

# THE SPLITTING

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## Chapter I

### The Blue Hour

“When was the last time you saw the crack of dawn?” Mr. Jamid asked Falaq as his vision chewed the grey newspaper, stapled carefully by Mrs. Jamid to maintain the neatness of the thin paper that easily crumpled. Falaq sat quietly, sipping on her first cup of tea. She knew better that the question was rhetorical and should not be answered. In moments of confrontation like this, her mind trained her to walk the path of silence. Instead, she chose to look outside the window; the concrete wall that was recently whitewashed reflected a thick ray of sunshine. As the light touched her face a serene sensation disseminated throughout her entire body.

Mr. Jamid spoke again, “Tell me! Did you ever manage to catch a glimpse of the first ray!? A night owl like you can never see such a view. I heard you making noise at 3 A.M last night. Is the night not there for you to sleep? Look at me while I am talking to you! I sleep at night so I can wake up at Fajr. I start my day as the Lord intended me to do and every task, every hurdle that comes my way throughout the day, easily works out for me. Do you know why? Because I sleep, I rest. On the other hand, people like you stay lethargic. And why would you not be if you waste the time that was granted for your rest? Where is your discipline?” Falaq kept nodding along as Mr. Jamid went on an on- yet an answer was due.

She carefully articulated her words, “Father, my sleep schedule has become a little messed up lately. It will be alright soon.” She successfully managed to keep her calm and pour out the words that would not entice his anger. However, in her heart more provoking questions were brewing, “Father, have you ever seen a yellow tungsten bulb lit across three buildings from our apartment while the sky was wrapped in cobalt blue hues? Did you see how the yellow light was

running towards me, cutting every one of those blue velvet layers of the twilight air? Did you see the airplane leaving a white chemtrail as it passes through the flamingo pink clouds of dawn? Did you ever notice that the early birds fly towards the sun as if they are deprived of light for years and years? I have been a witness to these events. I have seen the night and the dawn together. But you would not know and I cannot tell you. You wake up to mark your presence at the shrine of the Lord but me? I stay awake to celebrate what the Lord painted under the night sky before it vanishes as the first ray of sun strikes the sky.”

Falaq took her cup and returned to her room. Nothing good will come forth by staying at the dining table. Mr. Jamid was better off with his newspaper filled with thousands of black and red ants that somehow managed to form a structure, feeding him the information he craved. Falaq knew those creatures were much more digestible for her father than those provoking questions.

But Mr. Jamid was right. She did feel lethargic. Such sleepless nights do take a toll on the body. It acts as a reminder for her of the limitations she is confined by as a mere human, a creature of superfluous order and superficial structures. Yet as a fresh graduate, life was yet to start burdening her with serious responsibilities. So, she can sleep in. Can she not? The universe is much more forgiving when you are yet to be a full-fledged adult. Therefore she did not hesitate to surrender her body to the soft pillows.

In her room, a tender yellow light entered through the curtains. It looked as if all the lights of the world conspired, to put her into a trance. Half awake, half asleep and suddenly...

*“You know he is beyond repair right?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Then why do I see that glimpse of hope in you flickering like a firefly? Do you not understand that his spirit has hardened? And you should love it like you love fine China!”*

*“It is because I love him that I do not say anything back.”*

*“You are secretly proud that your core is still moldable like clay; you still have the privilege to glide into any form. You are so begrudgingly proud of it.”*

*“No, no. I... maybe I do not like the idea of solidifying myself. I never want to fit into constricted categories. It suffocates me. I am not proud of it but it comforts me to stay unidentifiable. I feel comforted by the idea of staying amorphous.”*

*“I wonder how long your formlessness will remain intact.”*

Falaq tried to redirect her focus to the external world. Some days are like that; the mind acquires its own free will; Takes up too much space, vibrates. She remembered the time Mrs. Jamid told her a grotesque story-

“There once was a king who defied the Lord. He declared to his companions, ‘None can defeat me! I am the most powerful being to ever exist!’ So the Lord sent a tiny mosquito that found its way inside his ear. After that his head throbbed from dawn till dusk; every day without rest the excruciating pain continued. The king started to beat his head with a wooden shoe until it bled. ‘HELP ME! MAKE THE BUZZING STOP!’ he screamed hysterically. The greatest doctor of the country was summoned but even he failed to heal the king. The king realized that the only solution was to crack his skull into pieces. His guards left his chambers to escort the doctor outside the palace. Later when they came back, they found the king’s head pulverized inside a

brick wall!” Falaq remembered how she plugged her ears with cotton balls after hearing that story. Yet, at some point of life, her fate decided to turn her mind into the most loud and uncontrollable organ. She experienced, and still experiences the same throbbing the king had suffered. The only difference was that no mosquito ever invaded her ear.

The only gateway from this artificial hell hole was to take a walk. Her plan was to move the legs with coordination without a destination while blending into the crowd. The strangers walking with her unknowingly comforted her. “I do not see flesh; I see humans carrying distinctive stories in each of them. They all are walking towards their destinations, each and every one embarking upon an unknown journey, unique to each of their own. All of them are driven by uniquely intriguing ideologies. What propels them to take the next step? What is their purpose of living? I want to learn about it all. I want them to unknowingly guide me towards inspiration, for as I am void of any concrete ideology. Show me, please!”- Falaq’s heart echoed these words. As she was yet to find her true vocation, she wanted exposure to the drive, the synergy that makes one passionate. She wanted to compare each of them and choose the truest of the passion from them all, a passion that resonated with her. Hence, all strangers became her destination. Each of them appeared to her as an enigma. She wanted to take her tote bag, the cheap black sunglasses and head out like a gale through that damned door, the one lump of wood which was the culprit- separating her from a world that is more vibrant, more alive than her, but her overprotective father still had not left for his office yet. “It is better to stay put for a while than to answer a million questions.” Her instincts told her to be patient.

The black sunglasses were an essential accessory for her escapades. In fact, it was more than an accessory- it was her camouflage. The pair of thin noir glasses saved her from the confrontations of many passing passengers, each traveling upon their own crimson string of fate. Falaq did not wish to meddle or cause an impact. Her only motive was to appear as a figure that Monet would have painted- an impression-like silhouette; without much of a concrete form. A form that can easily be forgotten, ignored but it would still take up space in their visual parameters. Using that imperceptible form, she wanted to observe the unhinged passersby without being noticed. The sunglasses in such a situation worked wonders! It concealed her eyes which are known to be the window to the soul. It may seem ironic that Falaq was gazing into the souls of others in her observational quest for inspiration while shielding herself from allowing others to do the same with her. Thus, upon wearing those noir glasses she could easily gaze into their eyes without being detected. Thus the existence of cheap black sunglasses transcended being a mere accessory. It helped her to enter spaces without disrupting its natural mechanisms. It was an intangible artificial boundary that was strictly maintained by her and it served her thirst quite well. Falaq was gazing into the souls of others in her observational quest for inspiration while shielding herself from allowing others to do the same with her- Ironic it may be, but she had her own reasons.

She quite often led herself inside the space of another, a space that one might call their essence as an individual, or the home of their soul. Anonymously and invisibly, she took her time to roam around. After all, as a visitor she had to observe the conditions of the home to honor the host. When she walked into the space of another, she developed millions of questions. “Why does the home look dusty? Why are you looking so disheveled in your portraits? Are the



flowers still fresh? Why is the pipe leaking? Who are you? That portrait of your mother looks magnificent! What books are you reading? So many shoes at your front door- You must have a lot of friends. You need to put today's date on the calendar. Why is the calendar still showing 7<sup>th</sup> December of 2005? Did anything noteworthy happen that day?" -Despite a million potential questions, Falaq admired their home silently, their essence as they were- uninterrupted and fed her imagination, her curiosity by strictly following her rule- that is to never cause a ripple.

