

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS

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# Brick Lane

Monica Ali

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER AND NOW A MAJOR FILM

At the tender age of eighteen, Nazneen's life is turned upside down. After an arranged marriage to a man twenty years her elder she exchanges her Bangladeshi village for a block of flats in London East End. In this new world, where poor people can be fat and even dogs go on diets, she struggles to make sense of her existence – and to do her duty to her husband. A man of inflated ideas (and a big stomach), he sorely tests her compliance.

But Nazneen submits, as she must, to Fate and devotes her life to raising her family and slapping down her demons of discontent. Until she becomes aware of a young radical, Karim.

Against a background of escalating racial and gang conflict, they embark on an affair that finally forces Nazneen to take control of her life . . .

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# Contents

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Cover  
About the Book  
Title Page  
Dedication  
Epigraph

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Chapter Sixteen  
Chapter Seventeen  
Chapter Eighteen  
Chapter Nineteen  
Chapter Twenty  
Chapter Twenty-One

Acknowledgements  
About the Author  
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Monica Ali

For Abba, with love

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*'Sternly, remorselessly, fate guides each of us; only at the beginning, when we're absorbed in details, in all sorts of nonsense, in ourselves, are we unaware of its harsh hand.'*

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Ivan Turgenev

*'A man's character is his fate.'*

Heraclitus

# CHAPTER ONE

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## MYMENSINGH DISTRICT, EAST PAKISTAN, 1967

AN HOUR AND forty-five minutes before Nazneen's life began – began as it would proceed for quite some time, that is to say uncertainly – her mother Rupban felt an iron fist squeeze her belly. Rupban squatted on a low three-legged stool outside the kitchen hut. She was plucking a chicken because Hamid's cousins had arrived from Jessore and there would be a feast. 'Cheepy-cheepy, you are old and stringy,' she said, calling the bird by name as she always did, 'but I would like to eat you, indigestion or no indigestion. And tomorrow I will have only boiled rice, no parathas.'

She pulled some more feathers and watched them float around her toes. 'Aaah,' she said. 'Aaaa. Aaaaah.' Things occurred to her. For seven months she had been ripening, like a mango on a tree. On seven months. She put those things that had occurred to her aside. For a while, an hour and a half, though she did not know it, until the men came in from the fields trailing dust and slapping their stomachs, Rupban clutched Cheepy-cheepy's limp and bony neck and said only *coming, coming* to answer enquiries about the bird. The shadows of the children playing marbles and thumping each other grew long and spiky. The scent of fried cumin and cardamom drifted over the compound. The goats bleated high and thin. Rupban screamed white heat, red blood.

Hamid ran from the latrine, although his business was unfinished. He ran across the vegetable plot past the towers of rice stalk taller than the tallest building, over the dirt track that bounded the village back to the compound and grabbed a club to kill the man who was killing his wife. He knew it was he. Who else could break glass with one screech? Rupban was in the sleeping quarters. The bed was unrolled, though she was still standing. With one hand she held Mumtaz's shoulder, with the other a half-plucked chicken.

Mumtaz waved Hamid away. 'Go. Get Banesa. Are you waiting for a rickshaw? Go on, use your legs.'

Banesa picked up Nazneen by an ankle and blew disparagingly through her gums over the tiny body. 'She will not take even one breath. Some people, who think too much about how to save a few takas, do not call a midwife.' She shook her hairless, wrinkled head. Banesa claimed to be one hundred and twenty years old, and had made this claim consistently for the past decade or so. Since no one in the village remembered her birth, and since Banesa was more desiccated than an old coconut, no one cared to dispute it. She claimed, too, one thousand babies of which only three were crippled, two were mutants (a hermaphrodite and a humpback), one a stillbirth and another a monkey-lizard hybrid-sin-against-God-that-was-buried-alive-in-the-faraway-forest-and-the-mother-sent-hence-to-who-cares-where. Nazneen, though dead, could not be counted among these failures, having been born shortly before Banesa creaked inside the hut.

'See your daughter,' Banesa said to Rupban. 'Perfect everywhere. All she lacked was someone to ease her path to this world.' She looked at Cheepy-cheepy lying next to the bereaved mother and hollowed her cheeks; a hungry look widened her eyes slightly although they were practically buried

crinkles. It was many months since she had tasted meat, now that two young girls (she should have strangled them at birth) had set up in competition.

‘Let me wash and dress her for the burial,’ said Banesa. ‘Of course I offer my service free. May I have just that chicken there for my trouble. I see it is old and stringy.’

‘Let me hold her,’ said Nazneen’s aunt, Mumtaz, who was crying.

‘I thought it was indigestion,’ said Rupban, also beginning to cry.

Mumtaz took hold of Nazneen, who was still dangling by the ankle, and felt the small, slick torso slide through her fingers to plop with a yowl onto the bloodstained mattress. A yowl! A cry! Rupban scooped her up and named her before she could die nameless again.

Banesa made little explosions with her lips. She used the corner of her yellowing sari to wipe some spittle from her chin. ‘This is called a death rattle,’ she explained. The three women put their faces close to the child. Nazneen flailed her arms and yelled, as if she could see this terrifying sight. She began to lose the blueness and turned slowly to brown and purple. ‘God has called her back to earth,’ said Banesa, with a look of disgust.

Mumtaz, who was beginning to doubt Banesa’s original diagnosis, said, ‘Well, didn’t He just send her to us a few minutes ago? Do you think He changes His mind every second?’

Banesa mumbled beneath her breath. She put her hand over Nazneen’s chest, her twisted fingers like the roots of an old tree that had worked their way above ground. ‘The baby lives but she is weak. There are two routes you can follow,’ she said, addressing herself solely to Rupban. ‘Take her to the city, to a hospital. They will put wires on her and give medicines. This is very expensive. You will have to sell your jewellery. Or you can just see what Fate will do.’ She turned a little to Mumtaz and included her now, and then back to Rupban. ‘Of course, Fate will decide everything in the end, whatever route you follow.’

‘We will take her to the city,’ said Mumtaz, red patches of defiance rising on her cheeks.

But Rupban, who could not stop crying, held her daughter to her breast and shook her head. ‘No,’ she said, ‘we must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way, she will be stronger.’

‘Good, then it is settled,’ said Banesa. She hovered for a moment or two because she was hungry enough, almost, to eat the baby but after a look from Mumtaz she shuffled away back to her hovel.

Hamid came to look at Nazneen. She was wrapped in cheesecloth and laid on an old jute sack on top of the bedroll. Her eyes were closed and puffed as though she had taken two hard punches.

‘A girl,’ said Rupban.

‘I know. Never mind,’ said Hamid. ‘What can you do?’ And he went away again.

Mumtaz came in with a tin plate of rice, dal and chicken curry.

‘She doesn’t feed,’ Rupban told her. ‘She doesn’t know what to do. Probably it is her Fate to starve to death.’

