

A Partial Cityscape

By

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my original work while completing my degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Epigraph

‘Memory’s images, once they are fixed in words, are erased,’ Polo said. ‘Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little.’

-Invisible cities, Italo Calvino

“Behind the story I tell is the one I don’t.

Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear.”

-Two or Three Things I Know for Sure, Dorothy Allison

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Chapter 1

We first find Maisha on her wedding day. It's late February, and the day was supposed to be cool. Only it is not. The air conditioners in the community center hall wheeze like ailing old men, but the room gets hotter and hotter and hotter. Her father's temper rises in tandem. He shouts at the manager, the waiters, the endless cousins directing the waiters, and perhaps at God himself, demanding someone do something before the groom's party arrives. But it is not to be. Droplets of sweat bead up on every forehead and eventually make their way down over the terrain of skin, creating pathways for future sweat beads to follow. They race down until they are wiped away by Achols, Ornas, backs of the hand, tissue paper and on rare occasions, embroidered handkerchiefs that are always folded back neatly with care. The heat remains relentless. New rivulets form. They are erased. Heat is no stranger to us. It is a national annoyance. We deal with it with jovial complaints and familiar ease.

Maisha sits on a sofa, on a stage, smiling a bride's smile, greeting a thousand strangers and posing for a million photos. This is the happiest day of her life, only it isn't and nobody ever told her it would be. A bengali wedding is as formal and somber an affair as it is informal and joyous. There's so much to do until the day of, and then the day is here. Does anyone ever finish all that was to do? Maisha didn't. But nevertheless, it's her wedding day and she sits, smiles, greets and poses. Being a bride is not harder than she anticipated. This is a small comfort. Maisha revels in it.

Children shriek with joy and run past her. They trip on their nice clothes, their little feet thunderous on the cheap wood of the stage. They ruin the photo Maisha is posing for, and get yelled at by the adults. Maisha doesn't mind, she taps her icy fingers against the offending

child's cheeks before posing again. Someone turns on the music over the speaker, as if trying to drown the heat with music. *He'll take her, he'll take her*, the song declares cheerfully, *the lover will take the bride away*. Maisha smiles at the familiar song. Someone leans in to whisper how beautiful she looks.

Maisha knows she is beautiful today. Her face is painted just enough to highlight her features. She is adorned with a few of her mother's wedding jewelry and new ones bought just for her. She's been laughing, and smiling and blushing and giggling for the past week. She looks her best when she is happy. God knows she is happy— happy to be the center of her family's attention. How could she not be when all the magic in the air was all for her.

The night before her *Gayee Holud*, Shiuli khala poured half of the hair product her husband sent from Dubai into the plastic bowl. Hasina chachi had deposited the last of the warmed-up coconut oil in it already. The girls called out and argued over their number on the cue. But chachi worked her fingers through Maisha's hair first, her right as the bride, careful to not tear out strands in the quest to reach the scalp. Nodi and Monika, daughters of rival branches of the family, each worked on one of Maisha's hands. The henna design they aimed to replicate stayed open on a tab screen. Nodi and Monika sniped at each other as mercilessly as they self-depreciated. Both criticizing the flowers, the kolkis, the abstract lines meant to add cohesion, each detail that made up the swirling pattern of mehendi. They took turns to chastise Maisha for fidgeting, joining their voice in Hasina's chachi's complaints about squirrly young ladies. Their dedication to the mehendi went beyond Maisha, beyond the ceremony, beyond even themselves. Family surrounded Maisha in all directions. They transformed the tiny room with their breath. The lights were more vivid, the acoustic sharper, the space larger. The gossip and giggles were

loud and unabashed as the women worked through each other's hair, mehendi patterns and their own grievances. In between, all the loud voices, Rosina fupu's hum chased away all the empty.

The men of the family betray their affection in different ways. They fussed over the practicals. Someone must send out the wedding invitation cards after someone calls the printing press and gets the cards delivered home. The venue must be checked on, and the cook followed up with. There is the *Holud* ceremony and someone has to deliver the gifts to the grooms. "Chacha, don't worry," Someone kept telling Maisha's father, "It'll be done." and it was every time. Her brothers hovered in her periphery, occasionally swooping into a conversation before and causing some mischief before disappearing again. In the living room, her uncles sat, sipping tea and shouting out their own opinions more *at* each other than *to* each other. They orchestrated the event occasionally, and hindered everyone else the rest of the time. But sure as the northern star, they appeared at her home every evening for the entire week before the wedding. These men who hadn't seen or spoken to her for years were suddenly insistent in their familiarity. They summoned old stories of Maisha being this big. Old stories of her tugging on beards and chasing stray dogs were summoned as if to assert their right to love her.

Here they were. All of them, coming together with their decades of bad blood in the name of shared blood, to gorge themselves on salt that will make them traitors, when they inevitably break off. Because the bloodsport is only ever ignored, not forgotten. Never forgotten, no truce ever came and will never be called for. So they sneak in rapier sharp jabs in the form of teasing. They let heated arguments dissolve into laughter a second before coming to blows. There are tears shed, egos bruised, strategic eavesdropping and legal arm-wrestling— all under the tent of unity. All is suffering, all is glad. All of this, because they are her family, and she is theirs. They

love her, just as much as they don't know her. Maisha revels in their company, revels in staying a stranger and being cared for so bluntly and harshly.

She is not alone in her exaltation. Her father preens in the midst of it all, stressed out of his mind and happiest for it. He is everywhere—the constant in the entropy. Her mother, too, frail as she is, stays steady by Maisha's side, smiling in that crooked way of hers. She is the easiest target in the family, and they take aim at her often. But Maisha's mother is bulletproof in her joy. The mother of the bride, the eye of the storm. Every so often she reaches out to touch her daughter, to caress her face, clumsy like a new-born. Maisha's mother lost her voice the same time she lost her legs. She speaks through fingers forming signs in a language without sound. But she never needed noise for Maisha. The ghost of the umbilical cord kept them connected even after all these years. Maisha felt her mother, the same way she felt the rest of her family. She has been cradled here all her life.

All of it has come to this: a wedding. *He'll take her, he'll take her, the lover will take the bride away.*

Maisha sits, smiles, greets and poses. She coos at the babies, is cooed at in return, jokes with friends and peers, bends to touch her elder's feet. She takes care not to dislodge the tikli. Her bangles knock together and clink. The weight of the saree keeps her grounded. The photographer, an old friend, keeps his camera firing like a machine, taking shot after shot, capturing everybody in a frame at least once.

Once, she and the photographer sat in a tea stall, joking about a different friend's wedding, making plans of holding shoes for ransome and picking songs for elaborate dance routines. Here they are instead. His lights leave her so exposed as to be captured in TIF, LZW or PNG. He made no plans for silly pranks and stands as the survellor instead. Ever vigilant to foil

all mischief and protect the sanctity of his photographs. The friend that was to be married, stayed single. They used to call her blue-voiced, *neelkontho*, like the song bird. But there is no trace of blue upon her now. She is a whirlwind of color in the community center hall. She leads the group holding the gate for the groom. She helps elderly women to their seats and snaps pictures for the younguns. She is pretty enough to rival the bride. She draws eyes and dominates the rumor mills with stories of her broken engagement and all the proposals that are sure to come for her soon. The song-bird has become a woman. The scraps of childhood they clung to together, gone, gone, gone. Maisha doesn't know how to mourn it.

Maisha never imagined it would go like this, even though it was always supposed to. She never noticed when the last of childhood had retreated, leaving her alone in open waters. Her feet don't touch land anymore, and the horizon is so far away, the current is so strong. Like a tall child, she can't help looking past the blinding lights for her mother.

Her mother's wheelchair is parked firmly in the first row. Chompa, the girl who looks after her, is missing as expected. But her mother doesn't seem bothered. She looks straight at Maisha, as if waiting to be sought out. She cries quietly. Maisha wants to cry too, wants to run to her like a little girl, to kneel in front of her and wrap her arms around her mother and tuck her head under her chin. Maisha's mother couldn't hold Maisha. But when she was small, mother used to pull her orna over the two of them. She let Maisha be as small as she felt, hidden from the world if not protected. All she wants now is to be hidden away. So he can't take her away.

But that is not how the story goes.

Sayed, Maisha's lover, sits, smiles, greets and poses somewhere else. We shuffle through time to find him earlier in the day. He is sitting in the drawing room of their three-bedroom, four-bathroom apartment. When he was little, he used to ponder the logic of calling it

the drawing room. Nobody ever let him draw there. On TV, they called drawing rooms living rooms. That, too, was strange. It was the most lifeless out of all the compartments of his home. That is, until they moved the TV in there from the dining space. Sayeed always loved TV. The window to the world, his father called it. The magic mirror, his grandmother called it. The idiot box, his mother called it. He agreed with all three. For him, the TV was the drawing factor in the drawing room, the thing that invited life in between the off-white walls and then stilled it to show life somewhere else. In his home, the TV is rarely turned off.

It is still on now, though nobody is watching. It's Sayeed's wedding day. Television told him, it's supposed to be the happiest day of his life, but it isn't. Happiest implies a comparison. He couldn't find any other experience in his 27 years that could measure against his own wedding. But the rest of the family was preparing in the fashion of week-long wedding mega-episodes anyway.

So that is how it goes. Sayeed is ushered out of his room to play general in today's conquest. He pitied his brother when he held this position. Now he extends that courtesy to himself. Neela Bhabi's kind smile and casual lean against his shoulder is the only thing keeping him from bolting. His brittle bones shake from the racket of a clan in motion. The very air itself vibrates with their energy. Sayeed tries and tries to find the rhythm everyone around him is raging to. He fails and resigns himself to failure. Like a child mirroring a parent, Sayeed goes through the motions. He sits where he is supposed to, laughs on cue, responds to reefs and teases with jokes of his own, and finds himself in myriad selfies. He stays a corporal thing to be gripped and jostled and pushed around. He is shocked. He had hoped to be a ghost of himself.

Most of his aunts, led by Bhabi and followed by their children, go on to the community center first. The rented minibuses cut through the city to deliver them. They are to begin the formalities with the in-laws, draw first blood if necessary. Sayeed's father is embarrassed by his sisters' eager sniffing for flaws. But he could never keep them contained. That impossible task is given to Neela Bhabi, and she shoulders it uncomplainingly as usual. Thus, with the infantry deployed, Sayeed, dressed in an itchy blue sherwani, is to board the chariot that is their Toyota Corolla. The car has been transformed with flowers for the battle for family pride. Garlands of marigold, punctuated with sticks of tuberose and roses, fresh in the morning, sagging sadly now, all hang from the car in familiar and new patterns. For all their attempts, they couldn't erase the age of this old thing. But the car is more of a weapon for it. It stands as a reminder that they are from old money .

The returned minibuses are to carry the rest of the family—the proper veterans who are the backbone of today's conquest. Once there, they have a gate held by the bride's party to collapse. The cousins are already deciding how much money they are willing to part with, and where is the beginning bid that fits the family's honor. Seasoned negotiators, the lot of them, they still lament the loss at Sayeed's older brother's wedding. This time they are determined for a win. Once the gate is passed, the war is won. Bhabi's party will return early to make sure the home is fit for Maisha's arrival. The final phase of the battle, that the men don't concern themselves with, but the ladies know from their domestic dramas that the third act is where the biggest twists take place.

Sayeed boards their old trusty Toyota Corolla after his mother and grandmother. His father sits in the front next to the driver. They wait for the rest of the family to get on their own vehicle, and then they are off.

The community center where they are having the weddings is in Dhanmondi. Sayeed didn't recognise it at all. A friend used to live nearby. He must have biked past the building a thousand times over before that friendship fell apart. It was a surprise to realize there was something he didn't know about the area. He thought he knew the street down to the potholes. He had distinct memories of shouting at a driver attempting to park by that very building two days before his A' levels. Maybe the car came to the community center. He couldn't remember. The stress of the exams colored that memory. He used to joke that he yelled at the driver for missing him. Maybe the community center had stood as a backdrop then. Maybe it appeared in the 6 years Sayeed lived abroad.

He's been back in Dhaka for a year now. Yet Sayeed still grapples with the way the city didn't freeze. It ate itself and grew larger on the same bones. All the landmarks, the concrete roads, and the labyrinth-like alleys were still there. But the old 5 story rental apartment complexes were replaced by 8 storied ones with garages. All the local grocery stores, pharmacies and laundries have been replaced with new ones in a different order. Everything is only familiar enough to throw him off. Maybe it would be better if Dhaka changed enough to be unrecognizable. 6 years is a long time.

The car pulls up in front of the community center. They are immediately crowded by the in-laws. Sayeed's father gets out first. The men from the micro begin to rendezvous around the Toyota Corolla as well. Sayeed cranes his neck towards the skyline just once. He tries to find the building his friend used to live in. A billboard advertising detergent blocks his view. As Sayeed climbs out of the car, he realizes he will never be able to pass the street without thinking of his wedding day anymore. The old association with his friend has already been overpowered by this shinier new one.

Sayed is swept right away by the hoard of bodies waiting for him as soon as he exits. He is swallowed whole to be the face of an entity known as the groom's party. He breathes as it breathes, moves as it moves, speaks through an assorted collection of voices from his family. The stone in the pit of his stomach sinks a bit deeper. It is suddenly so much more real now.

There is no reason why it should feel more real now than the day of their Akhd. Sayeed and Maisha were married in the eyes of the state already. Still the stone sank, and a left vacuum in its wake. He reels from the enormity of that feeling, and lets the party carry him through the celebrations or battles of wits. He could never tell.

At the end of it, Sayeed finds himself on the stage next to Maisha. The pair of them are still surrounded by too many people to count. The harsh studio lights illuminate everyone with an unnatural clarity. The groom's party and the bride's party are not separate creatures anymore. They merge now, fall into one another, crash through as the bodies disperse and intermingle. The chill of the day gives way to heat. It grows oppressive, trapped between the jewels and sequins that glitter equally under the light. The pleasantries are all but shouted. The roar of it is as loud as the blood in Sayeed's veins. He leans down to touch the elder's feet, he is embraced, he shakes hands. His gut is still filled with dread, even as he starts to feel light-headed. A new feeling begins to bloom in his chest, and Sayeed is surprised he has room for it all.