Some of those eyes did not lead her to a home, rather she found herself on a plate, served like a delicate dish ready to be devoured by a gluttonous bastard. On the plate, her body became a mouth-watering dish, served to a creature that only devours using its sight. The plate becomes a platform where she appears as the sole object of entertainment, a piece of meat to chew and spit out, a piece of inedible meat meant to satiate an endless hunger. The way Falaq makes it onto the plate is something she has also observed during her walks. To start with, in the beginning the creature constructed of black thin webs with multiple reddish eyes and a colossal tongue measures her from head to toe. Then it captures her to reach her curves using its slithery wires, penetrating her clothes to caress her in front of the public eye. Falaq could feel herself being dragged into their slaughterhouse and be served for their pleasure, a kind of pleasure she did not want to give. The black sunglasses were cheap and made at some local factory. It did not carry the weight of a lofty brand name but the other purpose it served was to shield her from those corrupt glares, making her anonymous, undetectable or that is what Falaq constructed in her mind to keep herself sane.

“Carpe diem! I shall seize the day. It will not seize me,” she thought to herself smiling as she carefully stored the sunglasses inside her tote bag. “Now what should I wear?” Falaq looked through her window and saw that it was a warm sunny day; the sky was decorated in a hazy blue color. “The charm of blue dies without the yellow. Without the blue melancholia, one cannot discover the yellow delight”, she thought to herself while rummaging through her closet. She picked her favorite mustard-coloured shirt and a pair of powder-blue jeans. “Dali would approve of this color combination; do you not agree?” she said to herself with a quirky smirk. The mustard-coloured shirt reminded her of an arid, dystopian land and the blue jeans reminded her of a cloudless sky. Falaq felt giddy. It was one of the moments where she could also become an enigma. She can leave clues and crumbs for a stranger to ponder upon; maybe they would be as intrigued by it as she is. It was another core aspect of her escapades; she loved to express herself through her garments. Despite her aim to blend in, she still wanted her creativity and fluid identity to speak volumes. It satiated her desire to emerge as a phenomenon that resonated “ART!”

In a jiff, she wore the outfits, applied some rouge on her lips and her cheeks then took her tote bag and filled it with some toffees to snack later on. As soon as Mr. Jamid left for work, she ran towards the front door without wasting much time. She needed to get out as soon as possible; the outside was calling her.

“Falaq! What are you wearing!”

The question hit her head like a nail being hammered. She carefully answered without looking at Mrs. Jamid’s face. “Why mother, it is a shirt. Is there something wrong?” she answered with innocence.

“I cannot deal with this anymore! Your buttocks are visible. Why are you wearing such a short shirt and tight pants? What would have happened if your father saw you like this huh!? He will blame me for letting you go out like this. What would the neighbors think if they saw you like this? Your father will become a laughing stock. He is known to be a pious, reputable man. If his daughter goes out wearing this blasphemy, people will know that he has failed to control his own daughter from sin.”

Falaq felt as if something shattered within her. Her throat started to swell rapidly. The lump forming inside was leading to a silent wail. The last thing she wanted was to show her tears or wail like a wimp in front of her mother. “Go wear the black shrug over it and also a scarf over your chest. Your fashion choices are becoming abysmal day by day.”

The mustard shirt and the powder-blue pants which were once glistening over her brown skin, swallowed into the black shrug, transforming her figure and ingenuity into a shapeless lump of coal while the linen scarf shackled her bust. There was not an ounce of enigma left within her. She felt nothing like Dali’s painting but rather a rag that the painter used to clean his paintbrushes with- filthy, dull and stained- filled with random strokes of colors that altogether remind one of a muddy swamp. Falaq took notice that her facial muscles had stiffened. Covered with socially accepted garments, she stood in front of her building for a moment, with a blank look in her eyes. Just a while ago she was brimming with joy, passion and energy- all of which withered away, trampled by a few very carefully chosen words from her mother.

A dose of self-consciousness hit her. She started walking and soon enough, she became an interesting subject for the onlookers to decipher. This was not what she wanted. Her

shoulders slouched, hands tightly crossed against her chest so that the curve of her breasts may never see the light of day. She wanted to be one with the crowd, but felt like all eyes were caressing her, judging her, commenting on her appearance. She was not just being served on a plate, but rather she became the entire meal. All of the people transformed into the black wired creature. She kept walking, not with the intention to observe the people but to run away from them. “How powerful can words be? So powerful that it shifts perspective, maims you” she thought while walking fast enough that everyone would assume she is running. She lost her sense of direction, the track of time and unexpectedly found herself over a bridge.

The bridge stood upon a crossroad for passersby, but it caught a magnificent view of the busy road. She stood a while upon the bridge watching the vehicles swiftly running away from her, far away to their destinations. She realized that she was not the only one being captivated by the sight. Beside her was an old homeless man with a dog sitting quietly next to him. Falaq also noticed that there was a piece of cardboard lying around the man. “Maybe that is where he sleeps. How can he sleep in such conditions? Does the vibration of cars not tamper his sleep? Or does it comfort him?” Falaq kept staring at the dog and the man, sitting closely by each other and in between them she saw something akin to warmth. She suddenly developed a craving for that warmth. She felt desperate. However, she remembered her one strict rule: Never cause a ripple. But her instincts led her to them. She rummaged through her tote grabbing the small toffee candies. Somewhat hesitant, but secretly jubilant she went up to the man, offering the paltry sweets. She tried to imagine what was going through him and what he might think of her and her intentions.

“Does he think I will rob him? But of what? What if he attacks me? What if he thinks I tainted the candy to rob him? What if he violates me? What if the dog identifies me as a threat and attacks me? Will he think of me as a hindrance to his solitude? What if he yells at me for not giving him money instead? Perhaps I am disrupting their peace. I am being selfish.”

As multiple questions kept erupting in her mind, her hands started to sweat like a waterfall. Taking a short breath, she reached her hand out to the man, her fists clammy with the candies. The man with opaque cataracts looked straight into her eyes leaving Falaq appalled as she discovered the man was partially blind. It crossed her mind again that she may appear as a threat to him yet he showed no signs of aggravation. The man gently took the toffees and waved his hand for her to sit beside him.

Never in her imagination had Falaq thought that the man would accept her offering but furthermore it never occurred to her that he might even extend an invitation. A smile lit up on her face but not without caution. She sat on the dirty pile of cardboard to look at the fast cars with them. It did not matter whether she was being judged by the people who showed a disturbed face when confronted by homeless beggars. All of the titles and labels that helped to identify her as a young well-off woman were stripped away as soon as she sat down. Those titles became valueless in an instant. Her visual parameter registered what the dog and the man were seeing, and that was enough. Time moved slowly unlike the cars but she appreciated it. The timid pace of time opened up an opportunity for her to salvage each moment with great care. Running away from the crowd was easy, but leaving this place was becoming hard. After all, she knew that this too shall pass and she cannot ever bring this moment back.

*“I am leaving. I am an intruder in your space. I do not belong here. I should show you some kindness and filter myself out.”*

*“Can you really leave?”*

*“.....”*

*“Can you really leave?”*

*“I cannot leave as long as you remember me.”*

Falaq knew very well that she can always leave in a physical aspect, but the moment she shared with this stranger will never leave her. A version of her is stuck and tied to this moment and space. She will carry it forever as well as the space that held her. The space and she will mutually recognize each other whenever they cross paths again. A version of Falaq will always occupy the dirty cardboard.

## Chapter II

### The Dawn

#### *Part One*

“I had some words to say...Only to you...But when my lips moved...The words drowned...Under the sea of white noises...”

“Why are you listening to this gloomy song?” The lights turned on all of sudden and Falaq shrieked hearing that voice. The culprit who ruined the heavy atmosphere that she carefully curated was none other than her older cousin Kishor, peeking through the mahogany door with a set of sparkling eyes that even failed the fluorescent light.

“Did you really have to turn on the light brother? Can you not see I draped the curtains only to tame the sunlight? What’s the point of it if you decide to illuminate the room from within? Ugh!”

“Why’re you listening to this sad song? You transformed the ‘living’ room into a mortuary.”

“You can’t listen to such songs in a warm and happy environment. Some songs require a gloomy setting to absorb it thoroughly.”

“You do realize you are nurturing your sadness, allowing it to expand unnecessarily.”

“Is that a crime? I am allowed to stay connected with my sadness and cradle it. I believe I might find all the answers to life if I venture into the plane of melancholia.”

“Forget it, please! You are on vacation now. You don’t need to water your melancholia or be so gloomy right now, do you? Enjoy the time you have, live in the present. Leave the gloomy contemplation for when you return to the city. Roam around, explore the countryside. Stop burrowing inside the couch. Come on, live a little!”

