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کہ لگا مجھے اور
سے ہم ہمیں اسلام آباد
گا بجائے

And I Thought
Islamabad Would Rescue
Us from Us

I was reading the newspaper in the exam hall of the university. Proctoring for a statistics paper was a special hell, a Jahannam reserved for junior lecturers, especially if you're a woman. The newspaper's pages were unwaxed, and ink stained my fingers as though I had murdered crows. Smug politicians were inaugurating a port in Gwadar, looking like gods in waistcoats and shalwar-kameez. On page two, a village panchayat had sanctioned the rape of a girl as punishment for a crime her brother had committed. On page seven, the color fuchsia was declared the 'rage' in fashion circuits this season. A photograph of a model was showing her blowing kisses on a catwalk in Lahore next to the designer, who was wearing a t-shirt with the words *Violent for Violet* emblazoned in purple sequins.

Rage, the article actually used that word for a color. *Rage*, as if madrassah students were burning the streets for purple-dyed saris and flowy ghararas. I turned back to page two so fiercely I ripped the newspaper through the headline about the village rape. The words panchayat and dishonor and tribal senior stood out.

Fuchsia.

It's an ugly color. An ugly shade for a shalwar. An ugly shade for a kameez. It could drape our shoulders in the form of a dupatta. It isn't a color found in khaki villages. The color of dust would never find its way to page seven's fashion news.

Fuchsia was also the color of my separation.

When I saw the photograph of the Bengali woman from Dhaka my former husband lived with, I thought she was beautiful. Perhaps it was the cold skies of Toronto in the photograph, or perhaps it was Abdullah's smile, but they looked devastating. She made him feel like himself. Some wives have that effect, you know—they make you into yourself. I saw it in the photograph, the way she rested a hand on his shoulder, his shoulder came into existence. Her sari was beautiful and elegantly draped. You know what else her sari told me? I say this knowing that fabric doesn't lie—her pallu's folds were innocent. The pallu was innocent, which is to say, Abdullah hadn't told her about me, told her about his past.

Her sari was the deepest shade of violet innocence.

I wanted to protect her from him.

I checked my watch and it was twenty to twelve. Students were beginning to crawl into the exam hall.

I used to like colors. I liked fashion. I liked paisleys and flowers and effusion and mismatched fabrics. I even liked outdated kimkhaab. I am not in mourning; I am just less silly. My colors are muted—no, not muted, responsible? Can colors be responsible? I like neatness and precision. I stack student papers on my desk like kapray ke dukaan fabrics. I

like my furniture perpendicular to the walls. I do all this in a culture of cupolas and domes and jharokhas and chajjas and arches and frescoes and poetry and Sufism and skies drenched with Allah, the divine marked in the curve of Arabic. All this in a culture with villages that observed no logic or straight lines.

We were fifteen minutes into the exam. I swear the student looked like Abdullah.

I noticed the way he stretched his arms over his broad neck. His tanned skin was like a Pathan farmer's arms—thick with muscle. He was cutting maize with a large scythe. He was lifting brick loads on his head on Islamabad's under-construction houses.

It felt foul and intense.

I tried to distract myself from its stink.

See, Mrs. Tabassum, I don't hate men. Last year, the Controller of Examinations told me none of the boys in my survey Literature course had earned an A.

Do you hate your male students, Ms. Alia? she asked me.

Did she think Abdullah had something to do with this? It was an arranged marriage and we did the nikkah over the phone, long distance. I was young and I was naïve and I was excited to meet my desi husband living in Canada. He had other plans when I landed at the airport. You travel eight-thousand miles to the West from a place like Pakistan, you hear the landing gear open and it's the sound of becoming Muslim on the asphalt, a strange loudness at immigration that lasts hours. I crossed oceans to become his—an Airbus A-300 soaring south from Greenland into what would become the absence of me, an Airbus A-300 reducing altitude into his me. We rarely are ours and I was never mine in Toronto, till I had to—.

Mrs. Tabassum certainly despises me, though. Perhaps it's because I come from an Urdu Speaking family—we are Muhajirs from India. I suppose her demeanor isn't helped by the circumstances of her life. Did I tell you she lost her only child decades ago? He got pneumonia on a cold Islamabad evening—little Jojo. She calls him Jojo and she keeps a photograph on her desk next to the stationary. He's wiping his small hands on Mickey Mouse pants. She ceased to be a mother because Jojo arrived early to a place we're all headed. I don't even know what Jojo's real name is. I don't think anyone does.