Mumtaz rolled her eyes. ‘She’ll feed in the morning. Now you eat. Or you are destined to die of hunger too.’ She smiled at her sister-in-law’s small sad face, all her features lined up, as ever, to mourn for everything that had passed and all that would come to pass.

But Nazneen did not feed in the morning. Nor the next day. The day after she turned her face away from the nipple and made gagging noises. Rupban, who was famous for crying, couldn’t keep up with the demand for tears. People came: aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, nephews, nieces, in-laws, village women and Banesa. The midwife dragged her bent feet across the hard mud floor of the hut and peered at the infant. ‘I have heard of one child who would not feed from the mother but was suckled by



goat.' She smiled and showed her black gums. 'Of course, that was not one of *my* babies.'

Hamid came once or twice, but at night he slept outside on a choki. On the fifth day, when Rupban in spite of herself was beginning to wish that Fate would hurry and make up its mind, Nazneen clamped her mouth around the nipple so that a thousand red-hot needles ran through Rupban's breast and made her cry out for pain and for the relief of a good and patient woman.

As Nazneen grew she heard many times this story of How You Were Left To Your Fate. It was because of her mother's wise decision that Nazneen lived to become the wide-faced, watchful girl that she was. Fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal. Not once did Nazneen question the logic of the story of How You Were Left To Your Fate. Indeed she was grateful for her mother's quiet courage, her tearful stoicism that was almost daily evidence. Hamid said – he always looked away as he spoke – your mother is naturally a saint. She comes from a family of saints. So when Rupban advised her to be still in her heart and mind, to accept the Grace of God, to treat life with the same indifference with which it would treat her, Nazneen listened closely with her large head tilted back and her cheeks slack with equanimity.

She was a comically solemn child.

'How is my precious? Still glad you came back to life?' said Mumtaz when she had not seen her for a couple of days.

'I have no complaints or regrets to tell you,' said Nazneen. 'I tell everything to God.'

What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle and challenge. So that when, at the age of thirty-four, after she had been given three children and had one taken away, when she had a future husband and had been fated a young and demanding lover, when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye.

Her sister Hasina, born only three days after Banesa passed away (one hundred and twenty years or thereabouts then and for evermore), listened to no one. At the age of sixteen when her beauty was becoming almost unbearable to own or even to look at, she eloped to Khulna with the nephew of the saw-mill owner. Hamid ground his teeth and an axe besides. For sixteen hot days and cool nights he sat between the two lemon trees that marked the entrance to the compound. For that time his only occupation was throwing stones at the piebald dogs that scavenged in the dump just beyond, and cursing his whore-peddler daughter whose head would be severed the moment she came crawling back. Those nights, Nazneen lay awake listening to the rattling of the corrugated tin roof, starting at the owl calls that no longer sounded like owls but more like a girl felled by an axe on the back of her neck. Hasina did not come. Hamid went back to supervising the labourers in the paddy fields. But for a couple of thrashings given on only the slightest of provocation, you would not know he had lost a daughter.

Soon after, when her father asked if she would like to see a photograph of the man she would marry the following month, Nazneen shook her head and replied, 'Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma.' But as she turned to go she noticed, without meaning to, where her father put the photograph.

She just happened to see it. These things happen. She carried the image around in her mind as she walked beneath the banyans with her cousins. The man she would marry was old. At least forty years old. He had a face like a frog. They would marry and he would take her back to England with him. She looked across the fields, glittering green and gold in the brief evening light. In the distance a hawk

circled and fell like a stone, came up again and flew against the sky until it shrank to nothing. There was a hut in the middle of the paddy. It looked wrong: embarrassed, sliding down at one side, trying to hide. The tornado that had flattened half the neighbouring village had selected this hut to be saved, but had relocated it. In the village they were still burying their dead and looking for bodies. Dark spots moved through the far fields. Men, doing whatever they could in this world.

## TOWER HAMLETS, LONDON, 1985

Nazneen waved at the tattoo lady. The tattoo lady was always there when Nazneen looked out across the dead grass and broken paving stones to the block opposite. Most of the flats that closed three sides of a square had net curtains and the life behind was all shapes and shadows. But the tattoo lady had no curtains at all. Morning and afternoon she sat with her big thighs spilling over the sides of her chair, tipping forward to drop ash in a bowl, tipping back to slug from her can. She drank now, and tossed the can out of the window.

It was the middle of the day. Nazneen had finished the housework. Soon she would start preparing the evening meal, but for a while she would let the time pass. It was hot and the sun fell flat on the metal window frames and glared off the glass. A red and gold sari hung out of a top-floor flat in the Rosemead block. A baby's bib and miniature dungarees lower down. The sign screwed to the brickwork was in stiff English capitals and the curlicues beneath were Bengali. No dumping. No parking. No ball games. Two old men in white panjabi-pyjama and skullcaps walked along the path slowly, as if they did not want to go where they were going. A thin brown dog sniffed along to the middle of the grass and defecated. The breeze on Nazneen's face was thick with the smell from the overflowing communal bins.

Six months now since she'd been sent away to London. Every morning before she opened her eyes she thought, *if I were the wishing type, I know what I would wish*. And then she opened her eyes and saw Chanu's puffy face on the pillow next to her, his lips parted indignantly even as he slept. She saw the pink dressing table with the curly-sided mirror, and the monstrous black wardrobe that claimed most of the room. Was it cheating? To think, *I know what I would wish*? Was it not the same as making the wish? If she knew what the wish would be, then somewhere in her heart she had already made it.

The tattoo lady waved back at Nazneen. She scratched her arms, her shoulders, the accessible portions of her buttocks. She yawned and lit a cigarette. At least two thirds of the flesh on show was covered in ink. Nazneen had never been close enough (never closer than this, never further) to decipher the designs. Chanu said the tattoo lady was Hell's Angel, which upset Nazneen. She thought the tattoos might be flowers, or birds. They were ugly and they made the tattoo lady more ugly than was necessary, but the tattoo lady clearly did not care. Every time Nazneen saw her she wore the same look of boredom and detachment. Such a state was sought by the sadhus who walked in rags through the Muslim villages, indifferent to the kindness of strangers, the unkind sun.

Nazneen thought sometimes of going downstairs, crossing the yard and climbing the Rosemead stairwell to the fourth floor. She might have to knock on a few doors before the tattoo lady answered. She would take something, an offering of samosas or bhajis, and the tattoo lady would smile and

Nazneen would smile and perhaps they would sit together by the window and let the time pass more easily. She thought of it but she would not go. Strangers would answer if she knocked on the wrong door. The tattoo lady might be angry at an unwanted interruption. It was clear she did not like to leave her chair. And even if she wasn't angry, what would be the point? Nazneen could say two things in English: sorry and thank you. She could spend another day alone. It was only another day.