“Well I did want to go outside but I fear I will go missing. I am familiar with every nook and cranny in my city but here in the suburbs, I am a lost cause. I thought you were spending time with Abid, your favorite cousin of all time. Why are you here bothering me?”

“Umm...As far as everyone, including you, knows- and this might be a very shocking reminder to you but...Abid and I live together! I have to start my day by seeing his face. I’m here to perform a noble deed but here you’re spouting useless facts. Come-on, we’re going for a bike ride! I must aid this utterly helplessly bored soul such as yourself.”

“Since when did you ride bikes and since when did I become a helpless soul? I do not think you are going to be of much help. It seems like I would have to enjoy my vacation from inside a casket, six feet under! I respectfully decline your offer, Mr. Boredom-Slayer!”

“Oh! Give me the benefit of the doubt will you? What does a road have to offer if no one travels upon it? So, come-on! I’ve dropped everything else I had planned for today for our bike ride. Let’s head outside. I’ll show you the real beauty of this place. Hell, let me take you to my secret hide-out. I promise to slay your boredom guaranteeing your utmost safety, my Gloomy-Bored-Liege.”

“Wait, is Abid coming with us?”

“Silly! The bike has seats for only two!”

“Alright, alright. Spare me a moment. I need to tie my hair or it might get severely tangled.”

All of a sudden, Kishor snatched the hair tie that Falaq had in her hand. In order to subdue him into giving it back she glared viciously, but Kishor had a certain look of defiance.

“Your dark hair exists to catch the wind, not to be tamed. Why must you stop it from going berserk? You get irritated if it tangles but have you ever seen the wind creating ripples as it



collided in the crevices of your unbridled hair? I see no difference between the wind flitting the curls of the unfastened coal hair from that of a dark sea. So please, let your hair run wild and let the waves crash.”

Falaq was spellbound. She had never imagined her hair in such a light. An immediate sense of guilt swept her away for keeping her hair tied up all this time. She took a silent oath to never deprive her hair of such poetic potential. She quickly collected herself and said “Then let the waves run free. O captain, my captain, let us commence our journey!”

The temperatures of the suburbs were naturally quite higher than the city but the air was different. The suburban air blew some unknown, unearthly power to silence Falaq’s internal turmoil. It was logical for the air to acquire such purifying qualities because the whole countryside was monopolized by countless forests holding a myriad of trees. The city felt like a distant place that was made for the sole purpose of an individual to create their identity and earn a living—but the suburbs beheld the power to consign the individual to an oblivion where they can leave all the worldly, materialistic ties in search for something much preponderant; to disappear into the fresh green oblivion. Falaq was enthralled by the idea of such an escape, to look back at the city with disdain where she could leave all her burdens and expectations behind. “Hold my shirt tight! Right now we are reckless, we are the wild youth! La-la-la-my heart is tied to the roads”, Kishor sang from his heart and Falaq adjusted her position more securely as the bike gradually sped up. “Woohooo! You see that Falaq, do you see the sky? It is running with us! Look at the clouds! We are winning!! You see the sun trying to catch us? We are faster Hahahaha!”

Falaq was nervous at first but Kishor's laughter relaxed her. She slowly started to look around and felt cozy as the wind caressed her face. Her lungs started to inhale the fresh air making her feel invigorated. The impurities, the monoxide-dioxide gasses, the chemicals that she collected inside her chest and lungs were being cleansed out. She had nothing to prove anymore. The grandiosity of nature came into contact with every fiber of her skin. She was reminded of her fragile stature as a human against the mighty nature, curing her from the unnecessary conquests that society burdens upon one. The road was devoid of vehicles apart from their little bike and all she could hear was the gushing of the wind against her ears, silencing the insects inside her skull. All she could see was an endless cathedral-like arch created by the trees emerging from both sides of the road that stuck upon a blue background decorated with a radiating yellow sun nestling on a bed of fluffy clouds. She gently let go of her fingers that a moment ago were clasping onto Kishor's shirt and to 'touch' the wind. The wind nuzzled her fingers and she could feel the pulse coursing from her fingers to her arm reaching her chest where it exploded.

"If I die right now, I will die happily brother," she whispered into Kishor's ears. She knew he would not be able to hear a single word, but Falaq felt content –she was able to convey her emotions into words to the plane of reality, to the green oblivion and that was enough for her.

Kishor parked the bike at the bay of a small mossy pond. The sun started to lean towards the west and the white cotton clouds were beginning to wear a mix of turmeric and tangerine rouge.

"This is my secret spot, look around; we reached our destination, I present to you- the Middle of Nowhere," said Kishor as Falaq's vision scanned around. "Impeccable," she murmured. As far as

her vision went, it only discovered vivid green grassy lands. Suddenly she found the seamless landscape being blocked by a magnanimous cluster of a deep forest. It intrigued her.

“Brother, can we go around the pond to the forest? I do not want to venture too much inside.

Who knows wha...”

“Yes absolutely! No worries, there aren’t any wild animals there.”

The two of them began heading towards the forest, following the tender green patterns of the grasslands created by the calm, warm summer breeze. As they stepped inside the perimeter of the forest, Falaq noticed the bright yellow sunlight trickling down the tawny branches while decorating the forest in multiple shades of green. Some speckles were crashing upon the brown soil and creating a glimmering crumbly floor as they wandered. It was as if the forest was alive and fate blessed them with a wonderful opportunity to discover it. Faraway she heard a cuckoo singing and thousands of crickets playing an orchestra for them creating a sublime polyphony that soothed her.

Kishor spoke up, “I think I’m being murdered. You know Falaq, beauty should have a limit. You understand what I’m talking about right? Limitless absorption of beauty is fatal. It makes my heart race uncontrollably. It makes me wonder, how can something so beautiful be able to carry such murderous intent?”

“Yeah, I think I do understand you, brother. But we are being murdered willingly though, are we not? We are not accustomed to such raw beauty; it is killing me for not being able to stop time right at this moment.”

“It’s killing me that I am unable to eternalize this atmosphere.”

“It is killing me that we will never encounter such a sight ever again, it will always be different.”

“It’s killing me that this beauty is causing an emergence of a sin within me. I’m becoming greedy.”

“An unknown thirst is emerging inside of me. It is very demanding.”

“I think it’s unquenchable.”

“I want more.”

“I want more!”

Falaq understood why it was only fitting for the Lord to be prideful. She looked up. A speck of sunlight penetrated her eyes, filling it with tears.

“You know I can never paint like this. The Lord is the true artist, brother,” She said it with a blurry vision. “This is why I brought you here. I need to tell you that I found my vocation upon this very soil. We can never paint like the Lord but we can be Their greatest audience. I decided that I will be the most endearing spectator of the Lords’ incomprehensible exhibition.”

She felt the time coming to a pause hearing Kishor’s words. Her head began to throb.

*“Did I hear him right?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“What is happening to me?”*

*“You are feeling troubled by what he said.”*

*“Oh my heavens! Why would I feel troubled?”*

*“You know the reason for your irritation.”*

*“No, tell me please. Please I beg of you. This is not the right emotion to feel. He has found something magnificent for himself; he found clarity, his reason to keep pushing the boulder like Sisyphus.”*

*“Yes, exactly that. That is the reason why you are irritated. You have not found your calling yet, have you?”*

*“No. Am I jealous of that?”*

*“Certainly that. Absolutely that. Also, your jealousy is being punctured with rage.”*

*“I deny it with all my being. I cannot give birth to let alone nurture such negative emotions towards my brother.”*

*“Right now he is less of a brother, and more of a thief.”*

*“A thief?? I am associating him with THEFT?”*

*“Yes. You feel like this vocation was meant for you. You believe that it was your responsibility to find a purpose of such a stratum before anyone else, making it your own. You wanted to carve your name upon it before anyone else, but your brother beat you to it.”*

*“You are being severely immature. Severely! Severely!!!!”*

*“You wanted to monopolize it, so selfishly. Nevertheless, the rage seethes within you as you realize that now .....Now you can never claim this vocation as your own. Now every time you try to call it your own, I will be there to remind you that you were merely inspired. Another individual found it first; you are left to follow the footsteps of the founder. You. Were. Incompetent. That boils down to the resolution that this vocation is not meant for you. You still have to shoulder the responsibility of finding yours. You still have to keep pushing your own boulder.”*

*“I really failed to articulate the call. It was right there in front of me and I was ignorant. I was blind. Right?”*

*“Hahaha...hahahaha...Admit your defeat Falaq. You still have to dwell upon these murky waters. Dwell upon this state of confusion restlessly.”*

*“Stop laughing, please. You are hurting me. I understand. Please stop.”*

*“You were a blind, ignorant fool. Gifted with the power of sight but failed to use it. You deserve to stay tangled. Why are you suddenly so desperate to find your calling? Did you not wish to stay ‘Amorphous’? You hypocrite, imbecile of a being.”*

“NO, I AM NOT!!!!” Kishor shrieked as Falaq screamed and those aching words faded away into the horizon. “Are you alright?! What happened?” he asked with a concerned look on his face.