Maisha looks at Sayeed and smiles. Sayeed smiles back. They don't speak to one another until the crowd around them begins to thin out. Sayeed ruffles through his vocabulary trying to find something to say, that feeling in his chest growing in tandem with his dread. Sayeed ran through this day a hundred times over in his head. He still failed to imagine what it would be like to sit next to the woman he promised his life to.

“Hi,” He chokes out, looking straight ahead as the cameraman fiddles with his equipment. He wants to take a few photos of them on the stage.

“Hi,” She answers, her voice is as scratchy as his own. “You look good.”

“Thank you. You look absolutely gorgeous.”

“Thanks. The ladies at the beauty parlor spent 3 hours on my face.”

Sayed snorts, and turns his head to look at her, “You’d look just as beautiful if they hadn’t.”

Maisha rolls her eyes, “Was the traffic okay?”

“Yes, as good as Dhaka traffic gets.”

“Good.”

“Yeah.” Sayeed chuckles, “Are we out of small talk already?”

“We’re not having a rousing conversation about the world and its politics on our wedding day, are we?”

“Should we have a conversation about the amazing life we will have together then?”

“Better not, it’ll end in us bringing shame to our families by breaking up *now* or dishonoring them even worse by acting on our *passions*.” Sayeed guffaws before hiding it in a laugh.

They manage to hold each other’s eyes for one indulgent moment before they are called to face the camera. Then, there are hundreds of people to greet, smile and pose with. After that, there is dinner, and another photoshoot. Then more people to greet. There is not a lot of time to speak. There is no time to dwell. Sayeed and Maisha play the groom and bride as everyone else plays wedding guests and host families. They both look at the hoard of children playing tag around the stage with something close to envy.

At the end of a Bengali wedding ceremony, crying is traditional. It’s perhaps the most important part of the ritual. The guests, and parts of the family, are almost always rendered

uncomfortable by this part. Nobody blames them for this, of course. It is nauseating to watch dignity melt away like chocolate and leave sticky, sickly, sweet grief that howls, and shrieks, and makes animals out of women. They become unconsolable. Their kajol is unevenly smudged away. Snot and tears wash away the cheap foundation to reveal blemished skin. Clothes go asunder, but nobody looks at the tantalizing strips of skin with anything but disgust or pity. The wailing women are always lucid. They know the exact perils the bride, now a wife, is to face. They have seen the face of it as young women themselves. They construct and wear that face for their own daughters-in-law, and they are the most enthusiastic to throw their own daughters, and sisters, and nieces and cousins to it. This is why they must cry. Because this cycle is their undoing as it is their becoming. This pain is matrilineal.

Maisha's family cries until they cannot stand. Even sitting, they continue to sob and weep uncontrollably for the precious few seconds in which this is allowed. Because this is the way the story goes. If there is any catharsis to be found, that is not to be mentioned. We all know the rules. Maisha plays by them. He came, and he is taking her away. She will go willingly. But for the few minutes she is allowed, she kneels by her mother's wheelchair, cranes her neck as unnaturally as she must to hide her face in her mother's shoulder, relishes in her father's wobbly voice, soaks up the affection he strokes onto her veil. She abandons all embarrassment and cries. Her mother's sobs tear out of her throat like convulsions. She might have tried to draw her achol over them both. Maisha doesn't get to find out if she really was. She is pulled away. Maisha had grown too big to hide away now anyway.

Chapter 2

Sayeed's oldest memory is of running in a field. Like in a dream, he doesn't know where the field is or how he got there, only the vast expanse of land ahead of him. He recalls pushing himself off the ground with one foot, then catching his weight with the other, stepping in time with the rhythm that thrums through him, both arms outstretched like an aeroplane. The wet smell of trampled grass had risen up to meet him. He shrieked with primordial joy. As nervous a child as he used to be, the call of the great green plains and brightness of summer always brought him out of his shell. He loved to run, so run he did. He went around in circles, letting out the air from his lungs in small huffs, feeling every bit the wild free thing he never had been. Then there were footsteps. Someone caught up to him. Hands grabbed at his shoulders and Sayeed twisted himself in the air to get away. Only to fall.

Maisha landed with a sickening crunch and immediately cried out. She remembers lying there on the soft, damp soil and thinking perhaps the sobs were a bit of an overkill. But she had committed to waterworks now, and she couldn't stop if she tried. She was an infamous crier at that age. The littlest thing would set her off, and for hours saltwater would flow from her eyes and noses. *Wah, wah, wah*, her cousins used to tease her, fists at their cheeks and elbows seesawing. They said she couldn't play with them if she kept crying at every little thing. The doll from the big city, they called her. The little "mem", they spat with enough silky sweetness for the insult to cut. She was glad nobody was around to see her cry now. Most of the house had gone to see what the Member had bought for Qurbani. In retrospect, she can't imagine that her family would leave her completely alone. Someone must have been home. Help did come really fast once she let out a horrified second scream. The initial pain had transformed into white-hot and

searing, the second she realized the unnatural angle her left arm was in. It was the only bone she ever broke.

Sayed, too, had only suffered through a single fracture so far. In the hospital, his mother had tried to clutch him close as the doctor set his bone back. He spent more time cringing at the comfort of her embrace than he did lamenting the pain. He shook her off. Instead, gritted his teeth, dug his fingernails into his palms and focused on the scratchiness of the cheap cotton against his cheek. He was so ashamed of the involuntary tears. To this day, the sting of shame in his mind is more vivid than anything else.

The accident happened in a particularly intense football match. It was his neighborhood versus the government colony across the block. Sayeed's team walked up to the colony's bigger field with all the bravado one had to wear for a game on enemy turf. The colony boys greeted them with the expected jeers. The match started almost right away.

Sayed was technically a defender. But really he chased the ball with all his might no matter where it was. All the boys did, it is how football goes. Sayeed wanted to win desperately. At 13, he was the youngest one in the team. He had something to prove to himself. Maybe the rest of the boys did too. They played rougher than they might on a different evening. Ten minutes into the second half, someone's forceful kick landed on Sayeed's calf. A crack cut through the pounding in his ear, and Sayeed was nothing but pain. He went down, hard, too far gone to cut off the cry that tore through his throat. The match stopped. Parents were called. A ride to the hospital was arranged.

The burning embarrassment of ruining the game they have been preparing for so long flashed bright even through the agony. Sayeed hated himself then. He was trying so hard to fit in, to be a man, to be whatever the hell he was supposed to be. It seemed so easy and so obvious

back then. Yet he still kept failing. He tried and tried again. He didn't know what he was doing wrong.

Probably it was everything.

Maisha kept her head down, stopped blinking at first, then closed her eyes to keep the tears at bay. She wouldn't cry, she wouldn't. The girl standing next to her, the one who was holding her ears and whose ears she held in turn— she wasn't crying. But what did it matter? The humiliation had already sunk deep.

Maisha still wanted to believe that she wasn't like the other girl. This careless, stupid, foul excuse of a girl who would go to ruin. Everyone said she ought to be expelled. She couldn't afford to be like her. If they called her father, or even spoke of a TC, Maisha would die. She would throw herself out the window without hesitation. Why hadn't she copied the homework from someone during the tiffin period? Everyone else had.

Just this once, she bargained with herself. "It'll be fine," she waved off the songbird's offering of her yellow math copy. She wolfed down the cold roti and egg, put her head down on her forearms and closed her eyes. She doodled flowers on the forehead of the girls in her textbook during the period previous, yawning and trying to hide behind the back of her hand. She had time to do a few simple problems.

Her own stupidity and laziness that brought her here. Standing in the halls holding the ears of someone who everyone called rotten, letting the world know that rot had gotten to her too. She still feels the black of it in her roots. As though, her organs had shifted away to make room for the corruption. Her failures followed her around like hive wasps. Everyone saw how she ran from it, everyone noticed the ruin she already was. *Shame on her, shame on her.*

Humiliation branded her. She could feel it, always. Maisha began shrinking to make room for

that wound. She filled the empty spaces her vanishing parts left with parts she'd stolen from people better than her. Without her noticing, she grew spikes around herself in the form of sharp words, feigned indifference and cold sarcasm. Under layers, and layers of persona Maisha hid her shame.

But Sayeed's shame was different. It caught in his throat like a fishbone. He choked on it. He was gasping for breath, spluttering gracelessly, desperate for a bit of air. Nobody noticed. Or, maybe nobody cared. Maybe they ignored this indiscretion out of courtesy. He couldn't call for help around all this panic.

Sayeed's school friends, now at ease with their new deeper voice, started to enjoy their own bodies. They were growing taller, getting stronger. There was new mirth in their eyes. The girls were transformed too. Something was blooming in everyone. The boy-girl segregated friend groups started to give way, all while the lines between the sexes grew thicker. His neighborhood friends too were caught up in this change. They swapt pen drives and magazines while smoking secret cigarettes and saying the unspeakables aloud. The unspeakable inside Sayeed clung to him, coating his insides like grease in the kitchen. Adolescence stretched his essence thin as his body grew long-limbed and foreign.

It was probably just teenage angst, growing pain they called it. But Sayeed felt everything so deeply then. He was supposed to make sense of the world and he was failing. He wasn't *right*. He wasn't what he was supposed to be. Life sat on his stomach as a stone to digest. It was the impossible feat the priest asks of the heroes of myth to prove his devotion. Life kept crawling out like bile. Sayeed wanted to call out for help. But his shame, a talisman from his father, *Be a man, Sayeed, be a man, goddammit*, becomes the blockade that keeps the stone down until it melts from the acid of him.

His home was always so tidy and quiet. Sayeed's mother kept everything perfect. There was natural light flooding in from the windows. No buildings obstructed the fresh air. Warm food was served for every meal. The clothes laundered and ironed in time. Every weekend, they hosted someone for dinner. *What a perfect family*, everyone said, and his parents relaxed their shoulders. Their home was a place of trial. Was this what life was supposed to be? Vying for approval from people you loved and hated alike, again and again and again. His father and brother wordlessly showed him how he was supposed to be. Sayeed kept trying to understand if life was this difficult for them too. But he had no way of reaching them.

He wanted childhood again. He wanted his mother to keep every ghost at bay, wanted to climb onto his brother's shoulder and secretly try on his father's glasses. He didn't want to reckon with his own transformation, didn't want to look at the monstrosity of himself, the way his weaknesses mangled him. He would sleepwalk through life if it meant he wouldn't have to face the wrongness in his soul. So he didn't say a word.

If a tree falls in a forest, and there is nobody to hear it, then did it really make a sound? If there was something that wasn't quite right, but if it affected nobody but him, did it even matter? Sayeed's always been in the camp of no. Maisha never thought of falling trees and sound much. But she is doggedly contrarian. Stubborn like the tree was right until it felt. She says that the tree is always, always, always making a sound as long as it is in the atmosphere. As long as it sends vibrations through the air as it collapses, then by definition, it is making noise, there is sound. Sayeed concedes to her, ever pliable, ever agreeable, exactly what he was supposed to be. In a gesture of goodwill, Maisha admits, maybe the sound doesn't matter if nobody hears it.

The way Sayeed sees it, how something is perceived is more important than the actuality of it. It's how people work. If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it must be a duck.

So then, why should all the glitters not be gold? The truth looks no different from a good lie, and the best lie of all is that truth shines. We want the shiny, polished, neatly arranged world where all is clean and good even if it's a flimsy reality. Why tear it? Why dig your hands into the grime for something uglier? Maisha wants to disagree. But she knows this was an argument that would go nowhere. She knew how to recognize those well.

She had those for days and days with her mother. She hated the long hours at school, private tuitions and the coaching centers. The half an hour of tiffin break and the walk from one institute to the other was her only reprieve. The songbird and the photographer were constants beside her, like an angel on each shoulder, as larger groups rotated and shifted with the months. But even then, Maisha never craved anything more than to be at home. She always wanted to sit opposite her mother, a sketchbook on her lap, as her left hand danced through pointless teasing, ardent commiseration and time soured fights. Her mother pushed her to spend more time with young people. "Join an art class, no better yet the debate club. The way you could twist words until water is oil, God knows what I did to have a daughter who runs her mouth like this, and won't even use it with anyone other than me!" Maisha didn't know how her mother didn't understand that she couldn't bear to be seen. And if by some miracle, Maisha grew self-esteem overnight, still nothing would tear her from her mother's side.

Sayed was never a part of school activities either. Though his friends had often prodded him to join their school's basketball team because of his height. He told them he didn't have the time. Truth was, standing on their polished court made him feel like a traitor to the patch grass they called their football field. His friendship with the neighborhood boys had been wilting slowly. He barely had anything in common with them at that point. Loyalty to that patch of grass where they still gathered every other afternoon was the only thing that held him to them. It was

already beginning to disappear, half filled with bricks and sand for the construction work happening all around it. How much longer till it would be eaten whole? The new apartment complex that would stand in its place would have boys too, of course. New kids who will take over the tongs and the rooftops and maybe some other patch of land for themselves. Sayeed's group would migrate to wherever the boys they displaced once upon a time had moved on too.

Only, Sayeed would not be with them anymore. His family was about to move away to a different part of the city. It was closer to his school, and the school friends who were rapidly shedding the school suffix. Sayeed wasn't as sorry as he ought to be, like his older brother was. He already belonged more to the new neighborhood. The football field of theirs was the only thing he would miss. He fully heartedly believed he couldn't betray it. But Sayeed did anyway. He had stood on the painted concrete of a basketball court in the 9th grade and aimed for a metal hoop. He watched the ball hit the board and fall right where it was supposed to. He still didn't make the basketball team. He didn't go back to football after that either.

Maisha never had any fields. She went to the same school all her life, and the school had 10 feet of concrete in front of it in lieu of any glass. There was one in her college, but Maisha never felt any particular attachment to it. Though, she did miss it sourly in the gloried parking lot of her university passed as campus space. The grassy plains of her village used to hold some fond memories. But by the time she reached her teens, those became fenced up land with giant signs either declaring ownership or that the owner wanted to make a sale. By then, the new Imam forbade the women from sitting by the pond. So all she had was the shared, ever shrinking courtyard her three uncle's houses faced. What Maisha had were roofs. There was the barren bannisterless concrete of the Al amin road apartment, the split level one at Kalabagan, the locked

inaccessible one she had to sneak into at Elephant road, and other rooftop spaces she could barely remember.