She should be getting on with the evening meal. The lamb curry was prepared. She had made it last night with tomatoes and new potatoes. There was chicken saved in the freezer from the last time Dr Azad had been invited but had cancelled at the last minute. There was still the dal to make, and the vegetable dishes, the spices to grind, the rice to wash, and the sauce to prepare for the fish that Chanu would bring this evening. She would rinse the glasses and rub them with newspaper to make them shine. The tablecloth had some spots to be scrubbed out. What if it went wrong? The rice might stick. She might over-salt the dal. Chanu might forget the fish.

It was only dinner. One dinner. One guest.

She left the window open. Standing on the sofa to reach, she picked up the Holy Qur'an from the high shelf that Chanu, under duress, had specially built. She made her intention as fervently as possible, seeking refuge from Satan with fists clenched and fingernails digging into her palms. Then she selected a page at random and began to read.

*To God belongs all that the heavens and the earth contain. We exhort you, as We have exhorted those to whom the Book was given before you, to fear God. If you deny Him, know that to God belongs all that the heavens and earth contain. God is self-sufficient and worthy of praise.*

The words calmed her stomach and she was pleased. Even Dr Azad was nothing as to God. To God belongs all that the heavens and the earth contain. She said it over a few times, aloud. She was composed. Nothing could bother her. Only God, if he chose to. Chanu might flap about and squawk because Dr Azad was coming for dinner. Let him flap. To God belongs all that the heavens and the earth contain. How would it sound in Arabic? More lovely even than in Bengali, she supposed, for those were the actual Words of God.

She closed the book and looked around the room to check it was tidy enough. Chanu's books and papers were stacked beneath the table. They would have to be moved or Dr Azad would not be able to get his feet in. The rugs, which she had held out of the window earlier and beaten with a wooden spoon, needed to be put down again. There were three rugs: red and orange, green and purple, brown and blue. The carpet was yellow with a green leaf design. One hundred per cent nylon and, Chanu said, very hard-wearing. The sofa and chairs were the colour of dried cow dung, which was a practical colour. They had little sheaths of plastic on the headrests to protect them from Chanu's hair oil. There was a lot of furniture, more than Nazneen had seen in one room before. Even if you took all the furniture in the compound, from every auntie and uncle's ghar, it would not match up to this one room. There was a low table with a glass centre and orange plastic legs, three little wooden tables that were stacked together, the big table they used for the evening meal, a bookcase, a corner cupboard, a rack for newspapers, a trolley filled with files and folders, the sofa and armchairs, two footstools, six dining chairs and a showcase. The walls were papered in yellow with brown squares and circles lined up neatly up and down. Nobody in Gouripur had anything like it. It made her proud. Her father was the second wealthiest man in the village and he never had anything like it. He had made a good marriage for her. There were plates on the wall, attached by hooks and wires, which were not for eating from but only for display. Some were rimmed in gold paint. 'Gold leaf', Chanu called it. His certificates were framed and mixed with the plates. She had everything here. All these beautiful things.

She put the Qur'an back in its place. Next to it lay the most Holy Book wrapped inside a cloth.

covering: the Qur'an in Arabic. She touched her fingers to the cloth.

Nazneen stared at the glass showcase stuffed with pottery animals, china figures and plastic fruit. Each one had to be dusted. She wondered how the dust got in and where it came from. All of it belonged to God. She wondered what He wanted with clay tigers, trinkets and dust.

And then, because she had let her mind drift and become uncentred again, she began to recite in her head from the Holy Qur'an one of the suras she had learned in school. She did not know what the words meant but the rhythm of them soothed her. Her breath came from down in her stomach. In and out. Smooth. Silent. Nazneen fell asleep on the sofa. She looked out across jade-green rice fields and a swam in the cool dark lake. She walked arm-in-arm to school with Hasina, and skipped part of the way and fell and they dusted their knees with their hands. And the mynah birds called from the trees, and the goats fretted by, and the big sad water buffaloes passed like a funeral. And heaven, which was above, was wide and empty and the land stretched out ahead and she could see to the very end of it where the earth smudged the sky in a dark blue line.

When she woke it was almost four o'clock. She rushed to the kitchen and began chopping onions with the sleep still in her eyes so that it was not long before she cut her finger, a deep cut to the left index just below the nail. She turned on the cold tap and held her hand beneath it. What was Hasina doing? This thought came to her all the time. *What is she doing right now?* It was not even a thought. It was a feeling, a stab in the lungs. Only God alone knew when she would see her again.

It worried her that Hasina kicked against fate. No good could come of it. Not a single person could say so. But then if you really looked into it, thought about it more deeply, how could you be sure that Hasina was not simply following her fate? If fate cannot be changed, no matter how you struggle against it, then perhaps Hasina was fated to run away with Malek. Maybe she struggled against *that* and *that* was what she could not alter. Oh, you think it would be simple, having made the decision long, long ago, to be at the beck and call of fate, but how to know which way it is calling you? And there was each and every day to be got through. If Chanu came home this evening and found the place untidy and the spices not even ground, could she put her hands like so and say, don't ask me why nothing is prepared, it was not I who decided it, it was fate. A wife could reasonably be beaten for lesser offence.

Chanu had not beaten her yet. He showed no signs of wanting to beat her. In fact he was kind and gentle. Even so, it was foolish to assume he would never beat her. He thought she was a 'good worker' (she had overheard him on the telephone). He would be shocked if she lapsed.

'She is an unspoilt girl. From the village.'

She had got up one night to fetch a glass of water. It was one week since they married. She had gone to bed and he was still up, talking on the telephone as she stood outside the door.

'No,' said Chanu. 'I would not say so. Not beautiful, but not so ugly either. The face is broad, broad forehead. Eyes are a bit too close together.'

Nazneen put her hand up to her head. It was true. The forehead was large. But she had never thought of her eyes being too close.

'Not tall. Not short. Around five foot two. Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children. All things considered, I am satisfied. Perhaps when she gets older she'll grow a beard on her chin but now she is only eighteen. And a blind uncle is better than no uncle. I waited too long to get a wife.'

Narrow hips! You could wish for such a fault, Nazneen said to herself, thinking of the rolls of fat

that hung low from Chanu's stomach. It would be possible to tuck all your hundred pens and pencils under those rolls and keep them safe and tight. You could stuff a book or two up there as well. If your spindle legs could take the weight.

'What's more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that. The only complaint I could make is she can't put my files in order, because she has no English. I don't complain though. As I said to a girl from the village: totally unspoilt.'

Chanu went on talking but Nazneen crept away, back to bed. A blind uncle is better than no uncle. Her husband had a proverb for everything. Any wife is better than no wife. Something is better than nothing. What had she imagined? That he was in love with her? That he was grateful because she was young and graceful, had accepted him? That in sacrificing herself to him, she was owed something. Yes. Yes. She realized in a stinging rush she had imagined all these things. Such a foolish girl. Such high notions. What self-regard.