Falaq felt as if her cheeks were burning and a sudden sense of embarrassment loomed over her, “No, no I am fine. For a moment I was lost in my thoughts,” she said, trying to regain her composure. “Are you sure? You look as though you’re being attacked by something”, He inquired even more.

Falaq quickly tried to deflect the topic. “How can I be attacked when I am surrounded by such a pleasant vista? In fact, I am overjoyed. Thank you, brother, for bringing me here. I am grateful that you found me worthy enough of your companionship and trusting me with your secret. This day will be etched in my memory.”

Kishor understood that prolonging his urge to understand Falaq’s troubles will only lead her to become sour, “I think we should head for home now. The sun is setting down and we should not upset your father.” Falaq replied with a concerned look on her face, “Yes, let’s hurry.”

She sat upon the passenger seat and Kishor sped the bike to its full potential. They were flying again under the crimson twilight sky but Falaq chose to close her eyes this time. “I don’t want to remember you. You shattered me,” these were the last words she uttered as they left the forest behind.

### *Part Two*

The muddy roads slowly faded away as the car ascended upon the asphalt road. It was the end of the vacation and the Jamid family was returning to their city. Falaq particularly did not enjoy the eight-hour-long car ride with her parents. There was an unspoken rule that made the whole experience uneasy for her, which was to never speak loudly or much while Mr. Jamid was driving. It tended to push him out of focus and he would start shouting at everyone out of frustration. Falaq wanted to avoid such chaos while they were confined in such a small space. Hence, the three of them would always find themselves on a pathetic silent journey that made them similar to corpses as dead people cannot speak. The only thing left for her to do was to tuck her earphones in, listen to some music which attested that she was not dead yet while feasting her eyes upon the moving countryside sceneries.

The summer spent at Kishor's home had established some unforgettable memories followed by some distressing self-realization. She felt trifled as the derogatory words her psyche labeled her with whispered around her constantly. She turned up the volume, put the song on repeat and thought to herself that maybe the loudness of the music would be able to silence her stream of thoughts. It was one of her fondest songs designated only for road trips, "I keep my distance from the target...I keep my focus on the red dot...And then... At a hundred thousand per hour ...I broke your heart...At the chosen time... But why did I do it?" She could really resonate with the verse "At a hundred thousand per hour" as their car rushed over the smooth asphalt highway. Her focus broke as Falaq noticed Mrs. Jamid was poking her while speaking inaudibly. She begrudgingly took out one of the earphones.

"Your father called you twice," she said to Falaq in a hushed tone.

Falaq was slightly alarmed, “I am sorry. My earphones were plugged in. What was that you were saying father?”

Falaq noticed Mr. Jamid’s eyebrows were furrowed and his face was a bit stiff. “I am embarrassed to even be having this talk with you. I did not say anything sooner as we were on vacation. I did not want to cause a scene in the house. However, some things need to be set right,” he said as he drove.

“I do not understand you, father.”

“It is okay to have fun. But do you not think that you should maintain some boundaries while having it?”

“I do not understand what you are implying,” she said, even more perplexed than weary.

“Did you leave the house with Kishor without notifying me or your mother?”

“Umm... Yes, I did. But father, I was mostly inside the house throughout the days we spent and I became a bit bored. So, when Kishor invited me for a bike ride, I did not hesitate,” she answered without thinking twice.

“Did you take my permission before riding a bike with him? You did not even tell me that you were going outside. Do you know who told me about it? A neighbor saw you two on the bike cruising away.”

“Which neighbor?” Falaq inquired.



“He saw you holding Kishor’s waist! Spreading your legs on a bike!” He was enraged and in a disgusted tone he said, "You both were way too close for my liking. I will not tolerate such blasphemous, brazen behavior!”

Falaq felt a shrill traversing down her back. Her ears were unable to make sense of his words. The music collided with the vile words, leaving a ringing in her ears.

“N..no father! You are completely misunderstanding me. I do not see him like...”

“Falaq! Listen to your father!” her mother intervened. “You are a woman now and you should understand better. If you want to live respectfully in this society, you have to maintain some boundaries with men, even your cousins. Or else you are reduced to an easy girl for entertainment,” Mrs. Jamid chewed those words out.

“But how can you say something like this? For the love of God, he is your nephew! I see him as my brother!” Falaq defended herself. “You have to believe me. I do not harbor any promiscuous feelings that you are accusing of me nor has he ever disrespected me!”

“Don’t you dare utter another word!” Mr. Jamid’s voice thundered.

Oftentimes Falaq was able to silence her rage but being attacked at such unfair means snapped her. Having such an innocent occurrence be twisted into something so incestuous and vile irked her in all the wrong ways. Her eyes became blurry and tears started pouring out burning her cheeks.

“You know what? Both of you disgust me! It was an innocent outing!” she screamed for the first time in ages at the top of her lungs. Her voice became louder within the confines of the car and

echoed louder, “We went for a hike in the forest! THE GOD DAMN FOREST! And how else did you want me to sit on a bike? Sideways?! You know that is dangerous!”

“How dare you speak to us like that?! You shameless slut! Sluts like you ride the bike putting their legs apart. Are you embarrassed? Do you have any idea how much embarrassment I felt when Azaad said those words to me?! He laughed and ridiculed me saying that daughters from a respectable family do not behave the way you did! He told me that you should start covering yourself properly! He had the audacity to say such words to me because you were so immodest!” her father screamed back before the echoes for Falaq’s voice could settle.

Falaq stopped functioning for a moment. She remembered Kishor’s mother, aunt Rashida, had once warned her about Mr. Azaad and his perverted stares, “He never looks straight into your eyes while talking to you. He looks at your chest first whether it makes you uncomfortable or not.” Suddenly a tremor full of disgust traveled to each and every part of Falaq’s skin. Her muscles clenched her body thinking how the old man vilified her body. She also became a victim of his ogling gaze and vile perception all because for one split moment, she forgot to maintain the stereotypical modest appearance.

“If you want to live here in this family then you must abide by the rules!! I am not raising you to become a shameless woman,” her father said to discipline her with his dominance.

Falaq started wheezing. From her chin to her lap tear droplets were slowly pouring down. She realized there was no point in prolonging this conversation, proving her innocence or defending Kishor’s. She desperately wanted to ask, “Why did you let him speak about me like that? He violated me! It was him who was inappropriate, not me! Am I not your daughter? How could you let a man speak like that about your daughter? Why did you not you kill him?!” The muscles in

her throat clinched and tightened into an unbearable stiffness. She wanted to scream and let all the air out of her lungs. She wanted to hide but where to in such a small space?

The clenched muscles were slowly loosening up and her whole body came to a stupor. She crouched and rested her head upon the window frame, looking at the horizon mindlessly while her mind was getting foggier by the minute. She noticed a truck rushing to overtake them with a blurry vision. It was an almost empty poultry truck. In the corner of the cage, the space was being occupied by a lonesome chicken. Flumped inside the coop, resting its beak upon the bars- looking rejected, devastated; as if it had already come to terms with its mortality. In that split moment, Falaq saw the chicken looking up at the blue sky through the grimy metal bars as life slowly left its eyes. Falaq smiled. “At least you are leaving your cage,” she murmured under her breath as the song kept repeating “At a hundred thousand per hour ...I broke your heart...At the chosen time...”