Sayed remembers the little rooftop garden on the roof of Maisha's home. Her father's home now, but shhh, he doesn't understand he's taken the bride away. Let's indulge him, shall we? Maisha took him up for some privacy on the day his family went there for a bride-viewing. They sat down between two planter pots of rose bushes, right on the near-burning concrete. Their backs were resting on the half-wall banister. Both kept their eyes trained straight ahead. Sayeed was so aware of every inch between their bodies. He wonders why he took her there.

Maisha laughs, says, "There was nowhere to go aside from the roof."

Sayed laughs too, but doesn't change his mind. He was inexplicably endeared to her there. He basked in the afternoon sun with her and his sodden heart grew bloated with new feelings he did not want to name.

He always thought of himself as a pragmatist. He didn't believe in love at first sight or silly things like that. So he called it intrigue, called it a crush, called it everything but the thing he wanted to call it the most. So he kept his eyes forward. He fixated on the birds flying home. He talked about the discomfort of meeting a stranger to marry. He cataloged, from the corner of his eye, every time she stole a glance. He lamented the jokes that fell flat and celebrated the ones that made her laugh. Sayeed did everything but look at Maisha to confirm if she felt what he felt too?

His old friends used to talk about love all the time. As did the ones he met abroad. Or, maybe they talked about desire. Sayeed could never tell the difference, except he knew Bengali love wasn't the same as the American one. He couldn't pinpoint the differences exactly. Was it the physicality? The commitment? Or, was it something more abstract? Or, something even

deeper, as though, the land he was born in still dictated the way he would love no matter how far he went. Roots, they call it. To him, it felt more like chains. He was lonely, always lonely. In the great American midwest, his loneliness made him feel at home. It was a coat he could pull closer, or hang it loose from his shoulders, let it fan out as far as it would stretch. The endless parking lots and acres of unoccupied land left room for the enormity of it. In crowded Dhaka, his loneliness congealed around him, weighing down the very air, suffocating him. Love, whatever it's build or make or nationality, eluded him everywhere. It was just him and himself. He never believed he could reach someone through the haze of his lonesome. But, in one sun-bathed afternoon, Sayeed began to hope. For the first time in his life, he was happy to be where he was.

Next to him, Maisha's insides were luminous with the joy of saying hello to a beautiful boy, and the hope that she might not have to say goodbye. Everybody goes, one way or the other. She had always known this. She was only beginning to understand what it meant to be left with a person-shaped emptiness for the loss to ricochet. The worst of it was when the space shrunk, and the hurt didn't. Still there were more people to love, more people to greet and more people to let go of. Make room in yourself, and then board it up brick by brick.

When Sayeed stood up, and offered her his hand, his shadow stretched tall beyond her, Maisha chose him.

The first boy Maisha loved never learned how she felt. She watched him from the backseat of the coaching center classroom, jostling around with the other boys, talking about ideas too big to fit in that sweltering space. It was a silly little crush. He'd never even looked at her twice. But Maisha's heart still broke when he started dating a prettier girl from their very coaching center. The white-hot sting of jealousy only added to her desire. But there was peace in the solid knowledge that she would never act. She could pine away from afar, imagining herself

a tragic heroine, content with the pureness of her own affection. Even in fantasies, love returned could not be as sweet as love unrequited. Her many crushes—each an infinitesimal love of her life, a short-lived possibility of a soulmate—since her first boy have all conflated into one by the waters of time. Like old gum, sometimes when Maisha chews on this faded memory, it lets out new bursts of sweetness.

The second boy Maisha loved was a tabla player with callouses on the side of his fingers. The first time they were alone together, he had brought Maisha's hand to them, and asked her to feel the roughness. He joked about lighting matches with his fingers, about the magic of a beat, the rhythm of the universe thundering through the dayan and baya into people. He was the picture of devotion, and artistry with unabashed snobbery. She was hopelessly charmed. The tabla-player introduced music to her fantasies, and unlike every other boy in the world, he looked at her twice. Then a third, a fourth, like she was someone worth seeing, a fifth and then she stopped counting, too busy trying to look back.

In most ways, the tabla player was the perfect inverse of Sayeed. The tabla-player's brown skin was constantly a shade darker from the sun. His shoulder length hair curled up when he didn't tie it up. He was loud and abrasive, proud and boastful. Every bit the local delinquent as he was the passionate artist. He dressed carelessly most of the time, stubbly cheeks and wrinkled shirts and tattered jeans, except when he had booked a show. Then, he would don crisp shirts and solid color punjabis, shave properly everyday and ask Maisha if he should cut his hair at least once each day. He was only happy when he had a show coming.

Sayeed is fair. His short-cropped hair lays flat against his skull. He is tall, but built and handsome in all the conventional ways. He's kind, polite and well-mannered. It's difficult to call Sayeed quiet, but he never takes up too much space in the conversation and listens more intently

than most. He dresses exactly how a respectable boy is supposed to. He never brags, or maybe he hasn't begun yet. But as far as Maisha could tell, they were of two separate worlds. That's probably why Maisha hoped Sayeed could be the third, and last love of her life.

The thing with the tabla-player was brilliant and beautiful. Like fireworks, it painted the dark with colors, and deafened Maisha to everything but the two of them. He was looking at her, and she at him. This was love requited at last, the last few beats played on the dayan before the baya finished the song so the fated lovers could be happy beyond the story. Maisha felt breathless anticipation, her heart picked up the rhythm and she kept looking at him. He looked back. He never once looked away.

The song ended still. The fireworks went out. The noise of the world rushed in to drown them out. Maisha and her lover kept holding each other's gaze. But when she reached for him through the dark, all she found was smoke. She had eyes only for him, but she had never seen him at all. Love requited was disappointing after all. For all the wonders it brought, it hurt in all the wrong ways. The noise of the real world drowned love out too easily. He wanted to make music his life, chased animal joys with reckless abandon, scoffed at the thought of ever settling down. He was a kite without a tether, and he would see the world. Maisha couldn't fly with him. She wouldn't even if she could. Her feet have always been firmly on the ground. She needed enough money to keep up with her parent's debts. Corporate slavery wouldn't be her first choice, but what else was she meant to do? Work would be just work, means to an end. She could save up. After the debts are paid, she's made sure her parents are taken care of, she could buy an apartment for herself. Realistically, it would take a while, and it'd still probably have to be small. But she would fill it with children and friends and family until it was home. She watched how easily dreams spoil, and so she accepted God stamped "pragmatist" on her forehead.

Sayed looked at Maisha too. But he was someone she could touch in ways she never could anyone else. He loved her first, she could tell. They met every weekend for a month after their first meeting at the bride-viewing before deciding to finalize the engagement. They continued to talk everyday for the 6 months their families decided to take to arrange the wedding too. He fell for her with no reservations, took care to never hide his feelings for her, and patiently waited for her to do the same. He held her hand, graciously kissed her cheek and moved away if she turned her head when he leaned in, didn't push when she finally did press her lips to his. Sayeed never said he loved her, never asked her to make her feelings explicit. She was happy it would be him. He was Mr. Right, the kind, down-to-earth, gentle lover—the second lead who the heroine always left for the man who would inevitably hurt her, the kind of man Maisha always wanted to want. So it would be him. He would be the third and last love of her life. Love wasn't a choice, but she chose him anyway. His hand in hers was the beginning of the right kind of forever. Lying so close to him now, tracing the lines in his palm with her finger, while they traded stories from before, Maisha knew whatever the fate of their marriage was, it would be something she cherished.

It is their wedding night, or perhaps the early morning of the day-after. There aren't any clocks on Sayeed's-no,their bedroom wall. Only the usual cliché of rose, tubestick and marigold garlands hiding the fresh coat of beige paint. Sayeed and Maisha retired here sometime after 1am, though Maisha saw to her suitcase being deposited here before evening. But then she joined Sayeed in the living room and spoke to her new relatives. It was no hardship indulging in the cheer of the event well passed. But when they finally bade everyone goodnight to hollars of teasing and crude jokes, both of them were exhausted.

It took Maisha a long time to undress. She started the process early. First, she submitted the gold jewelry to her mother-in-law's care despite the token protests. Then, she enlisted Bhabi and a distant cousin to free her hair from the elaborate updo. She wore the saree as long as possible, of course. It was the uniform that marked her as the new bride. But Bhabi was an observant woman. She drew Maisha aside and got rid of the pins poking into skin without her having to ask. She winked at Maisha, and launched into a story about her own wedding saree. In the bathroom, Maisha dabbed numerous cotton balls soaked in oil to get the makeup off her skin. The cold water of the shower made her body let go. It was strange to emerge in an old tee-shirt and pajamas in her new bedroom, strange to see Sayeed in old sleep clothes too. It was stranger still to sweep away the rose petal heart someone created in the middle of the bed. Sayeed laughed good naturedly about the awkwardness of it all. They climbed into the bed together, both tired but sleepless. So they started telling stories with an honesty they can only offer each other.

There is something too intimate about lying in the soupy dark with someone you promised your whole life to. Having Sayeed is something too big. Maisha can't bear the thought of him looking like the same man she met half a year ago. So she lets his voice wash over her, and focuses her gaze at the open palm he lays between them. She traces the lines of his hands with her finger, her bitten off nail catching on the creases. His palm is softer than hers, paler with no calluses.

"Are you interested in palmistry?" He asks in the same voice he confessed his loneliness in.

"Not really."

"I had a friend read my fate once, in high school, then an actual fortune teller at an American fair."

Maisha stills her finger, "Did what they said match up?"

"No." Sayeed admits. "Both did claim my destiny wasn't set in stone though."

"That's such a safe answer." She leans in to whisper conspiratorially, "The exact kind a fraud might give."

Grinning, Sayeed brings the hand Maisha isn't touching up to ruffle her hair. Her child-like giggle at the gesture dissolves the tension in the room like sugar in water. She makes a half-hearted attempt at pushing him off. Ultimately they settle having scooted closer, Sayeed's fingers gently running through the tangles of Maisha's hair.

"Yeah, you're probably right," Sayeed concedes, "I don't really believe in this stuff. It's just good fun."

Maisha hums in response, "I wouldn't say I don't believe in it, I suppose,"

"Hmm, what is the 'it', in question here?"

"Don't laugh at me." Maisha leans closer.

"Never, dearest," Sayeed promises solemnly.

"I don't know," Maisha hesitates for a second, "I'm a bit of a determinist. Part of it is sort of religious, but not fully. It's like, the future is set in stone by the past and present. Because what happened to me and what I did controls my present, so my future will also be controlled by right now. So the future is not infinite possibility, it's infinite consequences. Like dominos, the first one fell, so the rest will too. You get what I mean?"

"Yeah, probably. But I think there's still free will. I mean you can always make a decision in the present, you know? There are different ways to respond to what is out of our hands. The same action can have different results. We can't be sure, of course, but we can change." Sayeed retracts his hand to gesture vaguely.

“But do you even think free will is possible though? Like, every decision I make is half dictated by my brain chemistry and half by my experiences. I *can't* make any decisions at all. My range is limited by all that. Then, what I choose is also pre-determined, isn't it?”

Sayed doesn't answer right away, and embarrassment creeps up Maisha's neck. She didn't mean to get so passionate. She doesn't get a chance to stew for long. Sayeed says, carefully, sounding out each word with gravitas,

“But, we are the amalgamation of our brain chemistry and experiences. Freedom from that would be freedom from existence, wouldn't it?”

Maisha startles for a second, before she gives in with a laugh, “Yeah, I guess.”

Sayed laughs too, says, “I have to admit your kind of free appeals to me.”

“No,” Maisha scoots close enough to hide her face in Sayeed's shoulder, “I don't want to be free.”

“You don't?” He begins to stroke her hair again.

“Not at all. Freedom, all kinds of freedom I mean, not just the freedom from existence kind— it terrifies me. It's like free fall. I would rather submit to fate, thank you very much.”

Sayed indulges, “Fate, really?”

“Fate.” Maisha confirms.

“I think I will resist, if you don't mind.” He continues after the said wife makes an interested noise. “It's mostly out of feeling. I reject determinism because I want to be contrary to fate and be as free as, nay, be free *through* my brain chemistry and experiences. There is nothing that is supposed to happen anymore and everything will be as we make it.”

“As my lord husband says, so it shall be!” Maisha says, playful and sarcastic.

“Indeed. Do you know why, my lady love?” Sayeed pulls Maisha into his arms, “Because, we got married today, and began our happily ever after. Fate is done with us. Our only destiny is happiness.”

“As you say, husband.”

“No, really. I’ll prove it to you, right now.”

“Mhmm,” Maisha hums.

“You’ve got to believe me! Okay, so, indulge me in my superstitions here, okay?” Maisha hums ascent. “Both fortune tellers agreed on one thing about my life. They said that I would die in the city I was born in, and spend most of my life here. Let’s prove them both wrong. Let’s leave.”

Maisha stiffens, a sudden chill goes down her spine. She looks up at him with rounded eyes.

“Sayeed, you don’t mean that.”

“But I do.” Sayeed sits up, and Maisha hesitantly follows suit, “I’m really not kidding.” His voice remains earnest. “Listen, I got an offer. A friend from university is offering me a position in his start-up in San-francisco. It’s still a small company, but they have investors. The salary they’re offering me, Maisha, it’s insane. Maybe not by silicon valley standard but in taka, it’s-well, it’s a fortune. You could go back to university, get that second masters? Or, I don’t know. You could really do just about anything.”

“Sayeed, please. It’s... It’s not that easy for me. My family, my whole life....they’re all here.

You can’t spring this on me like this.”

“I’m sorry. I know this is a lot...” Sayeed takes her hands in his own, “I got the offer the day before yesterday. I don’t have to answer yet. Zi Han said he’ll hold the position open for as long as I need to decide. Just, please, think about it?”

Maisha nods mutely. Sayeed reaches out and fits his palm against her jaw.