But I don't hate men.

This student was sitting at the back. He looked like Abdullah without the events of Abdullah in my life, you know what I mean? At once him and sufficiently not him—a shade darker than Abdullah that kept me from losing my mind with resentment? I walked down the aisle, pacing slowly. I had populated my life with Abdullah's face. I had populated my hurt with him, given cheekbones and a mole to the devastation, so when I saw the student, he shocked me in the way his face didn't trigger a flood of memories. He simply wasn't my past sitting in a metal chair, bent over an answer book. He was the universe warning me I had no claim to write-off the shape of people.

He was beautiful.

No mole. Eyes more almond.

Muscle.

I returned to the lectern and scrolled through names in the exam roster—Sadaqat Khan, Javeria Hanif, Aisha Mueenuddin, Aun Shaukat—and I reached his:

Registration: 6004457, Jahanzeb Ansari, Comp Sci.

There was a photograph next to it.

Jahanzeb Ansari, I whispered and I continued scrolling down names. Sitting next to him was Meher Malik. Of course, they played basketball together, I remember now. I've seen them on the court many times, and I had seen the resemblance to Abdullah, just the way I saw him in others; though he hadn't struck me the way he was now. I had seen Meher speaking with Sarah Ahmed, the Debate Society President. Perhaps they were seeing each other: I saw them talking at the backside of the university once, where couples went to spoon sometimes. It's never anything serious, they're mostly splitting a samosa and being cute, and yet the idea provokes me: I can't help think some girl's being used, on my territory. I mean this isn't rural Punjab, this isn't the dominion of some Panchayat or Jirga, this certainly isn't his Toronto.

Jahanzeb stretched his arms over his neck again. This time his elbows cracked with strength. I remembered Abdullah, our first night, when the bedsheets pleated and curved on his navel. His palms were rough and tender at once, a feeling I could only describe as sincere. Abdullah must have known it was my first time. Here's what he did not know—when he reached inside me, he was reaching into everything, all the years I spent learning the art of being a desi girl, the non-touch of existing, the formality inside each friendship, each act of modesty I performed, the dupatta I wore when I stepped outside the house, the extra fabric in the suits my tailor stitched for me, the way I sat in a chair, the silence each time I sipped chai with cardamom afloat on the surface—Abdullah reached into my everything, he reached into history, a culture, a religion.

So why did he do what he ended up doing to me?

Men?

Desi men?

Maybe.

I have an uncle who wears a long beard and keeps his shalwar to the ankles as though he's perpetually ready to pray—we imitate mosques so perfectly we forgot to become Muslim. Some years ago he was Assistant Commissioner near the district of Attock. He confronted business owners who had underreported their earnings to pay less tax. He would tell them, *you are lying and your bank accounts show you're earning more, you have to pay five lakhs instead of one.* The business owners would plead and say, *we have to get our daughters married, we are building a mosque in the village, surely a religious man like you would understand?* My uncle would press harder and they would say, *we'll deliver one lakh to your house if you issue our tax certificate.* My bearded uncle would say *No* and close the file and leave, which was his way of signaling he had agreed to their proposal. This man prayed five times a day. He would tell my father, *Amina wears jeans outside the house, have you no shame?*

Things are deeply, deeply rotten.

When I attended the Aurat March and held a placard that said *Meri Jism, Meri Marzi*, it was published on Twitter with my face blurred out. Below it, a desi man wrote it was unnecessary to hide my face as I had no shame left, that it made no difference to me anymore as I had fallen, so I might as well be enjoyed by men.

All of them were alike. Jahanzeb and Meher were wearing the same joggers, the same white color and shape, or were they volleyball shoes? They were always hanging out together and preyed on university girls. I had seen them do this. Meher would abandon Sarah Ahmed one day and I was sure of this.

I saw Jahanzeb Ansari rest on the desk and turn his face towards Meher. Their mouths moved soft and quick and with smiles. I had seen this trick before. “What makes you think I can’t see your faces?” I marched down the aisle towards them. “Stand up.”

Jahanzeb lumbered up. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I was just resting my head.”

“I am moving you. You’re lucky I’m not filing a report.”

His large form shuffled the papers, a pen dropped, and he picked his bag to move. It had a university keychain hanging off its side: the logo had been scratched from overuse. He looked taller this close and I caught a whiff of deodorant that masked the after-smell of sweat. His hair was dark brown, like cracked mehndi a day before Eid. Meher continued to look down at his statistics paper, ignoring us both, crossing his legs and volleyball shoes.