## Chapter III

### The Twilight

#### *Part One*

That summer vacation changed everything. Life acquired the same mundane pace as before, but Falaq was struggling to feel comfortable in her own skin. She began to accept that, maybe she was at fault, and that there was something wrong with her. Maybe she would not be a victim of Mr. Azaad if she were a bit more conscious of her surroundings and made better decisions about how she carried herself out in public. Maybe she should have been a more poised woman, the woman that the yellow-eyed monster cannot find as she hides under her thick scarf. Maybe it was too impudent for her to roam around in such an uncouth manner with her ‘male’ cousin. She pondered if things would have been different if he was her biological brother. Nevertheless, after that bone-shattering encounter, Falaq could not even look into her fathers’ eyes. “All the mayhem could have been avoided. If only I did not ride that bike,” she only had herself to blame.

The outside that once felt so vibrant, so mysterious and inviting slowly started to change its demeanor. She tried to rekindle the spark she felt for the world outside, but after suffering that horrendous confrontation, every time she stepped out, she felt as though she was under the spotlight and that every man in the street was waiting, cheering, clapping for her to perform her act- an act that was only reserved for an entity blessed with ample bosom and curves that reminded one of evergreen mountains that quenched one’s unknown thirst and left one craving for more. Yes, she was the one who performed this act to these strangers who once brought her

comfort, who once felt familiar. After the act concluded, she found herself lying flat on her bed with a coarse heart, pulverized.

Even the black sunglasses that once were her knight in shining armor started to feel like an object that glistened way too much, attracting too much attention. Some of the days the sunglasses would completely stop working and she could feel gazes penetrating through the blackened shades, barging into her home without permission and laughing at her decorations. The eyes that were once curious of people and wandered, were now fixated downwards, onto concrete pavements; filled with fright because she could not bring herself to discover again that the unfamiliar faces, stitched with a pair of yellow eyes were invading her garments to lick her skin without her consent. There was no joy or interest left to play with dresses or to be an enigma for strangers. Even the very familiar over-bridge where she left one of her fondest memories now appeared as an obstacle that she did not want to overcome. A part of her heart still ached to find the homeless man again. She wanted to sit beside him and absorb the city and its shenanigans thoughtlessly, imbued with silent amazement but her feet became too heavy every time she was near the steps of the bridge. The bubble she curated exploded, leaving her naked to the eyes of the city- shunning Falaq into her chambers.

Mrs. Jamid no longer had to comment on Falaq's outfits as she would only wear the same black shrug throughout the week until it smelled of stale sweat. Even though the stench was unbearable, she was pleased because finally, her daughter was on the right path. She was rather relieved from anxiety as Mrs. Jamid did not have to worry about getting reprimanded by her husband for not being able to control her grown-up daughter as a woman. Mrs. Jamid was taught that a woman who grabs attention is shallow in morale. Men in general refuse to settle down with one who is not docile. Her husband, Falaq's father once told her "The reason I married you is

because you are a quiet woman. I do not appreciate anyone talking over me.” Hence, Mrs. Jamid was much more than satisfied with her daughter’s development towards feminine maturity.

She remembered the time when her daughter came for advice on what to do if someone from the street cat-called her. She told Falaq to be ignorant; told her to walk past them silently as such perpetrators liked receiving attention. Mrs. Jamid recalled her daughter’s scrutinizing expression, hearing her resolve. Falaq questioned her even more, “Mother, if a man dares to sexualize me, why should I stay quiet? I should alert other people about his ill intentions, right? Why can I not curse him back?”

“Well if you give him an earful it will show that you were bothered by his comment. If he realizes that he was successful in grabbing your attention, it will please him even more,” Mrs. Jamid insisted.

“But mother, what if he harasses another woman if I fail to teach him a lesson? Or commits another atrocity much crueler than before? If I do not make him understand his wrongdoings, then he might take it for granted that it is permissible to harass women,” Falaq asked her mother with a burning gaze.

Mrs. Jamid was taken aback by her logic but could not agree. The method Falaq spoke about felt unfamiliar to her. “Well if he sees you gathering crowds and decides to attack you, what will you do? Can you fight a man? God granted us a delicate body, created us as nurturing and forgiving souls because He wanted balance. If both men and women were to be made for dominance then a clash would occur, bringing apocalyptic devastations. So, we as ‘women’ must compromise our rage to live in harmony- at least one of our kind has to,” Mrs. Jamid felt satisfied with her answer.

She added, “Also is it not more strenuous to gather a crowd? And who would even listen to a woman? Do you not understand that avoiding conflict by any means is the best way to preserve peace?” She saw Falaq preparing for another tiresome round of debate. Before her daughter could even speak she stopped her. “I do not wish to prolong this conversation anymore. I have work left to do.” Mrs. Jamid remembered the memory with great fondness because finally, it was paying off.

However, the feeling of pleasure was cut short as she heard the bell ringing. The sound was unnatural. It was not a part of their daily routine. “That is strange. Who is here in the middle of the day? I placed the trash outside, collected milk from the milkman, even the maid has gone home. Who could it be now?” Mrs. Jamid reached the door gingerly while pondering about the stranger’s identity. She heard Falaq’s footsteps looming behind. Mrs. Jamid looked through the peeping hole and was taken aback. It was Kishor, standing on the other side. Her face went glum. It should have been anyone else but him.

“Why is he here?” She felt uncomfortable as Falaq was there. She really did not want them to meet again. Who knows how Kishor might influence her again, wooing her of a life that is shallow in morale?

With evident reluctance, she opened the door and saw Kishor standing with a beaming smile. “Hello, aunt Syeda! Oh hey, Falaq! Sorry to drop by without any invitation. It was quite an adventure to find your apartment. Can I come in? The weather’s too hot today!”

With a distasteful look in her eyes Mrs. Jamid said, “Yes, come on in.” Kishor sat on the sofa, covered in sweat so Falaq turned on the fan. She greeted Kishor with a dry greeting and stood near the sofa looking a bit frantic.

“Would you like to have a drink?” offered Mrs. Jamid not out of hospitality but because it is what you are supposed to do when you have a guest.

“Thanks for the offer, aunt but I’m afraid I have to leave soon. I came here just to meet you all for a short time. Uncle Jamid is at his office now, right?” Kishor asked while cooling himself under the fan, failing to understand the tense situation.

“Yes. You should have visited after Maghreb, if you wanted to meet him,” Mrs. Jamid said with contempt.

“That’s alright. My bus leaves at five o’clock so I’m in a rush. I thought of paying a visit as I’m already in the city.”

“Where are you headed? I am making lunch. You should have some with us. I cannot let you leave with an empty stomach. What would your parents say if they came to learn about it?” Mrs. Jamid asked apathetically.

“Oh Aunt, please. I don’t want to cause any trouble. I really just wanted to visit Falaq but if you insist, I’ll have a drink please.”

Mrs. Jamid tried to stay calm and subdue her repulsive feelings. She glared at Falaq. Her eyes notoriously reminded her daughter to maintain a boundary and to not over indulge herself into any conversation. Falaq looked visibly uncomfortable. “Fine, let me prepare the drink while you two chat,” Mrs. Jamid said reluctantly.

As soon as she walked away Kishor asked “You look like you’ve lost a lot of weight in the past two months. What happened? Are you sick?”



After a long pause Falaq replied in an agitated tone, “I am okay. Do not bother.” Kishor did not believe her. She looked a bit jittery as if given any chance she would not hesitate to flee the conversation. He became concerned; she was not in her usual jolly demeanor.

“I hope everything’s alright with you. You can talk to me about anything you want to, you know. I’ll always lend you ears so don’t hesitate to call me anytime,” Kishor lowered his voice and said, “Is your father being too much? Trying to control you way too much? Tell me about it. I am sure talking can be helpful.”

“I am fine, please. Tell me about your plans,” Falaq tried to divert the conversation from her. Kishor hesitated before replying as his enthusiasm was not being reciprocated. She did not even sound sincere.

“Well, I’m planning to visit the sea for the first time ever! Alone! My parents finally gave in. I annoyed them so much for their permission! I am outrageously excited about it. What should I bring for you? Do you want seashells or pickles?” Kishor’s ardour was pouring out from his voice.

“It is alright. You do not have to bring anything for me. I am just happy for you,” Falaq said with an artificial smile.

“I wish I could tag you along with me. I always appreciated how you pay attention to minor details. We could’ve shared jostling inputs with each other while discovering so much about the sea. It’d have been so great,” he expressed with sincerity.