The electricity goes out. There is perfect blackness for a few seconds. Outside their window, a security guard somewhere blows his whistle, the sharp sound cuts through the silence. Almost in retaliation, the rabid dogs of the neighborhood take up their barking again. There is a deep groan of machinery, and then the familiar buzz of the generator starts up too. The fan in their room makes a noise of its own as it starts to spin again, slow at first then it picks up speed. Another wheeze as the generator of the neighboring building starts, and the light from the apartment next to them filters into the room, making the darkness thin out. Maisha puts her own hand over Sayeed's, and wonders when she can pull away.

Chapter 3

Two weeks after the wedding, once again, a Wednesday arrives. It is one of the last ones of that period of early summer we call spring. The sun shines accordingly. The sky is a bright, merciless blue. It's that time of the day when the respectable sort begin to wake up. We rise with them, even though we never really are asleep. Sleep doesn't become us. Cities, by nature, are too loud and too alive to ever leave room for undeterred rest. So, we stay awake with all the insomniacs, the elderly who pray all night and the sickly who can't call on sleep to ease pain. We are up with all the night nurses and truck drivers, the thieves, muggers and hijackers, the terrified women waiting to open the door for their husbands and the ladies of the night who wave away their terror like a bad smell. We yawn with the weary rickshaw-pullers, CNG and Uber drivers who wait near bus stops and train stations and *Shadar Ghat*, and all the anxious students with exams and assignments coming up. When they finally go to dream, we are still awake as market men waiting to make inventory of the shipments and as exhausted van-pullers speeding through roads where they're not allowed. We become the city corporation workers, wearing tattered clothes under plastic yellow vests, tasked with the sisyphian task of cleaning a city. Then of course, we are awake as the day-dwellers too. How can we ever sleep as they flood the streets with a different vibrancy? Schools, offices, courts and markets all pant with the exertion of bodies. We must breathe with it all. We must see with all the eyes that are wide open and match our pulse to theirs. Awake as we always are, we still indulge in dreams. What is a city, what is a life, what is a story without its dreams? Dhaka dreams in carmine and azure and ultraviolet and yellow like puss and green like rot. Dhaka dreams in white noise and high pitched shrills and off key songs. Dhaka dreams in a miasma of hypocrisy and desolation, unending wrath and forlorn

commiseration. Dhaka dreams through stories it's been told, other people's stories set in other places and in other times, while our own story shrivels and decomposes under our tongues.

In his bed, Sayeed sleeps and dreams. Hidden safely under closed eyelids, he wants, he wishes, he desires and a black cat meows in front of a woman wrapped in white. Bees swarm a rotten tree. A crow caws, thrice in a row and a pigeon flies by a window. *This is a dream*, Sayeed tells himself, and he startles himself with his own lucidity.

Sayeed opens his eyes with a gasp and gropes for his phone. It is 7:12 am, a good 18 minutes before his alarm. Sayeed relaxes his shoulders and shifts onto his side. Maisha is snoozing away next to him. A pang of envy shoots through him. She sleeps so peacefully. All the intentionality with which she holds herself is let loose, and she lies as carelessly as a doll discarded. He contemplates closing his eyes and mimicking her until his phone plays that shrill tune signaling the alarm. But he decides against it. He sits up as quietly as he can and makes his way towards the bathroom.

A dull ache starts to build up behind Sayeed's temple in time with the inescapable high-pitched bell of rickshaws and pointlessly insistent car horns. The water from the showerhead is too warm to provide any relief. Sayeed longs for silence, and a cool, dark room. But he has office today and he knows exactly what is to come. He will make his way into the office, and fit himself into his cubicle. He will greet his coworkers and have the pion bring him tea. He will rub at his aching temples, look at emails and idly go through spreadsheets until he is given a new assignment at the meeting at noon. He will smoke with his coworkers, and he will try desperately to hide his ineptitude at this mundane vice. He will eat his lunch at the depressing canteen surrounded by equally depressing people. He will do his assignments, browse facebook when he's bored, have more tea, and listen to his companions drawl on about their ordinary lives. He

will glance at the clock countless times and pray for the day to end faster. He abandoned all hope of being happy about his work when he entered the job market as an IT coordinator.

After he's made himself presentable, Sayeed decides he needs caffeine to face the day. He heads to the kitchen to put on the kettle. He finds his mother already there.

"You're up already, baba?" His mother's voice is soft with affection. Sayeed's tense shoulders fall, unexpectedly disarmed. "Did you sleep well?"

"Uh, not really," he admits, "I don't really know why."

"It's those mobile screens. Both you and your brother, really. You're full grown men now, still glued to phones like children." She chides, as she uses the achol of her saree to move the still steaming pot of rice.

"Mmhhh, you're probably right."

"Now, tell me, what are you doing in the kitchen? Are you hungry? Shall I make something for you?"

"Na, Ma, it's fine. You need to get going, you'll be late."

"I don't have any first period classes on Wednesdays. The head teacher doesn't mind if I come in a little late. Are eggs with roti alright? Or, do you want some of the chicken curry I made for lunch? There's enough, if you don't mind repeating the dish."

"Ma, you really don't have to. I can feed myself..."

"No, no, it's fine. I already have the rotis in the hotpot on the dining table. I can quickly fry an egg."

"I can fry eggs," he continues his protest weakly. "You can make your own breakfast when I'm dead." She says with finality. "Go sit down. Let me take care of my son once in a while," Like

she isn't constantly taking care of the whole family, like she hasn't been making breakfast, lunch and dinner everyday for the last 30 years.

Tinged with guilt, Sayeed steps back into the dining room without bringing up tea. He will make some after his mother leaves. Having her fix him a cup feels like too much. He decides he will buy something for his mother on his way back. Maybe some murali if the cart is around, fuchka or chotpoti if it isn't. Could he get her one of those necklaces the street kids are always peddling? Did his mother like jasmine? Sayeed can't remember.

The rest of the family starts waking up in the next few minutes. His mother rushes out after handing him his plate. The bua arrives, and marches into the kitchen to begin the clatter of the day's washing. Sayeed's father puts on the morning news as soon as he leaves his bedroom. He leaves it on, as he looks through the newspaper, diligent and eager, as though the world might have changed in the few hours he was asleep. Food is almost an afterthought for him. Sayeed makes a valiant attempt to make his own tea, but ultimately isn't allowed near the kitchen. Maisha shoos him away and hands him a cup of steaming ginger tea after a few minutes. He idly chats with her, Bhaiya and Bhabi, as the women box up the lunch his mother cooked.

Sayeed is out the door at 9:49. His office isn't far. But he takes a rickshaw anyway, like he does everyday. The almost forgotten headache rushes back in as the sound and stench of Dhaka assaults his senses. The makeshift fish market near the end of his alley holds up the traffic. The men and women are too busy haggling to leave room for transportation. Even as the throbbing continues to grow and precipitation builds up at the back of his neck, Sayeed relishes the delay. He really doesn't want to go to work.

As the crowd clears up, Sayeed notices a dead parrot in the bend of the alley. It probably shocked itself trying to sit on one of the tangled electric lines and fell to its death. The poor

creature is already part of the filth of the alley, its spilled guts painting its radius, the dirt of the city already sucking in the red of its blood and coating its green feathers gray with dust. A single crow pecks it, and the rest of the people on the street pay it no mind. Sayeed turns his head away as soon as he can. But it's too late. The image of the carcass latches on to him as tightly as any other ghost.

The day goes on as it ought to. But the bird's gory body keeps flashing before his eyes. Sayeed keeps wondering who will clean up the carcass, whether it will still be there when he makes his way back. When he finally does return home, predictably, the thought of getting a gift for his mother is gone so thoroughly that it doesn't even leave behind any regret. Sayeed is only relieved that the parrot is gone too.

Bhabi's chatter fills up the room as they sit down to eat. Bhaiya chirps in occasionally. He's in a good mood from seeing some old friends that evening. His obvious cheer makes all the concern their mother was holding back bleed out of her. She's never been able to hide who her favorite son is, but Sayeed doesn't begrudge her that. His brother holds the family together in more ways than one. His gloom for the past few days put the whole house off-balance. It's good to see him come back to himself. Even Sayeed's father wears a ghost of a smile.

Sitting at the table for the last meal of the day is a new thing for them, something Maisha brought with her. Sayeed didn't expect this dinner together thing to last. But it has been for the last 3 weeks. He appreciates Maisha's insistence on this tradition. As if sensing Sayeed was thinking of her, Maisha turns to look at him. She tilts her head towards his father before straightening quickly, a subtle nudge at him. Sayeed nods, and then braces himself. He waits for

Bhabi to finish teasing her husband, then says, "Baba, everyone, I had something important to discuss."

Sayeed's father looks straight at him for just a second. He gestures for him to continue, and returns his focus to his plate.

"What is it, Baba?" His mother asks.

"I got an offer for a job. It's a good one. Production manager for a new startup. It's uh, the company is near San Francisco."

Everyone stills, and the table falls silent. But Sayeed is only looking at his father, his father who keeps his eyes trained on his food as he shifts it about the plate. A chill rises in him from the pits of his belly. Sayeed is so cold he could almost shiver. He feels Maisha's feet come up to rest against the side of his from across the table and accepts the comfort as what it is.

"In America." He tacks on, dumbly.

"In America..." his mother repeats.

"What kind of startup?" Sayeed's brother asks, after swallowing around his bite of food.

"It's," Sayeed wets his lips, "a studio, for optimizing game engines."

"You sure it'll stay afloat?"

"Yeah, almost definitely. It's new but uh, we're not the ones making any products of our own, basically. Bigger companies outsource work to us. Let us do all the transitional stuff and smaller mechanics. They already have a few big clients lined up. Jim, the CFO, he's a friend from uni, he knows people."

"That's... good."

"It sounds exciting," Bhabi agrees, "Still it's a big move..."

"America," Sayeed's mother says as though reminding them.

"...How does it compare to your current job, Sayeed? You're making good money here, aren't you?"

Sayeed nods again, still looking at his father, who busies himself with food as though nothing happened. "My current job's a deadend," He points out, "The project will end in a year or two and where does that leave me? Besides, it's not like I'm actually using my degree here. They have me managing clients and making spreadsheets of all things."

"But he hasn't decided to take the job yet," Maisha adds.

"You knew about this?" Sayeed's mother's accusation is more hurt than angry.

"He told me a while ago," Maisha answers guiltily, her apology clear in her face, "Like we said, we haven't decided anything! We wouldn't decide anything without involving you!"

"They approached me unofficially two days before the wedding. I wanted the offer on paper before I said anything."

"We wouldn't, *Sayeed* wouldn't make any decisions without your input." Maisha repeats.

Bhabi touches Maisha's shoulder, "No, of course! We know that, don't we, Ma?"

His mother stays silent and starts filling up the empty water glasses on the table.

"What do you think, Baba?" Sayeed asks, somewhat desperately.

His father looks up from the food again, but doesn't meet Sayeed's eye. He chews carefully, swallows and reaches for his glass. He drinks slowly too, in careful gulps, even as the whole family looks on at him.

"You're a grown man now," He says, finally, nodding at Maisha, as though she was the last ingredient for Sayeed to become an adult. Sayeed grits his teeth. "You will make your own decisions. What is there for me to say?"

“But America’s so far...” Sayeed’s mother mumbles.

“Go.” We tell him when he dreams, “Our duty is done. You are shaped in our image, and our image you shall carry upon your shoulder across the proverbial 7 seas and 13 rivers. You have released us from our responsibility to you, and we are burdened no more. So go. Go where your heart pleases you. But remember you are in our debt. Remember, you are not yet released. Remember.”

He turns over to dream a different dream.

Chapter 4

Maisha feels sweat drip down the underside of her chin. It's March. But everything is already still, suffocatingly thick and sticky with the combination of humidity and heat. Bhabi uses the coaching center fan someone handed her to fan them both. It does little with them being stuck among the throng of bodies of the traffic. The rickshaw driver keeps craning his neck impatiently, hoping to spot some movement up ahead. That too is futile, the schools have only let up and jammed the area for half an hour at least. Misery and impatience radiates from every direction.

"Should have left earlier," Maisha mutters as she wipes at her chin with her orna. *Like I told you*, she bites back.

"It's been a while since I've been in the area, I forgot about the schools," Bhabi admits, sheepish with guilt.

"I miss winter already." Maisha answers, to avoid accepting the apology.

"Yeah...My face is probably already melting off. There wasn't any point in wasting so much time with the makeup after all."

Maisha wants to hold on to her annoyance, but Bhabi's sorry demeanor also grates on her nerves.

"Aree, stop please," She says sharply, and then softens remembering her manners, "I'm just going to visit my mother. It's not like I'm about to miss the train."

"Still, you've only moved away... You must miss her very much. I'd want every extra second with her, if I were you. I really do feel bad."

"It hasn't been that long..."

“It must be difficult, trusting other people to look after your mother, when you’ve been doing it yourself for so long.” Bhabi continues. Her shoulder knocks into Maisha’s when the rickshaw finally starts moving again. She lets out a sigh, “Oh, finally!”

“We’re past the worst of it once we take the turn.”

“Good, good. It’s so hot, I need a shower already.”

“Me too,” Maisha agrees.

“So, how are you coping with being away?” Bhabi prods again.

“I’m not, really. I’m holding my breath all the time. I have this horrible feeling that something awful is about to happen.”

“It’s perfectly normal to be anxious.”

“It doesn’t feel like anxiety,” Maisha lets out a bitter laugh, “It feels like an omen.”

“Doesn’t it always? I’m sure aunty is doing fine.”

Maisha nods, “I hope so. I keep calling her when everyone leaves the house. I think last week I made her stay on video until someone came back home. She was so annoyed with me.”

Bhabi’s laughter is high pitched. “Your mother is such a spirited woman. Has she always been this sick?”

“Yes, at first nobody could figure out what was wrong with her. They were still telling us it’s psychosomatic or that Ma might be making this up until she lost her voice after a stroke when I was 8.”

“My god, that’s horrible! If only this country was different, you could have sued!”

“We considered taking her abroad. But we didn’t quite afford it. Before we knew it, she started needing a cane at first, then leg braces, eventually she couldn’t stand at all anymore. The doctor’s finally diagnosed Ehlers–Danlos.”

“Was it just the three of you? Nobody else to help?”

