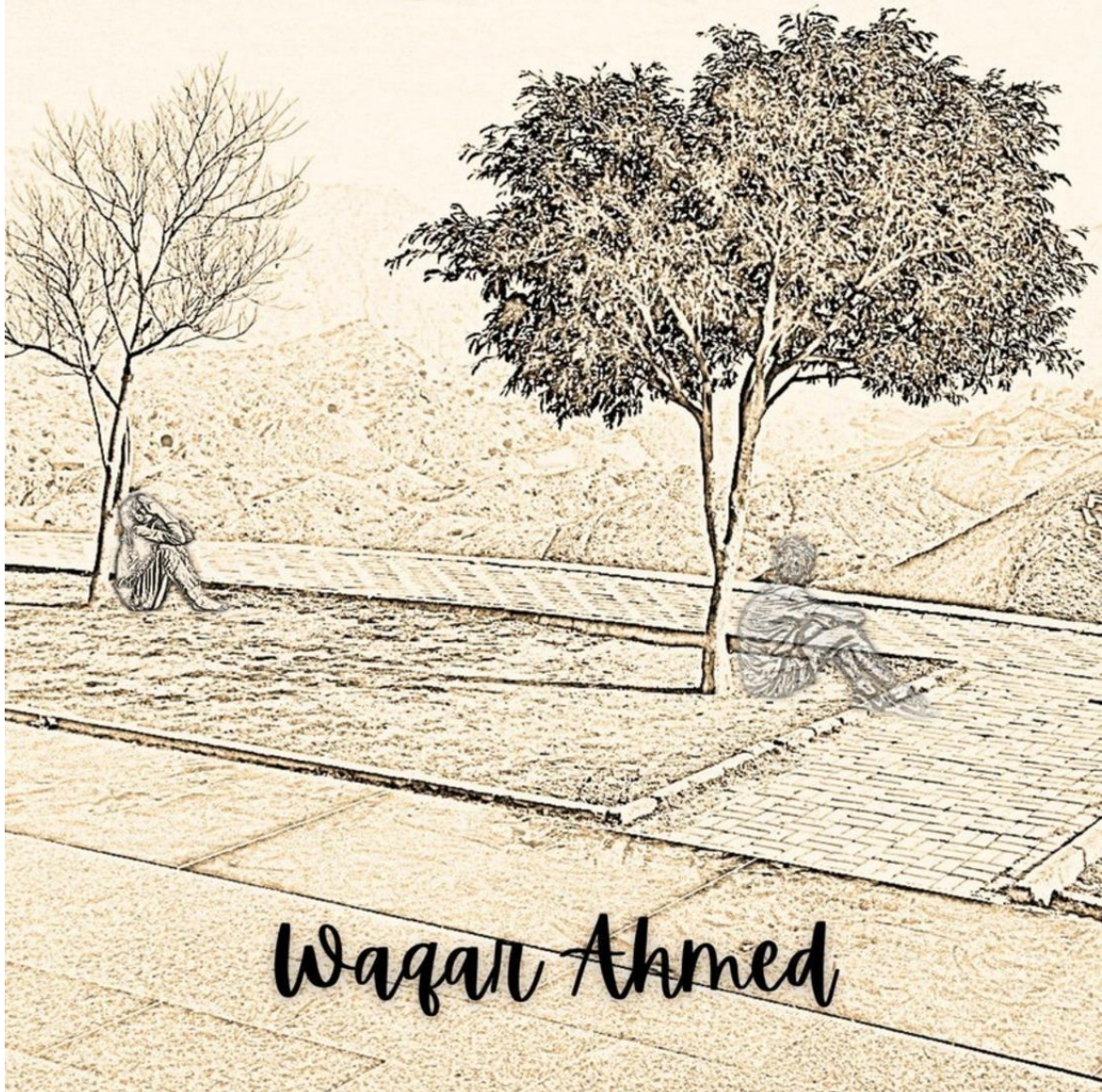


From Peaks TO SLUMS



Waqar Ahmed

Hello there,

Thank you for downloading this free sample. The full book is available on [Amazon](#) and on my [website](#).

From Peaks to Slums is my debut novel. It is also the closest to my heart, for it is inspired by real stories of some dauntingly persevering people. Stories of destitution, poverty, and tribal honour, of a people overlooked in the modern literature.

This isn't London, Paris, or New York. This is the third world.

I hope you enjoy reading it, as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Thank you,

Waqar A.

Olden Times # 1

November 5, 2001

In the cold, rocky wilderness between Afghanistan and Pakistan, life was somehow both beautiful and boring.

The pale glaciated peaks of the *Hindu Kush* mountains followed you across hundreds of valleys and ravines, the landscape a verdant mix of evergreens when you looked up high, while the deciduous trees at the base shed warm, crimson hues that sang of a coming frost. Musk deer and rusty foxes drank from sparkling springs gushing from mountains among the wildflowers and alpine grass, while hundreds of F-16s and Starlifters droned the western skies where the sun was slumping weaker by the day.

I was in *Parachinar* – far from my home and school in London.

For an English boy like me, the excitement of watching the noisy warplanes had vanished months ago. Life had fallen into a dull routine with sporadic waves of excitement, for there was always a shortage of interesting things to do. Every morning Mama handed me a rich naan with thick, yellowish yogurt (I couldn't learn to shovel the naan, so I would demand my Kellogg's Fruit Loops back!), and off I went to follow the local Pashto tribal-boys in their daylong misadventures.

While I had learned some fun survivalist skills (what tree-picked bugs you could eat, how to stone apples off from orchards, and sparking a fire with sharp stones) following the boys through disparate Afghan towns, forests, and rivers, the most useful lesson I had learned was keeping track of the calendar in our stone-brick not-home. It was home to Mama and Baba, not for me.

My home was back in Mayfair, London, where all the streets were paved, girls were allowed to play out in the streets, and we had plenty of playgrounds. I had been wanting to go back for 67 days now. Baba

was supposed to have returned from a business meeting in Kabul 65 days ago. But sometime in September, thundering warplanes and gunships started patrolling the skies of Afghanistan and dark smoke billowed from the peaks overlooking the Afghan flatlands.

I was eight years old when I learned that one's language affected their purity.

'YOU AN DIRTY PATHAN... BEAT IT, YOU LOSER!' The Pashto pack leader shoved me out of anger for not understanding either Pashto or Persian, on the rocky climb back to our village.

Maybe I had earned that shove, for I had spent the entire sordid *maahi chakari* (fishing) affair a silent observer to their pained yelps and screams. Maybe the boys didn't want to share the glory of catching a meaty fish with an outsider. Or maybe they secretly understood when I had yelled at them in both Urdu and English to not use the *Manja* (finely crushed glass glued onto a thread) they normally used for cutting other kites as a substitute for fish wire. No one had any fish wire, no one had cared to procure some.

They carried their fresh catch in a tattered old bag, their palms and fingers covered in nasty, bleeding cuts from where the glass had shredded and serrated the skin. The boys had learned the hard way that, unlike kites, which helplessly flutter onto the ground when their thread is sliced by a *Manja*, the finned catch in the river would give a harsher fight as it pulled and dithered against the bait hook.

I spoke the *Urdu* language, so there was nothing I could say to them. Back in England, the schoolteachers would ask me the Urdu names of common objects that would help them look chic in a society that spoke only one language. I was popular in those circles; I was special because I was different. Here in Pakistan's tribal region, I was impure for speaking a different language and wearing Western pant-shirts compared to their shalwar kameez.

*

The air rocked with another thunderous approach of a fighter jet – and I sat on the rocky floor with trembling lips from the pain. A nasty gash under my right arm, and a bloodied left elbow from where it had hit a sharp stone. I wasn't really interested in the Pashto boys anymore – my sights were on a very pretty girl who had arrived at our village from somewhere far north of Afghanistan with her family.