The bleeding seemed to have stopped. Nazneen turned off the tap and wrapped a piece of kitchen roll around her finger. Who had Chanu been talking to that day? Perhaps it was a call from Bangladesh, a relative who did not come to the wedding. Perhaps it was Dr Azad. Tonight he would see for himself the big forehead and too-close-together eyes. Blood spotted through from the cut. She discarded the kitchen roll and watched the red drops fall on the silver sink. The drops slid together like mercury and rolled down the drain. How long would it take to empty her finger of blood, drop by drop? How long for the arm? And for the body, an entire body? What she missed most was people. Not any people in particular (apart, of course, from Hasina) but just people. If she put her ear to the wall she could hear sounds. The television on. Coughing. Sometimes the lavatory flushing. Someone upstairs scraping a chair. A shouting match below. Everyone in their boxes, counting their possessions. In all her eighteen years, she could scarcely remember a moment that she had spent alone. Until she married. And came to London to sit day after day in this large box with the furniture to dust, and the muffled sound of private lives sealed away above, below and around her.

Nazneen examined her finger. The bleeding had stopped again. Random thoughts came now. She would speak to Chanu about another sari. Abba had not said goodbye. She thought he would come the morning, before they went to Dhaka, to the airport. But when she rose, he had already gone to the fields. Was it because he cared too much or because he cared too little? She needed more furniture polish. And bleach for the lavatory. Would Chanu want his corns cut again tonight? What was Hasina doing?

She went to the bedroom and opened the wardrobe. The letter was in a shoebox at the bottom. She sat on the bed to read it with her feet almost touching the black lacquered doors. Sometimes she dreamed the wardrobe had fallen on her, crushing her on the mattress. Sometimes she dreamed she was locked inside it and hammered and hammered but nobody heard.

*Our cousin Ahmed have given me your address praise God. I hear of marriage and pray many time on your wedding day I pray now also. I pray your husband is good man. You will write and telling all things to me.*

*I so happy now I almost scared. Hardly dare opening my eye. Why it is? What is bringing fear? God not putting me on earth only to suffer. I know this always even when days bringing no light.*

*Malek's uncle have got for him First Class job in railway company. This uncle very High Up at railway. Malek go out early in morning and coming back late late. He not knowing much about trains and such like but he say too also that do not matter. What matter is being smart. Nobody smarter than my husband.*

*Can you believe? We live in block of flat is three storey high. Our place have two room. No veranda but I go up on roof. There is brown stone floor it cool your feet. We have bed with metal spring a cabinet and two chairs in bedroom. I fold saris and put in box under bed. In living room we has three cane chair a rug one stool (Malek like to put feet on) a crate is only temporary before we getting table. Also paraffin stove I keep under shawl for making tidy. My pot and pans is keep inside the*

crate. Hardly any cockroach only one maybe two I see time to time.

Even we have nothing I happy. We have love. Love is happiness. Sometime I feel to run and jump like goat. This is how we do on way to school. But not much room for running here and I sixteen year old and married woman.

Everything good between us now. I do not let my tongue make trouble for it as my husband say. Just because man is kind to wife it do not mean she can say what she like. If women understanding this no one will beat. Malek have First Class job. I pray for son. I pray Maleks mother forgive the 'crime' of our marriage. It will come. Time comes she love me like daughter. If I wrong she is not true mother for mother love every part of son. Now I part of him. If Amma alive you think she forgive this thing Abba cannot? Sometime I think yes she do that. Many time I think no and then I angry and also too sad.

Sister I think of you every day and send love. I send respect to husband. Now you have address you will write and tell all thing about London. It make me tremble you so far away. You remember those story we hear as children begin like this. 'Once there was prince who lived in far off land seven seas and thirteen rivers away.' That is how I think of you. But as princess.

We see each other before long time pass and we as little girls again.

Someone was knocking on the front door of the flat. Nazneen opened it a crack, with the chain on then closed it while she slid the chain off and opened it wide.

'No one is saying it to his face,' Mrs Islam was telling Razia Iqbal, 'but everyone is saying behind his back. I don't like that kind of gossip.'

Nazneen exchanged salaams with her visitors and went to make tea.

Mrs Islam folded handkerchiefs, leaning over from the sofa to the low table and tucking them under the bobbed sleeves of her cardigan.

'Spreading rumours is our national pastime,' said Razia. 'That's not to say it is a good thing. Most of the time there's not a shred of truth in it.' She gave a sideways look at Nazneen, who was setting down the tea things. 'What is it they are saying this time? If I hear it from someone else I can set the straight about everything.'

'Well,' said Mrs Islam slowly. She settled back against the brown upholstery. Her sleeves bulged and bagged. She had carpet slippers on over black socks. Nazneen looked through the glass at the centre of the table and watched Mrs Islam's feet twitch with an excitement that her face did not betray. 'You have to bear in mind she had no children. This is after twelve years of marriage.'

'Yes, that is so,' said Razia. 'It is the worst thing, for any woman.'

'And at sixteen floors up, if you decide to jump, then there's the end to it.' Mrs Islam extracted a handkerchief and wiped away a little sweat from her hairline. Just looking at her made Nazneen feel unbearably hot.

'There's no chance of ending up a vegetable, if you jump from that high,' agreed Razia. She accepted a cup from Nazneen and held it in her man-size hands. She wore black lace-up shoes, wide and thick-soled. It was the sari that looked strange on her. 'But of course it was an accident. Why say otherwise?'

'A terrible accident,' said Mrs Islam. 'But everyone is whispering behind the husband's back.'

Nazneen sipped her tea. It was ten past five and all she had done was chop two onions. She had not heard about the accident. Chanu had mentioned nothing. She wanted to know who this woman was who died so terribly. She formed some questions in her mind, phrased and rephrased them.

'It is a shame,' said Razia. She smiled at Nazneen. Nazneen thought Razia did not look as though she really thought so. When she smiled she looked deeply amused although her mouth turned up only slightly to indicate pity rather than laughter. She had a long nose and narrow eyes that always looked at you from an angle, never straight on, so that she seemed perpetually to be evaluating if not mocking you.

Mrs Islam made a noise signalling that it was, indeed, a shame. She took a fresh handkerchief and blew her nose. After a decent interval she said, 'Did you hear about Jorina?'

‘I hear this and that,’ said Razia, as if no news about Jorina could possibly interest her.

‘And what do you say to it?’

‘That depends,’ said Razia, looking down her nose at her tea, ‘on what particular thing you mean.’

‘I don’t tell anything that isn’t known already. You can hardly keep it a secret when you begin going out to work.’