“We always had household helpers, and Ma insisted she didn’t need a nurse. We got Chompa when I started university. Khalamoni moved in before the wedding. But I’ve never been away for more than a—” Maisha is cut off as the rickshaw ahead of them stops hard and suddenly, making the front wheel of their rickshaw crash into its backboard. Both the drivers unmount and dissent into an argument that is more outlet for frustration than anything else. Bhabi feebly starts calling out to the drivers in an attempt to dissuade a fight.

“What were you saying?” Bhabi asks once she managed to persuade the drivers to get back on their own rickshaws.

“Oh, nothing. It’s only that I haven’t been away for so long before.”

Since that conversation on Wednesday night, the house felt thick with tension. Maisha didn’t want to bring up visiting her home and making her mother-in-law upset. It wasn’t even that she would be upset with Maisha. She did nothing wrong, and it was clear Sayeed’s family agreed. But that didn’t stop her mother-in-law making a few passive aggressive quips. But those, Maisha didn’t take to heart. She could see how distraught Sayeed’s mother was. She was fraying at the edges but resigned. As though, like everyone else, she knew this was going to happen.

Because this is how the story goes. You raise a son with all your love, and he doesn’t think of you when he dreams of a better life. He goes off to foreign lands, where he takes nothing but his shiny new wife. *He’ll take her, he’ll take her away, the lover will take the bride away.*

“How will you manage when you guys leave for America?”

“It’s not guaranteed we’ll go,” Maisha’s protest sounds weak to even her own ear. “I have a say in this too and I don’t think going is a good idea.”

Bhabi made a sympathetic noise, like she was humoring Maisha. Rage flares in her, before despair sets in. She can't pretend to have much of a choice either. Sayeed thought she did. He wanted her to have a say in this decision. Even though he wanted nothing more than to go, he still hadn't accepted the offer. He promised she could take her time, that he would listen. He did listen when she made her arguments. How could she leave her whole life that was here? How could she leave her family and friends? Her mother? How could Maisha ever go that far when 5 days away makes her sick with worry?

Sayeed didn't counter her with cheap logic of his own. Quietly, he kept forwarding her websites with pictures of pastel colored houses and grand museums, fliers of all the events and opportunities, the graduate and postgraduate programs in universities near San Francisco. Sayeed wordlessly acknowledged leaving would be a sacrifice, but he asked her to make it anyway. He pleaded with her through promises of a life like in the movies. Sayeed would never force her into following him. But he didn't have to be.

Nobody else thought the decision was Maisha's. Everyone took it for granted that she would go where Sayeed went. Even Sayeed never spoke of what he would do if she didn't go. Would he stay here for her? She had no sweet tales to spin about what life would be like here. They both knew exactly what life in this infernal city would be like.

It would be terrible traffic and gray smog and overpriced restaurants and over-crowded festivals. Bodies upon bodies roam these streets and they would be just as anonymous as any of them. It would be the same old museums with the exhibitions that were never updated. It would be plays that go empty and art showcases where people went for selfies. Corruption and pollution would seep into every dream either of them might have, until every ambition becomes means to

an end. An end which Sayeed didn't want and to which Maisha submitted years ago. She can be content being a cog in the machine, as long as she can go home to her people.

And Maisha's people are here. Her flawed family and her tiny friend group made everything worth it. The traffic and smog and heat and misery was only footnotes in days to be filled by the ones Maisha cared for. She has the luxury of loved ones who have been jewels in the delicate tangle of her life for years and years. For all the comfort and meaning life in that foreign land Sayeed offers her, he can't give her people. He couldn't give her the history she built up. Maisha isn't a verbose person. She doesn't welcome new people easily. And if she did, how would she ever when leaving would strip language from her too? How could she ever live somewhere where her words, the building blocks of her life, became translations? Could those reshaped noises ever communicate meaning without the broken maze of her city to filter through?

But even more than that, Maisha's mother. Her *sick* mother, who was getting older by the minute. How can Maisha leave her alone, to be buried by someone else?

Maisha is still lost in thought when Bhabi stops the rickshaw at the mouth of the narrow alleyway to drop her off. She is jostled back to reality by the soft squeeze Bhabi's fingers on her forearm. Maisha hops down from the rickshaw, and makes her way towards the gate of the building. Bhabi makes the rickshaw wait until Maisha enters the depths of the apartment complex, despite holding up foot traffic.

Inside, Maisha's aunt opens the door with a grin. She is herded to the master bedroom where her mother works at her sewing machine. Chompa sits at the foot of the bed with her earphones in and bowed over her smartphone. She greets Maisha, and goes back to smiling ear to ear at the contents of her screen.

“Ma,” Maisha calls out to grab her attention, and drops her bags to free her hands.

“Maisha, come see if this stitching looks crooked.” Her mother beckons, fingers and palms all coming alive to speak her words.

“Make Khalamoni check,”

“Oh, I already checked it twice over,” Khalamoni says aloud, “Apa still took out the stitches and started over.”

“They were crooked, and you didn’t tell me. I know you saw it wasn’t straight, even Maisha’s father could tell.” Ma puts as much exasperation on her face as possible.

“Sign slower, Apa, I’m not as used to this as you. Maisha, mamoni, please tell your mother the stitches are fine so she can stop—” Khala signs the last word for emphasis, “—*nagging*.”

Ma only glares. She spells out a rude word at speed her sister wouldn’t be able to catch.

“Hag,” Khalamoni mutters under her breath, not needing to recognize the gestures to understand the insult.

“Will you two ever stop bickering? Your only daughter comes to you, and you’re still fighting over stitching.”

“You keep calling so often that I didn’t realize you weren’t here.” Ma is dismissive, “Besides, I’m making this for your mother-in-law, you should take a look anyway.”

“Later, Ma,” Maisha takes in a deep breath, “Where is Baba?”

“At the bazaar. He should be back soon.”

“Okay, show me what you’re doing then. Once Baba gets here, I have something important to discuss.”

She explains the situation to her family after lunch. They sit in the drawing room. Her father on the arm chair, her mother parked beside him. Her aunt sits beside her on the couch. It doesn't take long.

“Oh.” Her father says, after a long, long silence.

“This is good news, isn't it?” Khalamoni asks, “You will have so many opportunities!”

“It's still not for sure we're going. Sayeed hasn't taken the job yet.”

“But you will go, won't you? This is the kind of offer everyone waits for.”

“Ma, Baba, won't you say something?”

Her father swallows around nothing. He reaches up to adjust his glasses, an old nervous tick. Maisha's skin crawls. “I can't say this is unexpected, Ma. Our jamai did stay in the US for 5 years. People who stay abroad that long usually go back.”

“But you didn't say anything to me! I didn't—I don't...” Maisha takes a deep breath to steady her voice. “What if. What if I don't go with him? I know this is a big deal and he has to take this up. But *I don't*. There's nothing for me there. I can stay.”

“My dear,” Her aunt takes her hand, “You can't let your husband go alone.”

“You did!” Maisha lashes out. Ma slaps her thigh. But she doesn't need to look to see the demand for an apology.

But Khalamoni is equally vicious, her eyes flash with fury. “And look at me now! Left alone here like a mistress he's ashamed of while he raises children with other women.” She softens with hurt, and lets out a watery sigh, “Allah didn't see fit to give me happiness in this life. I already accepted this. But, mamoni, I couldn't love you more if you were my own daughter. Your life isn't going to be like mine. I was a nobody compared to my husband. You aren't. Sayeed and you can be on equal footing. Go with him. Make something of yourself.”

“I am something already! I don’t need to fit myself into his—”

“So what are you going to do?” Baba interrupts, “Divorce him? Because he’s offering you a better life?”

“How do you even know if it’s better? It’s good right here. It’s good when I’m with you!”

Maisha’s mother claps again, trying to get Maisha to look at her. But she throws her head back and closes her eyes firmly. She doesn’t want to hear what her mother has to say. She wants nothing but to shrink and climb into her lap again, back under the veil of her orna, and press herself close to her mother’s body. She wants a tomorrow in the shape of all her yesterdays.

“Mamoni,” Baba says softly, “Be realistic.”

“Look at your mother, dear. She’s been trying to speak to you.” Khamoni says.

Maisha keeps her eyes closed. She doesn’t have it in her to listen to what her mother has to say. To look at her face, stony like it always is when she’s trying to hide her vulnerability, to see that expression she wears when she’s trying to be strong, it would break Maisha. It would crumble the picture of the future she’s been holding on to for her life. If a tree falls in a forest, and nobody hears the sound, it may as well have not made a sound at all.

“Maisha,” Her father lends his voice to her mother, and speaks the words into existence anyway. “Maisha, we won’t be here forever. You need to think of yourself. Think about your own dreams.”

“What dreams?” Maisha wants to ask. She doesn’t. Despite her best efforts, the tears slip from her screwed shut lids anyway.

“Stay,” she hears, “Stay, stay, stay, stay. We cannot go on without you. You are lost without us. So stay.” But she is just one person. We’re many. She doesn’t understand what she hears is not what we say.

Chapter 5

The tense atmosphere is gone by the time Sayeed joins them after work. They have dinner together, her mother ecstatic at having an appreciative guest to feed. A little after that, Maisha secures the plastic box full of beef curry they are to take home in a polythene bag as Sayeed ties his shoes in the drawing room. His ears are still hot from attempting to sign a farewell to his mother-in-law. He had been looking up sign language on youtube whenever he could, in his stupidity, it never occurred to him that the bangla sign language and the american one might be different. So he just made a fool of himself in front of his in-laws, gesturing in ways incomprehensible to everyone in the room. They took it in good humor, reacting to his intentions instead of ignorance. His mother-in-law is mute, not deaf, she understood what he said perfectly fine. If he had only paid more attention, he could have saved himself the embarrassment. He wanted them to think he was thoughtful, instead he only revealed his own thoughtlessness.

“Call us when you get home,” Shiuli khala translates for Maisha’s mother. Maisha’s father claps his hand on Sayeed’s shoulder. Then Maisha and Sayeed walk into the staircase tinted yellow by the old fashioned 40 watts lightbulb.

Their footsteps ring out in the hollows of the stairwell, the sharp thud of Sayeed’s leather loafers a clear contrast to the slap of Maisha’s sandals. The pair begin to synchronize their steps without a word, and then giggle when one of them misses a beat. Their cadence speeds up and slows down and then speeds up again until they find themselves level with the ground. Their rhythm joins and is eaten by the cacophony of the streets. Sayeed wants to hold Maisha’s hand. But he can’t find the courage to reach out. Maisha doesn’t reach out either. She only shifts the

polythene bag to her other hand so the hand closest to him might be free, and hopes that is invitation enough.

“Should we take a rickshaw?”

“The whole street will be jammed. If you’re not too tired, we’re better off walking.”

“I’m not too tired,” He says.

They set out for home.

Walking side by side is a difficult task in this part of the city. The unkempt, serpentine streets take sharp turns and expand and contract with no regards to the laws that try to school it. There are too many unsanctioned garbage dumps and parked vans and men with baskets full of goods for the side of the paths to be truly open. In some parts, the streets are too narrow for two vehicles to pass by. If there is room enough for two cars, then the street must host 5 at a time. When there is no space for two people to walk side by side as drivers attempt to navigate around one another, Sayeed walks ahead. He slips through the gaps with the same tenacity of a ranger scouting out uncharted territory, careful not to step on mud or rabble. He watches Maisha weave through with practiced ease after finding room to stand without obstructing other passers-by. They fall into step again until another obstacle has them separate.

It is not easy to talk with so frequent interruptions, but they hold fragments of conversations anyway.

“There used to be a confection store here when we first moved into the area. If Baba and I went out together, we’d always bring something back for Ma from here.”

“What happened to it?”

“I don’t know for sure. It’s probably not very profitable to have a confectionery this deep in an alley. But after it closed, Baba and I were in a crisis. What were we supposed to take back for

Ma now? I was so guilty when we went home empty handed for the first time. But Ma just breathed a sigh of relief. She hated the pastry we kept buying for her.”

Sayed says, after a long while, “So many constructions in the area, and all of them by apartment developers.”

“Hm, yes, I never quite noticed that.”

“Really?”

“Mmhm, I moaned about them a little. Whenever a building for rent was replaced by an apartment complex, it meant that there would be more cars. Look how narrow the roads are here. Cars only create more jam.”

“Car owners would probably blame the rickshaws and their bad driving for the jam.”

“Rickshaw drivers are definitely not free of fault. But even if they make no mistakes there is simply not enough room for jeeps and minibuses here. People who own cars as grand as those shouldn’t buy apartments in alleys.”

Sayed laughs, “In America, they would call this gentrification.”

“What a mouthful,” Maisha mutters.

When they make it onto the sidewalk of the Panthapath main road, there are day workers sit on the curb, talking amongst themselves as they wait for the road to quiet down, so they can lay down in front of the closed shutters of stores, where there is a patch of smooth flooring under shade. Maisha brushes against Sayeed’s side to avoid the oncoming crowd. She walks ahead sometimes, overtaking particularly leisurely pedestrians, leaving Sayeed fumbling to follow.

“All my private tutors and coachings are in this area,” Maisha tells Sayeed, her voice straining to be heard above the cacophony of cars stuck in pace for too long, “I used to come to this building for math tutoring from the most terrifying teacher in my school.”

“Oh, I think I’ve heard of him. Don’t tell Bhabi this, but one of Bhaiya’s old girlfriends came to him too. He used to sit in a tea stall across the street to wait for her,” Sayeed cranes his neck, and then almost shouts back, “It might be that one, I’m not too sure.”

“Did she go to my school?”

The already loud street transforms take on a frenzied edge as the traffic begins to move. We press our palms to the steering wheel and make all the cars trumpet out, and our rickshaws join in with their bells and shouts. A CNG in the middle lane struggles to start, and from our vehicles behind it make our displeasure known as ear-splittingly as possible. The helpless old driver inside keeps desperately fumbling at the wires in lieu of a key. When the machine finally begins to hum again, he breathes a sigh of relief with us and rushes forward in hope of making it past this intersection. But a standstill is once again enforced by the tired traffic surgeons eagerly awaiting the end of their shifts.

“What?”

“I asked,” Maisha says louder, “if she went to my school.”