'*Halet Khobe, Adam?*' Fairy called out from above the incline.

I called her Fairy because she looked exactly like one – her hair was coal-black, unlike the other girls who had shades of brown. And her rosy cheeks always glowed.

She ambled down the steep, rocky path from our village, barefoot.

'What happened to your shoes?' I pointed to her feet.

Fairy shrugged and pulled me off the ground. '*Dozdideh shodeh.*'

We shared no languages – Fairy spoke Persian, and I spoke Urdu and English. I wanted to get to know her better, I wanted to learn Farsi or Persian, or whatever they called it, just so I could talk to her.

'It's okay, you can take mine.' I offered her my slippers, my soles pinched as I stood barefoot on the rocky path.

'*To zakhmi shodei.*' Fairy took my arms, noting the bleeding gashes. I liked the softness of her hands.

'Can I at least know your name?' I asked, tip-toeing over the stony path whereas Fairy stood at ease barefoot.

Fairy looked at my slippers and shook her head – pointing me to wear them instead. '*To be kafsh niyaz dari.*'

Her orange eyes widened in some realisation, and she pointed downstream to a road that tribesmen used to travel between villages. '*Asal.*'

'But you have to take my slippers.' I insisted, pointing to her bare feet.

Fairy sighed with pursed lips, forcing me to wear the left slipper, while she wore the right one. And then she pulled me, wobbly-stepped, towards the flowing river.

*

'*Bodo! Bodo!*' Fairy ran towards me – and I assumed that *Bodo* meant run because an angry beekeeper was chasing her. Wearing slippers on one foot wasn't doing her wobbly stride any favours, but she was fast.

'*DA RAATLONA WGORA* –' The beekeeper yelled.

'What did you steal?' I asked confusedly as I broke into a run, and she pointed me to a wad of gooey, sweet honey on her palms.

'You needed honey? Mama has that at home!'

'*In daru ast.*'

We skipped and ran across the imposing wadi, crossing streams and turning into a cluster of forests until the beekeeper stopped following us.

'You shouldn't be stealing, it's not good manners.' I explained as we sat breathlessly on a boulder, under the shadowy canopy of shedding trees.

'*Faghat kami ast.*' Fairy pulled my hands, rubbing the gooey honey on the cuts and gashes so that the wounds prickled even more.

'I didn't know honey heals wounds.' I said, and Fairy looked at me smilingly.

'*In komak mikonad.*'

The leaves of our forest-canopy ruffled as another fight jet blared past in the sky. Beams of brilliant sunlight netted onto us, the wind carried a fragrant chill that made us sit closer, our hands interlocked. The ambience rang with tweeting birds.

'I'm tired of following the tribal-boys... I'd much rather spend time with you.' I said.

'*Man be donbal to migashtam.*' Fairy shrugged.

'It's not fair... I want to know your name. Maybe you can write it down for me?' I gestured a pen and paper with my hands.

Fairy gave a smiling nod. '*Are, are.*'

'I'm going to get in trouble with Uncle Zayd again... The boys from the other tribe hit one of our girls.' I said, hoping she'd understand me.

'*Man zaban shoma ra dust nadaram.*' Fairy shrugged again.

'You should stay away from the boys here... they are savages!' I played with her fingers, and Fairy kept looking at me dreamily.

We sat under the rustling leaves for hours, savouring the tweeting quiet, under the imposing embrace of mountains that climbed way up into the heavens. Fairy kept her honey-coated palm extended; her bright amber eyes swerving between the vibrant butterflies that dared closer to the sweet nectar, and when a pinkly one began dancing on her pale hand, Fairy gave me a melting smile.

*

'You should have gouged their eyes out for that.' Uncle Zayd scolded me, his steely fists tightly closed. 'The elders are all disappointed in you.'

'But she started calling the boys names!' I explained with failing breath, ambling up the steep climb of a peak that was Uncle Zayd's favourite. 'But I don't know what she said...'

Climbing the farthest mountain to the Afghan border had become routine, because Uncle Zayd and the tribesmen took in the view of the ongoing war the Americans had started, and Uncle Zayd *always* took me wherever he went.

'It doesn't matter what she did.' Uncle Zayd scoffed 'A girl in your tribe is *your* woman, she's the honour of your tribe. Would you have let them hurt Eve or Mary?'

'No, I love my sisters.' I replied, striding upwards to meet Uncle Zayd's pace. 'I just hate that I don't speak the languages everyone here does.'

Uncle Zayd stopped in his tracks, but the other tribesmen went on. I had never seen him this angry before, so bitterly disappointed in me. 'Your language does not matter. It's your *HONOUR* that matters.'

'But that girl wasn't my sister, and she started the argument, so why would I fight for her?'

'Because every girl in your tribe is your woman, she's your honour.' He explained, thick brows still furled. 'And if you think she's the one who started the fight, you should have been the one to punish her too. Do you know how?'

I shook my head, confused as to why in the world I would attack an innocent girl. No one should think they own girls.

'You should have pulled a fistful of hair off her scalp for forgetting her place.' Uncle Zayd cruelly pulled imaginary hair with his steely fists. 'She'll be growing into a woman soon enough, and the same goes for your sisters.'

'...'

'What? That's brutal... I'll never do that.' I said quickly, my eyes on the verge of tears. I couldn't imagine hurting Fairy, Eve or any other girl.

Uncle Zayd hauled me into his arms, so I was next to his steely, bearded face. He always smelled of *chars* and alcohol. 'You're still a boy. There's much you have to learn about being a man.'

'Ms Susan taught me that boys should be chivalrous, like Ser Lancelot and King Arthur.'

He scoffed. 'Chivalry is the fantasy of the white man... Do you know what *Pashtunwali* means?'

His dark eyes pierced me with a glare as I shook my head.

'Honour is *everything* to a Pashtun man, without it, you are a coward, a beghairat. When someone wrongs your honour, as those boys did... Your honour stays tarnished until you take your *badal*.'

'What's Badal?' I asked, looking at clouds shaped very much like the islands of Britain.

'Vengeance, Adam.' He said in clear English, grabbing my hand into his steely, veiny hands that had seen terrible bloodshed. 'Without it we are nothing.'

*

The tribesmen stood sentry on the farthest peaks of Parachinar, watching the Afghan plains extend forever into the horizon. They donned Kalashnikovs, keenly watching the sporadic intrigue. Every half-hour the Americans would show up in patrolling gunships, or we'd see ground patrols heading southwards.

Uncle Zayd drew his chillum from his kameez pocket and lit it, spreading the pungent smell of *chars* that I was starting to like, even though Eve and Mary hated it.

'Ms Susan says that drugs are bad for you.' I shrugged, but he forced the billowing pipe into my hands.

'Do you know what Parachinar means, Adam?' Uncle Zayd asked.

I shrugged.

'Parachinar means the Eagle's Beak in the Pashto language – and it was the greatest gift that colonial England gave to Pakistan. The Russians ruded it in the 80s, and now the Americans will lament it for years.'

'You look to the north – that's Afghanistan... you look to the south – that's Afghanistan – a clever wedge that the white people drew to fight the Russians a hundred years ago, in their Great Game.'

'Why don't you like the English? My teacher says I am English.' I shrugged.

'The English are a ruthless people who cover their backs with the flesh and marrow of the ones they colonise.' Uncle Zayd said – the sun was sinking, so Uncle Zayd draped me with his chadar. 'You are a Pashtun first, an Englishman second. Never forget that.'

I puffed on the chillum, feeling suddenly relaxed... lighter. Eve and Mary hated it when I smoked and drank with Uncle Zayd, but he always told me I was allowed to because I was becoming a man.

'The English thought they could enslave our people forever – that they'll never leave our lands.' Uncle Zayd scoffed. 'Our Kohzada tribe used to be stronger before the Russians and communists butchered us.'