Nazneen saw that Razia looked up sharply. Razia did not know the things that Mrs Islam knew. Mrs Islam knew everything about everybody. She had been in London for nearly thirty years and if you were a Bangladeshi here, what could you keep secret from her? Mrs Islam was the first person who called on Nazneen, in those first few days when her head was still spinning and the days were a blur of dreams and real life came to her only at night, when she slept. Mrs Islam was deemed by Chanu to be ‘respectable’. Not many people were ‘respectable’ enough to call or be called upon. ‘You see,’ said Chanu when he explained this for the first time, ‘most of our people here are Sylhetis. They all stick together because they come from the same district. They know each other from the villages, and they come to Tower Hamlets and they think they are back in the village. Most of them have jumped ship. That’s how they come. They have menial jobs on the ship, doing donkey work, or they stow away like little rats in the hold.’ He cleared his throat and spoke to the back of the room so that Nazneen turned her head to see who it was he was addressing. ‘And when they jump ship and scuttle over here, then they get a sense they are home again. And you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkey all in the same monkey clan. But these people are peasants. Uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition.’ He sat back and stroked his belly. ‘I don’t look down on them, but what can you expect from them? If a man has only ever driven a rickshaw and never in his life held a book in his hand, then what can you expect from him?’

Nazneen wondered about Mrs Islam. If she knew everybody’s business then she must mix with everybody, peasant or not. And still she was respectable.

‘Going out to work?’ Razia said to Mrs Islam. ‘What has happened to Jorina’s husband?’

‘Nothing has happened to Jorina’s husband,’ said Mrs Islam. Nazneen admired the way the words left her mouth, like bullets. It was too late now to ask about the woman who fell from the sixteenth floor.

‘Her husband is still working,’ said Razia, as if she were the provider of the information.

‘The husband is working but still she cannot fill her stomach. In Bangladesh one salary can feed twelve, but Jorina cannot fill her stomach.’

‘Where is she going? To the garment factory?’

‘Mixing with all sorts: Turkish, English, Jewish. All sorts. I am not old-fashioned,’ said Mrs Islam. ‘I don’t wear burkha. I keep purdah in my mind, which is the most important thing. Plus I have cardigans and anoraks and a scarf for my head. But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That’s how it is.’

‘Poor Jorina,’ said Razia. ‘Can you imagine?’ she said to Nazneen, who could not.

They talked on and Nazneen made more tea and answered some queries about herself and about her husband, and wondered all the while about supper and the impossibility of mentioning anything to her guests, who must be made welcome.

‘Dr Azad knows Mr Dalloway,’ Chanu had explained to her. ‘He has influence. If he puts in a word for me, the promotion will be automatic. That’s how it works. Make sure you fry the spices properly and cut the meat into big pieces. I don’t want small pieces of meat this evening.’

Nazneen asked after Razia’s children, a boy and a girl, five and three, who were playing at her auntie’s house. She made enquiries about Mrs Islam’s arthritic hip, and Mrs Islam made some noise

to indicate that indeed the hip was troubling her a great deal but it was nothing she could mention being in fact a stoic. And then, just when her anxiety about supper was beginning to make her chest hurt, her guests stood up to leave and Nazneen rushed to open the door, feeling rude as she stood by waiting for them to go.



## CHAPTER TWO

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DR AZAD WAS a small, precise man who, contrary to the Bengali custom, spoke at a level only a quarter of a decibel above a whisper. Anyone who wished to hear what he was saying was obliged to lean in towards him, so that all evening Chanu gave the appearance of hanging on his every word.

‘Come,’ said Dr Azad, when Nazneen was hovering behind the table ready to serve. ‘Come and sit down with us.’

‘My wife is very shy.’ Chanu smiled and motioned with his head for her to be seated.

‘This week I saw two of our young men in a very sorry state,’ said the doctor. ‘I told them straight this is your choice: stop drinking alcohol now, or by Eid your liver will be finished. Ten years ago that would be unthinkable. Two in one week! But now our children are copying what they see here, going to the pub, to nightclubs. Or drinking at home in their bedrooms where their parents think they are perfectly safe. The problem is our community is not properly educated about these things.’ Dr Azad drank a glass of water down in one long draught and poured himself another. ‘I always drink two glasses before starting the meal.’ He drank the second glass. ‘Good. Now I will not overeat.’

‘Eat! Eat!’ said Chanu. ‘Water is good for cleansing the system, but food is also essential.’ He scooped up lamb and rice with his fingers and chewed. He put too much in his mouth at once, and he made sloppy noises as he ate. When he could speak again, he said, ‘I agree with you. Our community is not educated about this, and much else besides. But for my part, I don’t plan to risk these things happening to my children. We will go back before they get spoiled.’

‘This is another disease that afflicts us,’ said the doctor. ‘I call it Going Home Syndrome. Do you know what that means?’ He addressed himself to Nazneen.

She felt a heat on the back of her neck and formed words that did not leave her mouth.

‘It is natural,’ said Chanu. ‘These people are basically peasants and they miss the land. The pull of the land is stronger even than the pull of blood.’

‘And when they have saved enough they will get on an aeroplane and go?’

‘They don’t ever really leave home. Their bodies are here but their hearts are back there. Anyway, look how they live: just recreating the villages here.’

‘But they will never save enough to go back.’ Dr Azad helped himself to vegetables. His shirt was spotless white, and his collar and tie so high under his chin that he seemed to be missing a neck. Nazneen saw an oily yellow stain on her husband’s shirt where he had dripped food.

Dr Azad continued, ‘Every year they think, just one more year. But whatever they save, it’s never enough.’

‘We would not need very much,’ said Nazneen. Both men looked at her. She spoke to her plate. ‘mean, we could live very cheaply.’ The back of her neck burned.

Chanu filled the silence with his laugh. ‘My wife is just settling in here.’ He coughed and shuffled in his chair. ‘The thing is, with the promotion coming up, things are beginning to go well for me now. If I just get the promotion confirmed then many things are possible.’

‘I used to think all the time of going back,’ said Dr Azad. He spoke so quietly that Nazneen was forced to look directly at him, because to catch all the words she had to follow his lips. ‘Every year I thought, “Maybe this year.” And I’d go for a visit, buy some more land, see relatives and friends and make up my mind to return for good. But something would always happen. A flood, a tornado that just missed the building, a power cut, some mind-numbing piece of petty bureaucracy, bribes to be paid

out to get anything done. And I'd think, "Well, maybe not this year." And now, I don't know. I just don't know.'

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Chanu cleared his throat. 'Of course, it's not been announced yet. Other people have applied. But after my years of service . . . Do you know, in six years I have not been late on one single day! And only three sick days, even with the ulcer. Some of my colleagues are very unhealthy, always going off sick with this or that. It's not something I could bring to Mr Dalloway's attention. Even so, I feel he ought to be aware of it.'

'I wish you luck,' said Dr Azad.

'Then there's the academic perspective. Within months I will be a fully fledged academic with two degrees. One from a British university. Bachelor of Arts degree. With honours.'

'I'm sure you have a good chance.'

'Did Mr Dalloway tell you that?'

'Who's that?'