“I am sure this journey would be more wonderful if completed in solitude brother. You are lucky to have lenient parents. Unfortunately, mine are not,” said Falaq, avoiding eye contact.

“I pray that someday you’ll also be able to bend them a bit and explore life with all its glory. But I think you’re right. I should experience this grand escapade in solitude. I promise to tell you all about the eight hundred miles and everything I discovered when we meet again,” Kishor pledged to her.

Falaq went silent as her mother came back with the drinks. Mrs. Jamid wanted to disrupt their conversation but could not find a proper excuse for it. Some cooking was left to be done. Reluctantly she said, “Falaq let me know when he is leaving. I have to head back to the kitchen. Do not make the conversation lengthy as he is in a rush, okay?” Falaq replied with a nod while Kishor was sipping the freshly squeezed juice. He offered Falaq a glass but she declined. Instead she looked at him and asked “If you are so keen to see the wonders that the Lord crafted then why are you not appreciating the city? You visited the city like what- once or twice? But I never heard anything about it from you. Do you not think your journey should start from here?”

Kishor was taken aback, “Well, that’s a good question but I don’t feel the city calling me. I don’t think I will ever come to appreciate it. The city from in and out appears so artificial. The people look desolate and mechanized, wearing empty stares that are hazardously driven to accommodate a materialistic, fickle lifestyle,” Kishor said firmly.

Falaq was disturbed by what he said, “You are blinded by obscure prejudices. People here are humans too. They share the same feelings as you do, maybe not as intensely like you, but they do. I am sure you can find signs of authenticity in decadent places if you look closely.”

“I don’t think so. There’s a high chance I’ll come across souls who have accepted an insufferable lifestyle to satiate their need for validation. For example, look at your father. He has become so rigid. The only thing he cares about is what other people think of him and earning their respect.

Don't you think that's shallow? I don't think I can ever feel any connection to a place filled with pretentious inhabitants," he said in a hushed voice.

"We are not a pretentious crowd. But I agree, most people dwell in this insufferable place emanating a materialistic behavior but they too carry unfathomable amounts of suffering," she argued.

"Alright, alright! If you think so, then when I come back, take me to an exploration. Take me to places. Contradict my beliefs! Show me something familiar in these strangers like me. Help me fall in love with the people," Kishor said with a tinge of excitement.

"I will, gladly. I plan to take you to my hide-out too when you come back. I will try my best to change your opinions," Falaq had a determined look in her eyes.

"I look forward to it!" Kishor said it with a genuine and exposed smile that did not mock but rather showed sincerity towards that eventful day. "I should be going now. I'm glad that I visited you before leaving. I really wanted to tell you about my upcoming endeavors because you were the first person I confided in when I realized my purpose," he looked at Falaq with gratefulness.

Smiling wryly, Falaq called for Mrs. Jamid. He bade them goodbye and left to seek his long-awaited escapade towards an unknown horizon. Falaq kept looking through the peeping hole as his silhouette faded away. She began to look forward to the day of his return and felt excitement in her heart after many days.

## *Part Two*

The catastrophic phone call came protruding in one bright morning disrupting her sleep. It was unexpected for anyone to call her at 11 o' clock on a Monday morning. It was even stranger that the call was coming from Abid. In a daze, Falaq picked up the phone thinking that he called mistakenly. "Hello!" Falaq mumbled. From the other side, a sound of whimpering came forth. "Hello? Abid? Are you okay? Is there something wrong?" she asked anxiously.

"Kishor is dead."

Falaq was confused. She could not register properly what he said in a faint voice. "I am sorry. What?"

He spoke again, in a much clearer tone, "Kishor is dead. Our brother is dead. The sea took him. He drowned." Falaq felt as if her chest was ripping apart hearing Abid.

"Who told you this? You are joking. This is a prank right? Hahaha... Kishor told you to say this, right?"

"No, he really is de..."

Before he could even finish his words Falaq interrupted, "I know why he devised this plan. He is coming back and wants to surprise me this way, right? Ha-ha what an insidious plan you two made. Ha-ha I nearly believed you. There is no way that he can be dead. He met me a few days ago!" Falaq said confidently.

"This is not a prank, Falaq. Kishor's body was found near the shore today, seven in the morning by the coastal guards. The police are speculating that he may have drowned the night before. Apparently, he went to the sea when it was high tide. I do not know what else to say...."

An abrupt sound of wailing pierced through the phone. It was unendurable, everything was becoming intolerable. She tried to stand up but her legs felt weak. The room began to spin. “*You will not be able to handle this alone. Find your mother*” someone said to her in a trice. Falaq managed to walk up towards the kitchen but fell down, stumping on her knees. Mrs. Jamid was there making breakfast preparations but seeing Falaq dropping to the floor with a hollow expression created a tremor inside her. She quickly grabbed Falaq’s arm trying to balance her on her feet again but Falaq dragged her to the floor. She started a harrowing wail. Mrs. Jamid sat with her on the floor while gently patting her head. “What happened? Tell me my dear what happened?” Falaq vomited the words. “He is dead, mother. KISHOR IS DEAD”.

Falaq could not remember clearly what happened afterwards. Retracing her memories was not an easy task as everything that happened was so fast, faded and blurry. She perhaps saw Mrs. Jamid calling her husband. He then rushed inside the house commanding to pack their bags. She remembered standing in front of her closet with an empty stare not knowing which clothes to pick out. “Does it matter at all? Does it really matter what I am wearing?” She kept questioning the need to pick out clothes during such a sad hour, grabbing whatever caught her hands. She wanted to run to Kishor for all that mattered was to see his face one last time. Falaq took a raggedy brown scarf. Before covering up she crumpled the scarf into a ball, squashing it over her face to let out a clamorous scream. She gasped for air, “*Why did I not stop him? Why did I not stop him? Why did I not stop him?!*” Mr. Jamid entered her room, finding Falaq in a disheveled state. Without saying anything, he took her bags to the car as they set off for a tedious and agonizing journey. She kept hearing a weeping sound coming from her mother. “Why are you crying? I thought you despised him?” Falaq thought in her confusion, heartbreak and anger.

Before entering Kishor's house Mr. Jamid pat Falaq's back. "Try to keep your calm. Understand that the Lord has a plan for all of us. He is the only one who granted us life so it is fair for Him to take it back whenever He wishes." Falaq squeezed his hand with eyes full of tears,

"But father, how is it fair? If an elderly person were to die I could have accepted it. But Kishor? He had so much left to see, so much life, such vivacity... How is this fair? Is it fair to rob someone of life, someone who had so much to live for?" Falaq started wheezing but Mr. Jamid could not find a word to comfort her. "Go inside. His body will arrive shortly. I need to make parking arrangements", he spoke as his voice cracked. Falaq looked at the house with dreaded eyes. Through the doors an echo of wailing came forth, leaving the soul dry. She knew this place would never shine brightly again. With a deep breath she entered a house where the living was also being robbed of life.

The darkest hour came bringing heavy, gray, stormy clouds shadowing the sun. When Falaq was still a child she saw similar dark clouds looming when her grandmother passed away. She remembered asking Mrs. Jamid about the sudden change of weather. She was told that when an unsullied soul dies, Mother Nature cries with the grievers. She looked up to the sky through the balcony. A drop of rain tapped her face, breaking her momentary trance, "What more can You even do? Contest the omnipotent Lord? You should cry a river for being so powerless and pathetic. It is Your sea where God decided to drown his body did They not? So, cry, mourn, and wail. Create a rampage, but remember! No amount of rampage will ever bring him back!" she thought while seething in anger.

Abid arrived and stood next to her without making a sound. He extended his hands forward as the sprinkles were starting to get heavier. “He is going to be here soon. Uncle Selim just called to inform us. How is he so calm? You know, he did not shed a drop of tear when he heard the news. He just dressed up and decided to go to the morgue. Now, he is in the same car where the body is resting. How is he still not breaking apart?” Abid asked as his shirt soaked the raindrops. Falaq had no answer.

It was indeed a mystery to her of how some people can endure so much in the face of chaos but she was not one of them. She was being eaten apart; her eyes red and burning. Abid continued speaking “I wish it was me instead of him. I wish the Lord reduced some of my time and gave it to him. Uncle Selim was so reluctant to give permission at first but Kishor was persistent. He fought so much for this trip. The fool he was. If he obeyed uncle for one more time, we would not be in this position.”