'You see – down there.' Uncle Zayd pointed to a cluster of forests below us. 'That's where they are gathering, the Jihadis and Taliban. We will retake our lands back from both the Pakistanis and the Americans.'

The skies behind us thundered as more fighter jets drew their routine patrol – the Pakistani jets. 'The Pakistanis play a double game on us, they're in bed with the Americans while pretending to be supporting us.'

*

I drew the chars-infused chillum again as Uncle Zayd brought out a bottle of Irani sagi, a dirty moonshine, from his bag. Eve and Mary had warned me not to drink again.

'Then why does Baba have factories in Pakistan, if we don't like Pakistan?' I shrugged.

'Because the Pakistanis are cunning people – they know business and money better than the Afghans do.'

'Are the Pakistanis rich?' I asked.

'No.'

'But your Baba was smarter – our business was so good that we started selling to England. That's what made you an Englishman.'

'But you don't like the English.'

'I don't.' Uncle Zayd filled shot-cups of the sagi and forced one into my hand.

Uncle Zayd's stone-solid hands smacked me on the collarbone for showing hesitation with the liquor. 'A man's fortitude must be challenged from childhood if he is to protect his lands and women.'

'I don't like drinking.' I complained, the vile liquor always stung my throat, made me lightheaded, and forced me to see strange things happening to my sisters, Eve and Mary, that I always thought were hallucinations, especially at our not-home.

I drank the shot cup and retched some of the bitter liquid onto our boulder. Uncle Zayd laughed.

'You will have four wives, my boy.' Uncle Zayd inserted a toke of fresh chars into his chillum. Every week, a mule-traveling merchant brought a variety of cannabis to our village from Peshawar.

'But Baba only has one.' I pointed confusedly. 'The elders in the village all have three or four wives.'

It was harder to find girls to play with in Pakistan, they were always locked at home, kneading dough and hanging washed clothes over trimmed tree branches. The *Fairy* girl was only free because her family were immigrants – they slept in the communal hall.

'Because your Baba is a weak man.' He replied bluntly, blowing a puff with his eyes closed, the setting sun brightening his long, dark scraggy hair that touched his muscly shoulders.

Uncle Zayd was a fearless soldier, a Jihadi who spoke the darndest words. The sort of things I'd get in trouble for at my Mayfair school, where everyone was softer. I wanted to grow confident exactly like him, to speak bluntly like he always did. Uncle Zayd never got in any trouble.

'But you're not married either – you don't have any girls!' I said, hoping to come off blunt too.

His dark eyes lit brightly. 'Oh yeah? How do you know I don't have girls?'

I shrugged.

'The women in our village tell me you've found someone, Adam.' Uncle Zayd said. 'One of the migrant girls.'

I nodded proudly. 'I think she looks like a fairy.'

'She's a foreigner, not an Afghan or Pashtun.' I didn't like his questioning. 'I think you'd better off with a girl from our blood.'

I shrugged again, but a tribal sentry distracted Uncle Zayd with some message in Pashto.

‘Do you not see my nephew?’ Uncle Zayd demanded. ‘Speak in Urdu, man.’

‘A *bird* is coming in from somewhere, we don’t know if it’s the Americans or the damned Pakistanis.’ The bearded tribesman announced in plain Urdu. It wasn’t long until the whirring noise of a flying machine rang the ambience.

Uncle Zayd threw his chillum onto the boulder. ‘I want my lineage to outdo where we two brothers failed.’

His eyes scanned the mountainous horizon, and we saw a patrolling gunship on the western vista. I saw the familiar blue-white-red roundel on its stern that I had always seen on the BBC. The Royal Air Force.

‘See?’ Uncle Zayd intently pointed his rifle towards the gunship, alert to the fact that it was about to cross over into the Pakistani side (or the land of our tribe), yet blind to the fact that the gunship carried MUCH larger guns, rockets, and ordnance that could blow even our boulder into smithereens.

‘We are practically home. The English are stuttering about.’

‘We spent our youth fighting these damned wars.’ One eye closed, the other drawing a sharp aim. ‘I want my nephew to enjoy more girls than we did... Relish the privilege of his manhood.’

‘Teacher said that it should always be one man and one wife.’ I said, remembering Ms Stacey from school reading us *Guess How Much I Love You*, the week before we had left England for holidays in our Pashtun tribe.

The little and big Nutbrown Hate would tell how much they loved one another using the craziest measures and scales. I knew that my Mama loved my Baba very much, she always kept his clothes clean and pressed, his leather boots shining, and served him the food first whenever the family ate. Mama would be very sad if we had another Mama between us. I wouldn’t like any other Mama.

BANG—

I crawled behind Uncle Zayd as he fired at the English gunship. Whether it was the bitter liquor making me see things, or the gunship had half-swerved, half-somersaulted above the mountains. It blew crudely sparking flares and like a startled prey, the helicopter swerved *harshly* towards the setting sun, realising that it had intruded into Pakistan.

A border protected by a drunk and stoned ex-Jihadi.

NOT AGAIN...

I chugged the bottle of liquor before passing it to Uncle Zayd, hoping it would make the about-to-be mundane world pass in a blur.

An hour from now, armed soldier from Pakistan's Frontier Scouts will be stepping off their armoured trucks, their Captain Khan furious at Uncle Zayd and our village elders for attacking the American alliance.

Or there will come a Toyota off-roader, carrying grunting army officers in plainclothes, dressed like tribesmen in loose shalwar kameez and chadar, who would complain about having to drive all the way from Kabul or Jalalabad because a '*chutiya*' had opened fire on a foreign army that was not Pakistan's enemy. Many of the plainclothes officers looked suspiciously white, and I wondered how many of them were from the CIA or Mi6.

And then the *Khasadar* constabulary would come on their trucks, wearing black shalwar kameez and red berets, because the tribal police existed to support the tribal leaders (no one here liked the Pakistani police).

The village elders, all ex-Jihadis and former soldiers, would tell their Pakistani quarry to get lost, leading to violent tussles and exchange of beautifully hurtful words in English, Urdu, Pashto, Persian, and a blend of other languages I was learning titbits of.

And in all this time, Uncle Zayd would keep me thickly glued to his side. He would teach me how to behave like a tribal man, a proper man who takes an eye for an eye, unlike the English softie I was growing to be.

It was a war that made no sense. The Americans and the English were the enemies. The Pakistanis were the enemies. The Uzbeks and Tajiks were the enemies. The Irani were the enemies. Even the other tribes around us were the enemies. Everyone absolutely hated each other, but no one fought plainly. There wasn't any war like this that I had seen on the BBC. It didn't feel like a war at all.

No way Uncle Zayd would let me play with Fairy tonight. I HATED this war.

*

'ZAYD –' Captain Khan yelled as he exited the armoured truck, the Pakistani soldiers had encircled our tribe.

'I'M RIGHT HERE, KHAN.' Uncle Zayd yelled back from the village square, carrying me tightly glued to his chest.

'DID YOU MOTHER BANG YOUR HEAD ON A BRICK?' Captain Khan's angry face was nearly stapled to Uncle Zayd's, and I could smell his sweaty, peppery breath.

'THE THIRD TIME THIS MONTH – WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO PROVE? YOU WERE TOLD NOT TO SHOOT AT THE AMERICANS.'

'THIS IS MY COUNTRY, NOT THEIRS –'

'DO YOU REALISE HOW MUCH SHIT WE HEAR FROM ISLAMABAD AND CENTCOM –'

'WHY ARE THE WHITIES HERE? MY PEOPLE AREN'T LAMBS FOR SLAUGHTER WHENEVER THEY FEEL LIKE IT –'

'YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED –'

'YOU REALLY THINK THE BOYS WHO PLAY IN DIRT HERE FELLED THEIR PRECIOUS TOWERS?'