'Mr Dalloway.'

The doctor shrugged his neat shoulders.

'My superior. Mr Dalloway. He told you I have a good chance?'

'No.'

'He said I didn't have a good chance?'

'He didn't say anything at all. I don't know the gentleman in question.'

'He's one of your patients. His secretary made an appointment for him to see you about his shoulder sprain. He's a squash player. Very active man. Average build, I'd say. Red hair. Wears contact lenses – perhaps you test his eyes as well.'

'It's possible he's a patient. There are several thousand on the list for my practice.'

'What I should have told you straight away – he has a harelip. Well, it's been put right with reconstructive surgery and all that, but you can always tell. That should put you on to him.'

The guest remained quiet. Nazneen heard Chanu suppress a belch. She wanted to go to him and stroke his forehead. She wanted to get up from the table and walk out of the door and never see him again.

'He might be a patient. I do not know him.' It was nearly a whisper.

'No,' said Chanu. 'I see.'

'But I wish you luck.'

'I am forty years old,' said Chanu. He spoke quietly like the doctor, with none of his assurance. 'I have been in this country for sixteen years. Nearly half my life.' He gave a dry-throated gargle. 'When I came I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the aeroplane I had my degree certificate in my suitcase and a few pounds in my pocket. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the Civil Service and become Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. As he told his story, his voice grew. It filled the room. 'That was my plan. And then I found things were a bit different. These people here didn't know the difference between me, who stepped off an aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads. What can you do?' He rolled a ball of rice and meat in his fingers and teased it around his plate.

'I did this and that. Whatever I could. So much hard work, so little reward. More or less it is true to say I have been chasing wild buffaloes and eating my own rice. You know that saying? All the begging letters from home I burned. And I made two promises to myself. I will be a success, come what may. That's promise number one. Number two, I will go back home. When I am a success. And I will

honour these promises.’ Chanu, who had grown taller and taller in his chair, sank back down.

‘Very good, very good,’ said Dr Azad. He checked his watch.

‘The begging letters still come,’ said Chanu. ‘From old servants, from the children of servants. Even from my own family, although they are not in need. All they can think of is money. They think there is gold lying about in the streets here and I am just hoarding it all in my palace. But I did not come here for money. Was I starving in Dhaka? I was not. Do they enquire about my diplomas?’ He gestured to the wall, where various framed certificates were displayed. ‘They do not. What is more . . .’ He cleared his throat, although it was already clear. Dr Azad looked at Nazneen and, without meaning to, she returned his gaze so that she was caught in a complicity of looks, given and returned, which said something about her husband that she ought not to be saying.

Chanu talked on. Dr Azad finished the food on his plate while Chanu’s food grew cold. Nazneen picked at the cauliflower curry. The doctor declined with a waggle of the head either a further helping or any dessert. He sat with his hands folded on the table while Chanu, his oration at an end, ate noisily and quickly. Twice more he checked his watch.

At half past nine Dr Azad said, ‘Well, Chanu. I thank you and your wife for a most pleasant evening and a delicious meal.’

Chanu protested that it was still early. The doctor was adamant. ‘I always retire at ten thirty and always read for half an hour in bed before that.’

‘We intellectuals must stick together,’ said Chanu, and he walked with his guest to the door.

‘If you take my advice, one intellectual to another, you will eat more slowly, chew more thoroughly, and take only a small portion of meat. Otherwise I’ll see you back at the clinic again with another ulcer.’

‘Just think,’ said Chanu, ‘if I did not have the ulcer in the first place, then we would not have met and we would not have had this dinner together.’

‘Just think,’ said the doctor. He waved stiffly and disappeared behind the door.

The television was on. Chanu liked to keep it glowing in the evenings, like a fire in the corner of the room. Sometimes he went over and stirred it by pressing the buttons so that the light flared and changed colours. Mostly he ignored it. Nazneen held a pile of the last dirty dishes to take to the kitchen, but the screen held her. A man in a very tight suit (so tight that it made his private parts stand out on display) and a woman in a skirt that did not even cover her bottom gripped each other as an invisible force hurtled them across an oval arena. The people in the audience clapped their hands together and then stopped. By some magic they all stopped at exactly the same time. The couple broke apart. They fled from each other and no sooner had they fled than they sought each other out. Every move they made was urgent, intense, a declaration. The woman raised one leg and rested her boot (Nazneen saw the thin blade for the first time) on the other thigh, making a triangular flag of her leg and spun around until she would surely fall but didn’t. She did not slow down. She stopped dead and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her.

‘What is this called?’ said Nazneen.

Chanu glanced at the screen. ‘Ice skating,’ he said, in English.

‘Ice e-skating,’ said Nazneen.

‘Ice skating,’ said Chanu.

‘Ice e-skating.’

‘No, no. No *e*. Ice skating. Try it again.’

Nazneen hesitated.

‘Go on!’

‘Ice es-kating,’ she said, with deliberation.

Chanu smiled. ‘Don’t worry about it. It’s a common problem for Bengalis. Two consonants together causes a difficulty. I have conquered this issue after a long time. But you are unlikely to need these words in any case.’

‘I would like to learn some English,’ said Nazneen.

Chanu puffed his cheeks and spat the air out in a *fuff*. ‘It will come. Don’t worry about it. Where is the need anyway?’ He looked at his book and Nazneen watched the screen.

‘He thinks he will get the promotion because he goes to the *pub* with the boss. He is so stupid he doesn’t even realize there is any other way of getting promotion.’ Chanu was supposed to be studying. His books were open at the table. Every so often he looked in one, or turned a page. Mostly, he talked *Pub, pub, pub*. Nazneen turned the word over in her mind. Another drop of English that she knew. There were other English words that Chanu sprinkled into his conversation, other things she could say to the tattoo lady. At this moment she could not think of any.

‘This Wilkie – I told you about him – he has one or maybe two O levels. Every lunchtime he goes to the pub and he comes back half an hour late. Today I saw him sitting in Mr Dalloway’s office using the phone with his feet up on the desk. The jackfruit is still on the tree but already he is oiling his moustache. No way is he going to get promoted.’

Nazneen stared at the television. There was a close-up of the woman. She had sparkly bits around her eyes like tiny sequins glued to her face. Her hair was scraped back and tied on top of her head with plastic flowers. Her chest pumped up and down as if her heart would shoot out and she smiled pure gold joy. She must be terrified, thought Nazneen, because such things cannot be held, and must be lost.

‘No,’ said Chanu. ‘I don’t have anything to fear from Wilkie. I have a degree from Dhaka University in English Literature. Can Wilkie quote from Chaucer or Dickens or Hardy?’

Nazneen, who feared her husband would begin one of his long quotations, stacked a final plate and went to the kitchen. He liked to quote in English and then give her a translation, phrase by phrase. And when it was translated it usually meant no more to her than it did in English, so that she did not know what to reply or even if a reply was required.