Falaq looked at Abid scornfully. “So you think it is his fault that he is dead because he was not a filial son! You think he wanted to die? Is that what you make of him? You both grew up together. You have spent more time with him and this is how you understood him? It was a fucking accident! I am sure he was the happiest person on earth, among any of us before he died. He was able to break his chains for a moment; take a breath like a free man for a moment. He was better than us.... He was...,” Falaq could not finish her words in the face of such hypocrisy and a choking sensation grappled her throat. Out of the blue, the agonizing sound of the ambulance struck their ears. “He is here!” Abid stood on the balcony looking at his feet while Falaq rushed towards the main gate.

The air was heavy and time came to a halt as Falaq tried to move past the crowd surrounding the coffin. She was not ready to face the sight but her body dragged her out of desperation. She was desperate to see Kishor's face for one last time before he disintegrated into the soil for eternity. While dragging her body towards the casket, from the corner of her eyes she saw Mr. Azaad being present in the crowd. They exchanged glances and as per his nature, Falaq discovered his eyes being glued upon her chest. Astonishingly, she did not feel offended nor did she try to fix her scarf. That is when she realized that not only was her body becoming numb but so were her feelings. It was as if the grim reaper did not just rob Kishor out of life but it was also gouging out any humane quintessence that belonged to her, slowly- leaving her an empty shell as she tried to reach the casket.

With every minute Falaq was being crushed by the crowd. She tried to look over the shoulders of the people but the crowd's interest was unforgiving. For a split moment Falaq saw a light flashing before her eyes amidst the squirming torsos. It was Kishor's face that blinded her. She found herself standing in front of the casket feeling perplexed as his face kept glowing in the thick of the white shroud. He looked happy while lying in his eternal slumber which left Falaq flabbergasted. She reached her hand out trying to touch his face but the crowd pushed her back. Falaq stood behind motionlessly with a hollow expression pondering why people were mourning when Kishor looked so tranquil. She heard Mr. Jamid's abrupt announcement that after a short while the body will be taken to the burial site.

It took six people to carry the yellow wooden casket. When the casket was leaving the main door, Rashida was clasp onto Mrs. Jamid for dear life, "Sayeda, bury me with my son. I beg of you! I have been such a horrible mother! Take me instead of my son!" she kept hollering the same lines over and over again before falling unconscious. Mrs. Jamid screamed for help.



Some women from the crowd came forth to bring Rashida to her chambers. After a while, Rashida regained her consciousness and the situation quietened. Mrs. Jamid was sitting beside her the whole time.

“Sayeda, for the rest of my life I will live with regret. I was upset with him before he left the house. I did not look him in the eye when he was leaving. My son! How can I live with myself? If only I told him to stay safe maybe he would still be alive, returning home to my arms. How can I live with myself?” Rashida wailed.

Mrs. Jamid’s face went glum. She remembered every single time she reprimanded Falaq for venturing outside, making her leave the house with an unhappy face. Suddenly she felt the urge to see her daughter and hold her in her arms, apologize to her for being an unsupportive mother. She wanted her daughter to forgive her for not cherishing her wishes, for not defending her in the face of insults, “She only wanted to explore the outside world, adorning herself with jewels and dresses that made her feel confident and what did I do? I robbed her of that happiness. What was I thinking? She did not demand too much from me, I could have easily accepted it. What was wrong with me?”

The sudden surge of epiphanies led Sayeda to look for Falaq frantically throughout the house but she was not there. In a sheer panic, she rushed towards the burial grounds as her instincts told her Falaq would be there and there indeed she was, standing in front of the main gate of the graveyard. Sayeda ran towards her, took her daughter into her arms, hugging her so tightly that she could hear Falaq’s heart through her chest.

Falaq looked at her with a hollow expression. “Mother, I was denied entry. The guard told me women are not allowed inside the graveyard. He told me it pains the dead to see a

woman from beneath as they can see me through my clothes.” Sayeda kept patting her head and said “Do not worry my dear. I am here now. I will stand here with you. Let us watch his burial from afar and pray for his departed soul”. Falaq started crying hysterically looking up towards the sky as Sayeda kept wiping her tears using the raggedy scarf that was covering Falaq’s chest.

## Chapter IV

### The Sunrise

Six months had passed but not an ounce of life ever found its way back to Kishor's home. Day by day the suburb was becoming unbearable for Abid. Every day he had to see the half-dead faces of people in the house. Hence, for a change of pace he thought of visiting the city but in his heart he wanted to meet Falaq the most. The last conversation he had with her left him in immeasurable guilt. He wanted to apologize for his rudeness to her personally rather than a call because it might look insincere. He decided to keep the apology short, quick but genuine. One day Abid decided to take an early bus to the city. After a tedious eight hour journey he managed to reach Mr. Jamid's house from the suburbs when it was just past noon.

Before he could even ring the bell, the door unlocked and a woman wearing black sunglasses was hastily leaving the house. Both of them jolted upon seeing each other. As they managed to regain their senses, Abid recognized it was Falaq. A flood of awkward greetings were exchanged and she invited him to the house but he felt the need to decline her offer as he thought of quickly being done with the dreaded conversation and leaving the premise. Both kept standing awkwardly again in front of the door. In his mind, Abid was trying to arrange the words to say to her in lieu of his visit.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you in person. I could have called you but it would not properly convey my sincerity. I wanted to say...I am sorry for the remarks I made that day. It was impudent and selfish of me. I made the whole incident about myself.” Falaq had a dumbfounded look on her face, yet he added, “I am not here to stay. I just wanted to let you know about all of

this and get rid of the burden off my chest.” Abid kept looking at her for an answer but Falaq took her time.

“I think we should sit down somewhere, have a drink and talk about it. Will you spare some time? I do not think this place is quite appropriate for our conversation,” she said in a spontaneous yet casual demeanor. Abid contemplated declining her offer again but a part of him insisted on accepting her request. “Okay, but where are we heading?” he asked.

“I know a good place. You will enjoy the lemonade. I am sure you have not eaten anything yet. You can grab some lunch there too. You must be feeling so hungry and tired after such a long trip. Let us get going,” Falaq insisted.

The coffee shop was located at a quaint and secluded place, not many people were around. As they sat down, Falaq ordered lemonade for both and a luncheon set for Abid. The waiter delivered their food as he looked around. He realized why this place could be one of her favorite places as one could have a glimpse of the sky through the giant concrete buildings. It baffled Abid because never in his imagination did he think there could be a place, existing in the city where one can rarely hear the buzzing traffic. “I am surprised to learn of such a secluded place in the city. How did you even find it?”

Falaq was putting on her sunglasses as she replied knowingly, “I traverse these roads more frequently than you can imagine but surprisingly, I never get tired of them. Each and every day I find something amusing while walking amongst these familiar roads.”

“So you are doing better than before I suppose?”

“What do you mean?” Falaq asked while squinting.

“I mean, it seems like you were able to bounce back to some level of normalcy. As for me, I am still grief-stricken over Kishor’s death. It makes you sick in the head if his face keeps popping up every time you close your eyes. I am traumatized by the memories of that day. Do you know why I paid this sudden visit to the city? I could not bear to see the lifeless face of my uncle or the tear-stricken eyes of my aunt anymore. The state of my mind does not get any better seeing them in such a state daily. I cannot live like this. Remembering Kishor’s face haunts me. I want to escape. I want to leave it all!” Abid’s voice was shaking as he rumbled.

“Some days I wonder whether I have any tears left to cry so as to numb the pain,” Falaq spoke in a monotonous tone.

“You are still mourning? I presumed you had overcome your grief. I clearly misunderstood you. I am sorry,” Abid said sheepishly.

“No no! Do not be, please. I just... I understand what you are feeling... Kishor stole a remnant of us that day. He took a part of us to his grave, creating an enormous wound inside us. We will keep yearning for the missing piece as the wound keeps widening in course of time. It is never going to heal I am afraid,” Falaq spoke as she stirred the straw in her lemonade glass.

Abid sat silently, deep into contemplation, staring emptily at the lemonade glass, barely touched. He realized he has no appetite.