Then I saw it.

It was under Jahanzeb’s chair. It must have fallen when he stood up, but I almost missed a small white scroll that was rolled up like innocence. I picked it up gently and opened the paper. Whatever numbers and formulas may have been scrawled on it, they were inked out completely. “*Allah khudaya.*”

It had been exchanged between the two.

Men operated in pairs.

I felt my neck stiffen.

I returned to the lectern and found the exam regulations. Proctors were required to report crib notes and literature found with examinees. I filled out the unfair means report and wrote down the facts, his name, my name and the exam’s details. I had never filled out a form with such speed and efficiency and I stared at the document, at my eager, perfectly still hands. Was this a Panchayat’s method of tribal justice, was this vengeance or was this cheating? I looked at the exam regulations again, and in the event of hidden literature, Jahanzeb would be dismissed from the university with transferable credit.

I paused at the signature line.

I looked at him again. Somehow, holding his future between my fingers, no man had ever looked less like Abdullah in my life. He was like any other student, sitting at a desk perpendicular to the wall. It was strange he no longer looked attractive either and I set the pen down. Why were men unappealing when I felt stronger? I looked at the report and put the document in my handbag without signing it.

I hate what this world has done to me.

After the exam finished, I collected the papers to deliver them to Mrs. Tabassum's Assistant, Mr. Imran Hashmi in Examinations. Outside the hall, students broke into a loud chatter and I walked through them with the papers. Sarah Ahmed joined the fray, dispersing towards two exits. I saw her and Jahanzeb Ansari leave from the large exit on the right of the exam hall. I took the long route shaded by rows of narrow junipers. The sidewalk had a flower-bed running alongside it, lined with bricks standing at a slant.

"Do you know what to do?" There was a sign outside the door which said, *No Student Entry*, and Mr. Hashmi was telling a proctor the procedure. "You put the envelope on this conveyor belt and the machine time-stamps it, see?" There was a queue of junior faculty holding exam booklets, and some proctors were waiting their turn on the chairs that lined the window. Mrs. Tabassum was inside her office, leaning on her desk next to Jojo's framed photograph, or whatever his real name was, observing the proctors. I took out my newspaper and placed the envelope on my lap.

The victim stated that an older man from the panchayat tried to comfort her "like a father figure," promising to convince the men to fake the punishment if she would enter the hut. However, once she entered, she discovered that this had not been the case, but was instead a ruse to get her into the hut without interference from bystanders. The witness's statement claims they then drugged her with bhang. Throughout the rapes, the older man spoke to her, ascertaining whether she was conscious. The statement adds that when the punishment was finished, the older man signaled the men to move away, then removed his shalwar and raped her himself, saying to her that it was no matter to her any more. The police have registered thirteen FIRs against members of the panchayat and the rapists. Local NGOs criticized the Punjab government for inaction.

Have you ever had a panic attack? During the Abdullah episode, I would get panic attacks. The first time I was washing dishes. There was no inciting event—I simply noticed my heart racing and my body become rigid. After that they visited when I would drift off to sleep. When it came on the chair in the Examinations office, the envelope in my lap dropped on the floor with a thud. The other proctors looked at me and said *Are you okay, Ms. Alia?* There was some shifting from seats and someone distinctly said *Get her some water*. The trick with panic attacks is—let them come, don't fight them. It makes them worse if you resist. They feel powerful when they taste your fear.

Or when they look at your face and say *you can't leave the house*.

Or when they were expecting a dehati woman grateful to be in Canada.

Or when they say, *I did not know you spoke English*.

Or when they beat you for talking back.

Someone helped me sip room-temperature water. I couldn't get the words out of my head—*it was no matter to her any more*. It felt personal, it felt familiar. I was glad I couldn't see my reflection because I sensed I was suffering from—I forget the medical term. It's

the oddest of phenomenon to look at your face and not recognize its ordinary expressions. The first time I *de*—something, it was inside the first panic attack, and I was planning my escape. Abdullah had my passport, so I secretly filed for a lost one, and the Pakistan embassy issued me a replacement in three weeks. I could taste freedom washing those dishes. I could taste returning to parents, to a country where I knew people in every city, where I had connections in the government. I was so close to escape, my fragile hope bloomed into a panic attack. I dropped the sudsy plate on the floor and it broke into two like friends walking away. I looked at my reflection and the face and body I saw was me and not me. I thought I was going mad.