“Probably. I don’t know. I only caught him sitting there while biking past him towards a friends’ place. I blackmailed him for days. He gave me a few of his DVDs and then spilled his guts.”

“You little menace!”

“No more than he was to me!” Sayeed sighs, “We used to be so much closer.”

“Did anything—” Maisha brushes close to her husband as a group of rowdy men approach and walk by, “—happen?”

“Not particularly. We grew up, I guess. We’re nothing alike.”

“Your Ma doesn’t think so.”

“Yeah? What did she say to you?”

“That both you and your brother are exactly like your father. Bhaiya is like what your father used to be before his brother died, and you resemble him as he is now.”

“Was he different before? My uncle died so long ago, I was barely a toddler. Baba would be in his early thirties then, not much older than Bhaiya.” Sayeed’s laugh is jagged to even his own ears. “I can’t remember or imagine Baba being anything but middle aged. God, what must he have been like when he was young.”

Maisha smiles, “I just told you, if your mother is right, then he used to be exactly like your brother.”

“Can you picture that though, my silent, serious, ever-imposing father being anything like Bhaiya? Besides, I don’t think I’m very similar to Baba at all. Not silent, not serious, okay I might be a little dry, but nothing about me is imposing. I melt into the shadows.”

Maisha laughs at that, “You’re right. But so does your father.”

Sayeed startles at that. But they need to cross the road, so he doesn’t ask anymore.

Without thinking, he takes Maisha’s hand as they look both ways and jog across. There are a dozen or so rickshaws parked at the corner of the street. A few of them call out to Sayeed, and he shakes his head in answer. He doesn’t notice when Maisha takes her hand back. Only feels the absence as they head into the narrower street that is no less busy. One of the street lamps flickers lazily. Maisha tries to remember if she ever spared a thought to this path before Sayeed came into her life.

“I’m gonna need you to elaborate on that.” Sayeed says, in his perfectly accented english. It strikes Maisha how effortlessly she and Sayeed change languages. All through this stuttering conversation they have deployed Bangla, and English and back and forth again so frequently that she can’t tell what language this conversation was in.

“Elaborate?” she says, the word rounding itself out in her own pronunciation.

“Did you mean to say Baba also melts into the shadows or whatever.”

“Kind of. I mean, he’s so quiet it’s really easy to forget he’s there. Only you and your mother seem to always be aware of him. Both of you keep poking at him in different ways, and I can’t tell if he’s glad or annoyed that you guys want him to participate so badly.”

“Huh, I thought everyone is as aware of Baba as I am.” Sayeed says.

They both fall into silence as they take another turn. Maisha fidgets with the polythene in her hand. She’s annoyed at her feet for aching from so short a walk and blames it on the shoes.

“I’m doing some remote work for Jim's company now by the way. I know you haven’t made up your mind, and I’m not pressuring you. But I thought I’d better tell you.”

“But doesn’t this mean you made up your mind?”

“Not necessarily. This is only freelance contract work. They want me as Production manager. That’s different stuff.”

“I see.” Maisha’s voice is stony.

The racket simmers down into a hum as they move deeper into the residential area. Rickshaws ring their bells almost nonsensically as they drift along, and the slum women sit on curbs combing oil into each other’s hair. The pack of stray dogs sniff around and prepare for another night of howling. Overhead, there are lights on in every window. If Maisha and Sayeed were paying attention, they could probably hear the voices float down from them. As they walk

past, the area plunges into a sudden darkness. Annoyance descends like unexpected rain and its expression in swears muttered under breath, huffs and groans. Then, one by one generators and IPSs come to life. Lights begin to flicker on, as others look for charger lights and candles.

Nobody is ever happy about the heat.

“Right,” Sayeed says, “I saw her again today.”

“Hm? Who do you mean?”

“You know, the mad woman.”

“Oh. Was she clothed?”

“Yeah, thank god. She was wearing a t-shirt someone probably gave to her.”

“Do you think she has someone looking out for her then?”

“She wouldn’t have survived on the streets for as long if nobody was looking out for her. I mean, she’s gotta eat.”

Maisha hums again, brushing close to Sayeed on the uneven and cracked cement. They don’t even bother to pave these side-alleys with asphalt anymore. The rainwater and steady traffic would return it to the usual state of ruin in weeks. “I still feel strange about this. It’s not safe for her. Especially if she has a tendency to—”

“I don’t think she does. She’s been in the area for years now. I never saw her naked before.”

“Could someone have...”

Sayeed swallows, “If someone did, there is no way to prove it. Even we can’t be sure. Both Ma and Bhabi tried speaking to her before. She says nothing but strings of nonsense, and gets agitated easily. She almost attacked Ma before.”

Maisha sighs and slumps back, “I would feel better if there was something we could do for her.”

“Yeah, me too.” Sayeed bumps his shoulders with Maisha. “Maybe there is a women’s shelter or something.”

“I know someone from school who works in a women’s rights organization now. I’ll get her number from the songbird tomorrow. Maybe she knows of some place.” Maisha clicks her tongue, realizing they are almost at the apartment. “Oh no, we passed the pharmacy already. You baba is out of antacids.”

“You go ahead, I’ll grab some. Do we need anything else?”

Sayeed doubles back to the pharmacy. After the purchase, he doesn't follow after Maisha right away. Instead, he stands, sweating, at the corner of the street and lights a cigarette. His cloak of loneliness embraces him like an old friend. He relaxes in its folds as he tips his head back to look at the night sky. Light pollution, smog and a plethora of other things obscure the stars. But he keeps his eyes up anyway, until the cigarette burns down. The breeze picks up when he starts to walk again. After the oppressive heat, the change is more than welcome.

Chapter 6

The nature of time is to keep on going. Even when nothing of note happens. Everyone knows this. Sayeed knows this, and like everyone sensible approaching thirty, he is terrified. But still he still dalleys, still he is surprised at the ease which he lets hours slip by. In the office, even as the pressure builds, lethargy takes over. Sayeed does not care for enjoying every second. He wants to be in the future. He wills time to go faster and sighs when the energy under his skin does not make the hands of the clock speed up.

He hates this office and feels guilty for it. They pay him well. He is treated well. His co-workers are amiable enough. But it makes no difference, Sayeed would kill to be free of here. Somewhere across the city, he imagines his brother sitting at his own cubicle, his mother in a cramped teacher's lounge furiously grading exam papers. It took his father 15 years to get an office room to share with three other people, another 10 more to have one of his own.

He spins his swivel chair back to his desk. The computer screen shows him meaningless emails he will have to sift through and answer. He clicks off, and then opens the browser back up almost immediately. He opens his email again, and finds the last one he sent off to Jim. It's nothing of consequence, only an acknowledgement he got the assignment.

Sayeed doesn't know why Jim wants him in the studio so desperately. They were friends in university, sure. But it was the kind of situational connection Sayeed expected to forget as soon as their time together passed. They lived on the same floor in the dormitory, and usually shared a few classes per semester because they had the same major. Jim was a handsome guy with a trust fund that transformed him into the most charming man in the room. He attracted friends like flies. Sayeed was always most comfortable in big groups. So he ended up tagging

along with Jim's groups fairly often anyway. Sayeed is not a difficult name to pronounce, but Jim could not be bothered to get used to this unfamiliar pattern of phonemes. At one of the few parties they both attended, Jim held a drunken ceremony and all but baptized Sayeed as "Sid" anyway. This grated on Sayeed, but he couldn't speak up at the party. He didn't want to be a killjoy. And later when the nickname stuck, Sayeed grew used to it. Aside from this unfortunate renaming tendency he shared with his forefathers, Sayeed liked Jim okay. But he didn't realize he made enough of an impression on the guy that he would have Sayeed's old roommate Zi Han hunt him down.

Or perhaps, it was Zi Han who was the reason for the studio's insistence on him. While Sayeed wasn't sure the feeling was mutual, Zi Han still was the best friend Sayeed ever had. As the only two foreign students in their dormitory, they developed an easy camaraderie in their first semester and started living together from then on. Zi Han was in the business school. He was smart as a whip, and always determined to coax laughter from everyone he met. There was something gentle about Zi Han that gave Sayeed the impression that he knew something of the loneliness in Sayeed's marrows. He always did spend more time with Jim and his group than Sayeed. "Networking", he called it, "important to know the rich, white guys who will hire me."

He was right. Jim did hire Zi Han, and was trying to hire Sayeed too. Sayeed has no delusions about working at the studio being much different than here. Work is work, he understands that. But he also knows working for an independent studio with people he knows actually care would be far more bearable than working here, where he is overqualified and underutilized. He remembers coding simple programs with classmates group projects. All the late nights, pouring energy drinks down his throat, bent over screens, and scanning hundreds of lines to find one letter out of place and making magic happen in the realm of the digital.

Sayed looks at the clock again, then refreshes his inbox. There's two new emails, both from admin, one announcing an office lunch to celebrate the anniversary of their company and the other reminding him his team is due for a meeting with the MD in half an hour. Sayeed sighs. He needed to go pick up his father's laptop from the computer shop. He already knows they'll get an earful at the meeting, and there's no way he could leave the office after. He could always pick up the laptop tomorrow. But letting his father down, even in things as inconsequential as this, doesn't sit right with him. The traffic will be horrible when he leaves the office at 7, but he should be able to reach the shop before it closes. He resolves himself to go.

"Sayeed bhai, I need a smoke before we face the MD. Want to come with?" The new hire asks from the cubicle behind him.

"Yeah, let's go," Sayeed clicks off the browser again.

"This is the second time she's missed her appointment! I don't understand why she and baba won't take this seriously! They are both over 65, and it's not like they have another heart lying around if this one gives out," The songbird huffs.

"My father is the same." The photographer shakes his head sadly. "Something about their generation."

"Well, I'd pay to keep my mother out of hospitals," Maisha tries for a joke, and immediately cringes at her own tone deafness. Her friends laugh anyway. She is grateful.

"I always figured you'd marry a doctor. Like, a romcom you know? You take your mom for a routine check up and lock eyes with the young new doctor kind of thing." The songbird waggles her eyebrows, "Then a bangla movie style dance sequence would start. All the patients would be back up dancers."

“God, you have made this same joke two thousand times. Let it go already.”

“Didn’t get a chance to dance it out in your Holud.” The songbird pouts, “Ey, photographer shaheeb, marry Jannat apu already, so I can dance at your Holud at least.”

“Okay.” The photographer leans back against the booth, and grins, “Jannat got a scholarship abroad. We’ve been talking about getting married before she leaves. Our families are meeting on Friday.”

They erupt into cheer. Their congratulations layers over their exclamations and affectionate shoving and backslapping. Maisha is weightless with second-hand exuberance only the comfort her friends can provide.

For most of her life, she’s had them so close, that they’ve borrowed deep under her ribs. The three of them have overlapped and interwoven that Maisha finds them in everything she does. Too often, she speaks with the songbird’s intonations superimposed over her voice, using words from the vocabulary the photographer infected her with. She doesn’t know how to miss them now, when they are part of her still, though not by her side anymore. She goes about her day without them, like she always knew she would have to someday. Like, she’d start keeping a diary and doing yoga someday. Like, she’d travel the world and learn 6 languages someday. She would be married someday. She’d be a grown woman making monumental decisions about her own life someday. Maisha always took the distance of all those “some days” for granted. Even as she lives in the days she’s been anticipating, she wants to cling on to that distance. Pretend, she has time when she really doesn’t.

Maisha doesn’t long for her friends’ company like she expected. She checks their social media religiously, and exchanges messages fairly frequently. She and the songbird have gotten

on video calls once or twice. Maisha has plenty of room for boredom lately. But she hasn't reached out recently.

“Earth to philosopher, madam come in,” The philosopher waves his hand in front of Maisha's face. She swats at him. “What do you want to eat? On account of the upcoming nuptials, I'm treating, so order something cheap!”

They bicker over the menu before ordering the same things they always get. The photographer takes his time detailing how he brought up sending a proposal to his father. He is a good story-teller, unlike Maisha herself. He spins what must have been nerve-wracking into the realms of the comedic, and they laugh the tension off together. She slips into the role she built for this trio in particular, and sighs with relief when this version of herself still fits like a glove. She says what she's expected to say, does what she's expected to do, and pretends that this right here is easy and uncomplicated. She is indulged in her fantasies just as much in return. They play the roles they chose themselves and they improvise a new scene as a trifecta in perfect harmony. Maisha pays close attention to the way the cadence of their three voices mirror one another. How they contain their gesturing or let loose in accordance to tone. Their faces transform and contort as they summon reactions, the photographer's expression stays mild, and the songbird lets her features speak louder than her words. The three of them switch from Bangla to English to Bangla again, referencing old inside jokes to refresh their history and letting shared experiences serve as shorthand for what they don't want to say.

“I don't want to go,” Maisha says. “Everyone keeps telling me ‘*don't be stupid.*’ And I'm not!! I've thought this through. I can get a decent job here. I can be close to family, close to *you*. My life is here. I don't care to go to a foriegn country and learn to speak again.”

“I don’t want you to go either,” The songbird’s voice is soft, musical even, as she covers Maisha’s hand with her own. “But you know you could have a good life there too.”

“No, I *can’t*.” Maisha implores weakly, “I have to start everything from scratch. I have nobody there. You know my degree isn’t worth anything either. No friends, no family, not even hopes for a fulfilling career.”

“But you already have family,” The photographer interrupts, “also, friends. Yeah, we’ll be far, but it’s not like we’ll be gone. We barely have time for each other already. Jannat is going to a strange country too, you know. She, and you too, you’re not dying. It’s the age of the internet. You can always call us. We’ll have these hangouts virtually.”

“And you’re thinking of work?” The songbird’s nose flares, “Work-smwark. Having a job is always at least a little miserable. But think of it this way, you don’t have to work if Sayeed bhai takes that job. You can go back to university. Maybe to art school this time?”

“Guys, that’s ridiculous. And you know why I can’t go. You know.”

“My friend,” The songbird squeezes her hand, “you’re an angel of a daughter. And you’re right, I can’t refute you. But please, before you decide anything, for once in your life, think about yourself.”

The photographer nods, “We’ll always be your home.”