'STOP – STOP –'

Trucks carrying Khasadar soldiers had entered the village square too. The ambience rang with frantic radio and static as the units all disparately responded to their commanders.

Captain Khan sighed. 'Your boy is crying...'

'He's a man of the Kohzada tribe – don't tell me how to raise him.' Uncle Zayd jerked me until I latched harder to his neck.

'Children shouldn't be exposed to this... Let him go play.' Captain Khan tried to pull me away, but Uncle Zayd held firm.

Captain Khan sighed, looking accusingly at Uncle Zayd. 'No, I don't think any of the tribal boys had anything to do with it... But I do think that certain people had a role in it.'

'What you accusing me of?' Uncle Zayd stepped even closer to Captain Khan. 'We run a clothing factory in Karachi.'

'Is that why your brother is in Kabul, a thousand miles from his factory, in a different country?' I didn't like how Captain Khan spoke about my Baba.

'You're too dumb to know how businesses and supply chains work, Khan.'

'Complex, indeed,' Captain Khan warned. 'Don't forget where you came from.'

The tribesmen had all gathered out of their stone homes, watching yet another bout of drama unfold. I saw the figures of Eve and Mary looking out the windows of our not-home. Amidst the growing dusk, I saw a familiar flutter of a shadow, peering from a stone fence a few steps from my not-home.

'I WANT TO GO PLAY.' I cried, punching Uncle Zayd on his chest until he dropped me onto the rocky floor.

Fairy's face curled with disappointment as I approached her.

'Shoma nabayad sigar bekeshi.'

Olden Times # 2

November 5 – November 20, 2001

Unlike the other tribal women, Fairy's mother never wore a burqa. They came from somewhere north in Afghanistan and were our guests, so we had to respect their choices. Uncle Zayd told me that an honourable Pashtun man defends his guests with his life and blood. Fairy's family meant there were four people under our protection – herself, her parents, and her uncle.

'Karachi is a better city to start a new life in.' Uncle Zayd advised Fairy's father.

'We... are... scared.' Fairy's father spoke in tattered, poor Urdu.

'The Americans will pay you handsomely.' Uncle Zayd put an assuring hand on his shoulder. 'If there's one thing they're good with, is giving out money.'

Fairy stood arms-crossed; her brows furrowed against her Uncle who kept wanting to pick her up. She was always fiercely independent like that. While Uncle Zayd carried me everywhere, Fairy was always running from her uncle.

'*Pedarbozorg-e ham ham mi ayad.*' Fairy told me playfully, the chilly wind-gusts blowing her hair away.

'*Man amuyam ra doost nadaram, u hamishe be man dast mizane.*'

I shrugged, not having understood a word of that. 'Do you want to go out to the orchards today?'

'*Man gorsne hastam.*'

I turned to Uncle Zayd, who was still talking to her parents. 'Why did you make me learn Urdu? Why didn't you make me learn Persian?'

'Urdu is the language of the Pakistanis, my boy.' Uncle Zayd crouched to me. 'You'll have more opportunities with it and English.'

'But I want to learn Persian.' I complained.

'You can make any woman you wed learn the language you know.'
Uncle Zayd patted my hair, glancing to Fairy who was playfully swaying left-right.

'*Bia berim, Bia berim.*' Fairy pulled me away and onto the road leading away from our village, still wobbly-footed from sharing my shoes.

We stopped at the village gate, our fingers interlocked, breathing in the crisp, chilly air made fragrant by the deciduous, shedding trees. Fairy pointed me to a herd of musk deer lazily sipping from the river below, and I pointed her to orchards at the end of our wadi. The weakening sunlight gave a faint, ethereal haze that reflected off the snow-peaked mountains, while the morning songs of Bulbul echoed through the valley, rousing the world in life.

*

'You shouldn't eat the fruit that has fallen to the floor.' I took the soil-picked guava from Fairy's hand, who shrugged and pointed to her tummy.

'*Man gornse.*'

I sighed. 'You should come to my home in the morning. My mama makes a lot of breakfast.'

Fairy pointed to the apple-guava orchards above us.

'Taking from the orchard is stealing... I don't think we should do that.' I shook my head, but Fairy looked at me pleadingly.

If there was anything worse than stealing, it was making Fairy sad, so I ambled up the trees. 'You want an apple or a guava?'

The branches rustled under my weight, but I ambled up higher until I could pick the fruits at the top. The wind was fiercely cold, and I could barely feel the bright sunlight.

'*PALANG.*' Fairy answered with a crying yell.

'I don't know what that is, can you point me?' I asked, doing my best to pull on a fruit strand.

'PALANG, ADAM-'

'RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR—'

I tripped and fell onto a larger branch protruding outwards — Fairy was stepping back slowly, trembling at the sight of a snarling and swaying big cat. The leopard hissed and growled as Fairy cowered backwards.

NO, I CAN'T LET HER BE HURT.

I plucked an apple from the orchard and aimed for the leopard's head — the hit connected, and in a swift stroke, the leopard was climbing onto the orchard I was leaping from. The world lost colour for a second as I fell onto the hard, rocky soil.

'KIDS STAY BACK!' A tall farmer carrying a sharp-looking rake ran between me and the leopard, forcing it to scurry into the wilderness.

'HAPPY YOU BOTH ARE SAFE!' Fairy leapt onto my shoulders, whimpering and sobbing as the farmer checked us over for cuts and bruises. He easily plucked an apple and handed one to us each, but Fairy refused it.

'Can she have a guava, please?' I asked, and the farmer smilingly plucked another fruit for us.

'These are God's fruits for his people.' He patted Fairy's hair. 'God will curse us if we don't share his bounty with his children.'

But Fairy sat glued to my shoulders, whimpering in Persian that I understood none of. The farmer sat us on a safer boulder, where I handed her a ripe, nectary guava in silence while braving the scraping pain in my back. I liked her — it felt nice to have a girl to care for, who cared for me too.

*

We spent the following weeks eloping from our village and Uncle Zayd's insistence to carry me *everywhere*. Fairy taught me how to play *Pittu Garam*, the Afghan version of Seven Stones. We would spend the mornings roping and duelling our Spinning Tops, and by the noon played with marbles under a shaded tree far from our village that became our favourite. We had made a permanent pitch for Hopscotch which was our evening pastime.

Fairy liked watching the kites fly but wouldn't let me fly one because of the bruises and cuts the glass-coated Manja gave me. She was a faster runner than me, mostly because I'd jump and hop from the pain in my left foot, so I'd always lose in games of tag. One weekend, I managed to convince Eve and Mary to join us at a travelling circus, where the four of us watched trickster monkeys, fire-breathing artists, horse-dancing, and burly men from a province called *Punjab* wrestle each other in mud.

Captain Khan returned every few nights to get into shouting matches with Uncle Zayd, who'd let me go and play with Fairy to save himself from my screeching cries (that I had made louder!). The American and English jets were soaring louder as the days passed, and I'd hear Captain Khan saying that Americans were making permanent bases along the Pakistani border. I thought they were stupid for coming here, because everyone I'd met here was so pleasant and nice. The Pakistani soldiers always gave me and Fairy treats.

Nearing the end of November, Fairy and I were sharing a shawl between us since it became too cold to venture far from the village. We'd sit and count the birds and clouds in the sky, where Fairy taught me counting in Persian.

'*Yek, do, se, chahar, panj, shesh, haft, hasht, noh, dah* –' Fairy and I were laid on a flat-top boulder, soaking in the fading sunlight.

'I don't want Baba to come back.' I shrugged, and Fairy looked at me smilingly.

'*Man ham babam ra doost daram.*'

'I wish I could stay here with you.' I said, emphasising on the '*you*' part. 'But I'm worried Baba will be coming back soon.'