She washed the dishes and rinsed them and Chanu came and leaned against the ill-fitting cupboard and talked some more. ‘You see,’ he said, a frequent opener although often she did not see, ‘it is the white underclass, like Wilkie, who are most afraid of people like me. To him, and people like him, we are the only thing standing in the way of them sliding totally to the bottom of the pile. As long as we are below them, then they are above something. If they see us rise then they are resentful because we have left our proper place. That is why you get the phenomenon of the *National Front*. They can play on those fears to create racial tensions, and give these people a superiority complex. The middle classes are more secure, and therefore more relaxed.’ He drummed his fingers against the Formica.

Nazneen took a tea towel and dried the plates. She wondered if the ice e-skating woman went home and washed and wiped. It was difficult to imagine. But there were no servants here. She would have to manage by herself.

Chanu ploughed on. ‘Wilkie is not exactly *underclass*. He has a job, so *technically* I would say no, he is not. But that is the mindset. This is what I am studying in the sub-section on Race, Ethnicity and Identity. It is part of the sociology module. Of course, when I have my Open University degree the

nobody can question my credentials. Although Dhaka University is one of the best in the world, the people here are by and large ignorant and know nothing of the Brontës or Thackeray.'

Nazneen began to put things away. She needed to get in the cupboard that Chanu blocked with his body. He didn't move although she waited in front of him. Eventually she left the pans on the cooktop to be put away in the morning.

'Ish,' said Chanu, breathing sharply. 'Did you draw blood?' He looked closely at his little toe. He wore only his pyjama bottoms and sat on the bed. Nazneen knelt to the side with a razor blade in her hand. It was time to cut her husband's corns again. She sliced through the semi-translucent skin, the build-up around the yellow core, and gathered the little dead bits in the palm of her hand.

'It's OK,' he said, 'but be careful, huh?'

Nazneen moved on to the other foot.

'I think it was a success this evening,' said Chanu when Nazneen got into bed next to him.

'Yes, I think so,' said Nazneen.

'He doesn't know Dalloway but that's not important. He's a good man, very respectable.'

'Respectable. Yes.'

'I think I am certain of the promotion in any case.'

'I am happy for you.'

'Shall we turn out the light?'

'I'll do it.'

After a minute or two in the dark, when her eyes had adjusted and the snoring began, Nazneen turned on her side and looked at her husband. She scrutinized his face, round as a ball, the blunt-corned thinning hair on top, and the dense eyebrows that crawled across his brow. His mouth was open and she began to regulate her breathing so that she inhaled as he did. When she got it wrong she could smell his breath. She looked at him for a long time. It was not a handsome face. In the month before her marriage, when she looked at his face in the photograph, she thought it ugly. Now she saw that it was not handsome, but it was kind. His mouth, always on duty, always moving, was full-lipped and generous, without a hint of cruelty. His eyes, small and beleaguered beneath those thick brows, were never anxious or far away, or both. Now that they were closed she could see the way the skin puckered up across the lids and drooped down to meet the creases at the corners. He shifted in his sleep and moved onto his stomach with his arms down by his side and his face squashed against the pillow.

Nazneen got out of bed and crossed the hall. She caught hold of the bead curtain that hung between the kitchen and the narrow hallway to stop it tinkling, and went to the fridge. She got out the Tupperware containers of rice and fish and chicken and took a spoon from the drawer. As she stood standing beside the sink, she looked out at the moon which hung above the dark flats chequered with streetlights. It was large and white and untroubled. She thought about Hasina and tried to imagine what it would be like to fall in love. Was she beginning to love Chanu, or just getting used to him? She looked down into the courtyard. Two boys exchanged mock punches, feinting left and right. Cigarettes burned in their mouths. She opened the window and leaned into the breeze.

The woman who fell, what terror came to her mind when she went down? What thoughts came? When she jumped, what thoughts came? Would they be the same ones? In the end, did it matter whether she jumped or fell? Suddenly Nazneen was sure that she jumped. A big jump, feet first and arms wide, eyes wide, silent all the way down and her hair wild and loose, and a big smile on her face because with this single everlasting act she defied everything and everyone. Nazneen closed the window and rubbed her arms. Across the way the tattoo lady raised a can to her lips.

Life made its pattern around and beneath and through her. Nazneen cleaned and cooked and washed. She made breakfast for Chanu and looked on as he ate, collected his pens and put them in his briefcase, watched him from the window as he stepped like a band leader across the courtyard to the bus stop on the far side of the estate. Then she ate standing up at the sink and washed the dishes. She made the bed and tidied the flat, washed socks and pants in the sink and larger items in the bath. In the afternoons she cooked and ate as she cooked so that Chanu began to wonder why she hardly touched her dinner, and she shrugged in a way that suggested that food was of no concern to her. And the days were tolerable, and the evenings were nothing to complain about. Sometimes she switched on the television and flicked through the channels, looking for ice e-skating. For a whole week it was on every afternoon while Nazneen sat cross-legged on the floor. While she sat, she was no longer a collection of the hopes, random thoughts, petty anxieties and selfish wants that made her, but was whole and pure. The old Nazneen was sublimated and the new Nazneen was filled with white light and glory.

But when it ended and she switched off the television, the old Nazneen returned. For a while it was a worse Nazneen than before because she hated the socks as she rubbed them with soap, and dropped the pottery tiger and elephant as she dusted them and was disappointed when they did not break. She was glad when the ice e-skating came no more. She began to pray five times each day, rolling out her prayer mat in the sitting room to face east. She was pleased with the order it gave to her day, and Chanu said it was a good thing. 'But remember,' he said, and coughed away a little imaginary phlegm, 'rubbing ashes on your face doesn't make you a saint. God sees what is in your heart.' And Nazneen hoped it was true because Chanu never to her knowledge prayed, and of all the books that he held in his hand she had never once seen him with the Holy Qur'an.

He took down his framed certificates and explained them to her. 'This one is from the Centre for Meditation and Healing in Victoria Street. Basically it is a qualification in transcendental philosophy. Here's the one from Writers' Bureau, a correspondence course. I applied for some jobs as a journalist after that. And I wrote some short stories as well. I have a letter from the *Bexleyheath Advertiser* somewhere. I'll look it out for you. It says, "We were most interested in your story, 'A Prince Among Peasants', but unfortunately it is not suitable for our publication. Thank you for your interest in the *Bexleyheath Advertiser*." It was a nice letter, I kept it somewhere.

'Now *this* is not actually a certificate as such. It's from Morley College evening classes on nineteenth-century economic thought, and it's just directions to the school, but that's all they gave out. No certificates. Here's my mathematics A level. That was a struggle. This is cycling proficiency and this is my acceptance letter for the IT Communications course – I only managed to get to a couple of classes.'