Chapter 7

On Friday night, Maisha leans back against the pillows and flips through one of her more recent sketchbooks. She takes mental notes of her favorite pieces so she can photograph them later, and thinks she might burn the rest. Sayeed looks at her from a few feet away, fiddling with the laptop. Water drips from his wet hair down the side of his neck until it soaks the collar of his cotton tee-shirt, but he pays it no mind, all his attention is on the screen.

“And I’m done! We can get back to our show now.” He announces, and scoots until his back is against the headboard too. He drags the laptop with him. Maisha flicks off the light switch before putting away the sketchbook and ducks under his arm to press herself to his side. Sayeed presses a kiss to her hair. Affection bubbles and fizzes in her chest. “We were up to episode four, right?”

“Five,” Maisha corrects and nestles closer to Sayeed.

The bright lights of the screen dance across their faces as they get lost in a different story. Maisha enjoys the comforting weight of Sayeed’s arm around his shoulder, the rustles of cotton where his leg presses against hers. He smells clean, of crisp, floral detergent and lingering sandalwood soap. It seeps away the tension from her body, and Maisha lets herself be held. She likes him best like this, safe and warm, doing nothing in particular except being with her.

“Do they really talk like this?” she mumbles.

“They?”

“People in America.”

“Not quite. They’re not as eloquent.”

Maisha laughs, “I don’t know what that word means.”

“It means well-spoken. You know, real people stammer and don’t use as many difficult words. What we say isn’t as clear. We’re at a loss for words.”

“Hmm, if people struggle in their native languages that much, how do you think I’ll manage?”

“You’ll manage fine. Besides, your first language is sign.”

“Oh nonono no. I learned sign at 8! Besides, I sign in Bangla anyway.”

“Do you think so?”

"I know what language I sign in, Sayeed." Maisha elbows him in fond exasperation.

"Yeah, no, you do. I'm not arguing against that. It's more like," he makes a frustrated noise and pauses the episode, "I mean more along the lines of, hm, dialects maybe. You know how Sylheti is barely the same language at this point? Kind of like that. You use Bangla sign, *obviously*. But you don't use the same sounds as bangla. Do you even use the same grammar?"

"Hmmm, I can’t say for sure, but I suppose not. I haven't quite given it much thought."

“Okay, Miss linguistics major.”

“Well, I am Mrs. Computer nerd now.”

“Aha! I see how it is! So, it’s not patriarchal bullshit anymore, now that it serves you.”

“Yes, my love, just like you are the champion of feminism when it serves you.”

“Oof. low-blow, madam,”

“All’s fair in love and war.”

“Not even remotely. Geneva convention and what not, but I concede this one to you. Shall we start the episode back up?”

“Not yet.” Maisha’s voice drops to a whisper, “Sayeed?”

“Speak your mind, my piece of moon.”

Maisha giggles nervously. “You’re too much.”

“I am just enough. What is it though?”

“What if I don’t want to go? What if I don’t want to defy fate and I want our happily ever after to be right here?”

“I don’t know.” Sayeed answers after a spell of silence. He pushes the laptop off their laps and turns to fully face Maisha. “Do you really think we could have a happily ever after here?”

“Do you?”

“I asked you first.”

“But your answer matters more.”

Sayeed makes a frustrated sound. “You know my answer already. This happily ever after thing. This fate thing. It’s bullshit. That’s just us, I don’t know, hiding. We’re both adults, Maisha, we need to talk properly like adults.”

“Fine! I think going abroad is a mistake. I can’t imagine me, or you for that matter, happy without our loved ones. A better job, a better lifestyle, *that’s* the real bullshit.”

“You can only say that because you haven’t experienced it. You’d get to dress how you want, go wherever you want, and do what you want. No prying eyes, no antiquated traditions, and my god, at least there is something to live for other than this work, home, work routine that’s actually killing me. There’s diversity. There’s people you can actually talk to. *Options.*”

“What makes you think I want any of that? I happen to like tradition. And people you can talk to? Don’t kid yourself, Sayeed. There’s people you can talk to here. You never try. You made up your mind already and—”

“Don’t kid myself?” Sayeed interrupts, letting out a bitter laugh. “Who’s deluding ourselves here? Who already made up their mind? God, Maisha, look at the state of this city. You hate it here. Everyone hates it here.”

“But the people I love—”

“There will be more people you love”

“So I just abandon the ones I have?”

“Yes, sure. Let’s make it about other people. Give me three years to become a shell of man and you, a shell of a woman. We can have shell children and fill them with misery too.”

Maisha says nothing.

Sayeed says nothing.

He closes the laptop. “Let’s go to bed. We’ll figure something out later.”

Maisha opens her mouth to speak, thinks better of it and says nothing. They act out their nightly rituals while their thoughts roam in two different directions. They lay down side by side, both on their backs.

Maisha listens to the silence, and wonders again if a tree falls in a forest and there is nobody to hear the sound, does the noise matter? She doesn’t know the answer. Neither does Sayeed. They don’t think about how every tree is home to a hundred birds and feeds a militia of cretins. There are squirrels on its branches, and fungi at its roots. When it falls, it crushes insects and small, unlucky animals. Its trunk rots where its leaves used to, and becomes a feast for bacterias. Every tree matters. Every note is important to the symphony of the forest. There is never silence where life is. There is no silence between Sayeed and Maisha either. They don’t speak a word, but their hearts beat, clothes rustle, lungs heave, and stomach gurgles. Every noise matters. They matter to us.

“Are you asleep?” Maisha asks eventually, turning on her side to face Sayeed.

“No,” he turns too, like he has every night they’ve spent together. “What is it?”

“God, I don’t know how to say it.”

“Can we not fight? I'm not angry—”

“No, no, I don't want to end the night with an argument. I'd rather... I wanted to thank you.”

“For what? Being mean?”

“My darling husband,” Maisha laughs, “You don't know what *mean* is. But I was thinking back to what you said before we fought. That you're right, sign probably is my first language at this point. I'm no good at translating, I'm even worse at speaking. But that's beside the point.”

Sayed shifts closer to her, his body curling up until he's her mirror image. Their bodies keep her words contained between them like a set of parentheses. “It's just nobody else ever noticed how much I take to signing, and I noticed that you've been trying to learn.” Sayeed lets out a groan.

Maisha smiles wider, “No, please, don't be embarrassed, really, it's the thought— and you always are so thoughtful and you *see* me, and well, I don't know, I am bad at this, but I wanted to thank you.”

“If you're grateful don't mention this ever again,” he mumbles. “I'm serious.”

“Sayeed,” She giggles again.

He finally lifts his face, “No, really. It's not a difficult thing. You, your Ma, your Baba, you guys barely say anything out loud, y'know. Khalamoni is the only one there who speaks, and well, it's really obvious when the three of you are using your voice to include the rest of us. It's obvious signing comes more naturally to you. And Maisha, you are my wife, and I know we went the arranged route. I know I'm asking you for a lot. but I do—” He draws a lungful of air, “—I do love you. I think I'd love you if I met you in school. I'd love you if I met you in the streets. I'd probably love you if I never even met you. You really don't have to be grateful. You and I agreed to be two halves of a whole. Of course, I'd see you. You left your home to come be a part

of my family, and I'm asking you for even more. Trying to learn your language is the least I could do."

Desire, Maisha used to think, would feel like setting oneself on fire. That's how the cliché went at least, and it had to be cliché for a reason. Love was the fire that kept the steam going, and she would work herself rugged and find more humanity in her than she ever imagined. She doesn't feel like that with Sayeed, and didn't feel that way with the tabla player either. Maybe it wasn't supposed to be like that at. She could never know for sure how other people felt. Her desire is of the mundane kind, an ordinary thing that neither burned nor set aflame. It isn't anything like the lewd grins of her cousins implied. But she can't call it casual either. Giving into it felt like swimming in still waters. She's uneasy with the unfamiliarity of it, like she's exposing the whole of her. But there's nobody else here, just him. Here he is, right here with her, another point of vulnerability, another person fully open and giving. Here they are, still half-strangers in strange situations that were as mundane as the sun in the sky. But gorgeous at the right time. Maisha didn't need fire, she didn't want to burn, sitting in the water with him was enough.

Maisha looks at Sayeed in the imperfect dark. She's always too terrified to properly want anything at all. She lets herself want him just for herself. She knows that she's chosen right. Sayeed, the third love of her life, is the only person she can imagine loving like this. He sees her, and Maisha is grateful for the murky veil of darkness.

Chapter 8

The phone rings after midnight. The carefully neutral melody is the final augury before calamity.

It takes just a second for everything to change.

Maisha holds her mother-in-law as tightly as she can, and watches her father-in-law age a lifetime in minutes. Sayeed barks into the phone with pure, unfiltered desperation. Within half an hour, they are rushing into the car barely dressed. The hospital is almost an hour away.

Around them, we keep moving, we keep living. There is nothing else for us to do. This is how the story goes, and it cannot stop.

Saif and Neela were driving back home. They had the window open. The sound system of the car was connected to Neela's phone. They were listening to music to feed the open mouth of loss in them. Neela asked if they could stop by the Azimpur graveyard so she could visit her father. Saif agreed. They have been in love for a decade. They were ready to love each other for a century more. They always understood they wouldn't get the chance. As twin lights zigzagged towards them, they came to know it. Neela and Saif turned to look at each other just as terror seized them.

There was a truck. It was being driven by a young man named Maruf. He was not supposed to be driving. He was only an assistant. But the driver, Salam-miya, was ill, and he trusted his young protege. Shivering and near delirious with fever, he switched seats with Maruf and fell asleep next to him. Maruf, full of excitement, spent his long drive imagining how he would tell this story to the woman he loved. He did not realize something was wrong with the brakes.

The vehicles crushed into one another.

Maruf jumped out of the car. Salam-miya did not. Saif and Neela could not.

People gathered. An ambulance was called. They were close enough to Dhaka to be rushed here. Salam died on the way. Saif, battered and concussed, could not make sense of anything. He kept calling for his wife. Neela, half her face beautifully unharmed and the other half bloodied and broken, would not open her eyes.

The next afternoon, Saif is released.

Two hours earlier, Neela died.

Chapter 9

The hospital reeks of chemical cleaners and sweat.

Sayed helps his brother onto the blue plastic chair next to their father. Bhaiya doesn't bother hiding his agony as he settles uneasily. He's dazed from the painkillers, but pain is still etched onto every line of his face. He is lost somewhere far beyond the four walls of this miserable place. But he nods a thanks at Sayeed as he heaves. Their father's hand hovers over Bhaiya's shoulders, worried if the touch might hurt. The way Sayeed sees it, there's little that can hurt Bhaiya anymore than he's already suffering. With a displaced shoulder, two ribs bruised, one rib cracked and countless cuts from the broken windshield, his brother was declared lucky. Bhaiya had managed to laugh at that, his death wish etched in every line of his haggard face. Sayeed says nothing to his father and takes the last empty chair on the conjoined set of three.

Up until now, there was work to be done. A funeral is a fussy event. Sayeed had been making phone calls after phone calls. For the first time in his life, he was glad for his extended family's interference. They swooped in like vultures and took over the ugliest parts. Sayeed didn't have to negotiate a price for a coffin. He didn't need to go to the graveyard to scout for space. He didn't have to figure out transport or food or even handle the mountains of paperwork. His uncles and cousins dragged him along by the hand like a little boy, and they walked him through every hurdle, fought every battle he wasn't strong enough for. They kept him moving like he needed to.

"Where's your mother?" Sayeed's father asks, his voice hoarse and small.

"With Bhabi's mother. They wanted to see the body. Maisha went with them."

“Okay,” He exhales slowly, “okay.”

Sayed swallows. “I already sent Mujib Kaku back with the rest of the uncles. You should take Ma, Aunty and Bhaiya home in our car once they get back. The rest of us will come back with Neela Bhabi in the ambulance.”

“Okay.”

Sayed turns his head to look at the men he’s idolized all his life. In the silence they sit in, all three of them are identical, melting into the shadows. His brother will never be the same again. The biggest piece of his heart used to beat in someone else’s chest and she’s taken it with her. His father, a man always haunted, has one more ghost in his head. He is old, now, Sayeed realizes with start. The broad back of his father is bowed by the weight of his loss. Bereavement breaks even the strongest of men and then they need someone else to lead them by the hand.

“Baba,” Sayeed says, “Did you eat lunch? Your sugar might drop.”

“No, no yet. I forgot. I should get something. Neela would never forgive me if I pass out from low blood sugar now.”

“No, she wouldn’t.” Bhaiya says, and begins to cry.

There is no standard answer to grief in Bangla. We rely on awkward, stilted questions. We touch, we visit. We bring food, we bring money, we bring legal advice, we bring precious memories. We play at normalcy because what is living if not playing at normalcy. Grief is a tidal wave. There is nothing to do but run or drown. Language is no buoy, no shelter, no relief. It is washed away with everything else.

You must understand this story is a translation. Every act of making meaning is a translation. We apologize, for we do not have the means to express loss. We dare not even try.

We must tell you this story around this gaping absence. It is not in our power to change it. The sentences have already been strung together, the story already told. This is how it goes. This is how we must tell you this story.

There is an announcement from the mosque's speakers. The ancient flower-shaped machinery comes alive with a slight cough. The reach of this rusted speaker is not negligible, though the ambient buzz renders the Imam's words almost incomprehensible. The old man repeats himself thrice anyway. Most don't manage to make anything out of it, some of who do utter the standard farewell under their breaths, *Inna Lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*.

The bathing of the body is taken care of at the hospital. Orderlies handle this task with a violently nonchalant efficiency. The hospital paperwork takes a long time to process. The police paperwork takes even longer. So the ambulance brings the corpse to the mosque almost an hour after the announcement. The men from the mosque help carry the body inside. The parked microbus blocks off a good portion of the road, and the people in the other vehicles try to contain their irritation. Some succeed, some fail, but either way the road is emptied after 20 minutes. The family and the Imam decide that it's late enough that they might as well wait until Asr for the Janazah.