Fairy shrugged and sat up to ruffle around the pockets of her loose frock. Her smile was always radiant, her bright orange eyes glistened like blinding sunlight, warmer than this sluggish, winter sun. No one here had eyes like her. Fairy passed me a letter she wrote.

“Адам, номи ман Париша Назарова аст. Ман дар ҳақиқат туро дӯст медорам, лутфан маро тарк накун. Бобо ман гуфт, ки Покистон замини олиён Суфиянон аст, ки назди Аллоҳанд. Ман аз авлиёи сурх хоҳиш мекунам, ки туро ба ман пас андозад. У ҳавофу дорад, ки у туро пайдо мекунад, дар ҳар ҷо ки равиш, ки ту рафтӣ, у туро ёфт. Хавф накунад.”

Doodled on the top was a wand-wielding, winged fairy who flew lazily over the (Persian?) letter written underneath. The fairy wore an elegant, flowing dress that sparkled in spots, a cutely crowned cockatiel perched on her neck.

But was this Persian? I'd never seen this language before. It looked nothing like the books Mama had in our not-home.

‘How do you know what fairy means? I thought you didn’t know English?’ I asked in amazement; Fairy was incredibly smart, and somehow she even knew titbits of English.

Fairy nodded matter-of-factly, a cheery smile on her face. ‘Are, are!’

‘I’ve never kissed a girl before. Would you mind if I give you a peck?’ I asked.

Fairy looked at me confusedly, drawing her hand to play with my fingers instead.

‘I didn’t mean to embarrass you... It’s okay if you don’t want to.’

Fairy shrugged and pulled me upwards, so that we sat together, closer.

‘I’m really going to miss playing with you. I don’t really want to go back to England.’ I shrugged, but Fairy pulled on my neck to peck me on the cheeks.

It felt... soft and moist, but Fairy hid her face behind her palms, looking flushed and giggling.

But Fairy's soft giggles were soon drowned out by massive, humming rotary engines of large military transporters flying towards us from the western horizon. Their deafening noise startled Fairy even closer to me, and we looked at the sky filled with transporters and fighter jets.

'Do you think the Americans are coming to Pakistan too?' I asked Fairy confusedly, who shrugged. 'They aren't allowed to come to the Pakistani side.'

"Sarbazha man ra mitarsanand, mikham ba to bimanam."

The turbulence of these low-flying transporters and jets rocked the wadi in a thunderous echo, and as I learned later that evening from Captain Khan and Uncle Zayd, it wasn't the Americans who had flown over from Afghanistan.

It was the Pakistanis who had flown back over from Afghanistan. I learned that the *Kunduz Airlift* had happened that day. And I learned months later from the BBC, that the Pakistani operation was nicknamed the *Airlift of Evil*.

And that was the last time my fingers were playfully locked with Fairy. The last I saw her was with wettened eyes, watching her stagger, fall, and chase after the taxi that was taking us from Parachinar to Peshawar – Baba had returned on one of those planes, and we were going back to our lives in London.

Present Day – Day 0

August 6, 2019

£80,000 Pounds sterling

‘Oi – GET UP, GIT!’ Eve smacked something on my head.

‘Get lost.’ I threw whatever it was back in her general direction.

‘You NEED to take me to university.’ Eve threw that same object on my head again.

‘Get Oliver or Edward to take you.’ I mumbled, wishing she’d disappeared already.

Eve scoffed. ‘Neither of them is my brother. I’ve got to file my forms and it’ll take HOURS.’

‘Exactly. Baba pays them for a reason.’

‘You’re going to send your sister with strangers?’ Eve threw a heavier object on my head. ‘WAKE UP YOU BUMBLING LOSER.’

‘OWW –’

The lights flicked on, and the curtains were drawn, letting in a dazzling summer sunshine that blinded me.

‘I’m taking your Benelli if you don’t wake up.’ Eve warned, looking menacingly around the room. ‘Scratch that – I’m going to be taking over your room if you DON’T WAKE UP TO LIFE.’

‘What does that mean?’

She gave a bright, shit-eating grin. ‘You’ll see, little brother.’

‘You’re three minutes older, smart-arse.’ I said as Eve slammed the door shut, startling me awake.

My iPhone showed me a hundred missed calls from Delilah, but the throbbing pain in my head compelled me to throw my phone back. The air-conditioner gave a cool, energising breeze that made the August heat easily bearable, and I sighed, not looking forward to another day of the same-old drama.

The door clicked open again and Mary entered with a glass of *Doogh*.

'You smell like shit.' Mary gave me a sideways scoff.

'I...' I had an explanation for the drinking, but Mary would have seen through it anyway.

'Are you ever going to stop drinking?' Mary pleaded, handing me the chilly, milky beverage. She was always the purest, kindest of our trio. She blamed Uncle Zayd for turning me into a lifelong drunkard.

Eve barged into the room again, wearing a low-cut top and her hair flowing. I wasn't the sort to be moderating female fashion, but Eve was dressing provocatively to get a rise out of others, to artificially make conflict.

'You know Uncle Zayd doesn't like you wearing that.' I remarked, sipping on my drink and rubbing my eyes.

'You'd be the one to talk... You want to control me like he does?' Eve scoffed.

I shrugged. 'It wouldn't hurt you to listen to him, he isn't all that bad.'

Eve and Mary shared a look that told me I was excluded from their club. I disliked that the two had secrets they wouldn't share with me, but I supposed it was a thing that girls did.

'Why do you both hate him so much?' I looked between them.

'He's the one who got you on this drunken path... got your brain dumb enough to focus only on those fucken' ice-cooled gaming systems, 8K TVs, and that Lexus you don't even need.' Eve angrily pointed to my room.

'That's it? 'cause you're jealous he likes me more?' I scoffed.

'...' Eve gave a hateful look that told me of a prospective, torturous murder. 'You really need to know why I used to BEG you not to drink with him?'

'No, you don't.' Mary intervened, tugging the Doogh in my hand. 'Drink, you'll need all the energy you can today.'

'What are you two not telling me?' I asked accusingly.

Eve looked at Mary with trembling lips and glistening eyes. 'Since you're obsessed with reading those damn Persian books, I'll give you a word to obsess over – *Hachma*.'

'That's not Persian.' I said, but Mary threw one of my Persian storybooks at Eve.

Eve caught the book and threw it on my head. 'Exactly. You're gonna waste your whole life trying to translate that stupid Parachinar letter while your sisters suffer.'

'Shut up.' Mary warned.

Eve scoffed again. 'I'll dress however the fuck I want to... Good luck making YOUR wife wear a Burqa.'

'My wife?' I asked confusedly. I'd never proposed to Delilah.

'Baba has fixed your marriage.' Mary said blankly.

'...'

'... with the daughter of his Afghan business partner.'

*

I never liked the Nordic-minimalist décor that Baba had chosen for our home – the colours were drab, and it was all made of straight lines. Delilah, however, was always insistent that she would want something similar for our house when we get married – the integrated home theatre, a Beovision Harmony TV, a VR treadmill, and especially an all-

intelligent washroom because that's where she spent much of her day. Today the prospect of us marrying together was becoming dimmer.

'WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS, ADAM?' Delilah yelled into my room seconds after I ignored her hundredth call.

'I don't know what he's on. I never asked to marry that girl.' I replied blankly.

'What do you mean he?' Delilah scoffed. 'Aren't you the one who's supposed to choose who to marry?'

'It's not that simple.' I felt stupid saying that, but that was the truth.

'...'

'Who is she? Do you know her? Have you met her before?' She demanded.

'What? I've never even heard of her before today.'

'Where is your dad?' Delilah demanded, shaking her head. 'THREE years we've spent together – you're going to say *NO* to your Baba today.'

'OSCAR.' Delilah yelled, and our concierge driver ambled up the steps quickly. 'Ready the car we're going to see Adam's father.'