I remember now. It's called Depersonalization.

Saying to her that it was no matter to her any more.

"Are you feeling better?" Someone asked me.

Who does my body belong to? We look at our hands and think that's me, that's my hand, but does my body belong to me? Everyone in Pakistan has an opinion about that.

Saying to her that it was no matter to her any more.

I took out the unfair means report from my handbag and slid it into the envelope containing the exams without even looking at it, fearing I would change my mind.

I left the Examinations block and walked across the quad. The straight lines of the sidewalks converged at a square fountain where three students sat. The fountain reminded me of the way Faisal Masjid had been designed with not a single curve in the mosque's architecture. Can you believe that? No curves inside or outside the mosque. Even the lightbulbs shining inside the square shades were custom-made hexagons. I should have been pleased to see the fountain designed with sharp angles, but just then it annoyed me. Perhaps filing the report was an act of impulse, so unlike the discipline it's taken to build this city. The heat was strong and the sparrows were fighting for the world in a rubber tree. I saw Sarah Ahmed's car parked at the far end of the student parking lot.

I did not see Meher Malik.

Did you know Abdullah emailed me after I left Toronto? He emailed me a number of times. He was heartbroken and unhappy. He said Toronto was cold without me. I never responded. After the fourth one he said I should have been grateful for the opportunity to live in Canada. Then he wrote saying I was never great in bed. He said he had been thinking of a Bengali co-worker whenever he was with me. In the last one he said I deserved to be taken by a number of men in a khada. I forwarded his emails to the Federal Investigation Agency.

Did he think no respectable girl from a middle-class household would take charge of her life and leave him? *I did not know you spoke English.* You think Meher Malik is going to be faithful to Sarah Ahmed for the rest of their college days, let alone a life together, marriage, maybe children? Maybe it was the unfair means report or maybe it was the newspaper article or maybe it was both, but I found myself walking to the backside of campus.

The alleyway was between two department buildings enveloped in shadow—Computer Sciences and Mechatronics. The sun shone at the opening on the far end and I walked towards it. I am not one to readily believe in coincidences or stars aligning, but I heard two voices lowered intimately, and I pressed a hand on my nape. It was no intention of mine to expose a couple; I was well within rights to be here. The end of a bench extended into view from where I stood inside the alleyway. I saw a bag pack with a university keychain hanging off the side, all scratched up.

When I approached the end of the alley, I saw Jahanzeb straddling the bench, facing away from me. His forearm was in the clasp of Meher, who held it to his chest with his head bowed down. He rubbed Jahanzeb's forearm gently and his lips were curved into a smile, as though he were whispering something discreet, as though they were passing notes of affection, blocked out by ink, and their volleyball joggers were intertwined—I couldn't tell their white shoes apart because they were inseparable.

I backed out of sight, back into the alleyway and felt a breeze in my face. I listened carefully for a shift in their tone. I listened carefully for a shift in anything, anything to suggest they had noticed I was there. I walked quickly through the alleyway back towards the quad and I reached the Examinations block and felt safe from the knowledge of what I'd seen. Jahanzeb Ansari and Mehr Malik were partners in volleyball. I was near enough to feel complicit and I was far enough to feel safe from suspicion, as though proximity were a part of knowing something well enough, as though location were a part of feeling responsible for what happened in villages, as though cities were paved with intersections to reverse the violence of elsewhere, as though it's residents reversed yesterday with the calm filing of forms.

Sometimes unjustly.

The sun was receding and I felt the warmth in waves. A crow cawed from a branch and the short trees had leaves scenting the air with lemon. Jahanzeb Ansari would be expelled from the university and I felt the weight of God on me.

“I made a mistake.”

“Excuse me, Ms. Alia?”

“I acted in haste. I was—wrong.”

“I don't understand.” Mr. Hashmi was holding the unfair means report. “You want to withdraw this report?”

“Yes, I made a mistake.”

“This is a very detailed report. I don't understand how this could be a mistake.”

“I am saying I am not sure if he actually cheated.”

“Then we don't have a problem.”

“I don't understand.”

“You reported the facts. The committee decides if it's cheating. Your job here is done.”

“I am not sure if the facts include everything.”

“All right. You can attach an addendum. I'll get you some paper.”