Friends, family, acquaintances gather at the deceased's home. The accident becomes a tale told over and over and over again until the words lose all meaning. Most are too shocked, reeling from the unexpectedness of a life taken away too soon, for proper bereavement. Some attending are distant enough to have escaped the blast radius of the mourning. They ache, they lament, they comfort. They tell stories from Neela's life as though it might bring her back. They recall memories from every nook and cranny of their minds to establish their right to mourn. Most mourners will feel pangs of loss shoot through them in the coming years when they turn to

look for someone who won't be there. Each time, the emptiness will shock them and they will discover mourning anew. The few who are left, the ones properly shot through bleed grief already. The exit wound is always bigger, more damaging. There is no filling the gap for them. They will carry her forever. But at the Janazah, mourners and strangers alike repeat the same prayers in the same cadence. The difference in their loss doesn't matter when all are on their knees begging forgiveness, kindness, and a warm welcome for the departed.

The ambulance blocks the road again, for a shorter interval this time, as they carry the body back into the car. A series of cars and minibuses shoot after it; the precision makes its way to the graveyard.

There is more than one burial at the graveyard at any given time. When they bring Neela, there are three others to be put into the ground. The undertakers are all experienced men. They begin the process of burial mechanically. The family hoped to bury Neela next to her father, but his grave is long gone. It takes a few weeks for a corpse to rot away properly. The undertakers try to wait a few months more before changing the name on the placard and burying someone else in the same spot. But this information is kept from the procession of mourners. The men of the graveyard find room for Neela in a plot as close to her father as possible. Saif, half carried by Sayeed, is the first to drop a fistful of soil. The rest blur together among the histrionics of a burial.

The day is cool for what is expected of March, but body heat wins despite the furious spinning of all the fans and the breeze passing through the open windows. The rivulets of sweat intercede rivulets of tears, and we wipe them away together by achols, ornas, sleeves and tissues. The heat is nothing new, but the dark clouds in the sky crackle with electricity. The possibility of

rain manifests through humidity thickening like the layers of noise within the apartment. In the master bedroom, one of the local Hafiz's leads the men in prayer. The women also read through the Quran in Bhaiya and Bhabi's room. The well-worn melodies of the recitals overlap into a new tune. The beat of it is kept through harshly drawn breaths, shaky sighs and occasional sobs. In Sayeed and Maisha's room, the less religious members of the family discuss if there is a point to pursuing a case. The children, uncomprehending, laugh and play, only sometimes forgetting themselves and letting out shrieks.

Maisha and one of her cousins-in-law make laps around the apartment with ice water in a two liter 7-up bottle, one plastic jug full of tepid water to mix it with and two glasses. It is a task she's undertaken in a hundred family gatherings before. The sudden difficulty of even this action forces her to confront how she's taken her own body for granted.

Maisha taps the cheek of a child when he passes the glass back to her. Her envy for his ignorance contaminates this gesture of affection. Submerged in a sorrow she's never had to face until now, everything in Maisha is dull and distant. She does what is asked of her, mimics everyone else's behavior and keeps quiet when she can. She tries to hide her bewilderment at the normalcy of it all. Is this what it is to mourn?

Her first instinct is still to seek out Bhabi, her guide and mentor in the alien world of womanhood, her first friend in her new family. But Maisha will never get to see her again. Because Bhabi's been taken away, and taken away proper, the pull of Death is stronger than any lover who's ever tried. When death takes a bride, she cannot return.

Maisha drops down onto a chair at the dining table and gulps down water straight from the bottle. Her mother wheels up next to her and taps a rhythm on her shoulder. Maisha turns to her, helplessly, hoping for an answer to a question she doesn't know to ask.

“Go sit with your family. We can take care of distributing the food.”

“But-”

Ma stills her hand by taking it into her own. “No buts. This is no hardship. They need you more over there.”

“Ma-” Maisha says aloud, and this time her mother brings her finger to her lips.

Her mother draws Maisha’s orna over her. Her nimble fingers stretch the corner of Maisha’s lips into a mimicry of smile. She smiles herself, then releases her daughter’s face, “Go on. Send your Baba to me.”

Maisha listens. She walks into the drawing room, and taps her Father’s shoulders to convey her mother’s summons in shorthand. Then, she takes a seat next to her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law startles, but looks glad for her presence. Opposite them, Sayeed and one of Bhaiya’s old friends sit on the floor by the sofa where Bhaiya lays. Nobody could convince him to take a bedroom. So they assigned him to a sofa with as many pillows as possible. It took time to arrange limbs on to his side so as to not jostle the shoulder splint. It took even more time to convince Bhaiya to take another painkiller. But mild-mannered Sayeed doggedly argued and begged until he gave in. But the fight looks worth it, even Maisha can catch the way tension leaves Bhaiya’s ravaged body.

“Baba?” Sayeed mouths when he catches Maisha’s eye.

Maisha reclines her chin towards their bedroom, “With Jamil mama.” she mouths back.

“Food?” Sayeed mimes eating.

“Taken care of.”

As though waiting for her cue, Maisha’s mother rolls her wheelchair into the room, with her father carrying a tray behind her. The chords of muscle in her arms flex as she settles the

brakes on her chair to park herself firmly. She claps her hands twice as though to get everyone's attention to shift to her from her wheelchair and lets her hands fly. Maisha's father translates without prompting, "Dinner is served on the dining table, if you could please come and help yourself. Most people in the other rooms were served already."

Sayed's mother startles again, breaking out of another reverie by remembering the prospect of dinner. "Ayesha apa, when did you arrange dinner?" she hisses when most people have left the room, "You should have said something to me, I would—"

"Do you hear yourself? This is the least we could do in your time of crisis." Maisha's father says, as he sets the tray before Saif Bhaiya. "Sayeed, baba, can you help your brother eat?" "I can manage on my own, thank you, chacha." Bhaiya insists feebly.

"A home in mourning mustn't light a fire for ten days," Maisha's mother says with Maisha's voice. "As your relatives, we are taking responsibility for your meals until then."

"You've already been generous enough!" Sayeed's mother protests.

"She's right," Sayeed stands up, "We're already in your debt."

"Don't, we've had this argument with your husband already. You've been through enough. Please, let us ease our consciences by taking care of little inconveniences."

Her father adds, "My wife and I consider it an honor."

"I...thank you." Sayeed's mother's voice grows thick. She takes Maisha's mother's hand in her own and looks her father in the eye, "Thank you."

"Come, Apa, let's eat." Baba says as the first of the guests begin to filter back with their plates.

"Or do you want to eat here? There's enough plates. Your husband is waiting, but I can bring him here."

"No, no, I'll help you serve. Sayeed, Saif, Maisha, will you three be okay here?"

“Yes, of course. Go on, Ma.”

Maisha watches her parents lead her overwhelmed mother-in-law out of the room. She’s always known her mother had an iron-will, but for the first time, Maisha truly understands that her mother is far from helpless. Even without her voice, she makes herself heard. She knows how to use her disability to her advantage and command a room. She knows exactly where her limits are, and navigates around them with years of experience. She is not ashamed or embarrassed. When she needs help, she asks for it, and knows how to get it exactly. She’s always loved Maisha, but she didn’t need her. Maisha’s father, Chompa, maybe even Shuili Khalamoni, can fill in the gaps for her mother. She’s sick, but she’s been so all her life. She knows how to live her life as she is.

It was Maisha who needed her to be helpless. So Maisha could keep being a dutiful daughter and hide herself under the veil of that role. It would keep her safe, hidden from the world so nobody would even know to look for Maisha. There’s always been rot at her core. She tricked herself into believing she was carving away the corruption when she carved away her hopes, her dreams, her chance of being her own person. She called it devotion when it was nothing but cowardice. Maisha made a cadaver out of her mother in her own twisted need to make a martyr out of herself. Her mother didn’t want to be deadweight drowning her own child. It was Maisha who called living a pipe dream although endless open doors were close enough to touch.

“You okay?” Sayeed asks, looking at Maisha directly.

“Yes, fine.” She answers, looking back.

The mourners clear away one by one, two by two, until only family is left. Sayeed makes sure the car goes to drop Maisha's parents off. They both warm his heart with smiles rich with understanding.

Seeing them off, Sayeed hauls the mattresses and blankets out of storage with his cousins. Even in the gloom, they tease him about his strength. He is surprised to find the half-hearted attempts at humor to be welcome. They lay out the extra mattresses on the floors of the bedrooms and pile the blankets atop each other. The last ones to leave the apartment are his two cousins who live in the city. They head back towards their own homes with promises to visit soon.

Sayeed's mother and Bhabi's mother take Bhaiya's room with one of Bhabi's aunts on the mattress on the floor. Sayeed's father and his two uncles are to sleep in the master bedroom. Maisha will sleep on the floor of their room, opening up the bed for Bhabi's other two aunts. Sayeed's brother fell asleep on the sofa in the end, and nobody really had the heart to wake him. So Sayeed opts to sleep on the blankets while leaving the other two sofas for his two cousins who've arrived from out of Dhaka.

He and Maisha see everyone to bed before beginning to tidy up the kitchen and dining room. In the silence, Sayeed's grief begins to tear his insides apart. He swallows as he rinses Bhabi's favorite mug. He got it for her before he left for America. It's a ugly pink thing that says Happy Birthday in a jagged font. The present was a joke. But every time his brother got Sayeed in a video call, Bhabi filled the mug with something and sipped at it, making sure Sayeed could see. She drank her tea from this mug just before she left for Kumilla only 48 hours ago. Now, she's gone. Ripped away from them forever. Sayeed only had her in his life for two years before

he left, and one after he got back. A tiny speck in the grand scheme of time, and he loved her so much.

He was just as close to losing his brother too. If the truck swerved, a little more to the left, it would have killed him too. His parents wouldn't have survived that loss. *Sayed* wouldn't have survived that loss. Death is a fact of life. Something that happens to everyone someday. Foolishly, he assumed that someday would never come. His composure isn't enough to contain the animal noise he lets out. Ashamed and anguished, *Sayed* weeps.

Maisha gently pries the mug from his shaking hands, and gathers him into her arms. He presses his forehead on her shoulder and grips her as tight as she can. If he hurts her, she doesn't complain, only runs her hand through his hair, murmurs sweet words too low for *Sayed* to make out. He doesn't know how long they stay like that. When they separate, she nudges him towards the hall bathroom. By the time he returns, she's already put away the dishes. *Sayed* walks Maisha to the closed door of their bedroom. Her upturned lips are a pale imitation of her usual smile, but he kisses them anyway. She ducks into the dark room, still smiling.

Turning around, *Sayed* spots his father sitting at the dining table with a glass of water. Embarrassment creeps up his neck despite his father being turned away from him.

"Baba?" He calls out, "Didn't you go to bed?" He walks up to the table and takes a chair next to him.

"Oh, *Sayed*." His father says.

"Is sharing with the uncles too much of a squeeze? I'm sure Rabbi won't mind giving up the sofa if one of you want to—"

"No, no, it's fine. I was just thinking."

"Oh."

“I’ve been thinking for a while really. Your mother and I, we’re getting old. I think we’d better start getting our affairs in order.”

“Baba, this is—”

“I know, I know. Not the time. I understand. We’ll talk about it later, with your mother and brother present. But if God forbid, should anything happen before we get that chance,” He grips Sayeed’s hand, “Son, make sure they bury me next to my brother.”

“Baba...”

“I know, but death is destined. When it comes for you, it will take you. I needed to make my request heard whilst I still could. I’ll let you get to bed.” He pats Sayeed’s hand once before getting up. Sayeed watches him walk back to his room and disappear inside.

Chapter 10

Maisha doesn't manage any sleep. She tosses and turns all night. She gets up with the aunts when the muezzin delivers the adhan. It's good they don't have to wake Maisha to ask for the prayer mat. She gives them space for their prayers before they can ask her to join. Stepping out of the room, she spots the kitchen light has been left on and the latch to the front door is open. She decides to make tea.

10 minutes later, she heads to the roof with a mug of steaming ginger tea in each hand. Sayeed is not surprised to see her when she pushes the metal door of the roof open with her shoulder. He is by her side in three long strides to relieve her of a mug. She grins at the deep set bags under his eyes and tousled hair. "Good morning. You look awful."

"Good morning, my gold. You look radiant as ever despite the fact your eyes don't seem to open all the way."

"Is this what I get for making you tea?"

"Sorry, sorry." he amends, "I tried to make it myself but I couldn't find the tea leaves. And thank you, by the way."

"You're welcome," She says as they make their way to the banister.

Sayeed's building is not the tallest, but on the 8th story, it still offers a decent view of the sky. It's been a while since either of them watched a sunrise. It catches them off guard by cracking open the sky into a burst of scarlet that seeps into and infects the deep navy of the night sky with luster. The clouds float around like aimless fish while flocks of birds fly in every direction with all the urgency of people catching the last train home. The old buildings with peeling layers of tacky paint and the new egg-shell colored ones cast strange shadows on each

other. From where Sayeed and Maisha lean, they can see a hand-drawn badminton court on the roof of the shorter building next to them. A single shirt fans out from the clothes line beside the court. It's still the hour of the birds, but occasionally, if they strain their ears, the pair can hear the ting-ting-ting of a rickshaw or bicycle. They sip their tea in peace, and for a few minutes they give themselves over to the song of the city.

We tell them, "Go, go, go. Do not come back."

We tell them, "Stay, please. Stay, don't go,"

We say, "Come back please. If you must go, then go. But come back. Come back home."

We say, "There is nothing for you here. You are not ours and we are not yours. There is no room for you here. We've done our part. We've shaped you into who you are. We've poured ourselves into you. Where will you go where we are not with you? Across 7 seas and 13 rivers, we will follow you everywhere. So go on. We are with you always."

We say, "Please. Please. We are as lost without you as you are without us. We're lacking, we know. We fail you, we know. But have we not held you all your life? Are we not what you love and what loves you? There is a debt. We do not know what you owe us, or what we owe you. But there is a debt, an unfinished exchange. Will you leave us now, weak as we are, to fend for ourselves? Stay with us, please."

We say a great many things, for we are a great many people. Do they hear us? Do you hear us? That is not for us to know. They pull away as you pull away too. It's alright, we are not meant to be heard. But we speak anyway. There is a story. There are an infinity of stories. They go this way and that. We hold each one, and the stories get to stay even when the people are taken away. Still, the story goes on and on and on.

“Hey, I love you, you know.” She says.

“I know. I love you too.” He answers.

“Where you go, I’ll follow.”

“What will you do if I stay?”