'... But he's downstairs.' Oscar shrugged.

'ADAM.' The steely voice of Uncle Zayd came from downstairs, and Delilah practically dragged me down two flights of stairs before we were upon the imposing figures of Uncle Zayd and Baba.

'What in the world is this?' Uncle Zayd demanded at seeing me get pulled by a woman.

Delilah's furious eyes swivelled between me and my peers. 'Adam here is going to tell you that he can't marry that Afghan woman.'

'And why would he tell us that?' Uncle Zayd had never bowed to a platoon of armed soldiers and gunships; Delilah's petite frame wasn't even a challenge, but she stood menacingly.

'Because HE'S WITH ME...' Delilah scoffed and yanked at my hands.
'TELL HIM, ADAM.'

I shook my head. 'I... I don't think I can marry that woman, sorry.'

'That's it?' Delilah demanded; her eyes widened. 'That's all you have to say?'

'Adam is in no such position to be making demands.' Baba stared at me menacingly. 'A man who doesn't earn his dues isn't a man.'

'But he's a man enough to get married?' Delilah insisted, looking at me pleadingly to disrespect the two men I'd never spoken a word against.

'We hold no ill will against you, girl, but Adam's first wife will have to be...'

'First wife?' Delilah demanded, disgust on her face. 'There can only be ONE wife.'

'Adam's marriage has already been fixed for this December. If you have a problem with that, I'd suggest speaking to your parents.' Baba advised her, to which she scoffed harder.

'You're not going to say anything?' Delilah jerked my hands again.

You're a coward – your woman is fighting for you, and you cower behind her.

'Baba...' I started, but I was promptly quieted by Uncle Zayd's slap to my wrist. 'YOU DON'T SPEAK BACK TO YOUR FATHER!'

'Adam, we need you at the helm of the family business.' Baba sighed.

'Marrying our business partner solidifies our business in blood, makes us stronger.'

'...'

Delilah scoffed at me. 'Really? You have nothing to defend *us* with?'

I returned her a pleading look, but she looked at me with trembling lips.

'I was an idiot... Everything special about you comes from your Baba's money... You couldn't make a life for yourself!'

Day 1

The Northern slums – somewhere in Karachi, Pakistan

August 7, 2019

2000 Pakistani rupees

The rickshaw driver gave me the dirtiest look as our noisy trike turned into yet another uneven slum-street, sporting its own pools of smelly sewage and trash heaps.

As loathful as his stare (worsened by his reddened, dust-caked eyes) was, I probably deserved it. I had been running the poor man into random streets and alleys of this massive, treeless and brown city. I had no idea where I wanted to go, and I was very much aware of how stupid I looked doing so.

This narrow street, as the dozens preceding it, was flanked by unending rows of dirty-looking, dilapidated brick houses so small and desperate they leaned and intruded into each other. Along their rusted doorways, where there would be clean footpaths back in England, sat men and older women on rocks, wooden stools, and plastic crates, doing absolutely *nothing*. Trampish, sore-looking beggar-kids begged for food along the streets.

What are these people doing? Their dulled eyes blankly followed my rickshaw as it passed, and then the other sorry-looking pedestrians and tiny bikes whirring across the rough, crooked streets. Emotionless and quiet, the signs of great thinkers, or simply people who were very, very exhausted.

‘Where are you from, Bhai?’ The rickshaw driver asked for the fourth time, irritation rising in his tone. It was becoming increasingly hard to pretend I hadn’t heard him. I peered at his long, scraggy face in the cockpit mirror. He wore a glistening, red topi.

Bhai means brother, is he calling me a ‘bro’?

'England.' I replied in Urdu, startled by the barking stray dogs.

You don't realise how many mirrors there are in a rickshaw until you sit in one. Two on the canvas roof, two on the sides, and another right on the metal bars separating the cabin from the passenger bay. Maybe they would be useful if I was a pretty woman en route to a wedding, but I was just an average bloke who knew nothing about this country, save for the language the people here spoke.

Well, you're here now – you wanted to imitate your Baba's success. He started with nothing too, right in these slums. Get at it.

Every accidental glance into the mirrors gave me a jolt of discomfort. I wanted *nothing* to do with my stupid face. I'd never complained about my face before, but now that I realised how stupid I was, I wanted to disassociate from myself. The air smelt of a humid stickiness and rust. I became acutely aware of the beads of sweat trickling down my cheek – I felt hot, cold, and then hot again.

WHERE IN THE WORLD AM I? WHAT HAVE I DONE?

My watch was about to hit five as the rickshaw slowed to avoid a large gutter hole in the street. I sighed, knowing I was only delaying the inevitable.

'You can stop here.' I said, my voice coarser than I meant.

The tired-looking driver stared at me from the canvas-roof mirror, looking puzzled. The man probably had many questions, the foremost of which was probably the reason why a well-dressed foreign-looking bloke had come into a smelly, disparate slum. I doubted that he would believe my answer anyway.

'This is your home?' He looked to a doorless slum-home where four dark men sat in ripped wifebeaters loudly playing cards. They made the sort of raucous laughter that scares children.

'HAHAHAHAHAHAHA –'

'No.' I faked a desperate smile, trying to sound casual. 'I am looking to live here. What do I owe you?'

I looked for the fare meter, but there wasn't any. It would be a barter. I had read books on coming on top of price-barters.

'Thousand rupees.' His reply was deadpan, but his dark eyes had questions. I stepped outside, feeling flushed from the prickly, airless heat emanating from the ground.

'TIN DABBA WALA – BUYING YOUR OLD JUNK AND METALS, BUYING YOUR OLD BATTERIES – GET OUT OF THE WAY.'

I glanced back to a salvage-laden cart-pusher looking at me crossly for hogging the road, so I hugged the rickshaw to make room. A thousand rupees – was that a lot?

Seemed fair for a 90-minute ride from the airport. I pulled out a crisp blue one-thousand rupee note from my wallet, feeling anxious that I was left with only a thousand rupees, or roughly £4. The driver took the fare as I departed into a random street, the tiny houses and narrow streets making me feel claustrophobic.

You forgot to barter, you muppet.

I leapt over a trash-pile, fighting the icy anxiety boiling anxiety inside me. Giant rats grazed peacefully on the trash-fields, while crawlies of all sizes dithered on the slum-walls. The ragged slum-dwellers gave me dirty and curious stares – I knew NOTHING of the streets where I was.

...

I HAVE TO GET BACK HOME. I WANT MY HOME BACK.

The *looks* were making me feel like a zoo attraction – my Burberry shirt was spotless, and I wore proper Nike shoes, while these folks wore dirty shalwar kameez and many were barefoot. I blinked my eyes, wishing to wake up from this nightmare. The air felt stale and humid, the sort that clings to your nose. There was no waking up from reality. I glanced at beggar-kids in tattered clothes pleading from passing adults, burqa-clad women carrying tiny bags of stale produce, and wild strays roaming along the trash heaps.

Was this really the slum where Baba had started into a million-dollar international corporation? HOW...?

I paced slowly till I saw a dingy-looking café with a rusting metal stall for a kitchen, hanging on its display was a sorry-looking, dusty chicken homing a hundred buzzing crawlies on its drying, greenish flesh. Maybe I could rest and think of a plan – *GET OUT OF HERE SOMEHOW*.

I stepped towards the café but midway I was side-stepped by a burly, red-looking man. His thick elbow planted into my rib for all his haste, and I half-kneeled from the jolting pain.

‘OW –’ I reeled. Not the worst hit I had taken, but it left me breathless anyhow. The prick didn’t even bother to apologise.

I skipped to the café and picked the least dirty chair to sit on. The cheap plastic creaked as I sat down, leaving me self-conscious for a very average body weight. I saw the bloke who had run into me was the café server, lading steaming teacups into a round tray, one hand awkwardly clutched into a dark shawl drooping from his neck.

