita Rose

When Anita thought of her mother, she could still smell her, a warm scent of sweat and sweet oils – clove, apricot, mustard, almond.

Zenobia liked to tell her how when she was a baby, colicky and crying night and day, Anita Rose nearly got them thrown out of the squat they lived in near Railway Lines, a much smaller room than they had now, with walls built of collapsing wood and surrounded by tired migrant labourers as their neighbours. Anita Rose kept her older brother awake night after night as she screamed and howled until the sun rose, till her frail blue body exhausted itself.

Zenobia realized after a week of the neighbours pounding and swearing at her door that it was Anita's teeth, poking through her red, swollen gums. She rubbed clove oil all along the pink-and-white ridges of her baby's mouth.

She had a cure for everything – they were not rich, she said, but only fools paid doctor's fees when they could mine the earth for medicine. Sweet *tulsi* oil mixed with scentless sesame was a balm that settled all her children's coughs, when rubbed against their brittle chests by their mother's strong hands. A drop of cinnamon oil, *dalchini*, peppery and warm, cleaned even the murky, unfiltered water in Railway Lines – though now, in Machar Colony, they filled their drinking water in jerrycans at the local