“Were you able to find a solution to this unbearable suffering? If you did, tell me. Please. I keep remembering the smell of the mud when his casket was being buried. I keep thinking that here we are, blessed with the gift of life and walking over the same soil that is decomposing his body down in the bosom of the earth. It feels fucking absurd! It feels fucking unfair! I see his face everywhere- the tree we used to climb on, the road we took for school. Every time his face

appears, I feel guilty, I feel horrible! Why was I chosen to live instead of him?" Abid said in a stinging voice.

Falaq saw his breaths getting shorter as tears streamed out from his eyes. Abid started weeping, his body shook uncontrollably. She reached for his hand, gently patting his shoulder to calm him down while her vision was clouded by tears.

"I have done my fair share of bargain with the Lord too but the reality is that-he is not coming back to us. I too asked the same questions. I blamed nature for being so feeble, for allowing the Lord to commit such an atrocity. Why did They have to bestow him with such a painful death? He was still a child inside. Even a small green sapling brought him immense joy. He appreciated the Lord's creative endeavors no matter how minuscule or magnanimous they were. He celebrated the grandiosity of life itself but then why did the Lord choose to drown him in deep dark waters? Why did They have to shun his curiosity in the cruelest of ways? I do not know brother, I have no answer to this," she spoke earnestly.

Abid wiped his cheek. In his head a thousand cranes were flapping their wings, creating a paralyzing uproar. He saw her dispersed face letting out a deep sigh through the lemonade glass. Upon her red shirt tear droplets created dark round patterns as they were being soaked. He tried to look straight up at Falaq but his eyes were heavy. Falaq kept speaking,

"The matter of life and death is beyond our control, brother. We cannot contest the Lord as mere mortals. We were never given such privileges thus our anger becomes futile as our lives. After his death I spent my days being swallowed by my bed, unable to lift a finger. Every day I was in a comatose state. You know I once told him I liked to drown myself in the sea of despair but this time I wanted the suffering to end badly. What an irony! Ha-ha. How foolish I was!"

Abid tried to construct a smile but failed miserably. He kept trying to identify Falaq's features through the misty cold glass as the light refracted and made her face more distorted.

“When you find yourself at the end of the tunnel, naturally the longing for light grows stronger. I cannot change the reality nor can I bring him back. But one day, the realization hit me. There may be a way to tame the turbulence in our hearts,” she calmly said.

Abid felt a shock traversing the creases of his skin. He asked while gazing deeply into the distorted set of eyes through the half-empty lemonade glass, belonging to the person in front of him, “So you found the remedy to this madness?”

“I thought I could never smile again. I too thought life had no concrete meaning but is it not wonderful to make Kishor our reason to keep moving forward? He lives in our memories, making him much more alive than ever. As long as we exist, he will continue to live on. Kishor wanted to absorb the world through his vision so I decided to lend him my eyes. As long as I live, with every fiber of my being I will happily be the witness of all life and its sorrows on behalf of him. I shall carry and nurture him in my consciousness, brother. I decided to make it my purpose of living,” the deformed face spoke in a firm notion.

In the spur of the moment, through the frosty glass, Abid could not recognize the identity of the individual sitting in front of him anymore. Sometimes, the outline of the silhouette carried the semblance of Falaq, sometimes it did not. Abid could hear his heart thumping while the entity spoke again,

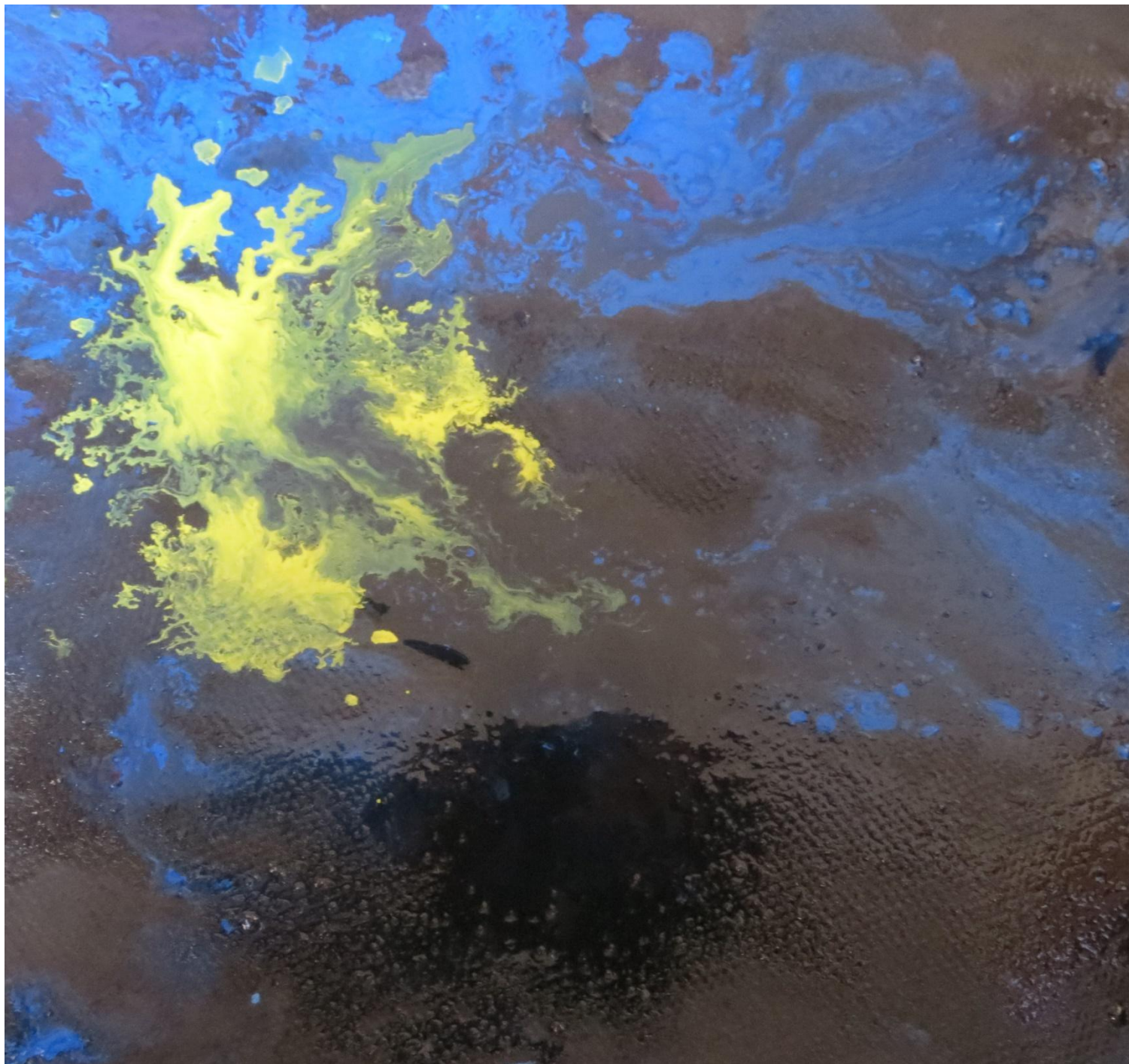
“As mortals, we were granted a fateful chance to traverse upon the realm of earth, discover Mother Nature's opulence within our short lifespan. Among us, Kishor was the one who eagerly desired to discover Her idiosyncrasies. He desired to understand Her, be one with Her the most.

But, he left this realm without being able to satiate his hunger; he left remaining unfulfilled. So brother, make sure to remember Kishor's face when the leaves dance mildly in the breeze. Think of him fondly when you walk over verdant grasslands without shoes while breathing the crystalline air. Tell him the stories you found in your city corridors without wasting a second. Look deep into his mother's brown eyes when she talks to you. Help him to keep traversing upon this plane without a body. If the wound keeps splitting no matter how many times you stitch it, do not feel perplexed. In fact, adore it. I adore the wound, brother. The pain reminds me of him. It bears the sole testament of his existence."

Through the frosty glass, Abid saw Kishor's face appearing for a split moment. This time, the sight of Kishor's face did not haunt him. Abid extended his hand to touch the face. As he came into contact with it, a teardrop fell upon his hand. He discovered, it was Falaq's eyes that were glimmering.

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“There is No Blue without Yellow”

Medium: *Original Artwork made with Acrylic on 12”x 14” inch Cartridge Paper*