The bodach running the café stall was yelling at the prick-server in a rough language I did not know.

‘Za dee welidam che da hagma batwa dee ghala krha –’

The café was patronised by grim-looking labourers, looking spent and smelling stank, the sort of men who swore a lot. I cringed at the surrounding slum-homes – windowless frames and covered by tattered sheets. Their mud-hued bricks made me appreciate the red-bricked townhouses popular in London. They were cleaner and soothing to the eyes. My heart was sinking lower by the second.

You’re way out of your element. A miserable loser who’ll run away at the first obstacle.

‘What do you want?’ The prick-server turned to me, twirling his hand into a question. Probably wanted to know my order.

What do you expect a server to do? Ask about the weather?

‘Chai?’ I asked blankly – without looking at the menu or if I could even afford one. I’d never been a bad patron.

I flinched as the drowning sun came into my eyes. How the heck am I getting out of here? I felt like the biggest idiot in the world. The poor

and needy of the world rowed on leaky tugboats to western countries, and here I was vastly overestimating my non-existent skillset to carve out a posh living. I wasn't a shrewd, clever businessman like Baba. Eve was right – I was a miserable loser.

I'd rarely spent my evenings on anything other than Xbox with my mates. Maybe I have some spare money, crumpled into a forgotten crevice of my wallet, or an old credit card that could send me back home. WHY DIDN'T I BRING MY CREDIT CARDS?

I tapped into my jean's back-pocket. Empty. The front pockets were coming out empty too, save for my British passport. I felt beads of cold sweat forming around my brows, prickling against the humid dust that had already settled.

THERE'S NO WALLET – WHERE'S MY WALLET?!

'...'

My brain kicked into a manic fight-or-flight dilemma. But there was no one to fight, and I couldn't afford a flight back home.

HAHA, YOU LOST YOUR WALLET.

I groped my pockets again, suddenly gaping for oxygen. The wayward chatter of the labourers was suddenly prickling my ears too. I wanted my cosy Mayfair bedroom back, where the world was a million times cleaner and quieter. Boring was suddenly good, even if I had spent a lifetime complaining to friends and company about how boring my rich life was.

My chair tumbled onto the floor as I leapt to frisk my arse-cheeks, desperately looking for my wallet. I groped every part of my pants, ready to accept any explanation. There were better times to look graceful. The world suddenly fell quiet, and I realised the patrons and servers were all staring at my manic episode. Their gloomy, dark stares pushed my brain to unhelpfully retrieve embarrassing memories I'd collected over the years – stage fright, being stood up on blind dates, spilling lemonades on Delilah, and emails sent to the wrong recipients.

But no one laughed at the moron groping his arse and crotch. Their silence made me feel jumpier and sweatier – WHY AREN'T THEY LAUGHING?

'What's wrong, Bhai?' The prick-server made his way to me, a steaming teacup on his tray.

'I can't find my wallet.' I babbled, still frisking wildly. The wallet could have fallen into my shirt cuffing or my socks. It *had* to be with me. I met his eyes; the teacup was now on the table, and I realised how bad that looked, feigning a lost wallet to get out of the bill.

'Please take it away. I can't pay for it.' I pleaded.

The server took me by the shoulder and pushed me onto another chair, the one I'd skipped because it looked dirty.

Is the chair REALLY your priority? GET SMART. Where will you be spending the night? It's getting LATE.

I *may* have been having a panic or anxiety attack because the prick-server snapped his fingers next to my eyes.

'Calm down, Bhai.' He handed me the cup anyway. Maybe he wasn't truly a prick.

'You're not from here.' His tone was declarative, not inquisitive. 'You are from some other country.'

I nodded. Someone else was figuring it out for me; much easier that way. What had given me away? Was it my clothes?

'England. I'm from England. Please you must help me.' A pathetic whimper came out from my dry mouth. 'Just let me make a call.'

'You came from England without your phone?' He asked confusedly.

'I...' I had the answer, but I cringed at it. I had chosen to leave my phone to make a clean start here. I wanted to leave no doubt on my would-be success. I thought it would be easier.

'You can use mine, bhai.' The server gave me a tiny brick phone – the screen barely an inch.

I quickly dialled Baba's number on the tiny buttons. If I could grovel in front of a stranger, I could beg my father to send me money. The thought brought me some ease, I fantasised that he would wire me some money and I could take the return flight tonight. I was ready to accept a lifetime of jokes and finger-pointing from my sisters, our servants and concierges, *ANYONE*.

I just couldn't be in this forsaken, treeless, dusty, smelly world.

'The number you have dialled does not exist.' Some promotional nonsense followed.

'You can't call other countries without their exit code.' The server explained. *'My friend calls his brother in Dubai, so he dials 971 before the number.'*

A simple mistake. My heart leapt once more. I fiddled on the dial pad again starting with the 971 exit code.

'The number you have dialled does not exist.'

'Bhai, use the exit code for England.' The server looked puzzled, probably concluding that I was stupid. I had only proven that point for the past several minutes.

'No, no, no.' I felt like a caveman with a sophisticated device in my hand. *'I don't know the exit code for England.'*

The other patrons had returned to their cups and murmurs. The little privacy that offered was at least some comfort, but the server was staring at me perplexedly.

'Bhai, you are far from your hotel, where is it?' His words implied that there must be a better, cleaner part of the city. No way an entire human city be as poor as this locale, where children weren't begging on the streets. I was clearly too poor to be heading that way.

'TA YE DOKHA KAWI—' The café owner yelled at the server again, but the prick-server ignored him.

'Don't have one.' I handed the phone back.

Why hadn't I bothered to think about renting someplace in advance, a room or something? Would something like Airbnb even work here? Would they have outrageous cleaning fees here too?

'I don't have any place to go.' I declared in a defeated sigh, staring at the grimy, sandy concrete floor.

I gasped for fresher air still, my heart threatening to explode out of its bony cage. A few hours to figure it all out, that's all I needed. Maybe I could stay at this café, quietly sip on water (which looked to be free) until I knew what had to be done.

'Other people had always made the important decisions for me.' I muttered weakly. Uncle Zayd decided where I would study, Baba decided where we would spend the summers. Why wasn't someone stepping in? I could sleep spend the night on this curb right here – a stick to scare away the stray, wild animals roaming about.

'Do you need a place to spend the night?' The prick-server asked, maybe feeling my pain, or feeling pity, probably the latter.

I nodded quickly.

'What's your name?' He asked, still holding the metal tray.

'Adam.' I answered quickly, realising I was suddenly at the man's mercy.

'Adam.' The way he pronounced the 'D' was softer, flatter. The same way people had in *Parachinar* too.

'I'm Hidayat.' He tugged proudly on his chadar.

The café owner, who had never quite stopped yelling at Hidayat was now boiling. Hidayat turned and yelled something back. This was the Pashto language again, the one I never learned back in *Parachinar*. Their body language was of daggers.

'PESE BERA TAAS WARKA, HARAMKHOR –'

The café owner threw a teacup at Hidayat, who had seen it coming and ducked. The cup crashed into a pool of sewage and splintered into a thousand pieces. Hidayat took my hand and pulled me into a sprint; my

right knee jerked onto the chipped concrete before the other picked me up.

The conviction to make my own decisions anymore had already abandoned me.

*

A nasty darkness had enveloped the dingy, smelly slum. A people too poor to imagine something so basic as streetlights across its unending hive of uneven, same-looking streets. Rays of lights that escaped from windows and crevices of the slum-dwellings were the only charity lighting our path, a bare necessity to leap over sewage pools, cockroaches, and centipedes that scrawled all over the dirt-caked streets. Trash covered the banks, so the pedestrians walked in the middle, sharing the road with bikers and derelict Suzukis.