“No sir. I would like to withdraw the report.”

“Ms. Alia, either this student acted inappropriately and you filed a report that you may amend, or you filed a baseless report, in which case it’s a false accusation and then we have a different problem.” He looked at me and tapped a pen. “You know, a student bribed a professor to withdraw a report and we cancelled his tenure?” He paused and breathed and started again. “Now tell me, what new knowledge has magically materialized between the exam and now to make you change your mind so drastically about the facts?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. Nothing has changed.”

You know what’s strange? Abdullah had already kidnapped me the night we made love in Toronto. I just did not know it yet. He had hidden my passport before we made love that night. He had imprisoned me in that apartment in that city in that country, as far as documents go. It’s almost funny to think how pleased I was to be in his arms. You know what else was strange? Jahanzeb and Meher. They’re strange because of their special friendship. Don’t misunderstand me. They’re strange because they were already not the people I thought they were when I saw that crumpled scroll on the floor. They were not the people I thought when I filed the unfair means report. They were simply the men of my life, the sort who whispered lies. That’s all most people are—the knowledge we bring to them.

“Ms. Alia, is everything okay?” I think Mrs. Tabassum noticed I was shaking.

“Nothing is okay.”

“Do you need some water?” She was motherly in her work manners and I knew why, everyone knew why.

When I saw my father at the Islamabad Airport and he leaned forward to hold me through my chador, I stepped away. I needed him to hold me. I stepped away because I needed to step away from him. I had no luggage and I had flown eight thousand miles holding my passport and I turned to my mother and she held my face and I screamed so loudly the guards at the arrival terminal approached my parents because they thought she was hurting me. When I began wailing my mother kept repeating my father’s name but he knew better than to touch my shoulder, which would have crumpled like fabric in billowy curves.

“What happened, Ms. Alia?”

I did not remember taking a chair in her office. “I would like to withdraw the report.”

“I see.” She had the photograph of Jojo on her desk.

“I know this is a lot to ask for.”

“Why did you file the report, Ms. Alia?”

I did not respond.

“It’s a simple question. Have you filed the report against this boy, what’s his name, for some hidden reason?”

I did not respond and I also thought it wasn’t a fair question.

“Are you withdrawing it for some reason you can’t mention?”

I did not say anything.

“Ms. Alia, you’re familiar with accusations of bias in your grading.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Tabassum. I’m sorry for everything.”

This world makes us mad in specific ways; it makes us occupy offices, villages and foreign countries at the same time—all our geographies sat in her chair, my chair, spouting words, remaining silent. And I was fighting to undo a warped intersection—perhaps being in the vicinity of Jahanzeb and Meher’s relationship in the back-alley was a mistake, or perhaps it was necessary to reverse the other geographies I brought to the filing of the report.

“What are you even doing in this university?”

“I made a mistake with the facts. I am sure Jahanzeb is a bright student.”

Mrs. Tabassum looked at me and looked away. She was immediately some place else and I leaned back. We have stopped rescuing each other, and it warmed me to see an elsewhere flicker across her face when I said the last thing I said, and if you were to ask me what Mrs. Tabassum’s madness was, it was right then that I would change my answer from what I’d known before, it was right then when I understood her as no one else had, that Mrs. Tabassum had had a son she called Jojo, a son whose proper name was Jahanzeb. That had always been his name, before Jahanzeb Ansari was born or I had become an adult or we had begun the lives that would bring us to this room.

She turned away. “Mr. Hashmi, please show me the report.”

When she flipped through the papers and scanned through the details, she paused at the end and her eyes widened. She looked at me and smiled. “You may leave, Ms. Alia.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You can only withdraw a report which has been submitted properly.”

I looked at her.

“Which is to say, next time, please make sure you sign the document before it’s time-stamped.” She showed me the blank space at the bottom. “See here?” She tore the papers in half and walked to the shredder.

I leaned back in my chair and my eyes were wet. Mrs. Tabassum came around me and draped an arm around my shoulders. “Go home.”

I left the Examinations block.

I was embarrassed. I was relieved. I was thankful for that oversight.

I walked to the edge of the university where my car was parked, next to the jacaranda trees that had indigo flowers hanging from them in bunches. They looked like accidental waterfalls, like excess life spilling from bark rough to the touch. I drove down Margallah Road towards Seventh Avenue that cuts across the city, admiring the trees blossoming on the median along the way, their bell-shaped flowers falling in patterns on the road.