He talked and she listened. Often she had the feeling he was not talking to her, or rather that she was only part of a larger audience for whom the speech was meant. He smiled at her but his eyes were always searching, as if she were a face in the crowd singled out for only a moment. He was loud, he talked, he joked, and he sang or hummed. Sometimes he read a book and sang at the same time. Or he read, watched television and talked. Only his eyes were unhappy. What are we doing here, they said, what are we doing on this round, jolly face?

It was when he talked about promotion that Chanu grew serious. 'This Mrs Thatcher is making more cuts. Spending cuts, spending cuts, that's all we hear. The council is being squeezed dry. Now we have to pay if we want biscuits with our tea. It's ridiculous. And it could affect my promotion. And then he was silent for a while, and Nazneen began to include the promotion in her prayer, although it came below her prayer for another letter from Hasina.

Once or twice she went out. She asked Chanu for a new sari. They looked in the shop windows on Bethnal Green Road. 'The pink with yellow is very nice,' she said. 'Do you think so?'

'Let me think,' said Chanu. He closed his eyes. Nazneen looked up at the grey towers, the blown-by forgotten strands of sky between them. She watched the traffic. There were more cars than people on the road here, a roaring metal army tearing up the town. A huge truck blocked her line of vision, petrol on her tongue, engines in her ears. The people who passed walked quickly, looked ahead at nothing or looked down at the pavement to negotiate puddles, litter and excrement. The white women wore clinging trousers, like tights with the feet cut out. They pushed prams and their mouths worked furiously. The children screeched at them and they screeched back. A pair went by who were differently dressed, short dark skirts with matching jackets. Their shoulders were padded up and out. They could balance a bucket on each side and not spill a drop of water. They saw her looking and whispered together. They walked and laughed, and looked at her over their puffy shoulders.

'According to Hume,' said Chanu, 'aaah, ahem.' He prepared himself. He spoke in English at some length, then screwed up his face. 'It's not easy to translate. Let me try. "All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, that is, Relations of Ideas, and Matters of Fact." Yes, I think that is a reasonable translation. He gives some examples from geometry and arithmetic of the first kind, meaning Relations of Ideas. "That three times five is equal to the half of thirty." Do you follow? "Though there never was a circle or triangle in nature the truths demonstrated by Euclid would for ever retain their certainty and evidence." Are you with me? Don't worry about the circle and triangle. They are from his other examples.

'Don't be anxious, I am getting to the point shortly. "Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature." This he illustrates, to my mind, brilliantly. "*That the sun will not rise tomorrow* is no less intelligible a proposition and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation *that it will rise.*"

'Do you see? Two proper objects of human enquiry, and you ask me if the pink and yellow is nice. What shall I say? I can say that it is nice or not nice, and how could I be wrong?' He stopped and smiled at Nazneen. She saw that he was waiting for a reply.

'I think it is nice, but I don't mind.'

He laughed and went inside the shop. He returned with the length of fabric. 'Foundations of Modern Philosophy. It's a very interesting module. Here is your sari.'

That night, as she lay awake next to her snoring husband, Nazneen wondered what kind of job it was that he had where the rising of the sun or the failure of the sun to rise could be a topic for serious discussion. If these were the things he had to learn to advance himself, what could he be doing? He worked for the local council. This much she understood. But whenever she asked what he did he gave such a long reply that she got lost in it and although she understood the words, they got together in such a way that their meaning became unclear, or she became confused by them. She remembered Chanu's words about the sun and wondered what he meant. If the sun did not rise tomorrow that would be beyond everyone's understanding but God's. And to say that it will *not* rise, and then that it *will* rise, is definitely a contradiction. *As sure as when I say the bed is too soft and toss and turn all night because of it, and Chanu says it is not too soft and falls asleep immediately. But then both of us can be right in our own way about the bed, but not about the sun. Either way, what is the point in lying awake and thinking about it? Let me sleep, let me sleep, let me sleep.* And she drifted off to where she wanted to be, in Gouripur tracing letters in the dirt with a stick while Hasina danced around her on six-year-old feet. In Gouripur, in her dreams, she was always a girl and Hasina was always six. Amma scolded and

cuddled, and smelled as sweet as the skin on the milk when it had been boiled all day with sugar. Abba sat on the choki, sang and clapped. He called out to them and took them on his lap, and sent them away with a rough kiss on the cheek. Then they walked around the lake to watch the fishermen pulling in great nets of silver fish, and saw the muscles knot on their arms and legs and chests. When she woke she thought *I know what I would wish* but by now she knew that where she wanted to go was not a different place but a different time. She was free to wish it but it would never be.

She did not often go out. 'Why should you go out?' said Chanu. 'If you go out, ten people will say, "I saw her walking on the street." And I will look like a fool. Personally, I don't mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?'

She never said anything to this.

'Besides, I get everything for you that you need from the shops. Anything you want, you only have to ask.'

She never said anything to this.

'I don't stop you from doing anything. I am westernized now. It is lucky for you that you married an educated man. That was a stroke of luck.'

She carried on with her chores.

'And anyway, if you were in Bangladesh you would not go out. Coming here you are not missing anything, only broadening your horizons.'

She razored away the dead flesh around his corns. She did not let the razor slip.

The days passed more easily now than at first. It was just a matter of waiting, as Amma always said. She had waited and now they passed more easily. If it wasn't for worrying about Hasina, she could call herself calm. *Just wait and see, that's all we can do.* How often she had heard those words. Amma always wiped away her tears with those words. When the harvest was poor, when her own mother was taken ill, when floods threatened, when Abba disappeared and stayed away for days at a time. She cried because crying was called for, but she accepted it, whatever it was. 'Such a saint,' Abba said. And then she died, and in dying proved life unpredictable and beyond control.

Mumtaz found her, leaning low over the sacks of rice in the store hut, staked through the heart by a spear. 'She had fallen,' said Mumtaz, 'and the spear was the only thing holding her up. It looked . . . looked as if she was still falling.'

At the funeral Mumtaz said, 'Your mother was wearing her best sari. I think that's nice, don't you?'

After a mourning period, Abba took another wife. She appeared suddenly out of nowhere and Abba said, 'This is your new mother.' Four weeks later, just as suddenly, she went. She was never mentioned again.

'Your mother was wearing her best sari,' said Mumtaz. 'It's strange. It wasn't a special day, after all.'

She never spoke to Abba after that, not that Nazneen saw. She always kept back the choicest bits of meat for Nazneen and Hasina. She kissed them all the time, even though they were fourteen and twelve. And she talked about Amma, over and over, as if you could change something by talking about it. 'I don't know why those spears were in the store, and wedged like that. So dangerous.' Hasina always ran off when she started, but Nazneen just stayed and listened.

Razia moved to Rosemead block, two floors beneath the tattoo lady. Staying on the estate did not count as going out. Nazneen, on the short journey over from Seasalter House, began to strike up acquaintances. She nodded to the apoplectic man in vest and shorts who flung open his door every



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