Hidayat stopped in front of an unremarkable single-storey brick house. On the ground level were empty shops. Opposite the street was another café, better lit and slightly less gloomy. Had more patrons too. Next to the café was a tandoor baking nans and flatbreads.

‘Come in.’ Hidayat beckoned me into a rusted doorway, which opened into a chipped concrete stairwell going up.

The unlit stairs led to a dead-end – no, another iron gate on the right. This one wasn’t locked. It opened into a claustrophobic single-step corridor. On the left was a room with a befouling smell, probably a toilet. The second gate opened into a small hall-like room. A crisp flick of the button lit the only bulb, which flickered as if it were on its last leg.

‘You take this one.’ Hidayat pointed into what appeared a miserable-looking bed, except it was only a brown and stained rag-like sheet on the solid floor.

It was the first in a series of similar ‘beds’ – I counted five in a glance. On the walls, the tenants had hammered in nails as clothes hooks.

Probably a dozen or so sets of wide and loose shalwar kameez hung from them, in random order and levels of griminess.

The opposing wall was cleaner, having only two nailed objects. A six-year-old calendar from 2013 featuring Masjid Haram in Mecca and a red wall clock. Nearly half past six, the clock at least synced with my watch. How I had the proactive thought to sync my watch to Pakistan time, but not proactively plan for practically any other possibility eluded me.

Hidayat had been candid when he offered me a 'place'. He had never promised the quality of it. Good or bad, this certainly was a *place*. Cradling a loose shawl from his neck, Hidayat plopped onto the bed next to mine. Some bugs, roaches, or whatever crawly little thing you'd find in this part of the world, sprinted in all directions away from his pillow. Crawly things always made me uneasy.

I noticed my bed was slightly more distant from the others, which were huddled closer. While every instinct in my body was telling me to start running and never stop until I reached the Channel Tunnel back to England, or at least the Bosphorus Bridge into Europe... But for Hidayat this dingy little place was home. He draped the shawl over his eyes and crossed his legs. The man was easily a giant.

'Don't think for a moment this gets easier.' He said to me, or himself, I was not quite sure. 'The others will be coming soon.'

'You live here with your family?' I asked.

'Would you want your family living here, Bhai?' Hidayat asked. I got what he meant. I would gladly sell all my organs before I let Eve or Mary set a foot inside here.

'Are you from Karachi?' I asked.

'Far north, you wouldn't know the names.' He replied, his tone was tired, as if wanting for some quiet.

'I spent a summer in *Parachinar*.' I said, shrugging to his sleeping grunt. The café downstairs was getting louder, and so were the small 70cc bikes that seemingly everyone rode.

Sharing was not an alien concept to me. I'd always shared rooms with my sisters on holidays, but those rooms tended to be in five-star resorts, with heated mattresses, 4K television, a toilet that didn't smell like the city sewers, premium furnishing, a good view, and DEFINITELY no lizards dithering above my bed.

Typically, those views would be of Côte d'Azur, Monaco, or of the Dolomites. This summer Baba had decided for somewhere in the Pyrenees. I was never supposed to be in Karachi.

I took a seat on my 'bed', avoiding the crawlies that sprang out. To my left was something of a kitchenette, a round iron stove on the floor connected to a dented gas cylinder that looked a decade past its service life. A single rotting, wood shelf held some plastic containers. Looked like sugar and salt. Hard to believe someone cooked here. The mould and dust said they probably didn't. Hidayat started into a loud snore.

I turned towards Hidayat; his skin was pale but burnt brown by the merciless sun. His clothes stank from the sweat and heat, suffocating little breeze flowing in the room from its only window. I tugged at my Burberry waistcoat and took it off, hoping to use it as a pillow cover, wishing I had worn something cheaper.

A private moment to recompose myself, to think *forward*.

I tugged at my pockets again. No coins, no loose change, no paper slips. I found my passports again. Didn't matter. I had Pakistani citizenship, Baba had made it a point to get us one, inherited by birth right or some jumbo. I couldn't tell what the flag looked like in a police line-up.

I could go to the British embassy and find help there. I'd have to beg for money at some traffic stop or something, but I'd do it.

Giving up so soon? You coward. BEGGING is how your millionaire father made his fortunes? Uncle Zayd will never forgive you, dowsing your honour like that. There isn't a drop of anything special in you – lesser men could achieve more.

A rancid smell rose from the latrine, melding with the humid air to give me breathless nausea. I stood up to the window above my bed, a convenient access for feasting mosquitos. I found the café downstairs to

be in rush hour, dozens of patrons stepped off their 70ccs, like the evening hubbub after a day of hard work in British taverns. Alcohol was illegal in this part of the world, and everyone seemed to drink tea.

But Uncle Zayd would have found a bottle of whiskey anyway. *A drink right now WOULD make you feel better.*

Next to the café was another slum dwelling, smaller with a tiny courtyard before a small room that made up the whole house. A weak-looking woman sat in the courtyard, balling and squeezing clothes in a bucket. She gestured to a younger boy, probably a teen, who was busy ignoring her.

KNOCK-KNOCK.

Outside were two burly men, knocking at her rusty metal gate. The two (siblings?) were busy ignoring the knocks. The boy skittishly glanced at the gate but did not open it. Was it common not to answer the door? I wouldn't open my door to two burly-looking men either.

Metal creaked behind me, and I saw new faces emerge into the room. A stranger standing in your room would probably mean a robbery in England, but this room was bare enough that no one cared. The robber would be doing them a favour, because the old stinky clothes were way past their expiry. One of the men stopped in his tracks and glared at me, as though I'd violated a sacred place.

'Is this some sort of a joke?' The glaring man half-yelled, a long scraggy beard hid most of his round, brown face. I wouldn't win any beauty awards, but I was far from the ugliest bloke.

I turned to Hidayat, who looked out of his shawl, eyes red shot. 'What?' He woke up irritably.

'That bed is for Habib,' The angry bloke started. 'We paid for his bed this month. I knew the arsehole would do this... NO ONE'S TOUCHING HABIB'S STUFF.'

'Get the hell out of here.' The prick-bloke beckoned me outside the room, but Hidayat stood up, his giant form towering over us. The room hadn't been made for five men to stand at once.

'He's not a new tenant, Abdullah hasn't come around yet to pick up the rent,' Hidayat explained, rubbing his eyes. 'I brought him here... Besides, Habib isn't coming back, and you know that, Farid Bhai.'

'You're a gullible idiot.' Farid's retort was childish but draped in bitterness, and I decided that I disliked this guy. His bony small stature and unkempt chin curtains didn't help either. I wasn't here to take Habib's precious luxury bed.

Farid glared at me. 'Don't touch any of Habib's stuff.'

I shrugged, looking around the empty room. 'What stuff?'

I followed Farid's gesture to a black plastic bag bundled into a corner. I could manage *not* touching a random bag.

'No one's going to touch Habib's bag, Bhai.' Hidayat introduced me to the other blokes, who exchanged pleasant handshakes before dropping flatly on their beds. 'This is Wazir... and Rayan.'

England was mostly all shades of white – the Europeans, the Poles, and the Slavs all blended in together. The palette here was all over the shop. Farid was a dark man, Rayan just a shade of tanned brown. Wazir and Hidayat were both pale Pashtuns, the sort of blokes I'd see in *Parachinar*.

'You hungry? I'm heading out for a paratha.' Hidayat asked, rubbing his eyes again.

It had been hours since I'd eaten, but I wasn't feeling hungry. Nothing made sense anymore. Why would I go snooping into Habib's stuff? Who the heck even was Habib? What am I even doing here? Didn't have a bean to buy dinner with anyway.

'No thanks, not hungry.' I landed my head down on my waistcoat pillow, a bit harder than I had meant, ignored the pain, and closed my eyes.

The saner part of me hoped the bugs would stay away.

The full book is available on [Amazon](#) and on my [website](#).